

**EXPLORING FACTORS THAT IMPACT ORAL
COMMUNICATION AND ESTABLISHING
ORAL SKILL STANDARDS IN A UNIVERSITY
IN THE UAE**

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IN THE UAE**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTFL	American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language
AUE	American University in the Emirates
EFL	English as a foreign Language
ELI	English Language Institute
EOC	English oral communication
ESL	English as a second Language
ETS	Educational Testing Services
IBT TOEFL	Internet Based Test
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
ITP TOEFL	Institutional Test Paper TOEFL
L1	First language
L2	Second language
NNS	Non-native speakers
NS	Native speaker
OPI	Oral Proficiency Interview
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
UAE	United Arab Emirates
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia
VLT	Vocabulary Level Test

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**MENEROKAI FAKTOR YANG MEMBERI KESAN KEPADA
KOMUNIKASI LISAN DAN MEWUJUDKAN PIAWAIAN KEMAHIRAN
LISAN DI SEBUAH UNIVERSITI DI UAE**

ABSTRAK

Kemahiran komunikasi lisan dalam bahasa Inggeris adalah penting dalam pengajian akademik bagi pelajar yang bahasa pengantarnya adalah bahasa Inggeris. Menguasai kemahiran bahasa Inggeris lisan membolehkan pelajar di Universiti menyertai dan menyelesaikan tugas mereka dengan berkesan dan berjaya. Menilai pertuturan tidak kurang ketaranya daripada mengajar. Menilai komunikasi lisan adalah penting bagi menentukan kecekapan pelajar bertutur. Oleh itu, kajian ini mengemukakan dua isu. Bahagian pertama kajian adalah untuk mengkaji berkaitan sebutan, pengetahuan kosa kata dan pendedahan kepada bahasa Inggeris serta kesan terhadap komunikasi lisan pelajar di Universiti di Emiriah Arab Bersatu (UAE). Bahagian kedua kajian adalah untuk mewujudkan piawaian untuk menilai kemahiran bertutur pelajar Universiti berdasarkan tahap pelajar yang ditentukan. Kajian ini menggunakan ujian dan soal selidik sebagai kaedah kuantitatif dan temubual separa berstruktur sebagai kaedah kualitatif untuk mengumpul data yang diperlukan. SPSS telah digunakan untuk menganalisis data dan hasil kajian yang dijalankan menunjukkan korelasi yang ketara pada tahap 0.01 dan 0.05 antara sebutan, pengetahuan kosa kata dan pendedahan kepada kemahiran bahasa Inggeris dan komunikasi secara lisan. Kajian ini menggunakan OPI (temuduga kemahiran lisan) untuk menilai responden dalam komunikasi lisan terhadap 5 kriteria termasuk faktor yang memberi kesan kepada komunikasi lisan (sebutan, kosa kata, kefahaman) serta

tatabahasa dan kefasihan. Responden sasaran kajian ini adalah pelajar yang belajar di Institut Bahasa Inggeris di salah sebuah universiti di UAE. Kajian ini melibatkan kesemua 200 pelajar yang semuanya dapat diakses dalam kajian ini. Hasil kajian ini diharap dapat membolehkan pengajar memberi tumpuan kepada faktor yang perlu dipelajari dalam pengajaran bahasa Inggeris peringkat universiti di UAE bagi meningkatkan prestasi pelajar dalam komunikasi lisan. Manakala penetapan piawaian untuk menilai kemahiran bertutur diharap dapat menjadi garis panduan bukan sahaja untuk pengajar bahasa Inggeris di universiti tetapi juga untuk Kementerian Pendidikan di UAE bagi tujuan mengkategorikan pelajar bahasa Inggeris kepada tahap berdasarkan penanda aras yang kukuh. Beberapa cadangan telah dibuat berkaitan kajian ini di dalam bab terakhir penyelidikan ini.

**EXPLORING FACTORS THAT IMPACT ORAL COMMUNICATION AND
ESTABLISHING ORAL SKILL STANDARDS IN A UNIVERSITY IN THE
UAE**

ABSTRACT

Oral communication skills in English are vital in academic studies for the students in which the medium of teaching is English. Mastering oral English skills enables the students in a university to participate and achieve their tasks effectively and successfully. Assessing speaking is not less significant than teaching it. It is so important that English instructors assess their students in speaking to determine their proficiency. Therefore, the study addressed two issues. The first part of the study is to examine to what extent pronunciation, vocabulary knowledge and exposure to English impact on oral communication of students in a university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The second part of the study is to establish standards for assessing speaking skill of university students as to be based on in specifying students' levels. The study used testing, questionnaire as quantitative method and semi-structured interview as a qualitative method to collect required data. SPSS was utilized to analyse data and the study came out with significant correlation at 0.01 and 0.05 levels between pronunciation, vocabulary knowledge and exposure to English and oral communication skills proficiency. The study used OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) to assess participants in speaking against 5 criteria including factors that impact on oral communication (pronunciation, vocabulary, comprehension) as well as grammar and fluency. SPSS was used to analyse data and came out with 6 levels. The target population of the study were students studying in English Language Institute at

American University in the Emirates in the UAE country. The study involved all 200 students who were all accessible to this study. The findings of the study are hoped to enable instructors to focus on said factors in teaching English in university in the UAE as to improve the students' performance in oral communication. Whereas establishing standards for speaking assessment is hoped to be a guideline not only for English instructors in university but also for ministry of education to categorize English learners into levels based on a solid benchmark. Several recommendations were made in relation to this study in the last chapter of the research.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

English language plays a vital role in the life of the people across the world and is considered a language of business, tourism, trading, and education. Language is an essential component in oral communication and through it; the people exchange information, express their opinions, thoughts, ideas, send and receive instructions. Wong (2011) argued the largest percentage of communication activities involve in listening. Wong added that oral skills occupy half of our communication time. Ismail (2012) commented oral communication is a core of learning and acquiring any foreign language. Because of proliferation of electronic media, the presence of orality has become accepted fact in contemporary society. Kern and Schultz (2005) claimed that electronic media may even have affected a shift from literary to orality in modern life.

The means of communication Kern and Schultz added, have been shifted from printed words to images and sounds, from books to televisions, movies, radios, recordings and computers. Instead of reading, most of the people prefer to watch and listen. No doubt that acquiring any foreign language mainly depends on understanding it in spoken form and trying to produce the utterances that have been attained, mostly in the same way that happens with acquiring the first language. In other words, listening and speaking all together are considered the essential skills of learning the target language. However, these two skills have not been given a great interest in the classroom and English teachers try to avoid teaching them. Bozorgian (2012) indicated that the instruction of listening and speaking requires teaching pronunciation and cross-cultural pragmatics to understand a speaker's intended message. Thus, there are

no clear standards to assess those two important skills. Arguing for the importance of listening and speaking in communication and the need of assessing these skills, the study aims at exploring the Factors that impact on oral communication of non-native English speakers particularly university students in their academic studies. Aleksandrak (2011) argued, testing speaking proficiency is a complex task and may cause considerable problems at any stage of process. Dunbar, Brooks and Miller (2006) reported that oral communication skills are considered in higher education institutions curriculum and communication skills are taught in general education courses. Dunbar, Brooks and Miller added that the assessing of communication skill provides a good case study for those interested in specific assessments of other skills acquired in general education.

The target of the current study was university students, studying in English Language Institute at a university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE is an Arabic Gulf country formed in 1971. UAE is a place in which many different nationalities are living, working, and investing. Arabic language is an official language for its citizens, but English is commonly used among the people who came from different countries. English Language is taught in all schools in the United Arab Emirates. English subject in the UAE is so important and all students in both public and private schools start learning English from grade one to grade twelve. English teachers came from different countries, Arab countries, and non-Arab countries. The Ministry of Education in the United Arab Emirates gives a great interest to English language as it is an international and a medium of university studies. Ali (2014) pointed that the Ministry of Education in the United Arab Emirates considers English proficiency as its priority and aims at meeting the international benchmark of the Common European Framework. Ali stated the long-term goal of teaching English is

to enable students to interact in a natural way. Ali added that speaking comes at first in communication. However, speaking surely comes after listening. Alam and Bashiruddin (2013) cited that oral communication means listening and speaking to oral language. Both these two skills are integrated and develop each other. Although the medium of teaching in most of UAE universities, public and private, the students still encounter problems in English language particularly with oral communication. Therefore, this research attempted to examine factors that impact on oral communication of university students in the UAE. Whereas the second part of the study is to establish standards for speaking assessment based on the university syllabus as to be benchmark for assessing students' performance in this important skill. Speaking skill needs to be evaluated clearly and precisely. Therefore, these standards will allow English instructors in university to measure the speaking proficiency of students, studying at university. Saeed (2018) "Speaking proficiency is a significant part of teaching and learning English curriculum, thus assessing speaking has become essential, too."

Beale (2008) stated that establishing standards for oral interaction to act as guidelines for judgment. Assessing speaking skill by using general assessment cannot tell us the real speaking ability of English learners. Presenting the score of the students' performance without providing any information does not lead to help the students in developing their speaking skill. It is controversial argument that there is no reliable measurement of assessing speaking. Luoma (2004) argued that it is very difficult to assess speaking because this lacks solid grounding. Luoma added grounding is based on theory and pedagogical and reliable test design. Thus, English instructor does not know what to assess: vocabulary, pronunciation, or grammar. Nakamura and Valens (2001) pointed that language instructors need method that transfer them from

qualitatively subjective assessing speaking proficiency to quantitatively objective assessing speaking skill. Assessing speaking is rarely considered in such different institutes as it is not easy, and it needs time to be done. Assessing speaking is so necessary for students, instructors, and stakeholders to evaluate the students speaking ability. The instructors always try to find a suitable method to assess their students' abilities in speaking. A study done by Sabbagh, in 2009 in the UAE classrooms indicates the most of instructors in the UAE English classrooms encourage their students to express their ideas and views about many different field areas, and they are interested in knowing the students' levels in speaking but they do not have benchmark to depend on in doing this kind of evaluation. Therefore, in this study, the researcher considered five criteria including comprehension, fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation as to be assessed analytically. The researcher took AUE (American University in the Emirates) university as a sample of other universities in the UAE that does not have valid and reliable speaking test to assess the students' ability in and who tend to join one of the offered programs in university.

The study aims to develop a valid and reliable speaking test for the students studying in English Language Institute at (AUE) American University in the Emirates. It is not only to explore the weakness and strengths of the student's ability in speaking skill, but it is also to enhance English instructors in determining in which level the students should be placed in. It is of great importance to provide English instructors in AUE University and other universities in the UAE with a system that precisely determines the ability of the students in speaking skill before joining the university. Thus, the instructors can benchmark the students' speaking proficiency in English against the university syllabi and curriculum. Beale (2008) stated that establishing standards for oral interaction to act as guidelines for judgment.

1.2 Background of the Study

As aforementioned English Language is a medium of teaching in the UAE universities both public and private. Jewels and Albon (2012, p.3) argued that “the majority of non-Arabic courses, the language of instruction in most UAE universities is English”. Usually, local students who graduate from UAE high school are eligible to join university after meeting university requirements such as high school certificate etc. Besides, they should achieve the required score in TOEFL or IELTS exams with 500+ and band 5+ respectively. However, non-local students have chances to join private university and must meet the admission requirements like high school certificate, passport with valid visa in the UAE as well as they must achieve the required score in TOEFL or IELTS score. Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the UAE Established in 1992 is responsible for supervising and ensuring the quality standards of the universities and other high institutions. It is responsible for licensing private high education institutions and accrediting their programs.

In 1996 an office was established called “Commission for Academic Accreditation to ensure that private higher education institutions meet international standards. UAE higher Education Curriculum is adopted by some private universities. However, other universities are using American curriculum, or British curriculum. As the researcher has been working in English Language Institute at the university, supervising, directing and administering all English proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, observing and studying the score results of the students in oral communication (listening and speaking) to find out how low score the students usually achieve in these two skills. Thus, the objective of the study is to examine the factors that impact on students’ oral communication proficiency whereas the second part of the study is to establish solid standards for speaking assessment that can be based on.

However, the study hypothesised three factors as they have been adopted as independent variables: pronunciation, vocabulary knowledge and exposure to English. In AUE University, there is a centre named as ELI (English Language Institute) responsible for delivering English levels and English intensive courses. The researcher has been working as an instructor in the said centre. There are four levels (Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced, IELTS /TOEFL as superior). IELTS preparation course and TOEFL preparation courses are offered for the ones who achieved higher scores in placement test. Each level lasts for 15 weeks with a total of 120 hours, eight hours weekly. Whereas, the total hours of IELTS or TOEFL course are only 60 hours that are 4 hours per week in 15 weeks. The ELI usually runs a placement test for new students who have not achieved the required score in TOEFL or IELTS and the placement test does not include speaking assessment. The students only do the test in reading, listening, grammar and vocabulary without speaking.

1.3 Context of the Study

The study targeted students at American University in the Emirates, the place where the researcher has been working. American University in the Emirates was established in 2006 as American College in the Emirates offering diploma in Science Technology, Business Administration, Fine Arts and Design, as well as Media and Mass Communication. In 2008, the college has become a university, to be named as American University in the Emirates and started to award bachelor's degree to its students. The programs that have been offered in the university are following the United Arab Emirates higher education curriculum. The medium of teaching is English language and all programs are offered in English language. The university accepts the students who graduate from high schools in United Arab Emirates, public schools, or

private schools with not less than 60% score under a condition that the high schools adopt the Emirates curriculum. One of the main requirements, the freshmen should meet is achieving a 500 score in TOEFL or band 5 in IELTS. This means the students are not in need to take a placement test and not to be placed in an English level that fits their grade. In case the students cannot achieve the required score in TOEFL or IELTS, they must do a placement test (reading, listening, grammar, vocabulary), and be placed in one of the levels that are offered by English Language Institute according to their grade. The institute is a part of AUE university, offers four levels, beginner, intermediate, advance, and TOEFL/IELTS preparation course, considered superior level. It is also a centre of running TOEFL exam and IELTS test. Since the university includes different students from different nationalities along with UAE students so it is considered as a multi-cultural community. Many different students from different nationalities males and females are studying at the university but most of the students are Arab Emirati students. The academic faculty members who have been working at the university come from different nationalities and most of them are holding PhD degrees in their field areas.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

In this study, the researcher addressed two issues: factors affecting oral communication skills (listening and speaking) proficiency of university students and establishing standards for assessing speaking skill in English. The researcher attempted to examine the factors: pronunciation, vocabulary knowledge and exposure to English that impact on oral communication proficiency of university students. The students are in need to involve themselves in oral activities such as open discussion, oral presentation and expressing their ideas with instructors, professors and within

themselves. Jones (2013) pointed to the importance of oral communication in academic studies as it is a part of higher education development in the twentieth century. Zareva (2011) stated that both educational institutions and employers have recently recognized that good oral communication and presentation skills are essential to the professional training of college students across all disciplines mispronunciation and insufficient exposure to English language or many other reasons which lead to hesitation, nervous, lack of confidence and thus the speakers refrain to speak up. The study based on many studies that attributed the problem of oral communication deficiency to the lack of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, exposure to language, grammar, and anxiety like (Aleksandrak, 2011; Al Hosni, 2014; Ali and Saberg ,2017; Al-Lawati, 1995; Gan, 2012; Heriansyah, 2012; Rababa'h, 2005; Riyaz and Mullick, 2016); Al-Sobhi and Preece 2018; Saigh and Schmitt 2012; Saigh and Schmitt 2012; Zakarneh, 2017; Akasha, 2013; Shteiwi and Hamuda, 2016; Abdellah, 2011; Fareh, 2010; Al-Roud, 2016).

Besides, the researcher practical experience and English instructors' perspectives who have been working at American University in the Emirates led to focus on the three linguistic factors: vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, and exposure to English language. Mokhtar (2009) stated that poor vocabulary knowledge may hinder progress of English learners in speaking skills formally and informally. There is a strong relationship Mokhtar added between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. Marzá (2014) pointed that pronunciation is a key of oral communication and it is a big hurdle for most English learners. Candilas, (2016) argued that exposure to target language is one of the prominent factors a foreign language learner holds to gain proficiency. Magno, Ann and Lajom (2011) argued exposure to English language will help the foreign learners develop their English

proficiency specially speaking skills thus their problems with oral communication will gradually disappear. According to Dr. Alex, Dr. Chris, Dr. Olga' perspectives who have been working at American University in the Emirates, students with more exposure to the target language are more likely to learn greater familiarity with the language itself. They added lack of vocabulary words may be another reason that impacts negatively on the students' oral communication in English. Abu Alyan (2013, p.232) "many students maintained that lack of active words hindered their oral communication proficiency." The last factor which is considered not less important than the latter ones is pronunciation. It is not possible to speak clearly and being understood without correct pronunciation. Morley (1991) pointed to speakers with poor intelligibility have long-range difficulties in developing their confidence and effectiveness in oral communication.

Arnold (2000) cited pronunciation is closest link to our self-concept. Zhang and Yin (2009) pointed that foreign English learners are not confident of themselves to speak because they do not pronounce the words and sentences appropriately. Many studies have examined the problems and investigated on the difficulties that the students encounter in their oral communication deeply. Some studies tackled those factors but not deeply. Tsiplakides and Keramid (2009) argued that foreign English learners refrain from speaking due to the fear of making mistakes and thus they will negatively be evaluated. In the AUE University English instructors have suggested to develop oral English courses but still no action has been taken by the decision makers in the university. Therefore, it has become so important to investigate on the problems and come out with practical plan to overcome these problems. Varghese (2015) argued that the students with insufficient oral language are not able to understand what to read. Therefore, Varghese added, foreign or second language learners should be given

plenty of opportunities to develop their oral skills in English language. English learners should be proficient in academic English to be successful in their academic studies. Many instructors in the AUE University complained about poor performance of their students in presenting their projects or delivering an oral speech. This means that the students 'speaking skills needs improvement. This was pointed out by Andrade (2006) who stated that students are reluctant to speak up in seminars, and their nerves restrict them to share their views and opinions which is resulted in an embarrassing and getting them unconfident. This feeling makes the students feel foolish and thus promise themselves not to speak up at all. Andrade added that a lack of confidence in presenting and talking to audiences is related to a lack of familiarity with topic content. Gan (2012, p. 46) pointed that "problems with speaking centred on academic speaking is due to grammar, fluency and pronunciation." Gan added that students were most concerned with oral presentation and whole class discussions, but it was noticed little difficulty with small group.

However, improving the students' performance in oral skills require a solid assessment that could be based on to know the students' abilities in oral performance. Thus, the second case to be addressed in this study is establishing standards for assessing speaking. Assessing speaking is the way that allows English instructors stand on a solid ground in measuring the performance of university students in oral communication particularly producing the language with confidence. Therefore, the researcher attempted to set standards in assessing speaking skills based on levels adopted by AUE university syllabi in the placement test: beginner, intermediate, advanced and superior. Buck (2001) argued, speaking test is not an easy test, and it takes time. Speaking test is neglected due to its complexities. However, speaking skill is so necessary for many reasons. One of those reasons is to urge the language teachers

to teach it. Buck (2001, p. 32) “The sound of a language must be learnt to understand speech.” It is thought that teaching pronunciation is not as significant as other sub-skills, whereas it is noticed that many students who have studied foreign language may be shocked to discover that they face problems when they communicate with the native speakers. Although speaking skill is so significant in communication, it is not usually assessed. Besides, assessing speaking enables foreign language teacher to know the learner’s development in the language. Sook (2003, p.5) “Testing speaking has become one of the most important issues in language testing since the role of speaking ability has become more central in language teaching.” Trejos (2013) reported that speaking is a productive skill, and it is a way of communicating as well as reflects the identity and culture of the communicator. Rycharik (2014) claimed that speaking is often practiced and developed but not assessed in an extensive way, as it is so hard to be assessed accurately and at the same time assessing speaking is a time consuming. Rycharik added, oral production is directly bound to aural (listening) intake, that is to say speaking, except some cases, such as monologues, speeches, telling a story or reading aloud, can hardly be assessed separately from listening because it is often a reaction to what the interlocutor has heard.

The problem with the speaking in American University in the Emirates and its assessment are still not realized and not solved. Sarwar, Alam, Hussain, Shah and Jabeen (2014) stated that English speaking skills are rarely assessed and is not given any interest which is resulted in poor performance of the high school students in speaking skills. They added that speaking skill empowers the person to communicate and starts oral discussion easily and comfortably. Ali (2012) summarized the problem with speaking among students in the UAE that English instructors always focus on vocabulary words and grammar more than other skills. Another thing is Ali added that

textbooks materials do not much more address the daily life activities. Consequently, the students are not well trained to speak English and thus they keep silent and avoid speaking. The main question may be raised as how to assess the student’s performance in speaking. The Ministry of Education in the UAE conducted a study in 2014 about the standards of assessing English skills not only for speaking but also for other skills (listening, reading and writing), from grade one to grade twelve. The framework of the standards confined the speaking abilities in English in discussion and collaboration and presentation of knowledge and ideas ranging from level 1 to level 4. On the other hand, no criteria based on to assess speaking or even listening in both Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education. The main objective of Ministry of Education in the UAE was to meet the international benchmark of both IELTS test and TOEFL exam. Table 1.1 shows the benchmarks that are followed by the Ministry of Education in the UAE.

Table 1.1

Oral skills Benchmark followed by Ministry of Education in the UAE

Grade Level	TOEFL	IELTS
End of kindergarten (KG 2)		
End of Grade 3	8 – 12 Speaking	KET 45 – 59
End of Grade 6	13 – 18 speaking	PET 45 – 59
End of Grade 8	57 – 86 speaking	4 – 5
End of Grade 10	87 – 109	5 – 6.5
End of Grade 12	110 – 120	7 – 8

Ministry of Education - UAE (2014)

Ministry of Education in the UAE country is not running any kind of speaking test, and only follows a test that is called CEPA (Common Educational Proficiency Assessment) that it does not measure English speaking and listening of students’ abilities who are expected to join university. CEPA is an official English exam

for students who graduate from high school in the UAE that measures grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Table 1.2 shows the scale the ministry is supposed to follow in 2014, but it is only a suggested plan and still not applied by the ministry, thus listening and speaking are still not assessed in all public schools in the UAE country. In other words, there are no any standards for assessing oral skills in English in all public schools in the UAE. Recently (2016 – 2017), the Ministry of Education in the UAE created a proficiency English test for the students who graduate from high school and want to join any local university in the country, but it does not include any speaking test, called EmSAT. Table 1.2 compares IELTS bands (Academic Track) and EmSAT English score ranges. While a perfect equating of any two tests is not possible, empirical analyses of UAE student performance on both tests have demonstrated comparable levels of performance in academic English proficiency.

Table 1.2

Compare IELTS and EmSAT English Score Ranges in the UAE

IELTS Academic Track	EmSAT
8	1925 – 2000
7.5	1675 – 1775
7	1650 – 1625
6.5	1550 – 1650
6	1400 – 1625
5.5	1250 – 1375
5	1100 – 1225
4.5	950 – 1075
4	825 – 925
*	800

1.5 The Purpose of the Study

As indicated in the abstract, two main purposes are beyond the study. The first purpose is to examine the relationship between oral communication (listening and speaking) and factors; vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, and exposure to English language. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) cited that “EFL learners’ speaking skill is affected by some linguistic components of English language like phonology, syntax, vocabulary, semantics and psychological factors such as motivation and personality. The second part of the study is to establish standards for assessing speaking. The researcher employed testing, questionnaire, and interview to explore the correlation between these factors and oral communication (listening and speaking).

Since there were few studies tackled these factors and their relationship with listening and speaking, the researcher attempted to go deeply on these factors and their affecting on oral communication proficiency of university students. The study aims to ensure that students can orally communicate effectively and demonstrate their presentation in the language of instruction in scientific quantitative and critical reasoning. It is well known that speaking proficiency plays a vital role in successful academic studies and poor performance in speaking effects negatively on students’ studies. This has raised issue of assessing speaking and without it, English instructors cannot develop and improve their students’ abilities in speaking. Setting a benchmark for speaking assessment will enable English learners to know their abilities in speaking and enhance English instructors to evaluate their students as well as explore the sub-skills that their students are weak in. Therefore, development of speaking assessment of university students is necessary.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

The current study addresses the following research objectives:

1. To examine the correlation between pronunciation and oral communication skill proficiency of university students.
2. To examine the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and oral communication proficiency of university students.
3. To examine the correlation between exposure to English and oral communication skills proficiency of university students.
4. To establish standards for assessing speaking skills within AUE university curriculum:
 - a. To design speaking assessment standards
 - b. To set cut off score for speaking assessment
 - c. To develop benchmark for speaking assessment

1.7 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent pronunciation in English language impacts on oral communication proficiency of university students?
2. To what extent vocabulary knowledge impacts on oral communication proficiency of university students?
3. To what extent exposure to English Language impacts on oral communication proficiency of university students?
4. What standards should be based on in assessing students' abilities in speaking skills within the curriculum of AUE University?

- a. What standardized design is used to assess speaking?
- b. How cut off score is developed to assess speaking?
- c. What benchmark is based on in assessing speaking?

1.8 Significance of the Study

The study is believed to be significant in its results of finding that may spotlight on the certain problems with oral communication and provide insights for students, researchers, university instructors, curriculum designers in university and people who are concerned about finding a practical strategic plan in enabling the students in English centres or universities to develop their oral skill in English. Establishing standards of assessing speaking will enable English instructors, and assessors to stand on a solid ground in determining the levels of English learners in speaking. Hadi (2016) stated that “effective oral skills facilitate the presentation of information to the target audience, assist in classroom participation and smoothen the understanding of responses from others.

The analysis of the results is expected to be the sources of information that the ministry of higher education will depend on to detect the poor proficiency in oral English in UAE universities. Besides, the information is useful for English teachers to develop their speaking class activities, thus their activities will become more effectively, communicatively, and functionally information for other researchers who want to have further study on oral communication. This study may be one of the few studies that tackles this issue in the UAE at the level of schools and universities. The Ministry of Education in the UAE has not considered assessing speaking in its curriculum for testing the high school graduating students’ abilities as well as are still highly depending on IELTS speaking test. In other words, they do not have their own

developed standards for assessing speaking. Finally, the study may provide some useful guidelines for the curriculum designers in the American University in the Emirates to adopt such oral courses that enhance in developing and improving oral communication skills within the whole university and then generalize it to other UAE universities.

1.9 Limitation of the Study

Limitation is something that impacts the result of the study. For example, population in one university may not reflect the real situation in other universities. Small numbers of the students answer questions and participate may impact on the accuracy. It is out of the researcher's control. It is a weakness in the study. Simon and Goes (2013, p.2) "Limitations are potential weaknesses in your study and are out of your control." There are limitations in almost everything research. However, limitation should not affect the outcome of the study. As the study was done in the place where the researcher working, it may be considered as one of the weakness the researcher could not overcome it. The study had to include other universities in the country. However, one of the strengths of this study is to be a reference to other researchers in investigating the problems that English learners encounter in oral communication and can be a guidance in assessing English speaking skills. The second thing is, the size of the participants might be small comparing with the number of students in the UAE. Hence, it is difficult to generalize the findings to other students in other universities. The insights of the study emerged from the perspective of the researcher towards the problems with oral communication and speaking assessment. However, the study is considered one of the unique studies tackled the problems with oral communication skill and the assessment of an important skill that is neglected and avoided by most of

English teachers and English centres as well as the standards that being established can be guidance for future researches.

1.10 Definition of Terms

There are some terms used throughout the whole study. They are defined and elaborated to clarify their meaning and remove any ambiguities as they are frequently appeared in all parts of the study.

Cut-off score: Bejar (2008) cited that cut score is a score that classifies the students' performance into levels. In this study it is to know the students whose score below the cut score into level, and the students' performance whose score is at or above cut score into higher level.

Dependent Variable: It is something that depends on other factors and could be impacted by those factors negatively or positively. In this study dependent variable is oral communication.

Independent Variables: It is a variable that represents a quantity that is being manipulated in a study. Independent variable in this study are factors impact on oral communications which are pronunciation, vocabulary, and exposure to English.

Establishing Standards: According to Bejar (2008, p.1) "This term refers to "methodology used to define levels of achievement or proficiency and the cut-scores corresponding to those levels." In this study, standards are established to recognize the students' abilities in speaking skill as to identify their levels.

Oral communication: According to Sahab (2015) Oral Communication is the ability to talk with others to exchange information and ideas. It includes oral discussion, presentation, asking questions and giving directions. It came from a Latin term

“communis” which means participate in discussion and share ideas. In this study oral communication is a dependent variable that is impacted by factors such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and exposure to English.

Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI): According to American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (2012). Oral proficiency interview is a standardized assessment of speaking ability. It is a form of semi-structured interview between the examinee and examiner. It is a test measures how well the learner speaks a foreign language by assessing his or her performance against certain criteria. In this study it is used to evaluate the students’ performance in speaking skill to identify their levels.

Speaking Assessment: It is direct test in speaking skill and abilities in actual performance. “Direct tests evaluate speaking skills and abilities in actual performance. Ginther (2013, p. 1) “The classic example of a direct assessment of speaking is an interview in which participants engage in structured or semi structured interaction with an interlocutor/interviewer/rater.” In this study the assessment of speaking is a direct test which means the participant is engaged in semi-structured interaction with interviewer.

Speaking Benchmark: It is a description and measuring of each level in speaking ability of English learners. Speaking Benchmark indicates how well a speaker can function in target language. It provides a framework for assessing speaking skill of English learners. According to Cambridge dictionary, it is a standard of achievement against certain criteria to be measured or judged.

1.11 Chapter Summary

In chapter one, the researcher explained the background of the study and gave an overview of the situation in the UAE regarding teaching English. Furthermore, the study dwelled on the AUE University students in which the researcher targeted to investigate such problems in oral communication the students have with. The study is to draw attention to the problems the students encounter when they graduate from high schools in the UAE, are surprised to find that all the courses delivered in English. Consequently, the students face many difficulties in their academic studies. However, the most challenge they encounter is oral communication. Thus, Oral communication is a big challenge faced by Arabs in university and is considered as a hinder to their performance at the level of the university.

This chapter discussed objectives and questions of the study. The first purpose of the study is to explore certain linguistic factors; vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation and exposure to English and their correlation to poor performance in oral communication of university students. The second purpose discussed in this chapter is the need of establishing standards for assessing speaking within university curriculum. Al Nakhalah (2016, p.100) cited, “there are many different factors cause difficulty in speaking.” It is widely recognized that assessing speaking skill is so hard and it’s a time-consuming plus it may be more subjective. Many studies claimed that speaking test assessment lacks solid grounding on theories and pedagogy and the design of speaking assessment is not so reliable.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

A literature review is a cover of all what is given in the topic. The researcher provides a background of the study. Shunda (2007, p.3) “It is an overview of research on a given topic and going through other studies related to the topic.” This chapter is a review of the research studies that firstly highlighted on factors; vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, and exposure to language that cause poor in oral communication skill of English foreign learners, and secondly, the studies that researched on designing standards of assessing speaking skill. Although oral skill (listening and speaking) are so significant in communication, it has not been given a great interest by English teachers and limited time is devoted in the classroom to the development of speaking skill. Adnan and Abidin (2014) cited that speaking skill in English is a global problem among all ESL learners.

In other words, when non-native English language want to produce English language, they face problems in pronunciation, finding suitable words and using sentences in suitable context. When non-Native-English speakers speak, they need to deal with different accents that are spoken by many native speakers such as British, American, Australian, and Canadian. ESL (English Second Learners) students are not only to understand the accents but also are to learn the features and cultural differences in spoken English. Crystal (2003) pointed that the spoken language is different from written language. It is so clear that the structure of spoken language is not as the same as written.

Listening skill is not less important than speaking. A speaker cannot speak if he or she does not understand what has been spoken. Yavuz and Celik (2017, p. 9). “It is regarded as one of the prior conditions of oral output in language learning process.” Horne (2004) argued that listening is the most frequently skill used in our oral communication at the level of academic and daily life. Horne (2004, p. 32) “A conversation cannot be successfully undertaken without the ability to listen.” Yıldırım and Yıldırım (2016) stated that listening plays a vital role in communication in our daily life and classroom. Yıldırım and Yıldırım added listening skill is as the same as speaking and without listening people cannot communicate and both skills must be developed together. Additionally, the study went through the studies that tackled the assessing of speaking skill as it is important to have basic standards for assessing this skill for both English language instructors and students.

English instructors need indicators to have information of how the students’ performance level in speaking skill and how they are progressing and developing in speaking. Saylor and Calman (2004) stated speaking assessment serve many purposes: to measure language proficiency; to assess achievement of the objectives of a course of study; to diagnose learners’ strengths and weaknesses; to identify what the learners do and don’t know; and to assist in the placement of learners within a teaching English program. Ahmed and Alamin (2014) argued that speaking skill is very important in foreign language proficiency, thus assessing speaking has become necessary to identify the ability of learners and specify their weakness. Most studies that tackled this subject claimed that there are no specific criteria and most of English teachers avoid assessing their student’s abilities in speaking skill for many reasons and some of these reasons are; time-consuming, clear criteria as well as there are no trained examiners to deal with this kind of assessment. Raza (2007) considers assessing

speaking is the most difficult skill to test, as the assessor should decide what to assess, how to conduct the test and the raters, tasks, time - consuming.

2.2 Oral Communication: Definition and Process

Communication can be defined as the process through which certain information is to be transmitted between two or more different parties. This involves the sender who formulates the message, encodes then transmits it to the receiver who on the other hand receives the encoded message, decodes, and forms feedback to the sender. According to Flormata (2003, p. 4) “Oral Communication is a vicious cycle which always involves two persons or more: a decoder, and an encoder; the message, the channel and the feedback”. Zulkurnain and Kaur (2014) stated that the process of oral communication involves at least one speaker and listener. It includes face to face conversation and telephone conversation. It starts with the sender who is considered the source of the information. Whereas the receiver is a person who is supposed to understand and then responds. Without message there is no communication. To exchange the message between the communicators there should be a medium that is the channel that allows the message to be transmitted. For communication to be effective, the intended meaning should be transmitted without alteration or distortion of the original message. In foreign language, the different pronunciation between native and non-native hinders the communication to be continued. The foreign learner must have ability to produce understandable language and realize the spoken language.

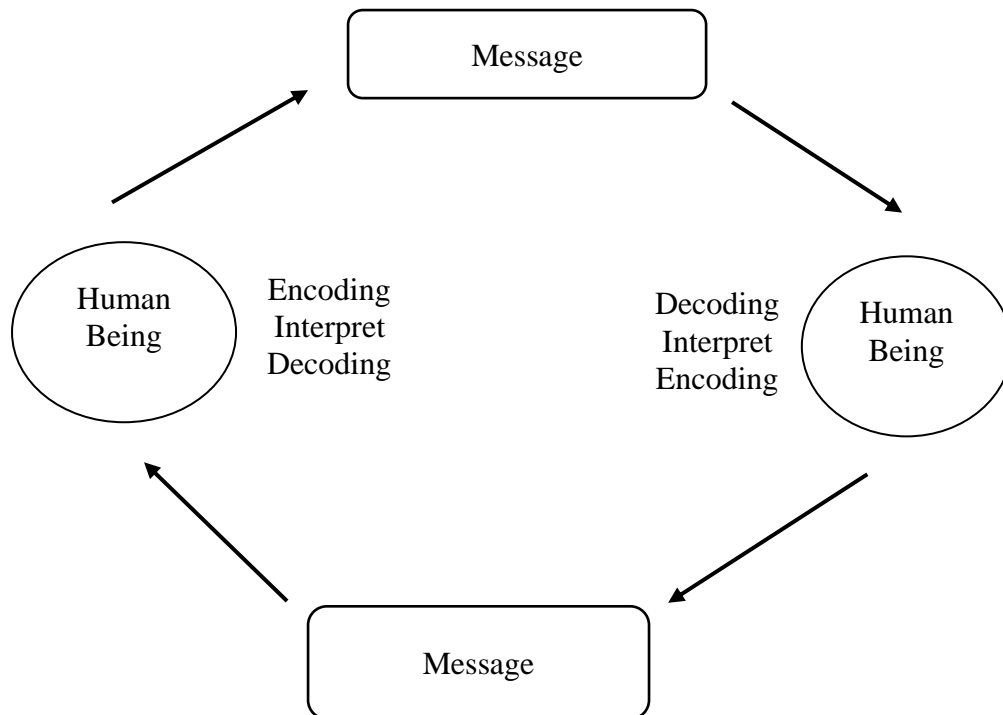


Figure 2.1. Schramm's model (1954) Communication process

Oral communication means an oral skill that includes both listening and speaking in which we need to communicate properly. Oral skills are tools that help the communicators to understand, exchange information, express their ideas and convey their messages. According to the dictionary, "Communication is defined as a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour. As Language experts believe, listening and speaking are foundation of literacy. These two skills are powerful to improve communication in all life aspects.

Haney (1992) indicated that communication skill is a mix of verbal, interpersonal and physical strategies that needs confidence and effectiveness. According to Rahman (2010, p.2) "Communication is a dynamic interaction process that involves the effective transmission of facts, ideas, feelings and values." Effective

communication skills depend on many factors such as ideas, thoughts, situations, and recipients of the speaker communication. Communication is the art and process of creating ideas. Oral communication happens in many forms, it can be conversation, TV or radio speech, meetings, conferences, interviews, or presenting and it needs to be used appropriately to satisfy and please the audiences.

2.3 Oral English Communication Proficiency

Backhouse (2012) cited that oral proficiency is so important for students to improve their communication. Backhouse stated that through oral communication, students develop other linguistic skills. Oral communication is not like reading and writing, it requires a real – situation to happen and needs several abilities the communicator to have to interact with his or her interactor. Hui (2011) stated that the speaker has to address five components to orally communicate properly and appropriately whether formally or informally and they are as follows: First, oral communication requires a message to send and receive; second, communicator should use correct sentences; third, the speaker is to have enough vocabulary knowledge to enable him/her participating in conversation; fourth, pronunciation is a significant component in producing clear and understandable language; finally, the speaker should express ideas, thoughts, etc. in reasonable fast without making long stops and looking to recall the words in order to complete his/ her ideas. Thus, the ability of speaking in a second language Hui added, can be divided into two categories: accuracy and fluency. Fluency means that the speaker should speak clearly and comfortably whereas accuracy means precisely without making mistakes. To conclude, oral communicating is a process between listener and speaker, and it happens in different situations for many purposes and the speaker needs abilities to enable him or her to