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The Challenges Facing the Teaching of Speaking in the Moroccan EFL Classroom

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Abstract:

This study seeks to investigate the challenges facing the teaching of speaking in the Moroccan English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The study adopted a mixed method design and random sampling to select Moroccan secondary school teachers of English. Data on the challenges hindering the implementation of speaking activities were collected using questionnaires administered to teachers and interviews as well. The data collected were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The study yielded that teachers perceive the teaching of the speaking skill as difficult and rank class size as the main challenge hindering the effective teaching and learning of the speaking skill.

Keywords: Speaking, EFL classroom, challenges, language teaching

1. Introduction

The process of learning a language requires the development of four major skills; reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Among these language skills, speaking is believed to be the most important. Hughes (2002:133) argues that speaking is believed to be 'the most effective means of gaining a fluent reading knowledge and correct speech as the foundation for good writing'. In stressing the importance of speaking, Sarosdy et.al. (2006) state that 'of all the four skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing), speaking seems to be the most important as people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language' (p.113). This means that it is worthless to reach full knowledge of a language without being actually able to use that language in spoken discourse. Teaching speaking is, therefore, an important issue in the field of language learning. Emphasis, in a language classroom, should be placed on helping learners develop the necessary skills to use the language effectively both inside the classroom and outside. However, it is argued in this study that secondary school teachers in the Moroccan EFL context still lag behind in terms of the implementation of diverse speaking activities owing to a number of constraints. According, the ultimate objective of this study is the investigation of these constraints.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Speaking

According to Harmer (2001), language skills are divided into two main types; 'receptive skills' and 'productive skills'. The author explains that 'Receptive skills is a term used for reading and listening, skills where meaning is extracted from the discourse. Productive skills are the term for speaking and writing, skills where students actually have to produce language themselves' (p.265). That is to say, the four language skills are described by the author according to their direction. Language that is produced by the learner (in writing or in speech) is labeled 'productive', whereas language which is addressed to the learner (in listening or in reading) is referred to as 'receptive'. The four language skills are also categorized in terms of the medium of conveying the message. This medium could be aural/oral or written. Thus, speaking is accordingly categorized as 'the productive aural/oral skill' (Bailey & Nunan, 2005:57).

Chaney & Burk (1998:13) define speaking as 'the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts' (Cited in Nuriani, 2016:7). In other words, speaking involves using the language to interact in meaningful conversations. This means also that for speaking to be regarded as successful, the use of non-verbal aspects of the language is also involved. This idea is further stressed by Rivers (1987: 204) who argues that for an oral communication to be effective, it is mandatory to use the language in an appropriate way and in different social interactions. Such interactions include both verbal communication as well as other speech elements such as intonation, pitch, and stress. Besides, elements that are nonlinguistic such as body language and gestures are also required for a message to be effectively conveyed.

These definitions share a common point in that they all refer to speaking and communication as a process which is characterized by being interactive. In this process, a learner alternates in their roles as listeners and speakers, and use both non-verbal and verbal means to accomplish their communicative goals and convey the message. Accordingly, the speaking skill requires that learners know how to use certain linguistic elements like vocabulary, pronunciation, or grammar, as well as understand how, why, and when to produce language.

2.2. Teaching Speaking

Traditionally, speaking was taught mainly through repetition of drills and dialogues memorization. Nowadays, however, the focus is on helping learners acquire and develop the necessary skills to be effective communicators. Hence, educators have grown interested in devising and adopting methods and techniques that would help learners' develop the ability to use the target language in meaningful interactions.

Generally, there are two major approaches to teaching speaking; a 'bottom-up' approach and a 'top-down' approach (Nunan, 2003: 32). The former suggests that the learners begin with individual sounds of language, and then move on to mastering words and sentences, and finally produce full speech. The latter approach, on the other hand, holds that learners begin with the bigger chunks of language which appear in meaningful contexts. Then, they make use of those contexts to understand and correctly use the smaller elements of language. According to this approach, spoken texts are considered to be the product of cooperation between two or more speakers at the same time point, and in the same context. Thus, advocates of this view recommend that learners are encouraged to engage in spoken discourses from the start instead of teaching them to form correct sentences before using them in speech. Eventually, learners would comprehend the processes involved in speech through which they can express their feelings, communicate their intentions, and react to different people and situations.

2.3. Teacher's Role in a Speaking Course

Larsen-Freeman (2000: 131) identifies the teacher's role as a 'manager' of classroom activities. Such a role demands that the teacher devises activities that promote communication. During these activities, the teacher plays the role of a consultant responding to students' questions, giving advice and offering language items when needed. The teacher also plays the role of a 'conductor and a monitor'. He/she is required to ensure that learners are aware of what they are required to practice and see to what extent they are effective in doing. No matter how diverse and varied the activities of a speaking lesson might be, using them would be worthless if they are not organized in a logical way. Hence, being a good 'organizer' is another role of the teacher. These roles indicate that there is a joined responsibility between the teacher and his/her learners. This grants learners the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations and improve their speaking skills.

2.4. Difficulties in Teaching Speaking

The teaching of the speaking skill has often been regarded as more challenging than the teaching of the other language skills. Malihah (2010) argues that producing spoken language has often meant a challenge for language learners too. According to the author the personalities of students' are pivotal in deciding how effectively and efficiently they would perform in a speaking activity or task. In this respect, the author states that students 'who are risk-takers, unafraid of making mistakes, are generally more talkative. Meanwhile, the conservative, shy students may take a long time to speak confidently' (p.2). Additionally, Ur (1991) argues that there is a strong link between learners' motivation and their achievement in language learning. That is, learners who are more willing to make efforts in speaking activities are more likely to achieve better results and show progression. Conversely, learners with no or little desire to engage in any form of speaking activities might find themselves unable to improve their speaking skill. The author also lists inhibition, lack of motive to talk, large classes, the use of mother tongue, etc. as other factors causing difficulty in speaking.

Obviously, some of the above mentioned factors are related to the learners themselves, while others are attributed to the context of learning, teaching strategies, the curriculum, and the classroom environment in general.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate the challenges that teachers of English in Moroccan secondary schools face when teaching the speaking skill.

3.2. Research Question

The study attempts to find an answer to the following question:
What are the challenges that face the teaching of speaking in the Moroccan EFL classroom?

3.3. Sample Population

The population sample consists of secondary school EFL teachers. The chosen teachers belong to different schools in the Fes-Meknes region. Concerning teachers' gender, the present sample is expected to represent both males and females equally. The technique used in selecting a representative sample of teachers is random sampling. This technique of sampling was chosen because it is more objective, and it gives the chance to everyone to participate in the study. Table.1 provides more details about the sample.

	Targeted Population	Number of Participants	Gender	Experience in Teaching
Questionnaire	EFL Secondary School Teachers	120	Males (52%) Females (48%)	0-5 years (20,4%) 5-10 years (28,6%) 10+ years (49%)
Interviews		15	Males (50%) Females (50%)	5-10 years (44%) 10+ years (56%)

Table 1: Sample Population of the Study

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

Two data collection instruments are used in this study. The first is the questionnaire which is a quantitative data collection instrument. Since questionnaires are limited in terms of eliciting in depth answers from the participants, interviews are also used to collect data and elicit in-depth information about the topic.

4. Results and Discussion

The results yielded that the vast majority of participants believe that giving speaking lessons in the Moroccan classroom is difficult as Figure 1 demonstrates.

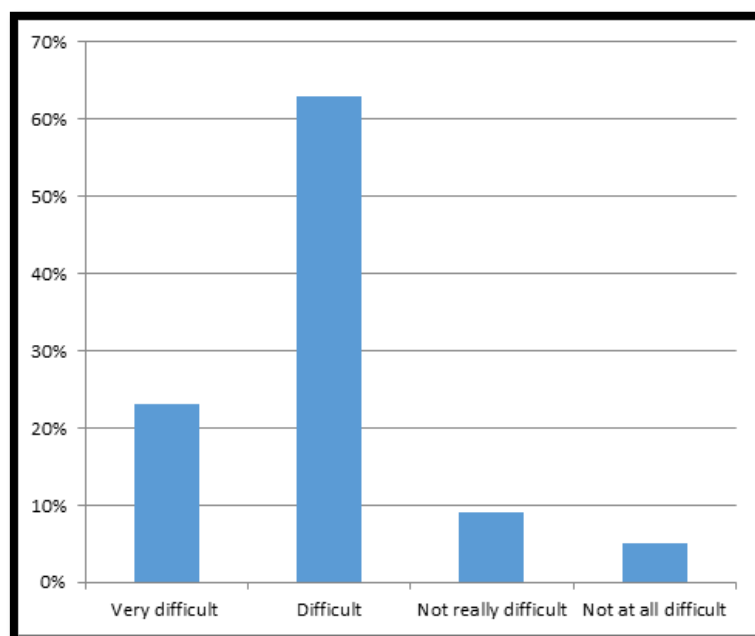


Figure 1: The Extent to Which Speaking Is Difficult to Teach

As illustrated in the Figure above, the results of the current study disclosed that 63% of the respondents agree that it is difficult to teach speaking in the Moroccan context. This difficulty is due to a number of challenges such as time constraints, class size, students' level, attitudes towards the language, and lack of equipments and facilities. These challenges were ranked by the respondents from the most to the least important. As shown in the Figure below, the main challenge facing the teaching of speaking in the Moroccan EFL classroom is class size.

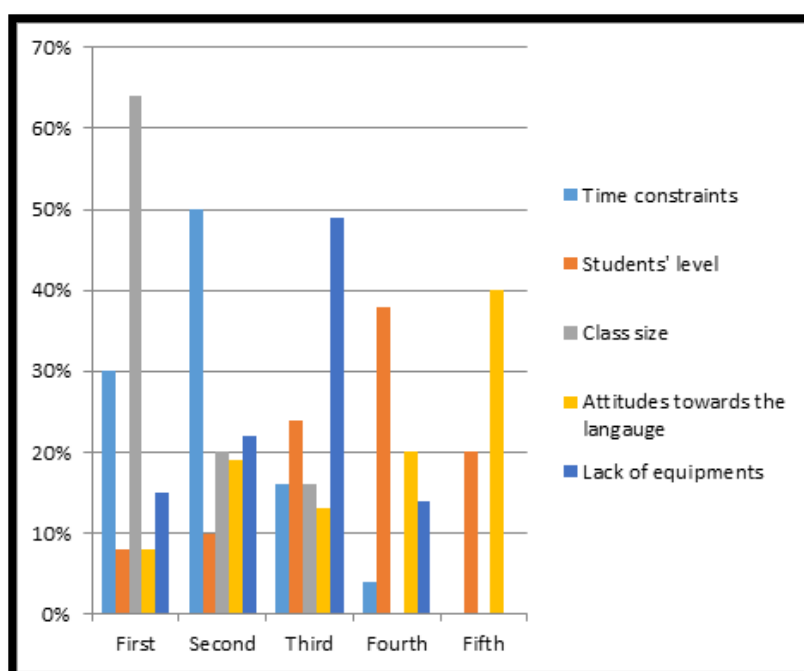


Figure 2: The Challenges Facing the Teaching of Speaking

A close analysis of the Figure reveals that class size is the main challenge hindering the teaching of speaking. This challenge was ranked first by 64% of the respondents. Speaking activities require giving each individual student the chance to use the language and express himself/herself. Yet, this is not an easy task when the number of students in a class is large. As interviewee 3 puts it, 'It's impossible to give every student the chance to talk as there are usually too many students'. Additionally, some speaking activities and tasks are done in groups which might cause chaos in over-crowded classrooms. As interviewee 2 says, 'I also find it difficult to manage group work or even pair work in large classes'. This finding is further confirmed by Febriyanti (2011) who states:

If the classroom is big, for example 30 or 40 students in a classroom, it is clearly that the students hardly got a chance to practice the language, and difficult for them to ask and receive individual attention they need. It is hard for the teacher to make contact with students at the back, to keep good discipline, also to organize dynamic and creative teaching and learning sessions (p.8).

High school teachers are given a curriculum which they have to teach in a certain period of time usually to prepare students to take end term tests and exams. The curricula are perceived by the teacher to be too long to be fulfilled; hence, time constraints are the second challenge hindering the teaching of the speaking skill. This challenge was ranked second by 50% of the respondents. In this respect, interviewee 4 says, 'it's not easy to diversify speaking activities and give students time to speak simply because we have long programs and we have to finish them on time'. Besides, the time devoted to the study of English is believed to be insufficient (3 to 4 hours per week).

Lack of equipments was rank third by 49% of the respondents. Some speaking activities are better taught with the help of some technological devices and with the incorporation of authentic language learning situations. However, not all schools are equipped enough to allow teachers to be creative and vary their teaching activities. One of the interviewees says, in this regard, 'you know, to use speaking activities we usually need to use songs, videos, data show...but in this school we don't have these equipments'. Similarly, interviewee 9 says: 'We need to have at least a multimedia room to use different speaking and listening activities, we can't teach these skills in a simple classroom'. These results are in line with Al-Issa, (2006) ideas who attributes students' lack of ability to communicate in the Omani EFL context to factors such as the textbooks, lack of technological aids, and the amount of time given to English in the curriculum.

Students' level was ranked fifth by 39% of the teachers which implies that students' level is not regarded a serious problem in this regard. This is confirmed by interviewee 7 who argued that 'the level is not really an issue, I think, you can find speaking activities for all levels'. That is, a teacher can always find activities that suit his/her students' level and abilities as speaking activities are varied and could be adapted to all levels.

40% of the respondents ranked students' attitudes towards the language as the last challenge that could hinder the teaching of speaking. This could be explained by the fact that students at the schools where the study was conducted have generally favorable attitudes towards English as concluded by an unpublished study that the researcher carried out in the year 2019.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Teaching speaking is part and parcel of the teaching and learning processes. Being able to use a language in meaningful communications contributes to students' success both inside and outside of school settings. This study investigated the challenges that face the teaching of speaking in the Moroccan EFL classroom. The results showed that the main challenge is large classes which hamper teachers' efforts to help learners be effective speakers. In light of these

findings, some pedagogical implications are drawn. First, the number of students in a given class should be minimized. Second, a reduction of the syllabi assigned is a prerequisite so that teachers can have enough time for granting students the opportunity to engage in meaningful communication through the use of multiple speaking activities. Third, adequate teaching-learning equipments should be provided to facilitate the teaching of authentic language. This way, learners would be able to develop basic interactive skills that are necessary for facing the fast changing demands of the 21st century.

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