

## **Evaluating Listening and Speaking Skills among Arab University Students**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The aim of this paper is to show the importance of listening and speaking skills in the classroom in order to get a perfect acquisition of the second language. Although these skills have been explained separately, they are inter-connected and should be practiced simultaneously. After a long experience of teaching at university level, the researcher has noticed that these skills are a very important part in relation to the learning of English language. For Arabic speakers, listening and speaking tend to be more complicated than the acquisition of other skills, such as reading or writing, since the former are quite difficult to practice when the student does not live in an English-speaking context. For this reason, this research deals with some activities in order to develop these skills. He also talks about some constraints during increasing efficacy of these skills.*

**Key Words:** *developing listening and speaking skills, difficulties, activities.*

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### **I. Introduction:**

Listening and speaking are the most important communication skills which are least focused. Listening is rarely taught because educators assume listening is synonymous to breathing— automatic (Thomas & Dyer, 2007). People think that teachers are already familiar with basic techniques for teaching English language using different activities. The main important part of this study is the concern with developing of speaking and listening skills through continuous and appropriate drills. It is also concerned with various kinds of commutative activities through which students can increase their English language listening and speaking ability.

#### **1.1. Statement of the Problem:**

There is a unsystematic relationship between the English sound and the way in which students are speaking and listening. There is a great range of variation between English and Arabic phonological sound systems that may lead to weakness in listening skill which leads to confusion. Moreover, many students don't focus on such skills at home. They don't take advantage of listening.

#### **1.2. Basic Assumptions:**

The basic assumptions of this research are:

- 1- Methods of developing English listening and speaking skills are completely neglected.
- 2- Students need to be helped to deal with phonetic symbols and grammar mistakes which are very important for them.
- 3- Teaching techniques play major role in developing listening and speaking skills. So, students need to focus on teachers' role.
- 4- Students experience shall be enriched in order to enable them to deal with speaking in seminar and group discussion.

#### **1.3. Significance of the Study:**

The significance of the study is:

- 1- It deals with the most important ideas about listening and speaking skills among university student.
- 2- This research deals with issues which influence English listening and speaking.
- 3- It deals with constrictions and performance of listening and speaking for all levels of university.
- 4- It focuses on phonetic symbols and will supply them with the best way to speak.

#### **1.4. Scope of the Study:**

This study covers students at College of Arts and Humanities, University of Bahri, Sudan and students at College of Science and Arts, Tanumah, King Khalid University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A comparison has been made among the students of both universities to show their listening and speaking abilities.

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### **1.5. Data Collection Techniques:**

The data of this study has been collected through questionnaire.

### **1.6. Methodology:**

The methodology of this study includes:

- Analytical approach.
- Descriptive approach.

They include different stages and procedures. The first stage consists of the observation of the development of the English lesson in order to check to what extent listening and speaking skills are carried out in the classroom. During the observation, it has been discovered that a great part of the time of each lesson was devoted to the study of the grammatical structures followed by the corresponding exercises to practice what they had learnt. As a second stage, teachers might be interviewed with the purpose of knowing how they confront both skills; the way they organize and structure lessons and exercises.

### **1.7. Definition of Terms:**

1. **Listening:** To pay attention to someone saying or to something you hear.
2. **Speaking:** To talk to someone about something or to use your voice to say something.
3. **Phonology:** The study of the sounds of a language.
4. **Performance:** When someone does a job or special activity.
6. **Second language:** The foreign language you learn.
7. **Communication:** Understanding between students and teachers.

## **II. Literature Review:**

In the past, students who undertook the study of a second language tended to center their energies on being able to translate written texts, rather than focus on oral communication. Based mainly on the Grammar-Translation method, the prevailing thought at the time was, that if you understood the grammar of the target language, then the rest would naturally follow. Other skills such as speaking and listening sometimes tended to be neglected or regarded by some people as “secondary skills – means to other ends, rather than ends in themselves” (Nunan, 1997:1).

However, since the 1960’s, there has been a renewed interest in the role that oral communication plays in the field of second language learning. Rost (1994) explains that listening is “vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin. Listening is thus fundamental to speaking” (Nunan, 1997:1).

### **2.1. Teaching Listening:**

We spend 65-90% of our time listening and yet it’s a skill that is almost entirely overlooked in the K12 classroom. Once a student learns to read, there’s no time spent on improving listening. And yet research shows that listening comprehension is closely tied to reading comprehension through 8th grade and beyond. Our education system needs to do better. The new Common Core standards have recognized the importance of this skill. The Common Core seeks to improve students’ skills and knowledge across a wide spectrum of learning skills. And for the first time in the history of education, it elevates listening to an anchor skill, cutting across the curriculum and applicable in kindergarten through 12th grade. The Speaking and Listening Standard requires students to interpret information from diverse media formats and to delineate specific arguments and claims.

### **2.2. Problems of Learning Listening:**

There has been little research on the listening problems that L2/F1 learners experience in learning to listen to spoken English in the classrooms. The present study attempts to investigate the listening problems encountered by a group of first year English major students of Qassim University. 60 students who took the listening course in 20011/12 were selected for the study. Data was gathered by means of questionnaires and interviews. The results of the study showed that Accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, and bad quality of recording were the major listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL Saudi learners. Understanding students' learning difficulties may enable EFL teachers to help students develop effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their English listening abilities. Suggestions are made for addressing problems regarding how teachers can help their students overcome listening comprehension problems.

Listening is a complex skill which operates at various levels. When we listen make use of information about the topic being spoken to us. The more we know the less intensively we have to listen. This is because the more information that we have, the easier it is to piece together the words and message.

We normally listen selectively rather than listening to every word. We try to catch key words and expression that give us clues to meaning and not to every single word as many learners tend to do. Our ability to do this depends on our knowledge of the topic and the topic and of the language with is associated culture.

### **2.3. Objectives of Listening:**

1. To develop listening skill for-
  - Specific information.
  - Gist.
  - Anticipation.
  - Interpretation and inference.
2. To develop learners training through:
  - Discussion and comparison of difficulties in listening.
  - Analysis of the listening process.
  - Exemplification and practical of listening strategies.

### **2.4. Types of listening:**

#### **2.4.1. Listening to lectures:**

There are a number of situations for learners to develop listening skills. They may need to listen and react appropriately in social situation with friends, colleagues and strangers. They may need to listener telephone as well as face to face conversation. In more formal academic sitting students will need to understand what is being told in tutorials, seminars and lectures.

Following lecture is particularly difficult since a listener and like a reader cannot control the flow of information. A reader can vary his reading speed, can stop, reflect or re-read, but listener is at the mercy of the speaker. There is usually no means of stopping the lecture to ask for clarification, as for most lectures this would be breaking the customary rules.

A lecturer may use various signals from the audience, such as facial expression or gaze, to interpret how well his message is clear to audience, and receiving any signs of lack of comprehension.

#### **2.4.2. Listening to Instructions:**

Lack of intelligence frequently has a direct result on students to understand simple classroom and workshop instruction. Individual teachers have many ways to give instruction. The English teacher can help a little by giving his students same practice in following classroom instructions in safe environment of the English class, thus enabling those to focus on one problem at a time.

#### **2.4.3. Listening Other Situations:**

Students many need to listen more and teacher will have to refer to the initial needs analysis to make sure students get appropriate exercises.

Possible problem areas in listening include:

- Listing in seminar (contribution may be at many different levels).
- Listening in meeting, committees (EDP).
- Listening to specialist radio and TV broadcasts.
- Listening to other non-standard varieties of English.

In all of these cases and relevant to particular students, the teacher well has to identify his students purposes in listening and will have to give exercises to suit these purposes.

On consequence of adopting the inductive approach is the student's book; summaries of content are help back until the end of each unit.

#### **2.4.4. Listening Exercises:**

The excises recorded on the cassettes are liked to be realistic. Task-charts are provided for students. There are no comprehension questions, answers will be related to our experience and use it in our own conversation. After each listening exercise you will have a chance to discuss what you found out.

### **2.5. Speaking:**

Speaking means to use your voice and say the words in a particular language, in order to make a formal speech and tell someone about a particular subject on person, so that he can compromise or agree with what you have spoken.

### **2.5.1. Seminar and Group Discussion Skills:**

In any discussion of seminar or group discussion it is important to remember that the form of the seminar or group discussion may vary from subject to subject and according to aims and objectives of seminar leader.

Typical seminar in the humanities for example, might consist of an introduction of a short paper, given either by the seminar leader or one of member, followed by discussion between teacher and students and from student to student.

Seminars are often used for setting and solving of problems, sometime involving calculations. In this sense, individual student or sometime pair will work on a problem while the lecturer or teacher circulates to help individual when required.

With this constraint in mind, there is evidence to suggest that overseas students have problems in seminar or discussion. An investigation done by Johns and (Johns, 1977) revealed the following difficulties (as reported by the students).

- a. Comprehension of spoken English (they speak too fast, they mumble vocabulary is idiomatic).
- b. The pressing need to formulate a contribution quickly (I can't think what to say).
- c. Shyness about the value of a contribution (I might says one thing wrong).
- d. In ability to formulate an idea in English (I don't know how to say it in English).
- e. Awareness that a given function may be realized in various ways (I don't the best way to say it).
- f. Frustration about being unable to enter the discussion (some students speak too much).

These 5 different points need specific materials that will make a student more confident in a discussion.

### **2.5.2. Listening, Speaking, Understanding:**

To describe the meaning of any information, we must think of the tone unit as being a part of some interactive event. The speaker is to be thought of as addressing a known listener or listeners, at particular moment in time. Each feature reflects the speaker's view of what state of background understanding exists now between speaker and listener. This mean's of course, that discussion of the intonation of isolated sentence must be avoided; the context must always be considered.

### **2.5.3. Listening and Speaking Activities:**

Pairs and group:

Most of the activities will involve you in conversation with partners in small groups or in pairs. There are several reasons why this is valuable:

- There is no need to worry about mistakes.
- Each activity can be a real conversation, not just apiece of language practice.

Working together:

The aim of this activity is to give you experience of working together with partner to solve various problems. Make scare that you and your partner discuss each problem and don't just try to solve it on your own. The large, the class, the more this student can't follow activities.

In other words, when learners are working together in small groups, they can communicate with each other and are not just practicing English or answering question.

Of course, it is true that they are more likely to make mistakes, but it is better for a whole class to speak independently with some mistakes.

### **2.6.1. Students' Difficulties:**

Nearly all students have great difficulty with suitable word at minimal pair work and generally the sound, has a low frequency in the beginner's vocabulary range.

Showing students, the tongue position is very helpful in teaching the sound. It is important to give students a physical demonstration of how to make the sound. There are students with sustained modal of the sound (i.e. pronouncing it without stopping for about 5-10 seconds). Help them to distinguish it from.

### **2.6.2. Benefit of Mistakes:**

You can't learn to speak a foreign language without making mistakes: The questions: How much do they matter? Is it more important to speak 100 accurately or to learn to communicate effectively?

If you are afraid to express an idea because you may make a mistake, then you cannot make any progress, a mistake can tell you what you still need to learn.

So don't be afraid of a mistake, your teacher will correct the ones which seem to prevent you from communicating.

### **2.6.3. Grammar and Mistakes:**

Although accuracy is an important aspect of language learning and should never be ignored. It is more important for learners to be able to communicate effectively. The activities should be task oriented. Learners' success or failure will not necessarily depend on grammatical accuracy. These activities are related to the topic of each unit and require the use of a wide range of language skills. They provide essential fluency practice allowing learners to learn how to communicate by actually using English.

No learner should be or even can be corrected every time he, she makes a mistake. Indeed, if that happened, some student would become mistake-conscious. They would be afraid to speak at all.

It must be realized that no one can learn a foreign language without making mistakes and that mistakes are an essential indicator of what learners still need to learn. Based on the mistake, a teacher can take proper initiatives to solve the problem. There is no point in attempting to revise the whole of English grammar at an upper intermediate level.

Specific difficulties can't be predicted; it is only when mistakes are made that you can see what specific difficulties are; then you should take an action.

### **2.6.4. Role of Teachers:**

The teacher has three main things to do while ideas are being used:

1. To get this started making everyone know that they have to do and possesses the necessary vocabulary to do it.

2. To monitor the groups at work and decide when to stop the activity.

3. To lead a short follow-up discussion after each activity; answering any question pointing out any significant mistakes and then doing any remedial work necessary.

It is wise to rearrange groups and pair frequently. This will help to keep the class fresh and receptive to different people, ideas. It may however, sometimes be necessary to make sure that the more dominant learners who might intermediate the less confident ones are kept together in the same group. Similarly, the shyest ones may talk to each other while they gain confidence.

### **2.6.5. Beginning of Teaching Pronunciation:**

Work:

Often advanced students find that they can improve all aspects of their proficiency in English except their pronunciation and mistakes which are impossible to eradicate.

The long-term answer to this problem to of the fossilized accent is to begin teaching pronunciation from the first week of beginner course, and to give students so much help in early stage that pronunciation mistakes are not learned by repetition.

In course planning often little or no time is allocated to pronunciation teaching at beginner levels, more time being allocated to pronunciation teaching at beginner than at later levels.

## **III. Analysis and Discussion:**

### **3.1. Analysis of Data:**

#### **3.1.1. The Questionnaire:**

The questionnaire which was distributed among students of the Department of English Language in two universities, College of Arts and Humanities, University of Bahri, Sudan and College of Science and Arts, Tanumah, King Khalid University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. 40 questionnaires were distributed at each college targeting students of different levels who learn English language as major specialization.

Responses were organized into ten tables. One table for each question. It consists of the responses of the students of both universities in figures and percentage.

#### **3.1.2. Responses of the Students:**

The responses for the first question were as follows: 25 students chose always and often with the percentage of 62.5 % which is considered as a positive sign for their confidence while 37.5 of them chose between sometimes and never. While 68 % of King Khalid students chose between always and often which

gives also positive indicator for good efficiency of communicative competence. And 30 % chose sometimes and never. In both universities the majority have good competence and confidence in using English language in spoken form.

**Table 1: Question One:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
<b>Q.1.</b> Do you speak English with your teachers and classmates during your English lessons?	8	20	17	42.5	11	27.5	4	10	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
<b>Q.1.</b> Do you speak English with your teachers and classmates during your English lessons?	9	22.5	19	47.5	10	25	2	5	40

In question two the students of University of Bahri responded to always and often by a percentage of 72.5 % which indicated high competence in communication while 22.5 % said sometimes and only 5 % responded by never. Students of King Khalid University responded to same question as follows: 70 % responded by sometimes which indicates a ratio of uncertainty and only 9 % chose always and often and 3 students chose never. Here we can obviously recognize a strong tendency of University of Bahri towards communicating in English.

**Table 2: Question Two:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
<b>Q.2.</b> Can you communicate in English?	11	27.5	18	45	9	22.5	2	5	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
<b>Q.2.</b> Can you communicate in English?	6	1.5	3	7.5	28	70	3	7.5	40

In question three students of both universities gave nearly same response with a marginal difference towards never. That tells a good ability towards communicating with native speakers. That can be interpreted in exposition to native or native-like teaching environment in both universities.

**Table 3: Question Three:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
<b>Q.3.</b> Can you understand a native speaker?	14	35	13	32.5	13	32.5	0	0	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
<b>Q.3.</b> Can you understand a native speaker?	13	32.5	13	32.5	13	32.5	1	2.5	40

In question four there are realistic responses as watching and understanding movies in English needs more than mere knowledge of English for academic purposes. People should have the skill of recognizing and understanding different accents and spoken styles and varieties. Though students of Bahri outnumbered the other university students in the first two responses (40 %) vs (20 %), but the third choice was favored by 25 students of King Khalid university students and 19 students from Bahri students and those who chose never were 5 students from Bahri (12.5 %) and 7 students from KKU (17.5 %).

**Table: 4: Question Four:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
Q.4. Can you watch original version of movies in (English) and understand the whole plot?	5	12.5	11	27.5	19	47.5	5	12.5	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
Q.4. Can you watch original version of movies in (English) and understand the whole plot?	1	2.5	7	17.5	25	62.5	7	17.5	40

In question five we can observe a huge difference in the responses of the students. If we count the first choices together as positive responses, we find that 65 % of students of University of Bahri favored these choices whereas only 32.5 % of KKU students went to these choices. The third choice was doubly chosen by university of Bahri students. The most remarkable difference was in the fourth choice as 9 of University of Bahri students only chose never while 22 of KKU students chose it.

**Table: 5: Question Five:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
Q.5. Can you listen to a song in English and understand it?	11	27.5	15	37.5	10	25	9	22.5	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
Q.5. Can you listen to a song in English and understand it?	5	12.5	8	20	5	12.5	22	55	40

Responses in question six were nearly with the same percentage as the question was about a technique used by many teachers who teach basic skills in foreign languages. Working in pairs or groups encourages students to get rid of hesitation and gain confidence. Therefore, the responses were so normal and expected.

**Table: 6: Question Six:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
Q.6. Do you work in pairs or groups to do interaction activities?	9	22.5	14	35	14	35	3	7.5	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
Q.6. Do you work in pairs or groups to do interaction activities?	10	25	16	40	11	27.5	3	7.5	40

Question seven deals with the accents and the responses were also nearly the same and that is so logical as we don't expect to have many accents in the surroundings as nearly all the students are of Arabic-speaking background and they are familiar with the accents of their teachers. They may face some difficulty in the first lectures or the first encounters with the new teachers but afterwards things become familiar and easy to understand the accent.

**Table: 7: Question Seven:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
Q.7. Are you able to understand whatever accent of English in the college?	11	27.5	15	37.5	15	37.5	0	0	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
Q.7. Are you able to understand whatever accent of English in the college?	10	25	14	35	14	35	1	2.5	40

In question eight we have 26 students of University of Bahri chose the first responses while 20 students of KKU chose them. But who chose sometimes were 17 students from KKU and 12 from Bahri University. Never was chosen by 2 of Bahri and 3 of KKU students. That may reinforce the fact interpreted in question 2.

**Table: 8: Question Eight:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
Q.8. Do you think your pronunciation in English is good?	10	25	16	40	12	30	2	5	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
Q.8. Do you think your pronunciation in English is good?	8	20	12	30	17	42.5	3	7.5	40

Question nine is more challenging as it deals with colloquial English which is not normally used in formal contexts like the university surroundings. But students may be exposed to when they watch movies, travelling abroad or meeting native speakers in informal contexts. We can easily observe that students of Bahri are more positive in their responses than those of KKU. That can be interpreted in more exposure to informal contexts of Bahri students more than KKU students.

**Table: 9: Question Nine:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
Q.9. Is it difficult for you to understand some colloquial expressions?	9	22.5	11	27.5	10	25	10	25	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
Q.9. Is it difficult for you to understand some colloquial expressions?	12	30	16	40	10	25	2	5	40

In the last question, the percentages were as follows: 77.5 % of Bahri students believe that practice of listening and speaking skills are useful while 60 % of KKU students have the same belief. Nearly most students have the same belief.

**Table: 10: Question Ten:**

Questions	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never		Total
	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	Fig.	%	
<b>Students of University of Bahri</b>									
Q.10. Do you consider that the practice of listening and speaking skills are useful?	19	47.5	12	30	9	22.5	0	0	40
<b>Students of King Khalid University</b>									
Q.10. Do you consider that the practice of listening and speaking skills are useful?	14	35	10	25	16	40	0	0	40



### **3.2. Comments:**

As a matter of fact, students in both universities have a BA study program of four years and they study different courses starting with basic skills courses. The programs and the text books are different in details, but they address the same learning goals. Students in both universities use language laboratories with different specifications but with the same principles.

### **3.3. Discussion of the Data:**

The responses towards the questionnaire produced some findings. Students of both universities have confidence which is a positive indicator for their mastering of communicative competence in using English language in spoken form. Though, there is some variation in the ability of students in both universities concerning communication competence.

Students also showed a tendency towards having an ability towards communicating with people outside classrooms or even outside the university environment.

Realistic responses came when students were asked about watching movies in English. Students should acquire such kind of ability by more dedication towards watching movies in English to become more able towards recognizing and understanding different accents and spoken styles and varieties. Strangely this not the case with listening and understanding songs in English. May be because listening to songs is less attractive than watching movies and needs more concentration.

With reference to the techniques used in language classes like working in pairs or groups to do interaction activities, we find the students of both universities responded positively as the technique is commonly used nearly by all teachers who teach basic skills in foreign languages.

Students showed nearly the same responses towards understanding different accents as it is not something common to encounter different accents within the university context. That may be interpreted into less interaction with native speakers and limited learning environment.

Formal or academic English may be evaluated as easier than colloquial English which is not normally used in the university surroundings. Students may not be exposed to many informal contexts during their university study. Exposure to informal context requires more than attending classes. Students of both universities believe in the usefulness of practicing listening and speaking skills.

## **4. Conclusions and Recommendations:**

### **4.1. Conclusions:**

Research results have arrived at the following conclusions:

- 1- Teachers in both universities apply different techniques in teaching basic skills to their students. Nevertheless, students need more exposure to informal interaction with native speakers. Teachers shall be trained on good English listening and speaking strategies.
- 2- Classroom activities are to be given much more consideration in teaching process and according to classroom activities, students need to be enabled to participate in oral and written speech.
- 3- Students need to be provided by audio-lingual materials to encourage them to master listening and speaking skills in non-academic contexts.
- 4- Students need exposure to many informal contexts during their university study. Exposure to informal context requires students to be within native contexts. Programs of exchange of students may be useful in this respect.
- 5- Students believe in the usefulness of practicing listening and speaking skills in all situations.
- 6- Special care shall be devoted to individual variations between students' capabilities to overcome hinders and difficulties even on personal basis.

### **4.2. Recommendations and Suggestions:**

Future studies may consider the following directives:

- 1-Future studies shall be carried out with large number of samples to generalize an overall conclusion applying to all EFL learners.
- 2- A standardized inventory of listening difficulties could be created to provide instructors and learners with an efficient way to diagnose difficulties strategy.
- 3-Studies need to be focused on the role of teachers and textbooks in developing students' listening and speaking competence in different institutions in different Arab countries.
- 4- Further researching needs to be conducted with more comprehensive samples including primary, secondary, and preparatory levels in order to get a complete picture of the problem.

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