

Obstacles Faced by Omani Grade Twelve ESL Learners in English Speaking Skills

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ABSTRACT

The academic field of second language acquisition has studied the obstacles faced by Arabic ESL learners in developing their English-speaking abilities for many years. This study examines the challenges faced by Omani high school Arabic ESL learners in rural contexts. The country has been focusing on English teaching since 1970. Despite attempts, outcomes remain subpar, necessitating additional tutoring, while graduates face job market challenges due to private sector demand. A qualitative approach was employed to gather data from eight grade 12 students at public schools in Oman, primarily through offline surveys. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, revealing four main themes related to the first research question: English language accessibility issues, self-confidence deficits, mother tongue interference, and external motivation. The second research question identified three major themes: Social stigma, educational background, cultural sensitivity, and fear of negative evaluation. The third research question revealed four major themes: Teachers should receive training to integrate speaking with other skills, engage with native speakers or language learning groups, encourage errors, and value English communication as a sign of adaptability and open-mindedness. The research results concluding a lack of relatedness to the language and rare exposure to the language inside and outside the classroom resulted in incompetence in communication skills in formal settings, which affected their higher education opportunities and employability. To overcome these challenges, theoretical and practical implementations are given for developing instructional strategies that optimize the learners' L2 and enhance their communication skills.

Keywords: *ESL; English Speaking Strategies; Omani ESL Learners; English Speaking Challenges; ESL Learning in Oman, Pronunciation Difficulties; Second Language Acquisition*

Background

For many years, researchers in the field of second language acquisition have been exploring the barriers that Arabic ESL learners face when learning online (Sornasekaran *et al.*, 2020; Jayampathy *et al.*, 2023), and the challenges they face in developing their English language skills (Hazrimah, Harison & Lubna, 2013; Mohammed *at al.*, 2023, particularly English speaking skills. This issue is particularly important in the Arab world. "Speaking in English is a problem faced by EFL/ESL

learners, particularly in Arabic countries” (Huwari, 2019). Since 1970, when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said ascended to the throne, Oman has prioritized English education. Oman has set aside significant budgets and resources for its implementation through educational initiatives. However, nearly thirty years later, it was discovered that students exiting Oman's ELT system have a variety of deficiencies in their English language proficiency, which has had a negative impact on the country's development. This has driven the government to try (ELT) by carrying out a reform plan by introducing Basic Education System. (Al-Issa, Ali & Al-Bulushi, Ali, 2012 as cited in Xu & Song, 2023). Unfortunately, this has produced only modest results. Most students entering higher education still require additional English instruction. "Omani graduates face several challenges on the job, including limited English proficiency, a lack of research and persuasive skills, and inappropriate language use in meetings and other tasks (Al Riyami, 2021). As a result, they require a solid foundation to strengthen and advance their English language skills. "The large majority of the students (88%) who join tertiary education take English-intensive programs that prepare them for studying their undergraduate programs in English" (Al-Riyami, 2021). Many foundation program students experience anxiety, particularly since this is their first time studying in English. Learners may feel uncomfortable during speaking lessons, exams, or when their instructor asks questions (Khouni, *et al.*, 2022). Omani graduates find it difficult to find work because the private sector often demands outstanding proficiency in English from prospective employees.

While the existing literature extensively covers the linguistic and phonological challenges that Arabic ESL learners face when speaking English (Mohammed & Yap, 2009), there is little research on the influence of autonomy, cultural nuances, and mother tongue influence among Omani grade 12 ESL students' speaking skills. This study looked at students' perspectives in a rural setting. There is a noticeable gap in understanding how specific factors affect students living in rural areas in English language discourse. Therefore, this study aimed to understand the English-speaking challenges faced by Omani ESL students in a rural context.

“Motivation is a central topic in the field of education. At the same time, this is one of the most critical topics” (Seven, 2020). Self-determination theory is one of the most popular theories of motivation to learn a language as well as for other purposes. Self-determination theory proposes that the more important issue is the quality of motivation. “The theory also emphasizes the role of the social context in supporting or thwarting optimal motivation. In summary, more autonomous forms of motivation will lead to improved student engagement and learning” (Chiu, Sun & Ismailov, 2022).

Due to differences in phonetic systems and grammatical structures between Arabic and English, Arabic ESL learners face several challenges when attempting to learn English speaking skills. "There are great differences between many aspects of English and Arabic" (Al Shaibani, 2023). When it comes to accent, rhythm, and intonation, Omani ESL learners' speech has several variations. "Non-native learners of English face several phonological problems mainly because most languages follow specific, predictable rules of pronunciation, but English does not" (Thakur, 2020). "There are clear indications of students' weakness in the English language, as students are unable to speak English, and their ability to comprehend and understand written texts is also weak" (Minshar, 2020, cited in Khasawneh, 2021).

To describe one's thoughts and emotions effectively, one must have a large vocabulary and use proper grammar. As a result, teachers must consider strategies for helping students improve their receptive skills and vocabulary (Khouni, *et al.*, 2022). Students in Oman's rural areas have limited exposure to English due to a lack of English-speaking people. As a result, they may not have the opportunity to improve their English speaking skills. There is a lack of effective teaching strategies to help Arabic learners overcome these obstacles. "Teachers focus on the written contents of the curriculum and neglect the verbal side of the language" (Khasawneh, 2021). Speaking is widely regarded as the most difficult skill to master among the four primary language skills. To successfully teach speaking skills, teachers must first understand the factors that influence students' speaking skills (Alrasheedi, 2020). Omani teachers failed to address the students' difficulties with speaking skills.

The learner's first language has a significant impact on L2 acquisition and improves considerably with minimal exposure to L2. "Moreover, the interference of EFL learners' mother tongue is commonly found during their learning process" (Septianasari, 2019, p. 2). Because of the variety of regional dialects and accents, Arabic ESL students struggle to pronounce specific English phonemes. "Many students who speak a foreign language may experience anxiety because they fear that their pronunciation is inadequate" (Nakazawa, 2012, & Berry, 2021). Arab learners mispronounce the following consonants: /ŋ/, /l/, /p/, /d/, /z/, and /v/ under various conditions (Jubier, 2019).

Second language learning is significantly impacted by the social and cultural context in which it takes place (Al-Busaidi, 2019). Many Arabic ESL students from rural areas have no prior knowledge of English. "Practically speaking, developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings such as family life, peer group interaction, and public spaces" (Lantolf, Poehner & Thorne, 2020). Teachers and students take ESL for granted, although they learn English in primary and secondary school. According to Ullah, 2017, as cited in (Poedjiastutie, Mayaputri & Arifani, 2021), English did not correspond to Arabic cultural language, customs, lifestyle, or communication style. Communicating in English regularly suggests that cultures are becoming more Westernized, which opposes Middle Eastern culture.

Omani students are not exceptional. They have difficulty moving to higher education because the medium of instruction in tertiary education is English rather than Arabic (Al Riyami, 2021). In 1986, the Omani government reformed the education system by establishing English as the medium of instruction (EMI) at the tertiary level. In Oman, English programs at higher education institutions have failed to address the communication skills required in the job market (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; cited in Bocar & Ancheta, 2023). It is therefore critical to understand why school graduates have poor English-speaking skills. This study will assist educators in producing higher education graduates with a level of proficiency required by the local and global employment market, which may lead to reduced investment in Foundation Programs.

Methods

Design

This study illustrates how the qualitative method is used. This study meets the fundamental need of a qualitative method study by aiming to investigate understanding human or social phenomena (Cresswell, 1997). The questionnaire was designed in accordance with the study's objectives and is currently being pilot tested by the supervisors. Ten open-ended questions were asked in the survey.

Participants

This study's participants are eight Omani students from various public schools in rural Oman. The researcher decided on convenience sampling because the sample was selected primarily based on what we could obtain. Rather than statistical representation, the study's focus is on gaining an in-depth understanding of the research problem. As a result, the researcher has chosen a small subset of the population. In this case, the accessible sample's characteristics are like those of the general population. Their ages range between 16 and 17 years old. As Arabic native speakers, they all had a similar linguistic background and had received instruction in Oman's basic education system. These students were chosen from a group of students who are having difficulty with speaking assessments in ESL classes. Assessments were performed using a variety of tasks, including listening, and responding to questions, following instructions, speaking complete sentences, using correct grammar, pronouncing words correctly, and understanding conversations. Participants were selected from among the lower-achieving participants.

Setting

Participants were on semester break. To conduct the offline survey, the researcher arranged a common place at the Grand Mall private hall in Salalah.

Research Objectives

- To find the reasons behind the high school Arabic ESL learners' difficulties in speaking in the second language (English) from students' perspective.
- To Examine how Omani ESL students perceive sociocultural factors affecting their English language proficiency.
- To find effective strategies for improving communication skills among Arabic English learners.

Research Questions

1. What are the main challenges faced by Omani ESL learners to speak English fluently?
2. How do the sociocultural factors of Omani ESL students significantly affect their English speaking abilities?
3. What are effective solutions and strategies to improve communication skills among Arabic learners of English?

Data Collection

The purpose of the study was explained to all participants, and they were informed that participation in the survey was optional. Each participant was given a consent form to sign before taking part in the survey. The survey was asked to be written in Arabic for the convenience of the participants. The data collection process was divided into three parts. First, agree to participate in the survey by signing the consent form. Second, the participants were given a form to fill out regarding their background and personal information. Finally, the survey was distributed with ten open-ended questions.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to evaluate survey data, which was collected holistically and translated into English before being read several times to familiarize it. The data is then classified into themes and sub-themes based on the researcher's concerns and issues raised during the research. The present study employed a variety of methods to ensure its reliability, including triangulation, peer evaluation, and member checks. As a result, the data was analyzed and compared from numerous perspectives.

Results

Table 1-Analysed survey report

No	Question	Themes	% students contributing to Themes
1	In which language do you answer the questions or respond to the teacher in the ESL classroom?	Arabic	50%
		English	0%
		Mixed	50%
2	Why it is difficult to understand the teacher's explanation?	Lack of Motivation and engagement	37.5%
		Lack of connection to real-world experience	25%
		Unclear/confusing language	37.5%
3	How frequently do you speak English in public?	Frequently	0%
		Rarely	37.5%
		Never spoken	62.5%
4	What are your reasons for wanting to learn English speaking skills?	Education & Employment	87.5%
		Broadening Horizons	12.5%
5	Describe any anxieties or negative self-perceptions/social-cultural influence you experienced when speaking English	Cultural and identity concerns	12.5%
		Lack of confidence	37.5%
		Fear of judgment	50%
6	What is the pronunciation or accent-related challenges faced when speaking English as an Arabic ESL learner?	Sounds which do not present in Arabic	75%
		Linguistic barrier	25%
		Encouragement and motivation	37.5%

7	What are your suggestions for improving English speaking in Oman?	Technological improvement	
		Interactive /practical lessons/student-centered classrooms	62.5%
8	What types of classroom activities or learning materials could improve your speaking skills?	Group activities/ Paired activities	75%
		Games and competitions	25%
9	What resources or support systems do you find effective in your independent learning journey?	Technology and tools	75%
		Traditional resources	25%
10	Have you used any interactive language learning resources or platforms that emphasise practicing and receiving feedback in spoken English? If yes, describe your experiences and how they worked.	Positive experience	62.5%
		Negative experience	0%
		Never used	37.5%

Discussion

The results of open-ended survey questions were divided according to research questions. The first research question: What are the main challenges faced by Omani ESL learners to speak English fluently?

Table 2 – Common Challenges and Sub-Themes

Identified Common Challenges in English Speaking Skills	Sub-Themes
Inaccessible use of English	Inaccessible use of English inside the classroom
	Inaccessible use of English outside the classroom
Lack of motivation	Speaking difficulties
	No specific goals
	No feedback/ encouragement from teachers
Mother tongue influence	Pronunciation and accent-related issues
	Grammatical issues
Social stigma	Fear of judgment
Lack of advanced educational resources	Traditional teaching methods

An Inaccessible Use of the English Language

Inside the Classroom:

Data showed that 37.5% of the participants do not understand the English lessons due to a lack of motivation and engagement from the teachers, 25% because of a lack of connection to real-world experience, and 37.5% of students do not understand English lessons due to unclear and confusing language delivered by the teachers while explaining the lessons.

The survey results revealed that teachers place a higher value on teaching grammar and vocabulary than on teaching speaking. Even when there is an opportunity to engage students in speaking, teachers simply conclude and move on to other activities such as reading and writing. Students explained that teachers and students mostly communicate in Arabic. The third grader explained, "I talk in Arabic in the English classroom, and the teacher explains the lessons and tasks in Arabic".

Outside the Classroom:

According to the results, 62.5% of students had never spoken English in public due to government language restrictions. Arabic-language media can limit exposure to English in public settings. Arabic is widely used in local media, signage, official communications, and government publications. Aa P3 stated, "I don't have much experience because I didn't get any opportunities to speak outside of the classroom. Media, official messages, road signs, and public announcements are all in Arabic". Therefore, there is no opportunity to practice speaking English in public. P7 stated, "I had no situations in which I could speak English in public. But when I visited Muscat, I noticed that people spoke English in airports, restaurants, and tourist attractions. I believe that because I live in a small

village, people here do not practice speaking English in public”. Students in rural areas have fewer opportunities to access English media or international interactions than students in urban areas.

A Lack of Motivation and Self-Assurance

Most of the students learn English speaking skills for educational and professional purposes. They are bored with what they are learning because some teachers simply present what is in the book without making it relevant to their own lives. P8: “It is extremely difficult to identify and correct errors because teachers do not provide consistent feedback. Teachers do not always assist or correct the worksheets given during lessons”. Without regular feedback from educators, students may continue to make mistakes, impeding their progress in pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. Lack of feedback from educators can be discouraging, leading to decreased motivation and confidence in communicating in English.

Arabic students are generally concerned that their accents and pronunciation prevent their ability to communicate effectively in English. P2: “I mostly struggle with pronunciation, particularly with English sounds that do not exist in my native language, such as /p/, /t/, and /d/. People don't always understand me because I mispronounce a few English words when I speak. This is truly discouraging”. Omani high school students are highly motivated to speak English, and they recognize the importance of it when they face interviews and language fluency tests for higher education enrollment. Most of the students stated that they did not perform well in English-speaking assessments due to shyness and fear of making mistakes in front of others.

Additionally, extrinsic motivation may have a significant impact on the participation of Arabic ESL learners in English-speaking activities. For example, most of the participants focus entirely on English communication skills to achieve high grades. They do not have a specific self-goal in mind when they learn these skills. For long-term, meaningful learning, it's crucial to find a balance and make sure students also take a sincere interest in the language.

Mother Tongue Influence

Students' lack of speaking was limited to two linguistic components.

Arabic speakers may struggle to pronounce certain words correctly or distinguish between similar English sounds. Some Arabic sounds do not exist in English, such as the "(a)" sound, which is pronounced in the back of the throat. English contains sounds like "th" (as in "think" and "this") that Arabic does not have. Arabic ESL students distinguish between /b/ and /p/ sounds, and emphatic consonants (/d/, /s/, /z/, /t/) are pronounced with a constriction of the throat or mouth. The pronunciation differs from that of native English speakers. Arabic vowels are shorter and monophthongs, while English diphthongs involve a gliding movement between two vowels. It can be difficult to master this movement as well as the individual vowel qualities of each diphthong. Diphthongs are pronounced differently by Arabic ESL students than in native English. Arabic vowels are shorter and monophthongs, while English diphthongs involve a gliding movement between two vowels. It can be challenging to master this movement and the unique vowel qualities of each diphthong.

Another linguistic factor influencing English speaking skills among Arabic ESL students is syntax differences between the two languages. The most common word order in Arabic is verb-subject-object (VSO), whereas the standard word order in English is subject-verb-object. Furthermore, Arabic speakers may struggle with precise sentence construction in English, such as verb conjugation, articles, prepositions, and pluralization. As an example, In Arabic, adjectives usually agree on gender and number with the nouns they modify. In contrast, English does not typically change depending on the gender or number of nouns they modify. P1: “I am confused with the tenses between the present perfect and past tense”. This is because Arabic has past and present/future, whereas English has twelve tenses, which leads to confusion among ESL learners.

The Second Research Question: How do the sociocultural factors of Omani ESL students significantly affect their English-speaking abilities?

Social Stigma

Due to social stigma, Arabic ESL learners may feel more anxious and self-conscious when speaking English. Fear of being stigmatized for language proficiency may have a negative impact on an individual's confidence and fluency. It could lead to fewer people attending English-language events. P7 stated, "I do not try to speak English outside the classroom because of my elders' judgements. They regard us as uncultured children if we speak English or listen to English films and songs". Preservation of language is frequently linked to the preservation of culture and identity. Language acts as a conduit for traditions, stories, and values passed down through generations. In some parts of Oman, people believe that their children will adopt foreign cultural values and customs, potentially leading to a loss of Arabic heritage. Fear of bad judgement among Arabic learners significantly affected their motivation to speak in English, resulting in fear of negative evaluation.

Lack of Advanced Educational Materials

The Omani curriculum for learning English places a greater emphasis on recall and grammar instruction than on conversational language skills. This method typically provides students with a solid foundation in grammar principles, but they struggle with fluency and the use of real language. Traditional teacher-centered teaching approaches can also make it more difficult for students to actively interact with the language and improve their speaking skills because they assume that students will learn information passively.

Omani students can greatly benefit from increased access to English-language resources, such as books, periodicals, internet content, and language learning aids. However, not all students will have easy access to or the ability to purchase these materials, particularly those living in rural or underdeveloped areas. 62.5% of the participants used technology to improve their English communicative skills and achieved positive results.

The Third Research Question: What are effective solutions and strategies to improve communication skills among Arabic learners of English?

Teachers Should Receive Training to Integrate Speaking with Other Skills & Teach It Effectively

Interactive and communicative exercises are essential components of preparing English language teachers to incorporate speaking skills into the classroom. Role-playing, group debates, and language games are some of the methods for creating an environment in which students feel motivated to participate. The learning process can also be made more immersive by using multimedia materials and creating realistic contexts. Teacher feedback is essential for students to correct and improve their speaking skills. Teachers can use constructive comments to help students improve their pronunciation, grammar, and fluency.

Talking With Language Learning Groups Will Help the Students Gain Self-Confidence

Speaking with native speakers and participating in language learning communities are excellent ways to improve speaking skills. Conversations with native speakers expose students to real-world language usage, which improves their understanding of slang terms, intonation, and cultural differences. Language learning groups provide a safe environment where people can practice speaking in front of others without fear of being judged, allowing them to gain confidence in their communication skills. Students improve their pronunciation, broaden their contextual vocabulary, and receive immediate feedback because of these exchanges, all of which contribute to more effective language learning. Immersive activities, real-life encounters, and discussions that provide practical experience allow students to apply their language skills in real-world situations. This useful method enhances fluency and cross-cultural comprehension.

Parents Should Value the Capacity of Learners to Communicate in English

Parents and teachers alike should value their children's ability to speak English because it motivates them to learn the language. When parents and teachers emphasize the importance of English proficiency, students are more likely to consider it a valuable skill. This acknowledgement can inspire students by giving their language studies a purpose and significance. A helpful learning environment is further enhanced by instructors' and parents' encouragement and positive reinforcement, which gives students a sense of accomplishment and increases their desire to improve their English-speaking skills.

Limitations

This study only includes PBE students in their second year of secondary school (Grade 12). The study only addresses issues related to English speaking skills and makes no mention of other skills or languages. The study only used a small number of samples to investigate an in-depth understanding of the research problem rather than a statistical representation. The study did not consider the perspectives of all stakeholders; only the students' perspectives were examined. Finally, the study only looks at rural areas in Oman, where English is influenced by numerous sociocultural, commercial, and educational factors. Individual views and perspectives can vary dramatically between groups due to their different conditions and experiences.

Significance

Understanding the specific challenges that Omani ESL students face can help educators and curriculum designers better meet their needs. Policymakers can use these findings to improve curriculum development, teacher training, and resource allocation for ESL learners in Oman. ESL learners can improve and learn areas of mistakes and master their English-speaking skills, potentially resulting in less investment in foundation programs and increasing Omani employability and economic development of the country.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Omani ESL post-basic education students struggle to speak due to L1 influence, inaccessible English language use, a lack of self-confidence, traditional teaching methodologies, sociocultural variables, negative evaluation, and education background. They struggle with pronouncing words, vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. Teachers play a significant role in motivating students to communicate in English. As a result, teachers should receive appropriate training to assist them in adapting to modern teaching methodologies and expanding opportunities for students to practice the language both inside and outside of the classroom. The Ministry of Education should implement new strategies that incentivize students to improve their English language skills.

Some parents, particularly those in rural areas, observe English as a valuable tool for their children to bridge cultural gaps. Language mastery is a time-consuming process requiring consistent effort, practice, and a positive attitude. Teachers and parents should collaborate, encourage students' accomplishments along the way, and make learning a new language exciting.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Participants received a concise overview of the study's objectives. They were assured of the optional nature of the survey, which emphasized consent, and anonymity was ensured.

Conflicts of Interest: The author proclaims no conflict of interest.

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