

Factors affecting English Speaking Ability for EFL learners

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Abstract

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most important skills in English language acquisition for a learner of a second language (L2 learner). It is also commonly accepted that L2 learners' speaking ability diverges widely. The purpose of this assignment is to investigate why this is. Various authors have proposed reasons and factors that can either promote or hinder L2 learner's speaking ability. These are explained using literature on this topic and include factors such as a L2 learner's personality, anxiety and exposure to English. By interviewing an EFL learner (Kristine), the author tests and explores the impact of a number of selected factors on a L2 learner's speaking ability. The author also attempts to extrapolate the most important factor which affects a L2 learner's speaking ability.

Key words: English speaking ability, factors, EFL learners

1. A summary of relevant theories

English is the language of internationally communication. According to Brown and Lee (2015, p. 163), the influence of English is continually expanding as “English is increasingly being used as a tool for interaction among nonnative speakers”. Among the four language learning skills, speaking is considered crucial to language acquisition (Chastain 1988, p. 271). This is because people most often

communicate orally. Moreover, speaking “facilitates language acquisition and development” of the other language skills (Goh 2007, p. 1). Given the significance of speaking, when studying English learners pay most attention to speaking acquisition. However, a phenomenon can be observed in that some L2 language learners are proficient and fluent in speaking English, while others face many difficulties and challenges in acquiring speaking skills. Clearly, certain reasons and factors must exist influencing and explaining learners’ English language speaking ability and performance (Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015). This essay aims to investigate these factors and reasons.

1.1 Linguistic factors

According to Saunders & O’Brien (2006), appropriate use of language forms is vital in learning a new language and has major influence on a L2 learners’ speaking proficiency. These linguistic factors include pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Pronunciation plays a crucial role in language speaking because it affects a listener’s understanding. A L2 learner may not be able to pronounce words accurately and use stress and intonation inappropriately, which in turn may cause misunderstanding. In addition, L2 learners might find it difficult to use an appropriate word in a specific context because they lack proper vocabulary to express themselves. Also as Nation (2001, p. 129) puts it, L2 learners can struggle to verbalise words they already know, failing to apply their ‘receptive vocabulary knowledge into productive use’. Consequently, a L2 learner’s spoken communication fluency is negatively affected. Having good command of grammar and being able to apply it in different contexts is also important in spoken English. This is because as the case study undertaken by Evans and Green (2007) revealed, even though students may use grammar rules when reading and writing they nonetheless may not implement these rules to speaking.

1.2 Affective factors

Anxiety has a negative impact on L2 learners’ speaking ability and performance. In fact, based on wide research into language acquisition, anxiety is regarded as the ‘main factor hindering the process of learning’ (Arnold & Brown 1999, p. 8). Unlike children, adult learners who speak in public are more cautious because they are afraid of being ‘wrong, stupid, or incomprehensible’ (Brown 2001, p. 269). This is especially so when talking to a native language speaker. Consequently, too much anxiety may lead to a L2 speaker being tongue-tied or to their ‘words being lost’ (Shumin 2002, p. 206), particularly when they are required to speak in an unexpected context. Apart from anxiety, Krashen (1982), identifies L2 learners’ motivation and self-confidence as affective factors impacting on their second language acquisition. Undoubtedly, Krashen (1982) argues, an unmotivated L2 learner with low self-confidence would be less likely to produce themselves verbally in spoken English.

1.3 Listening ability

Listening ability is important to develop learners' speaking proficiency because listening is the premise for speaking. If learners cannot comprehend what the other speaker says, they do not know how to respond appropriately. Doff (1988) found that listening and speaking are closely interrelated, without a firm grasp of listening, a L2 learner cannot master speaking. Listening and speaking are interactive activities and are intertwined.

1.4 Personality

It has been found that learners' personality will exert an influence over their speaking proficiency. For example, people who have a high self-esteem and are risk takers tend to become a skillful language speaker quickly (Mahripah, 2014). It has also been demonstrated that factors such as a learner's inhibitions deter risk-taking (Lightbown & Spada 2013, p. 84-85). Confident people conversely are assumed to have fewer blockages when speaking.

1.5 The role of teachers

Teachers play an important role in facilitating the willingness of L2 learner's speaking ability in a classroom setting. To be specific, teachers' lesson plan will affect the students' speaking performance. Tuan & Mai (2015), argue that if a teacher dominates a class, then students will have less opportunities to discuss, while if a teacher prepares a lesson plan which involves tasks to encourage L2 learners interact with each other and makes adjustment according to students' needs, they are likely to be encouraged to speak out. It is also vital that speaking activities conducted by L2 learners entail conveying a message, rather than just saying words (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017, p. 34). Speaking thus is meaningful.

1.6 Exposure to the language

The final factor often cited as impacting on the ability of L2 learners to acquire speaking English ability is their exposure to the language. Sheelai & Ravikumar (2016) criticize the limitations of a classroom environment has on L2 learners progress in their speaking ability. Instead they suggest a variety of strategies to allow L2 learners to have greater interaction with spoken English. These include holding discussion clubs and the use of social media to make friends with native speakers of English. Residing in an English-speaking country would also enable a L2 learner to be significantly more exposed to the studied target language than if they stayed home in turn ading their speaking ability.

2. Aim of your interview and research questions

This aim of this research seeks to explore the factors that affect speaking ability of L2 English speakers and to establish the most important factor. The two research questions are:

2.1 What are the key factors in affecting L2 learners' speaking ability?

2.2 Which factor plays the most important affecting L2 English speaking ability?

3. The participants information

Kristine speaks Mandarin as her first language (L1). Kristine has learned English from the age of 7. While in China, from primary school through to completing her undergraduate studies, Kristine has studied English in a classroom context. Two years ago, Kristine travelled to Australia and began her Masters in Applied Linguistics at the University of New South Wales. She graduated in December 2019. Last year, Kristine also completed the IELTS exam. Altogether, she has studied English for over 19 years.

4. Interview analysis and key findings

In the course of the interview, it was found that prior to arriving to Australia, Kristine studied English in a classroom context without L2 environment. Further, her study of English in China did not entail significant opportunities to speak (Appendix line 26). Kristine points to a lack of speaking practice as one of the reasons she chose to conduct her post-graduate studies overseas. From her arrival to Australia, Kristine notes significantly more chances to use the spoken form of English. While initially "very shy" of speaking to native speakers (Appendix line 83-84) and "afraid to make mistakes" and "being judged" particularly in a non-classroom environment, Kristine overcame that fear (Appendix line 83-86). Indeed, she has deliberately sought out contexts, where she could implement and improve her speaking skills, such social clubs or shopping trips (Appendix line 128-132). In conclusion, Kristine observed that she has made significant progress in her speaking while in Australia (Appendix line 88).

This section examines factors that may have obstructed Kristine's speaking skills and also factors, which enabled her to significantly improve her speaking ability. Relating to linguistic factors, Kristine argues that her lack of appropriate vocabulary and incorrect pronunciation had a great impact on her verbal communication in English. She observes that sometimes she finds it difficult to find precise words to express her idea (Appendix line 57-59), which may lead to misunderstandings. Further, she states she finds pronouncing some words correctly challenging, including the use of stress, intonation and rhythm (Appendix line 63-66). She concludes, however, that linguistic factors are not a barrier to her speaking ability, stating: that conversation partners "want to know what you are thinking" not how you say it (Appendix line 123-124).

Based on the interview, anxiety and stress may influence a L2 speakers' performance. According to Kristine, on arrival to Australia, she was anxious when talking to others, especially locals and those who had a better English-speaking ability than hers' (Appendix line 101-102). She kept silent because she was really worried about making mistakes and she was afraid of being judged by others (Appendix line 100-103). But through high motivation to succeed and confidence in her own ability,

which was able to improve her speaking ability. She would practice reading out loud and then implement this into practice by 'mingling' with native-speakers (Appendix lines 30-33). In Kristine's words: "I bravely speak out what I'm thinking about" (Appendix line 54).

The listening factor has a comparatively minor impact on Kristine's speaking ability. She occasionally has difficulty to understand a speaker because of their speaking speed or because of their Australian accent or use of idioms (Appendix line 43-48). Nonetheless, it is possible to conclude that a learners' listening ability is closely related to their speaking ability. Kristine agrees if she's unable to understand her interlocutor because, for example, they speak about a topic she's unfamiliar with, then in that situation "she [would] be worried about what [she's] saying" (Appendix line 53). She overcomes this by asking the speaker to speak slower or repeat (Appendix line 47-48).

The interview's findings suggest that a L2 learners' personality, namely high self-esteem helps them in their acquisition of spoken English. Kristine feels quite confident when speaking English (Appendix line 53-55) she believes that "practice makes perfect" and because of this positive attitude her oral English has improved (Appendix line 85-86). In addition, the interview also reveals that an extravert character and positive attitude help overcome difficulties with learning spoken English. For instance, unlike introverted learners with inhibitions, Kristine easily makes friends to converse with and actively seeks opportunities to interact with others through attending local events and by establishing social clubs, such as a Tea Club (Appendix lines 39-40, 76-78).

In relation to the impact teachers have on L2 learner's speaking ability, Kristine thinks teachers can help learners express themselves in English and provide useful feedback, which gives students more confidence and motivation to practice oral English (Appendix line 119-124). However, differing teaching styles exert influence over the quality of L2 learners' speaking performance. Specifically, Chinese English teachers pay more attention to the vocabulary and grammar (Appendix line 25), reading and listening due to the examination driven syllabus (Appendix line 10). This failure of speaking practice causes many L2 learners to lack fluency and accuracy in their spoken English (Appendix lines 24 and 63). Meanwhile in Australia the teachers' role is less dominant and focused more on students' needs (Appendix lines 116-124). Thus, if the teachers' role is one of a facilitator of acquiring spoken English it benefits a L2 learner.

According to Kristine, the more exposure to the target language, the more she improves her English-speaking ability (Appendix lines 79-80). Compared with learning conditions in China through residing in Australia Kristine is more exposed to authentic contexts such as conducting shopping in English. In order to experience an English-speaking environment as much as possible, she additionally attends an elective course called Personalized English Enhancement at her University, which is unavailable in her mother-country (Appendix line 38). Interestingly, Kristine has taken advantage of being surrounded by English speakers and has established a discussion club: the Tea Club. She appears to be aware as a L2 learner, she most easily converses about familiar topics, the Tea Club

offers the opportunity for both L2 learners and native speaker to immerse in Chinese culture while practising spoken English (Appendix line 39-41).

5. A comparison of the language learning experiences of Kristine and the researcher

Kristine and I both come from China. We both study similar degrees in Australia. Kristine's major is in Applied Linguistics, whereas I in TESOL. There are similarities in subjects offered in both degrees. For example, I have a course called Second Language Acquisition, which is the main learning area of study for Kristine's degree. However, unlike Kristine I learn more a variety of teaching methods to teach English to non-native English speakers. We share the same cultural background and were exposed to a alike environment in China and Australia. Thus, I am able to understand Kristine's learning experiences. But there are sufficient differences in our English studies to make me inquisitive enough into Kristine's speaking ability for the purpose of this assignment. Before I come to Australia, my English spoken proficiency was better than Kristine as I was able to practice my oral English speaking in China in various contexts. In my schooling environment in China, I was expected to talk to my classmates in English, whereas Kristine was not afforded this opportunity to practice English speaking. However, Kristine currently speaks English more natively than me. Thus, I wished to establish whether this is a result of her residing in Australia longer than me or perhaps it is because she had attended a variety of activities and social events which provided her more contact with native-speakers. Apart from Kristine's exposure to more contexts, she is also more confident than me. I prefer to speak in English to non-native speakers, where I will have less anxiety about making mistakes. Still we share the anxiety about native speakers judging our mistakes. In comparison with my pessimism, Kristine has a more positive attitude to overcome difficulties or challenges facing L2 learners of spoken English. Luckily, we are both hard-working and take advantage of being in an English-speaking environment each in our individual way. These slightly differing perspectives inspired me to conduct this interview.

6. Insights into factors in language learning

There are many individual differences in second language learning and acquisition, these differences include intelligence, aptitude, attitudes, motivation, personality, learning style, cognitive style and learning strategies. In term of personality, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, empathy and extraversion and introversion have been studied by researchers (Hummel, 2014, p. 194-206). All these affect L2 learners' success and performance. There's a current debate over whether an extravert or introvert personality is more suitable to second language learning. Some studies revealed that extraversion; confidence, forceful behaviour, willingness to take risks or try some new experiences is consistent with the success in language learning, while others found that the quiet, hard-working learners are more successful (Lightbown&Spada 2013, p. 84).

However, in this essay, the participant feels that her extrovert personality helps her to speak out bravely in new context she experienced in Australia. In terms of anxiety, it has been investigated that the learners' anxiety can differ based on context (Lightbown&Spada 2013, p. 85). This is because anxiety is related to the environment a L2 learner finds themselves in. For example, L2 learner's nervousness about delivering an oral presentation in front of a whole class makes them more anxious than speaking with classmates in group work. Doubtless anxiety can hinder the process of learning (Lightbown&Spada, 2013, p. 85). During the interview Kristine revealed that she is silent when she is very anxious. Language learning context is also an influential factor affecting second language acquisition. Traditionally, many teachers and students believe that immersing into the target language contributes to learning the language and its culture, however, Freed et al. (2004) reject that belief and argue that attending immersion program such as studying abroad is not necessarily useful to second language acquisition. This is due to the fact that although the students who study abroad have more opportunities to exposure to the target language, they may still have low cognitive processing ability, a natural ability to learn the language, which will all stop them from learning well. Further, insufficient length of staying abroad will also influence the level of language acquisition. In addition, a L2 learner who stays in a comfortable zone instead of being exposed to the target culture is unlikely to progress much in their speaking ability. As an example, some L2 learners isolate themselves in groups both in the class and outside contexts, despite residing in an English-speaking country. They would communicate in their mother-tongue instead of English. Conversely, other L2 learners like Kristine take advantage of the opportunities offered by living in Australia by actively improving her speaking ability.

7. Personal reflection

By doing this assignment, I have learned that there are many factors affecting the English-speaking ability and they play an important role in the development of L2 learners' English-speaking proficiency. Before I did this essay, I believed in learning speaking one is required to focus on linguistic learning such as vocabulary and pronunciation. Thanks to the conducting the interview, I realise that the more confident the speaker is, the better their spoken English performance. Furthermore, anxiety is an obstacle hindering L2 learner's ability to speak easily and effectively. In addition, it is necessary for teachers to give feedback appropriately on L2 learner's performance, as gentle error correction is useful to relax the learner and create a comfortable environment to learn speaking. Finally, it has emerged in the course of my research and interview process that one of the most influential factors influencing the level of English speaking of a L2 learner is their exposure to the target-language environment. Attention should be focussed on providing L2 Learners with wide range of exposure to the authentic context, where they could practice speaking English. One example of such environment immersion is provided by Kristine, who through living and studying in Australia has achieved significant progress in her speaking ability.

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Appendix

Interview with Kristine, an EFL learner

Example extracts highlighted in green indicate linguistic factor, highlighted in yellow indicates factor of listening ability, highlighted red indicates factor of personality, areas in blue indicate the anxiety factor, areas in purple indicate the factor of teacher role, area in gray indicate environment factor.

MEI [M]: Hello. I'm very happy to invite you to do the interview today. Thanks for your time. So can we start now?

KRISTINE [K]: Yes, please.

M: Hi. Could you introduce yourself briefly, please?

K: My name is Christine, I'm from China. I currently just passed my 26th birthday. I've just finished my study in master of Applied Linguistics in UNSW.

M: Great. Yeah. So when did you first start studying English?

K: I guess this about at about seven years old.

M: How much of your English study in China involved studying English speaking?

K: Very little because my school teachers just focussed on English reading and listening so we didn't study much about English speaking. So when I decided to go overseas for my further study, I went to an English Institute to find a teacher to teach me English speaking, personally.

M: How good do you estimate your English-speaking level before leaving China?

K: My English speaking level was very basic, I can just talk to people but not very fluently.

M: Did you study English speaking while in Australia?

K: No, not really. I didn't study English in Australia systematically. But I studied at a local University, all professors and student speak English, so relatively I will also talk to them in English, I so just learn to speak in this ways potentially.

M: What are the differences of teaching style between the Chinese speaking teacher and Australian teacher?

K: The difference is huge. During the Chinese English learning period, the teachers are all Chinese teachers. So they taught me sometimes in Mandarin instead of in all English. Also they have Chinese accents, so their English speaking is not very native, I have to say. On the other hand, they concentrated a lot on vocabulary and grammar. But in Australia, they comes from English speaking countries, so their oral English is very natural and native. So I learned the accent easier, they don't have another accent. That's what I think the differences are.

M: What other ways did you use to improve your English-speaking skills in Australia?

K: I try to develop a good habit, for example, I try to read out loudly every morning. Also I would like to attend as much social clubs as possible in my University, in this way can I make friends and communicate them in English. Besides, I tried to mingle with the local students but I find it's really hard because there are some cultural differences and gap between us, some of them comes from Asia, some are local students, some comes from Europe or Iran. Thus, I try to make friends through attending social clubs.

M: When you interact with them, do you spoke English, right?

K: Yeah, mostly, because some students don't understnad Mandarin. And I tried to I attend a course called Personalised English Enhancement at our University. It's an elective course. The purpose for attending that extra course is to improve my English. And also I set up a social club called Tea Club to create an English speaking environment for the students. In fact, I did improve my English speaking in Australia in these two ways.

M: Sounds great. Do you have trouble understanding when someone speaks English to you?

K: Sometimes, I think. Especially, when they speak very fast, I will have trouble understanding locals, so I just cannot catch them, Especially, some of them have an Australian accent to a large extent, you know, particularly for the old. Besides, some Australian, how do you say, some Australian idioms, jargon, is really hard to understand. Yet, when I ask them to speak slowly, most of them will do that and then I can understand most of what they are saying about.

M: When you ask them to repeat again, what's their attitude?

K: Most of them are very polite and they understand I don't speak English as the first language. But some of them are very impatient, which hurts me really.

M: What are your strengths in speaking English?

K: I think my strength is I'm confident when I speak English. I know I sometimes make mistakes in grammar or vocabulary, whatever, but I can bravely speak out what I'm thinking about. So that is my strength when it refers to English speaking.

M: Exactly, what are your weaknesses in speaking English?

K: En.., my weakness is mostly focussing on linguistics factors, such as the use of vocabulary. Sometimes it is really hard for me to find the exact, precise words to express my opinion and ideas, so that's the biggest challenge for me.

M: Any else?

K: What was the question again?

M: Your weaknesses, I mean.

K: yeah, apart from the linguistic aspects, I think fluency is another big challenge for me, because It's really hard to acquire how I can speak English in a more appropriate rhythm, intonation and stress you know. I think probably this is also due to the fact that my first language, Mandarin, affects my English speaking.

M: You mean Mandarin affects yours speaking?

K: Yeah, Mandarin, you know the grammar of these two languages is quite different, sometimes I just try to translate from what it is in Chinese, Mandarin into English. But especially the vocabulary and some grammar is just hard to translate equally, equivalent, it is hard to find the exact translation, so it quite affects my fluency in English speaking.

M: Yeah, yeah, I agree with you, So can you please tell me what your personality is?

K: I think I'm an extravert person because I like making friends with different people from different cultures, and I'm really opened minded.

M: Do you think that your personality affects the way you to learn to speak English?

K: Yes, definitely. Because outgoing personality promote me to have some social interaction in English speaking. For instance, I always seek opportunities to attend activities and local events and social clubs. As a result, I get lots of opportunity to speak English. To speak in authentic context, in an English speaking environment. So by interacting much more, my English speaking improved more.

M: Do you think that now you are a more confident speaker of English than before arriving in Australia? Why do you have this change?

K: Yes, I'm more confident. I have stayed in Australia for about two years. I was very shy when I first arrived to Australia. I didn't dare to speak to especially local people because I was afraid to be judged by them. But now I feel I've become more confident. If you ask for the reason, I would say that practice makes perfect. For example, I do presentation at my University and I make friends with local persons, during that process, I speak English as much as possible. Besides, my English speaking skills have improved linguistically. Gradually, I'm not so afraid of other people now and my confidence has been improved relatively.

M: When the topic that you are speaking about with others changes, would your level of confidence change, relatively?

K: Hmm, yes, when I'm having a discussion on a topic that I'm not familiar with, I would be worried about what I'm saying because, you know, I'm not familiar with some vocabulary or things like that.

M: So if the topic would be something that you are more interested in, would you be more confident?

K: Yes, of course, it's not about English speaking you know, it's about the topic. Even in Chinese, in Mandarin, if I speak about a topic that I'm interested in, I speak more.

M: Yeah, of course. Are you worried when you talk to others in English?

K: Sometimes definitely, I'm worried because I'm afraid to be judged by another person. English is my second language. So when I meet a person who speak English, especially a local person or some person whose English speaking is better than me, then I tend to be worried about making mistakes, or find an appropriate word to express what I'm thinking about, you know.

M: Do you think anxiety have an influence on your English speaking skills?

K: Yes, definitely. When I'm anxious, I just cannot speak very fluently.

M: How would you like to address that problem?

K: When I am anxious, I tend to be very quiet in a group, I choose not to talk to other people. But usually I cannot keep my heart quiet and anxiety will continue until I start to speak out. At this time, I often tend to seek advices from my supervisor, classmates, friends and my teachers that I very trust in. Luckily, they will give me some suggestions, and that help to animate my personality a little bit. So after that I can speak confidently again.

M: Are you afraid of making mistakes when speaking English?

K: Actually I was afraid of making mistakes one year ago because I was afraid to be judged by other people and my English-speaking ability is not good enough. But now I can speak better than before for several aspects. Firstly, my attitude has absolutely changed for the good learning conditions. For example, once in one of my lectures, I misused the word "lend" instead of "borrow" in that certain context. It was a lecture with over one hundred students, you know, but a local student just very warmly, friendly corrected me. Also, My lecturer, she was very kind and even explained that it is hard for some foreign students to speak English as a second language, and have a quick reaction with

the correct grammar and vocabulary. After that I felt not everybody judges you, instead, the most important thing is that they just want to know what you are thinking about, to convey how to correct or give a feedback to you. Thus, I have changed a lot after that issue.

M: So what do you think the most important factors are in improving your English speaking in Australia?

K: Firstly, thanks to the environment, the authentic context in Australia, my English-speaking proficiency have been improved to a large extent. Exposed to the target language in Australia, I have a lot of opportunities to practice my oral English, shopping, watching movies having classes, taking part in society, make friends with the local students and so on. All of these push me to speak out.

M: Thanks Christine, thanks for your time and have a nice day.

K: You're welcome.

M: Bye bye.

K: Bye bye.