

Teaching Oral Skills to Tunisian EFL Learners in the LMD System: The Frustrating Reality

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Abstract – All over the world, English has rapidly become the main medium of communication both locally and globally. Therefore, it is essential to take the teaching and learning of English language seriously especially for communication purposes to meet various needs and to pace up with worldwide demands for English language skills.

Despite its central position as a crucial component of second language learning and teaching, teaching speaking has been undervalued for many years even though today's world requires that the goal of teaching speaking should be improving English users' communicative skills.

Reflecting on a personal experience, this paper sets out to document the real situation of teaching oral skills to Tunisian EFL Learners in the LMD System. It is hoped that this paper explores the impact of the system requirements on both learners' proficiency and teachers' performance and ability to teach this basic component of English language, investigates difficulties faced by learners to develop and promote their oral skills and provides recommendations on how to enable both teachers to refine their teaching of oral skills and learners to speak in the best way possible.

Keywords – Communicative Purposes, Oral Skills, Proficiency, LMD System.

I. INTRODUCTION

Following The 2008 Higher Education Act (Law n°2008-19) that reformed university administration; institutions have been offered the option of moving from a centralized form of management system to a more flexible and decentralized one in key areas such as the academic, administrative and financial aspects.

Since 2006, Tunisian universities have operated under the Licence-Master-Doctorate, or “**LMD**,” system, which is accredited by the French government and designates that bachelor's degrees require three years of study, master's degrees require two, and a doctoral degree requires more than three.

The Introduction of the LMD system was the last important reform. But where the Europeans had allowed five years for negotiation,

Universities had been converted into vocational education centres. Higher education in Tunisia is conditioned by the LMD system, acronym for License – Master – Doctorate, for all training courses except for engineering, medicine and architecture.

In order to guarantee the scientific value of the Tunisian diploma and all that it encompasses as skills, Tunisia has adopted the LMD system and the accreditation techniques which come from an independent body and which meet the quality criteria.

This system based on three levels – bachelor's, master's and doctorate – is an arrangement of teaching in semesters and teaching units whose main objective is to establish a flexible and efficient training model, of an academic and applied nature and equivalent at the international level. Besides, this reform of higher education in Tunisia aims to create a new generation of

versatile graduates who adapt to a constantly evolving global context. The new credit system is designed to give students a greater deal of flexibility in designing their study tracks, while also allowing them to earn and transfer credits between institutions both domestically and internationally.

Generally speaking, the system was set to introduce a degree structure based on the new European 'Bologna' model of bachelor's, masters and doctoral degrees (*Licence, Master, and Doctorate*) similar to the new degree structure in France, which was introduced in line with the goals of the Bologna Process. As outlined by the Ministry of Higher Education in Tunisia, the main objectives of this system are:

1. The adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees;
2. The establishment of an academic credit-hour system;
3. The development of professionally oriented higher degrees;
4. To encourage student and faculty mobility through greater international degree and credit comparability;
5. The internationalization of higher studies;
6. Greater institutional autonomy
7. The award of national diplomas based on explicit criteria and standards set by the state.

In Chabchoub's view, the new system not only introduced profound structural changes to Tunisian universities, but also has brought about a decrease in the time spent on initial training from 3120 hours to 2268 hours for the new LMD system. The number of hours allocated to teaching practice has also considerably decreased from 182 hours to 112 hours. (Chabchoub 2006)

Following the implementation of the LMD system in Tunisian universities and considering its huge impact on reducing the time allocated to training and teaching, it would be relevant to question the quality of the teaching and learning process in general and in particular teachers' performance and learners' achievement as well.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL SKILLS LEARNING

It is almost beyond question that oral skills is the most important skill that each student has to develop because it is an instrument that helps each person to create an assertive communication in different contexts. Therefore, developing students' oral production skill would offer them the opportunity of improving their interaction with the world, creating an environment in which they will be able to express their own ideas and thoughts.

Following The Common European Framework of Reference for Learning, Teaching and Evaluation of Languages (CEFR), learning a language is the development of competences on the part of the learner. As it is well known, competence includes not only knowledge but also the ability to use that knowledge.

Therefore, achieving mastery of a foreign language, dictates on learners the development of the four principal language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. More importantly, using the target language effectively in order to interact with others orally has become of the utmost importance these days, up to the point where people who cannot speak a foreign language cannot be considered effective language users, even if they can read it and understand it.

Even though the development of the four skills is one of the main necessities in the learning of a foreign language and though each skill carries equal importance in this process, these skills not only develop in different rates among learners, but also seem to be a source of difficulties and challenges for a number of them especially when it comes to oral communication.

As a result of the globalization of English and a growing demand for good English speaking skills, a great emphasis has been increasingly placed on the teaching of oral skills in order to meet the diverse needs in relation to academic and professional performances.

Additionally, because language is primarily speech, oral skills are increasingly gaining more and more momentum up to the point that people are judged on their ability to present their ideas in a coherent way in a wide variety of situations (school, workplace, and society) which means, being fluent when expressing ideas and thoughts.

2.1. Major beliefs about the importance of Oral Skills

According to Resnick and Snow (2009), speaking skill is prerequisite skill to reading and writing. Therefore, EFL learners have to develop their oral skills first before they are able to read and write. Once learners can listen to a language and speak it, then they can progressively learn how to read and write effectively.

In the view of Coleman (2014), most language learners tend to build a strong correlation between effectiveness in speaking a language and knowledge of that language without paying too much attention or in comparison to other skills.

Following Philips (2007), “Speaking is an interactive process constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing”. Whether it is formal or simple, learners require speaking everywhere to communicate their thoughts and opinions.

Halliday (1979), states that oral communication is a perfect reflection of the persistent and powerful role of language and communication in human society. In his words, communication is more than merely an exchange of words between parties; it is a “...sociological encounter” (p. 139) and through exchange of meanings in the communication process, social reality is “created, maintained and modified” (p. 169).

Rahman (2010) conceives of oral communication to be a dynamic interactive process that involves the effective transmission of facts, ideas, thoughts, feelings and values. For Rahman (2010) oral communication is basically the spoken interaction between two or more people. The interaction is far more complex than it seems as it is composed of multiple elements which, when taken as a whole, result in the success or failure of the interaction.

More importantly, Rahman (2010) asserts that oral communication not only can occur spontaneously with an unplanned content, but also can be formal as it is the case of taking parts in meetings where the content is usually framed by a structured environment and an already set agenda.

In keeping with this emphasis on the importance of oral communication in learning a language for social interaction, professional and other communicative purposes on different occasions, Richard (2006) contends that the ever-going need for good communication skills in English has emerged in high demand around the world. As such, speaking has turned to be one of the essential skills in English occupying a superior status. Therefore, English teachers must give priority to English-speaking skills in their classrooms.

According to Rao (2012), oral skills can serve as the best introduction to other language learning skills. Indeed, learning through speaking is a natural way of learning a foreign language. Even more, speaking is important because it provides the opportunity for the practical usage of a foreign language since it brings fluency, correction then accuracy among EFL learners.

2.2. Teaching Oral Skills: Great Expectations

As English has become these days the most spoken language in the world, and in order to enable EFL learners to communicate and interact in a meaningful and fruitful way using this language, developing the oral skills has become a vital way to communicate among people whose native language is not English.

Therefore, more and more focus is increasingly placed on the necessity to enhance students’ proficiency in oral communication skills so as to function more effectively not only in the academic setting but also in the professional one. Hence, oral skills course has always been part of undergraduate classes with varying degrees but with ambitious expectations including, but not limited to, the following:

- Enabling learners to use language widely to achieve a variety of social purposes, as for example, to entertain, to explain how something works, to provide information, to argue a position.

- Using the target language to make sense of the world, to express and develop ideas on a range of topics.
- Offering students ample opportunities to communicate confidently and appropriately with people from all walks of life: with those who are older or younger, with those in positions of power, with peers and family and more importantly to speak confidently in class discussions. (Cotter, 2007)
- Encouraging creativity, understanding, and imagination; it is a means of solving problems, speculating, sharing ideas and making decisions; language builds friendships and enhances motivation through social interaction. White (2004)
- developing skills and strategies that contribute to the effective use of speaking in classroom discussions or in group work where the students need to be aware of how to start a topic, how to include others, how to change topics, how to repair communication breakdowns, how to deal with those who dominate the conversation, how to use language to solve problems, and how to end a discussion. (Cotter, 2007)

III. ORAL SKILLS IN THE TUNISIAN CONTEXT

Many languages are taught in Tunisian universities. But with the growing interest of the world in the English language Tunisia has also realized it as the most important medium not only for the instructive purpose but also for our day to day communication.

Considering these facts Tunisian officials and policy makers have included English as a compulsory subject from primary to university level.

In the Tunisian context, teaching oral skills with the globalization, calls has always been made a fundamental component of the academic curriculum in order for graduates to be proficient in oral communication skills and so that they can function effectively in the academic and professional setting.

Consequently, oral communication skills course is included in undergraduate classes especially within the outgoing Bachelor regime. Yet, despite the obvious awareness of the need to include oral communication skills in the curriculum, there appears to be less and less importance attributed to this subject especially with the coming of the LMD system.

As a matter of fact, for many years teaching speaking has become increasingly undervalued and deemphasized particularly in terms of the time allocated to actual teaching and more importantly in terms of limiting the learning of this subject to a unique level of studies, namely, first year students of English and hence depriving other levels of the opportunity to develop their oral communication skills.

3.1. Oral Skills teaching and learning problems

My interest in this area has been developing since I started teaching this subject to students of English within two different regimes which has offered me the opportunity to experience various interesting phenomena in the classroom during the actual teaching and during the assessment phase.

In this perspective, reflecting on my short experience and particularly on its LMD phase, has led me to identify the following major problems that both learners and teachers equally face during oral skills classes:

1. The first oral skill teaching problem commonly faced by Tunisian EFL teachers and learners in the case of English department students at ISL Gabes is the large class size despite the fact that groups of students are divided into smaller ones; however, the general setting seems unfavorable to teach oral English communication skills effectively especially regarding the room furniture and logistics. Obviously, due to large class size, students will never enjoy equal chances to participate in their classes.
2. Lack of oral practice environment which is primarily due to the fact that the time allotted is not enough to give the learners a chance to speak English in class. Indeed, having a one hour session per week and for a very limited period of time (imposed by assessment requirements) will result in getting little time to practice in different real-life situations. Such lack of oral practice environment inside and outside the classroom would inhibit teachers from steering the learners'

oral development. In other words, the amount of time devoted to the oral expression class is undoubtedly insufficient to practice the language. Therefore, students need more time for more practice to feel the progress.

3. In close connection to the unfavorable setting (the language lab design), the lack of supporting audio-visual tools for effective teaching of oral skills is a major problem encountered by learners and teachers as well.
4. Should the supporting audio-visual tools exist, still there is a serious problem relating to teachers' lack of skills and training to use these tools appropriately.
5. Oral skills teachers need to receive training not only on how to use supporting tools effectively but also on how they should conceive their real role inside their classes, on how they should revise and update their teaching methods in a way that seriously considers their learners' psychological obstacles such as anxiety, self-esteem, self confidence and shyness.
6. Teachers' time constraint in the classroom is another serious problem faced by oral skills teachers and learners. This problem emanates from assessment requirements imposed by the LMD system. Students are necessarily exposed to two tests during one term which makes teachers constantly in a struggle against time to assess all students before the end of the term and as a result, teachers become unable to provide learners oral practice environment for developing their oral English communication skills.
7. The seventh oral skill teaching problem commonly shared by Tunisian EFL teachers and learners as reported following an observation of ISL students of English is generally the students' lack of motivation and their passiveness especially with the increasing attention paid to assessment at the expense of learning. Indeed, students noticeably tend to invest more and more in preparing their assessments than looking for opportunities to refine their oral production skills.
8. The general trend is that many if not most students do not feel the motivation to practice oral skills inside and outside the classroom as they are constantly preoccupied with marks in addition to their fear that others would comment on their language.
9. Similarly, the traditional teaching method which is more teacher-oriented than learner-centered (again the reason is time constraint) does not allow the learners to be active participants in the lessons. As a result teachers' class speaking time considerably dominates learners' speaking time which results in depriving students of ample opportunities to talk and express themselves in the target language. At the same time, it is very demanding on the part of a teacher to steer learners' oral English communication skills performance through traditional teaching methods in an EFL context.
10. Due to time constraint primarily and to the choice of a teacher-centered teaching method, first year students of English lack the chance to choose topics of their interest to be discussed in class. As such, authenticity of the activities practiced in oral skills classes is to be given further attention and consideration.

IV. CONCLUSION

In an increasingly globalized world, it is almost beyond question that the goal of teaching speaking should improve students' communicative skills. It is only in this way that they can express themselves and interact in a meaningful and fruitful form. Despite its significance as a crucial part of second language teaching and learning, for the recent years teaching speaking has been undervalued and deemphasized especially with the implementation of the LMD system.

On the basis of my short and modest experience as a teacher of oral skills, it is quite obvious that serious problems are equally encountered by teachers and learners, principal among these problems is a wide gap between theory and practice which is likely to generate frustration among teachers who firmly believe in oral communication to be a dynamic interactive process that requires active involvement and engagement of speakers, but unable to spend enough time on that because of assessment requirements and a shortage of time to pursue an authentic teaching of this crucial language component.

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