Problems Faced by Jordanian Undergraduate Students in Speaking English

Ibrahim Fathi Huwari[a], [a,]Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts, Zarqa University, Jordan, Email: [a]ibrahimhuwari@yahoo.com/ihuwari@zu.edu.jo

Speaking in English is a problem faced by EFL/ESL learners, particularly in Arabic countries. Research on students' speaking skills in English for non-English speaking countries such as Jordanian is limited. The researcher carried out a qualitative case study which explored the problems faced by Jordanian undergraduate students at Zarqa University (ZU) while speaking English inside the classroom. The participants of this study consisted of Jordanian undergraduate students at ZU, who are enrolled in an English language and literature major in their first year of studies. All of them share the same mother tongue and the same specialization. The researcher interviewed twelve students, then analysed them. The findings were divided into four main themes with different sub-themes: linguistic matters (like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary), psychological factors (inhibition, lack of motivation), learning environment (topics of speaking modules, limited time), lack of practising.

Key words: *Speaking skill, speaking problems, strategies to overcome problems.*

Introduction

Nowadays, English language is considered the most common language. Worldwide, researchers such as Dewi (2015); Mukminin, Ali, & Ashari (2015); and Jackson & Stockwell (1996) all agree that English is used everywhere among different cultures, ethnicities, and social backgrounds. Acquiring a language requires the mastery of four main skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Researchers such as Ur (1996); Leong & Ahmadi (2017); and Shteiwi & Hamuda (2016) declared that among the four English skills, speaking is considered the most effective and significant skill. Al- Hosni (2014); and Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal (2014) have discussed why EFL learners have such difficulties speaking English. Their studies

among Omani and Jordanian students showed problems in speaking, because students use their mother tongue in the classroom, the time practising speaking is limited, vocabulary is lacking, and, there is low proficiency in oral performance.

Researchers, speakers, and learners declare that speaking is the most challenging part of English (Brown & Yule, 1983). In Jordan, for example, Arabic is a mother tongue, while students learn English as a second language. Formal instruction is the only way to learn English in Jordan, for several reasons. First, students learn English only inside the classroom, while several factors limit opportunities to use English outside the classroom; for example, few native English speakers live in Jordan. Second, the medium of instruction in Jordan at different levels is Arabic. So, students have problems in speaking English and understanding specialized written materials. Therefore they face problems in furthering postgraduate studies. This study was mainly concerned with the difficulties faced by Jordanian undergraduate students at Zarqa University (ZU) when communicating in English.

Research Questions

What are the major problems faced by Jordanian undergraduate students at ZU when they speak in English?

Literature Review
The Characteristics of Speaking Skill

According to Mazouzi (2013), learning should be based on the equivalence between achieving fluency and accuracy. They are parts of the skill of speaking (Mazouzi, 2013). Fluency means the ability to speak clearly (Hughes, 2002). Fluency is a requirement for learners of a new language. They need to focus on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation when speaking a new language (Mazouzi, 2013). At the same time, Hedge (2000) explains that fluency uses suprasegmental features like stress, intonation, producing the sounds clearly, and connecting words and phrases.

To gain accuracy in grammar, learners need to focus on the length and complexity of utterances and clauses. To gain accuracy in vocabulary, they need to choose the suitable word in each context. Learners are required to use words correctly in their positions. To gain accuracy in pronunciation, learners should produce the sounds correctly, as well as focusing on the phonological rules, and be aware of the different sounds of the language. In addition, they need to know the suprasegmental features such as stress, intonation, and pitch, to speak the language easily and effectively (Thornbury, 2005).

Past Studies

Researchers have studied the difficulties of speaking in different regions. In Eastern Asia, a study by Tuan & Mai (2015) discovered what students at Le Thanh Hiem High School in Vietnam encounter, when they speak English. Students faced problems because they do not practice speaking English outside the classroom, they use their mother tongue in English classes, and they lacked motivation to speak English. Another study from the same region, specifically China, is that of Liu and Jackson (2008). They found a lack of both vocabulary and confidence to speak English, because students worried about teachers' feedback, as the most common reasons for weakness in speaking. Nearby, recent research in 2018 by Abrar, Mukminin, Habibi, Asyrafi, Makmur, & Marzulina on Indonesian EFL learners showed students at a public university, in Jambi, Sumatera, experience problems when they speak English. These problems were language barriers, psychological effects, learning environment, and practice.

When surveying the Middle East, studies such as those of Al Hosni (2014), Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014), Keong, Ali and Hameed (2015), and Shteiwi and Hamuda (2016) emerged. The first study was conducted in 2014 by Al Hosni, to discover speaking difficulties among young, Omani learners of EFL. The findings pursued linguistic difficulties, using the mother tongue, inhibitions, and teaching strategies. Second, Al-Jamal & Al- Jamal (2014) studied Jordanian students at six public universities, to discover their difficulties when speaking English. The researcher used a mixed-method, which is a questionnaire distributed into 566 students, and interviewed 64 participants. Jordanian students were found to have a low proficiency in speaking. The reasons are using their mother tongue, large classes, and lack of time. Third, Keong et al. (2015) investigated the difficulties faced by Iraqi EFL undergraduates at Garmiyan University, when communicating in English. The researcher interviewed eight students and distributed a questionnaire for 36 students. Iraqi EFL students were found to have a poor command of speaking ability, because students have low self-confidence. Linguistic difficulties included pronunciation problems, lack of vocabulary, obstructions when using grammar in speaking, using their mother tongue, and lack of practice.

A Palestinian study by Abu Alyan in (2013) aimed to discover speaking difficulties among Palestinian university students in Gaza. The researcher interviewed 20 students majoring in English language, and six teachers. The researcher summarized students' responses into seven main reasons namely: incorrect pronunciation, limited vocabulary, lack of exposure to the target language, using the mother tongue, the particular strategies that students used in listening and reading, lack of self-confidence, and finally, difficulties in organizing students' ideas and meaning coherently. The researcher divided these reasons into two main factors, namely linguistic problems and psychological barriers. Nearby to Jordanian society, a

Turkish study by Tok (2009) examined the communication difficulties for Turkish EFL learners inside classrooms. The researcher applied his study at the Faculty of Education at Adiyaman University in Turkey. The researcher used a questionnaire for 139 participants. The findings showed that students in Turkey are unwilling to speak English and then feel anxiety when using the language. The last study was done by Shteiwi & Hamuda in 2016, to discover speaking problems among students at the Educational Faculty, Misrata University, Libya. The researcher used a questionnaire and interviews. Students related their problems to feedback, limited time to speak English, linguistic matters like pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Finally, students lacked the self-confidence to speak English.

A study by Huwari & Abd. Aziz (2010) discovered apprehensions about communication among 70 postgraduate students. A questionnaire measured different situations such as groups, meetings, and public speaking. Jordanian postgraduate students were shown to have had high levels of communication apprehension, when they speak English. Through the literature, the researcher of this study concludes that very few studies have been done on Jordanian society. Different research discovered different results. So, in this research, the researcher is going to the reasons behind the difficulties of speaking English in the classroom, and the strategies to overcome such problem among the students. Then the researcher tries to compare the differences and similarities between his results and others.

Strategies to overcome speaking difficulties

Overcoming a problem is very important for every researcher. Rubiati (2010) used debating techniques to overcome speaking problems among 26 students at Sungai Raya, Malaysia. The grade eight students defended their ideas or opinions, using 1) Motion; (2) Definition; (3) Theme-line; (4) Argument; (5) Rebuttal; (6) Sum up/closing. Students improved their speaking by using these debating tools, in discussing, defending their opinions, and communicating clearly with others. Schneider (1997) improved fluency by advising learners to speak in front of mirrors, and then record their own speech. These two ways might help ESL/EFL learners to improve their fluency of speech. In 2014, Wang says that learners should use three tasks to improve their fluency; an information-gap task that allows sharing ideas, problem-solving to discuss the topic, and finally, social monologues to allow learners to give their opinions. Uztosum & Erten (2014) highlighted the strategies that Turkish EFL students used in his study, namely gaining time during conversations, repairing structural mistakes in utterances, and using alternative vocabularies and rephrasing ambiguous points. In this research, the researcher found that very few studies discuss ways of overcoming speaking difficulties, from the students' perspective. Morozova (2013) suggested the following:

1. emphasising the quality of the books that students use,
2. focusing more on giving time for speaking,
3. providing a friendly environment for students to use the language,
4. teachers should use practical and applicable strategies,
5. improving students' self-confidence,
6. class size should not be over-loaded,
7. awards to motivate students,
8. listening more, and
9. using different activities to improve speaking skills.

From the above studies, there is no progress in the EFL students as well as adults' ability to speak English whether in school, university or at the workplace in the Arab world. This research is important in showing the strategies that students themselves used to improve their speech.

Research Methodology
Research Design

The researcher used a qualitative case study to understand both the reasons behind speaking difficulties, and the strategies students use to overcome problem when speaking English. Qualitative research is defined by Creswell (2012, p.46) as "a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants, describes and analyses these words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner". The researcher in this study selected a qualitative case study design to answer the research question, because it is the most suitable design to answer the research question.

Participants

The participants were Jordanian undergraduates at ZU who are enrolled in an English language and literature major in their first year. All share the same mother tongue language and the same specialization.

Data Collection

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument. The study used interviews only, and no other methodology. Twelve participants were interviewed, to describe their views of the exact topic (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Semi-structured interviews were used. The researcher attended to the dialogue with participants. Some questions were: What/how do you

feel when you speak English? From your perspective, what do you think the problem that you faced when you speak English? What are the ways that you follow to improve your speaking?

Before the interview, all questions were pilot-tested to preserve their clarity and accuracy. Each student was interviewed for about 20 minutes. To preserve interpretive adequacy, the researcher interviewed in Arabic and then translated it to English. Most students could not express exactly what they wanted to say in English, so the researcher thought it preferable to conduct it in Arabic, to obtain their exact meaning and intention. Field notes techniques preserved time and accuracy.

Data Analysis

The researcher followed some steps mentioned by Corder (1974): First, the researcher analysed students' paragraphs word by word and sentence by sentence, to find out the types of errors. Second, the researcher coded these types, and then converted them into a percentage to examine frequency. Third, the researcher compared students' errors with other studies. The interviewer was able to ask probing questions to gain a fuller understanding of the issues under discussion (Gillham, 2005) method.

Ethical Concerns

Participants were introduced to the study and its objectives briefly. The issue of their consent was addressed from the very beginning, and they were assured that the interview was optional. Also, the confidentiality of their information was protected by their anonymity.

Findings and Discussions

The objective of the present study was to discover the problems faced by Jordanian undergraduate students in speaking English at ZU. The findings from the interview data were as follows: the majority of the students interviewed were suffering from speaking inside classrooms. Most students proposed that their education in speaking should focus more on the acquisition of vocabulary and terminology. Table 1 shows the problems that students mentioned in their interviews.

Table 1: The problems faced by Jordanian undergraduate students in communicating in English at ZU

INTERVIEW Q: What are the problems that you face when do you communicate in English inside the classrooms?	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	Total (n=12)
1- linguistics matters like (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation)	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	11
2- Psychological factors (Inhibition, lack of motivation).	√	√		√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	10
3- Learning environment (topics of speaking modules, limited time).	√		√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√		10
4- lack of practicing	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√		√		10

The above table shows four factors or problems that Jordanian undergraduates at ZU face, when they speak English inside classrooms. Those four problems varied from linguistic matters (like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary), to psychological factors (inhibition, lack of motivation), to learning environment factors (topics of speaking modules, limited time), to lack of practice. The table has also shown the occurrences of each factor varied from 11 times to ten times. The researcher is going to discuss each factor or problem isolated.

The first problem is linguistics matters like (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary)

The first sub-theme is a limited vocabulary. The above table shows that almost all students (11 out of 12) mentioned vocabulary as their major problem. The researcher asked the interviewees about their vocabulary, saying *Do you think that your vocabulary knowledge is sufficient enough to express your ideas and argue about any topics? Explain*. Students describe this problem in different faces, such as some declaring that their vocab is insufficient to express ideas and argue about any topics. Also, some listed a lack of vocabulary knowledge as one problems which they encounter when speaking the target language. Others

claimed that a limited vocabulary makes learners unable to participate or continue in oral performance. Keeping silent was one way L2 used to not be criticized. The more vocabulary students have, the more they can participate in conversations. Moreover, the rest said that they could not retrieve the suitable vocabulary rapidly when they speak. One student said that: *Sometimes I can't express myself inside the classroom, I don't have enough vocabulary*. Another one claimed that: *When the doctors asked me to participate, I feel like I can't say even a single word because I don't have enough vocabulary*.

Through the literature, it is clear that vocabulary affects ESL/EFL learners when speaking English. Students at ZU showed that vocabulary is one of the most difficult problems they faced when they speak English, because they might not have enough vocabulary to speak. This result is similar to other findings, such as research by Abu Alyan (2013); Al- Hosni (2014); Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014); Liu and Jackson (2008); Mahripah (2014); Şakiroğlu and Kaya, (2018); Keong et al., (2015); and Shteiwi and Hamuda (2016). But the results are dissimilar to Abrar, et al. (2018); Tuan & Mai (2015).

The second problematic sub-theme is grammatical categories. Ten out of twelve students mentioned that they do not speak English inside the classroom, because of their grammatical mistakes such as using complex sentences, and tenses. This can be considered as a major problem, which gets in the way when speaking English. One participant said that *Grammar, oh, I have a headache. Inside the classrooms, I don't participate because I feel that I have a lot of grammatical errors. I can't speak a full sentence in a correct way, even though I have to do*. Another participant claimed that I *have good vocab to start my speaking, but the problem is with grammar. I feel my language is damaged because of the grammar, so I prefer to not participate with the doctors*.

Throughout the results, ZU students relate their speaking problems to grammar. Students do not differentiate between the types of sentences, which tense they need to say. This problem has been found in other research findings such as Al- Hosni (2014); Keong et al., (2015); Mahripah (2014); Şakiroğlu & Kaya, (2018); Shteiwi & Hamuda (2016). But the results are dissimilar to Abrar, et al. (2018); Tuan & Mai (2015); Liu and Jackson (2008).

The third sub-theme is pronunciation features. The majority of Jordanian undergraduate students at ZU (nine out of twelve) claimed that they do not speak English inside the classrooms because of their pronunciation, which contains word stress and intonation, for example. These features are very important for intelligibility because they express intentions. Word stress and sentence stress affect their ability in speaking skills. One student said that *oh, my pronunciation is very bad, I try to not participate in the classes because of my pronunciation*. Another one said that *sometimes I refused to participate because of the way I pronounce the words. I feel shy*. Throughout the results, students related their speaking

difficulties to the way they pronounce words. The findings are similar to Abu Alyan (2013); Al- Hosni (2014); Mahripah (2014); Şakiroğlu & Kaya, (2018); Shteiwi & Hamuda (2016). But the results are dissimilar to that of various researchers such as Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal (2014); Abrar, et al. (2018); Tuan & Mai (2015); Liu and Jackson (2008).

The second problem is psychological (inhibition, lack of motivation). The first sub-theme is inhibition. It is a main factor that hinders students in the classroom. Ten out of twelve students claimed to feel anxious or worry about making mistakes. Littlewood (2007) asserts that inhibitions and anxiety can be created easily in a foreign language classroom. The majority of students is afraid or shy to make a mistake in front of their classmates or their lecturers. This factor can be considered a main problem encountered when they try to speak the target language. Learners fear criticism by lecturers or students when committing speaking mistakes, or not recalling the appropriate words. One student said that *I usually do not participate inside the classrooms because of I am afraid to be wrong, so that my doctor will correct me. So, I am afraid that his correction will be in a rough way*.

The second sub-theme is lack of motivation. Students do not have the motivation to speak English. Seven out of 12 learners claim that motivation was absent when it comes to speaking a foreign language. Rivers (1981) thought that students sometimes cannot express themselves because of the topic. Teachers chose the topic, and students need to use it. Baker & Westrup (2003) declare that students cannot reply to their teachers' questions in a foreign language because they lack enough ideas to share, and also because of vocabulary and correct grammar. One student asked a few questions such as *Why do we need to speak in English? I don't think that I am going to travel anywhere, so why should I?* Another said that *Sometimes, I feel shy to speak in front of others, I can't say a thing inside the classrooms*. Students at ZU claimed that anxiety, shyness, low participation, inhibition, hesitation, and self-confidence are problems that faced students when they speak English. Other research has named these problems as psychological effects. This study resembles Abu Alyan (2013); Abrar, et al. (2018); Al- Hosni (2014); Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014); Tuan and Mai (2015); Tok (2009); Liu and Jackson (2008); Shteiwi and Hamuda (2016); Bashir, Azeem, and Dogar (2011); Mahripah (2014); Merisuo-Storm (2007); Şakiroğlu and Kaya (2018); and Tsou (2005).

The third problem is the learning environment (topics of speaking modules, limited time)

Another problem in speaking is participation. Seven out of 12 students said that they do not have a chance to speak. In a large group, teachers are unable to divide the time between all the students, so, it is noticed that one student speaks more than another does. One student said *I can speak very well, but the problem is that when I feel that students don't participate with me, so, I think that I can't express what I want to say in a good way*. Another student said *sometimes I can't practice because of the topic. Sometimes I don't like them*. The results of

this study are similar to other findings such as Al- Hosni (2014); Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014), Abrar, et al. (2018); Shteiwi and Hamuda (2016), but dissimilar to Tuan and Mai (2015), and Liu and Jackson (2008). To conclude, this main theme found in this research (learning environment) is found only among Arabian studies, but not among Asian studies such as Tuan and Mai (2015), Liu and Jackson (2008); Tok (2009).

The fourth problem is practising the language (lack of practising)

Lack of practice is a main factor affecting Jordanian undergraduates at ZU when they speak in English inside classrooms. Ten out of 12 participants said that they do not have a chance to practice speaking outside classes. Jordan is one of the Arabic countries in which they speak Arabic in all their daily moments. Learners of a foreign language, in general, have no chance to improve their speaking skill outside class, and they spend most of the time listening because of the nature of lectures. The lessons are presentations by the lecturers. It is rare to use the language outside the classroom, in places such as hotels and restaurants. On the other hand, participants declare that the time, which is given to speak in English inside the classroom, is still not enough. They said that learners have to be given enough time to express themselves, discuss, debate or argue with others in the classroom. This increases their speaking skills. Most of the time in lectures, learners keep silent, and just listen to lecturers and write down notes. The learners need more practice in class, which in turn needs much time. Students must be given chances to participate in conversations to improve their speaking skills. One student said that *As you know doctor, we don't speak in English in our daily life, that's why we are not very good at speaking, even though we just have one subject as a speaking course, which is not enough*. The finding of this study is similar to Abrar, et al. (2018); Keong et al., (2015); Tuan and Mai (2015). But it is dissimilar to other studies such as Al- Hosni (2014); Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014); Liu and Jackson (2008); and Tok (2009).

Conclusion

In short, the researcher carried out a qualitative case study exploring the problems faced while speaking English inside the classroom. Participants were Jordanian undergraduate students' at Zarqa University (ZU) enrolled in English language and literature majors, in their first year of studies. All share the same mother tongue and specialization. The researcher interviewed twelve students, and then analysed the data. Findings were divided into four main themes, with different sub-themes: linguistics matters (like pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary), psychological factors (inhibition, lack of motivation), and learning environment (topics of speaking modules, limited time), and lack of practice.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

1- How can you rate your level of speaking English? High/ Moderate/ Low.
2- What/how do you feel when you speak English?
3- Are you interested to speak English?
4- Do you think classes do not regularly focus on speaking?
5- Do you use your mother tongue when you try to speak English?
6- Do you think, it is easier to express our ideas and thoughts in ournative language?
7- Do you agree on this statement: I am afraid of making mistakes in English classes?
8- Do you think that your vocabulary knowledge is sufficient enough to express your ideas and argue about any topics? Explain.
9- From your own perspective, what do you thing the problem that you faced when you speak English?
10- What are the ways/ strategies that you use to improve your speaking?