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## *Task-Based Listening to Motivate EFL Students to Speak*

### مهاراة الاستماع القائم على المهام لتحفيز طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلفة اجنبية على التحدث

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#### Abstract

The research scope of motivation is so vague that it is almost impossible to examine its various aspects. In language research, motivation is often attached to the four skills, namely reading, listening, writing, and speaking. The speaking skill requires a high motivational thinking to be improved. Despite the increasing research on motivation the one hand, and the remarkable development of speaking studies of L2, on the other, the topic of the intersection of the two fields has only been partially explored. It has been frequently noticed that many learners find difficulties to speak; or rather they are demotivated to speak. The present study reflects on EFL students' difficulties in speaking. Through interviewing first year EFL students at Chlef University, it was revealed that the lack of vocabulary and the non-mastery of grammatical rules create a feeling of anxiety that turn them to be demotivated. It was revealed that task-based listening contributes strategically to motivate students to speak since it may overcome the aforementioned difficulties.

#### ملخص

#### الكلمات المفتاحية:

نطاق التحفيز البحثي غامض لدرجة أنه يكاد يكون من المستحيل دراسة جوانبه المختلفة. في البحث اللغوي، غالباً ما يرتبط التحفيز بالمهارات الأربع، وهي القراءة والاستماع والكتابة والتحدث. هذا الأخير يتطلب تفكيراً تحفيزياً عالياً لتحسينه. على الرغم من البحث المتزايد حول التحفيز من ناحية، والتطور الملحوظ لدراسات التحدث في اللغة الثانية، من ناحية أخرى، فقد تم استكشاف موضوع تقاطع المجالين جزئياً فقط. لقد لوحظ بشكل متكرر أن العديد من المتعلمين يجدون صعوبات في الكلام؛ أو بالأحرى هم محبطون للتحدث. تعكس الدراسة الحالية الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في التحدث. بإجراء مقابلات مع طلاب السنة الأولى من اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة الشلف، تم الكشف عن أن الافتقار إلى المفردات وعدم التمكن من القواعد النحوية يخلق شعوراً بالقلق يدفعهم إلى الإحباط. كما تم الكشف عن أن الاستماع القائم على المهام يساهم بطريقة إستراتيجية لتحفيز الطلاب على التحدث لأنه قد يتغلب على الصعوبات المذكورة سلفاً.

التحفيز  
الكلام  
طلاب اللغة  
الإنجليزية كلفة  
أجنبية  
الاستماع القائم على  
المهام.

## 1. introduction

Language teaching, which occupies a privileged place within applied linguistics, is reflective in the sense that teachers are involved observing themselves, collecting data about their own classrooms and their roles, and using that data as a reference frame for self-evaluation, for change, and hence for professional growth. In the line of symmetry, language learning is said to be a goal-directed process since any learning task is substantively grounded with goals set at the beginning. It can be said that teaching is driven by learning and teachers need to be levers of innovation and change whenever the learning process does not hold good.

Language learning is interactive in nature. To develop a sense of meaningful and genuine interaction within foreign language classrooms, learners should be involved in activities that stimulate their interest and attention. Teachers' role is to create an ongoing interactive atmosphere that makes learners active participants in the learning activities. Actually, no one can deny that interaction hinges totally upon the speaking skill and the latter plays a crucial role in determining learners' level of proficiency.

Teaching speaking is considered a challenging task since it is governed by linguistic and extra linguistic factors. At the university level, the speaking skills are taught within the subject (module) of listening comprehension and speaking. But in various language learning contexts, it is common place that this module is named oral expression because the oral-based discussion is the dominant mode of expression. It could be, as well, argued that this wrong belief stems from the absolute exclusion of the written mode in the speaking sessions. Therefore, students are recommended to speak and improve their speaking skills. In practical terms, practitioners report, over and over again, that the affective factor is critically acclaimed in EFL classrooms. In another way, EFL learners have a lack of motivation to speak. In a problem of this kind, the following questions might be asked:

- 1- Why do learners often have a lack of motivation to speak?
- 2- How can their motivation be increased?

Such pertinent issues which triggered off research on

motivational aspects of speaking are the main concern of the current study. Therefore, this paper will find answer to the basic question of how EFL students can be motivated to speak.

## 2. Motivation and Speaking: What Relation?

Decades of studies on motivation revealed that this concept is very important in the educational practices that look forward getting learners actively engaged in different pedagogical tasks. Foreign language education, similar to other educational disciplines, hinges crucially upon the motivational factor to realise affective education. In language classrooms, teachers need to have skills in motivating learners and these skills are important for any teachers' pedagogical knowledge. It is often thought that teachers' primary task is to teach the curriculum rather than doing motivational roles. Indeed, the former cannot be realised if the latter is ignored (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 27). Another important challenge for language teachers is not how to involve learners in motivational environment, but keeping constantly this vitality and dynamism inside the classroom has to be made able for improvement. Importantly enough, there are three pre-requisites that govern the motivational operation:

- Appropriate teacher behaviours and a good relationship with the students;
- A pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom;
- A cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms.

(Dörnyei, 2001, pp. 108-109)

Studies on the motivational aspects of speaking do not seem convincing enough in regard to the importance of skill in language learning despite the spoken mode of language is very highly valued in linguistics and applied linguistics. Speech is regarded as the primary form of a language and the source of innovation and language change. Most motivation researchers have been focusing on students' general orientation to learning as learning goals, intrinsic/ extrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy rather than on students' approach to specific disciplines.

The study of the speaking skill/s can be considered profound because it interrelates with a considerable number of other areas and disciplines. Speaking can be investigated from grammatical, morphological, or cultural perspectives. For example, how far is the structure of a conversation culturally determined (also dealt with in pragmatics and ethnography)? How far are the grammar and vocabulary of speech different from other sorts of grammar (which is related also to the fields of syntax and semantics)? What are the critical factors in the stream of speech that make it intelligible (prosody, phonetics/ phonemics) (Hughes, 2011, p. 07). In some way or another, the motivational aspect is often indispensable for any speaking enquiry.

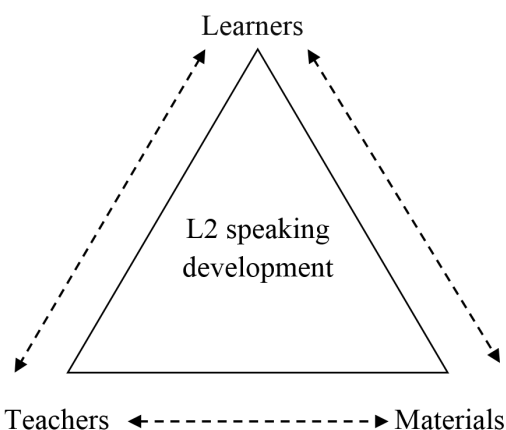
Speaking represents a real challenge to most EFL learners regardless of the academic level. They believe that a good speaker is the one who masters the systemic knowledge of language, i.e. the grammatical rules and having enough vocabulary items, with a bit of pronunciation thrown in. But in reality the speaking skill seems more complex than this because a large number of aspects, which considered extra-linguistic knowledge, should be taken into account, such as the cultural dimension, social interaction, and the norms of speaking related to the target language. With such aspects, the focus switches from speaking to communication and one of the fundamental objectives of teaching and learning speaking is to improve the communication skills.

As a matter of course, most second language learners consider speaking a difficult skill and the greatest difficulty they face in any attempt to speak is not the way of pronunciation or the idiomatic expressions, but rather the interactive nature of communication (Brown, 2001). Most of all, spoken language is a tool that creates collaboration with other people, schoolmates as partners in the constitution and negotiation of meaning outside and inside the classroom context, but this importance is rarely perceived by students. There are students who are intrinsically motivated to speak and get involved in the classroom speaking. This, unfortunately, is often due certain personal attributes, such as self-engagement, the surrounding environment, the pre-existing knowledge of the topic being discussed, etc rather than the way of teaching or the orientation to speaking.

The speaking skill needs to be taught in relation to other skills, notably the listening skill. These two skills are expected to be integrated and should be taught within one modular framework. Teachers use listening and speaking skill in an integrative way, therefore there is a natural connection between them (Harmer, 2001). In talking about the status quo of teaching listening within the speaking framework in Algerian EFL learning context, the situation seems to be critical. Listening within this core subject or module does not receive the aspiring attention due to several considerations. In terms of teaching materials, there is a severe shortage of teaching aids, especially technological devices. This skill requires multimedia technologies that provide learners with authentic input. The quasi-absence of laboratories specifically designed to teach listening at English departments in the Algerian universities makes it an arduous task for teachers in charge of this subject, turning them to pay extra attention to speaking. Without being too critical, overcrowding EFL classrooms may hamper the workability of listening comprehension sessions, in particular, and the overall courses.

Based on the earlier data, one can say that the development of the speaking skills in L2 classes might depend on three major elements: teachers, learners, and the materials. These elements have direct and indirect influence on students' motivational thinking. The following figure illustrates the interconnection of the aforementioned elements.

**Figure.1.** Three key resources in second language speaking development



The source: adapted from (Goh & Burns, 2012, p. 06)

One can notice that learners are overemphasised in position in regard to the teachers and materials. They are placed at the apex of the triangle and this conveys the utmost importance of their linguistic needs, affective needs, goals, and other considerations.

### 3. Task-Based Listening

Before any attempt to highlight and define task-based listening, it is interesting, in this respect, to recognise that this kind of listening came under the banner of task-based approach (TBA in brief) to language learning. The latter comes to emphasise that real-life tasks are the basic postulate of language education (Willis, 1996). This approach introduces language learners to real-life situations to use language naturally with a high interactive thinking (Larsen, 2000). The word ‘task’ is scrutinised within this approach and it is a means to realise objectives already determined. A task is as “an activity that involves individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation” (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). In terms of goals, two kinds of goals can be distinguished in designing tasks in task-based curricula/syllabuses: lower-level goals in terms of systemic knowledge of language (linguistic knowledge) and lower-level goals in terms of language use (using the target language in different context) (Branden, 2006, p. 03). The second kind remains more operational than the first kind since the underlying belief of the approach is to tackle real-life situations.

Within the realm of task-based approach, listening can be best taught as a sequel to the speaking framework. Under more demanding needs for integrating listening comprehension and speaking, foreign language teachers need to be systematic in teaching this central skill owing to the fact that it is a complex cognitive skill that requires some metacognitive skills on the part of learners. This means that listening is a process happening via different stages through which the listener or the receiver uses special cognitive and metacognitive skills, namely hearing, paying attention, understanding, evaluating, remembering, and responding. These are the sub-skills that make up the overall skill of listening. Raising learners’ awareness of managing these sub-skills can improve

their listening comprehension and enhance the overall L2 learning success (Vandergift, 2011, p. 455). The aforementioned skills are likely to be addressed systematically through undergoing three stages, namely, pre-listening, listening (during listening), and post listening. These stages make the basic postulate of task-based approach (TBA in brief).

To start with the pre-listening stage, students are given a task which introduces them to the topic being tackled via the audio or the video (during listening). It is a preparatory task in the sense that students identify key vocabulary items, comments, or answer questions already prepared by the teacher. This depends on the nature of listening whether it is informational, critical, emphatic, or appreciative listening. Most listening sessions start often with introducing vocabulary items, given as words/expressions matched to their definitions and explanations. Listeners are expected to infer vocabulary meaning. In this sense, vocabulary items are highly recommended in this stage since the poor language repertoire is one of the main problems hindering beginner language learner to speak. Such tasks may also enable students to activate some pre-existing knowledge (schema) to be familiar with the listening topic. The pre-listening stage plays a central role in getting students actively involved in the upcoming stages.

The listening stage (during listening) is very challenging for the listeners because they need to remember, understand, evaluate, and respond in regard to the listening text (Richards, 2008). Teachers are recommended, in this stage, to select authentic audios that help them to realize both goals in terms of linguistic knowledge and language use. The teacher’s roles are very important since he/she is an organiser, a machine operator, a prompter, and a feedback provider since listening is followed by tasks (Harmer, 2001, p. 232). Most listening tasks tackle a number of listening functions, including recognition (focusing on some aspect of the code itself), orientation (identifying facts about the text, such as participants, the situation or context, the general topic, the emotional tone, and the genre), comprehension of main ideas, and understanding and recall of details (Richards & Schmids, 2002). Tasks are given as true/



false statements, filling in gaps and tables, ordering re-ordered facts, etc. It is conventional to consider listeners' answers uneven due to the fact that the cognitive and metacognitive abilities differ innately from one to another.

The post listening stage gives the opportunity for listeners to put all that is acquired into production: speaking. Listeners, in this stage, are asked to practice language, making use all the linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge acquired from the listening text. This stage overemphasizes often language use in which listeners examine functional language. It is worth signaling that reflection is the springboard for speaking in the sense that the listener reflects on issues already found in the listening text (audio). The post listening stage enables students to personalise the listening text, such as expressing agreement and disagreement about a certain point (Brown, 2006). It can be said that post listening creates a favorable situation for listeners to move from reception to production, therefore improving their speaking skills.

Practically, certain difficulty factors might be encountered in teaching academic listening, especially to beginner learners. The skills of listening requires teachers to keep a sustained attention in material selection and authenticity, language clarity, appropriateness of tasks over the three stages, and the familiarity of the topics, all these must fit appropriately into listeners' cognitive and metacognitive abilities. Another sensitive factor in the framework of listening is assessment. The latter should be performance-based, based upon observational scheme (Brown, 1994). Assessment of listening is difficult because it entails the following factors and data:

- Clustering: attending to appropriate 'chunks' of language – phrases, clauses, constituents
- Redundancy: recognising the kinds of repetitions, rephrasing, elaborations, and insertions that unrehearsed spoken language often contains, and benefiting from that recognition.
- Performance variables: being able to 'weed out' hesitations, false starts, pauses, and corrections in natural speech.

- Colloquial language: comprehending idioms, slang, reduced forms, shared cultural knowledge.
- Rate of delivery: keeping up with the speed of delivery, processing automatically as the speaker continues.
- Stress, rhythm, and intonation: understanding the prosodic elements of spoken language
- Interaction: managing the interactive flow of language

(Brown & Abewickrama, 2010)

#### 4. The Study

This study hence attempts to investigate learners' lack of motivation to speak. It seeks to explore the reasons that make them unable to speak in the classroom. The participants of this study were first year EFL students at the University of Chlef. They were mainly concerned with a semi-structured interview. The researcher opted for semi-structured interview as a data collection tool because he needed to explore data outside the scope of the prepared questions, and it permits some kind of comparability and structure for analysis. Semi-structured interviews are considered a mixture of structured and unstructured interviews because some questions are planned and others are unplanned. Semi-structured interviews are qualitative in nature, and therefore, this study is qualitative par excellence. Accordingly, it is argued that "less rigid are semi-structured interviews, in which the researcher uses a written list of questions as a guide, while still having the freedom to digress and probe for more information" (Mackey & Gass, 2016, p. 225). It is the prerogative of the interviewer to determine the areas he/she would like to investigate, but the interviewee might change the direction by pointing out themes that can be considered irrelevant to the topical issue being investigated. This ensures the fact that the interviewer, in the semi-structured interview, does not control the interviews' subject matter.

Six students belonging to the first year level were interviewed and the interview content revolved around the listening and speaking sessions. It is worth reminding that students were interviewed after being involved in many task-based listening

sessions. The interview insisted more on open-ended questions to obtain more comprehensive and more detailed data about the already-mentioned issues. The interviews were content analysed after getting results orthographically written. The collected data were qualitatively analysed. The interview included pre-determined questions and the followings are the most important ones:

1. *What are the difficulties that prevent you from speaking?*

2. *Do you enjoy the listening sessions? Why?*

3. *What are the benefits of listening?*

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The aim of the current interview is to explore the underlying causes of students' demotivation to speak. Before displaying and analysing the collected data, it is worth reminding that the participants have already experienced task-based listening sessions. In terms of questions, the pre-planned questions helped the interviewer to reduce the possibility of faulty reporting that may threaten the reliability and the validity of study. The questions were asked in English and the interviewer resorted to Arabic whenever necessary, considering the fact that the participants are mixed-abilities since they are different in terms of verbal abilities. While some interviewees were skillful at providing the appropriate amount of information verbally, others lacked this sense what necessitated the use of Arabic.

The findings generated from the interview revealed quietly the same opinions among the interviewees. To start with, all the participants mentioned that the lack of vocabulary and the non-mastery of the grammatical rules are the main problems that hamper them to speak, and two of them reported that the difficulty of pronunciation makes speaking complex for them. All these difficulties pertain to systemic knowledge or linguistic knowledge. It can be said that the linguistic factors provoke affective factors. For instance, the student who does not master the grammatical rules or know the correct way of pronouncing words finds it embarrassing when his/her produced language

is constantly liable to teacher correction and peer correction. This embarrassment inhibits any attempt to speak and creates a feeling of anxiety or shyness, and therefore, leads to a demotivation to speak.

The same interpretation might be put about the vocabulary aspect which is a double-fold problem because the issue influences both reception and production. In terms of reception or input, lacking enough amounts of vocabulary items makes the individual student unfamiliar with listening because he/she does not grasp the meaning of words and expression. The mechanism of understanding speech depends on an interpretive capacity of the listener. In terms of production or output, having no appropriate vocabulary items or the nothing-to-say answer influences negatively student's attitudes towards speaking. As a matter of fact, much of the speaking concerns are attributed to the lack of vocabulary that seems to be the most frequently mentioned difficulty to speak.

The free-talk presentation is considered a topical issue in teaching speaking because it has been already noticed that students face difficulties whenever presenting topics. By questioning about the issue, five participants mentioned that the fear factor prevents them from speaking naturally. They feel anxious during the performances despite they prepare their presentations before. Some of them mentioned that there is nothing to say in English whenever questions are asked by the teachers or students. The remaining participant (one) considered free-talk presentation enjoyable. The latter had the opportunity to perform skillfully without any remarked difficulties. Analytically speaking, the participants' answers were convincing to some extent and language anxiety is the most frequently mentioned issue of this question. This emotional state influences negatively the clarity of students' speech in terms of pronunciation and fluency. In terms of grammar, students have not yet an acceptable mastery of grammatical rules and making mistakes in front of audience seems to be very embarrassing for them. Regarding these data, it can be said that many students are not linguistically competent. They become confused because they

are expected to speak naturally and spontaneously without thinking about the linguistic knowledge. The linguistic deficit provokes inevitably disengagement.

Another important issue worth highlighting of the current interview is the exploration of students' attitudes towards listening. All the interviewees said that they enjoy listening, stating numerous benefits. The two shared benefits (mentioned by all the participants) among the stated ones were the enrichment of the vocabulary repertoire and the increase of cultural knowledge. As reminder, the topics addressed in the classroom were *how false information spreads, social networking, sleeping for exam, the benefits of sport*, etc. These topics were selected in accordance with their interests. Half of the participants said that pronunciation is best learned through listening. One said that all the language skills are integrated within the listening framework. The issue of vocabulary provides a fertile ground for analysis since it is the prominent sliding barrier to speaking. In practical terms, students do not find appropriate items in real-time speaking despite having useful ideas. Learning vocabulary is not strongly associated with the speaking skill, and extant literature attaches it to reading, and hence it is interrelated to other subjects, such writing, literature, civilisation, and other subjects. To be objective, learning vocabulary remains primarily a question of personal diligence on the part of students despite it is learned systematically through special strategies within special subjects. But the speaking framework remains another perfect locus where teachers can use vocabulary strategies in accordance with students' needs. From a task-based listening perspective, enriching students' vocabulary was attached an extra importance, departing from the preconceived idea that the lack of vocabulary is one of main reasons behind students' lack of motivation. So, all the pre-listening tasks focus on vocabulary to prepare students to understand the listening audio and speak comfortably in the post listening task. Despite underused by the teacher, bottom-up listening remains operational in parallel with top-down listening to overcome the speaking difficulties.

## 5.Rethinking the Current Practices in Teaching Speaking

From a Pedagogical perspective, teaching speaking is a very challenging task because involving students actively in classroom talk is not merely governed by linguistic factors, but what is more the affective involvement seems to be a great challenge that teachers want to realize in regard to remarked difficulties. Far from listening, it is worth observing that the dominant pattern of teaching speaking in EFL classrooms is the free-talk presentations. Such traditional revolvment of speaking sessions is not recommended for the beginning levels, notably the first and second levels. The commonly heard criticism by students about free-talk presentations is that they have always oscillations in performance and they stand in front of audience with a high degree of anxiety. Such cases were frequently observed and here it is the teachers' role to assure students' comfort and safety. It has been already stated that "our jobs as teachers is to provide a kind of warm, embracing a climate that encourages students to speak, however halting or broken their attempts" (Brown, 2001, p. 269). The nature of this skill is transactional in the sense that students needs to listen and speak simultaneously. It can be said that the affective involvement is crucial factor to improving speaking skills. Simply put, effective education is affective education.

Teaching speaking requires a sense of reflective practice. Novice and in-service teachers, as reflective practitioners, may use different exploratory tasks inside the classroom to reflect on/upon the teaching-learning process, such as observations, diaries, checklist, etc. Through a reflective mindset, it is the teacher who enables students to get involved whenever they lack initiation to speak. In addition to being involvers, being enabler is another important specification of effective teachers. The enabler teacher brings into classroom the necessary conditions for successful learning by mastering three areas that make up the teaching profession: the subject matter means what should be taught to learners; methodology which specifies what activities should effectively fit learners' input, and learners through keeping affective and cognitive continuum of

learning (Scrivener, 2005, p. 26). As a matter of fact, enablement entails teachers' awareness of learners' personal attributes, such aspect that involvement does not entail.

Regarding the aforementioned difficulties that render EFL learners demotivated to speak, teachers, more specifically novice and in-service teachers, are recommended to use the pedagogical practices given below so as to foster the motivational aspect of speaking.

- Planning activities that draw learners' attention to linguistic forms, discourse structure, and vocabulary so as to develop their ability to speak accurately.
- Considering the teacher's role in scaffolding classroom interaction so that learners are guided progressively towards effective speaking skills.
- Making the classroom environment non-threatening, and encouraged guided reflection or discussion to help learners monitor and eventually lower their language anxiety.
- Teaching learners to use strategies for reducing their speaking anxiety.

(Goh & Burns, 2012, p. 33)

## 6. Conclusion

Speaking is a very important skill in language learning because, away from fluency, it contributes towards the improving the academic development of foreign language students. Despite this importance, students often avoid speaking and there are cognitive and affective factors that prevent them to speak. These factors are interconnected in which lacking enough vocabulary basis or ignoring pronunciation rules may create a kind of language anxiety that threatens their engagement in speaking. In this vein, it is pointed out that "one direct result of language anxiety is that learners may become reticent and consequently withdraw from active participation in the classroom" (Goh & Burns, 2012, p. 29). To increase students' motivation to speak, the prerequisite components of motivational teaching practice in EFL classrooms should be fulfilled. These components are interrelated and cannot work inseparably. Said in another way, fulfilling one component and ignoring the other (s)

will be ineffective in the teaching of the four language skills in general, and speaking in particular. And that, in a nutshell is what this study has revealed.

Task-based listening seems a contributing strategy to motivate EFL students to speak. In this framework, the pre-listening tasks serve as the point of departure in which students get more familiar with the listening topics through the introduced vocabulary items. This stage prepares students to understand the listening text and activate their schematic (pre-existing) knowledge in regard to the topic. By having enough vocabulary, students can be actively involved in the post listening stage in which they can reproduce the receptive language without affective hurdles, supporting their performances by personal experiences. Another important stimulus is the familiarity and availability of the listening topics that foster their involvement. As a matter of course, topics selection plays a central role in keeping students' interest going. Although this study was not of a sufficient scale to be generalised, it may bring into play for other studies that add further values on the motivational aspect of speaking.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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