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Moroccan EFL Learners' Speaking Skills: Status, Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

Most learners in Moroccan public schools are exposed to English at a late stage, which is one of the challenges they face. The main objective of this study is to identify the main challenges encountered by Moroccan EFL learners in English-speaking skills. The main question of this research is what the Moroccan EFL learners' main challenges in English-speaking skills are. The significance of this study is to allow teachers and students to benefit from this research outcomes. This study contributes to finding solutions to the challenges that encounter the Moroccan learners of English as a foreign language in the English-speaking skills. This study opted for students' questionnaire distributed to Moroccan EFL learners, second year baccalaureate, Science and Art streams, at Dar Salam senior high school in Rabat. The study concluded that Moroccan English as a foreign language (EFL) learners need more time to practice English-speaking skills. Besides, motivation is important in enhancing learners speaking skills. The syllabus and the teaching materials of the speaking English skills courses require improvement to meet the needs of the learners and to fit the demands of the labor market. The recommendations and the solutions would help to overcome the current status and challenges in learning English-speaking skills.

Keywords: English speaking skills, EFL learners, challenges, Moroccan English Learners, solutions.

1. Introduction

This study is concerned with Moroccan EFL learners of English-speaking skills of high school students. Although Moroccan EFL learners start learning English as a foreign language from class nine till they join University, they still face tremendous challenges in English speaking skills when they try to express themselves in English in or out the classroom. However, they begin studying English from class seven starting from the school year 2023-2024. Students lack encouragements, motivation, and enough practice. They also fear criticism of making mistakes and shyness of inhibit. This factor affects the speaking fluency of Moroccan EFL learners. When learners are afraid of making mistakes or shy, they become hesitant, (Al- Ghazali, 201). According to Brown (2019), practicing phonological features through a speaking performance can be self-initiated or done in pairs. Therefore, speaking English as a foreign language can be more difficult for learners due to its complex rules.

Morocco is a multilingual and diglossic country in which a specific variety of Northern-African Arabic, a hybrid between classical Arabic and modern standard Arabic (Erihani, 2016) is considered the official state language and the mother tongue of most Moroccan citizens. Arabic was reinstated in Morocco after the end of the French colonization in 1956 (Eckert and McGonell-Ginet, 2013; Ennaji, 2005; Siddiqi, 2003).

1.1. The rational of the study

This study would help understand the challenges and the factors that hinder English speaking skills' learning and teaching process at Dar Salam high school. It would also help the teachers to improve the situation in teaching the English-Speaking Skills course. The present study would also raise the awareness of the Moroccan EFL learners to master the English-speaking skills before joining university. This study will also contribute to identifying the challenges encountered by Moroccan high school students. Besides, both teachers and learners will benefit from this work.

1.2. Objectives of the study

The following are the main objectives of this study:

- To identify the main challenges encountered by Moroccan high school students in learning English speaking skills.
- To investigate the adequacy and the appropriateness of the current syllabi and teaching materials for English speaking skills courses at Dar Salam high school.

- To investigate the main reasons for the learners' low English-speaking skills,
- To provide some recommendations and solutions that might help both teachers and learners to improve and develop learning the English speaking skills at Dar Salam high school.

1.3. Research Questions

These are the research questions of this study:

1) What are Moroccan EFL learners' main challenges in English-Speaking skills?

2) What are the reasons of the low English speaking skills for the Moroccan EFL learners?

3) How adequate and appropriate are the current syllabi and teaching materials for English-speaking skills at Dar Salam high school?

4) What are solutions and suggestions that can help the current situation to improve the Moroccan EFL learners' English-speaking skills at Dar Salam high school?

2. Literature Review

The Moroccan EFL learners encounter challenges in learning English-Speaking skills at Dar Salam high school. For English as foreign language (EFL) learners, speaking English is a crucial skill since it is important for communicating verbally with others. Poor environments, lack of interest and lack of motivation are the primary factors behind learners' inability to speak English (Alhamdi, 2014; Ali, et al. 2019). Thus, English-speaking skills need a good background. Dewi (2015) stated that English is used in every corner of the world to communicate with people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures. Al Hosni (2014) indicated that anxiety and unwillingness to participate in speaking skills lessons are the main barriers to practical English-speaking skills. Teachers of English at Dar Salam should focus on speaking skills such as fluency and accuracy because learners should be accurate and fluent in learning English speaking skills.

The English language objectives are to improve the learners' comprehensive ability, especially oral expressions, and motivate EFL learners to have adequate opportunity to use the foreign language fluency. Al-Tamimi (2004). Moroccan EFL learners are exposed to English at a late stage. English speaking skills are considered one of the most challenging aspects of EFL learners in the Arab world. Many Moroccan EFL learners found it difficult to speak English fluently. Classroom activities such as storytelling, speeches, and debates could alleviate the problem of poor oral skills. Moroccan EFL Learners can practice English-speaking skills in the

classroom using the learner-centered approach rather than a teacher-centered approach where they feel free to discuss and correct each other. Learners need the teacher's feedback while practicing English-speaking skills in the classroom.

The researchers, as university teachers, realized that motivation is a factor to improve the Moroccan EFL learners in English speaking skills. If learners of English are well-motivated to practice different real-life situations in English speaking skills, this way will improve their level of English-speaking skills. Motivation and practice are two sides of the same coin. Al-Hosni (2014) observed that some learners are not motivated to communicate in English as they do not see a need to learn or speak English. Therefore, English language teachers should explain the significance of studying English speaking skills to their learners.

English speaking skill is an essential part of communication with others for social interaction and other communication purposes. The need for good communication skills in English has grown worldwide, according to Richards (2006). Ability to speak English is one of the essential skills in English due to its superior status. Thus, English teachers must prioritize English speaking skills in the classroom. Therefore, teachers should adopt a communicative approach when teaching English speaking skills in the classroom. Brown (2007) indicated that communicative language teaching is an approach to language teaching methodology that emphasizes authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, and task-based activities, and communicating in both the target language. Students find out many differences between English and their mother language which is Arabic. Therefore, students should try consciously to learn the English language (Al-Sobhi & Prees, 2018).

Communicative Language Teaching Materials and Syllabus:

Teaching materials intended to facilitate communicative language usage in communicative instructional systems. This teaching strategy will assist teachers and improve Moroccan students' proficiency in interacting with others in English. According to Richards and Rodgers (1986) three materials are used: one; Text-based materials. Two; Task-based. Three; Realia. Teachers of English-speaking skills at Dar Salam high school should provide a variety of authentic and communicative materials for teaching English-speaking skills to improve the level of their learners. The current English courses should focus on communicative English to meet learners' needs and achieve the desired teaching objectives of English-speaking skills.

3. Methodology

This study used only one instrument of scientific research methods to gather data and information, which is quantitative research method (students' questionnaire). Collecting of data by using questionnaire has many advantages, according to Sarantakos (1980). Few of these advantages are:

- Questionnaire produce quick results.
- They give greater assurance of anonymity.
- They also provide a more comprehensive look at the responses because researchers can reach respondents more rapidly than other research methods.

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study are female and male students from science and arts streams, high school students, Dar Salam high school in Rabat, Morocco. The total number of respondents was 105. Sixty were females and 45 were males.

3.2. Research Design

The researcher designed a questionnaire for the Moroccan EFL learners at Dar-Salam high school. The questionnaire referred to the teacher of English at the same school before administering it to ensure validity. The questionnaire distributed to the participants of this study during class time.

4. Results of the Study

The research method used in this study was a quantitative scientific research method (questionnaire) for collecting data and information. The questionnaire was classified into three parts; the first part of the questionnaire was concerned with general background knowledge of the learners and learners' main challenges in English speaking skills, the second part of the questionnaire was about the reasons behind the Moroccan high school students challenges in English speaking skills and learners' motivation to learn English. The last part of the questionnaire focused on the exposure of the learners to the English language and learners' opinion about the appropriateness of the syllabus and teaching materials for the English-speaking skills courses at Dar-Salam high school.

Table 1 shows the sex of the respondents who participated in this study. One hundred and five of the learners, 100% from Dar-Salam high school were, females and males. Statistical data show that the majority of the participant were females.

Table 1. Gender of the learners

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Female	63	60
Male	42	40
Total	**105**	**100**

The item in table 2 asked the participant when they have started learning English for the first time in their schools. Two of the learners, 1.90% said that they started learning English in class four, while none of the students opted for class one, two and three. Three of the students, 2.56%, have started learning English in class five and five other students, 4.76%, began to study English from class six. Seven of the learners, 6.67%, began to learn English in class seven and four learners, 3.81%, began to learn English in class eight. Eighty-four students, 80%, began to learn English in class nine. Table 2 indicates that the majority of Moroccan EFL learners start to learn English at a late age. This could be a reason why learners find difficulties in learning English as a foreign language in Dar-Salam public high school.

Table 2. The first contact for learners with English in schools

Status	Responses	
Class	Frequency	Percentage
One	0	0%
Two	0	0%
Three	0	0%
Four	2	1.90%
Five	3	2.86%
Six	5	4.76%
Seven	7	6.67%
Eight	4	3.81%
Nine	84	80%
Total	105	100%

The item in table 3 asked learners whether they encounter challenges in learning speaking skills. Seventy-five of the learners, 71.43% replied with yes, while 20 learners, 19.05%, said that they did not face any difficulties in learning speaking skills. Ten learners, 9.52%, did not respond. The statistical data implied that most of the learners still encounter difficulties in learning speaking skills due to their weak background knowledge in English.

Table 3. Moroccan English learners encountered challenges in speaking skills

	Responses	
Status	Frequency	Percentage
a. Yes	75	71.43
b. No	20	19.05
c. No response	10	9.52
Total	105	100

The learners were asked if they feel afraid and anxious about making mistakes when speaking English in and outside the classroom (table 4). Fifty of the learners, 47.62%, strongly agreed that they felt frightened and anxious when speaking English, and twenty-five of them, 23,81%, agreed. Ten of the learners, 9.52% didn't respond, and fifteen, 14.76%, disagreed. Only five of the learners, 4.75%, strongly disagreed. It indicated that there is no encouragement for the learners from the teachers' side to practice English speaking skills in different situations whatever mistakes they made.

Table 4. How often do learners speak English in and outside the classroom?

Learners feel afraid and anxious to make mistakes while speaking English.		
Responses		
Status	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	50	47.62%
Agree	25	23.81%
No opinion	10	9.52%
Disagree	15	14.29%
Strongly disagree	5	4.76%
Total	105	100%

The learners were also asked if their teachers provide them with enough time to practice English speaking skills in the classroom (table 5). Twenty-five of the learners, 23.81%, replied with yes, and seventy-five of the respondents, 71.43% answered no. however, only five of the learners, 4.76, did not answer. These answers implies that most of the learners did not practice enough speaking skills in the classroom. Teacher should, on the other side, control the class time for the sake of the learners to improve their English-speaking skills.

The participants were asked if their teachers motivate and encourage them to speak English in the classroom and elsewhere. Table 6 shows that 30 of the participants, 28.57%, answered yes and sixty-five of them, 61.90%, said no. finally, only ten of the learners, 9.53%, did not reply. It implied

that students were sometimes motivated by their teachers to participate and speak English in the class. Inspiration and encouragement will allow the learners to break the wall of anxiety and fright.

As shown in table 7, the learners were asked their opinion about the sufficiency of the class time allotted in practicing English speaking skills, twenty o the learners, 19.05%, said that the class time allotted for practicing English speaking skill was enough, but seventy of them, 66.67%, said it was not enough. Seven of the learners, 6.67%, were neutral and eight of them, 7.61% was enough. This implied that the class time was insufficient for practicing English speaking skills because most learners negatively replied. It also meant that the teachers rushed in their teaching the lessons the lessons according to the week's study plan because they wanted to finish the syllabus of the course of English-speaking skills without giving the learners enough practice in English speaking skills.

Table 5. The practice of English speaking-skills in the classroom by the learners.

	Responses	
Status	Frequency	Percentages
a. Yes	25	23.81%
b. No	75	71.43%
c. No response	5	4.76%
Total	105	100%

Table 6. Learners' motivation to speak English.

	Responses	
Status	Frequency	Percentage
a. Yes	30	28.57
b. No	65	61.90
c. No response	10	9.53
Total	105	100

Table 7. The time allotted to practice English speaking skills in the class.

	Responses	
Status	Frequency	Percentage
a. Enough	20	19.05%
b. Not enough	70	66.67%
c. Neutral	7	6.67%
d. Rather enough	8	7.61%
Total	105	100%

In table 8, the learners were asked if the teaching methodology used by the teachers of English-speaking skills were learner-centered. Only twelve, 11.42%, strongly agreed that the teaching method was learner centered, and only fifteen of them, 14.29% agreed that the teaching method was learner-centered. Eight of the learners, 7.62%, remained with no opinion, thirty-eight of the learners, 36.19%, disagreed that the teaching method employed by the teacher was learner-centered. Thirty-two of them, 30.48, strongly disagreed that the teaching method used in teaching the English-speaking skills was learner-centered. These responses implied that the teaching methodology employed by the teachers in teaching English speaking skills course was not learner-centered, but it was teacher centered.

Table 8. The teaching methodology used by the teachers

The methodology used in teaching speaking skills was learner centered.		
Responses		
Status	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	12	11.42%
Agree	15	14.29%
No opinion	8	7.62%
Disagree	38	36.19%
Strongly disagree	32	30.48%
Total	105	100%

Learners were asked about the appropriateness of the topics included in English-speaking skills syllabus (table 9). Thirty, 28.57%, strongly agreed that the issues were appropriate, and another thirty-two, 30.38% decided that issues were appropriate. Six of the learners, 5.72%, did not reply. On the other hand, twenty of them, 19.04%, disagreed that the topics in the syllabus of this course were appropriate, and seventeen of them, 16.19%, strongly disagreed that issues were appropriate. These responses implied that the topics were rather good and needed some additions and changes for development.

Table 9. Learners' opinions about the topics of teaching English speaking skills

The topics in the syllabus are appropriate for teaching English-speaking skills.		
Status	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	30	28.57%
Agree	32	30.48%
No opinion	6	5.72%
Disagree	20	19.04%
Strongly disagree	17	16.19%
Total	105	100%

The learners were asked if the materials in teaching the English-speaking skills course were challenging (table 10). Thirty-eight of the learners, 36.19%, strongly agreed that the available materials were challenging. Forty-two of the learners, 40%, agreed that the available materials in teaching English speaking skills were challenging. Eight of the learners, 7.62% did not give their opinions, while eleven of the learners, 10.48% disagreed that the available materials were challenging, and six of them, 5.71%, strongly disagreed that the available materials were challenging. This statistical data revealed that most of the learners replied that the available materials in teaching English speaking skills were challenging.

Table 10. *Learners' opinion about the materials used in teaching English speaking skills*

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	38	36.19%
Agree	42	40%
No opinion	8	7.62%
Disagree	11	10.48%
Strongly disagree	6	5.71%
Total	105	100%

The item displayed in table 11 shows results of the learners who were asked about their opinions, and if the teaching materials in teaching English-speaking skills were motivating and communicative. Eighteen of the learners, 17.14%, strongly agree that the teaching materials in teaching English speaking skills were motivating and communicative. Sixteen of the learners, 15, 14%, decided that issues were motivating and communicative. Whereas, five of the learners, 4.76%, did not answer. Thirty-four of the learners, 32.48%, disagreed that the teaching materials in teaching English-speaking skills were motivating and communicative. Thirty-two of the learners, 30.48%, strongly disagreed that the teaching materials in teaching English-speaking skills were motivating and communicative. This implied that the teaching materials of teaching speaking-speaking skills need supplementary materials to go with the needs of the Moroccan EFL learners.

To summarize, the statistical data of this study showed that:

- Most of learners started to study English from class nine of their schooling, i.e., at a late stage before joining the university. It affected their level of English-speaking skills.
- The Moroccan EFL learners encountered challenges in studying English-speaking skills because of their limited background knowledge in English.

- Most of the teaching classes of English-speaking skills were teacher-centered rather than student-centered. Besides, the class time allotted for teaching English-speaking skills was not enough to give the Moroccan EFL learners the chance to communicate in English and to improve their level of English-speaking skills.

Table 11. The motivating and communicative teaching materials

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	18	17.14%
Agree	16	15.24%
No opinion	5	4.76%
Disagree	34	32.38%
Strongly disagree	32	30.48%
Total	105	100%

Overall, despite its significance, this research used only a small number of samples that focus on one geographical area therefore we cannot generalize the findings.

5. Conclusion

The researchers recognized that the Moroccan EFL learners need to have enough time to practice English-speaking skills in different status of real-life situations in and outside the classroom. The English-speaking skills should teach Moroccan EFL learners using a communicative language approach (CLT). Using communicative authentic teaching materials to teach English speaking skills will benefit Moroccan EFL learners who has positive attitudes toward studying English speaking skills. Therefore, teachers of English-speaking skills should change their teaching method from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach in teaching English speaking skills at Dar-Salam high school in Rabat, Morocco. The teaching materials and syllabus topics on English speaking skills should be motivating, communicative, authentic, and interactive. The solutions mentioned above tackle the current challenges in teaching and learning English speaking skills encountered by Moroccan EFL learners at Dar-Salam high school in Rabat, Morocco.

6. Recommendations and Solutions

The following are recommendations and solutions based on the results of this study:

1) Teaching English should be taught at early stages in Moroccan schools, learning English at the beginning of their primary education will enable them to speak it fluently.

2) The Moroccan EFL learners of English-speaking skills should be motivated and encouraged positively.

3) Learners should be allotted enough time in practicing English speaking skills in the classroom.

4) Teaching English speaking skills should be a student centered approach in the classroom rather than a teacher centered approach. The student-centered approach will provide the Moroccan EFL learners a positive attitude towards learning English speaking skills and understanding its strategies. On the other hand, this approach will enable Moroccan EFL learners to break the wall of anxiety and fear of making mistakes when speaking and communicating in English.

5) The teachers of English should develop the teaching materials when teaching oral skills in order to reach the level of realistic situation, authentic materials, and communicative topics in teaching English speaking at Dar-Salam high school.

6) Further research should be conducted, including more significant number sampling.

7) Different research methods should be used, and a more extended implementation period should exist.

8) EFL teachers should be put in training courses regarding implementing the CLT principles.

9) Communication should be encouraged more and speaking activities should be increased.

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