UNDERSTANDING INSTRUCTORS' PERSPECTIVES ON ESL PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS LEARNING SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract: This paper explores instructors' perspectives and insights regarding the teaching of English Language Speaking Skill to pre-university students. Five instructors were selected for this study based on their proficiency in teaching ESL to pre-university students. A series of interviews were conducted to gain the instructors' perspectives. Based on the findings, these instructors discussed their perceptions of their students' performance in their speaking class and the reasons why their students were intimidated when presenting in front of the class. They also discussed ways to encourage students to speak in front of the class. The instructors were also questioned about their views on the implementation of online learning in the classroom. The results indicate that these instructors had contradictory views regarding the use of the Internet in their classrooms. The final section of the paper highlights the implications for practise and makes suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Speaking, Perceptions, Pre-University Students, Difficulties in Speaking, Online Learning

INTRODUCTION

English is a fundamental subject in the Malaysian educational curriculum and whether they like it or not, Malaysian students will have to endure the subject's learning process. As mentioned by Larsson (2001), language is a tool for communication and to communicate effectively, a good command of language for the purposes of reading, writing, listening, and speaking is paramount. English language is widely used in a Commonwealth country like Malaysia. It is used as a tool of communication in school, workplace and in community. A good grasp of the language is essential as it is believed to be important for employment and career success. Hence, it is compulsory for the students to learn the language for them to compete in the society. As English is considered as the second language, it cannot be avoided and must be learnt despite the difficulties the students may face. Students must have a specific level of English proficiency as part of their secondary education in order to pursue higher education. It is critical for students to perform well in secondary school because English is the primary subject that must be learned and passed on. They have a strong incentive to perform well on the subject since they recognise the importance of it. 11 years of learning English in school does not help the students to achieve reasonable English literacy (Naginder, 2006; Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Norsimah Mat Awal & Kesumawati Abu Bakar, 2008). In fact, they need to continue learning way after their secondary level. Nonetheless, this motivation to acquire the language is temporary. When students reach the pre-university level, their motivation to learn English wanes. They now believe that it is no longer important to score or even study English. Worse, the significant weighting of other courses, such as mathematics and science, leads students to assume that there is no need to put forth much effort in the classroom for English. As a result, they simply participate in and attend the course to meet the course's standards to simply learn the four skills.

Speaking proficiency is one of the most challenging abilities for language learners. Speaking is believed to be the most crucial of the four language abilities (Bueno, Madrid, & Mclaren, 2006). Numerous students claim to have invested a considerable amount of time studying the English language, yet they are unable to speak it in an appropriate and understandable manner.

Therefore, it is believed that it is the responsibility of instructors in pre-university colleges to reinvigorate students' interest in language learning especially in learning the speaking skill and to help them recognise the significance of the language beyond academic objectives.

Consequently, the primary objective of this research is to explore and comprehend the instructors' perspective on their students' degree of motivation to develop the speaking skill in class to fully comprehend what must be done in their classroom.

This research aims to answer these 3 research questions:
1. **What are the instructors' opinions on students' performance in speaking skill?**
2. **What are some suggestions that can be implemented in class?**
3. **What are instructors' opinion on online teaching?**

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Speaking Skills

Speaking is undoubtedly one of the most important skills to cultivate and enhance effective communication. Due to their relations to other forms of communication such as grammar, paralinguistic features, sociolinguistic competences, and discourse, speech abilities are considered as one of the most difficult aspects of language acquisition (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017). Many language learners find it difficult to adequately communicate their thoughts in a foreign language; consequently, it is difficult for them to effectively express themselves orally. According to Ariyanti (2016), most of the time in language learning classrooms, students avoid speaking in the target language due to their fear of making mistakes, discomfort with their teachers, fear of being laughed at and ridiculed by their peers, lack of self-esteem and confidence, the feeling that they are far from being as good as a native speaker, their negative self-perceptions of language proficiency, and their teachers' negative attitudes. They frequently lack adequate vocabulary and practise, making it challenging for them to speak English fluently (Syafiq et al., 2021).

Motivation can influence and be influenced by the components of language learning in relation to English learning and practise. According to Merisuo-Storm (2007), an integrative and receptive attitude towards the individuals whose language is being acquired sensitises learners to the audio-lingual components of language and heightens their awareness of pronunciation and accent. If language learners have a hostile attitude towards the language, they will not make significant progress in acquiring its various features (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). These results indicate that communicative competence alone is insufficient for language learners to enhance their speaking skills. Without a positive attitude towards speaking, learners will not be able to achieve the objective of speaking, and without the appropriate motivation, they will also be unable to speak effectively.

The scope of this paper will focus primarily on pre-university students. As soon as they enter pre-university, these pre-university students are overwhelmed with responsibilities. Pre-university students are required to take three to five subjects per semester, and the subject matter is substantially more in-depth and complex than what they studied in high school. Cheng and James (2010) discovered that pre-university travel and experience had a significant effect on career decisions and the development of human capital in society. As a result, these students tend to disregard electives such as English, Religious Studies, General Studies, and Extracurricular Activities in favour of the essential subjects they believe will assist them in selecting a profession or a particular college degree. Students do not perceive that these elective courses will aid them in deciding on a career and they labour solely to pass them in order to qualify for pre-university. In a parallel study of language anxiety among English language learners in higher education, most interviewees reported being extremely anxious and having great difficulty speaking English (Noor Hassanah Abdul Aziz, 2007). In other contexts, respondents opt to use Bahasa Malaysia. In other terms, individuals are more assured when speaking their native language and they feel more comfortable in expressing themselves in their first language.

Speaking difficulties among ESL Pre-University students

Rao (2019) stated in his study that the worldwide community of diverse languages and cultures accepts English as a universal language due to the language's virtually universally identical characteristics. This statement implies

that English is the most universal language, or, to use a more common term, a global language, able to be understood in any other country despite cultural and linguistic differences. Given the widespread use of the language throughout the world, it is not remarkable that students, regardless of their academic performance, should be able to acquire, comprehend, and master the language. In nations where English is designated as a foreign language, or EFL (English as a Foreign Language), many students find it challenging to acquire or master the language for a variety of reasons. A study conducted by J. Kovalenko (2021) on a group of Ukrainian students revealed that not all students have the same motivation or purpose for learning English, as some view it as merely a required course or subject and do not recognise its significance as a means of communication that allows them to adapt to new technological and scientific developments. In other words, the students view these English classes as a means of obtaining a passing grade and believe that the material they are required to learn in order to pass is irrelevant to their actual existence. It would be challenging for instructors to teach these unmotivated students, whose only motivation for learning the language is academic.

Based on the research query "What are the challenges in speaking English?" posed to EFL Indonesian students, Pratolo, Habibie, and Setiawan (2019) discovered that there are several factors that contribute to the obstacles to speaking skills encountered by EFL Indonesian students. Then, the students responded to the question, and based on their responses, they were divided into several topics, including language boundaries (relating to the vocabulary usage, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency of the student, as well as how their mother tongue affects their speaking skill), psychological factors (anxiety in speaking), patron factors (peers and unstable class participation), topics given (low knowledge depth and uninteresting topic), and means of speaking practise. According to the research, these factors are experienced by these students, and instructors should be able to encourage and facilitate them, promoting the classroom to be more encouraging for students to speak in speaking classrooms and making the learners feel at ease to facilitate fluent communication and reduce stress. It is suggested that students acquire experience with a variety of teaching methods and techniques in order to improve their ability or skill to speak English in the classroom. This will provide them with additional opportunities to practise the target language and enhance their English proficiency.

There are a limited number of events and factors, according to Tuan and Mai (2015), that cause students to struggle with speaking and skill development. They concluded that inhibition, or to use a more common term, self-consciousness, is one of the primary factors contributing to their inability to enhance their speaking abilities. It is believed that students are humiliated by the ridicule they receive for their mistakes and have negative attitudes towards criticism. In addition to being unable to recall the information they desired to convey; the students lacked the motivation to express themselves (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). To support this claim, students may have difficulty expressing their own opinions and thoughts due to a lack of knowledge about a particular topic, resulting in a lack of motivation to communicate in class.

Therefore, the aim of the paper is to investigate further the perspective of Malaysian pre-university college instructors on the issue of speaking skills among students and what can the instructors do in order to at least encourage and motivate them to speak. It also aims to find out whether the idea of teaching online can help the students too.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach, employing a series of interviews with the five instructors. Five instructors with between ten and twenty-five years of experience teaching pre-university students have been picked by the researchers. The researchers and the five instructors established an agreement on a schedule for interviewing them about teaching speaking skills to students.

The interview method was selected because the researchers needed thorough and specific information that a questionnaire could not offer.

1. Tenure in service for Instructors (years)

Table 4.1 : Distribution of the Instructors in term Tenure in Service (Years)

Highest Degree	Frequency n=5	Percentage (%)
21 and above	2	40
16 to 20	3	60

SOURCE: Field survey 2023

2. Highest Degree Program Obtained by Instructors

Table 4.2 : Distribution of the Instructors in term Highest Degree Program Obtained

Highest Degree	Frequency n=5	Percentage (%)
Doctorate degree (Ph.D.)	0	0
Master's degree	3	60
Baccalaureate Degree	2	40

SOURCE: Field survey 2023

FINDINGS

Based on the data, the researchers categorized the findings into 3 main categories:
1. Perception on teaching speaking skills
2. Perception on teaching strategies
3. Perception on the use of online teaching

1. Perception on teaching speaking skills

The first analysed data was on the instructors' perception on teaching speaking skill to the students. When asked on some issues that they face when teaching speaking to the students, all 5 instructors agreed and mentioned that the students did not have self-confidence, they did not have many ideas on what to speak and lack of motivation to speak especially in front of others.

"It's not that they don't have any knowledge of the language.. they don't have the motivation err.. they are afraid to talk in front of people. On top of it, they said that they do not have ideas on how to explain and this is somehow related to lack of vocab and lack of confident"
(I1, 17/3/2022)

"Dealing with their confidence…they are shy..they won't even open their mouth"
"Lack of motivation and lack confidence…"   *(I2,17/3/2022)*
They refuse to speak and they don't volunteer to answer the questions (or) even when we call their names"
(I5,21/3/2022)

Expert 3 mentioned that when the students were in secondary schools, they did not use the language with their family and friends, and they did not see the importance of learning the language. Therefore, when they enter the pre-university level, it has become a problem.

"Students are afraid that their friends might laugh at them"   *(I3,17/3/2022)*

Expert 4 stated that the students refused to speak since they were unable to elaborate on the ideas and just touched on them superficially. The students did not elaborate since they did not have anything to say.

"Basically it's the elaboration…they just say few sentences and they stop"
(I4,19/3/2022)

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According to the data gathered from the interviews, the students' reluctance to speak in front of their peers or to volunteer when it comes to delivering a presentation is rooted in shared sentiments. These students were scared during the presentation because they were shy, compared themselves to peers who were better than them, and were concerned that their classmates would laugh at them if they made mistakes. The students would shut down and refuse to participate if they lacked the self-assurance to talk. Online classes exacerbated the problem by allowing students to "hide" behind their screens.

Lack of ideas or points to elaborate on is one of the primary reasons why the students' performance was subpar. According to the instructors, the students were unable to elaborate the points because they lacked the appropriate vocabulary or knowledge of the topic. Therefore, students withdrew from the speaking activities consequently. Most pre-university students speak English as a second language, according to data from instructors. Thus, they did not use the language at home, and they unfortunately only use it in class. According to the instructors, a lack of practise outside of the classroom exacerbated the problem.

2. Perception on teaching strategies
However, despite the difficulty that they confront, from the data instructors employed several techniques to overcome the challenges.

All the instructors agreed that group work will help students improve their speaking skills, and that the students' abilities will be balanced so that they may assist one another in class.

" I will decide who will be with whom and I will mix them; the good ones with the weaker ones so that the good ones will guide the weaker students and the will share ideas..in terms of vocab.. ways to say things for example"

(I1,17/3/2022)

Instructor 2 shared the same opinion with Instructor 1 as she believed group work will at least help to break the ice.

"I will ask them to sit in groups.. how I start the group is like...aa.. I will let them sit based on their results (SPM Results) and I will group them in mixed ability students and I will throw one question to them.. question like social media..the advantages of social media (for example) and they will delegate the task according to points and let them talk and that will be the exposure activity(group work)"
(I2,17/3/2022)

Expert 3 explained that she would first tell her students the importance of speaking especially later in university life and to make them realise that the skill is as vital as other skills too.
"I will tell them about interviews that they have to attend, the presentations that they have to do... this is how I will tell them.. all reasons..all advantages when they are able to speak in English"

(I3,17/3/2022)

It can be concluded that the instructors considered that specific approaches would assist them in addressing the issues that surfaced in their speaking classes based on the data gathered. It was essential for the students to recognise the significance of English language, especially in the context of their future interviews and presentations. instructors believed that if students were made aware of the significance of English, they would make more efforts to learn speaking.

The instructors favoured the group learning technique because they believed in cooperative learning. It was hoped that mixed ability groups would assist weaker students learn more from their classmates. The weaker students' friends would be able to encourage them to perform and talk well, and this would increase their motivation to learn how to speak.

3. Teaching speaking via online
Instructor 2 was eager about using the Online to teach her students speaking. She urged the students to participate actively in online learning. With the current state of Covid-19, Expert 2 concluded that online speaking teaching was the most effective method.

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"I basically use presentation online..for example I ask them to video themselves and post(them) on Youtube and another way is using Live Streaming where they will be talking live and they have a bunch of people motivating them (because) when you have audience you will feel more motivated…another thing aa another medium would be Instagram..they can do video and they can post it there"

(I2,17/3/2022)

Instructor 4 had some ideas of using online to teach her students. She believed that by exposing the students to online learning via TedTalk for example will expose the students to the first language speakers as they are competent speakers.

" Students will be able to imitate.. or highlight certain strength of the (TedTalk) speakers and I will ask them to video record their presentation and upload it.. I will let them do few times so that they could compare the first video and the second video or the third one so that they can see there is an improvement or not. Over time when they become more confident we can have forums or debate online"
(I4, 19/3/2022)

Instructor 5 mentioned that in order to let them feel less shy, when teaching online, she would ask them to read a paragraph from any sources and record them and the students will send it to her.

"The students will hear their own voice…and I save them.. I will play them (the recordings) in the class and let them hear.. and they will be whispering to each other and they feel so happy hearing their voice(s) and in a way I'm motivating them"
(I5, 21/3/2022)

Instructor 3 however did not prefer to teach speaking via online as she believed it would be a problem for her in dealing with monitoring the students.

"I think it's quite difficult for me to teach speaking online..because if it's face-to-face I could see them.. I could somehow monitor them.. I could somehow monitor them… and because when I teach them online, they are behind the screen..behind the monitor and sometimes when I force them to speak, the will Google first and when they answer I know it's from Google and not from them. So it's difficult for me to see their progress"
(I3, 17/3/2022)

Instructor 1 echoed the same sentiment when she stated that she strongly opposed online education since it separated students from their friends. She was unable to utilise the media due to the lack of reactions from the students, as the communication was predominantly unidirectional.

"Students hardly respond to teachers..okay..questions..okay even though they are just simple questions.. end up.. teacher asks the questions and the teacher will answer and that's why I disagree.. I totally disagree with online because it is one way..most of the time… and they are at their place (home) and it is difficult to handle or to force them.. as we don't see them"
(I1, 17/3/2022)

To analyse the question on online teaching, it can be concluded that Instructors 2, 4 and 5 were in favour of using online classes to teach their students since they believed the media may stimulate students' interest in acquiring the skill. The instructors believed that when students have an interest in learning the skills, it will improve their motivation to perform well and speak the language fluently. It was anticipated that a variety of media such as video recordings, YouTube, or Live Streaming Platforms like Instagram or Facebook may assist pre-university students in putting in more effort to learn the language, as they were interested in studying via these medium.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, the instructors have interesting insights of the way they handle the students in their speaking class.

The instructors were unanimously agreed that the main reason why students did not perform well in the skill due to their low motivation to speak. The lack of motivation hinders them from performing well in their speaking class as they become timid and intimidated especially when presenting or speaking in front of their peers who are better than

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them. This worry was further confirmed by Tuan and Mai (2015) who noted that a lack of motivation prevented students from expressing themselves since they were unable to build sentences, while having thoughts about what to say in their native language. This scenario led to the learners being passive in the classroom, since their lack of language knowledge prevented them from participating actively. It can be said that lack of motivation to speak will deter the process of learning the speaking skill as the students will still need to overcome their fear of speaking.

The suggestions made by the instructors can be taken into consideration as they believed that groupwork is the best way to make the students speak. In group work, students will have to talk to each other, and that means they are using those language skills which they have been working so hard to learn (Khilolahon & Guloyim, 2022). This indicates that grouping students is the most effective method for getting everyone communicating. It is the instructors' responsibility to implement some teaching strategies on cooperative learning in their classroom for the students to speak and communicate more in the target language.

It is also believed that teaching speaking online can aid instructors in guiding students to acquire the skill. Utilising YouTube Live (for presentations) or any other live platform should help students overcome their timidity issues. One of the instructors also mentioned TedTalk in relation to the use of online instruction. This brilliant concept should inspire other instructors to introduce the learning platform to their students as well.

This paper presents the opinions of instructors regarding the level of their students' speaking abilities. In addition, they discussed the obstacles and problems they encountered during the teaching process. There was some discussion regarding the various methods they could aid the students. The study's findings can serve as a guide for future research on addressing students' concerns of speaking. It is anticipated that the research findings will aid instructors at other institutions in better understanding and knowing their students. Once they get to know their students, addressing the issue will be a breeze.

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