



Factors Affecting English Speaking Skills: Evidence from Graduate Students in Rawalpindi

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to find the factors affecting the speaking skills of graduate students. The study was conducted in the selected institutions of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The objectives of the study were to identify the factors affecting the speaking skills of graduate students and to analyze the students' and teachers' perceptions of the factors affecting speaking skills. The sample included 100 students from three institutions. Questionnaires were used to get the information from the graduate students studying English and the English teachers. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) program. Analyzed data were presented descriptively using graphs. The results of the study show that students make errors when they speak English. Future researchers can carry out experimental research to find how different English language teaching method help students to acquire better English-speaking skills.

Keywords: English speaking skills, ESL, English learning barriers, Graduate Classroom

Introduction

Language as a tool is used by different speech communities for interaction and socialization. In different geographical areas of the world, many languages are spoken. English being an international language is spoken all over the world; it is considered the language of science, technology, commerce, and business. Keeping in view the significance of the English language, it is spoken in different countries as a second language after 'mother tongue'. Proficiency in the English Language includes receptive skills (listening & reading) and Productive Skills (reading & writing) (KIE, 2002). Following this order, it is clearly shown that listening skills make good speaking. Similarly, good reading skills ensure good writing skills. These receptive skills help the student to empower their productive skills. The main language procedure is to be followed while learning a second language and L2 becomes the 'mother language' if it is used where the target language is used. According to Gass and Selinker (2001), this procedure is used in learning a second language in a classroom setting.

Most of us know that languages are structures of arbitrary verbal symbols, which allow all individuals of certain beliefs or other people who have learned the system of that culture,



communication, or interaction. By our utterances, we do not utter words only, we also encode messages for the decoders. In ESL classrooms, the emphasis remains on the reading and writing skills of the students as speaking skill is not evaluated in the examination. Proficiency in speaking skills needs a lot of dedication and practice. The mother tongue is learned through the environment. So, the language instructor should provide the same environment to the students for language learning instead of cramming the rules. This also helps the learners to mind their nerves while speaking.

Problem Statement

For majority of Pakistani students, English is second or third language of acquisition. At tertiary level of education, English is used as a medium of instruction. Researches show that the students are under pressure to acquire English language and the stress to learn English affects the academic performance of university students. In the 21st century, acquisition of oral communication skills is equally important for a good career. In other words, learners engaged in learning a second language utilize the linguistic resources of their respective languages. It is seen that students memorize the content for exams but their oral communication skills are not polished. The current study aims to investigate the factors affecting the English-speaking skills of graduate students. Moreover, it looks for the communication barriers, which affect the oral communication skills of graduate students.

Research objectives

- 1) To identify the common errors encountered by graduate students in speaking English.
- 2) To find the aspects affecting graduate students' acquisition of speaking skills in English.

Research Questions

- 1) What types of common errors do graduate students usually encounter in speaking English?
- 2) Which factors affect the acquisition of English-speaking skills of graduate students?

Significance of the study

The findings of the research will provide solutions to the problems faced by the teachers of English, students, and administrators while learning speaking skills. It will help teachers to develop their pedagogies to help graduate students to overcome English-speaking barriers. Moreover, the results of this study will help graduate students to understand the significance of English as a language thus expediting the acquisition process.

Review of literature

The following section provides a brief review of available literature with regards to the phenomenon related to understudy.



Knowledge of the Second Language

Research studies claim that people cannot acquire or learn a language without significant exposure to the target language. People must understand and successfully communicate in the target language (e.g. English language) to become second language speakers. Asher (2003) augments that the ESL (English as Second language) teachers demonstrate the language for ESL learners to explain the content and context of the language. To listen and speak a second language (s), learners must have a listening and speaking attitude (Krashen, 1988); this helps learners gain knowledge and can utilize it in reading and writing. Richard and Rodger (2001) argue that in conventional pedagogies of ESL, the speaking skills of learners are overlooked and the major emphasis remains on improving the reading and writing skills of ESL learners. For example, in GTM (Grammar Translation Method), the reading and writing skills of ESL learners are the main focus of teaching, whereas the listening and speaking skills of students are given the least importance. Eminent scholars like Ur (2000) claim that all language skills including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and speaking are vital for powerful correspondence. A similar viewpoint is given by Baker and Westrup (2003) who assumed that students who speak English can get better training, securing great positions, and getting advancement in their learning.

Characteristics of Speaking

Mazouzi (2013) says that speaking practice can enable students to build up their informative skills. The principal normal for speaking is familiarity and it is the main topic of educators in expressing speaking ability. As per Hughes (2002), familiarity tells about the capacity of students who can talk in correspondence to the context and engage the audience members, if students' communication is not justified with the context, it can cause boredom to listeners and audience members might lose interest in the speech of students. Hugh further adds that familiarity defines the ability to reply comprehensibly by connecting the words, which helps in articulation by using accurate pitch and stress patterns.

Another characteristic of speaking performance is exactness. Students should be familiar with the remote language. ESL teachers must emphasize precision in their instructing procedure. Moreover, students should pay special attention to precision when speaking, for example, sentence structure, words, and expression (Mazouzi, 2013). Thornbury (2005) directed that students should know the right use of language and expressions and also be familiar with the length and articulations in different settings. Precision regarding lexis intends to choose appropriate words in reasonable settings. He further adds that articulation is the minimal element of information students normally focus on. Students should be familiar with the phonological, and syntactic patterns of language to have precision while speaking. Moreover, they should know about the pitch and sound of words. This helps students to speak the English language more successfully.



Speaking Problems of ESL Learners

There are a few difficulties in speaking ability that instructors can run over in helping understudies to talk in the classroom. The constraints involved in speaking ESL are shyness, low interest in a second language, and the liberty of using the first language or mother tongue (Tuan and Mai, 2015). Students commit errors in ESL and this creates embarrassing situations for the students. Littlewood (2007) communicated that a language classroom can create problems for students who are poor at speaking the English language. Pastry and Westrup (2003) explained that ESL learners have poor knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar rules, and it is extremely troublesome for students to answer when their teachers question in English. They do not know what to be said, which vocabulary item to be applied, or how to construct sentence structure according to a reasonable setting.

The less interactive, teacher-centered, classrooms turned out to be another reason for the poor speaking skills of ESL learners. These classrooms provide the least participation to students. A few students overwhelm the entire class while others do not talk. The last difficulty identified with the speaking capacity is that when a few students share a similar primary language, they speak in speaking class with comfort as it is not an issue for them but others do have difficulty in speaking (Tuan and Mai, 2015). Moreover, the utilization of primary language is exceptionally normal for students to utilize. If instructors do not instruct to talk in English, students will naturally use their first language to relate information to their fellow students.

Capability, Availability, and Operation of Instructional Resources

Effective instructions may be acknowledged. If the material used for instruction is beneficial in the classroom Mutai (2006) said in his investigation that if the material is not used in learning it rebounds the entire procedure (Igwe et al., 2014). A similar argument is built by Kitheka (2005) saying that a couple of instructional materials are effectively used for improving learning and accomplishment of instructive objectives and goals. The creator additionally includes that deficiency of these materials could prompt poor execution in institutions.

Methodology

This research is quantitative in nature. It is a descriptive study and a convenient sampling technique was used to carry out this study. The sample comprised 100 graduate students studying in institutions, which are NUML, FJWU, and BPGCW. Data were collected through standardized questionnaires. The questionnaire had 18 items in the form of statements. Likert scale having options of Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA) was used. The respondents were asked to choose one of the options for each statement. 5 experts validated the questionnaire.



Delimitations

The present research involved institutions located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad only. Secondly, depending on the nature of the study, only graduate students were sampled. The sample size for the study includes only three institutions and 35 students from each institution filled questionnaire. The data was analyzed through the SPSS.

Results

This study intends to observe the factors affecting the speaking skills of graduate students for this purpose sample of 100 was selected. Table 1 shows the statements of tools and percentages of responses for each statement.

Table 1

Percentages of responses against each statement

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. English as a medium of instruction can improve the teaching of English.	0	0	16	55	29
2. Your teacher speaks Urdu while teaching English class.	14	22	24	38	2
3. Your teacher encourages you to participate in classroom activities.	6	1	3	38	52
4. The environment of institution can have positive impact in learning English.	2	7	4	49	38
5. Effective use of different A.V Aids can improve the teaching of English.	1	7	22	59	11
6. Learning the English language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	0	0	12	51	37
7. I have positive aptitude for English learning.	0	3	6	68	23
8. I feel shy while speaking English in front of my class fellows.	0	20	37	28	15
9. Family support has a strong influence on English speaking skills of students.	2	7	8	53	30
10. There is influence of family background on students' English speaking skills.	0	15	4	48	33
11. Mother-tongue can affect the speaking skills of students.	0	7	8	68	17
12. Inspiration is a key element in second language learning.	1	3	7	54	35
13. Active listeners are always good English speakers.	2	8	3	40	47
14. Lack of confidence can affect the speaking skills of students studying English as a subject.	0	4	8	50	38
15. It is important to rehearse and practice language to attain	0	9	17	46	28



<i>English language competency.</i>					
16. <i>It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.</i>	2	37	22	28	11
17. <i>If students are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it becomes hard for them to correct at later stages.</i>	17	15	18	41	9
18. <i>Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.</i>	2	10	21	56	11

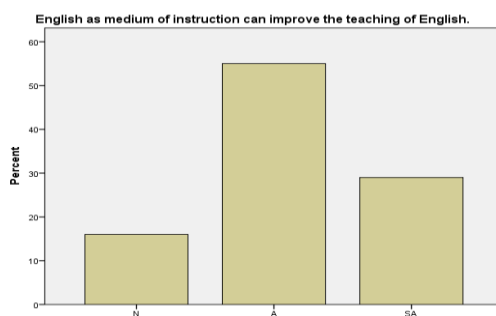


Figure 1: English as the medium of instruction can improve the teaching of English

The above figure shows that 16% of the students were neutral, 55% of students agreed and 29% of the students strongly agreed with the statement. Overall, the majority agrees that using English as the medium of instruction (MEI) can help in improving the English language skills of students.

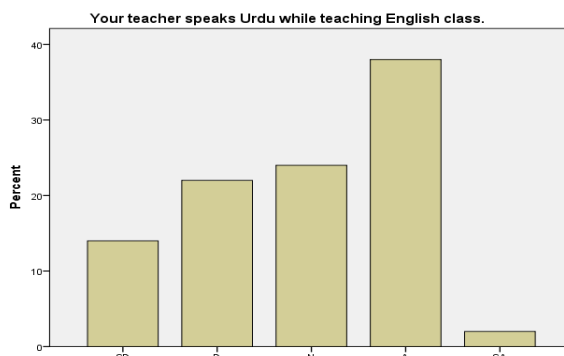


Figure 2: Using Urdu for teaching English subject

In response to the second statement, 14% of the students strongly disagreed that their teachers do not speak Urdu while teaching English class, 22% of students disagreed with that, 24% observed as neutral, 38% agreed and 2% strongly agreed with that. The majority of the respondents agreed with the second statement.

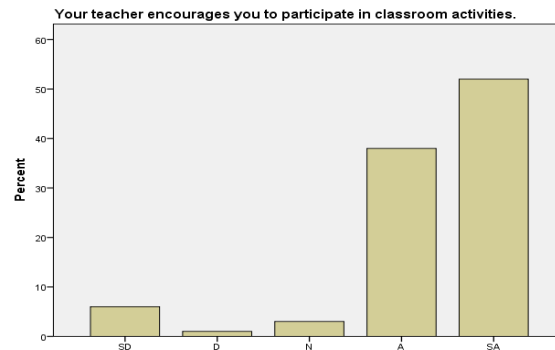


Figure 3: Encouraging attitude of English teachers to engage students in classroom activities

Table 3 shows that 6% of the students strongly disagreed with that, 1% of the students disagreed means their teachers do not encourage them to participate in classroom activities, 3% observed as neutral, 38% expressed agreement and 52% strongly agreed with the third statement. It shows that ESL teachers teaching at the graduate level are aware of the students' needs and have an encouraging attitude towards students. This kind of attitude can motivate students to be more interactive in classroom discussions, which can ultimately help students in developing good communication and interactive skills.

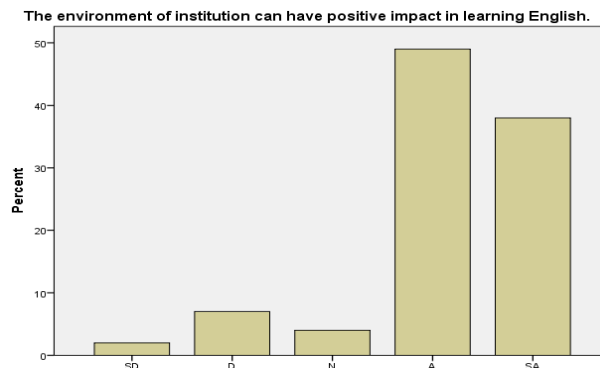


Figure 4: The role of the institution environment on the English speaking skills of learners

2% of the students strongly disagreed with the statement that the institutional environment has a role in improving the English-speaking skills of students, 7% of the students disagreed, 4% observed as neutral, 49% agreed with the statement and 38% strongly agreed with that. Overall, the percentage of agreed participants is significant and it can be said that the institutional environment can play a major role in improving the English speaking skills of ESL learners.

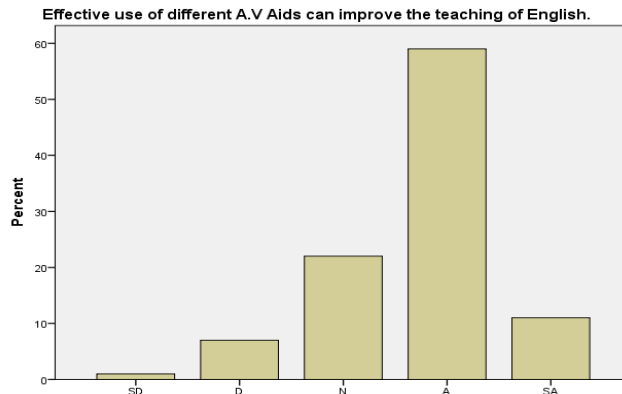


Figure 5: The role of AV aids in improving the teaching of English

1% of the students strongly disagreed, 7% disagreed, 22% were neutral, 59% agreed and 11% strongly agreed with statement number 5. Overall, the majority of the participants agreed that the use of AV aids in English language teaching can play important role in improving the English speaking skills of graduate students.

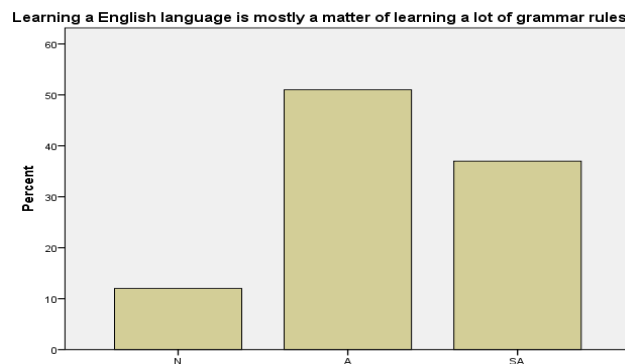


Figure 6: Learning English means learning English grammar rules

Table 6 shows responses about English language learning along with a lot of grammar rules, 0 % disagreed, 12% were neutral, 51% agreed and 37% strongly agreed with that. The majority of the participants have a conception that learning the English language means learning grammar.

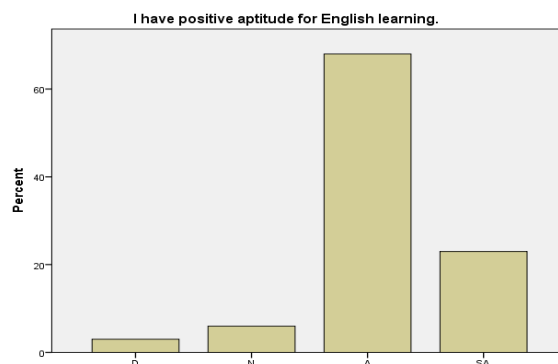




Figure 7: Students' positive attitude toward learning English as a language

Only 3% disagreed, 6% were neutral, 68% agreed and 23% strongly agreed with statement number 7. Overall, the majority agreed that learners have a positive attitude towards learning English as a second language.

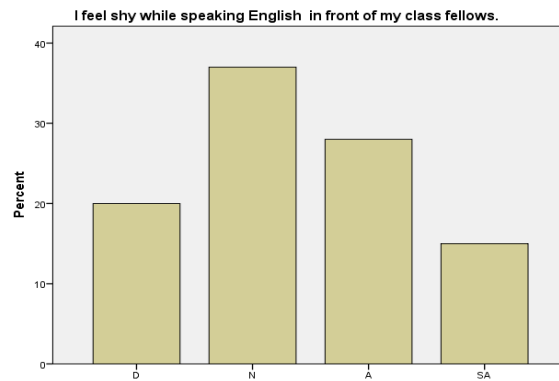


Figure 8: Students feel shy while speaking English in front of the class

20% disagreed, 37% were neutral, 28% agreed and 15% strongly agreed with that. The majority agreed with the statement and the percentage of neutral participants was high. The shyness of the students acts as a barrier and due to this reason; students fail to develop good English speaking skills.

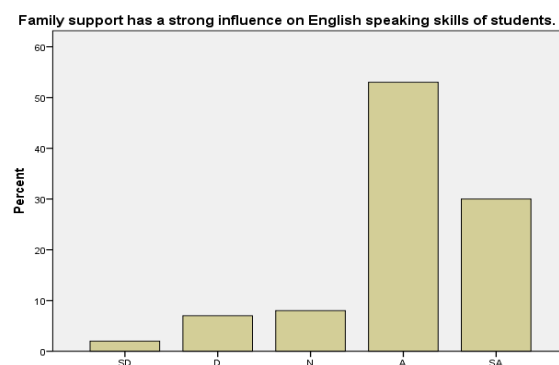


Figure 9: Role of family support in improving English speaking skills

2% strongly disagreed with that, 7% disagreed, 8% were neutral, and 83% agreed with to statement that family support has a strong influence on developing English-speaking skills of graduate students. Since domestic and academic languages are different for most Pakistani graduate students, at home parents encourage family members to speak 'mother tongue' or Urdu; the only place for English speaking practice is the classroom.

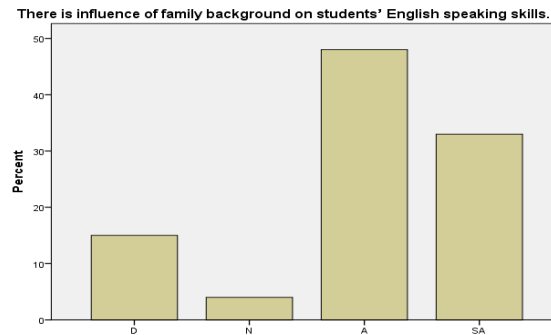


Figure 10: The role of family background on students' English speaking skills

15% disagreed, 4% were neutral, and 81% agreed that the family background of students influences the English speaking skills of graduate students.

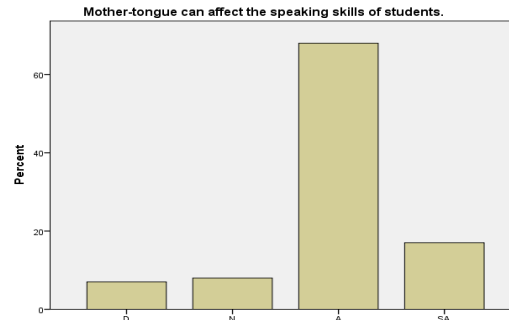


Figure 11: 'mother tongue' affects English speaking skills of learners

7% disagreed, 8% were neutral, 68% agreed and 17% strongly agreed with that. So, the majority of participants agreed that 'mother tongue' influences the ESL learners' speaking skills. The majority of Pakistanis come from a rural background and the majority of them have a regional language as their 'mother tongue'. For Pakistani children usually 'mother tongue' is L1, after those students learn Urdu as a second language. The English language is used as an academic and official language but it rarely has any domestic use. The expression of the mother tongue is strong and when these learners speak English, the listener can easily feel the influence of the mother tongue in the utterances of the speakers.

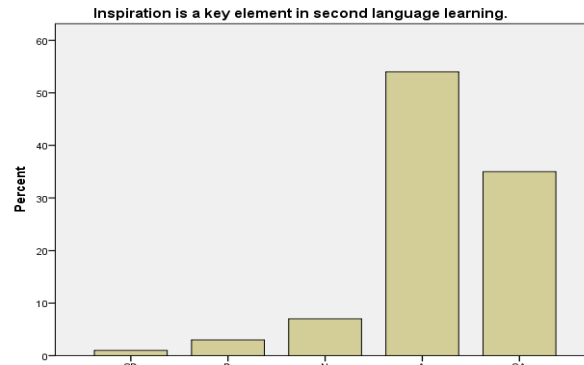


Figure 12: Role of inspiration in learning the English language

3% disagree that inspiration has a role to play in learning the English language, 7% were neutral, 54% agreed and 35% strongly agreed with that.

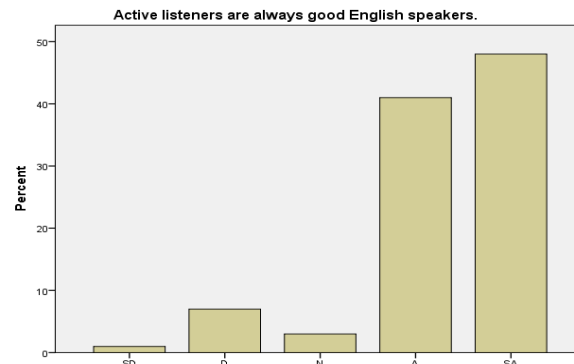


Figure 13: Active learners are good English speakers

Figure 13 shows responses about active listeners who are always good speakers. 82% strongly disagreed with that, 8% disagreed, 3% were neutral, 40% agree and 47% strongly agreed with that. Overall, the majority of students feel that active learning is a strong reason to learn English.

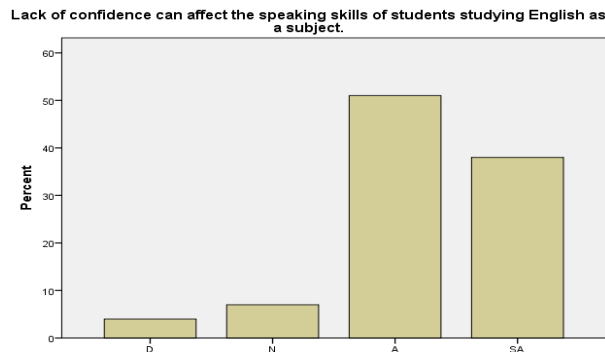


Figure 14: Lack of confidence and learning English



Figure 14 shows responses about lack of confidence and its impact on the speaking skills of students studying English as a subject; 4% disagree, 8% were neutral, 50% agreed and 38% strongly agreed with that. 88 percent of students agreed which shows that lack of confidence is one of the significant barriers to improving the English speaking skills of students and learning English as a subject.

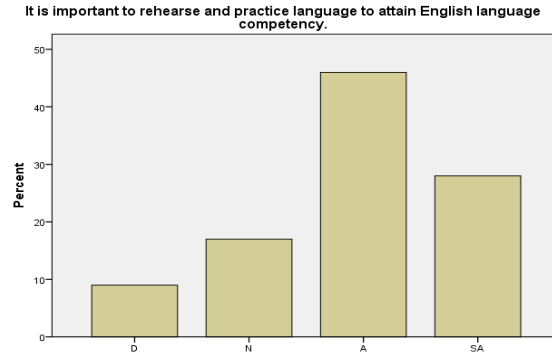


Figure 15: English speaking practice and English speaking skills

9% disagreed, 17% were neutral, 46% agreed and 28% strongly agreed with that. Overall, the majority of the students agreed that practicing English is one of the factors in improving their English-speaking skills. As mentioned previously, ESL classrooms are the best place to practice English conversations and improve the speaking skills of graduate students.

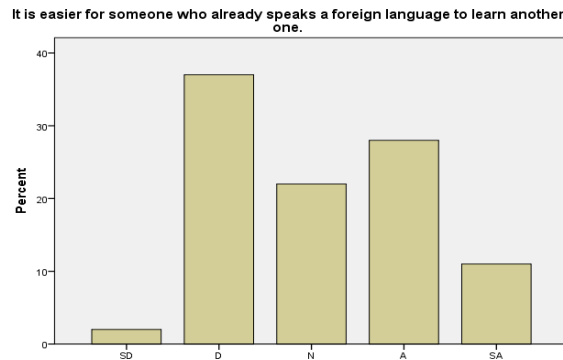


Figure 16: Learning English is easy for learners who speak a foreign language

In responses about the statement 16, 2% strongly disagree with that, 37% disagree, 22% were neutral, 28% agree and 11% strongly agree with that. Although the majority agreed, the percentage of neutral and disagreed responses is also high.



Figure 17: Correcting language errors at the start can help in learning the correct language

Figure 17 shows responses to the statement that if students are allowed to make mistakes, in the beginning, it becomes hard for them to correct at later stages. 17% strongly disagreed with that, 15% disagreed, 18% were neutral, 41% agreed and 9% strongly agreed.

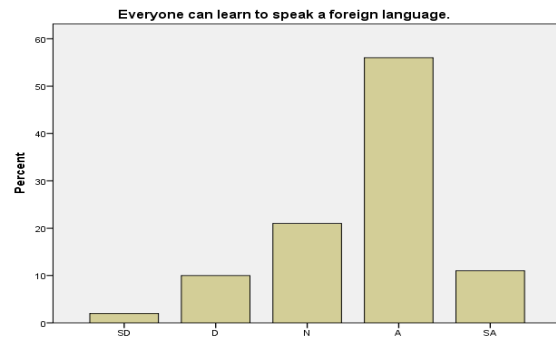


Figure 18: Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language

2% strongly disagree with that, 10% disagreed, 21% were neutral, 56% agreed and 11% of the students strongly agreed with that.

FINDINGS

English as a Medium of Instruction and Role of Institutional Environment

About majority of the students agreed that their teachers use the English language as the medium of instruction for teaching English. It helps in the improvement of English among students. Otherwise, students translate twice to comprehend the content. There were multiple responses from the students that their teachers speak Urdu while teaching in English. Teachers use translanguaging pedagogies, but this may demotivate the students because most students follow their teachers as role models. The teachers want to improve the content learning abilities of students and play the role of facilitators, students usually imitate the instructors and intentionally or unintentionally do not give much attention to improving English-speaking skills.



Half of the students agreed that the environment of the institution can have a positive impact on learning English which means that a positive environment of the institution can play a vital role in learning English.

Effective use of Different A.V Aids in Classroom Activities

Half of the students express a strong agreement that their teachers encourage them to participate in classroom activities. It is a positive sign for the enhancement of English in students.

About majority of the students agreed that effective use of different A.V Aids can improve the teaching of English. Its means that using different A.V Aids can improve the teaching of English so English teachers try to use different A.V Aids during the teaching of English.

Learning English and Grammar Rules

Half of the students agreed that a lot of grammar is to be learned for learning the English language, which means that students must learn grammar rules for learning the English language.

Positive Aptitude for English Learning

Most of the students agreed that they have a positive aptitude for English learning. When someone has a positive attitude toward learning anything they learn quickly and efficiently.

Lack of Confidence and Shyness

Some of the students were neutral while responding to the statement that students feel shy while speaking English in front of their class fellows. It shows that they don't have enough confidence to face their class fellows while speaking in class, here teachers can play a vital role by motivating and encouraging shy students and trying to give them enough confidence that they can face their class fellows.

Half of the students agreed that lack of confidence can affect the speaking skills of students studying English as a subject. confidence is the key to success without confidence we can not attain anything. So students must try to develop confidence and teachers must try to adopt such strategies through which students' confidence levels increase.

Influence of Family Support and Family Background

The majority of the students agreed that family support has a strong influence on their English-speaking skills of students. It means that those students belong to strong families they have strong English-speaking skills. About half of the students agreed that there is an influence of family background on students' English-speaking skills, it shows that those students who have an educated family background have good English-speaking skills because in educated families' students learn a lot from their parent's siblings and surroundings.

Effects of 'Mother Tongue'

The majority of the students agreed that 'mother tongue' can affect their speaking skills of students. As we are not native speakers of English so there is always the influence of our mother tongue on our English speaking skills.

Inspiration is a Key Element

The majority of the students agreed that inspiration is a key element in second language



learning. As our students are learning English as a second language until they are not inspired they cannot learn the English language because inspiration is the key element in second language learning.

Importance of English-speaking Practice and Active Listening

About half of the students agreed that it is important to rehearse and practice language to attain English language competency, it is a common phenomenon that without practicing, no one can attain competency in anything.

About half of the students strongly agreed that active listeners are always good English speakers. Obviously, without paying attention no one can learn anything.

Mistakes in the Beginning

About half of the students agreed that if students are allowed to make mistakes, in the beginning, it becomes hard for them to correct at later stages. If teachers do not correct the students at earlier stages, it will become their habit, so teachers should correct the mistakes of the students at the earlier stages.

Learning a Foreign Language

There were multiple responses to the statement that language is easy to learn for those who already speak a foreign language. About half of the students agreed that in learning of foreign language, for this they have to put their efforts, they have to build confidence and practice a lot.

Conclusions

English language acquisition can be achieved if students are provided with AV aids and given chance to speak freely to improve their vocabulary for use. The methods used in the classroom setting, the instruction can motivate students to speak or demotivate them in the learning process. In our country, most teachers use the direct method of teaching which demotivated the students because in direct methods teachers are active and the students' role is passive so there is less participation from the students which decreases their confidence.

Learning English as a second language, in our society where English is not our first language so there is always the influence of our mother tongue. So our students made errors while speaking in English. Students' wrong pronunciations and direct translation from their mother tongue to English is the main problem while speaking.

As this study found many factors which affect the speaking skills of graduate students like motivation, the influence of mother tongue, family foundation and condition, inspiration, poor direction, Poor listening aptitude, absence of confidence, nervousness, absence of appropriate vocabulary, age, and admission.



Recommendations

Recommendations from the findings of the study include;

1. Instructional materials help in the teaching of English-speaking skills and they should be used over time. So our institution must use new and modern instructional material and different A.V Aids for enhancement of the speaking skills.
2. Teachers should use learner-oriented strategies like role play and dialogue, instead of a direct method in which students' role is passive. These strategies help in building confidence and minimize mother tongue use. Teachers should use advanced strategies while instructing in English class.
3. Students should be encouraged and motivated by teachers. It will help them to develop an interest in reading like newspapers, educational magazines, articles, and storybooks. It will increase their vocabulary. Students should practice speaking English in school and at home. Students might communicate in English with fellow students and insist to respond in English.
4. Students should be encouraged to participate in debates and speeches to improve their English-speaking skills and teacher should appreciate students.

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