



English-Speaking Confidence among Malaysian Technical University Students: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Speaking in English confidently is a challenging task but very crucial for university students. Graduates with good communication efficiency especially in the engineering field are greatly demanded in the current work industry. Performing confidently is not only important for scoring academic tasks but also to help expand the revenue of the companies at workplace. Thus, a pilot study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of a public technical university engineering undergraduates' confidence level in speaking English. A mixed method design was employed where a survey and semi-structured interview were conducted for data collection. The participants were selected using purposive sampling method where a total number of 50 undergraduates provided valid responses to the online questionnaire and 5 undergraduates participated in the semi-structured interview. Descriptive statistics using Statistical Package for the Social Science Version 25.0 (SPSS version 25.0) and thematic analysis were adopted for data analyses. The results revealed three main areas that were identified as important to build the students' confidence in speaking: applying manual skills, familiarization of vocabulary and correct usage of grammar. The findings also highlighted that the participants felt that more public speaking practices should be provided to them to improve their confidence level further in speaking English fluently.

Keywords: Speaking confidence; Communication ability; University undergraduates; Engineering students.

1. Introduction

Speaking is a productive skill which is unquestionably pulsating in the encouragement of effective communication and exclusively important in daily life. Besides, speaking confidently becomes a vital corresponding tool in communication (Sadiku, 2015). Since English language is practiced widely around the globe, many countries have been practising the use of English thoroughly (Crystal, 2003). Although challenging, the ability to speak confidently in English is not only important in the learning institutions but also within the society and workplace. Moreover, it is a norm nowadays for employers to seek for employees who can communicate competently in English. Previous studies show that the proficiency level among students are not satisfying due to various factors including the engineering students (Chavez *et al.*, 2016). Unfortunately, this is also a common scenario in the Malaysian context (Idrus and Salleh, 2017). Since the technical universities produce alumni who have skills in making innovations, it is very important for them to be proficient in English as well in order to market their products and ideas globally. In other words, they have to speak in English confidently to sell their designs worldwide.

There are many courses in Malaysian universities which are taught in English. However, students are found to be struggling to prepare their academic tasks including reports, assignments and projects in English which would affect their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) in studies (Ramadi *et al.*, 2016). Despite their ability in the basic English, students are reluctant to participate in classroom activities due to various reason including not having enough confidence in using the language (Abbas *et al.*, 2013). As a matter of fact, learning English as a Second Language (ESL) also poses difficulty in mastering the speaking skill among students (Leong and Ahmadi, 2017). Thus, many ESL learners including the university engineering students struggle in speaking English confidently in their academic pursuits which would affect their working career greatly if not tackled appropriately from the early stage itself. According to Slavin and Elton (1994), using English as a medium of communication has the advantage of being understood throughout the world in conducting business at international level. Therefore, technical

university undergraduates have to communicate confidently in English not only to perform in academia but also when they have graduated to make them more desirable to employers and consumers.

2. Confident Speaking and Contributing Factors among University Students

Speaking confidently helps students to deliver information more precisely and communicate with others more meaningfully. Raja (2017), stated that students can assess their level of self-confidence when they need to give a speech in public. Speaking to others publicly or personally with confidence which is essential for a better impression when students enter the realm of work can also add to professionalism. According to Tridinanti (2018), self-confidence significantly contributes to the learner's willingness to communicate in a foreign language. Thus, speaking in a foreign or second language requires a high level of self-confidence so that the message can be communicated across without being shy or hostile in various situations. A study conducted by Fatemeh (2017) has confirmed that speaking with confidence needs more practices. Hence, university students may gain more confidence when they keep practicing the language that they want to improve such as English.

According to Leong and Ahmadi (2017), students who speak English confidently are able to use accurate sentences. This is because they have wide vocabulary that can build confidence to speak in English without fear. Apart from that, vocabulary knowledge also becomes an important aspect in second language learning as limited vocabulary may hinder effective communication especially when speaking in English (Alqahtani, 2015). Besides, grammar ability is also always perceived as an important aspect of the ability in using English profoundly. Educators and learners of English will never be able to negate the importance of mastering the grammar ability in order to perform well in English. The speakers of English can usually improvise the ability in using good grammar by practising the language till they obtain the experience of speaking without hesitation to others. Based on their speaking experience they can identify their weaknesses or deficiencies especially in grammar (Leong and Ahmadi, 2017). Thus, learners can rectify their mistakes so that they can speak more confidently in English. In addition, confidence level can be improved by enhancing students' manual abilities including soft skills which can provide better chances to be engaged in the industry (Bartel, 2018; Collins, 2018; Rao, 2014). Students with high confidence level to speak in English are much more in line with the industry demands where they have high quality manual abilities including soft skills as well. Studies show that soft skills also influence successful learning tremendously (Handayani and Rabbianty, 2017). According to Ameen (2013), among the characteristics of manual abilities include the communication skills to express attitudes, ideas and thoughts well which are crucial in determining the success of employees at work place.

Many undergraduates who seem to have low competency in speaking skills are affected significantly by this inferiority that lead towards language anxiety and lack of motivation to continue speaking (Hidayati, 2018; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2011; Sutarsyah, 2017). Apparently, students become extremely cautious towards other people's judgments about their speaking competency, hence, sometimes cause them to refuse speaking in English (Subekti, 2018; Sutarsyah, 2017). Many students are comparatively quiet and fearful of speaking especially in public for various reasons such as afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at. The cultural concept of losing face when making mistakes is a common obstacle to fluency in speaking which affect students' confidence greatly. These associated problems make all their academic activities including in-class presentation, speaking examination and presenting ideas verbally become extremely challenging. Thus, in order to have technical university alumni who can speak in English confidently, university students have to practice from the first year they enter the university.

In order to become effective speaker, students need to develop self-confidence which is one of the fundamental key elements that can unlock some important communication barriers, especially in English. However, there are also other reasons for students for not being able to speak in English confidently. There will always be some dominant students who would interrupt frequently or who constantly look for teachers' attention where the more timid students are comfortable keeping quiet and watching the lesson unfolding instead of participating (Juhana, 2012). Thus, one of the main reasons for not being able to speak confidently is low of participation. Therefore, it is very important for students to know exactly the factors that impede their fluency in speaking confidently in English.

2.1. Objective of the Study

The technical university students' future work area would be mostly associated with people in public. In this case, the confidence in speaking in English would play an important role for them to be successful at work place. Thus, the main objective of this study is to identify the barriers of English-speaking confidence level among the university students based on the first year Engineering undergraduates' perception.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Sampling

This pilot study was conducted to obtain primary data from the undergraduates themselves regarding the main issue of confidence in speaking English. Their perceptions of the priority areas to focus in order to improve their confidence level in speaking English were studied. Thus, a mixed method design was employed in this pilot study using on a survey and semi-structured interview techniques. The participants selected for the study were the first-year undergraduates (from one of the Engineering faculties) of a technical public university in Malaysia. A sample of 50 participants was chosen using purposive sampling method for the survey. Meanwhile, five participants who participated in the survey were randomly selected to participate in the semi-structured interview. The survey was carried out by sending questionnaires to the participants using Google Forms. This study employed a self-developed

questionnaire with four-point Likert Scale where the scales were: 1= Never, 2= Seldom, 3= Often and 4= Always. The items were developed based on literature review. All the items were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Science Version 25 (SPSS 25).

The Google Forms were distributed through *WhatsApp* application. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Section A (personal information) and Section B (English speaking confidence). In Section A of the questionnaire, only the participants' information related to year of study, faculty and program were asked as this study involved purposive sampling where only students under engineering faculty who were pursuing the degree program in the first year were selected as participants of the study. In Section B, questions related to speaking confidence were asked where the constructs were divided into three parts to identify the participants' ability specifically in terms of grammar, vocabulary and manual abilities. Part 1 had three items that tested the participants' perceptions about the importance of grammar in speaking confidence. Part 2 had four items to study the participants' perceptions about the importance of vocabulary. Part 3 had three items to study the participants' perceptions of manual abilities application to speak confidently in English. Next, the semi-structured interview was carried out on five randomly selected participants. During the interview sessions, participants were asked to provide recommendations on how to develop speaking confidence in English that would be suitable for them to improve their confidence level in speaking English. All questions for the survey and interview which covered the three main aspects for confidence in speaking (grammar, vocabulary and manual abilities) were created by taking into consideration of the students' background as the first-year engineering students from a technical university to assess their confidence level in speaking English. All responses were analyzed respectively.

4. Findings and Discussion

This pilot study involved 50 students who participated in the survey conducted where five of them were randomly selected to participate in the semi-structured interview. The questionnaire used for survey consisted of two sections. The Section A was answered by 50 (100%) first year engineering students who were pursuing degree program. The Section B comprised items for English speaking confidence issues related to grammar (Part 1), vocabulary (Part 2) and manual abilities (Part 3). In Part 1, the three items on grammar aspect included elements of paying attention to grammar included issues of paying attention to grammar tenses, focussing correct articles and repeating speech (if there was grammatical error). In Part 2, the four items on vocabulary included issues of the importance of vocabulary in relation to focusing on each word used in speech, usage of dictionary for meanings, unfamiliar words' influence and reading activities to acquire new words. In Part 3, the three items on manual abilities included elements of importance on clarity, emphasis on problem-solving and decision-making speech related to enhancing speaking confidence in English. [Table 1](#) shows the summary of the students' responses based on the constructs of the questionnaire.

Table-1. Summary of Mean Score Based on Constructs

		Number of respondents (N=50)	
Skills	Question	Mean	Ranking
Grammar	paying attention to grammar tenses	2.127	2.902
	focussing on correct articles		
	Repeating speech (if there is error)		
Vocab	Focus on each word	3.15	
	usage of dictionary for meanings		
	unfamiliar words' influence		
	read to learn new words		
Manual	importance of clarity	3.36	
	Express ideas well		
	Reduce anxiety		

[Table 1](#) shows that the mean score for Part 1 (grammar) was 2.127, Part 2 (vocabulary) was 3.15 and Part 3 (manual) was 3.36. This shows that the participants perceived that manual abilities were the most important element followed by vocabulary and grammar in developing confidence in speaking English.

According to the analysis data via SPSS 25, the cronbach alpha for the instrument (questionnaire) used was 0.859 which was considered high and the instruments could be accepted to be used for this research. As stated in the objectives, this research was to explore English speaking confidence level which was classified under grammar, vocab and manual abilities, among the selected Engineering undergraduates of a technical public university. This level was determined by referring to the level of Scale by [Mohd \(2009\)](#) as highlighted in [Table 2](#) below.

Table-2. Level of Scale

Mean	Level
Low	0.00 – 1.33
Moderate	1.34 – 2.66
High	2.67 – 4.0

The findings revealed that participants' mean scores for manual abilities (the highest) was 3.36 and vocabulary (the second highest) was 3.15, which were considered high. The results of the mean score for the aspect of grammar was 2.127 which highlighted that their perceptions towards the importance of grammar in speaking was moderate. Table 3 shows the summary of the analysis for Section B based on the ranking perceived by the participants of the study.

Table-3. Summary Item Analysis Based on Ranking of Importance

Skills	Summary Item Statistics							
Part 3 - Manual		Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Rang	Maximum / Minimum	Variance	N of Items
	Item Means	3.360	3.300	3.420	.120	1.036	.004	3
Part 2 - Vocab		Mean	Minimum	maximum	rang	Maximum / Minimum	Variance	N of Items
	Item Means	3.150	1.980	3.620	1.640	1.828	.616	4
Part 1 - Grammar		Mean	Minimum	maximum	rang	Maximum / Minimum	Variance	N of Items
	Item Means	2.127	1.380	2.900	1.520	2.101	.578	3

The study revealed that the participants' of this pilot study considered that among the three aspects that were investigated, the manual abilities and vocabulary were very important in developing confidence in their English-speaking skills. Grammar component was assumed as a minor aspect of importance in terms of confidence in speaking. However, the overall the mean value for the study was 2.902 which was considered high (Mohd, 2009). Thus, the importance of grammar in helping students to speak confidently in English would not be negated.

Next, data were also collected from the semi-structured interview where five students from those who answered the questionnaire were randomly selected and interviewed. The interview provided more details about their own perceptions on how they could improve their speaking confidence in English. Most of their suggestions fell under the theme of regular practices in English where they mentioned phrases such as 'speaking to friends', 'speak to lecturers', 'public speaking practice' and 'speak based on needs'. Thus, the interviewees obviously felt that with more speaking practices during their study in the university would create a good platform for them to improve their speaking skills in English that would help them to enhance their confidence level as well.

5. Conclusion

The pilot study highlighted that the level of confidence in speaking English among the undergraduates was relatively good but can be further improved. The study provided the primary data from the undergraduates' own perception regarding the main aspects involved in developing confidence level to speak in English. Based on the pilot study it was found that they prioritized manual abilities, vocabulary and grammar accordingly. This study is hoped to provide some prior information for the actual study on the aspects to focus on in order to help the engineering undergraduates to develop confidence in speaking English. It would be much easier and more meaningful to plan subsequent projects or activities by emphasizing the aspects that they think would be beneficial to them for their own betterment. In this way, the effort of the educators will be parallel with the needs of the engineering undergraduates. Based on the findings from the interview also showed that the participants would prefer if more public-oriented speaking activities were conducted during their lecture hours. They were hoping that the in-class session would be more fruitful for them if they could utilize it more towards practising their own speaking skills that would significantly help to develop their confidence level as well. Therefore, students should be provided with more the time and opportunity towards course presentations to enhance their confidence level to speak in English through various demeanors.

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