

LOW SPEAKING PROFICIENCY AMONG THE MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES: WHY AND HOW?

Rusreena Rusli

rwits26@gmail.com

Melor Md Yunus

melor@ukm.edu.my

Harwati Hashim

harwati@ukm.edu.my

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the factors that contributed to low English speaking proficiency among Malaysian undergraduates and to get students' suggestions of the possible solutions that can be employed in enhancing their speaking proficiency. In order to answer the research questions, the researchers employed a mixed-method research design, using questionnaires and structured-interview. This study was done at a local university in Malaysia, involving twenty undergraduates who were in their final year of study. Based on the findings, it was found that, management in teaching, psychology, as well as, teacher and peer influence were the factors that contributed to the low speaking proficiency of English among the Malaysian undergraduates. It is shown that all undergraduates should acknowledge their own efficacy and learn to make progress rather than avoiding to speak. Lecturers also need to build an English language learning environment that suits the students' levels and interests. Most importantly, teachers and students need to be motivated and passionate in teaching and learning the language to support future achievements. This study is significant in understanding what contributed to the Malaysian undergraduates' low proficiency level. Without proper investigation and the right solution, this problem will be the result of undergraduates' unemployment in the future.

Keywords: *ESL classroom; language learning; speaking performance; speaking proficiency; undergraduates*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a two-way process that includes a man to convey significance or message by creating and getting data to someone else. The data depends on specific elements, including the quantity of members included, the apprehension of speakers, the surroundings and also the objectives of that discourse. Vygotsky (1962) suggested that thoughts can be developed into words in a number of stages, starting from imaging to the inner speech and towards a speech act. Consequently, it is crucial to deliver a classroom condition that is loaded with discourse, since the learners should be effectively occupied with their reasoning. In the contrary, in Malaysia, it has been observed that Malaysian understudies have between 11 to 13 years of learning to formal English lessons in schools, however their language competence are still a long way from satisfactory (David et al., 2015). According to the previous Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, motivating Malaysians to ace English is a need for the government as to focus on the language that has a huge part in nation building (Jantmary & Melor, 2014). In fact, according to Malaysian Education Blueprint, the operational proficiency in English is much lower. Only 28% of students achieved a minimum credit in the 2011 SPM English paper against Cambridge 1119 standards.

Poor English capability among undergraduates has been unmistakably one of the top five issues confronting Malaysian employers. The quantity of jobless undergraduates in Malaysia has expanded throughout the years, informed Nor Zahidi Alias, the chief economist at Malaysian Rating Corp Bhd. In a section distributed in The Edge, he referred to poor English capability as one of the main factors behind joblessness among undergraduates in the nation. There were many issues among the work searchers, particularly new graduates, SPM and diploma holders. Some of them are unable to develop correct sentences nor pass on the message in a discussion, Malaysia Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said. In the Salary Surveys 2016 by MEF, it was discovered that over 90% of respondents showed the requirement for improvement on their English capability in order to be employable (The Star Online, 2017). Therefore, this study will investigate on the factors that contribute to low English speaking proficiency among the undergraduates and the possible solutions in students' perspectives that can be used to improve their speaking proficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jindathai (2015) had done a research to explore the factors that contribute to low English speaking among engineering undergraduates. From his discoveries, one of the primary elements of the undergraduates' English language speaking issues was the management in teaching and learning English. Variables issued and originated from the management include the administration of classroom exercises and the course syllabus. The undergraduates exceptionally knew the significance of getting great speaking performance however they liked to have more creative exposure on the language. In other research by Mosha (2014), likewise like Jindathai (2015), she discovered that the management of teaching was somewhat poor as the employed English educators were not in expected quality. The management also did not consider the significance of enlisting proper number of educators, as the educators in the department were insufficient to cater for all the undergraduates. This factor unmistakably made an impact towards the undergraduates' learning as educators are the good example of the undergraduates regardless of in a classroom setting or as a general. In different work, Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014) had led an exploration that researched the challenges looked by EFL undergraduates in speaking proficiency. Their discoveries likewise uncovered a few disappointments on the management's part in English language teaching where improper selections of materials were utilized. These criticisms included irrelevant of course book's materials on enhancing undergraduates' communicative demands and the failure of relating speaking practices to real life uses for the much dependence on language aspects.

In other research done by Debreli and Demirkan (2015) investigated the speaking anxiety of Turkish and Turkish Cypriot students in English. The disclosures of the research revealed that the undergraduates are hesitant to commit errors. Other than that, the intriguing point was, the undergraduates with better speaking ability were seen to be more restless than the lower level of undergraduates. This indicated how managing nervousness and the requirements to embrace mistakes as a major aspect of learning ought to be incorporated into the undergraduates. Other research from Tuan. N.H and Mai.T.N (2015) examined the variables influencing undergraduates' speaking performance likewise had similar discoveries. Their outcomes demonstrated that psychological factors influenced undergraduates' speaking performance and indeed, the most significant factor was because of the undergraduates' motivation. Other research by Astuti (2013) who examined the factors that impacted the lack of English speaking performance in Indonesia found that her respondents likewise admitted that they felt timid to communicate in English and there were feeling of uncertainty and

nervousness. This indicated how the understudies' speaking focus was influenced no matter of having the knowledge of the language.

Al-Mahrooqi (2012) conducted a research and found that the understudies felt the instructors are the primary explanation behind their hazardous English capability. Their information demonstrated that the educators were not sufficiently strong to roll out improvements on understudies' attitudes or help in expanding understudies' inspiration. One of the discoveries that was very new contrasted with other researchers was the peer discouragement. Peers that mocked upon another peer's exhibition in communicating in English can influence one's learning progress. Understudies can be extrinsically motivated in learning English. Extrinsic factors, for example, include the instructors and learning the advantage of learning English. . In general, a large number of respondents agreed that a great English teacher is what keeps them looking forwards to come to school. A strong teacher-students relationship might influence students' perception of teachers as their inspirational source (Siti Sukainah and Melor, 2014). Another research by Soureshjani and Riahipour (2012) discovered that understudies' speaking skills were mostly afflicted by the educators. They pinpointed issues about the instructors' behaviour and discrimination upon weak and strong understudies that influenced their learning inspiration. Educators selected unsuitable teaching materials and this likewise made the understudies be unambitious to learn. Thusly, instructors and peers play a critical part in one's speaking process.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers used mixed method (quantitative questionnaires and structured interview) to collect the data needed. Data were collected from twenty participants at a university in Selangor. The 12 questions in the questionnaires were grouped according to 3 different domains namely; 1) management in teaching; 2) psychological factors and 3) teacher and peer influence. The questions were adapted from several researchers that were discussed in the previous section. The results were calculated and tabulated manually. Meanwhile, the structured interview used a list of questions which were prepared earlier to help the respondents to keep focus on the main objectives of the questions itself. Students' responses were then transcribed and analysed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are several factors that cause the speaking problems for the students. In this research, researcher had predicted the possible causes and grouped them in the

questionnaires. Participants’ responses determine which factor that contributed to their problems the most. From there, appropriate improvisation can be made accordingly.

Management in Teaching

A. Management in Teaching	Strongly Agree		Agree		Moderate		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
There are many speaking exercises in my book to be practiced inside and outside of the classroom.	0	-	5	25	3	15	11	55	1	5
Large classes cause speaking activities hard to demonstrate	3	15	12	60	3	15	2	10	0	-
The time devoted to speaking lesson is enough.	3	15	5	25	7	35	5	25	0	-
Lessons do not fulfil students’ interest.	2	10	5	25	6	30	7	35	0	-

Table 1: Teaching management contributed to low speaking proficiency

The respondents demonstrated agreement to the challenges of having large classes as this causes the speaking activities to be difficult to perform. The management ought not to assign an excessive number of understudies in a similar class, this weights the instructors as well as made the understudies uncomfortable in their learning condition. Classrooms are often cramped and crowded, containing mixed levels of language proficiency, and there is a general dearth of facilities and incentives for keen learners (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012).

The respondents likewise found that speaking practices in their book are insufficient to be used and this indicated how the administration neglected to give and pick proficient materials to the speaking lessons. Although teachers have the authority in the classroom, they did not have the power to change the syllabus or the supposed textbooks that they are required to follow. As this happens, students are not greatly emphasized on speaking no matter inside or outside the classroom. Half of the

respondents expressed how the time dedicated to speaking lessons is not sufficient. Classroom practices are mainly characterized by answering reading comprehension questions and essay writings with limited listening and speaking exercises (Normazidah et al., 2012). This likewise demonstrated the disappointment of the management to allocate adequate time for speaking lessons in the course plot.

The understudies favored more exciting activities outside the classroom setting, for example, summer camping or a chance to join a short course abroad. Understudies want to differ the learning styles and exposed to real life circumstances where they can work on their speaking skills as opposed to simply adapting knowledge theoretically. Imparting instruction of speaking skill to EFL undergraduates poses a great challenge to their communicative competence and one of the very important aspect of the problem that has been highlighted by our study is the need to evaluate the English departments’ programmes and curricula to make sure that such curricula and programmes are adequate to cater for the students’ communicate needs (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2014).

Psychological Factor

B. Psychological Factor	Strongly Agree		Agree		Moderate		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I feel nervous and shy while speaking in English.	8	40	8	40	2	10	2	10	0	-
I seldom participate in oral lesson even though I know the answers.	5	25	7	35	7	35	1	5	0	-
I rather not speak because I am afraid of peer judgement.	5	25	12	60	0	-	3	15	0	-
I will speak only in small classrooms or group discussions.	4	20	9	45	4	20	3	15	0	-

Table 2: Psychological factor contributed to low speaking proficiency

Based on the table, we can see that psychological factors are a significant factor that caused the weak performance in English speaking. All the participants are showing agreement for all the items in this section of questionnaires, which means the undergraduates definitely have problems in controlling and managing their psychological influences. The participants felt nervous and shy when they have to speak in English, and this impacted on their performances. When the students are impaired with the nervousness and shyness, they could not express their ideas properly, as they are not confident on their own capabilities. This resulted in poor speeches during presentations, where the students are depending on scripts rather than trying to speak spontaneously. The students' lack of confidence, plus the lack of speaking trials outside the classroom contexts could also cause the students from speaking well.

The respondents also admitted that they seldom participated in oral lessons even though they knew the answers. This showed how passive they were in a lesson, and while teachers were asking for their opinions or elaborations on certain topics, students chose to remain silent rather than voicing out their thoughts freely. Furthermore, students are afraid of being judged by their peers. They did not want to appear silly in front of the class and so they refused to speak out, in order to avoid mistakes. Although these students are of the final year in the university and should have enough knowledge on the language aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, their insecurity affected their ability to perform. More than half of the students appeared to have low level of speaking anxiety. The reason for this result can be attributed to the awareness of the fact that speaking in foreign language is the key to securing their future in the faculty and also for finding a better job with a good salary in their country (Debreli & Demirkan, 2015)

Students need to motivate themselves to be open minded in learning English as great people who achieve success usually are those who embrace their weaknesses and improve them. Instead of being quiet of their inadequate abilities, they should be brave to accept and make a change. These students may have the capabilities to perform, however the psychological factors inhibit them to believe in themselves. This will be complicated as they will be finding jobs in the future. They will face difficulties in working if they could not instil positive behaviour towards learning processes.

Teacher and Peer Influence

C. Teacher and Peer Influence	Strongly Agree		Agree		Moderate		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
My friends are very encouraging when I speak English outside of the classroom.	2	10	7	35	6	30	5	25	0	-
Lecturers focus only on active students.	4	20	7	35	6	30	3	15	0	-
Lecturers are building up my motivation to learn.	0	-	6	30	10	50	4	20	0	-
My friends would help in correcting my mistakes in speaking.	3	15	7	35	8	40	2	10	0	-

Table 3: Teacher and Peer Influence contribute to low speaking proficiency

Based on the table, we can see that teachers do bring an impact towards students' speaking performance. As 55% of the respondents showed agreement towards the focus of teachers upon the active students in classroom, this proved how the teachers are not treating the students equally and attentively. Passive and problematic students are actually those who needed the teachers' focus more than the active ones. Teachers should give attention to the weak ones as to motivate their progress as well as making sure of their speaking improvements. Teachers are important for the undergraduates as it is their role models that they looked up to, and that is why the teachers need to be generous and fair towards all their students. The weak students, if given extra care and support, they can also perform like the successful students. The teachers' feedbacks during speaking practices are very important as they can also help to enhance the students to believe in themselves. When the teachers are not trying to engage the students with speaking activities, the students may feel anxious when they need to speak in future presentations and tasks.

Other than that, peers that support and help in correcting speaking mistakes will generate the love for speaking practices and enforce the confidence level among them. The respondents agreed that their friends would help if they made mistake, this

showed how the students are relying on positive surroundings to gain positive perceptions towards learning. Positive and helpful peers can evolve a good and healthy environment where the students can daringly be motivated to keep practicing. Moreover, 45% of the respondents agreed that their friends are very encouraging when they try to speak English outside the classroom contexts. This confirmed that the respondents have no problems with their peers as their friends are supportive and encouraging enough to be considerate in improving their peers' speaking proficiency.

Possible Solutions

When the respondents are asked about their plans to improve their low speaking proficiency, they shared on how they have used several methods to help their situation. One of them is how reading English books can help their speaking proficiency because reading enhanced the grab of diverse vocabularies. Besides that, students can learn more new words, to get used to how the language works such as the sentence structure, the grammar and so on. When they are reading, they tend to speak English internally in their minds and this is considered as their practices by their own initiatives. Besides that, reading will also open the doors to knowledge that are abundant in English medium. The more knowledge they have, the better-equipped they are to tackle any challenge in the future (Siti Sukainah & Melor, 2014).

Apart from reading English books, the respondents preferred their learning in a more exciting and relaxed way. They shared on how they will watch English movies and listen to English songs and try to grab what the speaker said without the help of subtitles. Researchers opinionated that this method is acceptable as when the students tried to listen attentively, this helps the students in a communicative situation where they need to converse and listen to the other people's responses to give feedbacks. In a lesson, they too will need to listen to their teachers' questions and ideas, in order to correct and to assess their own understandings. So, it is crucial for the students to know how to grab a speaker's meaning no matter its slang, utterance and speed to assist their speaking performance. Students also have their own preferred learning environment that they will commit best in the speaking lessons. The respondents stated that the sitting arrangements, stress-free environment and avoiding large classes can help in improving their speaking skills. The teachers on the other hand should always look for ways to improve their classrooms and language instructions. The best way to do this is by creating a comfortable environment for students to learn the language at their own pace (Siti Sukainah and Melor, 2014).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

In a conclusion, this study had confirmed the students' lack of proficiency in speaking are due to their psychological factors, inefficient of management's role and also the influence of teachers' and peers' motivation on theirs. These factors can be overcome if all the students acknowledge their own ability and try to select initiatives that suits them most. Teachers need to create a classroom that has the enforcement of authentic activities and materials, meaningful and relatable assignments to induce the motivation for the low speaking proficiency students. There are several solutions that can be made to improve their speaking condition. Firstly, to know their own abilities in the speaking skills, to know their own weaknesses in order to learn what is needed. More focus can be put and students can emphasize more on the strategies to help their own weaknesses rather than ignoring them. Next, students need to produce initiatives on improving their own speaking proficiency. Reading to English books, watching and listening to English movies and songs without subtitles are some of the methods that the students self-initiated. Other than that, the students' suggestions for the lecturers are by using variety of approaches and exciting activities, plus integrating the use of technology in speaking lessons. Speaking is a high-priority part in teaching and learning English. Unfortunately, teaching of speaking has been underestimated and the teaching process is a set of repeating strategies and same activities such as the dialogues memorization and drilling. Therefore, in this era, the objectives of the speaking lesson should be focused on the students' ability to communicate and to produce students with the ability to express themselves.

Currently, there are many linguists and TESL teachers opinionated that students learn speaking best in interactive activities. The use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can perform and fulfil the objectives of speaking lessons. Students need to be exposed to the real-life situations rather than the usual classroom contexts. This method will guide the students to communicate with the teachers and peers using English. This will happen when students are working together with their peers in groups or pair works to accomplish a task with the teacher's facilitation. There are a number of possibilities for further research in this area of study. Future researchers who wanted to do further investigation on this topic may locate the field of respondents, the respondents' race, the instrumentation method and the geographical background of study. It is important for the teachers, management and the students to work together as a team in a teaching and learning processes in order to produce high quality workers for the next generation.

REFERENCES

- Al-Jamal, D. A., & Al-Jamal, G. A. (2013). *An investigation of the difficulties faced by EFL undergraduates in speaking skills*. *English Language Teaching*, 7(1), 19.
- Al-Mahrooqi, R. (2012). *A student perspective on low English proficiency in Oman*. *International Education Studies*, 5(6), 263-271.
- Astuti, D. K. (2013). *The Gap between English Competence & Performance (Performance: The Learners Speaking Ability)*. In FLLT Conference Proceedings by LITU (Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 660-670).
- David, A. R., Thang, S. M., & Azman, H. (2015). *Accommodating Low Proficiency Esl Students'language Learning Needs Through An Online Writing Support System*. *e-Bangi*, 10(1), 118.
- Debreli, E., & Demirkan, S. (2015). *Sources and levels of foreign language speaking anxiety of English as a foreign language university students with regard to language proficiency and gender*. *International Journal of English Language Education*, 4(1), 49-62.
- English proficiency still a big problem for many M'sian grads*. Retrieved March 10, 2018, from <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/01/21/english-proficiency-still-a-big-problem-for-many-msian-grads/#MttZf4ZPZR3TxKi3.99>
- Hamad, M. M. (2013). *Factors Negatively Affect Speaking Skills at Saudi Colleges for Girls in the South*. *English Language Teaching*, 6(12), 87-97
- Jindathai, S. (2015). *Factors affecting English speaking problems among engineering students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology*. In Selected Proceedings of the 3rd National Interdisciplinary Academic Conference, Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (pp. 344-8).
- Mat, S. S. C., & Yunus, M. M. (2014). *Attitudes and motivation towards learning English among FELDA school Students*. *Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 8(5), 1-8.
- Mosha, M. A. (2014). *Factors affecting students' performance in English language in Zanzibar rural and urban secondary schools*. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 5(35), 64-76.
- Musa, N. C., Lie, K. Y., & Azman, H. (2012). *Exploring English language learning and teaching in Malaysia*. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 12(1).

- Poor English is Why Malaysian Graduates Find it Hard to Get Jobs*. Retrieved March 10, 2018, from <http://www.worldofbuzz.com/poor-english-malaysian-graduates-find-hard-get-jobs/>
- Soureshjani, K. H., & Riahipour, P. (2012). *Demotivating factors on English speaking skill: A study of EFL language learners and teachers' attitudes*. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 17(3), 327-339.
- Thirusanku, J., & Yunus, M. M. (2014). *Status of English in Malaysia*. *Asian Social Science*, 10(14), 254.
- Vietnam, V. (2015). *Factors affecting students' speaking performance at Le Thanh Hien High School*. *Asian journal of educational research* vol, 3(2).