

## Challenges and Solutions in Teaching English Speaking Skills to Arab Students in Northern Syria in 2023-2024.

التحديات والمقترحات في مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنكليزية للطلاب العرب في شمال سوريا  
للعام 2023 - 2024

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### Abstract

This study examines the challenges and solutions in teaching English speaking skills to Arab students in Northern Syria, focusing on first-year students at Idleb University. The research highlights key issues impacting students' English-speaking proficiency, such as difficulties with speaking and listening, neglect of practical phonetics, low-quality teaching at primary education levels, and limited exposure to English. Other significant challenges include ineffective teaching methods, weak classroom participation, cultural influences, and the hardships of living in war conditions. The study uses descriptive and analytical mixed methods, the sample consists of (100) students and (30) teachers, and they used SPSS for data analysis. Findings reveal that students' low confidence, large class sizes, and a lack of seriousness in learning English further compound the issue. The study recommends fostering peer interaction, providing language support, integrating real-world contexts, offering feedback and correction, incorporating speaking activities, and utilizing technology tools. Addressing these challenges aims to enhance the

English-speaking skills of students at Idleb University, contributing to their academic and professional development.

**Keywords: Challenges, Speaking skills, Idleb University, Teaching methods, Language support**

### الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة التحديات والحلول في تعليم مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب العرب في شمال سوريا، مع التركيز على طلاب السنة الأولى في جامعة إدلب. يبرز البحث القضايا الرئيسية التي تؤثر على كفاءة الطلاب في التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية، مثل صعوبات مهارات التحدث والاستماع، إهمال علم الصوتيات العملي، ضعف جودة التعليم في المراحل الابتدائية، وقلة التعرض للغة الإنجليزية. وتشمل التحديات الأخرى طرق التدريس غير الفعالة، ضعف المشاركة في الفصل، العوامل الثقافية، وتأثير ظروف العيش في ظل الحرب. تستخدم الدراسة منهجاً وصفيًا وتحليلياً تكونت عينة الدراسة من (100) طالب و(30) معلماً، كما استخدم الباحثون برنامج (SPSS) لتحليل البيانات. تُظهر النتائج أن ضعف الثقة بالنفس لدى الطلاب، كبر حجم الفصول، وعدم الجدوية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية يزيد من تعقيد المشكلة. أوصت الدراسة بتشجيع التفاعل بين الأقران، توفير الدعم اللغوي، دمج السياقات الواقعية، تقديم التغذية الراجعة والتصحيح، إدخال أنشطة التحدث، واستخدام أدوات التكنولوجيا. تهدف معالجة هذه التحديات إلى تعزيز مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب جامعة إدلب، مما يدعم نجاحهم الأكاديمي والمهني.

**الكلمات المفتاحية: التحديات، مهارات التحدث، جامعة إدلب، طرق التدريس، الدعم اللغوي**

### Introduction

The strong presence of the English language has made it the common language in many countries and the most spoken language in the world. Nowadays, English plays a prominent role in developing the world's education and business. This global significance makes English receive special attention in Northern Syria. Accordingly, it has been given great importance in schools, colleges, universities, and institutions. For instance, public schools teach English as a core subject from the first through twelfth grades. However, most private schools start teaching English from kindergarten, during their general education.

### Statement of the Problem

The statement of the study problem is the weak English-speaking level of the first-year university students who study English as a second language, which is affected

by lack of exposure to English, weak self-confidence and self-motivation, lack of language practice and exposure to it, and neglect the phonetics along with vocabulary and grammar, as well as to the low teaching quality during the primary stages.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are to investigate and analyze the following:

1. Identifying the factors contributing to the low English-speaking level of first-year students at Idleb University in Syria, who are studying English as a second language.
2. Understanding the challenges and barriers faced by these students in learning English speaking.
3. Proposing applicable solutions to improve their proficiency.

### **Hypotheses of the Study**

1. Neglecting phonetics particularly will lead to a horrible quality of pronunciation and speaking and vice versa. In addition, having a strong grammar background and vocabulary can support speaking fluently.
2. Low teaching quality at primary stages makes speaking fluently much more difficult in the first year at university.
3. Non-native university students who are not exposed to English and do not practice it at home or other places will face more difficulties in speaking fluently and accurately.

### **Questions of the Study**

1. Why phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary are important to enhance the English-speaking level?
2. What teaching quality at primary stages can contribute to enhancing English speaking during the first university year?
3. How does limited exposure to English at home impact the speaking proficiency of non-native speakers?

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study lies in its potential to address a pressing issue in the education system. By focusing on the English-speaking level of first-year students

at Idleb University, the study will highlight the challenges faced by students who are learning English as a second language in a non-English-speaking country like Syria. This study has the potential to identify the root causes of the problem and propose practical solutions that can be implemented in the university setting to improve the English-speaking skills of these students. By doing so, it can contribute to the overall development and success of the students, not just in their English language proficiency, but also in their academic and professional endeavors.

### **Methodology of the Study**

The methodology used to conduct the current study is the analytical-descriptive method. In addition to that, observation of the students' speaking will be taken into consideration.

An electronic survey will be conducted, having many questions to measure and assess the ideas that need to be dealt with like problems and solutions regarding English speaking, to show its results later using visualization applications. This questionnaire may be conducted through direct/indirect interviews.

Regarding the sample:

The number of expected interviews of targeted students is about (100), and the number of expected interviews with teachers is about (30).

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study will be limited to the first year, Idleb University students in Syria, who study the English language as a second language in academic year 2023–2024.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Developing English speaking skills among Arab students in Northern Syria presents unique challenges due to sociocultural, economic, and educational constraints. This literature review examines key studies addressing these challenges and explores effective solutions implemented to improve English language speaking proficiency.

#### **Challenges in Teaching English Speaking Skills**

##### **Socioeconomic Barriers**

The socioeconomic conditions in Northern Syria significantly impact educational outcomes. According to Al-Ali (2021), many students face economic hardships that limit access to educational resources, including English language learning materials and qualified teachers. These financial constraints result in larger class sizes and limit one-on-one support (Ahmad & Jamil, 2022).

### **Lack of Trained Educators**

One of the most pressing issues is the shortage of well-trained English language educators. A study by Haddad (2020) highlights that many teachers in conflict-affected regions do not possess adequate training in communicative language teaching (CLT) methods, which are essential for fostering speaking skills. This lack of professional development affects the quality of language instruction (Salem, 2022).

### **Linguistic and Cultural Barriers**

Cultural factors also influence students' willingness to practice speaking English. Arab students often experience anxiety when speaking a foreign language due to fear of making mistakes and facing peer judgment (Hussein, 2021). Additionally, the significant linguistic differences between Arabic and English create pronunciation and fluency challenges (Zaid, 2020).

### **Solutions for Improving English Speaking Skills**

#### **Implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

Research suggests that adopting CLT is highly effective in enhancing speaking skills. CLT focuses on student interaction, which encourages real-life communication. According to a study by Mansour (2023), implementing role-playing activities and group discussions in classrooms has been shown to significantly improve students' speaking abilities.

#### **Teacher Training Programs**

Investing in teacher training programs is crucial for overcoming the shortage of qualified educators. Al-Mohammad (2023) found that professional development workshops focusing on modern teaching methodologies improved teachers' ability to engage students in speaking activities. These programs help educators incorporate interactive strategies such as debates, storytelling, and peer feedback.

### **Technological Integration**

The use of technology has also been identified as a key solution. Online language learning tools and applications can bridge the gap where resources are scarce. For instance, a study by Kareem (2023) demonstrated that integrating mobile–assisted language learning (MALL) into the curriculum enabled students to practice speaking outside the classroom and increased their overall proficiency.

### **Motivation and Student Engagement**

Student motivation plays the most important role in language learning success. Research by Ibrahim (2021) shows that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation significantly influence students' willingness to participate in speaking activities. Strategies such as gamification and reward systems have been found to boost student engagement (Rahman, 2022). Creating an engaging learning environment can lead to higher confidence and better speaking outcomes (Youssef, 2020).

### **Curriculum Development and Policy Support**

Effective curriculum design is essential for fostering English–speaking skills. According to Nader (2021), curricula that incorporate speaking–focused modules, practical language activities, and culturally relevant content lead to better learning outcomes. Policy support that prioritizes speaking skills within the broader educational framework also contributes to sustainable improvements (Fahmy, 2023).

### **Parental and Community Involvement**

Parental and community support can play an influential role in the language acquisition process. A study by Aziz (2023) found that students who receive encouragement and opportunities to practice English at home or within their communities show significant improvements in speaking fluency. Community programs that promote English conversation practice can complement school–based efforts (Hassan, 2021).

### **The Role of the Teachers in Improving Speaking Skills:**

Al-Sobhi and Preece, (2018). suggest that, to improve teaching, EFL teachers can make their classes student-centered by giving the students more oral tasks in which they work in pairs or groups to achieve the objectives of the task. Unlike individual tasks, group work maximizes the students' chances to perform a specific communication function such as requesting permission, explaining a process, giving an opinion, and offering a suggestion. During the activities, the teacher's role is to encourage the students to practice English and provide them with constructive feedback. Ur (2007) lists several communicative activities and games, e.g. group work, role play, and dialogue which enhance the students' ability to speak fluent English. The classroom speaking activities can be taken and adapted from different sources such as newspapers, magazines, textbooks, and websites.

### **The students' Role in Improving their Speaking Skills:**

They should memorize new phrases and expressions in order to help them in the class discussion and their daily life as well. Here comes the role of the teacher to increase the students' awareness of the negative effects of mocking and making fun of others. The teacher can select some excellent students to motivate and energize the weak ones. The teachers' help, advice, and inspirational talk can gradually change the current classroom environment to a favorable one., Al-Sobhi and Preece, (2018).

### **The Role of the Teaching Institution in Improving Speaking Skills**

As a study was conducted in a Saudi School in Kuala Lumpur (SSKL), the school should provide the English teachers with the necessary teaching materials that make them present the lessons effectively. In order to achieve the speaking lessons' objectives, language teachers need adequate teaching facilities such as a language laboratory, a library, videotapes, educational software, audiotapes, pictures, posters, flashcards and a teacher's manual. Furthermore, the SSKL can provide English teachers with in-service training. For example, seminars, workshops, and training courses should be regularly held for the teachers to improve their knowledge and method of teaching. Unlike most Arab countries where a small number of language centers are available, Kuala Lumpur English language centers attract large numbers of Arabs every year in order to learn English. Many of these centers such as the British Council and ELS provide professional teaching programs like TESOL and

CELTA where candidates are exposed to online, face-to-face courses as well as authentic practicum, (Al-Sobhi and Preece, 2018).

### **Pronunciation Exercises**

Alshehri, (2021) states that the sound /dʒ/ is a highly distinct and continuous fricative that is produced by positioning the articulator dangerously close to the point of articulation of the sound /d/, while also creating a deeply voiced fricative. The placement of the sound /d/, along with the complex network of muscular movements and emotional meaning, may confuse and puzzle the observant student, resulting in a complete absence or lack of sound when attempting to sing the song. Embedded within each line of this harmonic masterpiece lies the resounding and triumphant sound /d/, which is the most frequently encountered stop plosive sound in both Arabic and English.

### **Discussion**

Bilal Mohd Zakarneh's study addressed a critical aspect of language education, communication skills. It focused on Arab university students, providing insights specific to this context. It identified several challenges experienced by English teachers and highlighted challenges unique to certain universities as well as suggested possible solutions. However, the sample size was relatively small (30 English teachers). It focused on Arab universities where applicability to other cultural contexts may vary. The study does not directly compare the effectiveness of different solutions. For instance, it does not explore which strategies are most successful in reducing challenges. While the study mentioned using a survey questionnaire, it lacks extensive details about the survey design.

Fariha Asif's study investigated the factors that trigger language anxiety among Saudi learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The study examined anxiety factors from the viewpoint of English language teachers whose insights are valuable for understanding learners' experiences. It explored strategies that can be designed and used to successfully cope with language anxiety through practical recommendations that can benefit both learners and educators. A larger sample would enhance the study's generalizability.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges in teaching English speaking skills to Arab students in Northern Syria are multifaceted, stemming from socioeconomic, educational, and cultural factors. However, solutions such as adopting communicative teaching approaches, enhancing teacher training, leveraging technology, and focusing on student motivation, curriculum development, and community involvement have shown promise in addressing these challenges. Continued focus on these strategies is essential to improving English speaking proficiency in this context.<sup>2</sup> Most Solutions that Improve English Speaking.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This part outlines the study's design, participants, instruments, procedures, and data analysis methods used in the study. The aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the methods employed to achieve the study's objectives.

### **Population**

The study targeted Arab students in the English department, especially the first-year students, males and females, their ages ranged between 19 and 33 years old. In addition, it involved the university teachers in the same department.

### **Sample Size**

The sample size involved 100 students out of (550) which is 18%, it was enough to represent the whole number. The random sample was the most appropriate type to conduct the survey. Regarding the teachers, the sample size was 100%, where it targeted all the teachers in the department as well as tutors whose students are from the same college and year.

### **Instruments of data collection**

**Test:** A test of 50 questions was formed within a multi-choices style, the test involved questions that enable us to know the English level in general like grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, and phonetics.

**Questionnaire:** The questionnaire was dedicated to teachers; it was designed by Google Forms. Likert scale was considered in closed questions' answers for better understanding and evaluation. There are open questions for more clarification about closed questions, and for other questions that need deeper information.

### 3.4 Procedures

The test was formed online over Google Forms. The test was shared with students online. The test lasted for 10 days, between 2.06.2024 to 12.06.2024. The test takes about 30 minutes on average to be conducted. The data was received on a database over Google sheet, then it was exported as an XLS sheet. The researcher was following with students about the number of received questionnaires, and if there were any comments.

The questionnaire was formed online over google forms. It was shared online with a teacher who shared it with his colleagues immediately, completing the needed number for the sample took about 7 days, from 10.07.2024 to 16.07.2024.

### **Reliability and Validity of Instruments**

Reliability refers to applying this instrument in measuring what it is supposed to measure after a period should be given the same results. This was evaluated through various methods such as test–retest reliability, which checks the stability of the results over time, and internal consistency, which assesses the correlation between different items on the same test using Cronbach’s alpha and Likert scale.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

This section presents the analysis of the test questions and the results of the test analysis. It also includes the analysis of the questionnaire statements, and the results derived from them, as well as to detailed examination of the test questions, including tables and figures to illustrate the findings. It supports the evaluation of the questionnaire statements, supported by tables and figures to highlight key points. In addition, it has a discussion on the testing of hypotheses based on the collected data.

#### 4.1 The Analysis of the Test Questions

**Table 4.1.1: Gender & age of respondents**

<i>Gender of respondents</i>	<i>Age average</i>
<i>Female</i> 64	23
<i>Male</i> 36	

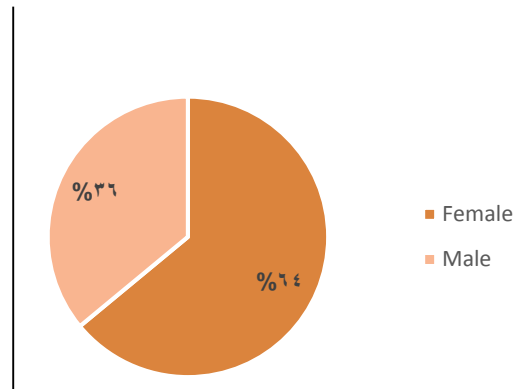


Figure 4.1.1: Students gender

Analysis showed that out of the whole respondent students, 36% of them were males, whereas 64% were females. However, the age average was 23 years old for the whole (33 years Max, 18 years Min).

Table 4.2.2: Test's results

<i>Average of each section result</i>	<i>Test total average</i>
<i>Grammar</i> 47.9%	44.5%
<i>Comprehension/vocabulary</i> 33.8%	
<i>Phonetics</i> 44.9%	

The average result of the total test was 44.5% which consists of all the tests side, but if we come to each section, we find that the average result of Grammar section was 47%, the Comprehensive & Vocabulary was 33.8%, and the Phonetics was 44.9%.

### **The Results of the Test Analysis**

#### **Low level in comprehension and vocabulary:**

Students might frequently misunderstand or misuse words, leading to incorrect answers or incomplete comprehension of texts, some choices were similar in spelling, others were strange or new, which shows limited exposure to diverse vocabulary, insufficient reading practice, or lack of effective vocabulary learning strategies.

#### **Moderate level in grammar:**

Students showed a moderate level of proficiency in grammar, indicating a mix of strengths and areas needing improvement, where basic grammatical rules and sentence structures are generally well understood and correctly applied, but more complex grammatical concepts, such as advanced tenses, verbs with prepositions, or prepositions, might pose challenges.

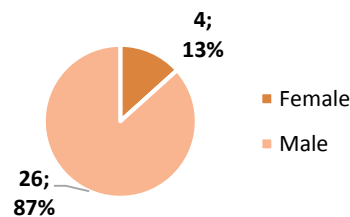
### **Moderate level in phonetics:**

Students were able to transcribe many words correctly, but there were notable errors in more complex or less familiar words. Mistakes included incorrect representation of vowels within a word, or confusion between similar sounds. These errors could stem from limited practice with phonetic symbols, lack of familiarity with the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), or insufficient exposure to diverse accents and pronunciations.

### **The Analysis of the Questionnaire Statements**

#### **Respondents' gender:**

Regarding the respondents' gender, 13% (4) of them were females, whereas 87% (26) were males.



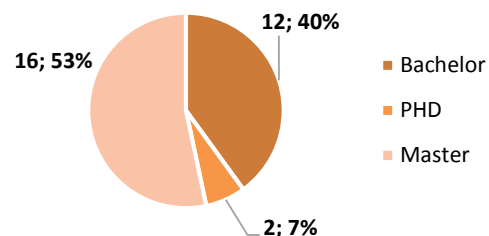
**Figure 4.3.1: Respondents gender**

#### **Respondents' academic qualifications:**

Analysis shows that 7% (2) of them are doctors, 40% (12) have a master's degree, while 53% (16) have a bachelor's degree.

#### **English proficiency level:**

According to respondents' replies, the average English proficiency level is 2.5 out of 4 (2 Min, 3 Max).



**Figure 4.3.2: Respondents' qualification**

### Most skills students are struggling with:

Analysis shows that students have concern or difficulties with certain skills, where results shows that 53% of students have difficulty in speaking skills, while 33% of them have difficulty in listening skills, 7% of them struggle with writing, also 7% struggle with reading. See the figure below:

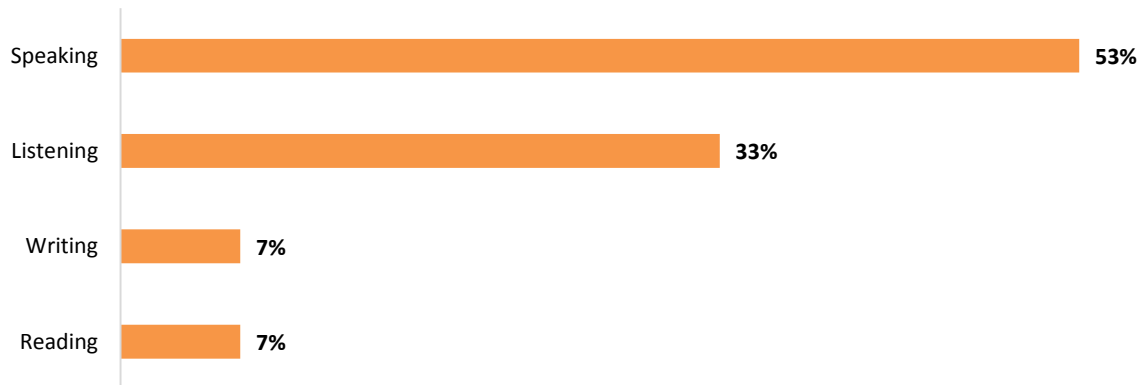


Figure 2.3.3: Students mostly struggle with

### Neglecting practical phonetics:

All respondents replied with “agree” that neglecting practical phonetics will lead to a horrible quality of pronunciation or speaking.

### low teaching quality at primary stages:

It is worth mentioning that 47% of respondents said “agree” that low teaching quality at primary stages makes speaking fluently much more difficult, while 53% of them replied with “strongly agree”.

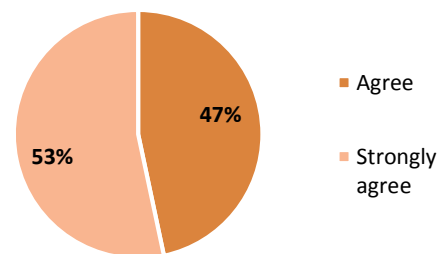


Figure 4.3.3: Teaching at primary stages effect

### Technology in enhancing English speaking:

Regarding technology like electronic applications and online education platforms and if it can enhance speaking skill, 53% of respondents replied with “neutral”, 27% of them replied with “agree”, while 20% replied with “strongly agree”.

### Exposing to English:

87% of respondents replied with “strongly agree” regarding students who not exposed to English and do not practice it at home will face more difficulties in speaking fluently and accurately. However, 13% replied with “agree”.

#### 4.3.8 Teaching methods efficiency:

Regarding the current English language teaching methods efficiency, 60% of respondents replied with “neutral”, while 40% replied with “agree”.

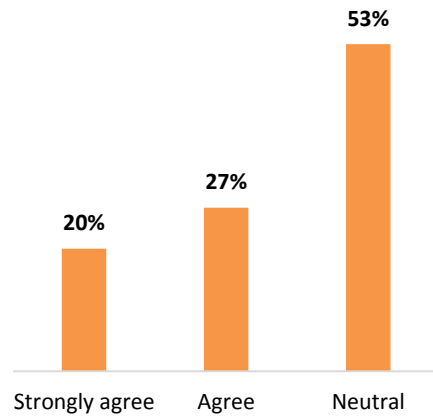


Figure 4.3.4: Technology in enhancing E-speaking

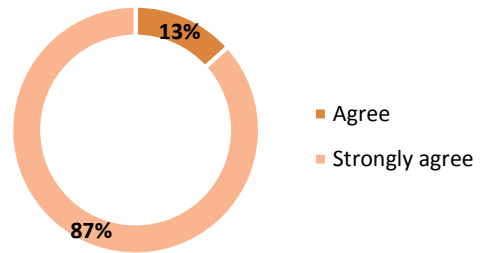


Figure 4.3.5: Not exposing to English affects

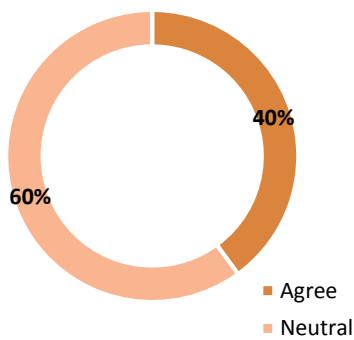


Figure 4.3.6: Current teaching methods efficiency

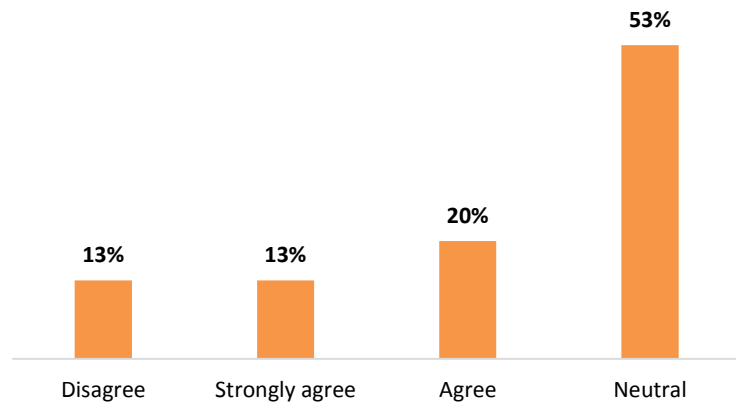


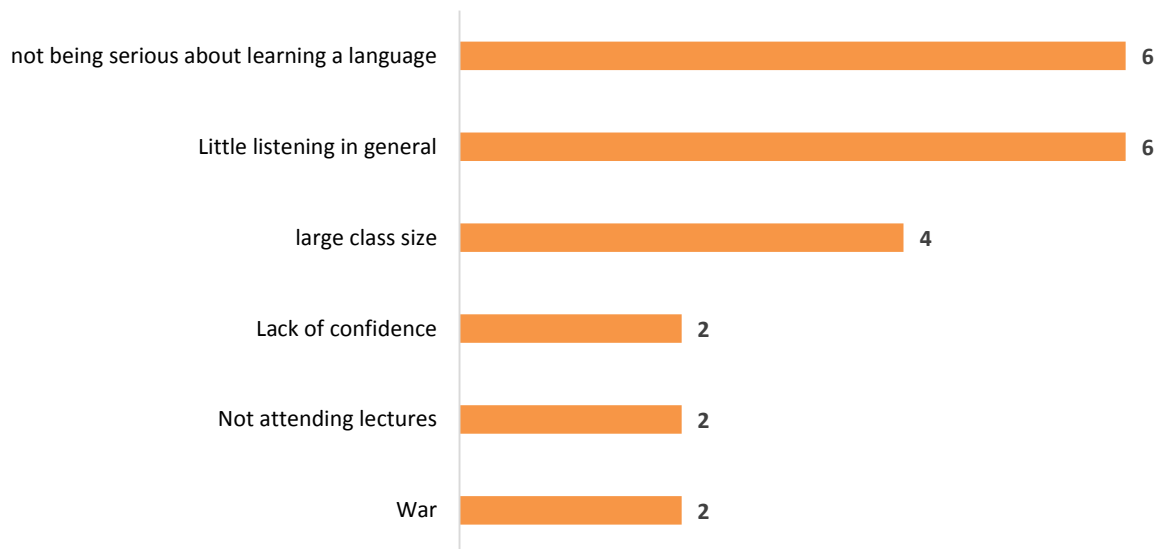
Figure 4.3.7: Students participation in the class

**Participation in the class:**

When talking about the level of participation by students in the class, 53% of respondents replied with “neutral”, 20% replied with "agree”, 13% replied with "strongly agree”, and 13% replied with "disagree”. One of the respondents said this returns to a lack of confidence. See above Figure 4.3.10.

**Other problems cause a low level of speaking skill:**

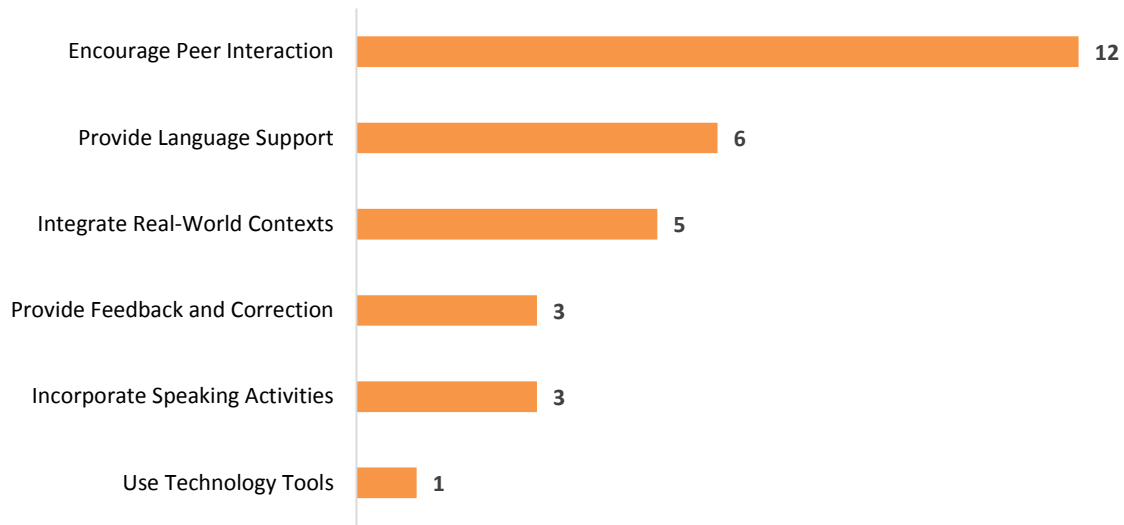
Most respondents gave other reasons behind the low level of speaking skills like (1) Not being serious about learning a language, (2) Little listening in general, (3) Large class size, (4) Lack of confidence, (5) Not attending lectures, (6) The current war. See below Figure 4.3.13 for details.



**Figure 4.3.8: Other problems cause a low-level of speaking skill**

**Other solutions can lead to better speaking skills:**

Respondents provided some techniques that consume in improving students’ speaking skill, which are (1) Encourage Peer Interaction, (2) Provide Language Support, (3) Integrate Real-World Contexts, (4) Provide Feedback and Correction, (5) Incorporate Speaking Activities, and (6) Use Technology Tools. See below Figure 4.3.14 for details.



**Figure 4.3.91: Other solutions which can lead to better speaking skills**

### **The Results of the Questionnaire Statements**

1. Students mostly suffer from speaking and listening skills:

Speaking and listening are fundamental skills for effective communication, and difficulties here can hinder students' ability to express themselves clearly and confidently. However, there is little difficulty regarding writing and reading.

2. Students neglect practical phonetics:

Results showed that students do not concentrate on phonetics which leads to poor pronunciation and speaking skills, as well as to difficulty in listening.

3. Teaching quality at primary stages is low:

Primary education is crucial for building foundational skills in language. Low teaching quality at this stage means that students may not develop essential skills such as basic grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. This can lead to difficulties in the more advanced stages of learning in general and in speaking particularly.

4. Limited exposure to English affects speaking skills:

Students who are not exposed to English and do not practice it at home or other places will face more difficulties in speaking fluently and accurately. This overwhelming majority highlights the critical role that regular exposure and practice play in language acquisition.

5. Teaching methods are not efficient enough:

The high percentage of neutral responses suggests that there may be a lack of clear evidence or experiences that strongly support or oppose the current teaching methods.

#### 6. Cultural factors affecting language learning:

The influence of the mother tongue can lead to interference in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Students may carry over phonetic and syntactic patterns from their native language, which can create challenges in acquiring accurate English pronunciation and fluency. In addition, the perception of foreign language importance can stem from cultural attitudes that prioritize other subjects or careers over language learning. If students and their communities do not see the value in learning English, they may lack motivation and commitment to mastering the language.

### **Recommendations**

#### 1. Enhancing Vocabulary and Comprehension:

Implementing reading programs with a variety of texts (e.g., fiction, non-fiction, articles, and poetry) helps students encounter new words in different contexts. This exposure not only expands their vocabulary but also improves their understanding of how words are used in different situations.

#### . Improving Grammar and Phonetics:**2**

This could be achieved by grammar workshops, where focusing on complex grammatical concepts (such as verb tenses, clauses, and sentence structure) can help students understand and apply these rules more effectively. These workshops can include interactive activities, such as sentence correction exercises, to make learning more engaging. In addition, we cannot forget phonetics practice, where incorporating phonetics exercises helps students improve their pronunciation by understanding the sounds of the language.

#### 3. Increasing Student Motivation and Participation:

Organizing language exchange programs allows students to practice speaking in real-world situations. These programs can be local or international and might include activities like conversation clubs, pen pal exchanges, or study abroad opportunities. On the other hand, offering incentives such as certificates, prizes, or academic credits can motivate students to engage more actively in language learning

activities. These incentives can recognize and reward students' efforts and achievements, encouraging them to continue improving their skills.

#### 4. Improving Teaching Methods and Quality:

Investing in professional development for teachers helps them stay updated with the latest teaching methods and strategies. This training can include workshops, seminars, and courses on topics like differentiated instruction, classroom management, and the use of technology in teaching.

#### 5. Integrating Language Skills:

Designing lessons that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. For instance, a lesson could start with a listening activity, followed by a discussion (speaking), reading a related text, and then writing a summary or response. This total approach ensures that students develop all aspects of language proficiency. In addition, we need real-world applications, where using such tasks and scenarios to teach language skills. For example, students could practice writing emails, conducting interviews, or giving presentations. This not only makes learning more relevant but also prepares students for practical use of the language.

#### 6. Encouraging Permanent Learning:

Encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning by providing them with strategies and resources for independent study. This could include setting personal learning goals, using language learning apps, or engaging in self-study activities. In addition, fostering a mindset that values continuous learning and improvement. Highlight the benefits of lifelong learning, such as personal growth, career advancement, and the ability to adapt to new challenges.

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