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Speaking problems of 9th grade high school Turkish learners of L2 English and possible reasons for those problems: Exploring the teachers and students' perspectives

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the speaking problems of ninth-grade high school Turkish EFL learners and possible reasons for these problems through the perspective of teachers and students. The means of data collection involved a questionnaire for teachers and students, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations considering classroom materials and syllabus. The results revealed that the students mostly experienced problems in speaking English affectively through personal factors including: insufficient language and content knowledge, limited contact with English outside the classroom, and the mis-directed methods and materials used in the classroom.

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1. Introduction

With the advancement of Communicative Language Teaching in foreign language teaching the significance of speaking has been emphasized in ELT where the goal of teaching is defined as developing communicative competence of learners by acquiring the linguistic means to accomplish the language through several functions. Canale and Swain define (as cited in Richards and Rodgers 1986, p.71) four dimensions of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Grammar competence covers knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and mechanics like sounds of letters and syllables, pronunciation, intonation and stress. Discourse competence is related to the relationships beyond the sentence level, rules of cohesion and coherence that are carried out the conversation in a meaningful way (Coombe, et al., 2007, p. 113). Sociolinguistic competence is concerned with the understanding of the social context in which communication takes place. Strategic competence deals with the strategies to cope with the communicators to take to the floor, to keep the conversation appropriately advancing. Coombe et al., (2007) said “As in daily life, speaking is an important channel of communication in a general English program” which as productive skill stands in some components such as knowledge, aptitude, confidence, and appropriate context. Therefore, for as many EFL learners

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and teachers, speaking has been generally accepted as one of the most difficult skills to perform. McDonough and Shaw (2003) point out: “As a skill that enables us to produce utterances, when genuinely communicative, speaking is desire- and purpose-driven, in other words we genuinely want to communicate something to achieve a particular end” (p.134). The target language is taught to help learners achieve a particular purpose in daily life. The speaking ability of learners should be promoted within this view of language. However, to accomplish this aim some fundamental elements of speaking should be closely considered. By doing so, teachers enrich their students’ communicative competencies in the target language.

2. The Study

2.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate and analyse the kinds of speaking problems that Turkish EFL 9th grade high school learners have and the reasons for these problems from the perspective of teachers and students. In this research, the following questions will be addressed:

- 1a. What are the speaking problems of 9th grade high school Turkish learners of L2 English, as perceived by the students’ themselves?
- 1b. What are the speaking problems of 9th grade high school Turkish learners of L2 English, as perceived by their teachers?
- 2a. What, according to the students, are the possible reasons concerning their speaking problems?
- 2b. What, according to the teachers, are the possible reasons for the students’ speaking problems?
3. Do the students’ answers match the teachers’?

Participants

The participants of the study were four non-native 9th grade high school English teachers (2 male – 2 female). Among these teachers there was a total of 12-22 education experience and a completed four-year Bachelor program of English Language Teaching (ELT) in a Turkish university. Their age range was between 38 and 48. The study also included 120 students enrolled in a public school. Their ages ranged between 15 and 16. There were sixty-six females and fifty-four males in this study. They have been learning English for 5 or 6 years. Most of them are from the same background regarding their first language, previous educational experience, and learning context.

Data-collection instruments

In terms of the research questions and the purpose of the study, data was collected through face-to-face interviews and four classroom observations and questionnaires for students and teachers. In addition, the materials such as coursebooks and syllabi for the 9th grade English classrooms were analysed. The questions for students were written in their mother tongue - Turkish. The interview consisted of fifteen questions; five of them were multiple-choice questions. The questions for both teachers and students were the same in order to make the data more reliable and to compare the responses. During the study a total of sixteen participants were interviewed; twelve of them were students and their respective teachers. From each class two students, where one was female and one was male were chosen randomly. Then with their English teachers were interviewed. The particular reason for this was to see to what extent students’ and teachers’ answers match each other’s responses. Each interview lasted about fifteen to thirty minutes and all interviews took place in a safe place in the school district. For the questionnaire, some questions were adapted from Irismet (2006). A discussion was conducted with the teachers, and then the questionnaire was piloted in an English class with 25 students in another school to insure the appropriateness and comprehensibility of the questionnaire items. In the questionnaire the Likert scale with five points had been used to ask the participants their degrees of agreement. Additionally, a comment part was included to encourage the

participants to give their opinion. Before administration of the questionnaire clear instructions were given to the participants to explain the purpose of the study.

3.1. Data analysis

The research data was analysed to investigate speaking problems of the students and reasons for these problems from the teacher's and student's view. The analysis was carried out at the centre of research questions (RQ). For instance, RQ 1a and 1b questionnaires and interviews were analysed to seek the problem from both parties. Questionnaires, interviews and classroom materials were analysed for the RQs 2a and 2b for the purpose of the examining what teachers and students think about the reasons of the students' failures in speaking English. Observations, interviews and questionnaires were used to analyse RQ3 to see to what extent teacher and student replies match each other.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Speaking problems of the students from their own perspectives

According to the responses, 41.6% of the students they had difficulty when speaking English in the classroom, whereas 11.6 % of them did not have this problem. Only 5 % percent of the respondents believed that there were no speaking problems, with 12.4% remaining undecided on the matter. One of the respondents who has a speaking problem said: *"I am facing a problem speaking English. Actually, I would like to speak but after trying a few times and within a short time I resort to my first language"*. Ellis (2012) explains that L1 can be a tool for managing instructional tasks and learning. It also enables students to socialize with each other (p.171).

Thirty-seven (37%) per cent of the students answered they were afraid of making mistakes when speaking English. It was interesting that 20.8 per cent of the students believed that they were afraid of making mistakes when speaking English and 20.8 per cent of them did not have any idea whether they were afraid or not.

According to the results, the students commonly believed that they could not speak English fluently. Therefore, these results gave us some reasons to think the students were aware of the problem.

The majority of them thought that the main problem of their inability to speak English was because of their fear of a limited vocabulary in which students could not describe the expression they would like, and they gave up speaking. This was more clear with one of the students' statement: *"I really want to talk with native speakers in English but when expressing my ideas I cannot find the correct word at this time – so I prefer not to talk"*.

The study also revealed a very surprising result: Thirty-one (31%) per cent of the students believed their speaking problem was not related to poor pronunciation even though it was seen through the observations most of the students had trouble with pronouncing some vowels, consonants and intonation. Nearly twenty-five per cent of the students did not have any idea about whether the classroom environment was appropriate to speak the language. Based on the findings: Forty-nine (49%) per cent of the students claimed that their teacher did not motivate them to speak in English, whereas many educators advise teachers to encourage learners to use the target language to interact with the students. However, the findings showed that they disagree with these results, based on their experiences with EFL learners' speaking problems. The main issue was lessons basically relied on grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The data obtained through observation sessions provided different evidence. The teachers were not aware of this problem as the teacher asked a student to read the text; the other students were distracted with unknown words and structures of the language in the classroom.

4.2. Speaking problems of the students from teachers' perspectives

Most of the teachers said that their students could not speak English fluently and they got excited while speaking. Two teachers explained that their students did not want to use the language because they were not interested in the

topics. These students however, did not have appropriate content knowledge. Seventy-five (75%) per cent of teacher participants also stated that most of the students were silent in the classroom because they had a lack of confidence. They were feared being embarrassment when they made mistakes. The result of the study showed that half of the teachers were not clear about the amount of L1 use in the classroom. It has been suggested that there should be a balance in the use of L1 in the classroom but how should the teachers decide on this balance? Harmer (2007) advised EFL teachers that a balanced use the first language really depends upon some factors such as age, background of the students, context, and level of the learners (p. 133). Consequently, all participant teachers seemed to share a common view that their students could not speak English and these problems were derived from limited vocabulary, anxiety, poor pronunciation, insufficient knowledge about the topic, peer pressure, uninteresting topics, and lack of motivation.

4.3. Possible reasons for the students' problems from perspectives of the students

A high percentage of students (%28) claimed that the main reason of their speaking problems were that they mainly relied on their mother tongue (Turkish). They believed that they are learning English mostly with the help of Turkish and their teacher rarely speaks in English. According to their statements they would like to be fluent in the language and learn English for their daily life, whereas they were learning English in an isolated classroom environment. When looking into the coursebook and syllabus of various classes, speaking has been emphasized but not sufficiently covered in the lessons. It was observed that speaking practice was done through drills and repetition of new language items in either dialogue or role play in the classroom. The interview question - '*What kind of speaking activities and exercises you have in the classroom?*' proves this result clearer: A high percentage of students (%86) replied on role play activities from the coursebook. That is, they first listened to a conversation on a cassette twice, and then wrote the scripted dialogue on a paper. Next, the teacher gave them time to memorise it and finally they acted it out in front of their friends.

4.4. Possible reasons for students' problems from perspectives of the teachers

Half of the teachers thought that the students were studying English as a compulsory course which encouraged a negative attitude in learning a foreign language. The students primary and evidently only concern is getting a good mark. To illustrate, one teacher clearly indicated that the students were only interested in marks. They could not be motivated to use English because of the absence of any opportunities to practise it outside the classroom. According to the teachers there are some other reasons that influence students' poor oral performance in English. They believed that there are explanations concerning inadequate linguistic competency.

One teacher believed that the reasons of his students' speaking problems are based on insufficient amounts of reading material in the first and second language. This led to poor speaking performance. In addition, most of the teachers (75%) stated that their students get overly excited while speaking English and fear of being laughed at in front of their friends because of mistakes in pronunciation.

4.5. Comparison of the students' and teachers' responses on possible speaking problems

The main problems stem from inadequate vocabulary, anxiety, uninteresting topics, and reliance on their first language, lack of motivation, coursebooks and other learning materials used in the classroom. 40% of students thought that having insufficient vocabulary was problematic. Their teachers agreed with them. Another agreement between students and teachers is very evident: anxiety. The students struggled with speaking English because of having a high anxiety level causes unintended problems: simple fear of using English, not being understood by their classmates and inferiority issues. This is consistently an issue with adolescents, regardless of language acquisition. According to the teachers, the students have many opportunities to practise English in situations such as a library or on the internet but the students have mentioned that they do not have enough opportunity. They sincerely want a

native speaker as a model. The teachers participated in this study believed that the biggest problem of students was a lack of motivation and the teachers were at an impasse as to how they could resolve this basic problem. They also added other reasons for this problem; not having enough confidence, learning English as a compulsory course, and peer pressure. The findings revealed that there was a noticeable discrepancy between students' and teachers' perspectives on speaking English and possible reasons for those problems. Since sixty-five per cent of the students believed that the coursebooks used in the classroom had insufficient speaking activities but fifty per cent of the teachers thought there were enough activities. Through the observations, even was not stated by the participants was, the classroom size and teaching guides. These problems were a hindrance in speaking activities. The classes were made up of more than 35 students. This might hinder teachers to conduct group-work activities and similarly prevented them from giving feedback to each student in a brief 45-minute lesson.

5. Conclusion

This study was carried out to examine speaking problems of the students that they experienced and the reasons of these problems from the perspectives of teachers and students. As a result, it has been revealed that the students had a problem with speaking English and the reasons for these problems were somewhat the same with some variation among teachers and students. Most of the students complained that their language was limited to mechanic vocabulary and grammar structures. Major reasons behind this problem might be about having low language and/or content knowledge and the methods and materials of the classroom and considerable affective and personal factors. Thus, teachers should build a supportive climate by considering the factors stated in this finding to encourage learners to participate in classroom activities. Ur (1991) suggested how EFL teachers may in some ways overcome speaking problems with strategies that place students in small groups to maximise the amount of their involvement in the classroom. Teaching essential vocabulary before starting the activity may help learners to produce some talk (p. 121). As educators or teachers we all know that there are no unique or magic solutions to cope with this problem but we can minimise it on one level. To summarise, speaking is the most undeveloped part of the language leaning. It is surely one of the important elements of communication that needs to be taken into a careful consideration by EFL teachers. They should examine their students' real needs. This must be framed in the context, materials and other factors discussed that may affect their instruction. The entire purpose of this pursuit is to assist their students' competency in speaking the language as best as we can as educators.

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