

Assessment Of Inhibitors Of ESL Learners In General Foundation Program: A Case Study Of The Scientific College Of Design

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Abstract: Higher education institutions are diligently working for assessment of teaching learning process as well as factors influencing this process to have continuous improvement. According to the Ministry of Education in Oman (1996), basic education aims to make the learner gain necessary skills for life by developing his/her communication skills, self-learning, and ability to use critical thinking to deal with science and modern technology (Al Abri, 2008).

Spoken language production is often considered one of the most difficult aspects of language learning (Brown & Yule, 1983). Learners of English in Oman often do not have opportunities to speak English outside the classroom, and for many of them, the course book is the only place where they meet English (Al Zedjali, 2009).

This case study explores factors which influence oral English skills of ESL learners in the second level of GFP at Scientific College of Design Oman. Factors include lack of motivation, cultural inhibition, anxiety, insufficient opportunities in the ESL classroom, lack of exposure to spoken English outside class, peer group discouragement, use of native language and uneven participation. The study also aims to find out the main factors which contribute to the existence of these problems. One hundred sixty General Foundation Programme level 2 students (high school graduates) and ten ESL instructors answered a questionnaire on the problems the learners faced while speaking in English.

The results of this study can help the EFL teachers, ESL students, curriculum designers, instructors and assessors to understand factors which influence spoken L2 skills. Consequently these findings can be incorporated in the ESL classrooms, curricula and assessments to improve the students' oral communication skills.

Keywords: Oral English skills, ESL Learners, Oman, communication,

I. INTRODUCTION

Judith Munat (2005) stated English today is considered as the international lingua franca. According to some estimates, is spoken (at various levels of competence) by more than 2,000 million people around the globe, including native speakers (over 380 million) and those who learn it as a second or foreign language. English Club the world's premier showed how learning any language involves the four skills which we call "Macro Skills" that we need for complete communication. When we learn our native language, we usually learn to listen first, then to speak, then to read, and finally to write. These are called the four "language skills". (listen→speak) (read→write). Each two skills are connected to each other in

other words. Listening and reading are the input "reception" while speaking, and writing are the output "production". This rule is the same with learning English.

From her experience of teaching ESL at the General Foundation Programme in Scientific College of Design, the researcher has observed that the ESL students can pass the ESL exams but they are unwilling to speak in L2. Through personal interactions and academic advising the students disclosed the following factors lack of motivation, cultural inhibition, anxiety, insufficient opportunities in the ESL classroom, lack of exposure to spoken English outside class, peer group discouragement, use of native language and uneven participation are their barriers to speak in L2. To facilitate the students to improve their speaking skills, it is imperative to

find solutions to their problems. Furthermore, the ESL instructors need to know the factors that influence their students speaking skills so that they can tackle with these factors to assist the students to ameliorate their speaking potential. However, it is the first time a research in this problem is conducted at Scientific College of Design.

The current study addresses two issues:

- ✓ What are the problems that the ESL students at Scientific College of design experience when they learn to speak English?
- ✓ What are the factors that affect their speaking skill?

English is a global language; it is the language of commerce, technology and science for generations to come. 1.5 billion people are learning English Language in the world today, although everyone knows this language. As (Judy 2011, p. 13 & 17) pointed that “there is always a problem to differentiate between written English alphabets and spoken alphabet.” In this case study the gap between the teaching methodologies and the learning process with reference to spoken English production is addressed. The study deals with the external and the internal factors that impede the ESL students speaking skills in L2. The internal factors are anxiety, motivation, fear, and the external factors are uneven participation, use of L1, peer group discouragement, insufficient opportunities, and cultural inhibition.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

PREVIOUS STUDIES RELATED TO THE INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC FACTORS

ANXIETY

Anxiety can be defined as “a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (McIntyre & Gardner, 1994: cited in 1999).

Park & Lee (2005), Tanveer (2007) examined the relationships between second language learners’ anxiety, self-confidence and speaking performance. The results of their study indicated that learners’ anxiety level was negatively related to their oral performance. The findings suggested that students’ feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness may impede their language learning and performance abilities. He cites that “the higher the anxiety, the lower the performance”.

MOTIVATION

Motivation is defined as the extent one strives to acquire the language because of the desire to do so and the satisfaction derived from it Gardner (1985). In addition Parsons, Hinson and Brown (2001, p. 28) define motivation as an important component or factor in the learning process. Learning and motivation have the same importance in order to achieve something. Learning makes us gain new knowledge and skills and motivation pushes us or encourages us to go through the learning process.

Ali Dincer & Savas Yesilyurt (2013) in their study *Pre-Service English Teachers’ Beliefs on Speaking Skills Based on*

Motivational Orientations the findings revealed that “the subjects, whether they were intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to speak English, had negative ideas about speaking instruction in Turkey, though they all agreed that it was the most important language skill. The findings also showed that they felt incompetent in oral communication though they had different motivational orientations about speaking English. The findings are significant for understanding speaking instruction in English language classrooms from a motivational perspective and helpful for enhancing learners’ speaking ability with intrinsic motivation.”

According to Asante, Al-Mahrooqi & Abrar-ul-Hassan (2012), most school students are not interested in or motivated to learn English because of their negative perceptions of it and of westerners. They see it as difficult and not as important as other subjects. They lack sufficient autonomy to study it, work at it only for exams, and then cheat in order to pass them. They also lack appropriate study skills and depend on memorization, a strategy transferred from their culture and traditional Arab way of learning.

FEAR

The results of the past research supports the idea that language anxiety, for untold number of learners, has its origin in the fear of making mistakes and attracting the derision of classmates” (Jones, 2004). Jones also argues that language learners feel afraid because of “a fear of appearing awkward, foolish and incompetent in the eyes of learners’ peers or others”. As a result of the fear of making mistakes, some learners expressed that learning and speaking a foreign language in the classroom is “always a problem”. In line with the study of Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) on ‘perfectionism’, fear of making mistakes has been found to be strongly linked with the learners’ concern to save their positive image or impression in the mind of their teacher and peers.

UNEVEN PARTICIPATION

This finding goes in accordance with the result of Chau, Fung-ming (1996) who states that the big class size discourages students from expressing views as it is extremely threatening for teenagers to face a large number of people by themselves while speaking a foreign language which they may expose their weaknesses by making mistakes very easily. The students were not given enough time to respond. Because of their language, they need more time to think, to put words, to make sentences before they can speak in class (Zainal Abidin Bin Sayadi, 2007).

The finding is consistent with another study carried out by Liu (2005) who reported that some students need more time to think and organize their thoughts before they can participate.

Al-Lawati (1995) also investigated the difficulties encountered by Omani students in their oral production of English and found out that the linguistic domain (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and discourse) constitutes the most serious area of difficulty, and this is because, as explained by teachers, the learners have not yet developed an adequate level in the basic abilities of the language. This is because—they think—of the curriculum that does not provide enough

opportunity for learning and practicing new and varied vocabulary and does not provide enough variety in tasks designed for the teaching of grammar. This results in having very few opportunities for students to practice the speaking skill, especially with the large number of students in class.

USE OF LI

Harmer (1991) suggests some reasons why students use mother-tongue in class. Firstly, when the students are asked to have a discussion about a topic that they are incapable of, if they want to say anything about the topic, they will use their own language. Another reason is that the use of mother-tongue is a natural thing to do. In addition, using the first language to explain something to another if there is no encouragement from the teachers. Finally, if teachers frequently use the students' language, the students will feel comfortable to do it.

PEER GROUP DISCOURAGEMENT

Active discouragement comes from linguistically incompetent peers who mock their friends' efforts to use their English outside the classroom. Unmotivated themselves, they are poor models for their friends. Nor does there seem to be much in-class opportunity for pair or group work, which creates an uncooperative atmosphere not conducive to language learning.

Fear of losing face, publicly or in front of their classmates through criticizing, caused many students to become anxious when speaking English in class. Causing someone to lose face results in a loss of cooperation and even, in extreme occasions, with subtle retaliation against the professor months after the original action transpired (Liu & Little wood, 1997).

This finding is similar to another study done by Tanveer (2007) who reported that the students in his study experience grammatical difficulties which can lead to the impression that anxious students are not capable communication in the second language.

This finding is similar to that reached by Thaher (2005) who reported that students are afraid of being laughed at or of being criticized by others due to inaccurate pronunciation.

INSUFFICIENT OPPORTUNITIES

There is, then, a paucity of opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Even in school – beyond the classroom – students are denied a chance to speak or practice the language with their teachers, most of whom want to converse in Arabic after the English period. Students attempting to practice their language with other students are mocked by them because of overall negative attitudes and a particular, long-standing perception that those who try to speak English outside the classroom are showing off (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012b). There is minimal English output from students, therefore, partly because of a discouraging environment. Though much is expected of students, unhelpful school administrations do not try to create an atmosphere that fosters English language acquisition. Classrooms are often cramped and crowded,

containing mixed levels of language proficiency, and there is a general dearth of facilities and incentives for keen learners.

CULTURAL INHIBITION

Social status or social distance between interlocutors can have a considerable influence on communication (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977: cited in Carrier, 1999). Similar to Jones' (2004) findings about culture as a causal factor in Asian context, an experienced female teacher stated, "It is not anxiety just about language but differences in cultural practices. The use of the term 'losing face', by the participant supports Jones' (2004) view that language anxiety is a concern of face in different cultures.

As Li and Lui (2011) put forward, one of the causes of reticence and reluctance in the EFL classroom may be cultural differences because certain cultures forbid or strongly discourage individuals from speaking up in classroom settings.

Parental attitudes and the wider social context are also relevant because they reflect little awareness of the importance of English for school students' future academic and professional success – attitudes mirroring the students' own. At best parents are satisfied if their children simply obtain a passing grade in English, and some even discourage their children from learning and excelling in it, seeing it as foreign and potentially harmful. Hence, then, a lack of supervision of homework or concern about academic progress in general.

The internal and external factors results in negative ramification, both the ESL lecturers and ESL students are disappointed. Therefore it is exigent to investigate the inhibitors and to comprehend ESL learners unwillingness to partake in the English language classroom and to augment the learning and teaching of ESL.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study were 159 Female and 1 Male General Foundation Program level two students from Scientific College of Design, Sultanate of Oman. The students were studying Fall Semester, academic year 2016-2017. Another set of participants also included a focus group of ten ESL instructors (4 female and 6 male).

B. RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The research instrument utilized for this study was a questionnaire based on a 5 point Likert Scale which was adapted from the original 7-point Likert Scale format of Gardner's Attitude / Motivation Test Battery (AMI), 909 ranged from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' (Gardner, 1960).

The questionnaire was delivered during class hours to both the ten ESL instructors and 160 General Foundation Program level two students. The teachers questionnaires consisted of 10 mixed questions (2-point Likert scale, 5-point Likert scale and open ended question) designed in English.

The students questionnaire consisted of 42 closed-questions (5- point Likert scale) designed in English.

The students' questionnaire consists of the following parts:

PART 1: General background information of the GFP2 students.

PART 2: GFP2 students' problems with English speaking.

The ESL instructors' questionnaire consists of the following parts:

PART 1: Demographic information of the ESL instructors.

PART 2: ESL instructors' assessment of the GFP2 students' problems with English speaking skills.

IV. RESULTS

A. RESULTS OF INSTRUCTORS QUESTIONNAIRES

The majority of the teachers (50%) agreed that the students listening skills are bad. 40% of the teachers agreed that the students were very bad in their L2 listening skills. 10% of the teachers believed that the students had average L2 listening skills. The majority of the teachers (60%) agreed that the students have average L2 speaking skills. 30% of the teachers agreed that the students were bad in their L2 speaking skills. 10% of the teachers believed that the students were very bad in their L2 speaking skills. The majority of the teachers (60%) agreed that the students have average L2 speaking skills. 30% of the teachers agreed that the students were bad in their L2 speaking skills. 10% of the teachers believed that the students were very bad in their L2 speaking skills.

The majority of the teachers (80%) agreed that they keep quiet, smile and encourage the students to go on their task. 60% of the teachers would stop the students and correct their mistakes. 50% of the teachers would watch, listen to the students and write down points to give feedback later. 40% of the teachers would prompt the students forwards if the students cannot think of what to say. One teacher agreed to getting annoyed when the students keep making mistakes.

The majority of the teachers (90%) agreed that motivation to speak affected students' speaking performance (Figure 1). 80% of the teachers thought that confidence and anxiety negatively influenced the students' speaking performance. The same number of teachers (40%) viewed time for preparation and the students listening ability to speak as important factors that influenced students' speaking performance. 60% of the teachers thought that pressure to perform well also affected their students' speaking performance. The teachers (30%) agreed that topical knowledge affected students' speaking performance. 50% referred listeners' support that affect the speaking performance. 12% agreed that students are shy and 8% believe that the students were fearful of criticism. None of the teachers believed that the time allowed to perform a speaking task affected the students speaking performance. One teacher believed that their students' speaking performance was affected by feedback during the speaking activities.

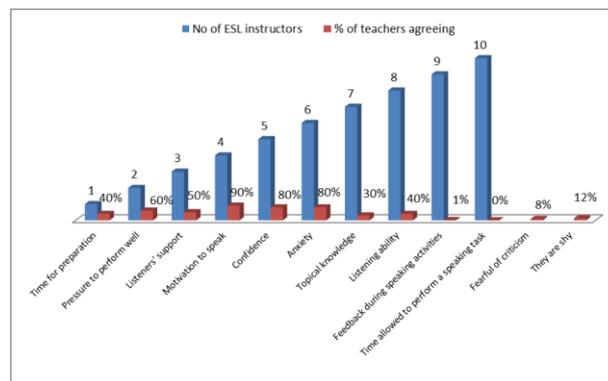


Figure 1: Factors affecting GFP students speaking performance

The teachers were asked to choose the problems that their students encountered. There were five problems provided for the teachers to choose from. 80% of the teachers stated that their students cannot use relevant vocabulary in English. The same number of teachers (60%) believed that the students lacked encouragement from the society and the students prefer to converse in Arabic. For (40%) teachers, peer group discouragement was a problem for the students. One teacher agreed that the students speak very little or not at all.

The teachers' were asked to choose close-ended questions. 70% of the teachers agreed that the GFP2 students have sufficient opportunity to speak in English in the college, but 30% of the teachers disagreed. The teachers' were asked to choose close-ended questions. Majority of the teachers (90%) agreed that the GFP2 students were shy to participate in the class because of the presence of a male student. Only (10%) of the teachers disagreed. The teachers' were asked to choose close-ended questions. Majority of the teachers (60%) agreed that the GFP2 students can practice their English speaking skills with their family members or friends, but (40%) of the teachers disagreed.

All the teachers' (100%) agreed that the class size affects the GFP2 students speaking opportunity. Majority of the teachers suggested that the students' should be proactive and take interest to practice speaking in English using the online activities. The students' should make an effort to actively participate in the class speaking activities. The students should make an attempt to speak in English on campus and in their society with their family and friends. The students' should participate in the English club activities.

B. RESULTS FROM STUDENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

This research study explored a set of possible inhibitors of ESL learners which might influence oral skills. Factors include: lack of motivation, cultural inhibitors, anxiety, insufficient opportunities peer group discouragement, use of Arabic, uneven class participation, and anxiety. Results indicated that the most influential factors were motivation and anxiety while the least was uneven participation. For motivation, the majority of students thought that English is not an essential in their society; that they will not use English after they graduate; they need English to pass the General Foundation Program; they were more interested in completing the course rather than learning the language (Figure 2). Boredom ranked as the least factor among motivational

factors. Sixty percent of the students reported that they got bored due to teaching methodology used in class.

As for anxiety, students reported that they get tense and nervous when they speak in front of the whole class; they get anxious as they are not confident in speaking English; they are worried about failing; they are frightened when they do not understand the teacher. It is important to note that 65% of the students felt scared in English courses than in Math and Computer (Figure 3).

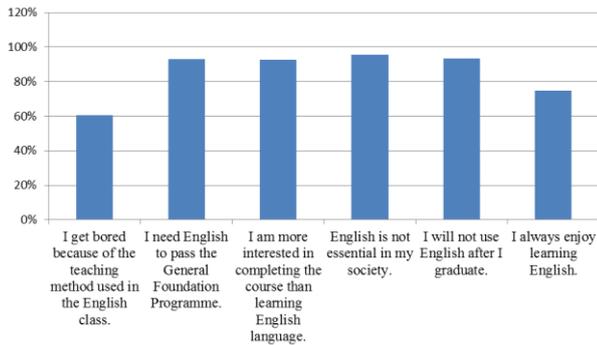


Figure 2: Motivation factors affecting students' speaking performance

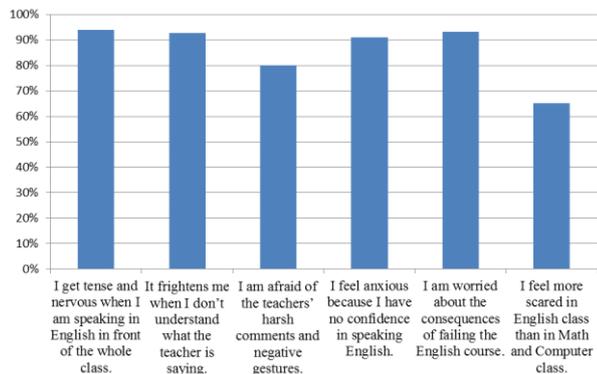


Figure 3: Anxiety factors affecting students' speaking performance

Eighty seven percent of students reported that they used Arabic, body language, or remain silent instead of interacting in English (Figure 4). Ninety one percent of respondents indicated that they used Arabic because they have limited English vocabulary. The majority of students reported that it was easier for them to think in Arabic and translate thoughts to English. Lack of proficiency in English grammar was also a factor to use Arabic. Other factors which led to the use of Arabic was time required for organization of ideas. In addition, students indicated that they preferred to clear their doubts in Arabic rather than English.

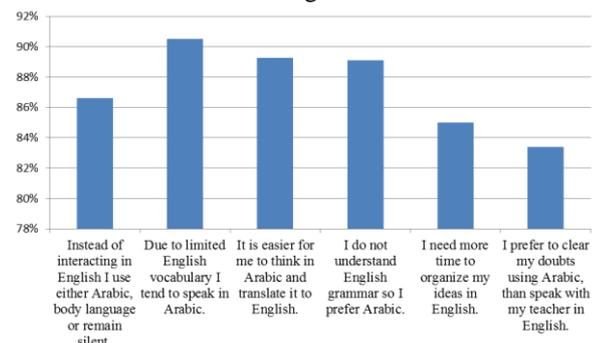


Figure 4: Reasons for Using Arabic instead of English

In investigating cultural inhibition, results revealed that the majority of students (95%) reported that English was not necessary as Arabic is the official language in Sultanate of Oman; Their families and society do not encourage one to speak in English; Shyness to speak in presence of male classmates was also an inhibitor (Figure 5). Other factors were less evident, students indicated that factors such as having classmates who were smart and intelligent and classmates who can speak good English. Only 49% of students reported that they were shy to speak in the presence of male teachers.

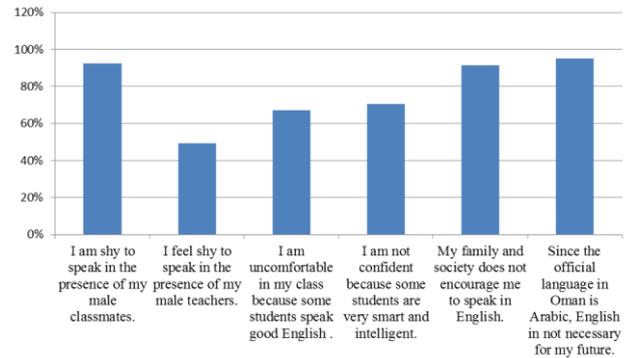


Figure 5: Cultural inhibition factors affecting students' speaking performance

Results revealed "insufficient opportunities to speak in English" was among factors inhibiting students to learn English in the General Foundation Program. Ninety two percent of respondents reported that they did not have the opportunity to speak English outside the classroom (Figure 6). Respondents family, friends, teachers, and students converse in Arabic. Sixty nine percent reported that they are unable to speak in class because of the large number of students and sixty five percent reported that students with good English proficiency always interact in class. The least evident factor was that their teachers did not give the time needed to understand, think, and answer. In other words, sufficient time for the speaking task.

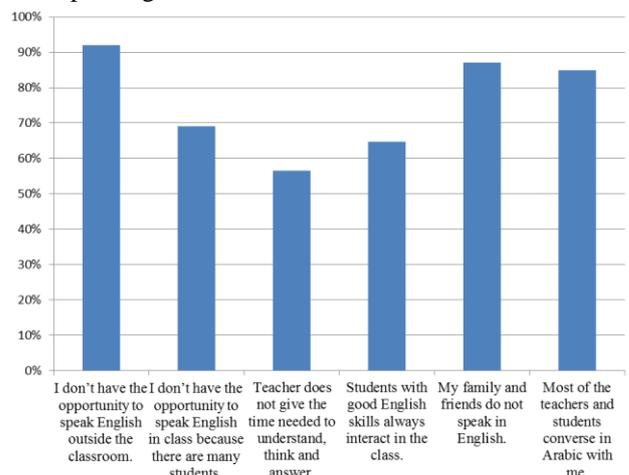


Figure 6: Insufficient Opportunities to Speak in English

Respondents indicated that 76% did not realize the need to speak in English since their classmates were fluent in Arabic and 70% feared that they would lose face with their classmates (Figure 7). Sixty nine of the respondents reported that they did not feel bonded with their classmates. Sixty seven percent indicated that their friends made fun of them

when they spoke in English. Fifty seven percent reported that their classmates did not listen and interact with them during their presentations and 56% reported that their classmates did not allow them to contribute in group tasks.

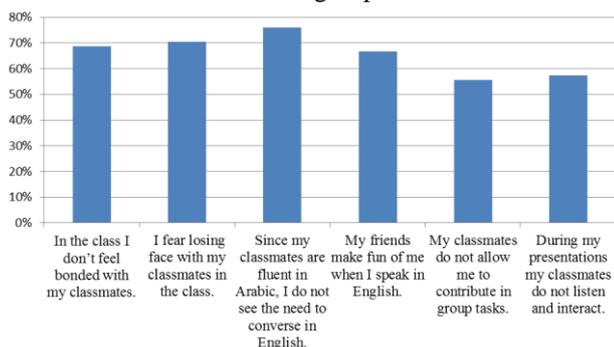


Figure 7: Peer group discouragement factors affecting students speaking performance

In exploring "uneven participation", results indicated that 56% of the students thought that the instructor is unable to focus on each students and due to large class size the instructor is unable to interact with individual students (Figure 8). Fifty percent of the students thought that instructors focus on the good and outstanding students only. Forty three percent thought the classroom arrangements does not encourage participation. Only 37% thought that they did not get an opportunity to speak during group tasks and 35% thought they miss a few classes, they would be unable to participate.

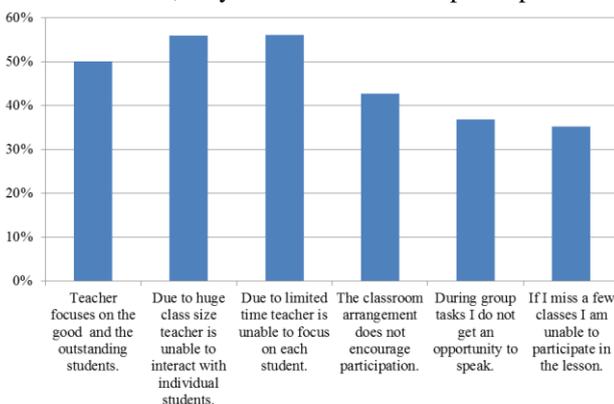


Figure 8: Reasons for uneven participation

V. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the factors which influence the oral English skills of ESL learners in the second level of General Foundation Programme at Scientific College of Design Oman. The results of the study indicate that the ESL students faced many problems such as (1) it is easier for them to think in Arabic and translate it to English also they do not understand English grammar so they prefer to speak in Arabic; (2) the students lacked motivation and a common goal to speak in English; (3) they are shy to speak in the presence of their male classmates; (4) students don't have the opportunity to speak English outside the classroom; (5) they fear losing face and they don't feel bonded with my classmates; (6) they were not confident because some students were very smart and intelligent and spoke good English; (7) they get tensed and

nervous when they are speaking in English in front of the whole class; (8) it frightens them when they don't understand what the teacher is saying and they are worried about the consequences of failing the English course.

Based on the results of the study, some recommendations were suggested for both the instructors and the students at Scientific College of Design Oman. As for the ESL instructors. The results of this study can help the EFL teachers, ESL students, curriculum designers, instructors and assessors to understand factors which influence spoken L2 skills. Consequently these findings can be incorporated in the ESL classrooms, curricula and assessments to improve the students' oral communication skills.

It is important to note the limitations of this research study. The majority of the research sample consisted of females. This limits the generalization of results. Perhaps there are gender differences which could be focused on during future research studies. Descriptive statistical analysis was used since it was a preliminary research study to investigate the main factors influencing the ESL students in the General Foundation Program. However, in future comparative research studies including other higher education institutions in Oman, inferential statistics will be used.

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