Comprehension and Oral Communication Course: Help or Hindrance?

What Perceptions Do Students Have?

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Abstract ;

Comprehension and oral communication course is suggested to be a valuable source to give language input. However, there is valid concern whether such course enhance speaking skill for every student. The aim of the present study is to explore the merit of the course, and highlight the potentially impacts it can have on student learning. A total of 60 students from department of English at Batna 2 university participated in the study. Data were sought from online questionnaire. The study found that a wide range of problems concerning the role of the course are held by students, that there is teachers' unwillingness, lack of students' motivation, no fixed syllabus, limited exposure to authentic environment. The results also showed that these problems can be remedied by using more authentic materials, integration of technology to raise students' willingness, and revising the content of syllabus.

1. *Introduction*

Speaking is a productive skill that involves using words to express thoughts and ideas. It is very important in the context of English learning. Parmawati (2018, p. 19) states "the mastery of speaking skill in English is a priority for many second language or foreign language learners". Without the ability to communicate effectively, opportunities for making new social connections, building leadership skills, and improving communication skills will be inevitably lost. Despite its significance, speaking is one of the most challenging areas in the education system. The ever-increasing demand for high levels of communication skills makes this issue even more pressing. As Nunan (1991, p. 39) stated "To most people, mastering the art of speaking is the single most important factor of learning a second or foreign language and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language"

Mastering speaking skill is very essential for the students in order to help students to communicate in English with other people from different countries easily. According to Richard (2008, p. 19) "the mastery of speaking skill in English is priority for many language learners". It can be said that the role of speaking is to help students to communicate in various contexts. In line with this, Chaney (1998, p. 13) argues that "speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols in a variety of contexts". Traditionally, people overlook the role of speaking, while overemphasizing the role of writing in learning. Speaking is one of the indispensable abilities in language. Speaking is important because it aids students lay the foundations of other skills. Through speaking, students can form many useful words, phrases, and sentences. Although there is an increasing recognition of importance of speaking, there are still many obstacles and challenges for teaching speaking to foreign language students in the classrooms

Through comprehension and oral communication course, students will normally improve their listening comprehension and speaking ability based on practice. Teachers can help improve student oral performance through instruction of speaking strategies. As such, teachers' perception of involvement and awareness of the importance of such course are critical in order to encourage students to use English not only in the classroom but also in any other English speaking environment. Hence, their awareness should be raised around the responsibility of developing skills, particularly speaking skills, among the students by creating such dynamic environment in English classrooms. Keeping in view the significance of speaking skills, as mentioned above.

2. *Literature Review*

2. 1. *Speaking skill: definition and understanding*

Speaking is one of the most essential skills that students should master in order to involve in communication using the target language. It is a way to share personal experience. According to Brown (2004) and Burns & Joyce (1997), "Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, the participants, and the purposes of speaking"

Speaking is considered as significant in all contextual sides of life further away than classroom, Thornbury (2005) claimed that "Speaking is so much a part of daily life that we take it for granted." (p.1), It is essential not only in classrooms, but also in other subjects. Speaking is also one of the most difficult skills for the students to master as speaking demands different agreements as building and sharing ideas through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in various contexts. However, when we speak about the difficulties of speaking, we may find so many aspects. The students face a lot of speaking obstacles when learning. They can be mental, social processing, or language features.

Speaking is a form of communication that includes series of symbols to construct words and sentences that symbolize the sounds of speech. There are codes and agreements which control these words and sentences to allow individuals to express their thoughts and ideas. Harmer (2004, p.10) stated that "speaking and writing have their own signs, symbols and devices allowing communication to be more accurate". Accordingly, speaking is an ability for that enables people to express and communicate their ideas effectively and efficiently.

Speaking can be also an indicator to show students' success. If they do not master it, it will be difficult for them to express their ideas to their teachers or their classmates in a spoken form.

2.2. *Purpose of comprehension and oral communication course in teaching speaking*

Speaking is actually a developmental process. Oral expression course has been suggested as teaching aid in the classroom also used to help students understand/address various aspects of foreign language. Teachers have to provide students with the chance to create their own meanings within a positive and cooperative environment. What they need is to practice more and more.

The effectiveness of oral expression course has been a perennial subject of discussion in education, hence attitudes toward it has been cyclic; students' and teachers' arguments and attitudes about the role of such course are becoming louder and more common.

According to Harmer, (2007, p. 131) "the role of the teacher is to correct students' shortcomings which are made in the activity as students' mispronunciations". At the same time, a number of teachers have provided growing evidence of the usefulness of comprehension and oral communication course when employed effectively. According to Byrn (1967, p. 08) the oral communication is a "two ways processing" between the speaker and the listener; it makes use of both speaking which is a "productive skill" and listening with understanding which is a "receptive skill". In teaching speaking, tasks and activities must be designed by the teacher correctly i.e. appropriate for students in order to get their participation and make them benefit from those activities. From the explanation above, it can be assumed that the role of oral expression course is really essential in speaking English. It can be said then, the role of such course of quite appropriate in teaching speaking.

Speaking is a complex task involving many component skills, some of which students may lack completely, some of which they may have only partially mastered. When students lack skills in these areas, their speaking may be unsatisfactory in multiple ways – from poor grammar and syntax to lack of confidence to shyness in speaking. Complicating matters is the fact that many students' speaking skills are also poor. According to Zhang (2009), speaking is the most difficult skill for students to master, and they are still unskilled in communicating orally in English.

Concerning speaking performance skill, it seems that most students are facing problems related to vocabulary organizing ideas, grammar and spelling, and finding the appropriate words. They are often impatient to outline, organize ideas logically and connect them together in their speaking. This makes oral performance of students not clear, not fluent and sometimes they even translate their native language into English word by word. Whenever the students translate Arabic into English, of course, they would not use correct expression of grammar; they use unsuitable patterns of grammar. Students practice speaking skill very little in class because they spend most of their time learning the linguistic knowledge of the language. Teachers do not pay attention to listening and speaking tasks. Therefore, students only remember individual words and cannot express their perspectives in correct English.

Because the issue of weighing up students' perceptions of the role of comprehension and oral communication course has not been addressed before, the significance of conducting the present study is that no similar studies pertain to the Algerian context, Therefore, the present study sheds light on students' attitudes towards the importance of attending comprehension and oral

communication class by attempting to answer the following questions:

- Does comprehension and oral communication course improve students' speaking performance?

- How is comprehension and oral communication course perceived by students? Do they recognize the benefits, and does its attendance influence their learning habits?

- What is the effect of comprehension and oral communication course on the learning process in general?

3. *Methodology*

3.1. *Research Design and Methodology*

The present research paper used qualitative research methodology by exploring in-depth and focusing on analyzing the students' attitudes towards the comprehension and oral communication course. The reason for choosing such design is because the current study aims to explore in depth about the students' perspectives in their speaking performance. According to Dörnyei (2007, p.126), "The importance of qualitative approach is not about how representative the study is, but it focuses more on the individuals and the insights they have".

3.2 *Participants*

"Two issues to take into consideration when conducting qualitative research are how many participants are needed and what kind of participants are needed" (Dörnyei 2007, p. 96). The sample needs to represent the

population. The sample in the present study consisted of 65 first year students, in the department of English Language at Batna 2 University during the academic year 2020-2021. But this number has been reduced to 60 answers. The rest (5 questionnaires) were disregarded for two main justifications: first, some students did not complete answering their questionnaire. Second, the others did not return the questionnaire at all. The criteria for first year students were if students' speaking is not addressed adequately at earlier level, the upcoming levels will always be inundated with students who are academically under-prepared. Believing that what students learn at first year level either prepares or under-prepares them for second- and third-year studies.

Participants were approached in different ways to ensure a high response rate; participants were contacted via a Facebook group of first year students of English at Batna 2 university, and using a snowballing technique, whereby participants were also asked to forward the questionnaire to their friends from different classes. The students who responded to the questionnaire were chosen randomly among the total number of the first year students' population (320 students), at Batna 2 University.

3.3. *Data collection and Data analysis*

The questionnaire aimed to elicit how the students experienced the course on their

speaking performance. Some of the main concerns were how helpful it is, whether the course had any effect on their speaking development. It includes three sections: students' perception towards the course (section 1), students' understanding of the speaking skill (section 2), and students' attitudes of the role of the course in improving their speaking performance (section 3)

As stated by (Hazzi & Maldaon, 2015), The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were achieved by conducting a pilot study. The procedure for the development of the questionnaire was completed through an extensive review of its content by three experts in which the questions of the questionnaire were reduced to 13 questions. Then, ten students, who were not included in the sample were given the questionnaire to complete. After slight modifications, a total number of 60 questionnaires were distributed among students. For the reliability evidence, the estimate of Cronbach alpha indicated a high internal consistency 0.84. The data was analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics procedures by using SPSS software. After that, the data was collected and all the questionnaires were reported as valid and reliable.
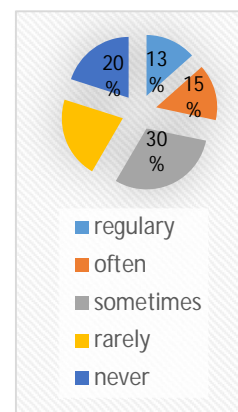
4. *Results and Discussion*

4.1. *Students' Engagement and Attendance in the Course*

Fig.1. Students' attendance in the course

Fig.2. Students' participation in the course
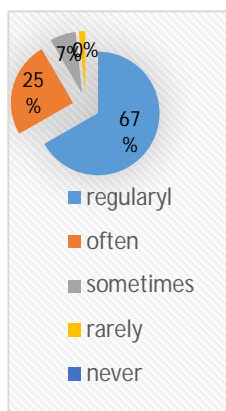
As figure 1 shows, 67% of students have reported high interest in attending the comprehension and oral communication course. This is probably because students fully realize the importance of such course and benefits of speaking toward other areas of their study as well toward their future career. Teachers should enjoy this fact and capitalize

on students' interest in the class to make students' learning fruitful.

As it is known, interest affects students' motivation and level of engagement. Hidi (2000) stated that interest is related with cognitive functioning, persistence, and affective engagement, all of which help in the development of students' attention on certain activities. As seen in figure 1 there has really been a great number of students who are interested in attending the course. However, difference was reported between students in the participation in that course. Students reported lower interest (13%) in the speaking class participation than those in the attendance.

With regards to course participation, even though students express high interest in attending it, this interest does not translate into speaking engagement. This means that there are a couple points centered around the idea of participation; students face serious problems and obstacles that hider their engagement and affect their performance.

4.2. *The Role of the Course: students' perceptions*

The main findings of the present study are presented based upon the following themes:

- *Students' understanding of the course*

Findings highlight that a challenge is posed by the students themselves. They (75%)

find speaking skill a difficult task, and 67% of them stress the importance of the course in improving their communication skills which can be seen in their percentage of attendance (67%). Even though not all of them participate in the oral class, they may still see the significance of such course in their learning in general.

The majority of students were successful in demonstrating techniques and strategies that increased their speaking performance. Effective teaching materials was found to be a major part of this performance. These findings can be seen in relation to previous statistics that claim that oral class does not have benefits if those materials are not integrated. Appropriate and effective learning in the classroom should be desired and worth achieving. Creating a positive environment in comprehension and oral communication course have been found in the present research work as primary in achieving appropriate and effective communication in the classroom.

- *The lack and/or limited exposure to authentic materials and lack of motivation*

Authentic materials are one of the good materials that can be used in teaching speaking skill classroom. According Martinez (2002, p. 1) "authentic materials sometimes called "authentic" or "contextualized", real-life materials are those that a student sees in everyday life but that weren't created for

educational purposes". Findings highlight that 75% of students stated that their teachers do not depend on authentic material in oral class; the lack authentic material exposure. They do not know how to use their vocabulary correctly. As a result, the students of such class fail to benefit when the teacher do not use an effective teaching materials. This evidence concurs with the findings of Mc Neil (1994) and Kilickaya (2004) as they mentioned that the use of authentic materials is a way through which students can feel that they are learning the real language.

The above response is typically what motivates students to learn and practice their speaking skill because learners come with some vocabulary and with no knowledge of using them. It is essential to note that students should be provided with a wide range of materials to increase speaking performance, as opposed to simply relying on traditional lecture-based instruction. It can be concluded that using authentic materials is beneficial in boosting students' interests in practicing FL speaking and in helping to expose them to real English while it is challenging for inexperienced students. Most of the students (83%) in the present study also showed positive attitudes toward video materials in improving their speaking performance.

Motivation is also an important factor to consider. As summed up earlier, motivation can come from authentic materials exposure and students' willingness. However, teachers are also imperative in bringing motivations to classrooms. Teachers have to obtain interest and engagement in the course even when students are initially not interested in it (Ahmed, 2015). In questioning students about the reason behind their weakness in speaking, 67% of students have expressed concerns about their lack of motivation. This may interpret the low average regarding their engagement and participation in the course as indicated in figure 2.

- *Teachers' state of willingness and oral communication course syllabus*

Students (59%) highlighted that some speaking problems are caused by their teachers themselves. Some teachers do not find it comfortable to teach using technology than their own, therefore they prefer to use their traditional way. Some teachers also are not proficient in information and communication skills. Teachers themselves who know that they are not well grounded in modern communicative language teaching approaches find it difficult to teach the foreign language and therefore teach in speaking skills. Teachers' lack of creativity and motivation in teaching oral communication classes also has a negative effect; teachers should be encouraged to integrate technology in their classes.

Another important point about the attitudes among EFL students towards the role of comprehension and oral communication

course is the topic of interest and their preparedness. If the talking point is an attention getting and an interest-appropriate one, the students want to speak and participate more in the discussion which resolves reluctance (only 13% of them are interested in participating as figure 2 showed).

Many researchers state that in the process of learning the foreign language silence presents a worthy threat to successful language learning when it is featured by an absence of oral communication and verbal responsiveness from students (Nakane, 2002; Tani, 2005; Tsui, 1996). 83% of students stated that they will perform better if their teachers provide them with the content of the course syllabus in advance, and 67% of them wanted their teachers to change the way they teach oral classes; prior student knowledge is a good foundation which teachers should build on. This may reflect on the absence of a fixed and unified syllabus for the course which permit students to prepare. This point of view is essential in terms of reviewing the content and methods adopted in the oral communication courses.

5. *Conclusion and recommendations*

The present study revealed that most students are passably aware of the role of comprehension and oral communication course and its positive effects on foreign language speaking. It is worth stating that they listed many factors which work together

to hind them to get good speaking performance in oral classes. Different challenges and opportunities abound in every oral communication classes. These challenges and opportunities often are left unattended by most teachers. Yet there is much that both teachers and students can do to change the way teaching such kind of classes so that developing their students' oral communicative skills.

Students and teachers often search for explanations for poor performance on oral communication exams—teachers because they wish to know how they can aid their students perform better and students because they wish to develop their scores. There is good evidence that teachers can influence the effort students invest in their comprehension and oral communication course. Practice should be a fundamental principle that guides the instruction and teaching of student speaking performance. As with the importance of speaking skills, being fluent communicator takes many years of practice. Presumably, such practice helps students to gain control over their words and sentences.

The present study proposes a number of practical recommendations to English language education, including speaking teaching and learning. The current research work finds compelling evidence that there appears a clear and common tendency towards the importance of comprehension and oral communication course in improving

students' speaking performance. Based on the concepts discussed throughout the paper, a number of practical educational recommendations would be proposed as follows:

As a starting point, oral communication teachers and curriculum designers should consider the needs and the challenges of students to prepare them with prerequisite skills. It is important to do a diagnostic test at the beginning of the semester in order to identify students' problems and needs according to which the content of the course will be tailored. Comprehension and oral communication course is a challenging subject; there are many choices and paths to explore and address. Students' reluctance to speak in FL should be the focal point of the syllabus.

In relation to oral course syllabus, the lessons of the Speaking class should try to solve the students' obstacles by supporting them to speak English, giving them much practice to speak, and using English in class. Speaking lecturers should not criticize any mistakes made by students in vocabulary or pronunciation but provide positive comments for student's development. Mistakes can be discussed separately. When students start speaking, the focus should be on the way of expressing the ideas not on forms. Brown (2001, p. 62), lecturers of Speaking should provide affective supports, such as: (a) showing a supportive attitude to the students,

(b) selecting challenging topics and activities, (c) considering students' language ego states, (d) showing patience and understanding to the students.

The vocal aspect in getting successful communication is the students themselves. It is believed that the students should be courageous to participate in oral classes, without feeling afraid of doing mistakes. They should exploit every chance to practice their speaking skill. The effectiveness of oral classes lectures lies in a good classroom interaction. This is a missing gap that the student must fill to enable teachers to solve their problems and challenges; the students must be actively involved in communicative activities in order to master the art of debate. According to Lucantoni (2002, p.48), the problem coming from the students "when students think that they are based on what they say. They then prefer keeping silent to speaking language"

With respect to technology use, it is not only the students' skills and effort which are essential to have good speaking performance. Teachers should exert a lot of effort to identify the contemporary teaching methods that might motivate students to actively participate in the classroom and attain high language proficiency. Authentic materials and tools are essential sources to be utilized during language teaching. Besides positive effects, there are of course difficulties encountered while using them in language

teaching; some teachers do not have adequate knowledge about their use and teachers do not get involved in anything concerning how to utilize them in language teaching.

The English teachers should be creative and innovative in teaching comprehension and oral communication course. They should be able to find new ways in delivering material to students to make learning process become more effective. Teachers should provide effective authentic materials and assure to bring them to the classroom to be used as a reference whenever needed, and use interesting techniques or methods in teaching comprehension and oral communication course will greatly assist students in improving speaking skills. When students show interest, this motivates them to keep participating and selecting what significant to them even if they encounter difficulties.

The present study is expected to give useful information toward students' perceptions of comprehension and oral communication course which should be used to improve student's speaking skills. It can be used as reference of research which related to the current issue. Donald (2010) states that the reasons of students' reluctance in oral classes cannot be generalized as being pertinent to all students because all the students are various from each other. There is, nonetheless, a need for further studies in the same issue, involving more participants.

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7. *Appendix*

Students' Questionnaire

Dear students,

I am carrying out a survey on comprehension and oral communication course: help or hindrance? what perceptions do students have? Thus, you are kindly requested to answer the following questions by selecting the answer that best reflects your opinion and making comments whenever necessary. Your answers will be confidentially and anonymously treated.

Section one: students' perception towards the comprehension and oral communication course

1. To what extent is the integration of comprehension and oral communication course important in curriculum?

…………………………………………………

………………………………………

2. Do you attend oral English sessions?

    regulary ☐

    often ☐

    sometimes ☐

    rarely ☐

    never ☐

3. Do you participate in oral English sessions?

    regulary ☐

    often ☐

    sometimes ☐

    rarely ☐

    never ☐

4. How often do your teachers use the authentic materials?

    always ☐

    sometimes ☐

    rarely ☐

    never ☐

    In case of always, do teachers vary them?...

    ....

5. Do you think that your weaknesses in speaking are due to:

    The lack of motivation ☐

    The lack of practice ☐

    The role of the teacher ☐

    Section two: students' understanding of the speaking skill

6. According to you, speaking in English is:

    A difficult task ☐

    An easy task ☐

7. How do you consider your speaking abilities?

    An average ☐   good average ☐

    under average ☐

8. Do you follow any strategy/technique to improve your speaking performance or to deal with your difficulties in speaking?

    Yes ☐

    No ☐

    if yes, state it…………………………………………………

    ……………………………………………..

Section three: students' attitudes of the role of the course in improving their speaking performance

9. Do you think that attending oral expression class will improve your speaking skill?

    Yes ☐

    No ☐

10. Do you think that the method that has been chosen by your teacher helps you to speak?

    English well?

    Yes ☐

    No ☐

11. Does your teacher provide you with the content of the course at the beginning of the year?

    Yes ☐

    No ☐

12. Do you perform better when:

    You prepare the subject in advance ☐

    without preparation ☐

13. If you were a teacher of oral expression, what would you suggest to improve your Students' level in speaking?

    ………………………………………………………

    ……………………………………………

                                            Thank you!