

Challenges That Examiners Encounter When Assessing Speaking Skills at Yanbu English Language Institute and Preparatory Year Program (YELI-PYP)

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Abstract—The current paper aims to explore the challenges that assessors face when they conduct the speaking test at Yanbu English Language Institute and Preparatory Year Program (YELI-PYP). The study employed interviews to collect the data, with a sample consisting of 10 faculty members that varied between males and females, native and non-native speakers. The study revealed the following results: the examiners found that their students used incorrect grammar and an improper level of vocabulary during their speaking test, possessed a weak level of pronunciation, and demonstrated limited fluency. In addition, one of the biggest challenges that examiners encountered was the level of reluctance shown by their students during their exam, which they felt may have stemmed from a lack of vocabulary or as a result of psychological reasons, such as fear or anxiety. Moreover, it could have been due to the test instruments and/or the procedures of the exam that were applied by the examiners. For instance, many of the examiners felt that some of the test questions were significantly above the students' ability levels, which was due to the enrolment process. That is, the students were accepted onto the YELI-PYP directly from secondary school and were all placed in one level without any kind of placement test. The findings of this study also identified factors that negatively affected the performance of the students, such as the test time, learners' hesitation to ask the assessors questions if they did not understand something (or the questions were unclear), learners' tendency to memorize the answers before the exam and the teachers' personal and professional characteristics. Based on these findings, the researchers identified a number of recommendations and suggestions.

Index Terms—challenges, examiner of speaking skill, Yanbu English Language Institute and Preparatory Year Program (YELI-PYP)

I. INTRODUCTION

The speaking skill is one of the four foundational language skills within the English Language in addition to reading, writing and listening. These skills are normally divided into productive and receptive skills, with speaking and writing being classified as productive skills. As an essential component of second language acquisition, speaking is frequently regarded as the most demanding of the four fundamental skills, particularly when interacting with specific languages. (Amiri et al., 2017). In addition, it can be difficult to evaluate in some cases because the test questions are subjective. As a result, there are many reasons and factors that could potentially affect teachers and the students during the speaking examination. Ounis (2017) mentioned that the difficulties affecting speaking performance assessments are related to the following factors: psychological, knowledge, performance and technical factors. Koroglu and Utku (2018) also pointed out that these reasons may be due to physical, psychological and environmental factors, while Karpovich et al. (2021) added some negative factors that can affect the learning of speaking skills, such as fear, anxiety, low self-esteem or a lack of motivation. Since the researchers of this study are examiners of the speaking skill at YELI-PYP, they felt it necessary to conduct a study to explore the challenges faced by the faculty members who conduct the oral speaking test. Despite the importance of the speaking skill, it is apparent that there are challenges in evaluating this skill for second language learners. Therefore, the treatment of this problem is determined in answering the following main question: What are the challenges encountered by examiners when assessing the speaking skill at YELI-PYP? The current study aimed at exploring the challenges that speaking assessors encounter during the oral assessment of students at YELI-PYP. Furthermore, it aimed to find pedagogical solutions to overcome any of these identified challenges. This study helps the English Language department at YELI-PYP to explore the challenges that faculty members face when conducting the oral assessment and explores solutions to overcome them. These difficulties are encountered by faculty members twice

per semester when they conduct the speaking midterm and final exams. Therefore, the results of this study will help in the planning and development of training programs for the examiners. On a wider scale, it presents suggestions and recommendations that may contribute to the overall development of speaking skills in the YELI-PYP.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking is one of the four foundational language skills in language learning and is classified as a productive skill. Moreover, speaking plays a number of key roles within communication, as one of the primary goals of learning oral skills is to enhance communicative effectively and efficiency. Kingen (2000) elaborates on the multifaceted roles and functions of speaking skills, emphasizing their significance in effective communication. Firstly, speaking serves a personal function, allowing individuals to express their feelings, opinions, beliefs, and ideas. It also plays a descriptive role, enabling speakers to vividly describe people or objects, whether real or imagined. Furthermore, narrative speaking is essential for creating and recounting stories or events in a chronological manner, while instructive speaking focuses on giving clear instructions or directions aimed at achieving specific outcomes.

Additionally, questioning is a critical function that involves asking questions to elicit valuable information, and comparative speaking allows individuals to compare different objects, people, or ideas, facilitating informed judgments. Imaginative speaking encourages the expression of mental images related to various subjects, while predictive speaking involves forecasting potential future events. Interpretative speaking explores deeper meanings, engages in hypothetical reasoning, and considers inferences, thereby enriching discussions. Persuasive speaking seeks to influence others' opinions, attitudes, or behaviors, while explanatory speaking aims to clarify and support ideas and opinions. Finally, informative speaking is crucial for sharing knowledge and insights with others. Collectively, these diverse functions underscore the importance of speaking skills in fostering effective interpersonal communication and interaction.

That said, there are a number of difficulties that L2 learners undergo when learning how to speak a second language. For instance, there is hesitation, filling in pauses, much repetition and frequent indefiniteness as learners try to choose the most appropriate combination of words to express their intended meaning (Rivers, 1981). These difficulties may be due to psychological problems, disinterest or disengagement toward the subject, insufficient practice in listening skills, a limited range of vocabulary, low self-confidence, or the fear of committing mistakes (Soraya, 2010).

A. *Evaluation of Speaking*

There are different ways of assessing English Language skills in general and speaking skills in particular. Ginther (2013) classified language assessment methods into direct, indirect and semi-direct, and stated that two of these methods are suitable when assessing speaking skills: direct and semi-direct. As for the direct method, this evaluates speaking skills in actual performance. An example of direct evaluation of the speaking skill is where the participant (examinee) is involved in a pre-prepared or semi-prepared interaction with the interviewer (examiner), and the focus is on the interviews and their competencies. In this type of evaluation, the examinees interact face-to-face with the examiners and answer their questions. But the participants or examinees are aware because they speak in front of a language specialist, not a driver or waiter. As for the second type of assessment, it is semi-direct, and this type does not require the presence of an examiner to administer the test. Audio recordings of questions or tasks are prepared in classrooms. What distinguishes this type from the direct method is its efficiency, saving time and cost, as well as its reliability.

While the method of assessment is important to explore, there is a wider issue that needs to be addressed; that is, the challenges of conducting oral assessments in general, which this study seeks to investigate further. For instance, Hamad (2013) investigated the factors that negatively affect speaking skills in girls' colleges across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The study concluded that EFL female learners are not good or not highly skilled in oral skills compared to their performance in other English language skills. Moreover, Sarwar et al. (2014) emphasized that, although the assessment of speaking skills motivates learners to practice and improve their speaking, there are many drawbacks in this assessment, which he listed as: insufficient training, lack of public trust on oral assessment and problems related to test validity.

A study by Al-Amari and Fawzi (2016) sought to explore the preferred techniques of Yanbu University College students used by English language teachers in correcting the mistakes committed. The study concluded that the students preferred the recast and implicit techniques, and the researchers recommended English language teachers take into account the goal of the activity in order to decide when and how to correct the error, as well as taking into account the students' level of ability. That is, for students who have a high proficiency in fluency, the teachers should focus on correcting them in accuracy, whereas those who have less proficiency, the teachers should focus on correcting their fluency in order to improve their communicative language.

In another study by K roglu (2019), the aim of this was to identify the impact of the interventionist model of Dynamic Assessment in the assessment of student-teacher speaking skills performance and to explore their attitudes toward assessment. The study reached the following results: making mistakes in the oral exam causes stress and increase anxiety, and that students need more time to prepare themselves.

Zaim et al. (2020) pointed out that the most prominent problems secondary school teachers face when they use various forms of speaking evaluation are short discussion, information gap, role plays, debates, speech, acting out, short presentation and guessing games. In addition, they listed the problems that teachers encounter with types of topics to assess, which were: animals, fruits, famous actor/actress, recipes, manuals, advertisement, announcement and shopping.

The researchers noted that the most important factors affect the student's Proficiency in speaking skill are disinterest or disengagement toward the subject, insufficient practice in listening skills, a limited range of vocabulary, low self-confidence, or the fear of committing mistakes.

B. Lack of Interest in the Subject

In many schools, some students do not like the English language and this is due to many reasons. These reasons, according to the researchers' point of view, are: the traditional methods or the strategies that the teachers use, the students do not recognize the importance of English as an international language, unqualified English teachers who cause boredom for students, and a lack of attractive classrooms or schools. Irfan et al. (2020) also mentioned the difficulties that English language teachers encounter in teaching the four language skills. These difficulties are a lack of student's motivation, lack of resources, unqualified teachers, over-crowded classrooms and a lack of classroom management/control.

C. Insufficient Practice in Listening Skills

While speaking fundamentally involves interaction among two or more individuals, listening comprehension also serves as a critical component within these communicative exchanges. Learners must engage in rigorous practice of listening to the target language's functional aspects, as this will create the foundational support required to enhance their speaking abilities. Yilamz and Yavuz (2015) aimed to identify the problems that young learners face during listening skills and concluded that, if the learner is not given enough opportunity to practice listening, he/she will face problems related to understanding the utterances of native speakers. Furthermore, Ur (1996) states that there are many factors that cause difficulties in speaking. The first one is inhibition, where learners try to avoid making mistakes because they try to avoid negative criticism or because they are shy. The second factor is that learners find no topic or ideas to speak about, as well as a lack of motivation to express themselves. The third factor is the minimal or unequal chances to participate during classroom or speaking activities. The fourth factor relates to the use of their mother-tongue (L1), wherein students tend to use their mother-tongue because convenient and is easier to communicate, especially in a foreign language context.

D. Lack of Self- Confidence and the Fear of Making Mistakes

A prevalent occurrence in language learning classrooms is for students to keep silent or hesitate to participate in discussions in order to avoid committing mistakes. They are afraid of teacher admonishment or their classmates' mockery. On other occasions, their reluctance is due to a concern of being continuously corrected by the teacher for every slip they make.

In their study, Jing et al. (2016) aimed to identify ways to correct errors committed by students during English language teaching. The study concluded that, when the student committed an error, the teacher was the one to decide whether to correct the error or not. When correcting errors, the teachers must consider the time and method we use, as well as our attitudes. Correction can be during the performance of the task or it can be after the task is completed. We must also adopt certain characteristics towards the students, such as friendliness and patience. Moreover, we can use body language, reformulate the sentence correctly, or ask a question based on the student's error, avoiding the student's discouragement or frustration during correction.

Dansieh et al. (2018) sought to explore the factors or reasons that cause ESL students to be anxious when they speak in public. The study revealed that the main reason for this was due to poor self-confidence in their ability to speak to the public, as well as lack of experience and knowledge in this area. In addition to this, a fear of making mistakes, laughter and ridicule from colleagues were also key factors. Lastly, not being well-prepared to speak was also amongst the problems.

A recent study by Zulfikar (2022) showed that more than 63.33% of learners do not feel confident when they use a second language in front of others, while 80% of learners begin to panic when they speak a second language without prior preparation. Furthermore, 46.67% of students are reluctant to speak a second language and feel uncomfortable because their teachers correct their mistakes in front of their classmates. Nevertheless, it is evident that students' mistakes must be corrected; however, the student should not be interrupted unless these errors are due to pronunciation or grammatical issues, which would affect communication or be unacceptable to a native speaker.

Therefore, as many researchers have recommended, an effective way to develop oral proficiency of a foreign language is achieved when the classroom environment is relaxed and friendly, in which students feel at ease with the teacher and with each other.

E. Deficient Vocabulary

When students try to convey their thoughts in a foreign language, they often face difficulties in selecting the right words due to their restricted linguistic repertoire. This inability to articulate ideas using advanced or nuanced vocabulary leads to feelings of frustration and discomfort. Consequently, educators must remain mindful of this psychological challenge and recognize their pivotal role in facilitating the learning process.

Khan et al. (2018) sought to find out what role vocabulary knowledge plays in developing the speaking skill of Saudi EFL learners. The results of the study confirmed that there is an agreement between the responses of teachers and learners concerning the strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and the ability to speak fluently. Moreover, according

to Bashori et al. (2021), vocabulary deficit negatively affects the students' performance in the English language. In addition, some feelings, such as anxiety in speaking or enjoying the language, can also affect students' achievement.

F. Accuracy and Fluency

Based on studies by Brown (2003), Zuheer (2008) and Hui (2023), the communication process has a number of important aspects that make communication successful. These are: comprehension, accent, fluency, and accuracy of grammar and vocabulary; however, the most controversial aspects of these, that lead researchers to argue which is more important, are fluency and accuracy.

Omar (2001) defined accuracy as the capacity to construct grammatically correct sentences, though it does not necessarily encompass the ability to communicate fluently in speech or writing. It extends beyond grammar to include precision in vocabulary usage and pronunciation. Fluency, on the other hand, should not be viewed in opposition to accuracy but rather as its complement, as both are essential components for effective oral communication. Brown (2003) explains that fluency in a language is demonstrated when an individual can accurately employ its structures while focusing on meaning rather than form, effortlessly utilizing linguistic units and patterns at a natural conversational speed as required.

Wang (2014) aimed to explore the speaking efficiency of students in an English Language department, specifically in relation to their accuracy and fluency. The most notable results of this study were as follows: in terms of accuracy, 46% of students made grammatical errors and 20% had pronunciation errors. This showed that committing errors in grammar and pronunciation affects speaking skill. As for the fluency in speaking, 44% of the learners had issues in their fluency, as they often paused and hesitated to speak. Finally, 45% of students largely forgot which words to use when articulating themselves. This, the conclusion made here was that hesitation and pausing causes the listener to lose pleasure in what is being articulated, and recalling or remembering the right words to use also causes the conversation to lose its beauty and hinders the smoothness of what is being said.

In another study, Derakhshan et al. (2016) sought to develop EFL learner's speaking ability, accuracy and fluency. The study concluded that, providing an ideal environment for both young and adult learners inside the classroom gives them the opportunity to increase their opportunity for effective participation in conversations, and this in turn, makes it easier for them to practice this language outside the classroom.

In a recent study by Schurz et al. (2022), they aimed to answer many questions related to accuracy and fluency. One of these questions was: how is fluency taught as reported by the teachers from the three countries: France, Austria & Sweden? Teachers mentioned some difficulties faced by students, such as a short amount of time to conduct the speaking test and teachers overcoming this difficulty by asking students to prepare speaking tasks in advance. Moreover, one of the difficulties in fluency tasks arose from a loss of confidence, while students also tended to rely on word-by-word because of the effect of translation from their mother tongue. A strategy adopted by teachers was to accept their students' mistakes while speaking and to give them activities that suit their abilities. Lastly, as mentioned in other studies, an important factor to encourage fluency was to provide a suitable environment for students.

The researchers conducting the present study believed that a fluent speaker of a language is one who can convey his/her message to the listener in a short way and the listener can understand this message. This is something that is found prevalently in the existing literature, as well as in various cultural and religious contexts. For instance, in the Islamic faith, God (Allah) mentioned this characteristic in the Holy Quran when recounting the story of Moses (Musa), wherein Musa is asking his brother Aaron (Haroon) to help him because Haroon speaks fluently and concisely. Allah narrates what Musa says in the following verse: "And my brother Aaron – he is more eloquent in speech than I: so, send him with me as a helper, to confirm (and strengthen) me: for I fear that they may accuse me of falsehood" (The Holy Quran, 389).

The researchers of this study conclude that there are essential factors that ideally promote speakers' fluency. One of these factors is an encouragement to give more opportunities for student-centered classroom. This is effectively achieved by meaningful classroom discussions. These discussions should be critically and analytically thinking-based, and should provide the stimulus needed to further engage students, thus making the classroom environment conducive for participation. Another interesting way of increasing students' fluency is achieved through debates and speaking competitions on relevant issues. Students will be familiarized with the speaking criteria of these activities. Furthermore, maintaining an environment that engages students inside the classroom and ensures them that, as adult learners, they bring to the learning environment their background knowledge and experiences.

To add to this point, the researchers like to point out the students' contributions on any level should be regarded as highly appreciated. Hence, students' errors are constructively addressed through error analysis. This leaves absolutely no room for student bullying or mocking. Finally, scheduling field trips to companies, establishments and agencies (i.e. Aramco, SABIC, etc.), whose official language is English, will encourage students to apply the language fluently. Brown (2003) also suggests that teachers should do five things in their classrooms: motivate learners to view mistakes as valuable learning opportunities, provide ample chances for practice, design tasks that require them to effectively convey their ideas, evaluate their fluency rather than focusing solely on accuracy, and engage in open discussions with learners about the importance of fluency in communication.

G. The Relationship Between Fluency and Accuracy

The researchers believe that there is a close relationship between accuracy and fluency, and beginner learners should be encouraged to focus on fluency first in order to gain confidence in themselves. As for more advanced speakers, there should be a balance between accuracy and fluency.

That said, a learner who is focused only on fluency may make numerous mistakes, which could make the communication difficult to understand and, as a result, places an unreasonable burden on the listener. As for a learner who focuses only on accuracy, they may find it difficult to take part in communication outside the classroom because they need more time to prepare what they are going to say. This in turn, may also place an unreasonable burden on the listener (Watkins, 2012).

H. Ways of Developing Fluency and Accuracy

The English language teachers can apply several activities to develop the speaking skills of their students. Teachers should take the following into account when planning and implementing these activities: the appropriateness of the activity for the age of the child, and the appropriate place or class for practicing such an activity. Some activities need a small number of students and a larger area to be successful and it is therefore the teacher's responsibility to implement the activity according to the time and its appropriateness for the lesson.

Watkins (2012) suggested the following ways of developing fluency and accuracy: dialogue building, discussion, listen and repeat, story-telling, presentations, problem-solving, just a minute strategy, role-plays, drills and information gap activities. Rao (2019) also mentioned some activities for English language teachers to apply to improve speaking skills. Some of these activities are fun activities in the form of language games, which get the students to speak in the classroom, because the majority of the students are interested in playing games and therefore will be more likely to participate. They can also use brainstorming activities in their classrooms as it encourages their students to speak, and role-plays are also seen as one of the best activities to improve the students' speaking skills.

Moreover, activities such as pair or group work also enhances the students' speaking skills significantly, but it is wise for teachers to select topics that relate to the students' interest and needs for familiarity purposes. Another activity that teachers can use in their English classrooms is story-telling. Furthermore, listening to music in English and singing along with the lyrics are considered to be among the best tools for learning intonation and pronunciation, while watching movies in the target language gives the learners opportunity to learn listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, idioms and slang.

I. Communication

According to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington (2009), communication is characterized as a dynamic process through which individuals assign and transmit meaning to foster mutual understanding. This process relies on a broad range of competencies, including intrapersonal and interpersonal processing, listening, observing, speaking, questioning, analyzing, and evaluating. The application of these skills evolves over time and extends to all facets of life, encompassing personal, educational, social, and professional contexts.

Oral communication skills involve various sub-skills that enhance communication by words. The most important oral communication skills include a strong and extensive vocabulary, a good pronunciation of words, a knowledge-based understanding of the parts of speech and their usage with good listening comprehension skills.

According to Mohammed (2011), Oral communication skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) encompass several sub-skills, such as accurately producing English speech sounds and patterns, including word and sentence stress, intonation, and rhythm. They also involve choosing appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures based on the social context, audience, situation, and topic. Additionally, these skills require organizing ideas in a coherent, logical, and meaningful sequence, using language to express values and judgments, and speaking quickly and confidently with minimal unnatural pauses to achieve fluency.

III. METHODOLOGY

The current exploring research implies a qualitative approach on the premise that it highlights an in-depth view of the challenges that examiners may face when they assess their students' speaking skill. Qualitative enquiry is the type of research that deals with non-numeric data and is defined by Gorman and Clayton (2004) as: an investigative approach that gathers information from the circumstances surrounding events to depict these occurrences. This method aims to understand how events are interconnected and to capture the viewpoints of those involved, employing inductive reasoning to formulate potential explanations based on what has been observed.

Creswell (2009) maintains that, within qualitative enquiry, scholars suppose that the social milieu is more complex. He added that there are two possible ways to understand and uncover this complicated milieu. These two ways are by receiving participants' opinions and investigators' descriptions and explanations for those opinions.

During the current research, the researchers utilized interviews to solicit the informants' views. Fossey et al. (2002) mention that qualitative interviews are one of the research tools that are used to attain informants' points of view concerning the intended researched topic. In addition, interviews are used to create a path through which researchers can gain informants' behaviours, reactions and their relationship with their community domains.

A. Qualitative Paradigm

Creswell (2009) affirmed that qualitative investigators believe that the best approach to extend our knowledge about any social setting is by investigating it from the inside, approaching the informants' opinions and feelings. Thus, the current study applied the qualitative approach to explore the targeted setting and informants, and to answer the research question.

B. Research Question

What are the challenges that encounter EFL teachers during speaking assessment in YELI-PYP?

C. Participants

10 EFL teachers (8 male and 2 female) were chosen to participate in this study. These informants teach the speaking skills in the English department at YELI-PYP, and assess their learners during the midterm and final examinations. The selection of the research location was based on the fact that the targeted subjects work for the English Language Institute (ELI) in Saudi Arabia.

The institute has been administering speaking tests in English as a Foreign Language for more than 20 years, which is enough duration to gain significant insights into the test applying procedures and experiences of the EFL teachers. In our research site, speaking skills of the learners are assessed at the end of each module, which lasts eight weeks for all levels, ranging from A1 (beginner level), A2 (elementary), B1 (pre-intermediate), and B2 (intermediate), all of which are in accordance to the CEFR (Common European Framework). In order to preserve their privacy and anonymity, the names of the participants in the current study are pseudonyms. Table 1 shows the details of the study participants, with a heading for the table.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANTS' INFORMATION

| Faculty members | Academic Degree | Years of Experience | Native Speakers | Non-Native speakers | Male | Female |
|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|------|--------|
| Hassan | Instructor | 30 | | Yes | Yes | |
| Yousef | Instructor | 2 | | Yes | Yes | |
| Raji | Lecturer | 31 | Yes | | Yes | |
| Ali | Lecturer | 5 | | Yes | Yes | |
| Fatimah | Lecturer | 8 | | Yes | | Yes |
| William | Lecturer | 22 | Yes | | Yes | |
| Ahmad | Lecturer | 18 | | | Yes | |
| Waheeb | Lecturer | 13 | | Yes | Yes | |
| Noura | Assistant Professor | 2 | | Yes | | Yes |
| Nasir | Assistant Professor | 27 | | Yes | Yes | |

D. Research Instruments

The data collection instrument selected for this study was semi-structured interviews. According to Jamshed (2014), the most common data collection instrument in qualitative research is the interview. Moreover, semi-structured interviews have the advantage that they can provide researchers with information about the participants' lives, as well as providing a means for investigators to gain a deeper insight into the participants' behaviours, feelings and environment (Fossey, 2002).

Semi-structured interviews also have several advantages that can help the researchers to answer the research questions. One of these significant benefits is that it has ready-guided questions before conducting the interview. However, due to its semi-structured nature, they also allow for researchers to change or add to the interview questions in order to clarify any level of ambiguity, as well as making the questions more intelligible, which can help elicit more detailed information from interviewees. Based on these aforementioned points, and taking into account the nature of the study, the researchers decided to adopt the semi-structured interview method.

The interview questions were prepared based on the literature review, and then piloted to ensure the questions and prompt questions were suitable to address all the targeted research objectives. The interviews were conducted on site with the participants on an individual face-to-face basis. One-to-one interviews is a noteworthy method to raise the level of privacy, which helped the participants feel more at ease to explicitly disclose their ideas, thoughts and feelings. The researcher digitally recorded the interview, after taking consent from the participants, which were then transcribed for the analysis and discussion process.

E. Thematic Analysis (TA)

Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that a theme encapsulates significant aspects of data that are pertinent to the study topic and signifies a degree of repetitive response or significance within the collected data. Furthermore, Willig (2013) asserts that thematic analysis assists researchers to move towards participants' perspectives and clarification to create new concepts of their environment. Practically-speaking, thematic analysis involves iterative steps that allow the investigator to go from one stage to a different one, either ahead or reverse. The current research applied the six-phase flexible

framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). There are six separate steps to this framework: getting to know the data, coding, finding themes, assessing themes, identifying and clarifying themes, and writing up.

F. Ethical Procedures

Qualitative research is a type of social science inquiry that seeks to understand the meaning and experience behind human behaviour. It involves collecting data through interviews, focus groups, observations, or other methods, which are then analysed for patterns and themes. One of the main challenges facing any researcher in conducting qualitative research is maintaining ethical standards throughout their investigation.

The researchers followed a number of procedures that are essential for ensuring that data collected from participants and informants during a study adhere to rigorous criteria, as well as protecting all those affected by it, including both researchers and participants. First, the researchers obtained informed consent (Appendix A) from participants before beginning their study to ensure they had a clear understanding about what their involvement entails and to ensure their confidentiality. Once the data that the participant provided was digitally recorded, the researchers kept this information on a secure file that was password-protected. Due of anonymity concerns, the participants were informed that they will not be identified using their names, and instead pseudonyms/aliases would be given to them. Respondents were informed that their involvement was optional and that they were free to withdraw to the study at any point in time for whatever reason.

G. Study Limitations

This study was limited to the speaking skill for students in YELI-PYP during their first term of the academic year 2022/2023.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned above, to analyse the collected qualitative data, the researchers transcribed the recorded interviews, and then applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework (see Thematic Analysis section). The data helped the researchers to answer the research question: What are the challenges encountered by examiners when assessing the speaking skill at YELI-PYP? The study uncovers five main themes that were exposed in the data. These themes are: 1) learners' level, 2) test performance, 3) test conduct and administration, 4) test-taking and 5) teachers' competency. Each principal theme was created via a series of sub-themes, which have been subsequently delineated through various codes.

A. Learners' Linguistic Level

The participants highlighted that one of the challenges they encounter when assessing the speaking test is the correct grammar and proper level of vocabulary used by students during the exam. They further raised the issue of how weak the students' level of pronunciation was, as well as their limited fluency. For instance, Mr. Hassan answered the interview question about the difficulty of the assessor, explaining that, "*students lack important skills during the test: grammar, vocab, pronunciation, fluency*". In the same vein, Mr. Yousef mentioned that, "*The level of some students is very low, and they lack the vocabulary needed to talk and to answer the questions in the test.*" The findings of the current study are in line with the findings of Khan et al. (2018), who confirmed that there is a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and the ability to speak well.

B. Test Performance

In the interview of the current study, the participants acknowledged that there are a number of difficulties that prevent students from performing well during the speaking test. One of these difficulties is the reluctance that learners show during the exam. For example, Mr. Raji stated that "*teachers find it difficult to make the students speak*". Mr. Yousef affirmed similar sentiments, saying that "*students are reluctant to speak in the exam.*" This reluctance may be caused by the linguistic difficulties (e.g. lack of needed vocabulary) or psychological reasons (e.g., fear or anxiety). As highlighted in the literature review, a number of reasons that may cause fear and anxiety among learners to speak in L2 were stated by Dansieh et al. (2021), which were: low self-confidence to speak in public, lack of experience and knowledge of speaking to the public, fear of making mistakes and laughter and ridicule from colleagues. The other reason that may raise the level of fear occurs when examinees make mistakes during oral exams. Köroglu (2019) states that if students make mistakes in the speaking test, they will be under stress and their anxiety will increase. Thus, Al-Amari and Fawzi (2016) recommend that EFL instructors consider not only the goals of the activity, but also the student's level of ability, in order to determine when and how to correct students' mistakes. They state that, for students with high-level language proficiency, their instructors focus on their accuracy. On the other hand, if students show low-level language skills, their instructors should focus on their fluency to improve their communicative language. They further state that if examiners follow this recommendation, the examinees' anxiety and reluctance to speak will decrease.

C. Test Conduct and Administration

The data revealed that there are a number of obstacles that examiners may encounter during the speaking test, which are caused by a number of factors. The first factor may relate to the test instrument and the procedures of the exam itself. For example, Mr. Ali raised an issue that that "*The test questions are way above the students' levels*". Mr. Raji added that

“the problem is the level of the students compared to the questions on the speaking test raises the level of anxiety among the test takers”.

This problem may relate to two issues: the experience of text makers and/or the huge variety of learners' ability level within one class. The latter is expected because the students are accepted onto the PYP program from secondary school and all of them are put in one level without any kind of placement test. The second factor is test time (i.e. the amount of time allocated to administer the test to students), which appears to be an issue because it is limited, and both students and teachers do not find enough time to complete the oral assessment for each individual student within each classroom. Mr. Hassan mentioned this problem saying *“the time allocated for the speaking exams is considered a challenge. It may become a challenge if the number of students is high, and you have a limited time to conduct the exam”.* This problem may occur because of the huge number of students within a section and the limited number of instructors, which represents a very critical challenge at YELI-PYP.

In addition, the data revealed that learners contribute to the challenges that are encountered during the speaking test. One of the problems that is created by the learners is that they focus on language form rather than language fluency and ideas production. For instance, Mr. William states that *“Sometimes the students focus on grammar and on pronunciation and cannot think of ideas and information and that doesn't help them to give complete answers”.*

Moreover, the learners' hesitation to tell their assessor that the questions they have asked are unclear or that they do not understand the questions; this appears to be a significant challenge during the speaking exams. Mr. Ahmad mentions that, *“sometimes, students become afraid to tell the interviewer that they do not understand the questions and they just become speechless”.* This may occur because learners, as Ur (1996) states, try to avoid making mistakes because they try to avoid negative criticism or because they are shy. It may also occur because learners aim to avoid teachers' feedback. As Zulfiqar's (2021) study showed, 46.67% of students felt uncomfortable because their teachers correct their mistakes in front of their classmates. Students in such instances, as Mr. Ahmad says, find themselves unable to express themselves. This may affect the result of the students from two sides. First, the students will not speak up, which will create a case of no-discourse that will not help the assessor to find discourse parts that can be evaluated and marked. Second, students will take a long time to cover all the questions and parts that an assessor aims to ask for the exam. What will oblige the assessor is to either stop the exam before he or she finishes the questions needed for the exam goals or to extend the exam time, which will affect the time of other students.

D. Test Taking

Under the test taking theme, two sub-themes that emerged from the participants' responses were: memorizing the answers and learning the test-taking strategies. First, learners' tendency to memorize the answers before the exam was presented as one of the main challenges that the examiners encounter during the speaking exam. Mr. Waheeb mentioned that *“Students try to memorise the answers and get anxious.”* This caused the researcher to deliberate over whether this issue could stem from the teaching style that is used in the classroom. That is, the students will memorize the answers because the teachers will go over these types of questions during class, which are the same questions that students should expect to encounter in the final exam.

Second, the data revealed that one of the challenges that assessors encounter in the speaking test is that learners lack some test-taking strategies. Moreover, the data is linked between the lack of those strategies and some of psychological issues like anxiety. Mr. William raised that challenge when he said:

“... To reduce the test anxiety, students should learn the test-taking strategies and the teachers can help them by giving them practices on how they take a test. Teachers may also give some suggestions (such as taking deep breathing, relaxing their muscles, and closing their eyes and imagining positive results) to help the students overcome their problems of high stress level and anxiety to help them stay calm and confident before and during the exam”.

E. Teachers' Competency

The data collected during this study raised a number of difficulties that may make the speaking test difficult for the assessor. Among these difficulties was the assessor's competency to deal with the learners. Dr Noura pointed out that, *“some assessor lack of a level of training to know the student' level, to be able to judge a group of learners and to be able to compare between learners, to determine purpose of the test”.*

In the same vein, Dr Nasir raised the following concerns: *“Teachers need a number of characteristics that some of the teachers miss when they test their students speaking test. For example, they show little as attentive and keen listeners during the test. Also, some of them show a low level of experience as a speaking evaluator”.*

The above extracts discuss two groups of issues that the speaking test assessor must contend with. The first group relates to the teachers' personal and professional characteristics. These are their weaknesses to be attentive, keen listeners during the test and their low level of experience as a speaking evaluator. The other group of characteristics focus on their knowledge about their students and the test they are conducting.

V. CONCLUSION

It is evident that there are many differences between language learners when they seek to communicate in their L2, due to intelligence, motivation, an absence of enthusiasm in the subject, inadequate listening skills, insufficient vocabulary,

or a deficiency in trust in oneself coupled with an anxiety of making mistakes. The role of an effective teacher is to motivate and encourage his/her students as much as possible to learn the language accurately and fluently, and to overcome the challenges that they face. Teachers and learners should bear in mind that rapid speaking does not inherently equate to fluent speech. Fluent native speakers will adjust their speaking pace according to the context. Non-native English speakers believe that speaking rapidly enhances their fluency. Nevertheless, rapid speaking does not inherently equate to fluent communication and, while there is a strong relationship between accuracy and fluency, a person will not speak fluently unless they are strong in accuracy.

A. Finding

According to the results of the current study, there are many challenges facing assessors when they conduct speaking exams. First, incorrect grammar and improper level of vocabulary are used by students during the speaking test, in addition to their weak level of pronunciation and their limited fluency. Second, the reluctance that learners show during the exam. For example, a lack of needed vocabulary or psychological reasons (i.e. fear or anxiety). Third, the test instrument and the procedures of the exam that the examiner may apply. For example, some test questions are above the students' ability levels. Fourth, the students are accepted onto the PYP program from secondary school, and are all put in one level group without any kind of placement test. Fifth, the test time is limited and both students and teachers do not find enough time to complete the test for each individual student. Lastly, the learners' hesitation to tell their assessor that the questions they asked are not clear or they do not understand the questions of the assessors appear as a challenge. Furthermore, learners' tendency to memorize answers before the exam was presented as one of the challenges that may be encountered by examiners. The students may memorize these answers because the teachers prepare these questions during class, which students can expect to encounter in the final exam.

In conclusion, among these difficulties is the assessor's competency to deal with the learners. The teachers' personal and professional characteristics. These are their weaknesses to be attentive and keen listeners during the test and their low level of experience as a speaking evaluator. In addition, their knowledge about their students and the test they are conducting.

B. Recommendations and Suggestions

Based on the results of the study, the researchers reached a number of recommendations. First, there should be a diagnostic exam early in speaking skills, specifically at the beginning of the academic semester, so that teachers can discover the weakest points in their students (i.e. incorrect grammar and improper vocabulary), and then plan to carry out remedial programs. Second, there should be freedom for teachers to teach the skills that they are interested in. Third, there should be a committee to prepare speaking tests, in which the appropriateness of the test considers the students' levels, or to assign the task of preparing the test to the subject teacher for their full knowledge of the levels of their students. Moreover, there should be more opportunities for students to speak in front of their colleagues at least once a week. Furthermore, there should be an entry exam to determine which level or course is suitable for the YELI-PYP students, so that they are placed in the correct class from the onset. Finally, there should be training programs or workshops for students to reduce some factors that may affect them in learning speaking skills like anxiety, hesitation, being afraid, etc.

The researchers suggest further studies into this area of study. One of these suggestions is conducting a similar study in the secondary stage to investigate the challenges that face the teachers when they conduct speaking skills. This study includes speaking teachers who only teach male students. In line of this criteria and to further investigate, we propose that a similar study conducting in the female department.

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