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Oral Communication Problems of Yemeni High School EFL Students in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study aimed to investigate oral communication problems among Yemeni high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Malaysia. The data was collected through a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire was adapted, as it dealt with possible problems experienced by EFL students. Therefore, 40 Yemeni high school students studying at an international Arabic school in Kuala Lumpur participated in the study. To triangulate the questionnaire data, six students were interviewed. The results revealed that the oral communication problems of Yemeni high school EFL students could be categorised into three factors. Firstly, teachers were focused on the grammatical aspect while neglecting the practical side of the language and they did not encourage their students to speak English in class. Secondly, the curriculum was not designed to promote and enhance oral communication since students had very limited drills to practise orally. Thirdly, most of the students were not confident using English as a means of communication both inside and outside the classroom.

Key words: Oral communication problems, EFL teachers, curriculum factors, EFL learners, international school

INTRODUCTION

Today, English has become the main means of communication in all fields such as education, medicine and business and Yemeni students who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) need to improve their proficiency in the language to be able to communicate with other people living in different cultures and speaking different languages. In addition, a good command of the language can help EFL students such as Yemeni students improve their professional development, academic performance and personal and social effectiveness (Lafford, 2004; Richards and Renandya, 2002). Moreover, EFL students might need speaking skills to convey their ideas as it is the easiest way to express their thoughts (Alexander, 1996; Jones, 1992; Senel, 2012).

Oral communication in this study has to do with the ability of Yemeni students in carrying out a conversation in English successfully with either a native speaker or non-native speaker because the success of Yemeni EFL students is measured by their ability to deal with others successfully in the target language (Alyan, 2013; Lindsay and Knight, 2006). In order to master English language, Yemeni students need to move beyond the boundaries of grammar into the actual use of the language in real communicative situations. Yemeni students might spend

many years studying English but when it comes to using English in the process of communication with others, they encounter many problems that break down the chain of communication. So, this study aims at investigating the oral communication problems among Yemeni high school students in Malaysia.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although the medium of instruction adopted by international Arabic high schools is English their students face many linguistic problems in expressing their thoughts proficiently. Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011) argued that the main goal of learning English is to be able to communicate with others which according to the results of his study, has not been achieved by the school students. Similarly, in a study of Palestinian EFL students it was found that they could not structure their ideas and meanings in a coherent way when they spoke in English (Alyan, 2013).

One reason was that teachers concentrated on the theoretical part of teaching English and they neglected the practical part which has kept Arab high school students moving in an empty circle to find, after many years, unable to use English in real communicative situations (Rabab'ah, 2005). Another reason was that they

did not practise using English inside and outside the class, according to Senel (2012) who investigated the oral communication problems among Turkish EFL students.

In the case of Yemeni high school students in Malaysia where the medium of instruction is also English, many of them still have oral communication problems using English. One possible cause is that their Arabic teachers neither emphasise nor encourage the acquisition of speaking skills in the target language inside and outside the classroom. Students spend most of their time working with grammar exercises and saw no benefits in using English verbally during English lessons and school hours. This is perplexing since the medium of instruction of the institution is in English and yet the teaching and learning of English do not emphasise on the development of a sound oral communication ability amongst its students.

Objective and research question: The objective of the study is to investigate the factors that contribute to oral communication problems among Yemeni high school students in Malaysia while it aims to answer the following question.

What are the factors that contribute to the oral communication problems of Yemeni high school EFL students in Malaysia?

Significance of the study: Research on oral communication has investigated this problem in different parts of the world as it is an international issue, yet no similar study has been conducted on the oral communication problems of Yemeni high school students in Malaysia. Therefore, this study would be a meaningful contribution to the field.

Although research on oral communication problems of EFL/ESL students in their respective countries has been conducted, the oral communication problems of EFL high school students studying outside their country has yet to be investigated. The dearth of this type of research is especially evident in multi-ethnic societies such as Malaysia because students' need the English language to communicate with other ethnic groups in their daily interactions.

Many studies have investigated oral communication problems among students of English as a second or a foreign language. Ferris (1998) investigated the speaking and listening problems among international students who study English and revealed that the majority of the students encounter problems when it comes to oral presentations or when they try to participate inside the classroom during class discussions raised by the teachers. When the students feel that they cannot convey

their emotions and thoughts, they in many cases get the feeling of apprehension and frustration (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991; Watson and Friend, 1969; Horwitz *et al.*, 1991).

Likewise, two other studies found similar results as the above researchers; Horwitz *et al.* (1986) who developed a scale to measure students' anxiety on speaking and listening skills in a foreign language classroom while Senel (2012) related oral communication problems to anxiety. However, Senel's research investigated the oral communication problem among students who were enrolled in the first year. Oral communication needs a lot of practice so if the researcher had investigated the problem among advanced students the results would have been much more significant since students in advanced levels such as years three and four would have been more proficient with the language than the first year students.

Meanwhile, Lynch (1996) conducted a strategy through which partners with different mother tongues are able to identify slips in each other's L2 output. However, his study which was conducted to identify errors and slips made by students where learners edit a transcript of their own L2 output, focused on slips. Thus, one can assume that EFL learners will notice only slips whereas errors can only be identified by teachers or someone proficient in English. Yemeni high school students in Malaysia are not able to recognize their mistakes so they need guidance from their teachers. Teachers should provide the students with proper strategies that can help them to improve their proficiency in speaking.

In another study by Nakatani (2005) who divided two groups of students; with the first group undergoing a course for 12 weeks during which the teacher taught Oral Communication Strategies (OCS) while the second group attended a course which did not pay attention to OCS. The result revealed that the students who have received OCS training outperformed the non-OCS students.

However, the participants were not assigned randomly to the groups. "The students chose these classes because of class availability at particular times which means that they were not randomly assigned to groups. This is a potential weakness of the study", (Nakatani, 2005). Furthermore, this study as in Lynch (1996) above did not investigate the role of the teacher in enabling students to acquire proficiency in oral interactional skills.

This is important as Arab students who study English as a foreign language encounter many problems when it comes to face to face oral communication. One of the reasons is that English departments in Arabic universities admit students to the program without

bearing in mind the level of the students' proficiency and whether their skills will enable them to complete the program successfully (Rabab'ah, 2005). The absence of a policy of admitting student results in the departments accepting a huge number of the students, he adds. Consequently, they find themselves unable to pay close attention to every individual and to provide sufficient opportunities for the students to improve their speaking skills inside the classrooms. Another reason is the lack of exposure to the target language where students might be willing to talk with others using English but the curriculum designed might not help them to achieve their goals (Rabab'ah, 2005). Hence, the problem is not that of the students alone but also the curriculum in helping students improve their oral communication ability in the target language.

Jdetawy (2011) found that the lack of learners' personal motivation and weakness of English language curricula adopted by Arab teachers were the causes of communication breakdowns in EFL learners. Consequently, this present study seeks to determine if a harmonious understanding between students and teachers can result in more effective oral communication for Arabic EFL high school learners which hopefully could offer a better insight into the possible problems encountered by these students in Malaysia.

Although there are studies that equate the oral communication problems of native speakers of English with that of non native speakers of English such as Emanuel (2011), they do not explicitly explain how this is so. Similarly, Al-Nawrasy (2013) used a speaking skill achievement test in the form of oral interviews between students and examiner. The analysis of students' speaking test showed that both groups; native speakers and non-native speakers have almost the same level of the language proficiency as shown on the students' results, which means that Native English Speaking Tests and Non Native English Speaking Tests have the same effect on the proficiency of EFL students.

Two other studies utilised interviews to determine the oral communication problems of EFL learners were Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011) and Alyan (2013). The former focused on the speaking strategies and did not pay too much attention to the receptive strategies used during the process of communication while the latter employed two rather dated models; Levelt (1989) L1 speech production model and De Bot (1992) L2 speech production model as the theoretical framework. However, for the current study, interviews would only be used as a tool to gather secondary data to triangulate the primary data of the survey.

One possible reason Yemeni high school EFL students in Malaysia experience problems in oral communication is that they do not have native speaker

teachers. Hence, they are not obliged to speak English in class as they can use their mother tongue, the Arabic language, to interact with teachers and fellow students. Given the current practice Yemeni high school EFL students adopt, their problems of oral communication would be studied from three perspectives; teachers, curriculum and students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses a quantitative and qualitative method to collect the data. A questionnaire was distributed to 40 Yemeni high school students studying in an international Arabic school in Kuala Lumpur. The questionnaire contains 20 items and it has been adopted from Senel (2012) because it matches with the students' age which was between 15 and 18 and it covers the three areas of the study; teachers, curriculum and students. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section investigates the problems that are related to the teachers, the second looks at the factors that are related to the curriculum and the third studies the problems that are related to the students who were selected randomly between both males and females. Their age ranged from 16 and 19 years old. For triangulation purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students.

Statistical analysis: The data of the questionnaire was collated and analysed using frequency count in order to determine the oral communication problems which Yemeni high school EFL students in Malaysia encounter. Subsequently, the interview data was used to support the statistical analysis of the questionnaire data.

RESULTS

The result of the questionnaire and the interviews can be divided into three sections. The first section highlights the teachers' factors that contributed to the oral communication problems among Yemeni high school EFL students in Malaysia, the second highlights the curriculum factors and the third discussed the students' factors.

The results as shown in Table 1 revealed that 65% of the teachers do not use English language inside the classroom and they interrupt the students when they speak which further discourages them. In addition, 60% of the teachers criticize the students' pronunciation which negatively affects the students' confidence while 75% of them do not force the students to express their ideas in the English language. Another factor is that their teachers are non-native speakers so the students are not obliged

to use English inside the classroom with 77.5% responses. Lastly, 85% felt that the methods of teaching used by the instructors do not encourage the students to participate inside the classroom.

The interviews with the students support the above findings. According to them, the teachers do not encourage them to participate inside the classroom and most teachers enter the class and start giving the students information without paying any attention to the importance of using English inside the classrooms. If the teachers do not encourage the students to speak inside the classroom, the students will not find a chance to speak outside the classroom as the classroom is the best place for the students to participate. For instance, Student 1 said “my teachers come to the class and deliver the lecture and they do not encourage us to speak in front of the others” while Student 2 revealed that “I have never been encouraged by my teachers to speak inside the classroom”. Similarly, Students 4 and 5 expressed that “my teachers do not give us the chance to speak inside the classroom and they only deliver the lecture and leave”.

The results of the second section on curriculum factors, as seen in Table 1, appear to suggest that the curriculum plays an important role in the oral English communication problems of the students since the curriculum does not provide the learners with practice exercises. About 80% of the students are aware that the fewer subjects are taught in the mother tongue, the greater are the opportunities for the students to use English.

However, 77.5% of the students responded that they take mostly written exams so they do not give priority to speaking English while 82.5% said that oral English communication is not part of the curriculum. Hence, 57.5% felt that they have limited avenues to improve their speaking skills.

In the interviews, the students also revealed that the curriculum does not help them to improve their oral communication skills since it concentrates on the theoretical aspects of English language. Consequently, oral drills to practise using the language in real communicative situations are far from satisfactory. In this regard, Student 1 said “I always study hard and my marks in English are perfect but I do not find myself obliged to speak inside the classroom. The curriculum gives us a lot of important information but there are not many activities to be done by us inside the classroom”. Similarly, Student 3 opined that “the curriculum gives us a lot of information but it does not encourage us to speak inside the classroom” while Student 6 pointed out that “the curriculum does not give us practical exercises to the lessons which we have studied. It only focuses on the theoretical knowledge which we get from our teachers”.

The third section, designed to investigate the personal factors which contribute to the oral communication problems among Yemeni high school students, shows in Table 1 that 60% of the students do not have sufficient vocabulary to discuss the topics with their teachers and classmates both inside and outside the classroom. In addition, 62.5% of the students remain

Table 1: Data analysis of teacher, curriculum and student factors

No.	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD
Teacher factor						
1	Our instructors do not frequently use the target language in the courses, so we prefer using our native language	35.0	30.0	20.0	10.0	5.0
2	Our speeches are frequently interrupted by our instructors, so this discourages us for using the target language	40.0	30.0	20.0	7.5	2.5
3	Our instructors frequently criticize our pronunciation mistakes, so we do not want to speak and we feel demotivated	37.5	22.5	20.0	12.5	7.5
4	Our instructors do not force us to express our ideas in the target language	47.5	27.5	10.0	10.0	5.0
5	Plenty of our instructors are non-native speakers, so this does not force us to speak in the target language	50.0	32.5	7.5	5.0	5.0
6	Number of the native speakers is only a few, so this does not require us to use the target language	45.0	32.5	10.0	7.5	5.0
7	Teaching methods and techniques used by our instructors do not encourage us to use the target language	57.5	27.5	2.5	7.5	5.0
Curriculum factor						
8	Number of the English courses is only a few	20.0	27.5	20.0	22.5	10.0
9	The less the number of the Arabic courses in the program is, the more we can use the target language	60.0	20.0	10.0	5.0	5.0
10	It is easier to express our ideas and thoughts in our native language	62.5	20.0	10.0	7.5	-
11	We do not make any speaking and listening activities, so this affects us in a negative way in using the target language	40.0	30.0	12.5	10.0	7.5
12	Most of our exams are written, so we do not give priority to oral language	40.0	37.5	10.0	7.5	5.0
13	When we use our native language during our English courses, we do not get any punishment and sanction	47.5	27.5	10.0	7.5	7.5
14	Speaking course is not a part of the curriculum, so this affects us in a negative way to use oral communication	32.5	50.0	10.0	7.5	-
15	Some courses because of their contents and the attitudes of our instructors make us not use target language orally	40.0	30.0	15.0	10.0	5.0
16	Courses do not give us a chance to use target language orally	35.0	22.5	20.0	15.0	7.5
Student factor						
17	Our vocabulary knowledge is not sufficient enough to express our ideas and argue about any topics	27.5	32.5	15.0	15.0	10.0
18	In most of the courses we are generally passive, so we do not need to use the target language	30.0	32.5	17.5	12.5	7.5
19	Feeling of making a mistake while talking in the target language increases our anxiety and it is dissuasive	30.0	32.5	15.0	12.5	10.0
20	I feel myself responsible for not using the spoken language	27.5	32.5	10.0	20.0	10.0

SA: Strongly agree, A: Agree, N: Neutral, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly disagree

passive most of the time as they are afraid of committing mistakes in the language during the process of communication. More importantly, 60% of the students feel that they are part of the problem as they do not use the target language.

One reason is that the students are afraid of being evaluated negatively by their teachers and their classmates. Students prefer to be silent and are hesitant to participate in class. For example, Student 2 said that "I am afraid that when I speak the other students will laugh at me". A similar response was offered by Students 4, 5 and 6. They feel very anxious when it comes to participation in class as revealed by Student 1 (I feel nervous when I want to speak inside the classroom, I feel that my mouth becomes dry and my voice disappears), Student 2 (I cannot express my ideas well) and Student 4 (I do not feel confident when I speak in front of the others).

Another reason is that Yemeni high school students do not practise speaking both inside and outside the classroom. The following are some of their responses in the interview:

- "I do not speak with my friend using English language inside the classroom and outside the classroom. I rarely speak with my friends although I like English so much and it is one of my best subjects" (Student 2)
- "I speak with my friend using Arabic language. I do not use English except when I discuss the homework given to us by our teachers" (Student 4)
- "English is one of my best subjects and I like to communicate with others using English language but I do not find any one to practise speaking with him outside the classroom. Actually, I can speak and communicate with any one but I do not find any person to speak with him using English language" (Student 5)

It is clear that the students might have some skills to communicate with others but they do not practise speaking with the others outside the classroom which does not help them in overcoming their oral English communication problems.

DISCUSSION

The items (1-7) in the first section of the questionnaire designed to investigate the teachers' factors that contribute to oral English communication problems of Yemeni EFL learners revealed that teachers did not use the English language during the process of teaching which affected the ability of the students to use oral English inside the classroom. When the teachers do not

use English, the students will use their mother tongue to communicate with their teachers (Alyan, 2013). Moreover, the majority of the students agreed that the teachers frequently interrupted them when they tried to use the English language in class. This has a negative effect on the students as they will not have the courage to participate orally (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991). Hence, teachers should encourage their students to speak and avoid any kind of interruptions when they communicate with their classmates as this will motivate them to participate frequently inside the classroom (Ferris, 1998).

Moreover, the students felt that the teachers frequently criticised their pronunciation in class when they did not know the correct pronunciation of certain words or they were unable to pronounce words correctly due to the influence of their mother tongue. Criticizing the pronunciation of the students demotivates them to use English inside the classroom and it creates a sense of fear among the students.

Another factor contributing to the oral English communication problems of Yemeni high school EFL students was that most of their teachers in the international school in Malaysia were non-native speakers so the students were not obligated to communicate with their teachers using English. They instead used the Arabic language which could negatively affect the ability of the students to use English in oral communication (Al-Nawras, 2013; Jdetawy, 2011). International Arabic schools in Malaysia will be able to motivate their students to use English in class if they employ native teachers of English as the students will find themselves obliged to use the language during discussions inside the classroom (Rabab'ah, 2005).

The next teacher factor Yemeni high school EFL students encountered in oral communication was attributed to the teaching methods used. They did not encourage the students to use English because the teachers' teaching was focused on the theoretical activities of the language. Students were rarely afforded the opportunity to practise the language orally to improve on their communicative abilities.

The second section (items 8-16) has been designed to investigate the effect of the curriculum on the oral English communication of Yemeni high school EFL students. The findings suggested that one of the factors was the limited number of English courses. If the students could study more courses in English, their oral proficiency could be improved with the passage of the time (Senel, 2012). Moreover, the majority of the students agreed that if the number of the Arabic courses was reduced, they would be able to improve their oral communication proficiency since

they would be more opportunities for them to practise the English language.

Additionally, the students agreed that they could express their thoughts in an effective way in their mother tongue which is the Arabic language. This means that the curriculum does not motivate the students to use the English language so the students find it difficult to express their thoughts and opinions in the target language (Rabab'ah, 2005). This weakness is further compounded by the lack of speaking and listening activities in the curriculum. If the students are encouraged to use English in real communicative situations, they will be able to improve their communication skills and use the target language appropriately. Besides, the students pointed out that most of the exams taken by them were in the written form leaving very restricted use of oral English. Teachers should design oral practical activities for the students in order to motivate them to use the spoken language.

Yet another curriculum factor was that the students had neither been guided when they used the English language orally nor received any feedback from their teachers. Such behaviour will not enhance the students' speaking skills. One of the most disturbing factors was that oral communication course was not a part of the curriculum. Students might study many things in grammar and in writing but they might not be able to speak in the target language. There must be a spoken course to guide the students to use English as the absence of this course has kept the students from improving their oral communication skills. Another point that must be taken into consideration is that the content of the courses which is focused on the theoretical side of the language and does not provide any practical activities should be reviewed. Similarly, the attitude of the teachers towards the content of the course might distract them from using oral exercises which in turn might have a negative effect on the students who have no opportunities in polishing their speaking skills (Senel, 2012).

The third section (items 17-20), designed to investigate the personal factors that affect the oral communication of Yemeni high school EFL students, showed that the students did not have sufficient vocabulary. This hinders them from expressing their thoughts or conveying their ideas. They might be able to participate or speak inside the class using their mother tongue but they cannot express their ideas in English because they do not have the words to express their thoughts. Students need to build a sufficiently functional set of words in order for them to express their thoughts (Alyan, 2013).

Another personal factor was that students were passive and did not participate inside the classroom.

Students should have self-motivation to be active and use the target language in class since it is normal for students to feel frustrated when it comes to participation inside the classroom (Watson and Friend, 1969; Horwitz *et al.*, 1991; Alyan, 2013). Both teachers and students should realize that the best place for using English is the classroom and those who do not use English with their teachers and classmates will not be able to communicate with others outside the class.

The third personal factor was that some students were afraid of committing mistakes when they talked in class. This fear raises the level of anxiety and negatively affects the process of communication as those who feel comfortable can express their ideas and communicate better than those who feel anxious (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). Teachers should be aware of this and attempt to provide an atmosphere that is conducive for the students to express their ideas. At the same time, students should realize this problem and feel confident when they orally express their ideas inside the classroom.

In addition, some students found themselves responsible for not using the target language while others felt that it was not their responsibility. Students are partly responsible for not using the target language but they are not solely responsible as teachers and the curriculum are also considered a part of the problem. Students should do their best to improve their speaking skills and practise using the language even outside the classroom as this can help them to overcome their communication problems (Lynch, 1996).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the factors that contribute to the oral English communication problems among Yemeni high school EFL students in Malaysia. The data was collected through a questionnaire distributed to 40 students studying in the International Modern Arabic School. In addition, six students were interviewed in order to validate the data collected from the questionnaire. Both the questionnaire and the interview revealed that the students encountered problems in oral English communication due to three factors. Firstly, the teachers did not encourage the students to speak inside the classroom and they concentrated too much on the theoretical knowledge and neglected the practical side of the language. Secondly, the curriculum did not provide the students with oral drills in order for them to develop their speaking skills. Thirdly, the students themselves were too timid and embarrassed to use English inside and outside the classroom.

The above conclusion is acceptable since the Arabic language of the Yemeni high school EFL students in Malaysia being a Semitic language is different in form and structure from English which is a Romanized language. Obviously, these students will face a lot of obstacles in learning to speak English unlike EFL and ESL students of languages such as Malay where the alphabet is similar to English.

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