Teachers' and Learners' Attitudes towards the Place of the Speaking Skill in the EFL Curriculum

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Abstract

The teaching of the speaking skill is given very little weight in the EFL curriculum at many educational institutions due to decision makers' conviction that listening and speaking are not as important as the "academic" skills of reading, writing, and grammar. The present study investigates the attitudes of students and English teachers toward the importance of teaching the speaking skill within the EFL curriculum. Forty-two students and ten English teachers participated in the study, which was designed on a survey basis using an open-ended questionnaire. Analysis of the data revealed participants' appreciation of the role that this skill plays in communication and their enthusiasm for a more prominent place for speaking in the program. Results also showed differences between the two groups of participants regarding how speaking should be taught, what needs to be emphasized, and the factors that lead to a successful speaking session.
Keywords: speaking skill; learner attitudes; teacher attitudes; EFL curriculum,

اراء المعلمين والمتعلمين حول اهمية مهارة التحدث في مناهج اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية

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الملخص

يحظى تدريس مهارة التحدث بقدر قليل من الأهمية في مناهج اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية في العديد من المؤسسات التعليمية بسبب قناعة مالكي القرار في تلك المؤسسات بأن مهارتي الاستماع والتحدث ليستا بنفس أهمية المهارات "الأكاديمية" المتمثلة في القراءة والكتابة والنحو. تبحث الدراسة الحالية في اراء طلبة ومعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية حول أهمية تدريس مهارة التحدث في مناهج اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية. وقد شارك اثنان وأربعون طالبًا وعشرون معلما للغة الإنجليزية في هذه الدراسة عبر استخدام استبانة مفتوحة. وقد أظهر تحليل البيانات استيعاب المشاركين للدور الذي تلعبه هذه المهارة في التواصل اللغوي وحماستهم لان يكون لتلك المهارة حصة أكبر في المناهج. كما أظهرت النتائج أيضًا بعض الاختلافات بين مجموعتي المشاركين فيما يتعلق بكيفية تدريس مهارة التحدث، وما يجب التأكيد عليه عند تدريسها، والعوامل اللازمة لتقديم حصص ناجحة لمهارة التحدث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مهارة التحدث؛ اراء المتعلمين. اراء المعلمين؛ مناهج اللغة الإنكليزية.

1. Introduction

One of the most important decisions to make when designing a language teaching curriculum is which skills to teach and in what sequence, and despite the long history of teaching foreign and second languages, speaking had always had a "peculiar position" (Bygate, 2001, p. 14) when it came to deciding on language skills to be taught in an EFL program, and has only started to assume its position as a branch of teaching and learning of its own during the past thirty years. Bygate attributes this peculiar position to three reasons: (1) tradition (the influence of the grammar-translation method with its emphasis mainly on grammar and vocabulary); (2) lack of necessary technology for studying talk, and (3) exploitation of most post-grammar-translation method approaches of speaking as "a special medium for providing language input, memorization practice, and habit-formation," and thus "speaking was mainly associated with pronunciation."

Starting with the early 1970s, however, a new understanding of the central role that effective communication plays in language learning emerged and consequently led the field of foreign language teaching to witness a great revolution that shifted the focus of formal instruction towards adopting the communicative approach with more emphasis on improving students' ability to communicate meaningfully, and with communication and interaction coming to be seen as both the means and the goal of learning a language.

A quick look at any of the major TEFL textbooks that are currently used in the UAE (e.g., *Headway*, *Interchanges*, *Cutting Edge*, *NorthStar*, *Interactions*, etc.), as well as the major standardized tests for assessing the proficiency of English as a Foreign Language nowadays (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL iBT, etc.), would show that all four major skills are given the same importance and weight. However, due to how closely connected the listening and speaking skills are, according to Brown and Lee (2015, p. 345), EFL curricula that treat oral communication skills often introduce both skills within one course labeled as the "Listening/Speaking" course. Furthermore, the admission criteria in most academic institutions currently do not only look at the total score in a standardized test but require a minimum score in each band or section (i.e., skill) on those tests. Accordingly, Nation and Newton (2009, p. 10) sum this new understanding up when they maintain that EFL courses that intend to teach receptive and productive skills must give all four language skills "roughly the same amount of time."

However, decision-makers at many educational institutions still prefer to emphasize particular language skills rather than others in their EFL curricula and language proficiency assessment tools. This failure to give enough emphasis on speaking skills in curricula and examination systems, according to Richards (n.d.), is one of the major causes of EFL students' poor speaking skills.

Another critical decision that must be made when designing and implementing language teaching programs (especially for their speaking and writing components) is whether the emphasis should be placed on fluency or accuracy.

According to Richards and Schmidt (2013, p. 223), accuracy in speech refers to learners' ability to produce grammatically correct sentences. Hedge (2000) expands this definition to cover such aspects of language as accurate pronunciation and

proper choice of words. Bailey (2005, p. 5) offers a more comprehensive description of accuracy, defining accuracy as the capacity to communicate correctly. In other words, to Baily, accuracy is about being able to use the right words and grammatical patterns of English to convey the intended meaning.

On the other hand, fluency can be defined as natural language use or the speaker's capacity to connect speech units with ease and without effort, unnecessary slowness, or unnecessary pauses (Hedge, 2000, p. 54).

EFL teaching pedagogy, again, witnessed several radical changes in terms of prioritizing these two aspects. According to Lazaraton (2014), until the early 1970s, EFL teaching practice was mainly characterized by the older trend of focusing only on improving learners' grammatical competencies, i.e., accuracy. During the mid to late 70s period, an "anti-grammar approach" prevailed for a while, which "turned away from accuracy issues in favor of providing a plethora of 'natural' language' activity in the classroom." (Brown 2001, 268). Thus, language educators like Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) emphasized that rather than imposing accuracy activities, teachers should create activities that foster the ability to express oneself clearly and effectively via the use of words in daily life.

This fluency-only approach where accuracy exercises are neglected has received some criticism from some researchers like Nation (1989), who believes that such an approach may lead to fossilization where errors become a permanent part of the way a learner speaks and consequently prevent the learner from improving their fluency.

More recently, however, both fluency and accuracy are looked at as two crucial goals for speaking courses, or "complementary principles underlying communicative techniques" (Brown 1994, p. 245), and EFL speaking teachers nowadays are expected to "balance" their focus on students' accuracy with a focus on fluency (Lazaraton 2001, p. 104), though current approaches to language teaching, according to Brown (2001, p. 269), still "lean strongly toward fluency with accuracy offering a supporting role."

As for speaking activities, a number of speaking skills activities have been repeatedly practiced by EFL teachers and proven to help improve students' speaking skills in the classroom. Among these activities, the most popular ones are role plays, storytelling, and group discussions. Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) offer an interesting classification of speaking activities into four types. They start by talking about linguistically structured activities in which learners are given specific language structures and are then required to modify them. Language games and picture games are some examples of such controlled structure activities. Next, the authors discuss activities that learners prepare in advance and carry out in class for their classmates, calling them performance activities. Some examples of this type are speeches, role-plays, and debates. Third, the authors talk about activities where learners need to interact with the teacher and with each other using the language in its natural way, calling these participation activities. Examples of such activities include conversations facilitated by a teacher, in which learners debate a subject of their choosing. The fourth and last type of speaking activity is observation with learners assigned to observe native speakers of the language and

explore ways to handle different social situations and related verbal and nonverbal interactions. Learners would then write notes about their observations and present them to their classmates.

When designing classroom speaking activities, a number of factors need to be considered. One such factor has to do with the information that speaking teachers should have. Goulden (1998, p. 90) identifies two kinds of information teachers should have, particularly when promoting speaking and listening skills in their classrooms. First, there is "general information" regarding both the content areas of speaking and listening and how teachers can incorporate appropriate instruction for these two skills, and second, "specific information" about the procedures through which the two skills can be taught, practiced, and assessed.

Another factor is the teacher, who, according to Butler and Stevens (1997, p. 214), plays a vital role in the success of the communicative language classroom arguing. The authors go on to say that it is mostly the teacher's responsibility to foster communicative efficiency among their students, and it is teachers' responsibility to inform their students of the importance of the speaking skill and the decisive role it plays in their academic success.

Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) talk about the importance of the classroom environment, maintaining that for communicative activities to be of any use, these activities must be carried out in a non-threatening environment where students can confidently practice, "feel free to take risks and have sufficient opportunities to speak" (p. 126). Butler and Stevens (1997, p. 214) also emphasize the considerable role of an encouraging, open classroom environment in improving active language skills due to the effect of such an atmosphere on reducing students' fear and discomfort when being corrected.

According to the UAE Institutes of Nursing (ION) Program Package (2012), the ultimate goal of the English program at the ION is "to maintain professional academic functioning since English is the language used in all healthcare facilities in the multicultural society of the UAE and it is the language required to be lifelong learners" (p. 4). However, out of the 763 contact hours English students take (see table 1), only 144 (18%) hours are devoted to listening/speaking courses. Only a fraction of these hours is dedicated to the explicit direct teaching of speaking. In addition, despite the many hours devoted to the English language program and the hard work English teachers do, dissatisfaction persists regarding students' spoken English in academic and professional settings.

Table 1:
Number of contact hours per course

COURSES	Course Period in weeks	Contact Hours/ Week	Contact Hours/ Semester
English I	8	22	176
English II	10	16	160
English III	18	10	180

English IV	17	5	85
English V	18	5	90
English VI	18	2	36
English VII	18	2	36
	Total English Courses		**763**

The picture was not always like this, though. When I joined the ION teaching staff over eight years ago, far more emphasis was placed on students' communicative skills. Courses that emphasized listening and speaking were taught throughout the three academic levels. Year by year, however, and with new members joining the ION administration, the number of sessions devoted to these critical skills was reduced, first by changing the focus of the 3rd year English program to reading and writing only, and then by canceling the 2nd year listening/speaking courses, and finally by reducing the number of hours devoted for teaching the ESP course from 2 to 1 hour per week mainly because the new book for the course states that it emphasizes listening and speaking. As the Head of the English Department and a curriculum committee member, I tried my best to emphasize the importance of those skills for our students. Still, the administration's unchangeable conviction was that those two skills were not as critical as the "academic" skills of reading, writing, and grammar, which the program should focus on.

Therefore, as the first step towards enlightening decision-makers in our institution about the importance of giving more weight and emphasis to teaching the speaking skill and building a better curriculum for the English Department at the ION, the present study will attempt to investigate what both ION English teachers and ION students think about the importance of teaching the speaking skill at the ION. To address the purpose of the study, the following two research questions were posited:

1. What are English teachers' attitudes toward teaching the speaking skill at the ION?
2. What are students' attitudes toward teaching the speaking skill at the ION?

The present study is expected to shed light on ION student's and English language teachers' attitudes toward the speaking skill component of the current English program at the ION and thus help me as the Head of the department as well as the other members of the ION administration to design a better curriculum that meets those needs. The study will also provide insight into similar institutions in the UAE and other non-English speaking countries where English is used as the sole medium of instruction.

2. Methodology
Context
The program at the ION is a three-year Diploma program designed for students who hold an official secondary school certificate from the United Arab Emirates or its equivalent. The language of instruction at the ION is English. In addition to the

major nursing-related courses, a number of English courses that match the language proficiency needs of the students are offered throughout their three years of studies at the ION. The English program at the ION aims to improve students' English language proficiency and prepare them both for their studies at the ION and their profession after graduation.

To achieve this, seven English courses are given to students (see the curriculum layout in table 2). Each of the three English courses offered during students' first year of studies at the ION (ENG 101, ENG 102, and ENG 103) consists of four separate subjects: reading, writing, listening/speaking, and grammar. As for English courses given during students' second year (ENG 201 and ENG 202), three subjects are taught: reading/writing, grammar, and ESP. Similarly, English courses given during students' third year (ENG 301 and ENG 302) consist of three subjects: reading, writing, and grammar.

Table 2:

Curriculum Layout

	COURSE TITLE	Cr.				COURSE TITLE	Cr.		
		T	L	P			T	L	P
	YEAR ONE								
	SEMESTER I Episode A (8 weeks)					SEMESTER II (18 weeks)			
ENG 101	English I	3			ENG 103	English III	3		
ART 101	Communication Skills	2			HSC 103	Anatomy and Physiology II	5		
	Total Year I / Sem I (A) cr:		5		NUR 102	Fundamentals of Nursing II	3	1	
	SEMESTER I Episode B (10 weeks)				NUR 103	Health Assessment for Nurses	1	1	
ENG 102	English II	3			NUR 104	Health Promotion Across the Life Span	4		
HSC 101	Anatomy and Physiology I	5			CLN 101	Nursing Practicum I			2
NUR 101	Fundamentals of Nursing I	2	1						
HSC 102	Introduction to Nutrition	1							
	Total Year I / Sem I (B) cr:		12			Total Year I / Sem II cr:		20	
	YEAR TWO								
	SEMESTER I (17 weeks)					SEMESTER II (18 weeks)			
ENG 201	English IV	2			ENG 202	English V	2		
NUR 201	Adult Health Nursing I	5			NUR 204	Adult Health Nursing II	7		
NUR 202	Maternal Health Nursing	5			NUR 205	Child Health Nursing	6		
NUR 203	Clinical Pharmacology I	2			NUR 206	Clinical Pharmacology II	2		
HSC 201	Microbiology	3			CLN 203	Nursing Practicum IV			2
CLN 201	Nursing Practicum II			2	CLN 204	Nursing Practicum V			2
CLN 202	Nursing Practicum III			2					
	Total Year II / Sem I cr:		21			Total Year I / Sem II cr:		21	
	YEAR THREE								
	SEMESTER I (21 weeks)					SEMESTER II (18 weeks)			
CLN 301	Nursing Practicum VI (3 Weeks-5 Days/Week)			2	ENG 302	English VII	1		
ENG 301	English VI	1			NUR 304	Critical Care Nursing	6		
NUR 301	Adult Health Nursing III	6			NUR 305	Community Health Nursing	3		
NUR 302	Mental Health Nursing	3			NUR 306	Management and Leadership in Nursing	3		
NUR 303	Foundations of Nursing Research	2			CLN 304	Nursing Practicum IX			5
CLN 302	Nursing Practicum VII			5	CLN 305	Nursing Practicum X			1
CLN 303	Nursing Practicum VIII			1					
	Total Year III / Sem I cr:		20			Total Year I / Sem II cr:		19	
						INTERNSHIP COURSE (8 weeks)			
					CLN 306	Nursing Practicum XI			6

The listening/speaking component of the three first-year English courses receives more or less one-quarter of the contact hours devoted to those courses. The two

textbooks used for teaching listening/speaking for those courses are *Interactions 1* (English 101 and English 102) and *NorthStar* – Intermediate (English 103).

In *Interactions 1 (Listening and Speaking)*, all ten chapters are taught in semester 1 (five per English course). Each chapter typically consists of four parts: *Before You Listen*, *Listen*, *After You Listen*, and *Talk It Over*, where speaking receives almost one-quarter of the number of contact hours for this subject.

In *NorthStar – Intermediate (Listening and Speaking)*, six units are typically taught in semester 2. Each unit also typically consists of four parts: *Focus on the Topic, Focus on Listening, Focus on Vocabulary, and Focus on Speaking*, where speaking activities again receive more or less one-quarter of the number of contact hours for this subject.

What this means is that speaking, one of the four major language skills, receives 25% (of L/S) of 25% (of 1st-year subjects) of 68% of the English program, which roughly amounts to 4% of the contact hours in the program!

As for the assessment scheme in the ION English program, the speaking skill (in the form of oral presentations) appears only in the evaluation schemes of two courses (English 102 and English 103), where it receives 7.5% of the total mark for each of those courses. Again, this means that the weight given to assessing the speaking skill is only 2% of the total evaluation scheme!

Of course, one reason for placing so little weight on evaluating the speaking skill is the subjective nature of evaluation in this skill and the strictly centralized system of assessment at the ION, where consistency in assigning marks in all three branches is of extreme importance. Still, ION decision makers' conviction that this skill is of little importance to our students, and their decision to stop teaching listening/speaking skills in 2nd year English courses, as well as the introduction of the eight-week English foundation program (English 101) where students are not required to give oral presentations, not to mention the administration's constant pressure to reduce the number of contact hours devoted to listening/speaking sessions even further have all contributed to the current situation.

Participants

Ten English teachers from all three branches of the ION and all 3rd-year students in the Sharjah branch of the ION (n=42) participated in the study. All 10 teacher participants are non-native speakers of English with BA or MA degrees and tertiary-level EFL teaching experience ranging from 10 to 20 years.

The decision to have 3rd-year students participate in the study was because these students have already done most of the English and the nursing programs at the ION and are in a better position (than students in their 1st or 2nd year) to give an informed opinion about the importance of the speaking skill in ION curriculum. The decision not to have earlier graduates participate was because those students were exposed to a radically different program in terms of courses, textbooks, course requirements, etc.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations of working with fellow teachers and students were observed. All participants were given the choice to participate without pressure. They were informed of their participation in a study about their perceptions of the importance of teaching the speaking skill before they were given the questionnaire. I explained to them that everything they said would be confidential, as the names of those participants who decided to write their names would not be mentioned in the study report. Data were presented as given.

Instruments and Procedures

To answer the two research questions of the current study, two versions of the questionnaire were produced. One was labeled *Teachers' Survey* and was administered to teacher participants first, and the other version was labeled *Students' Survey* and was distributed to student participants the next day.

Both versions of the questionnaire consisted of nine questions that asked participants for their opinions about the importance of different language skills. In particular, the first four questions (items 1-4), in both versions, asked participants about their opinions regarding the four language skills in general, and as follows:

1. To assess students' confidence in their English, participants were asked to express their confidence level in each skill using a 4-item, 6-point Likert-type scale. Each of the four items on the scale represented one of the major language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Participants were asked to tick one of six possible choices: *Excellent, Very Good, Good, Acceptable, Poor,* and *Very Poor.*

2. To assess skills where respondents find students to be the weakest, participants were asked to write the skill where they thought students felt the weakest and explain why they believed so.

3. To investigate participants' perception of the relative importance of each of the four language skills to students' success in the ION, participants were first asked to order the four skills in terms of their importance for their studies and then to explain why they decided to put them in that order.

4. To investigate participants' perception of the relative importance of each of the four language skills to students' success in their field after graduation, participants were first asked to order the four skills in terms of their importance after graduation and then to explain why they decided to put them in that order.

The following five questions (items 5-9) focused more on the speaking skill:

5. To get an insight into participants' perception of the relative weight that speaking should be given in the ION English program, participants were first asked what percentage they would give to the teaching of the speaking skill if the English program at the ION were to be divided among the four skills and then to explain why they gave it that percentage.

6. To obtain participants' perception of whether students' speaking skills could be improved sufficiently by practicing speaking within other language courses or if the speaking skill should be taught as a separate course,

participants were asked to indicate their choice and then explain why they made that choice.

7. To obtain participants' perception of the speaking activities in the current ION English program, participants were first asked whether those activities were enough to prepare students to be successful during their studies at the ION and after graduation, and then to explain why they believed so.

8. Next, participants were asked whether classroom speaking activities and speaking assessments should focus on improving students' ability to speak fluently or helping those students speak accurately. Then, they were asked to explain why they made that choice.

9. Finally, participants were asked to list those factors that play an essential part in the success of the speaking session.

3. Results and Discussion

The results show that both teacher and student participants agree that more emphasis should be given to speaking skills in the ION English language curriculum. They also agree on the importance of the speaking skill for students' success in their field after graduation. However, some interesting differences between both groups of participants can also be seen regarding the importance of speaking for students' success at the ION, how speaking should be taught, what needs to be emphasized in a speaking course, and the major factors that lead to a successful speaking session. Following is the analysis of respondents' answers to each survey item.

Students' Confidence in their English

Teacher participants think that students are more confident about their listening/speaking skills than their reading and particularly writing - where seven teachers chose "poor."

On the other hand, the answers of student participants reflected that they had more confidence in their receptive skills than their productive skills, especially writing – again, the only skill where students (n=4) described their level as "poor."

Skills Where Respondents Find Students to Be the Weakest

When asked what they thought, teacher participants clearly showed their concern about students' productive skills, and were equally split between speaking (n=4) and writing (n=4), respectively, with only two teachers mentioning reading.

Teacher participants explained their choice of writing by referring to students' weakness in grammar (n=4) and students' use of Arabic sentence structure when writing. As for speaking, teachers talked about the limited opportunities for students to practice speaking (n=4) and students' current "informal and monosyllabic" speaking performance.

On the other hand, student participants' answers leave no doubt about where they thought they were the weakest: the productive skills. Apart from only two students who chose listening, all other forty students mentioned the productive skills of writing (n=26) and speaking (n=14) as their weakest skills.

Student participants gave two major reasons for their choice of the productive skills: their lack of confidence about their accuracy (in grammar, spelling, and

pronunciation) and not having enough time to practice writing or speaking, or to discuss their mistakes with teachers. Several students also referred to their limited vocabulary.

The results of the first two items show that both teachers and student participants agree that the productive skills of writing and speaking are the ones where they felt students were the weakest. One explanation for students' responses might have to do with their focus on accuracy, which puts them under a lot of pressure and weakens their confidence in their performance in productive skills. The results also show that teachers are unaware of the extent to which students lack confidence in their spoken English.

Relative Importance of Skills to Students' Success in the ION

The results show that teacher participants see the receptive skills as more important for students' success at the ION than the productive skills, with reading chosen as the most important by seven teachers. Right after and very close to the other receptive skill of listening comes speaking, with writing given the last place. The explanation teacher participants gave for their choices was mainly that students need to be able to understand first and then to be able to produce.

Interestingly, student participants' responses were diametrically opposed to those of teachers. The results show that student participants see the productive skills as more important for students' success at the ION than their receptive skills, with the speaking skill being marked as the most important by the majority of students (n=26, 62%) and writing as the second most important skill by 43% (n=18) of students. On the other hand, listening and reading ranked third and fourth, respectively.

Most common student participants explained their choice of speaking by saying that it helps them communicate with others (students, teachers, patients, and doctors). Four students also discussed the importance of this skill in their nursing courses, which utilize case-based teaching methodology (where students are always expected to give oral presentations and participate in group discussions) and clinical training.

Interestingly, the only four comments I found for choosing writing as the second most important skill had to do with their perception that writing had a much larger weight in the evaluation scheme and that they wanted to "avoid losing marks here and there." In attempting to explain why they did not choose receptive skills, one student wrote, "reading can be improved anywhere else," and other students wrote, "listening doesn't need effort."

The contrast between teachers' and students' responses shows a lack of a common understanding or a common view of what students need (in terms of language skills) for success in the ION. Students' response shows their anxiety about evaluation and lack of confidence in their productive language skills. Teachers' responses also clearly show their lack of awareness of students' fears and worries about their proficiency in the productive skills and how this affects their success at the ION.

Relative Importance of Skills to Student's Success in their Field after Graduation

All ten teacher participants chose listening and speaking as the two most important skills to students' success in their field, with listening given the first rank by seven teachers. All teacher participants chose reading and writing as the least important, with six teachers giving reading the fourth position. Teachers explained their choices by saying that most graduates' work in the field will have to do with person-to-person verbal interaction with patients and doctors.

On the other hand, the skills that student participants consider essential for success after graduation were the same as those necessary for success at the ION. Hence, student participants again chose the productive skills as the most important for students' success after graduation, with speaking marked as the most important by 71% of students (n=30) and writing as the second most important skill by 43% (n=18) of students. On the other hand, listening and reading ranked third and fourth, respectively.

Student participants again explained their choice of speaking by referring to how it helps them communicate with others and how they would need to provide important information verbally to non-Arab patients. The four comments given for choosing writing as the second most crucial skill both had to do with the importance of writing reports and documenting what they do and how this is "the evidence that we apply the care for him/her." Students' responses to this item show their confidence in reading and listening proficiency and their anxiety about their productive skills.

Before moving to the items that directly address the speaking skill, let me sum up both teacher and student participants' views regarding the four language skills. Teacher participants believe that students are weaker at productive language skills and that these skills need more emphasis in the English language program. For students' success at the ION, teachers believe that students' receptive skills are the most important. In contrast, teacher participants believe that speaking and listening are the two most essential skills for students' success after graduation. Interestingly this leaves out writing as the skill that is neither very important for success while at the ION nor after graduation, and still the skill that gets the biggest emphasis in the current program!

On the other hand, student participants are anxious about their productive skills. Not only do they believe that these skills are where they feel the weakest, but they also feel that these two skills are the most important for their success at the ION and their success after graduation. One explanation for this might have to do with their lack of confidence about their proficiency in these two skills, which may be to a certain extent due to their emphasis on accuracy when evaluating their proficiency, as evidenced in the prevalence of such expressions as "correct spelling," correct grammar," and "correct pronunciation" in their answers. Another explanation may have to do with the emphasis given to writing in the current English program in terms of the number and frequency of written assignments that students are required to do and the weight that writing receives in the evaluation scheme.

Another interesting thing to note is that neither of the two opposing views of what skills are essential for students during their studies at the ION agrees with that of the administration, which is gearing the whole program towards more and more focus on reading and writing and less on listening and speaking.

Relative Weight That Speaking Should Be Given in the ION English Program
When asked for their opinion about what percentage they would give to the teaching of the speaking skill if the English program at the ION were to be divided among the four skills, teacher participants gave three different answers, with four teachers giving 25%, explaining that speaking deserves the same weight as the other three language skills, three teachers giving 40% demonstrating that when students graduate, it is this skill that they will be using to communicate. The last three teachers gave 50%, explaining that "speaking involves reading and comprehending, and it could be done during the reading session also"!
The percentages suggested by student participants ranged from 35% to 100%, with the majority of recommended percentages divided between 50% (n=14, 33% of students) and 80% (n=10, 24% of students). Students again made short comments about the importance of the speaking skill for communication with others both on the ION campus and in hospitals, and how improving their speaking will enhance their abilities in the other language skills as well as their vocabulary and grammar. A few students again said that this would enable teachers to correct students' common mistakes.
Despite the apparent misunderstanding of the item on the part of some of the respondents, the results reflect their enthusiasm towards giving more focus to the speaking skill in the program again.

Separate vs. Integrated Speaking Courses
Teacher participants' unanimous response to this item clearly shows their preference for teaching speaking as part of other language skills and not as a separate skill of its own, explaining that this would enable students to "grasp the skill unconsciously" and "will give them different contexts to practice." One of the only three teachers who wrote "both" explained why she was willing to consider teaching speaking as a separate course, too, saying that this would "give them [students] the strategies and tools for effective speaking."
On the other hand, student participants were almost evenly split about this matter, with 22 participants (52 %) opting for teaching speaking as a separate skill and the remaining 20 (48%) suggesting it should be taught within other language skills.
Participants opting for a separate course on speaking, who seemed more enthusiastic about writing their comments, mostly talked about how this will give them the chance to focus on speaking and enough time to practice, with one student complaining that "when we take it with other courses it doesn't make a big sense for us because it's occur for short period (sic) only not like other courses." Students opting for integrating speaking within other courses, however, mainly talked about how "language is connected and if we improve our grammar and reading our speaking will improve," and how "language should be learned as a one package

(sic)," which is an argument really against teaching any skill (not only speaking) separately –a situation that may be more appropriate in a content-based course that does not have a skills-based division (Nation and Newton, 2009, pp. 11-12), and not an intensive English program taught by a number of different teachers as is the situation in the ION.

Teachers' choice was a surprise to me since teachers have always complained about not having enough time and opportunity to give their students the chance to practice speaking within other language courses. On the other hand, students' response was more in line with their constant yearning for more focus on speaking in the program.

Speaking Activities in the Current English Program

Six teacher participants indicated that the current English program did not provide enough speaking activities. They suggested such activities as "interviews, demonstrations, everyday activities like getting information over the phone," and "plays, debates, telling stories about the current events, English clubs."

Apart from 12 student participants, all other 30 participants (71%) thought that the speaking activities in the current ION English program were insufficient to prepare students to succeed during their studies at the ION and after graduation. Apart from games and group stories, most of these students could not suggest other speaking activities they needed and asked for more time to practice and focus on speaking and more interesting speaking topics.

The results show that teachers and students feel that more speaking activities are needed in the current program. The activities suggested by both groups of participants represented types 2 (performance activities) and 3 (participation activities) in Riggenbach and Lazaraton's (1991) classification. On the other hand, observation activities, or type 4, will only be mentioned by students later as one of the factors that positively influence the teaching of speaking. Interestingly many of the activities suggested by teachers do necessitate giving a separate portion of the program to speaking, and it may be challenging to have students practice them adequately within other language courses.

Fluency vs. Accuracy

All 10 teacher participants agreed that classroom speaking activities should focus on improving students' fluency rather than accuracy, especially at the beginning, explaining the importance of "building confidence first" and how "Speaking fluently and being understood is far more important than speaking accurately without making mistakes."

On the contrary, apart from eight participants who said both were important and another six who chose fluency, most student participants (n=28, 67%) felt that classroom speaking activities should focus on helping students speak more accurately. Students explained their choice, saying that speaking without mistakes will make others understand and that being able to speak accurately will allow them to "gradually speak smoothly." Four others said that if students talked

smoothly but with mistakes, "we will not benefit anything and we will embarrass ourselves so we will feel shy to talk again."

One of the only six students who defended their choice of fluency over accuracy wrote that they needed to "speak faster because we have a busy job. It doesn't matter if we have some mistakes." The other student warned, "if we didn't speak (with mistakes), we would not learn how to speak accurately."

While teacher participants' response goes with the current trend in teaching speaking, where more and more emphasis is given to fluency (Lazaraton, 2001; Brown, 1994; Riggenbach and Lazaraton, 1991, etc.), student participants' response confirmed their focus on accuracy, which was projected throughout their responses to the previous items. The explanations they give for their choices again reflect their lack of confidence and fear of being embarrassed in front of others. Some student responses also show that they share Nation's (1989) fear that focusing only on fluency may lead to fossilization and, as a result, prevent them from improving their fluency.

Important Factors for a Successful Speaking Session

The most common factor in teacher participants' responses to this item was that of providing "interesting, amusing activities, topics …" in a "comfortable fun environment" with "NO emphasis on grades and evaluation." Four teachers also talked about the importance of building students' confidence to be able to speak in front of others. This, of course, goes with Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) and Butler and Stevens' (1997) emphasis on the role of the classroom environment in improving learners' speaking skills. Teacher participants' responses also revealed their awareness of the importance of student anxiety and fear of making mistakes in front of others which, according to Brown (2001, 269), is "one of the major obstacles learners have to overcome" when trying to speak.

Interestingly, the most common factor among student participants' responses was the teacher (n=24) (in terms of teachers' ability to control the class, their method of teaching and encouraging students to speak even if they make mistakes, and their "language" [proficiency]). This supports Butler and Stevens' (1997) emphasis on the teacher's role in the success of speaking sessions. It also agrees with Goulden's (1998) theory regarding the information that speaking teachers should have for their teaching to be successful.

Next to the teacher came such factors as interesting speaking topics that are relevant to students' culture and age group (n=10), having enough time (n=6), and correcting students' (especially pronunciation) mistakes. Some other factors were reading books, stories, etc., (n=5), the textbooks (n=2), the English program (n=1), and interestingly listening to fluent/native speakers (n=5). This choice shows their awareness of the importance of observation activities which Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) place at the highest level of speaking activities.

It is very interesting how teachers have their primary focus on having interesting activities and a comfortable environment and do not see their role as an essential factor in creating a successful session. In contrast, the most critical factor for students is teachers themselves and what they do in the classroom.

4. Conclusion

From the discussion above, it may be concluded that both teachers and students have a very positive attitude toward giving more emphasis to the speaking skill in the English program at the ION. Participants' awareness of students' weak proficiency in this skill, the importance of this skill for students' success in their field after graduation, and their demand for more activities and a more prominent place in the English program all indicate teachers' and students' unhappiness about the current place of speaking in the English program.

As for the items where both groups disagreed, a number of conclusions may also be arrived at. Despite teachers' rationalization for their responses to items 1 and 3, the results at least partly reflect teachers' lack of awareness of the level of students' anxiety about their speaking proficiency level and their considerable need for it for their nursing courses (i.e., case-based learning, clinical practice, etc.) during their studies at the ION. This may necessitate further inquiry into teachers' awareness since helping teachers become aware of this can help them focus their efforts on dealing with students' language needs more effectively.

Both groups' disparity in their views of what should be done to improve students' speaking may also lead to some interesting conclusions. Teachers aspire to create a comfortable, fun environment within other language courses where they can engage students in speaking activities that focus on improving their fluency at the beginning. On the other hand, most students yearn for separate speaking sessions where they get ample time to practice speaking in the classroom and where the teacher plays a vital role in managing the class and helping them improve their accuracy. Students' attention may need to be drawn to the importance of fluency in the productive skills. They need to be aware of the realistic accuracy level acceptable at their language learning level.

More investigation needs to be done regarding why students emphasize accuracy and how it affects their confidence in their language proficiency. Teachers also need to pay more attention to their role in facilitating the speaking session and give students more adequate and probably encouraging feedback regarding their language accuracy.

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