

How do Productive Skills of Saudi Students Affect EFL Learning and Teaching

Vipin Kumar Sharma

English Language Centre, Jazan University, Jazan
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Language plays a crucial role in the development of human society. It is the main means of communication between individuals, groups and countries. Nowadays, more and more people are learning English as a foreign or second language, and their key objective is to get expertise in English. The abrupt changes in the broad field of economy, business, science, technology and education have triggered the youth and coming generation to improve their communication skills. Language acquisition involves four modules of teaching that includes Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing. The teachers have to be dynamic and updated to teach these language skills to the students. The researcher has interviewed the participants on various aspects involved in teaching-learning process to find out the root cause of the problems encountered by students studying at Jazan University to attain the speaking and the writing skills. The problems are further critically analysed, evaluated to derive at conclusions to suggest the most appropriate measures to be taken by the language teachers to overcome the problems of the students to enhance and expertise in their productive skills.

Keywords: Communication; Technology; Foreign language; Productive skills

1. Introduction

The teaching of English language was not given importance in the first half of the last century in the gulf countries but from the second half of twentieth century to till today, as Kachru and Nelson suggest that English has developed from the native language of a relatively small island nation to the most widely taught, read, and spoken language that the world has ever known (Kuo, 2006). The opening up of trade boundaries and the movement of people from other countries into Saudi Arabia created a need to acquire the knowledge of English as a foreign language (EFL). The Govt. of Higher Education has introduced English in the school level curriculum. But learning EFL has become a need of the hour and improving English proficiency gains a significant position in this language acquisition. There are four language skills i.e. listening, reading, writing and speaking, involved in the language learning process. The reading and listening skills are called receptive skills and speaking and writing skills are called productive skills.

It is a universal phenomenon that a child follows certain path to achieve these skills. He first listens to his mother tongue or first language, then speak, read and later on writing is the last skill of language acquisition process. The receptive skills are easy to attain than the productive skills as they need an enormous practice. However, in the case of EFL learning, this sequence does not always work the same way.

The researcher has interviewed Saudi students and found that a child usually start to learn a foreign language in the sixth standard now. Then he learns listening, reading EFL comfortably but has to struggle to learn speaking and writing. But through teacher's pragmatic approach, the students develop all the four skills simultaneously. We see in the language lab that listening to the target language usually helps to develop speaking skills and similarly reading does the same to writing skills.

The researcher makes a seminal attempt to find out the problems related to productive skills in language acquisition process, then analyzing and evaluating to extract some similarities and differences between spoken language and written language and suggest implementing the best practices to attain effective English language learning and teaching in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

2.Features and Significance of Productive Skills

Human beings are blessed with many languages and language is a tool of communication of human society. The language has many functions in real-life situations as Yule while discussing the origins of language mentions two functions of language:

“...All this noise-making and gesturing, seems to be characteristic of only one of the major functions of language use, which we may describe as the interactional function. It has to do with how humans use language to interact with each other, socially or emotionally; how they indicate friendliness, co-operate or hostility, or annoyance, pain, or pleasure... But there is another major function of language, the transactional function, whereby humans use their linguistic abilities to communicate knowledge, skills and information.. ” (1996, p. 6).

Language differentiates us from animals and the language originated from the critical need of the people to communicate clearly and effectively. As a resultant of this NEED the spoken language came into existence and developed, and consequently the written language, which catered for the need of recording and preserving for future references. The use of the language facilitates the people interactions and exchange of knowledge of their respective fields. The receptive skills usually prepare the foundation for the productive skills to produce output in the form of completion of task. The learners are required to attain all the four skills to accomplish their objective of language acquisition as attaining half would not serve the purpose. Communication is a two way process that consists of receiving information and responding in the form of giving information. The receiving information covers listening and reading skills whereas speaking and writing skills are productive skills. A person is considered to be a complete gainer of Language when he speaks fluently and write effectively.

First language acquisition is known as a natural process as speaking is learned unconsciously in daily life but writing skills are learned consciously in schools. But in the foreign language learning situation, both speaking and writing are hard nut to crack. There are many features and differences between these two productive skills.

The first language at Saudi Arabia is Arabic and people do all transactions in Arabic only. They become so fluent from their childhood because of conducive environment they get at home and outside but same is not the case with foreign language. Teaching and learning of English came later as a foreign language and this language is hardly used in routine affairs except few words like computer, studio, biscuit, salad, doctor, tyre, radar chocolate etc. and except on few occasions like business meetings, conferences, seminars etc. The English lecture at school level is only the time and place that English language learners get to learn and practice English.

It is forced, artificial and formal way of teaching and the learners don't feel free in this environment and hesitant to speak in English.

The students at this University do face grammatical problems while speaking English in class or peer group. A sound knowledge of grammar will help the students to understand the speech of others and respond correctly using right words, correct tense and correct sentences. Grammar helps the students by providing standard set of rules which not only help them to learn, understand and speak but enhance their confidence resulting speaking English fluently and effectively. Despite this, the mother tongue of various dialects influence the English pronunciation of learners as Brown rightly mentioned that:

“... There is, to begin with, no influential description of spoken English which has, say, the status of grammars of written English. Spoken English appears very variable, and is very different from one dialect area to another. Even between speakers who mostly speak ‘standard English’ there is different emphasis in their selection from forms in standard English. ...” (Brown, 1983, p. 3).

There are many speech sounds in different cultures, traditions, dialects, age groups and society in a country resulting in no set rules for spoken English to the learners. The native language may have certain rules in writing and speaking but Saudi students speak the same as written in English texts. Speaking in English is not to speak the written words but to learn beyond written words. The emphasis in Saudi Arabia is still on western accent but spoken language has become dynamic in nature globally and it has set a great challenge for the scholars and teachers to introspect and innovate new method and techniques for teaching spoken English to the English foreign learners.

3. Spoken English Vs Written English

The concepts of spoken and written English are not new to any language, cultures and countries because they carry out various activities in their societal and business life. The use of these two terms depends upon the requirements and the prevalent situations. The first form is oral and doesn't require much preparation and attention whereas written English needs careful selection of words, using in correct order and place as per grammar rules. We can observe in our routine affairs that people use different words when they write on a specific matter but use different words when they speak or interact on the same matter.

The speaking and writing skills are also called productive skills but written language doesn't contain words and language what have been spoken and spoken language is not just reading out loudly the written words and language. Bygate has rightly pointed out the difference in this read-aloud case example:

“Of course if you have actually tried to “speak like a book” yourself, you may agree that it can be hard work. It is hard work reading aloud from a book. This may be because it is not something we are used to; or because the sentences can be awkward to read aloud - too long, too complex, or too technical. It can be tricky to get the correct intonation, and you may find you often have to re-read bits to make them sound right. Reading aloud tends to require considerable attention.” (Bygate, 1991, p. 10)

The researcher has interviewed many Saudi students from various regions studying at Jazan University and asked about English teaching in schools. They are of the same opinion that the teacher used to ask the students to read paragraphs loudly to get them more familiar with English words, pronunciation and to enhance speaking skills. But this, of course, satisfies the teachers but the students' spoken skills remained far from attaining the desired standard and fluency. The teacher must understand the aims and objectives to master in spoken skills.

The productive skills are different from each other in many ways. The spoken language is often inconsistent and dynamic in nature except recorded, whereas the written language can be kept as a record for future references. Misunderstanding while speaking can be cleared up instantly 'on the spot', which is not possible in writing. The written language is thoughtful and conscious process that needs more time and is monotonous but spoken language serves to deal with feelings, emotions and different situations to clarify doubts, if any, to make communication constructive and effective. Written language often uses long and complex sentences comparing to that of spoken language where the sentences are shorter and easier to understand. Therefore, we should adhere to different ways to learn, attain and deal English language learning and teaching.

4. Effective Ways to Handle Spoken Language in English Language Learning and Teaching

The researcher further explored the syllabi and evaluation module of different classes to assess English language learning in the various schools in Saudi Arabia and found that the main focus of the teaching English is on reading and writing only and no attention is given to the listening and the speaking skills. The students are serious only in reading and writing to pass in English subject because they are evaluated only on these two aspects. The students speak Arabic all the time except few minutes of lecture in a day and don't get social environment to use and develop listening and speaking skills. The more or the less is the situation at university also. But the English Language Centre at this University has motivated its faculty to provide a wider exposure of these receiving and productive skills and is producing the desired results. There are some effective ways through which English language learning can be improved:

The Govt. of higher education has already set up language laboratories in the universities and trying to set up in schools also.

The Saudi students graduated in English are being employed in schools to teach the foreign language and teach spoken English.

Globalization, liberalization, setting up businesses and industries by foreign countries in Saudi Arabia in the recent years has paved the way to make a wide use of English. It further enhanced the job opportunities to Saudi students who are good in spoken English to carry out official work.

The Govt. of Higher Education and the Universities at Saudi Arabia (those not included) should introduce an evaluation and assessment system that includes all the four skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking to evaluate its students in final examination.

There is an independent department called Centre for Foreign languages that prepares the students and conduct TOFEL examination for the students who want to go abroad for their higher studies but it lacks in assessing spoken English. The learners have to strive hard to get good marks in this test.

The teacher should focus on controlled activities- vocal, individual listening, and repetition of the teacher's modal of pronunciation, guided activities- model dialogues, guided role-play and creative activities that includes free role-plays, group discussions, debates, simulations, communication games.

The University English Language center is dynamic and consistent in improvising its curriculum and has positive effects on English language learning and teaching in Jazan University. The members of faculty are trying their level best to encourage, support and motivate students to draw attention to practical usages of English language, especially the learning of spoken language. The students are taught the current trends, and

needs of the region, country and world to learn spoken language and get expertise in English pronunciation and intonation. There are differences in pronouncing vowel and consonants in English and few sounds don't exist in Arabic language. The students have to be very careful in pronouncing such words and have adequate knowledge of English letters sound that doesn't exist or match sounds in Arabic language. The researcher found few English consonants, namely, /ŋ/, /p/, /v/, /l/, /dʒ/, /ð/, and /r/ as problematic ones for Arabic speakers. The wrong pronunciation may bring adverse results in communication. The syllabi at this university has listening audio conversation and answering the questions from the audio in level 1 and 2, dialogue practice, greetings, welcome note, debate, group discussion, organizing various activities by the students, provide adequate practice to enhance the speaking skills.

The teacher has to update and make use of ICT (Information and communication Technology) to create students' interest in learning English language because speaking any language as a foreign language is a colossal task for the native speakers. The learners must have the knowledge of phonemes, syllable, phonetics, stress and intonation for correct pronunciation of English words. The maximum time is spent on oral communication and there is a critical need to come out from traditional teaching-learning approach to the innovative modern approach as Bygate while discussing how to learn spoken language has cited some traditional methods for learning spoken language, he says,

“Ten years later, during which time this approach to teaching oral skills had been widely adopted, David Wilkins pointed out there were some learning problems that exercises like these did not solve. An important one is that of ensuring a satisfactory transition from supervised learning in the classroom to real-life use of the skill. This transition is often called the “transfer of skills”. (Bygate, 1991, p. 6).

Bygate (1991) has favoured learning in real-life situations where learners get an opportunity to use and exploit their learning of English language. The learners try to transfer their classroom learning into real-life environment. The teachers are asked to interact with students in English and create English language learning environment that doesn't exist outside the classroom or formal interactions. But we have planned various activities for students keep in regular touch with English. The teacher has planned various societies for the students i.e. English Society that provides a platform for the students to showcase their talent in activities like slogan writing, story writing, poetry writing, social networking etc. The students meet during club activities under mentorship to talk in English language. The students are supplied with the CDs and are given ample exercises on audio in the laboratory where they can learn independently and under scanner also. Yule (1996) has commented on the method of learning and teaching spoken English, he says:

“Audiolingual method, a very different approach, emphasizing the spoken language, became popular in the 1950s. This involved a systematic presentation of the structures of the L2, moving from the simple to the more complex, often in the form of drills which the students had to repeat. This approach, called the Audiolingual method, was strongly influenced by the belief that the fluent use of a language was essentially a set of ‘habits’ which could be developed with a lot of practice.” (Yule, 1996, p. 193)

There is a universal proverb prevails in all the countries that ‘Practice makes a man perfect’ and through the audiolingual method the learner improves in learning of spoken language. While repeating the contents - simple to complex or same contents, the learner become habitual consequently make him/her to produce spoken language in foreign language from intentionally to somewhat automatically and speak the foreign language more naturally.

The learners encounter many real-life problems in the process of learning English language. The vast inflow of people of varied cultures, languages and countries made these skills indispensable for all students who are looking for their career opportunities. The peoples' perception and thinking is also getting a facelift and advancing towards a global culture and language to gain momentum and eminence to function effectively building a strong bonding and intra & interpersonal relationship in the society. It has created a space for all languages and cultures to move from rigidity to flexibility in communication as Bygate rightly said:

“...in a reciprocal exchange, a speaker will often have to adjust his or her vocabulary and message to take the listener into account. The speaker also has to participate actively in the interlocutor's message—asking questions, reacting and so on. This is something which requires an ability to be flexible in communication, and a learner may need to be prepared for it.”(Bygate, 1991, p. 8)

The learners have to be very careful in their use of English language in exchanging their views with the people of other languages and nationalities. They need to acquire vocabulary that consists of synonyms, antonyms, idioms, phrases, words often confused, homonyms, homophones, semantics, tenses and other vital grammatical aspects. At times, the learners face problems choosing right word at right place at a right time to respond, express and influence constructively. We try to teach all the skills of language acquisition to the students at this university with adequate exposure in real-life situations. There is no standard English in the world but it differs in pronunciation, intonation, lexical and other aspects. The students are motivated, encouraged and facilitated with many audio-visual programs, live chat, debate on TV, English movies and other authentic material than their own text books. Besides emphasizing on pronunciation and intonation, we also focus on sociocultural aspects of people belonging to different languages, traditions and nationalities because any wrong selection of words in spoken English may jeopardize your purpose of communication and affect business relations.

The learners should acquaint and expertise themselves at all the skills of target foreign language and use them in real-life situations using English knowledge judiciously. The researcher belongs to India and observed many sociocultural and English pronunciation differences at Saudi Arabia but he came up and made equilibrium in both the situations and now performing well in teaching English language to Saudi students.

5. Effective Ways to Handle Written Language in English Language Learning and Teaching

It is well known fact that writing came after the speaking and later it developed to serve various functions. This is one of the toughest skills to learn which involves expressing oneself or the purpose clearly, using right words and language; creating, compiling and paraphrasing rational ideas to respond effectively. It involves structure of the contents, its style and the content on the matter. The researcher experienced in class that “the main problem in writing is attributed to spelling mistakes as it has been noted that many English language learners, including Arab students, have difficulties with English spelling” (Al-zuoud & Kabilan, 2013).

In many ways writing is the most neglected skill in the TEFL world ‘teaching English as a foreign language’, as many teachers don't attend ‘office hours’. Writing, therefore, is often relegated to homework, which in turn is frequently not done so the skill is never developed. The students are prone to commit spelling mistakes because of the differences in the orthographic system between Arabic and English, and first language

(L1) interference. Consequently, these spelling difficulties cause many spelling errors which negatively affect the writing proficiency of Arab students (Saiegh-Haddad, 2004).

The researcher has tried to overcome this problem by preparing exercises on related topics for practice and motivating the students to write in the class room itself and it produced good results. The learners may speak English easily but they lack in writing. Yule rightly mentioned that:

“When we consider the development of writing, we should bear in mind that a very large number of the languages found in the world today are used only in the spoken form. They do not have a written form. For those languages which do have writing systems, the development of writing, as we know it, is a relatively recent phenomenon. ...” (Yule, 1996, p. 9).

Many countries have made it compulsory for the admissions to various programmes to assess this skill through different tests like TOEFL, IELTS which reflects the level of the learners in written language. The contents of the written language will show the standard and level of the learners in English language. The ELC of university has its vision to enhance this skill required for working professionals and for written communication too. The faculty emphasize on developing writing skills of the students through intensive teaching of grammar, conducting and penning down the activities, written exercises on real-life situations, writing e-mails, formal and informal letters and many more. Of course, it is a hard nut to crack but a sound knowledge of syntax, semantics, comprehensions and different writing styles and formats leads learners to write effectively and impress the readers. Tribble expresses the vitality and complexity of English writing as:

“An ability to speak well—fluently, persuasively, appropriately—is something that most of us would hope to achieve in our first language. It is also an objective for many learners of a foreign language, especially those who wish to do business internationally, or to study to travel in English speaking countries. An ability to write appropriately and effectively is, however, something which evades many of us, in our mother tongues or in any other languages we may wish to learn, and this in spite of the many years which are frequently devoted to the development of the skill.” (Tribble, 1997, p. 3)

It is worthy here to mention that correct and precise writing is difficult in all languages and needs practice to attain expertise and when a learners starts writing in the foreign language like here at Saudi Arabia, he faces lots of difficulties because of lack of the fundamental knowledge of English language. The concerted efforts should be made to teach, develop through practice and evaluate the writing skills from school level. Later on, the basic and in-depth knowledge along with knowledge of 7Cs would definitely make the learners more confident and competent in writing formal or informal contents.

6. Conclusion

This article presents various materials for productive skills- teaching that apply to an authentic productive skills strategies drawn from research findings so that teachers can be encouraged to put theories or insights into practice. One limitation of this suggestion lies in contradictions among research findings, for example, conflicting perspectives on the role of L1 equivalents in L2 English words pronunciation and vocabulary-learning. Moreover, the various speaking and writing skills- teaching strategies suggested in this study need to be variably applied to EFL students strictly as per their proficiency levels. Although the number of studies reviewed and employed here are limited, but they do yield implications for EFL productive skills that teachers may use as theoretical suggestions for preparing study materials.

The primary focus of this article is to study the effectiveness of productive skills of English language – speaking and writing but at the same time it is difficult to separate them from receptive skills– reading and listening because they are all mutually supportive learning activities. The function of language is to exchange ideas, thoughts, and opinion formally or informally in multiple contexts and situations with others to maintain certain interpersonal relationships. Both speaking and writing skills have similarities and differences and the teacher has to adopt different methods and strategies of teaching to the learners. Choosing a correct approach to enhance speaking and writing skills is a colossus and challenging task in Saudi Arabia. The English Language Centre at Jazan University suggests and experiments various new teaching pedagogies judiciously to empower the English language learners with better fluency in speaking and accuracy in writing respectively. Creative writing should be encouraged, as it engages the learners and the finished work usually provides them with the sense of pride, confidence and self- recognition. The implications of this study suggest that the teachers should be more creative in constructing learning experiences for their students and teach coping strategies as part of students’ repertoires of productive skills.

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