



# Capitalizing on Speaking Skill of EFL Learners for the Language Literacy

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## Abstract

This study aims at grabbing the attention of EFL /ESL teachers, trainers, and administrators towards the importance of teaching speaking skill to enhance overall language proficiency of EFL learners. Comprehensive research done in the field of applied linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT) establishes a positive correlation of speaking skill with the overall language proficiency. Despite this obvious significance of speaking skill in language learning process, it has not gained sufficient attention in the ELT or the assessments in Oman. Relying on the available literature on the importance of the speaking skill and its effective role in enhancing other language macro skills (listening, reading, and writing), this exploratory research analyzes the current status of speaking skill in ELT and assessments at the General Foundation Programme (GFP) in Oman. As many GFP's have IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam as their programme exit examination, the study begins with measuring the correlation of speaking skill grades with other macro skill in order to accentuate the positive impact of speaking skill on other language skills. Secondly, it presents the statistics of time devoted to teaching and weights that speaking skill hold in the GFP in Oman. Finally, the study suggests the ways to optimize speaking skill opportunities to create successful literacy experience among adult EFL learners.

**Keywords:** English Language Teaching (ELT), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), General Foundation Program (GFP)

## 1. Introduction

The nature of speaking in one's own native language is often taken for granted as Brown (2002) says 'walking and talking are species specific' but learning to speak in a foreign language is apparently the most challenging of all the four language macro-skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. Proficiency in speaking in a foreign language provides a foundation for communication of ideas, intelligent conversation, and the development of other language skills in the target language. 'Often the ability to speak a language is considered synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication.' (Folse, 2006). Yet this significance of teaching 'speaking skill' is not reflected at most of the instances in EFL classrooms. As Kinsella (2006) reported that 'extensive oral language or speaking for both social and academic purposes must be incorporated into successful literacy development, but it is routinely overlooked by teachers who fear losing classroom control.'

The scenario is no different in Oman where the 'speaking skill' is the most neglected skill in ELT as well as assessments. Highlighting the objective of English in Oman Al Issa (2007) reports that 'Oman needs English- the only official language in the country-as a fundamental tool for 'modernization', 'nationalization' and the acquisition of science and technology.' (pp.199-200). Further, he says that one of the powerful 'ideologies' that governs English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Sultanate of Oman is 'neocolonial/communicative'. English is considered a functional tool for "Omanisation" – a systematic and gradual replacement of foreign skilled labor by Omani nationals. In fact, functional competence in English is a prerequisite for finding a white-collar job in the public and private sector.' But ironically Al-Mahrooqi (2012) raises her concern by stating that 'Oman has invested heavily on teaching English at all levels, from grade one to undergraduate and postgraduate degree. Yet a majority of school leavers lack their linguistic and communicative skills which are indispensable for their future academic or professional success.' Al-Issa (2006) also mentions 'Al-Toubi's (1998) study that included 82 multi nationality school teachers. It found that Omani ELT school curriculum fail to prepare students for oral communication and the classes do not provide enough room for spoken English. Consequently the students who graduate from the schools have weak speaking skills.'

However, there is also Pre University General Foundation Programme (GFP) that caters to school graduates and other adults and aim to enhance the English language proficiency of the learners. But the status of speaking skill is not very promising in these institutions either. The reason to the daunting progress of the learners in speaking might be several. Nevertheless the domain of this skill in the academic setup in terms of teaching and assessments can be a major factor.

This skill is extremely instrumental in the language learning process and must be given equal importance as the other macro skills of the language.

### 1.1 Literature Review

‘Oral interactions account for the bulk of our everyday communications that remain the primary mode of discourse throughout the world’ (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). To attain proficiency in any language and become that language literate, individuals need proficiency in all its receptive and productive macro skills, i.e. listening, reading (receptive) and speaking, writing (productive). It is undeniable that listening is a primary receptive followed by speaking, which is the primary productive skill. Loban (1976) also expresses a similar view about the speaking skill by saying,

*‘We listen a book a day,  
talk a book a week,  
read a book a month,  
and write a book a year.’*

*(cited in Buckley, 1992)*

The significance of speaking skill as the first productive skill is indubitable but apparently it is the most challenging skill for EFL learners because it is more than knowing the semantic and grammatical rules of the language. ‘In social interaction while speaking, listeners and speakers are concurrently involved in producing and processing spoken interactions. This brings them under the time constraints. They are under time constraints which mean that they must process language as they go, with no opportunities to go back and make changes. Speakers must also take account of relationships with others, adjusting their language according to the meanings they wish to get across, and responding to verbal or non-verbal signals from their listeners.’ (Thornbury, 2007). Despite all the challenges encountered in learning to speak in a foreign language its role is fostering language literacy is crucial. Carter & Nunan (2001) and Celce-Murcia (2001) accentuate the fact that among EFL/ESL learners, the speaking skill underpins language literacy. Further, Omaggio (1986) advocates that transferability of linguistic knowledge to *new contexts (topics) and situations* is possible only when the oral skill is of a higher degree.

Several studies in ELT suggest the positive influence of speaking skill on other language’s macro-skills. To begin with the reading skills, hardly any reading theorists or researchers would ever question the significance of oral language skill for learning to read. Condelli, Wrigley, and Yoon (2009) also found that English language learners with higher oral proficiency demonstrated higher achievements in reading as compared to the ones with lower oral proficiency. The use of the language-experience approach, the assertion on natural language patterns in books to which emerging and beginning readers are exposed, the practice of reading books aloud, all assert that oral proficiency usually lays the foundation for reading proficiency.

Speaking also impacts writing skills. Weak speaking skill can be linked with challenges in fluent production of words and clauses in text and are usually associated with weaker standards of composition (Berninger & Fuller, 1992; Berninger et al., 1992). Limitations with oral vocabulary (Bishop & Clarkson, 2003; Dockrell, Lindsay, Connelly, & Mackie, 2007) and oral narrative performance (Cragg & Nation, 2006) are related to poor written text production. Further, socializing language is more important to narrative forms and this constitutes the core of writing tasks. So, Mc Cutchen (1986) associates increased written language proficiency to increased oral language facility. Therefore all the commendable work done to analyse the impact of speaking skill on reading and writing skills has made its primacy undeniable.

However this primacy of speaking skill in ELT has been overlooked in developing nations like Oman where English holds the status of a Foreign Language and EFL learners have a very limited exposure to the language outside their classrooms. Consequently, their overall proficiency in the target language is hampered.

### 1.2 Adult EFL learner’s background in Oman

The ‘Omani nationals learn English for purposes like pursuing post-secondary education, travelling, cultural analysis and understanding, conducting business, finding a white collar job in the private and public sectors and acquisition of science and technology’ (Al-Issa, 2002).

According to Siddiqui (2012) ‘English is a foreign language in Oman and its use is limited to certain educational and professional contexts. It is taught as one of the subjects in the public school curriculum. However, the medium of instruction of other subjects still remains Arabic’. The school graduates and many other adult learners who seek enrolment in foreign universities have to give the evidence of their English language proficiency because most of these Universities’s syllabus and the medium of teaching is English. The proficiency level requirement depends on the University or the Course. Most of these universities accept IELTS results (see appendix for IELTS Test level descriptors). Equal weight is given to each skill in this test that includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing and the total band (score) is the average of all the skills.

Learners who are able to meet the Language requirements of the Universities enrol directly in the Academic or Professional course that they seek. Else, they have to enrol in the GFP. It aims at enhancing English language proficiency of these learners. ‘Learners who enroll in the General Foundation Programme (GFP) are usually between

the age group of 18 to 45' (Siddiqui 2012). GFP course cater to all the level of learners (beginners to upper intermediate). To promote a learner from one level to the other there is an assessment and at the end of the GFP there is an exit examination which is usually IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam. Nevertheless there is a mismatch in the level transition assessments and the end of the course assessment (IELTS) where speaking is equally important as the other macro skills. This research has tried to highlight that the speaking skill's domain in the system is limited and is a matter of concern.

## 2. Research

### 2.1 Method

**This research was conducted in two phases:**

1. The first phase of the study analysed Academic IELTS results of 30 Omani (EFL) students. It was the only instrument used to validate the positive correlation of the speaking skill with other macro-skills. Statistical tools for summary output included Pearsons Correlation Coefficient and Descriptive Statistics. IELTS results were considered as the bench mark for the language proficiency test due to its high acceptance around the world and it is the course exit examination in most of the GFP's in Oman. The results were taken from 3 different years, i.e; 2011, 2012 and 2013. This is done with the objective that speaking skill has a positive correlation with other macro skill and hence must not be ignored.
2. The second part of the study aimed to explore status of the 'speaking skill' in EFL teaching in Oman. A written questionnaire was given to the Heads or the Academic Coordinators of English Language Centres who manage **General Foundation Program (GFPs) for adult EFL learners**. Most of these GFPs have IELTS as their exit examination. The questions formulated, elicited the information about the general back ground of the learners who enrol in the programme, total course duration, breakdown of total hours for each language skill and the breakdown of the marks for each skill tested in their language assessment.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Data 1: Correlation of Speaking skill with other Language Skills

Respondents

Table 1. Personal Characteristics of group sampled (IELTS Results)

Characteristics	All Respondents
<b>Gender ( %):</b>	
Female	47%
Male	53%
<b>Age</b>	
Average age	25.10
Low-High (age)	18-45
Range	28

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of all language skills

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Listening	30	4	8	5.133	0.2005
Reading	30	4	7.5	4.733	0.1674
Writing	30	3	6	5.167	0.1799
Speaking	30	4	8	5.7	0.2098
Valid N (list wise)	30				

Table 3. Pairwise Correlation Coefficient

		Listening	Reading	writing	Speaking	Overall
	Pearson correlation	0.812**	0.640**	0.417*	1	0.871**
Speaking	Sig(2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000		
	N	30	30	30	30	30

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Interpretation (Data 1)*

Of the 30 results that were taken for the study, 47% were females and 53% males and their average age was 25.1. The descriptive statistic for each language skill (table 2) reveals that the lowest attainment was in reading with the mean of 4.733 and standard deviation 0.9166. In contrast the highest attainment was in the speaking skill with the mean of 5.7 and standard deviation 1.1492. In addition the results of Pairwise Correlation Coefficient (table 3) supported the research hypothesis. There is a strong, positive correlation between the variables, speaking and listening ( $r = .812, n = 30, p \leq .000$ ), speaking and reading ( $r = .64, n = 30, p \leq .000$ ). However, the results were slightly misleading in the case of correlation of speaking and writing ( $r = .417, n = 30, p \leq .000$ ). The correlation between speaking and the overall IELTS performance was ( $r = .871, n = 30, p \leq .000$ ).

*Discussion (Data 1)*

According to the results, age and gender variables do not majorly affect the IELTS scores of students. Besides, the correlation of speaking skills with other individual macro-skills is positive which implies that if speaking skill is higher, reading and listening skills also tend to be good. However there is a mismatch of oral and written scores correlation which can be misleading for teachers. Nevertheless, there are many other variables that affect good writing and consequently the scores. Hence speaking skills should be considered crucial for fostering language proficiency but not at the cost of jeopardizing listening, reading and writing skills.

**3.2 Data 2: Status of teaching and assessing speaking skill in Oman's General Foundation program**

**To investigate the status of the speaking skill in ELT at Oman, data was collected from the English Language Centres of nine colleges in Oman in July-August 2013.**

Table 4. Status of teaching and assessing speaking skill in Oman's

General Foundation program	
	Average
Duration Of GFP ( Hrs)	877.71
Speaking Lessons( Hrs)	82.29
Speaking lessons Share in the GFP duration (%)	9.4
Speaking skills weight in assessment (%)	14.29

*Interpretation (Data2)*

At the time of study, the data collected from nine renowned English Language Centres of colleges and universities in Oman shows that there is a very little consistency in the GFP duration. The duration of the program varies between 1000 hrs to 660 hrs. Average duration of GFPs in Oman is 877.71 hours. These programs either have semester or level system. However, every college has Beginners, Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate and advanced levels of General English course. Also some colleges include EAP and ESP courses at the advanced levels. In addition, many colleges have IELTS as their exit examination and IELTS are pre requisite to enroll in university level professional or academic courses.

Some colleges do not have separate hours allocated exclusively to practise speaking skill and claim to have a communicative language teaching approach where all the skills are integrated. Nevertheless, some colleges have separate hours solely allotted in their timetables for speaking activities of various kinds but only an average of 9.4% hours of the total GFP duration is devoted to the speaking skill.

The components in the examination from beginners to intermediate level include Listening, Reading, Grammar, Vocabulary, Writing and Speaking. But speaking accounts for the lowest weight in the examination. It varies between 10 to 20 percent. The average is 14.49% of the total examination score. (Table 4)

*Discussion (Data 2)*

Despite having a common aim and objective of preparing adult learners for university, academic or professional courses, General Foundation Programmes in Oman vary in their design and functioning. This entirely depends on the governing management. These colleges also have a liberty to choose their own syllabus. The weight given to the speaking skill in the timetables and examinations suggests that it is considered the least important skill. Ironically the GFPs who have Academic IELTS as their exit examination in which speaking accounts for 25% of the total score, give least weight to speaking in their teaching hours and in-house examinations. Hence there is a mismatch between the ongoing and the final assessment.

**4. Conclusion**

Speaking skill is certainly a key skill and a fundamental tool of language literacy among EFL learners which is verified through the correlation of the speaking skill with other language skills and with overall academic IELTS scores. To this

end there is a need to establish the due domain of speaking skill in the classrooms and in the assessments at the General Foundation Programmes that facilitate English language courses in Oman. This can be done by devoting more lessons and hours in the timetable exclusively for various speaking activities especially at the lower levels i.e. beginners, elementary and pre intermediate level because this is the primary productive skill. Moreover increase in the weight of speaking skill in the ongoing level transition assessments will align it with the final end of the course assessment. Hence when there will be a top-down approach where speaking skill will be given equal weight as the other skills in the timetables and the assessments then it will encourage the learners and the teachers to practise the speaking skill more vividly in classrooms and will eventually foster overall literacy of the learners in the target language.

Understanding the socio- political factors of Oman, EFL teachers have to give attention to provide more opportunities for quality speaking practice to learners. Thus to optimize speaking skill opportunities in EFL classrooms a few things are worth considering. Communicative Language Teaching and Collaborative Learning may be the preferred teaching approaches which are more learners centred and give more opportunities to the learners to practice speaking. Secondly, lesson must incorporate more time where learners may talk to their fellow learner for instance; sharing news, discussing and brainstorming writing topics or even peer tutoring. Besides various activities such as; group discussions, presentations, role plays, skit, language games etc must be encouraged in the classroom. (see Kaye, 2006) .

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## APPENDIX A

### IELTS Levels Band Descriptors:

#### **Band 9- Expert User**

Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.

#### **Band 8- Very Good User**

Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation well.

#### **Band 7- Good User**

Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.

#### **Band 6- Competent User**

Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations

#### **Band 5- Modest User**

Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.

#### **Band 4- Limited User**

Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.

#### **Band 3- Extremely Limited User**

Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.

#### **Band 2- Intermittent User**

**No real** communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.

#### **Band 1- Non User**