

An investigation on the Challenges of Teaching Oral Skills as Perceived by Upper Basic Stage English Language Teachers in Jordan

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the EFL teachers' challenges of teaching oral skills in Amman, Jordan. The participants of the study consisted of 130 EFL teachers in public and private schools in Jordan who were selected randomly during the academic year 2017/2018.

A questionnaire, which consists of three domains of challenges (i.e. challenges related to teachers, challenges related to students, and challenges related to equipment, facilities and textbooks), was developed based on related literature. Interviews with some teachers were also made to support the data collected via the questionnaire. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (i.e. means and standard deviations, ANOVA and MANOVA).

The results revealed that teachers- regardless of their experience, gender or the grade level they teach- have similar challenges of teaching oral skills. The only differences were between public and private school teachers with regard to the challenge of equipment. The results also showed that the domain of "Students" as a source of challenge got the highest mean score (2.88).

The authors recommend that more teacher training workshops on teaching oral skills be held by the Ministry of Education. It was also recommended that oral skills be included in the General Secondary Certificate Exam in Jordan.

Key Words: Challenges, Speaking skills, Basic stage, EFL teachers, Jordan.

Introduction

Teachers face several challenges in teaching oral skills such as challenges related to teachers, students, equipment, facilities and textbooks. For example, students' shyness, teachers' need for professional development, shortage of needed equipment, unsuitable curriculum may affect the teaching of oral skills negatively. Chen & Goh (2011) concluded that teachers in EFL countries face many difficulties in teaching oral skills such as students' low participation in oral classes, lack of

authentic language atmosphere, insufficient teaching resources, big number of students in classes and teachers' lack of teaching strategies.

Richard (2008) considered listening a significant skill since it provides learners with suitable input to produce the language. Both listeners and speakers are active learners since they work together to negotiate meaning. Listening is not a passive skill since listeners comprehend the spoken language to communicate efficiently using the target language.

The first core subject outcome for the English language curriculum for basic and secondary stages is "to communicate information, ideas, opinions and feelings effectively for a variety of purposes in written, spoken and visual forms to interact and collaborate with others to accomplish goals". (MOE 2013:9). Therefore, balance and integration of teaching the four skills of English language are essential in teaching English as a foreign language.

Arab EFL learners face many serious difficulties in practicing the four skills of language. The causes of these problems are many. First, students prefer to speak in Arabic in English classes. Second, they are not motivated to practice oral skills. Third, they are not exposed to natural EFL context. Finally, English Curricula do not include sufficient authentic content. (Jdetawi, 2011)

If teachers are aware of the challenges they face in teaching oral skills, they can deeply reconsider their teaching methods and seek to enhance their professional development. Borg (2015) believed that there is a strong relationship between teachers' perceptions and their own classroom practices. The profession of teaching has its own demands and challenges, which lead teachers to act like physicians when they diagnose difficulties, expect solutions and make decisions.

Therefore, this study was intended to shed light on upper basic Jordanian EFL teachers' perceptions of the challenges they encounter in the field of teaching oral skills in Amman, Therefore, the following two questions were addressed:

1-What are the challenges of teaching oral skills which are perceived by upper basic stage EFL teachers in Amman?

2- Are there any statistically significant differences ($\alpha = .05$) between the mean scores of EFL teachers in Amman that can be attributed to teachers' variables (i.e. experience, gender, school type, and the grade they teach)?

Review of Literature

To achieve communicative outcomes, oral skills should be highly emphasized in EFL classes.

Boonkit(2010) confirmed that speaking is one of the four basic skills that is essential for good communication in a language. Since communication is the main objective for any foreign language learners, speaking and listening should be highly focused in language classrooms. When students practice oral skills, they can express themselves, negotiate meaning and exchange ideas with others in English.

Chen& Goh (2011) explored the challenges that teachers face in teaching oral English in higher education in the English as a foreign language. Open-ended questions and interviews were used to collect data. The sample of the study was 331 EFL teachers from 44 universities in China. 30 teachers were interviewed. The results showed that teachers face different challenges such as large classes and lack of facilities. Many teachers were keen to join training courses to improve their

professional skills.

Habib (2011) investigated the pedagogical challenges that English language teachers faced in teaching oral skills at secondary stages in Bangladesh. The sample was 260 students and 10 teachers. Questionnaires and interviews were used to gather data. The results showed that both teachers and students prefer to speak Bangla in English classes. Students feel scared to communicate in English simply because they don't practice oral skills in classes. Some reasons behind the difficulties that the teachers face in oral classes were test – directed teaching and educational rules. The study recommended that teachers should focus on speaking English in oral classes. They should be passionate to teach students oral skills. Syllabus developers should include more communicative tasks in textbooks.

Maryslessor, Barasa, & Omulando (2012) examined the challenges faced in the use of the CLT approach for teaching Listening and speaking lessons among teachers in Lugari District in Kenya. Observation and interviews were used to collect data of the study. The sample of the study was fourteen teachers from secondary schools. The findings revealed that the main difficulties were limitedness of time, large curriculum, and the anxiety for exams which made teachers ignore authentic situations. The study recommended that resources and teaching aids should be used to create communicative environment in EFL classrooms.

Tilahun & Wolyie (2013) investigated the challenges of teaching speaking skill in a large English language classroom. The sample of the study was 6 English teachers who taught 9th grade and 100 students in 9th grade. Three instruments were used for data collection: A questionnaire, classroom observation and semi- structured interviews. The study revealed that English teachers face many challenges such as classroom environment, students' low motivation to speak, the need for teachers' professional development.

Abu-Helu, Qutami & Dweik (2009) explored the role of the English language teachers' pedagogical beliefs in teaching oral communication skills at the upper basic stage in Jordan. Eight experienced female English language teachers who taught ninth grade in public schools participated in the study. Structured interviews and classroom observation were used to achieve the purpose of the study. The findings showed that all teachers were aware of the significance of oral skills to students; however their practices were incongruent with their own beliefs.

Alkhalwaldeh (2010) investigated the types of challenges EFL teachers faced in Amman 1st and 2nd Directorates of Education .A questionnaire was used to collect data. The participants were 125 EFL teachers. The findings of the study shed light on important challenges such as weakness in English, students' negative attitudes towards English, decrease in students' achievement in English, and inability of students to communicate in English.

Alrawashdeh, A, & Al-zayed (2017) examined the difficulties that English teachers faced when they teach listening and their attitudes towards English in Karak School. A questionnaire and informal interviews were used in this study .The study has proved that the challenges that English teachers face, such as the learning atmosphere and equipment and facilities, are related to the large number of class and the lack of resources. The study recommended that further studies should be conducted on the best techniques applied in teaching listening and designing curriculum that concentrated on English skills.

Methodology

This is a quantitative – qualitative descriptive study which aimed at investigating the challenges of teaching oral skills as perceived by upper basic stage English language teachers in Jordan. Data were collected via questionnaires and interviews with teachers. 130 EFL teachers were randomly chosen from 850 upper basic stage English language teachers to respond to the questionnaire. Twenty teachers from this sample were selected randomly for the interview.

The questionnaire items were divided into three domains covering the sources of challenges: challenges related to the teacher, challenges related to students, and challenges related to equipment, facilities and textbooks. Each domain consisted of 10 items) An open-ended question was asked so that teachers could write any additional challenges regarding teaching oral skills in English. (See appendix 1). The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers, 10 teachers from public schools and other 10 teachers from private schools, in order to elicit more detailed information about their challenges of teaching oral skills.

To collect the data of this study, several steps were followed:

- 2 A thirty-item questionnaire was developed based on related literature
- 3 Interview questions were developed based on related literature,
- 4 Validity of the two instruments was ensured by consulting fourteen EFL professors and supervisors.
- 5 All Questionnaires were distributed to the sample of the study by the authors.
- 6 Reliability of the questionnaire was established by calculating Cronbach’s alpha correlation coefficient.
- 7 Interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure intra-rater reliability. The authors used audio recording for the interviews for the ease and accurate data interpretation. Interviews took 4 to 10 minutes depending on the cooperation of the interviewee.
9. Data were analyzed using SPSS (i.e. means and standard deviations, ANOVA and MANOVA).

Findings

Results Related to the First Question: What are the challenges of teaching oral skills as perceived by upper basic stage EFL teachers in Jordan?

To answer this question, means and standard deviations were calculated. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of EFL teachers in regard to the challenges they face in teaching oral skills.

Rank	Source of challenge	mean	Std. deviation	Degree
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Rank	Source of challenge	mean	Std. deviation	Degree
1	Challenges related to Students	2.88	.566	moderate
2	Challenges related Equipment, facilities and textbooks	2.74	.613	moderate
3	Challenges related Teacher	2.36	.536	moderate
	Total	2.66	.442	moderate

*Degree of agreement of teachers on questionnaire items: High degree = 3-4 , Moderate = 2-2.99 , Low= 1-1.99

Table 1 shows that the mean score of EFL teachers' perceptions of the challenges they face in teaching oral skills is (M=2.66) as shown in Table 2. This indicates that EFL teachers agree to a moderate level that they face challenges in teaching oral skills. However, the results reveal that the domain of "Student" gets the highest mean score (2.88). This may be attributed to the fact that English is taught as a foreign language in Jordan, and so students probably have no chance to communicate orally in English outside the classroom. Even at class, students are observed reluctant to speak in English with peers. Another reason could be that students may not be able to employ their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary into their oral skills.

These interpretations are supported by the results of the interviews with some teachers. For example, (70%) of teachers in private schools believe that oral skills don't receive their due emphasis in the EFL Curriculum. On the other hand, 50% of public school teachers assert the fact that crowded classes are considered a serious challenge in classrooms. Moreover, 40% of public school teachers think that students are not motivated to speak English, and 20% of them believe that their students lack English vocabulary. 30% of private school teachers think that students are very shy to speak. 10% of them agree that students can't pronounce the words correctly, and they underestimate themselves.

Some teachers' answers to the open-ended question include "Upper stage students are weak in oral skills because they haven't mastered the basics of English language in lower stages". "The most important challenge I face is the weakness of students in general. They reach 5th grade without having the desire to develop". "One of the problems that are commonly observed in classrooms are related to individuals' personalities and attitudes to the learning process in general, and practicing speaking in particular", "Students are afraid of making mistakes. That's why they prefer to use their mother tongue when they express their opinions."

Results related to the second question: "Are there any statistically significant differences ($\alpha=.05$) between the mean scores of EFL teachers in Amman that can be attributed to teachers' variables (i.e. experience, gender, school type, and the grade they teach)?

To answer this question, means and standard deviations were calculated. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations regarding teachers' variables (i.e. experience, gender, school type, and the grade they teach)

Teachers' Variables	Source of challenge	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	Teacher	Male	35	2.33	.389
		Female	96	2.37	.582
	Student	Male	35	2.84	.650
		female	96	2.89	.535
	Equipment	Male	35	2.77	.564
		female	96	2.73	.633
	Total	Male	35	2.65	.359
		female	96	2.66	.470
School Type	Teacher	public	73	2.42	.548
		private	58	2.28	.516
	Student	public	73	2.97	.569
		private	58	2.77	.546
	Equipment	public	73	3.03	.494
		private	58	2.38	.561
	Total	public	73	2.80	.405
		private	58	2.48	.422
Experience	Teacher	less than 5 years	17	2.54	.570
		5-10 years	37	2.40	.526
		more than 10 years	77	2.30	.530
	Student	less than 5 years	17	2.83	.584
		5-10 years	37	2.85	.656
		more than 10 years	77	2.91	.520
	Equipment	less than 5 years	17	2.70	.783
		5-10 years	37	2.64	.632
		more than 10 years	77	2.80	.563
	Total	less than 5 years	17	2.69	.558
		5-10 years	37	2.63	.467
		more than 10 years	77	2.67	.405
Grade	Teacher	Seventh	57	2.30	.470
		Eighth	17	2.45	.473
		Ninth	24	2.36	.580
		Tenth	33	2.41	.643
	Student	Seventh	57	2.81	.518

Teachers' Variables	Source of challenge	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	
		Eighth	17	2.85	.773	
		Ninth	24	2.89	.502	
		Tenth	33	3.01	.570	
	Equipment	Seventh	57	2.58	.532	
		Eighth	17	2.80	.740	
		Ninth	24	2.82	.734	
	Total	Tenth	33	2.92	.535	
		Seventh	57	2.56	.406	
		Eighth	17	2.70	.456	
		Ninth	24	2.69	.437	
			Tenth	33	2.78	.480

Results in Table 2 indicate that there are differences in teachers' **mean scores** that can be attributed to teacher's experience, gender, school type, and the grade they teach.

To test whether these differences were statistically significant or not ($\alpha=0.05$), multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was applied. Results are presented in Table 3

Table 3: Four -way MANOVA test of the differences between the mean scores of teachers due to teachers' variables (i.e. experience, gender, school type, and the grade they teach)

Teachers' variables	Source of challenge	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Experience	Teacher	1.234	2	.617	2.140	.122
	Student	.012	2	.006	.018	.982
	Equipment, facilities and textbooks	.357	2	.179	.651	.523
Grade	Teacher	.255	3	.085	.295	.829
	Student	.513	3	.171	.525	.666
	Equipment, facilities and textbooks	.936	3	.312	1.137	.337
Teacher's gender	Teacher	.002	1	.002	.006	.936
	Student	.048	1	.048	.147	.702
	Equipment, facilities and textbooks	.358	1	.358	1.305	.255
School Type	Teacher	.856	1	.856	2.970	.087
	Student	.738	1	.738	2.265	.135

Teachers' variables	Source of challenge	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Equipment, facilities and textbooks	12.113	1	12.113	44.154	.000*
Error	Teacher	35.176	122	.288		

The results in Table 3 show that there are no statistically significant differences between the mean scores of teachers due to gender, experience, type of school and the grade they teach. The only exception was the differences between private school teachers and public school teachers in regard to equipment, facilities and textbooks. The differences were in favor of public school teachers as shown in Table 2.

These results imply that private schools have better equipment and facilities such as CDs , microphones, and speakers that can be connected to computers in the school labs. It is worth mentioning that such facilities are barely available at public school due to limited government expenditure. Another reason is that the number of students in the class at public schools is too big to allow all students to practice speaking. Overcrowded classes may have obliged EFL teachers at public schools to underemphasize teaching these important language skills (listening and speaking).

The results of interviews may support these interpretations in that 70% of public school teachers complain that CDs and cassettes are not available in schools, 50% of them say that crowded classes are considered a serious challenge in classroom, 40% of them suppose that CDs . Moreover, 70% of those teachers complained that oral skills don't receive their due emphasis in the EFL Curriculum. Some public school teachers' responses to the open-ended question include the following: "Our schools are not suitable for achieving the whole skills of English language", "Upper stage students are weak in oral skills because they haven't mastered the basics of English language in lower stages". On the other hand, public school teacher mentioned the following additional challenges "The most important challenge I face is the weakness of students in general. They reach 5th grade without having the desire to develop," and "Students don't want to speak English because they feel embarrassed".

Conclusion

It can be concluded that EFL teachers in Amman face many challenges in teaching oral skills, such as students' low level on speaking, lack of facilities for teaching oral skills, overcrowded classes, This study shows that teachers regardless of their experience, gender or grade share the same challenges when they teach oral skills. In spite of the challenges that English teachers face in teaching oral skills, EFL teachers believe that they can improve their students' oral skills by motivating students to participate in oral classes and encouraging them to benefit from available social media (smart phones, I pads, Facebook, Skype ,Twitter...etc) to communicate in English outside the classroom.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The authors recommend that more teacher training workshops on teaching oral skills be held by the Ministry of Education. It was also recommended that oral skills be included in the General Secondary Certificate Exam in Jordan.

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Appendix

(1)

The Questionnaire

Personal information:

1-Academic degree:

B.A in English. M.A. in English others

2-Teaching experience.

Less than 5 years 5-10 years more than 10 years

3- The grade I teach:

7 8 9 10

4- Gender:

Male Female

5- Type of School:

Public Private

Questionnaire items

No	Items	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
First domain: Challenges related to Teacher					
1.	During my study, there was little emphasis on methods of teaching oral skills.				
2.	During my study, there was little emphasis on methods of evaluating oral skills.				

3.	During my study, there was little emphases on using Communication Technology(ICT) to teach English oral skills.				
4.	I have little knowledge about teaching oral skills to mixed abilities EFL students.				
5.	I have little knowledge about evaluating oral skills of mixed abilities EFL students.				
6.	I don't know how to design extra curricula activities to promote students' oral skills.				
7.	Oral skills should be given little emphasis, because they are not included in the General Certificate Exam.				
8.	I have little knowledge about planning oral lessons.				
9.	I have no idea how to activate students' prior knowledge about the new topic.				
10.	I find difficulty in providing students with feedback about their oral skills.				
Second domain: Challenges related to Student					
11	Students feel reluctant to participate orally in the English class.				
12	Students do not seem to get the message of the speaker in English.				
13	Students are unable to pronounce the words correctly.				
14	Students have no chance to communicate orally in English outside the classroom.				
15	Students feel embarrassed when the teacher corrects their oral mistakes.				
16	Students find it difficult to recognize the meanings of unfamiliar words when they listen to English.				
17	Students cannot remember the details in English when the speaker is too fast.				
18	Students cannot employ their knowledge of grammar				

	and vocabulary into their listening and speaking.				
19	Students do not seem motivated to practice oral skills.				
20	Students speak in Arabic when they work in groups in oral classes.				
Third domain: Challenges related to school Equipment, facilities and textbooks					
21	The oral skills' CDs at school are not of good quality.				
22	There are no labs for students to practice speaking in English				
23	English textbooks are not accompanied by CDs for students to practice oral skills at home.				
24	The number of students is too big to allow for oral practice during the English classes.				
25	Oral activities in textbooks are not interesting for students at this age level				
26	Teaching oral skills requires a lot of equipment which is not available at school				
27	Instructions regarding teaching and evaluating oral skills in the Teacher's Book are not helpful.				
28	The oral skills' CDs are not available to all teachers.				
29	Schools lack microphones and speakers that can be connected to computers.				
30	There are frequent internet disconnections in the computer labs during oral activities.				

Additional information

Please, write any additional challenges regarding teaching oral skills in EFL classroom, *which are not mentioned in the questionnaire*. Be specific; give examples if necessary.