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## **Strategies for Improving EFL Learners' Speaking Skills at Kuwait University**

*By*

**Mohammad Almutairi**

*College of Basic Education, Language Center, Public Authority for  
Applied Education and Training, Kuwait.*

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# Strategies for Improving EFL Learners' Speaking Skills at Kuwait University

**Mohammad Almutairi**  
*College of Basic Education, Language Center,  
Public Authority for Applied Education and  
Training, Kuwait.*

## **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the attempts of six EFL teachers at various colleges and faculties of Kuwait University to develop their EFL students' speaking skills. In a qualitative method using semi-structured interviews, the EFL teachers described their students' levels of English as very good or good, but they needed to encourage their students to use their speaking English widely so that they could, therefore, improve it to better levels. The qualitative method was chosen to get in-depth details and information about the individual experiences of the experienced teachers. The findings showed that the participants used various strategies and techniques, such as using supplementary materials, using drama, listening to tape recorders, working in language labs, having group discussions (with or against), etc. The data also revealed that the improvement of speaking skills of EFL students at Kuwait University had been successfully achieved.

**Keywords:** improving speaking skills, TESOL, ELT curriculum, speaking English

## **1. Introduction**

EFL students at Kuwait University are enrolled in three English courses: a remedial course, English 1, and English 2. Some EFL teachers have noticed that although the students have encouraging language levels, the need to improve and develop the students' speaking skills is a must. In this study, the researcher seeks to explore the individual experiences and strategies of the EFL teachers from different colleges and faculties towards improving their EFL students' oral proficiency. The researcher chooses the qualitative method (semi-structured interviews) for getting his data because he finds it more appropriate for getting in-depth details. The participants are all educated in the USA or UK with an MA or PhD in TESOL or Applied Linguistics and have at least ten years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language for college students.

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## **2. Purpose of the Study**

Besides the researcher's personal interest in developing and improving the ELT in Kuwait University, the results of this study will provide some insights and information towards opening the door for a new foreign language teaching methodology and curriculum design regarding speaking and speaking skills.

In fact, due to the shortage of empirical studies examining EFL students' speaking skills and speaking proficiency among Kuwait University EFL students, this study takes on a pioneering role and, therefore, would provide the basis for researchers for future studies in this issue.

## **4. Literature Review**

Speaking is an integral part of learning ESL/EFL. Without it, students cannot use their linguistic storage outside their classrooms. The importance of English-speaking skills appeared recently when the great world turned into a small village due to globalization, using English as a way of communication between its nations. Although a few researchers believe that EFL students share the responsibility of improving their speaking skills, many of them think that it is the responsibility of EFL/ESL teachers to give their ESL/EFL students an acceptable command of oral English.

For this reason, language teachers must be well-trained in their professions so that they may provide maximum help to EFL/ESL learners. They must follow a teaching method appropriate for the particular group of learners. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) identified appropriate instruction as the most important factor for developing speaking skills. A teacher ought to provide authentic materials to ensure effective learning. Individual attention, coupled with a good curriculum, most often leads to success in language learning. When teaching conversation, a teacher might consider an audiolingual method, situational language teaching, or communicative language teaching as they have provisions for conversation/dialogue practice. Any good textbook, such as *A Conversation Book Series (English in Everyday Life)*, *Speaking Naturally*, *Compelling Conversations*, *Speaking (Collins English for Life)*, *Pocket Guide to Everyday Conversational English*, *Speak Now (Communicate with Confidence series)*, *Spoken English*, could help students practice and learn conversation in an effective way. Since spoken English is taught following certain methods, the learners also need to learn how to learn, a consideration emphasized by Offner (1997) in a study in Japan.

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Conversation has its own rules as revealed by discourse analysis. Therefore, when teaching conversation, the ESL/EFL teacher must consider the issues of talk initiation and closure, turn-taking, adjacency pairs, agreement/disagreement, short answers, and expanding expression (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2002; Liddicoat, 2007). Teachers explain what happens between the interlocutors during a conversation, particularly its structure, purpose, and features (Pridham, 2001). Conversation is an art form whose development needs special care in the shape of soft skill training (Maggio, 2005; Fine, 2005). According to Barrass (2006), it is necessary for learners of English to learn how to be brief, clear, sincere, polite, accurate, and appropriate to be accomplished conversationalists. In conversation, formulaic expressions are of utter importance as they enhance fluency and quick response. In their work, Keller and Warner provided a useful list of such formulaic expressions, termed “gambits” (1988). Phrasal verbs, idioms, clichés, and slangs also constitute an important part of the conversational repertoire. Learners must also know how to use fillers and various discourse markers during the course of conversation. Thornbury and Slade (2006, p. 60) note that mainly five kinds of word recur in conversation: 1. greetings and farewells (e.g., hi, bye bye); 2. interjections (e.g., oh!, wow!, ugh!); 3. polite formulae (e.g., thank you, sorry, please); 4. hedges (e.g., I think, actually); and 5. expletives (e.g., Chill! Bloody hell!). Mastering such recurring words may greatly boost one’s conversational ability. According to Offner (2012), a conversation may be divided into different small parts, such as Follow-up Questions, Informative Answers, Returning the Question, Rejoinders, and Fillers, for the sake of conversation practice. Learners will get an idea of how a conversation works and quickly reach the desired level of skill.

Furthermore, EFL teachers must help their learners improve their pronunciation because words must be articulated and given a specific verbal form. If a student wants to utter a word or sentence, he/she must know and be trained in how to pronounce it. Just as written expression needs an alphabet and writing conventions, spoken expression needs verbal signs to be produced by the vocal organs. Training the correct pronunciation is a prerequisite for achieving acceptable conversational/spoken English. Pronunciation with proper intonation and accent is a sign of elegant use of language as it expresses the state of mind in a precise way, which many EFL learners often struggle with. In this respect, King (2015) observes that many foreign learners of English show poor ability in proper expression and

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inflection, so the meaning of the words they use falls flat and is sometimes interpreted incorrectly.

During conversation, EFL learners must also be trained to be aware of the norms of the society in which he/she is living. It should be acknowledged that the conventions of speaking, i.e., what to utter in what circumstances, vary across communities and cultures (Sanders, 1987, p. 153). The violation of social rules is no less serious than the violation of linguistic rules. Greeting, thanking, offering, congratulating, bidding bye, etc., are constrained by social conventions. Therefore, it is necessary to learn not only what to speak about but how to speak in a certain social setting. A *faux pas* in expression may lead to a misunderstanding between the speaker and listener; it may even at times turn offensive to the point of evoking a harsh reaction. Therefore, it is important for learners to know social rules and conform to them while speaking.

When teaching conversational English, EFL teachers must ensure that EFL learners are able to use general and social interactional English to produce an extended piece of spoken discourse and to engage in discussion and practical work. Through conversations, learners should be able to deal with information as well as interpersonal relationships (Chamberlain, 2014). Successful learners will act upon their lexical and grammatical knowledge, pronunciation and discourse management skills, and sociolinguistic competence. Lundquist (2012) puts forth two thumb rules: 1. Think in English and 2. Speak it aloud. Xiao (2012) suggests the following measures for the overall improvement of the conversational skills of learners of English as a second/foreign language:

- Using good resource books or internet materials
- Paying attention to the fluency, accuracy, and appropriateness of language
- Employing oral communication strategies such as paraphrasing, body language, and giving examples
- Listening to recordings or watching video clips and repeating the speakers' words aloud
- Practicing oral composition by taping and creating different settings
- Watching a video clip and retelling the story in their own words
- Using active vocabulary to explain or paraphrase passive vocabulary
- Interacting with English speakers in virtual spaces like Facebook, Twitter, and Skype as well as real-life social events
- Focusing more on meaning than form
- Using a smartphone to learn English anytime, anywhere

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## **5. Methodology:**

Because of the limited number of participants in the current study (10 EFL teachers) and because the researcher aims to find reasons and facts rather than numbers and statistics, the qualitative method (semi-structured interviews) is chosen to collect data in the present study.

The qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews, introduces the research questions in interpretative ways, such as asking questions about watching or listening to the phenomena under investigation, that is, searching for why and how things happen. It is commonly used to investigate the tendencies, frequencies, and causes of phenomena. Shohamy & Seliger (1989), for example, believe that interviews, including semi-structured ones, permit a level of in-depth information-gathering, free response, and flexibility that other procedures do not. The interviewer can probe for information and obtain data that often have not been foreseen. Finally, interviews are widely used because they are a great means of both obtaining information and gaining insights into a certain issue.

### *5.1 Research Questions*

As mentioned above, this study aims to explore and investigate strategies and techniques used by EFL teachers at Kuwait University to develop and enhance their EFL students' speaking skills. Thus, this study seeks answers to the following questions:

- 1- What is the level of oral proficiency that EFL students at Kuwait University have?
- 2- What are the strategies and techniques used by EFL teachers to develop and enhance the speaking skills of their EFL students?

### *5.2 Participants*

The participants of this study are EFL teachers working in various colleges and faculties of Kuwait University. They hold at least an MA in TESOL or ELT from the USA or the UK. Some of them also have a Ph.D. in the same specialty. They have a minimum of ten years' experience in teaching ESL/EFL for college students.

### *5.3 Setting*

The current study takes place at Kuwait University's Shadadiyah Campus. Kuwait University is the sole government university in the country and admits only high school graduates with high scores. Students with lower scores apply to other higher institutions such as PAAET (the Public Authority for Applied Education & Training) or other private universities in or outside Kuwait.

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## 6. Results and Discussion

Teacher A, who has an MA in TESOL, states that his students possess a very strong level of English but need more attention to their oral skills. He thinks that they have only fair speaking skills because they were not trained enough in their schools before entering the university. He adds that he made his own strategy to improve his students' oral skills. He uses supplementary materials parallel to textbook teaching, which contain a lot of speaking exercises. He encourages them to participate in the dialogues included in the material. He also employs listening to a tape recorder and then asks his students to repeat what was played in the tape. He claims that his strategy resulted in improving his student's speaking skills.

Teacher B, who has an MA in ELT, believes that his students have a good level of English in most of the skills except the oral skills. He states that this happened because their ELT curriculum in the public schools did not include the speaking skills and, therefore, these were not assessed in the final score. This could, as he claims, have created a lack of motivation for them to be involved in oral exercises. To counter this, he used two plans: training and motivating. He started training his students by assigning one class of his weekly classes to be only for speaking (Tuesday conversation) with using a very useful book for oral exercises (*For and Against*) and then started involving his students in the discussion of the subjects inside the book by adopting a position either to be with or against and why. His second plan entailed including oral skills in the students' assessment as 10% of the total final grade. He claims that, by doing this, he succeeded in creating a way of motivating his students.

Teacher C, who has a PhD in Applied Linguistics, informs the researchers that his EFL students are very good in English but have satisfactory oral skills. He thinks this could result from a lack of confidence. To combat the shyness or lack of confidence, he uses very interesting strategies. He says he usually creates class speaking activities such as group discussions and debates on topics chosen by the students because they tend to help the students to speak. When a student participates in an activity by starting to speak, he does not approach the student or stare at his/her face while he/she is speaking because this will make him/her even shier. Instead, he approaches another student, simply stands back, or pretends to do something such as picking up a book or going back to his table. When the student makes pronunciation or grammar mistakes, Teacher C never interrupts him/her but waits till he/she finishes and then says what the mistakes are. This will make the student feel more relaxed and calmer. He

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also adds that by using these strategies in addition to well-chosen textbooks containing different speaking exercises, EFL teachers can improve their EFL students' speaking skills.

Teacher D, who has an MA in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from the USA and who has 11 years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language, describes her students' level of English as a very good one but describes her students' speaking skills as only good.

She thinks that having such a level of speaking skills could be because of the poor emphasis on them during the 12 years of studying English in public schools. She also adds that she discussed the reasons for avoiding conversations and avoiding speaking in class with her students, and their reply was, "We didn't do this in schools frequently."

As a result, and aiming to improve her students' speaking abilities, she used a very interesting strategy, which is drama.

She says, "I'm a very lucky teacher because I have a small number of students in my classes; they rarely exceed 20. For this reason, I found drama is a very successful and enjoyable means for involving my students in speaking English and practicing their oral skills." She adds that she teaches speaking once a week, and, in this class, she brings with her McDonalds' meal, for example, and plays the role of staff in a McDonalds' restaurant. Then, she asks her students by turns to come and ask for their favorite meal in English; after that, students, by turns, play the role of the staff. By this practice, as she claims, the class becomes very enjoyable and interesting, which results in encouraging students to be involved in making conversations and therefore improving their oral skills.

Teacher E has a PhD in English language teaching from the USA and has thirteen years of experience teaching English as a second language to college students. She identifies her students' level of English as good and their speaking skills as fair. She also holds the current ELT curriculum in the government high schools the responsibility of this present low oral level. Moreover, she says that she specialized in teaching the remedial course called 098. In this type of course, students must study five hours a week, two of which take place in the language lab. There, Teacher E starts her strategy of improving her students' speaking skills. She claims that her students attend two hours in the language lab without any textbooks but with blank papers and pencils. She adds that she displays a short movie about students' favorite topics in the language lab. Afterward, students start talking with each other and the teacher using headphones and microphones. She says that choosing students' favorite topics, like shopping in their



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favorite stores or famous football teams and players, makes the class more enjoyable and interesting, and this, in turn, encourages students to be involved in talking with each other.

She also says that this method succeeds in enhancing college students' oral communication skills. This appears in the results of the two achievement tests that she gives to measure her students' speaking abilities at the beginning and end of each semester. She claims the results are always encouraging.

Teacher F, who has a Ph.D. in English Language from the UK and 20 years of experience in teaching foreign languages to university students, says that his students have speaking at high levels but that they are not motivated to use their speaking skills. He suggests this could be because of the poor focus on speech education in public schools and the lack of speaking assessments in the final grade. He adds that at the beginning of the semester, he uses some interesting techniques to improve his speaking skills. One of them is to support those skills with a form called "presenting myself," which is ready to be filled with the details of each student: name, date of birth, nationality, address, major, future plans, hobbies, etc. When the form has been completed with all the students' details and corrected by the teacher, the teacher assigns the students 3 phases during which to use their speaking skills.

In phase 1, the students are asked to read the paper while remaining seated. The next week during the speaking training, in phase 2, they are asked to read it in front of the students, using the form. In the third week, in phase 3, they have to stand up in front of the class and present themselves without using the form. Teacher F says that dividing the work and asking the students gradually to present themselves gives them the courage to speak without fear and the strength to face the audience.

Also, in the speaking lecture, the teacher uses a very interesting strategy. He divides his class into five groups, each consisting of four students. Then he asks them to write a dialogue about any subject they choose, such as a mother and father speaking with their children, a group of friends suggesting a trip, or a group of students discussing their futures. When the dialogue is finished and has been corrected by the teachers, for phase 1, they read it from their desks, using their script. The next week, for phase 2, the students read their roles in front of the class as actors would. The following week, for phase 3, they have to have their own dialogue with each other without a script or any other help. Teacher F claims that he found this strategy to be very successful for enhancing his EFL students' speaking

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skills several years ago and considers it a very helpful method to overcome any weaknesses in students' oral communication.

The results of this study demonstrate clear support for the need to improve the speaking skills of EFL students at Kuwait University. This is supported, in part, by the unanimous agreement among EFL teachers that, although their EFL students have a very strong level of English language skills, they still need some focus on their speaking and oral skills. In discussing the reasons for this phenomenon with their students, some of the EFL teachers have concluded it could be because of the lack of focus on teaching speaking in public schools. Others believe it is because of a lack of motivation or confidence. Others think it is due to the absence of speaking assessment in the final grades of public schools. Whatever the reasons are, the EFL teachers at Kuwait University have used very successful and interesting strategies and techniques for improving and enhancing their students' speaking proficiency. Most of them worked individually, using strategies and techniques recommended by Xiao (2012), such as good resource books or supplementary materials, listening to tapes, or watching films in language labs. Their simple and modest experiences showed great achievement in developing the students' speaking skills. This can be demonstrated by Teacher E, who tested the level of her students twice, once at the beginning of the semester and again at the end of the semester. Her findings showed great success in enhancing her EFL students' speaking skills.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

As mentioned earlier, this study examined the strategies and techniques of EFL teachers at Kuwait University for improving their EFL students' speaking skills. Six EFL teachers working at different colleges and departments of Kuwaiti University participated in the study. By analyzing the participants' responses, we noticed their common agreement that although their EFL students have very good levels of English in all skills, their speaking skills fall behind. This issue should ring a bell in the head of officials and curriculum designers in the Ministry of Education to amend their plans and overcome this drawback. It can also be concluded that EFL teachers tended to use their own strategies and techniques for developing their students' speaking skills. Their experiences showed promising results in developing their EFL speaking skills. For example, Teacher E tested her students' speaking proficiency at the beginning of the semester, used her techniques to improve their speaking skills, and then tested her students again at the end of the semester. The results of her tests showed very

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encouraging development and improvement in the oral proficiency of her EFL students.

Because of the positive results of the EFL teachers at Kuwait University in enhancing their EFL students' speaking skills, the researcher recommends that other EFL teachers at Kuwait University and other higher institutions try to use such techniques and strategies to better develop the speaking skills of their EFL students.

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