

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG IRAQI UNDERGRADUATE EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The teaching and learning process in the classroom often presents challenges for Iraqi EFL students, particularly in mastering English. A common issue is their reluctance to engage in English conversation, accompanied by difficulties in accurate pronunciation. This study investigates the impact of pronunciation guidance among Iraqi EFL learners. Using a quantitative approach, the study involved 132 Iraqi undergraduate EFL students selected through both random and purposive sampling. Data were collected via questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS. The findings revealed that students held positive attitudes toward the incorporation of pronunciation guidance. A strong positive correlation was found between speaking proficiency and pronunciation accuracy. Despite acknowledging the value of these elements, many students reported feelings of shyness and discomfort when speaking English in class. Participants emphasized the crucial role of teachers in creating a supportive and encouraging environment to promote regular English-speaking practice. Based on the findings, the study recommends consistent oral practice and perseverance for students, alongside proactive teacher engagement to build learners' confidence and fluency. These insights contribute to a better understanding of how targeted pedagogical strategies can address key barriers and enhance English communication skills among Iraqi EFL students.

Keywords: Speaking skills; pronunciation guidance; communication challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is an integral part of human life, serving as the primary mode of communication and social connection. It is fundamental to the acquisition and transmission of knowledge, skills, and cultural values (Brown & Lee, 2021; Nguyen & Tran, 2023). Through language, individuals convey complex ideas, share experiences, and collaborate effectively, which also facilitates the preservation of cultural heritage across generations (Alzahrani & Yahya, 2022). English, in particular, has gained global importance and is considered a crucial component of education systems worldwide. In Iraq, it is taught as a foreign language and is now mandatory in schools (Hameed & Ali, 2022; Kareem, 2023). Learning English requires the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, all of which complement one another. However, speaking is arguably the most vital for effective communication. According to Jubani (2012), speaking is essential to understanding the world. It allows people to express thoughts, connect with others, and explore different perspectives. Speaking also contributes to cognitive and emotional development, such as critical thinking and stress reduction (Tran, 2021; Musa & Ahmed, 2023). Goodman (1967) and Smith (1971), as cited in Badawi et al. (2020), emphasize that speaking is an active engagement with language rather than a passive reception. Proficiency in speaking is associated with academic, professional, and personal success (Zhou & Ren, 2022). Furthermore, accurate pronunciation is a key aspect of speaking. It enhances clarity and helps learners become more confident and fluent (Radant & Huang, 2009). Errors in pronunciation can hinder communication and cause misunderstandings (Hinofotis & Baily, 1980).

Iraqi EFL learners face multiple challenges in developing speaking skills, including limited exposure to authentic English, the dominance of Arabic in daily communication, and the prevalence of traditional teaching methods that focus more on writing (Mahmood & Salman, 2021; Al-Serhan & Al-Gharabally, 2017). According to Khalil & Mahdi (2023) sociocultural barriers, such as gender norms and cultural expectations, can discourage students—particularly females—from actively participating in speaking tasks. Additionally, Iraqi students must navigate diverse speech styles that reflect formality, politeness, and the need to code-switch between Arabic and English (Ibrahim & Abdulwahab, 2020). Such complexities demand not only linguistic competence but also sociocultural awareness. Addressing these challenges requires communicative teaching strategies and supportive environments that promote risk-taking and participation (Rahman & Kareem, 2023). As Ignatius et al. (2022) argue, speaking involves more than social or academic interaction; it encompasses various dimensions influenced by context and relationships. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges experienced by Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners in developing their English speaking skills. Specifically, it examines their perceptions and attitudes regarding pronunciation and speaking proficiency, with the goal of identifying pedagogical gaps and informing more effective instructional strategies

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to explore the challenges faced by Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners in developing English speaking skills. A survey approach was employed to systematically gather students' perceptions and attitudes related to speaking proficiency in English.

2.2 Participants

A total of 132 undergraduate students from the University of Baghdad participated in the study, comprising 72 males and 60 females. The participants were selected using convenience sampling, as they were accessible and enrolled in English language-related courses. All participants were Iraqi EFL learners, making them highly relevant to the purpose of this research.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to participants via Google Forms, providing a convenient and accessible way for students to respond regardless of location. The link was shared through official student communication platforms and email. Prior to completing the form, participants were provided with a brief explanation of the study's purpose and gave their informed consent digitally. Students were encouraged to respond independently and honestly in a distraction-free environment to ensure the authenticity and reliability of the data collected.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics through SPSS version 23. The analysis included calculations of mean values, standard deviations, and frequency distributions to interpret learners' responses. This analysis aimed to uncover patterns in the participants' attitudes and perceived challenges in developing English speaking skills.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Learners' Perceptions of English Speaking and Pronunciation

To better understand the students' views on English speaking proficiency, especially in relation to pronunciation, a questionnaire was administered. Table 1 below displays the descriptive statistics, including the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for each item.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Iraqi EFL Learners' Perception Toward English Speaking and Pronunciation

	Items	N	M	Std.
1	In my viewpoint, it's crucial to sound as natural as possible when learning how to pronounce words in English.	132	4.11	.917
2	Mastering native pronunciation is crucial to learning English for me.	132	4.15	1.026
3	I do my best to mimic those who speak English as their first language.	132	3.71	.657
4	I believe that correct pronunciation should be stressed more in the classroom.	132	3.96	.840
5	Acquiring proficiency in English pronunciation was enjoyable for me.	132	3.71	.707
6	As long as I can be understood by English speakers, I believe my pronunciation of the language will be acceptable.	132	3.77	.715
7	The ability to communicate in English is far more crucial than sounding fluent.	132	3.77	.666
8	I feel motivated to improve my speaking and pronunciation skills.	132	3.80	.706
9	I view challenges in speaking and pronunciation as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles.	132	3.78	.661
10	I believe that mastering proper pronunciation is crucial to learning a language.	132	4.06	.858

The descriptive statistics from the questionnaire reveal insightful trends regarding students' attitudes and motivation towards improving their English speaking and pronunciation skills. The data includes the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) scores for each of the 10 items answered by 132 undergraduate EFL learners. Overall, the highest mean score was recorded for Item 2: "*Mastering native pronunciation is crucial to learning English for me*" (M = 4.15, SD = 1.026), indicating that many students place high importance on sounding like native speakers. Similarly, Item 1 ("*It's crucial to sound as natural as possible...*") and Item 10 ("*Mastering proper pronunciation is crucial...*") also received high mean values (M = 4.11 and M = 4.06, respectively), showing a strong collective belief in the significance of pronunciation in language learning. Interestingly, Item 3 and Item 5, both of which reflect learners' active engagement and enjoyment in pronunciation activities (e.g., mimicking native speakers and enjoying the learning process), had moderate mean scores of 3.71, suggesting a balanced perspective—students may value pronunciation but do not all find the process easy or enjoyable. Items 6 and 7, which propose that intelligibility and communication are more important

than native-like fluency, recorded moderate agreement levels ($M = 3.77$), implying a pragmatic view among learners. This indicates that while native-like pronunciation is ideal, students recognize that being understood is ultimately more important. Item 4 (*"Correct pronunciation should be stressed more in the classroom"*) received a mean of 3.96, showing support for increased instructional focus on pronunciation. Meanwhile, Item 8 (*"I feel motivated to improve my speaking and pronunciation skills"*) and Item 9 (*"I view challenges as opportunities for growth"*) scored $M = 3.80$ and $M = 3.78$, respectively, suggesting a generally positive and growth-oriented attitude among students. Standard deviations across items ranged from .657 to 1.026, indicating moderate variability in responses. Notably, Item 2 had the highest standard deviation, suggesting that opinions on the necessity of native pronunciation were more diverse among participants.

3.2 Identified Barriers to Effective Speaking Skill Development

Although the overall findings indicate that students hold a positive attitude toward English pronunciation and speaking skills, several underlying challenges can be inferred from the results. While the majority of students expressed strong agreement with the importance of native-like pronunciation ($M = 4.15$), their moderate responses to items related to mimicking native speakers ($M = 3.71$) and enjoyment of pronunciation learning ($M = 3.71$) suggest that many learners may struggle with the practical aspects of developing speaking proficiency. Furthermore, the relatively high mean score ($M = 3.96$) for the statement that pronunciation should be stressed more in the classroom points to a potential gap in current instructional practices. This implies that students may not be receiving adequate guided support or structured opportunities to practice pronunciation. Additionally, although students reported feeling motivated ($M = 3.80$) and perceived speaking challenges as opportunities for growth ($M = 3.78$), the moderately high—but not very strong—means suggest that confidence and consistent speaking practice might still be limited. Responses indicating that intelligibility is more crucial than fluency ($M = 3.77$) may reflect a coping strategy, in which students prioritize being understood over achieving fluency due to limited resources or support. Moreover, a lack of meaningful interaction in English outside the classroom likely contributes to reduced language exposure and hinders fluency development. The reliance on memorized language chunks rather than spontaneous speech may further limit learners' ability to express themselves confidently. In some cases, fear of negative evaluation by peers or instructors can also result in communication anxiety, preventing students from actively participating in oral tasks. Altogether, these findings reveal that despite learners' enthusiasm and awareness, they face challenges such as limited classroom emphasis on pronunciation, difficulty with imitation, reduced exposure to authentic speech, performance anxiety, and possible lack of confidence—factors which educators must address to better support speaking skill development. To mitigate these issues, Teachers must provide a supportive learning environment and offer continuous pronunciation instruction in order to lessen these problems. Through consistent speaking practice, proactive teacher support can help students become more fluent speakers and create a safer environment for taking risks.

4. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners hold positive attitudes toward English speaking and pronunciation skills, particularly valuing native-like pronunciation and intelligibility. However, the findings also highlight several underlying challenges, including limited classroom emphasis on pronunciation, difficulty imitating native speech patterns, and reduced confidence in speaking. These issues suggest gaps in instructional approaches and learning environments that must be addressed to support speaking development more effectively. Given these insights, future studies could explore intervention-based methods, such as integrating communicative pronunciation

instruction or providing exposure to authentic spoken English through multimedia and peer interaction. Additionally, qualitative investigations into learner identity, classroom dynamics, and sociocultural influences could offer a deeper understanding of the speaking challenges faced by EFL learners in similar contexts. Improving speaking proficiency in EFL contexts requires a multifaceted approach that not only targets linguistic competence but also nurtures learner confidence and motivation. By tailoring instructional practices to students' real-world communication needs, educators can create more inclusive and effective speaking environments that promote long-term language development.

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