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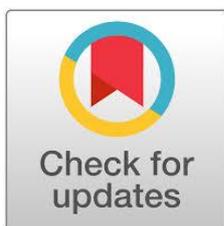
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Learning Environment Related Factors Affecting Afghan EFL Undergraduates' Speaking Skill

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Abstract

Of the four language skills, speaking is usually considered an indicator of proficiency in a language. As an EFL student, one should master speaking skill (Nazara, 2012). Unfortunately, most Afghan EFL undergraduates are not as good at speaking as they are in the other three English language skills (reading, writing and listening). Most Afghan undergraduate EFL learners are good at reading and writing, but in part of oral communication, they are not accurate and fluent (Zia & Sulan, 2015). Hence, this study was conducted to investigate the factors that affect the Afghan undergraduate EFL learners' speaking skill at Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani University Kunar, Afghanistan. The study specifically investigated the learning environment-related factors that affected student speaking skill. A mixed method was used for this study, i.e., quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interview). The questionnaire data were descriptively analyzed in SPSS version 20 and presented in figures and tables. The interview data were thematically analyzed and presented. A total of 90 students (40 junior and 50 senior) were purposively selected and participated in this study. The findings revealed that large classes and the lack of basic facilities in the speaking classroom were some factors in the learning environment that affected the students speaking skill. The current study's findings will hopefully help teachers and educators be attentive and creative in building a proper learning environment to reduce the factors that affect students' speaking skill.

Keywords: Afghan EFL Undergraduates; Learning Environment-related Factors; Speaking Skill

Introduction

Learners worldwide have broad use and understanding of English, making this language important for communication. As communication is the primary objective of every language, one who wants to learn the English language needs to be an excellent communicator. Speaking skill constitutes an essential part of the EFL course (Knight, 1992). One of the biggest frustrations in foreign language learners is that they cannot speak English properly though they have spent years learning it (Balasree, Malarvezhi & Jothi, 2017).

According to Luoma (2004), speaking is the most difficult skill, especially in a foreign language where competence in speaking takes too much time to develop. EFL learners who are major English are required to have excellent oral communication skills. Most Afghan EFL undergraduate students can easily master reading and writing skills, but they tend to lack oral communication (Zia & Sulan, 2015). Therefore, this study will investigate the factors that affect Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill.

The major problem with Afghanistan's education, in general, is due to the country's decades of civil wars and internal conflicts (BBC News report, 2009). The political tensions and internal wars have suffered every sector of the country's life, especially the education sector. Most people were compelled to leave the country due to tough living conditions. Those still in the county were deprived of basic services and facilities.

Nevertheless, the conditions improved in 2001, with the efforts of the international community. New schools were built, teachers were trained, new teachers were recruited, and most importantly, the number of school-going children dramatically increased since then (World Education News and Reviews, 2016). Similarly, the curricula at various levels of education were updated, and English as a compulsory subject was placed at various levels of education (Ministry of Education of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2010).

Similarly, considering the importance of English, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has introduced English departments at most universities in the country. English as a subject was included in the curriculum of all departments (Ministry of Higher Education, Afghanistan, n.d). Furthermore, looking to the needs of English departments, the ministry has supported and provided the departments with all the necessary infrastructures.

Yet, besides all these endeavors, the Afghan undergraduate students in English departments still face challenges. A great number of Afghan EFL undergraduate students are having difficulty in their speaking skill. Studies have shown that Afghan EFL undergraduates are good at reading, writing and listening; however, they face issues while speaking English. Most Afghan EFL undergraduates have anxiety while participating in classroom activities and underperform speaking skill (Zia & Sulan, 2015).

Therefore, the current study investigated learning environment-related factors affecting Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill. The findings will surely assist teachers and educators in understanding the factors that cause the issue and apply their strengths to create a proper learning environment in speaking classes.

Research Objectives

The current research has two main objectives. The study's first objective is to investigate the classroom setting that affects Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill. Similarly, the study's second objective is to investigate the role of classroom facilities that helps improve Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill.

Research Questions

Two research questions were used for the study. The first research question reads: what are the classroom settings that affect Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill? The second research question reads: what is the role of classroom facilities in improving Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill?

Conceptual Framework

The learning environment cannot be marginalized as it plays a vital role in learning and enhancing speaking skill. Classroom settings, i.e., large classes, will hinder students from learning to speak. According to Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2013), large classes are one of the issues that affect speaking skill. Similarly, the limitation of technology, i.e., electricity, communicative labs, computers, projectors, speech recognition software, the internet and so on, in the speaking class

is another issue altogether in the speaking skill. According to Bahadorfar and Omidvar (2014), all technological facilities provide maximum opportunities for the learners to learn correctly and efficiently in the speaking class, i.e., audio, video, games, voice recordings, quizzes, podcasts, and so on play an essential role in exposing students to high input of target language, which ultimately helps their speaking skill.

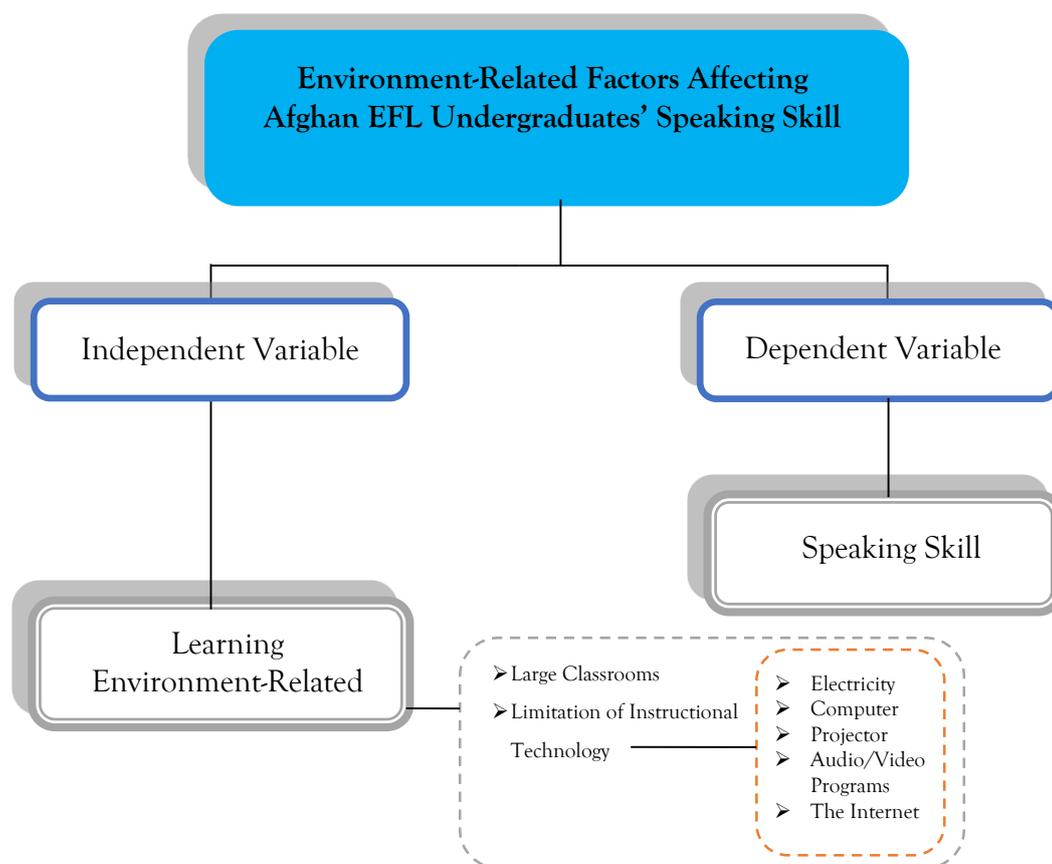


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Literature Review

Speaking Skill

Speaking is difficult as it happens instantly, and there is no time for the speaker to think deeply before speaking. It is the oral delivery of a language and involves several speech organs like lungs, vocal cord, vocal tract, teeth and lips to produce meaningful sounds (Pal, 2015).

Speaking is not only the production of meaningless sounds but the production of sounds that can be understood. However, Sanaa (2013) considered the speaking skill as one of the most natural skills of the four language skills. She argued that speaking is the expression of an everyday occurrence for most of us and usually does not require significant efforts, thoughts, and preparation.

The four skills of a language have essential functions in every language. Speaking is the second skill after listening skill that comes from human experience. It is meant for a listener and usually appears to a target listener. The main aim of foreign language learning is to speak and communicate with it (Nadia, 2013). Speaking is the act of performing and producing oral language to convey a message in different situations and appropriate contexts. So, to communicate with other speakers, respond to someone else, and deal with different events, speaking is a productive skill involving placing all elements of language together to perform and construct the intended message. It is spoken language that involves certain characteristics that distinguish it from other skills, such as tone of voice, stress, intonation, speed of speech, along with the gestures and facial expression of the speaker that they can use with repetitions and pauses.

To communicate with others, one needs to have speaking skill. Speaking is “the process of building and sharing meaning through verbal and non-verbal symbols, in various contexts” (Chaney & Burk, 1998). Speaking allows humans to construct meaningful sounds for a particular purpose while exchanging ideas, including expressing opinions, clearing trouble or carrying on a social relation (Donough & Shaw, 1993).

According to Mustafa (2015), speaking is the process of conveying a meaning that deals with the production, reception and processing of the information and the context where it happens, determining its form and meaning. He added that context includes the participants, their shared experience, the environment and the speaking purpose. Richards and Rerandya (2008) mentioned that speaking plays a pivotal role in communication, and in English as a foreign language, it is the element that needs more attention. They added that for an EFL teacher to provide practical instruction. Inspecting the aspect, condition, and mechanism of effective speaking is essential.

From the definitions discussed above, speaking is the expression of ideas, opinions or feelings by using words or sounds of articulation to inform, persuade and entertain. In many cultures, speaking is perceived as the measure of language learning. That is to say that speaking is a kind of synonym for language. The importance of speaking in a language can be known from the fact that usually, people use the question “can you speak English?” when asking about one’s language competency.

Theoretical Background

This part, the theoretical background, discusses and explains speaking skill based on the various theories. The following are some of the theories related to speaking skill.

Bygate’s Theory

The main aim of speaking is communication. Bygate (1987) suggested two aspects that can achieve the communicative goal of speaking. Bygate named the two aspects language knowledge and skills to use the knowledge. Knowing is insufficient for proper speaking, but the speaker needs to use this knowledge appropriately in different situations. For the communicative goal of speaking, only assembling sentences will not work, but making and using these sentences appropriately in various situations is essential. Speaking involves making a decision rapidly, implementing the decision smoothly and adjusting the conversation to unexpected issues (Bygate, 1987). The second aspect of speaking is the ability to decide what to say and how to say it explicitly on the spot and to be flexible in using sentences for different situations.

Harmer’s Theory

The elements which Harmer (2001) suggested for fluent speaking are two crucial aspects, i.e., knowledge of language features and the ability to process the information on the spot. The first aspect (language feature) features for better-spoken production are connected speech, expressive devices, lexis, and grammar. Connected speech means to convey fluent connected speech like assimilation, elision, contractions and stress sounds. Expressive devices include pitch, stress, speed, and volume for conveying the meaning also called super-segmental features.

Similarly, the work of lexis and grammar is to provide standard lexical phrases for certain functions like agreeing, disagreeing, expressing shock, surprise, approval, etc. The second essential aspect of successful language interaction comprises language processing, interacting with others and on-the-spot information processing. Language processing is processing the language in the brain, putting it in proper order for words and phrases retrieved from memory, and combining them into appropriate sequences. Interacting with others comprises listening, understanding how the other participants are feeling and knowing how linguistically allow others to do so. On the spot, information processing means processing information at the moment of listening.

Horwitz's Theory

Speaking involves fear and anxiety, defined as the subjective feeling of tension and worry by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). It involves the arousal of the autonomic nervous system and causes the individual low levels of verbal production and inability to answer even straightforward questions. Moreover, the anxiety causes the individual to fidget, squirm, and be unable to replicate the sound of the target language.

Consequently, the study tries to identify the factors that affect Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill taking theoretical assistance from Bygate's theory of language knowledge and skills, Harmer's theory of language features and Horwitz and associates' theory of anxiety in speaking classes.

Learning Environment Related Factors

The learning environment plays a pivotal role in the learning process of a language. Several aspects represent learning environment-related factors. However, the current study is confined to only two aspects, i.e., classroom setting and facilities/technology available in the classroom discussed in the coming paragraphs.

Classroom Setting

A large number of students in a speaking class may hinder students' speaking skill. It is difficult for the teacher to allow each student of a large class to practice several activities in the

limited class time. Many students in a speaking class are a significant factor affecting speaking skill (Hamad, 2013).

Similarly, Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal (2013) carried a research on the difficulties faced by EFL undergraduates in speaking skill. Their findings found that along with other factors, the large classes were one factor that affected the students' speaking skill. As discussed in the pair work and group work section, pair work and group work play essential roles in the speaking class to improve the speaking skill of students and provide the students with the opportunity to practice the language. Nonetheless, pair work and group work would be a significant challenge in classes where the number of students is enormous.

Likewise, Raja and Saeed (2012) found that the number of students at the college level is more than 100 and that it is not easy for the teacher to conduct group work in such large classes. They favor small classes where a teacher can physically be close to the students. They added that the seating arrangement in such large classes does not allow teachers to come physically close to the students.

Facilities/ Technology in Speaking Class

Technology plays an essential role in the stimulation of the learners' thinking. Technology provides the students with a chance to be self-directed, have self-faced interactions, privacy and the kind of safe environment in which students can correct their errors and get specific feedback. The feedback a machine gives extra value by its ability to track mistakes and refer students immediately to the exercises that focus on the specific error. Studies have shown the importance of qualitative feedback on the software. The value of technology further increases when links for the location of explanation, additional help, and reference are provided (Bahadorfar & Omidvar, 2014). The facilities available include as follows.

Communication Labs

Communication labs are an important asset of every language learning institution. The labs provide the students with the necessary facilities to learn a language more technically and professionally. The lab includes numerous software that helps students develop speaking skill.

Moreover, in the current era of mobile technology, students can install proper communication software on their smartphone or laptop/computer to get a lab-like experience anywhere. This software will provide students with the chance to practice again and again and improve their speaking skill anytime, anywhere. One should get the benefit of the available resources. The minimum available technology can help in effective learning. For example, using headphones allows the learners to listen attentively and induces them to listen repeatedly instead of feeling bored (Bahadorfar & Omidvar, 2014).

Speech Recognition Software

Speech recognition software helps significantly in the improvement of students' speaking. This software turn spoke words into machine-readable input. The device identifies the accuracy of what is read and gives positive support like "You sound great" or allows the user to try once more. In this fashion, the learners know whether he is reading well. As the learner improves, the technology reads fewer materials to the learner to allow the learners to read more. This software also helps the learner with grammar, pronunciation, and comprehension and provides correct forms. i.e., if a student mispronounces a word, the learning tool instantly spots it and helps in its correction (Bahadorfar & Omidvar, 2014).

The Internet

No one denies the importance of the internet, a commonly acknowledged term globally. The internet can be a vast source of learning materials, i.e., audio, video, radio, TV shows, games, voice recordings, quizzes, and podcasts. It plays an important role in students' exposure to the input of the target language, which indeed helps their speaking skill (Bahadorfar & Omidvar, 2014).

In the current era of technology and developments, students can use Skype, Messenger, Google talk and thousands of other such applications to connect with their classmates, friends, teachers and even native speakers and improve their speaking skill. These learning methods have been proven effective in improving oral proficiency, helping the students to participate in online conferences, which enhance intercultural awareness and motivation and raise the level of interaction. To conclude, all these applications and programs need the internet for proper usage.

Method

Research Design

A mixed-method research design was used for the study. Mixed-method research design is always favored by researchers for its capability to study a research problem in-depth. A mixed method design gives the researcher an in-depth understanding of a research issue (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2016).

Research Setting

The research occurred at the English Department of Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani University, Kunar, Afghanistan. The university is a public university inaugurated in 2010. Currently, the university offers admission in 21 undergraduate programs at the Faculty of Education, Faculty of Sharia, Faculty of Computer Science, Faculty of Agriculture and Faculty of Economics.

Subjects and Sampling

All EFL undergraduate students (190 students at four levels, i.e., freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior) at the English Department were the study population, of which 90 students (50 senior and 40 junior students) were purposively selected as the participants. The researcher selected junior and senior students as they had more experience, and it could be easy for them to reply to the researcher's questions. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select a sample that could be suitable for the study (Fraenkel et al., 2016). All these students were male, ranging from 22 to 24 years old.

Data Collection Instruments

Based on the research design requirements and to fully explore the research issue, the researcher has used two data collection instruments, i.e., questionnaire and interview items. A brief explanation of the two instruments is as follows.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was adopted from Pal's research (2015) to investigate participants' reactions

to learning environment-related factors affecting students' speaking skill and then adapted to the theme of the current study. A questionnaire as an instrument provides the researcher with systematic data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). The questionnaire contained a total of 4 items. It was designed to collect data in two parts, i.e., classroom setting and facilities available in the speaking class.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data and support quantitative data collected through questionnaires. Qualitative data helps provide data on attitudes, thoughts, and actions of a particular subject (Kendall, 2008). Ten students were purposively selected out of 90 for interviews to get the wanted data and avoid redundant ideas and thoughts for each interview item. The interviews contained 4 semi-structured questions and tried to find information about the factors that affect students' speaking skill in part of the learning environment.

Data Analysis

The study used a mixed-method approach with both quantitative and qualitative data, so SPSS version 20 was used for quantitative data analysis.

The quantitative data analysis involves descriptive statistics, i.e., frequency, percentage, and then presented in tables, whereas the qualitative data analysis involves organizing data, putting data in the relevant categories (patterns) and then making themes of the different categories.

In the qualitative data analysis, special code names for the respondent were used to keep the subjects' privacy. For example, the code name 'Y3S1' represented the third-year first student. These were the words of the first student from the junior class. The researcher had a list of all the respondents in the data and knew who the first student was.

Before conducting a thematic analysis of qualitative data, the data was obtained through four step interview procedure. Figure 3.1 displays how the four-step interview procedure was conducted. The procedure began with recording the subjects' responses in their native language (Pashto) with a voice recorder. Then the students attentively listened to the recordings one by

one. Next, the exact responses were transcribed. Finally, the transcribed data was translated from the Pashto language into the English language.

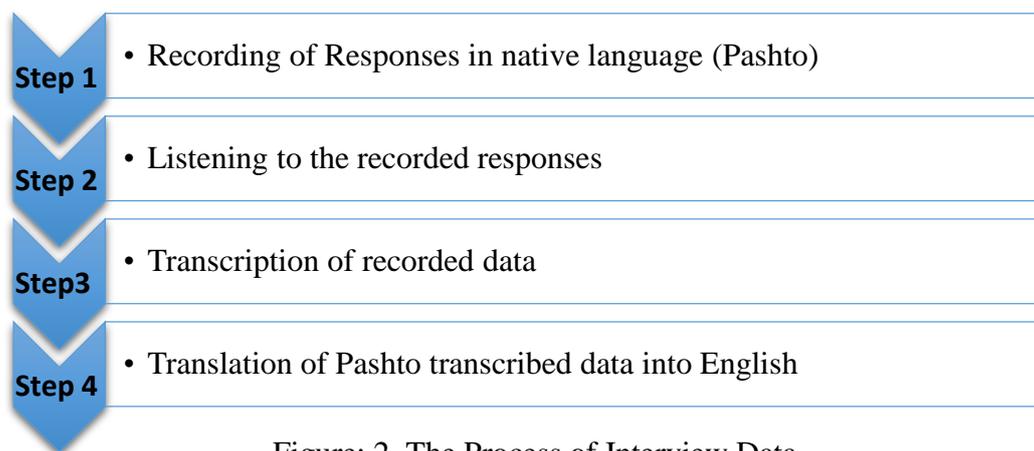


Figure: 2. The Process of Interview Data

Findings

The Questionnaire

RQ1 & RQ2: The Classroom Setting and Facilities Available

The following responses are about the classroom setting of the speaking class. The respondents were required to provide information regarding classroom settings that affect Afghan EFL undergraduate speaking skill. The results are shown in Table 1.

According to Table 4.1, the students' answers to question no.1 asked about the number of students enrolled in their class; there were more than 30 students in their speaking class (100%). Question no.2 asked about the class's arrangement that could facilitate better learning of speaking skill; all of the students (90) replied that their class was not arranged in a way that could facilitate them in learning English speaking better (100%). Question no.3 asked about the spoken lab in the university that facilitates their learning of English speaking; all of the students (90) replied no spoken Lab in the university that could facilitate the students learning of English speaking (100%). Question no.4 asked about the facilities available in the classroom; all of the students (90) replied that their class was not equipped with modern learning resources (100%).

Table 1. The Classroom Setting and Available Facilities in the Speaking Class

No.	Items	Alternatives		Total	
		Yes	No		
1	In my class, there are more than thirty (30) students	Fre.	90	0	90
		%	100	0	100
2	My classroom is arranged in a way that facilitates me in learning English speaking better	Fre.	0	90	90
		%	0	100	100
3	There is a spoken Lab in the university that facilitates my learning of English speaking	Fre.	0	90	90
		%	0	100	100
4	My classroom is equipped with modern learning resources	Fre.	0	90	90
		%	0	100	100

The Interviews

RQ1 & RQ2 (Classroom Setting and Facilities)

In responses to the question about students enrolled in their English-speaking class, they said more than 30 students were enrolled. They expressed their views that the students would not be able to practice different activities due to the many students in the speaking class. Similarly, the teacher was bound to speak with a loud voice, and when he spoke loudly, he became tired and could not teach for an extended period and would not be able to teach the class as correctly as it should be, and the class turned dull. The following excerpts are some of the examples of learners' responses to the question regarding enrolled students in their English-speaking class and the students' stances towards it.

Y3S2: "The number of presently *admitted students* is around about 40 students. Yes, the less number of

students is very helpful in the class as each student can have the turn to talk". (Line 30-32)

Y4S4: *"Presently, there are about 50 **students in our class**. The less the students' number in class, the more are chances for each student to talk and practice their vocabulary, sentence structures and so on"*. (Line 30-32)

Asking about the facilities they had in their speaking class, all participants answered that no facilities were available in the speaking class. There was only one teacher, and they always only listened to him. He came up with a laptop for the speaking class, which was not helpful as it did not have any materials for speaking practice. They expressed their views about the importance of the facilities in the speaking class. They argued that the teacher sometimes came up with a laptop and audio clips which improved their listening and motivated them to speak like them. They had learned the pronunciation of some words from the audio clips and now felt confident as they pronounced the same way as the native speaker. The following excerpts are some examples of learners' responses to the question regarding the available facilities in their English-speaking class and the students' stances towards it.

Y3S4: *"There are no **facilities** available in our speaking class"*. (Line 32)

Y4S1: *"There are no **facilities** in our speaking class. We have only the teacher in the class to whom we listen. However, the only **facility** we have is the teacher's laptop which he rarely brings to the classroom and plays audio for us to listen. When the teacher has started to bring a laptop to the class, and we listen to the native speaker through the computer, really encouraged us in speaking as we believe that we are speaking just what the native speakers are saying, so we are not wrong. Also, with the help of listening to native speakers, we have got to an extent the accent of the native speakers"*. (Line 51-57)

Discussion

The study's primary objective is to examine the learning-environment-related factors that affect Afghan EFL undergraduate speaking skill at the department of English, SJAU, Kunar, Afghanistan. Two research objectives/research questions were used for this study. The first research objective/research question deals with classroom settings that affected Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill. The second research objective/research question deal with the

role of facilities in improving Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill. Based on the research objectives/questions, the discussion is presented next.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis findings for the first research objective/research question showed that the classes were crowded, and the classroom arrangement was not supportive of developing speaking skill. The study supported these findings by Hamad (2013), where the excessive number of students in the class was one of the major factors affecting the speaking skill of Saudi students at Saudi colleges for girls in the south of Saudi. Similarly, Raja and Saeed (2012) found that the seating arrangement in large classes does not allow teachers to use pair work or group work activities in the class. They concluded that large classes were not supportive of developing speaking skill.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis findings for the second research objective/question showed no speech lab in the university, and essential modern facilities for developing students' speaking skill are missing. These findings were backed by the study by Bahadorfar and Omidvar (2014). They found that facilities played a vital role in the speaking class; even headphones could help students improve their listening and speaking skill. They suggested that a language classroom must have speech recognition software to help the learner with grammar, pronunciation, and comprehension and provide correct forms.

The number of students is critical in the speaking class. Many students in one class have some economic benefit for the government, as it saves the government by not spending too much money on extra classes and teaching staff. However, larger classes are unsupportive of learning. Due to the students' increased interest in education, hundreds of students every year find a way to the English language department of SJAU through Kankor Exam (a nationwide university entrance examination). However, the Department of English language at SJAU had limited classes (rooms) and lecturers, placing all the students in one class.

Similarly, technology plays a pivotal role in teaching, learning, and speaking class. However, due to the country's poor economic conditions, the Ministry of Higher Education, Afghanistan, cannot provide each university with the necessary facilities. Quality teaching and learning is impossible without necessary modern facilities like a communication lab, speech recognition software, electricity, computer, overhead projector, audio/video player, student's open access to the internet in the classroom and so on. Unfortunately, most of these necessary

modern facilities and technologies are also missing at the department of English language, SJAU, Kunar, Afghanistan.

Conclusions

This study has attempted to explore the learning environment-related factors (classroom setting and facilities/technology) that affect Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill.

Improper classroom settings due to large/crowded classes and the unavailability of modern facilities in the classroom were some of the major learning environment-related factors that affected Afghan EFL undergraduates' speaking skill. The classes were large/crowded, which did not allow appropriate classroom arrangement and ultimately affected the students' speaking skill. Similarly, essential facilities like speech lab, audio/video player and open access to the internet for students in the speaking classroom were missing, which eventually affected the students' speaking skill.

Recommendations

Based on the study's conclusions, the following are some of the propositions the researcher thinks are essential to recommend.

The classroom environment plays a significant role in developing students' speaking skill. The universities should create a supportive learning environment for the students by providing facilities for speaking classes. Providing facilities to the teacher and students should be the priority of all universities. They should provide language classes with all the essential modern facilities, especially computers, internet and language learning programs and software. There must be a language laboratory at the university level. These facilities will undoubtedly help students in learning and improving their speaking skill.

On the other hand, it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) to equip every university with essential modern facilities. MoHE should devise plans and strategies for upgrading universities countrywide with modern facilities. Moreover, MoHE

should give more value to modern facilities and technologies in higher education by increasing the score value of facilities in the quality assurance framework.

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