

12 Student's Beliefs' about Learning to Speak English

Khadija Ali Al-Zedjali
Muscat Region

1 INTRODUCTION

This study is an investigation of students' beliefs about learning to speak English. I was motivated to do this research by a number of factors. Firstly, there was my personal interest in the subject and a desire to find out about my learners' beliefs about speaking English. Secondly, in Oman there is increasing emphasis on developing speaking skills in English and the Ministry of Education recently added an oral component to the national English test. Finally, there has not been any research into Omani learners' beliefs about speaking English, so I felt it would be timely to study this issue.

2 STUDYING LEARNERS' BELIEFS

A belief is "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (Borg, 2001: 186). Language learners possess a set of beliefs about the nature of language learning, which Hosenfeld (2003), cited in Ellis (1994:477), defines as 'mini theories' of second language learning. Wenden (1986) and Horwitz (1988) also argue that language learners indeed hold such beliefs. There have in fact been several studies of the beliefs learners hold about language learning (e.g. Horwitz, 1988) but there has been little specific attention to language learners' beliefs about speaking (Cohen & Fass, 2001 is an exception here). As noted earlier, in Oman there has been no research of this kind.

There are good reasons for studying language learners' beliefs. As Nunan & Lamb (1996) point out, learners' attitudes towards the target language, the learning situation, and the roles that they are expected to play within that learning situation exert significant influences on the language learning process. Thus the beliefs Omani learners have about speaking English are likely to influence their learning and particularly the development of their oral skills. Moreover, Rifkin (2000:394)

asserts that learners' beliefs about the learning process are "of critical importance to the success or failure of any student's efforts to master a foreign language". Nunan (1998:177) adds that "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner's subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account". As noted by Bada & Okan (2000), many teachers acknowledge the need to understand learners' preferences, but they may not actually consult learners in deciding how to teach. Teachers may believe that learners are not capable of expressing what they want or need to learn and how they want to learn. However researchers like Block (1994) claim that learners do have an awareness of what goes on in classes and that teachers should therefore make an attempt to align their task orientation to that of learners. The importance to syllabus designers of being aware of learners' beliefs and preferences has also been noted by Barkhuizen (1998).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

This is a mixed method study of learners' beliefs about speaking English in the EFL classroom. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are students' beliefs' about speaking English?
- How do students react to speaking tasks in English?
- What changes and difficulties can we observe in students' oral production when they are engaged in such tasks?

3.2 Participants & Context

The class involved in the research was composed of 31 students, all of them girls who were 14-16 years old, in a mixed ability Grade 10 Cycle 2 Basic School in Muscat. They did not have many opportunities to develop their spoken English - two speaking lessons (public speech) a month plus occasional speaking activities in their course book (*Our World through English*). In selecting the class for this study, I obtained permission and support from the Senior Teacher in the school and also the willingness of the teacher and students to contribute to the study. Grade 10 was chosen as the students there had been studying English for five years and had some oral ability in English.

3.3 Research Instruments

The findings I report below are based on a set of structured data collection strategies: a questionnaire, classroom observation and focus group interviews. I describe each form of data collection below.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

As Burton & Bartlett (2005:100) state "a well-designed questionnaire can provide useful information on respondents' attitudes, values and habits". Following advice in the above source, I designed the questionnaire, making sure that the questions were clear and specific. The questionnaire had 22 questions, both closed and open-ended, which collected information about students' beliefs about speaking.

The questionnaire was administered to the class of students studied here during class time. It was in English but the questions were explained in Arabic for those who needed extra support. The questionnaire was analysed using an analysis coding scheme adapted from Dörnyei (2003). These questionnaires were numbered from 1-31, then the number of each closed question was written in a grid (following advice in Munn & Drever, 2004) and the responses transferred from the questionnaires into the grid (each closed response was given a numerical value – e.g. 1 = strongly disagree). I did a frequency count for each question and figures and tables were used to present the closed questions after the analysis. Most students answered the open-ended questions in Arabic. These responses were translated into English and analyzed into categories according to the answers students provided.

3.3.2 Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were also conducted and these allowed me to document the speaking behaviours of students and difficulties they faced while speaking English in the classroom. I selected three speaking tasks from English for Me Grade 10B (see Appendix 1 for an example) and the class teacher agreed to teach these to her learners, in three lessons over a period of three weeks. The teacher gave a brief introduction about each task. The students were sitting in groups of five and they were working in groups, pairs and individually according to the tasks. To maximize the accuracy of the data collected, the lessons observed were audio recorded, using a digital voice recorder, supported with field notes. As Hitchcock & Hughes (1989:67) suggest, field notes can provide valuable additional contextual information, especially of the kind that will not be captured by an audio recording.

The observational data were fully transcribed and, with the accompanying field notes, provided a detailed description of each task. In analyzing the observations, I first focused on describing what the teacher did at the beginning of the task. I then identified episodes from each task to illustrate how they were taught and what the students did. The analysis of the observational data highlighted a number of issues which provided the framework for follow up semi-structured interviews with students.

3.3.3 Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were directed by a set of general questions which I as a researcher used flexibly in encouraging the interviewee to talk about their beliefs (see Appendix 2 for the questions). Interviews were used because, as Bell (1999) argues, they allow insight into the reasons respondents have for their actions. The interview was piloted with a group of students and as a result I revised the interview questions to improve clarity and to ensure that they addressed my research questions more precisely. Students were interviewed in two groups (seven students in each). They were chosen according to their ability in speaking English, interest in the topic, and willingness to participate in the study. The focus group interviews were focused on classroom episodes in which speaking occurred and provided students with the opportunity to talk about and make explicit their feelings during these episodes. During these interviews, students were shown a copy of each task and asked to comment on what they were doing and the rationale for learning to speak English. The interviews were conducted in English. Each

interview last forty minutes and was audio recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed. After the transcriptions, the interview data were read several times and analyzed with reference to the research questions; thus I looked for comments related to the beliefs learners held, influences on these beliefs, and other factors which influenced the way they learn to speak English. Interview data were initially coded under headings then gradually refined into sub categories referring, for example, to different types of beliefs the learners articulated and different kinds of factors they felt influenced them in learning to speak.

4 FINDINGS

In considering the findings from this study, we must be mindful that these results come from one class of girls containing 31 students who completed a questionnaire and three speaking tasks, and 14 students from the same class who participated in the two focus group interviews.

4.1 Questionnaire

Question 1 asked the students how they felt about speaking English in real life. Figure 1 shows the answers the students gave and the number of students who chose each. The most common response here was that students were worried about making mistakes; over half, though, also said that they were relaxed about speaking English.

In Question 2, 24 students (77.4%) replied that they felt it was very important to speak English in the classroom; in Question 3, though, only nine (29%) said that it

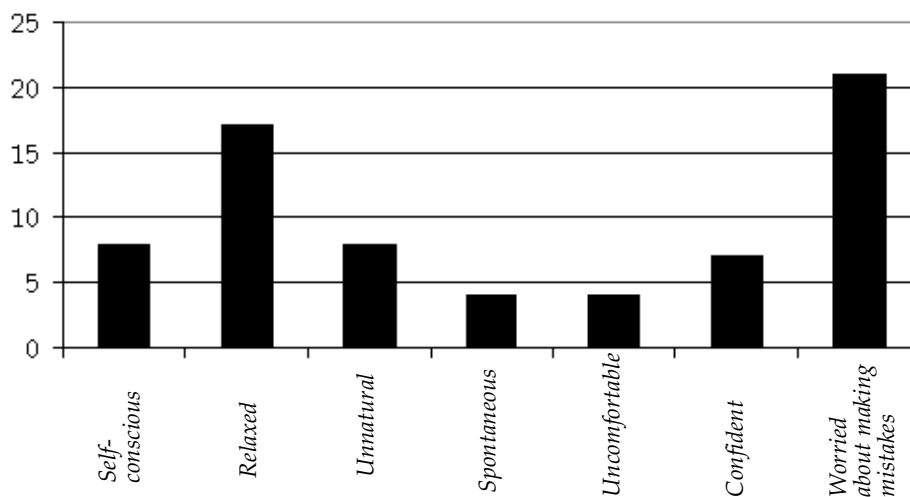


Figure 1: Learners' feelings about speaking English

was very important to speak English outside the classroom. Asked whether they would like to be able to speak English in front of others, 27 students (87.1%) said yes; those who said no said it was because they were afraid of making mistakes.

Question 7 asked students how often they spoke English in the classroom. 17 said sometimes, while 10 (surprisingly in my view) said they spoke English always.

With specific reference to oral activities in class, though, 16 students (51.6%) said they do not participate because they are afraid of making errors. When asked to explain this fear (in Question 18), two main reasons emerged. One is the fear of being laughed at by classmates (13 students said this) and the second was the fear of leaving a bad impression on the teacher (mentioned by 12 students).

Table 1: Ways to learn to speak English

N	Ways to learn to speak English
21	Make a friend in English speaking culture
12	Listen to English language radio and native speakers
19	Watch English news, movies and television
11	Listen to English music

In Question 10 students were asked about the best way to learn to speak English. Table 1 summarizes their responses. The most common answer chosen by the students was making an English-speaking friend, though watching the news, movies and television in English was also a popular answer.

In Question 13 students were asked about the kinds of difficulties they expect during speaking activities. Grammar and vocabulary were by far the most common responses, followed by pronunciation and not being able to understand the teacher.

Some of the questionnaire items asked about the teacher. Question 11 asked whether the teacher corrected students' mistakes when they spoke English; 25 students (80.6%) said that the teacher did and 22 students (71%) said they found the corrections helpful. Question 16 was also about the teacher; it asked students if they felt they could improve their English with more specific help. 23 students (74.2%) said yes and were asked to suggest the kinds of help they think would be beneficial. They suggested the following: a better knowledge of language rules; writing and talking in class; having more English classes; having more opportunities to speak; being encouraged to speak and being given help in making sentences; one student also said that it would help if they felt trusted by the teacher. Another question about the teacher was 21. It asked students what the teacher could do to motivate them to speak English. Their responses are given in Table 2.

Table 2: How teachers can motivate students to speak

N	Motivating teacher behaviours
7	Stop speaking Arabic inside the class
4	Give stories , quizzes, games and more activities
3	Give all students chance to speak
2	Not to use hard words
2	Correct their words
2	Do a lot of competitions in the lesson between the groups

As this table shows, students made a range of suggestions for ways in which the teacher might motivate them to speak English; minimizing the use of Arabic in the classroom was a key issue here.

4.2 Observations & Interviews

As explained earlier, as part of this study I asked the teacher of the class involved here to teach them three speaking tasks taking from a newer coursebook being used in Oman but which had not been adopted in this class yet. I then conducted two focus group interviews in which I discussed these tasks with the learners.

Both groups said that they enjoyed the tasks and found them useful in getting them to speak. In terms of the difficulties they faced during the speaking tasks, learners indicated that the main problems were pronouncing the words and understanding the meanings of the words. My recordings of the tasks supported this. Understanding the meaning of the words was seen by students to be the foundation for effective speaking, and they felt that not knowing how to pronounce words correctly was also a major problem. For example they said that in the tasks "some words seem are very hard for us to pronounce". Making sentences and answering questions were also mentioned by some learners, but these did not emerge here as issues the students felt caused them great difficulty in speaking.

Both groups interviewed also agreed that knowing words was more important than grammar in enabling them to speak English. They believed that it is very important to have a firm understanding of vocabulary and meaning of English words in order to speak. Similarly, both groups agreed that if the teacher speaks the L1 then learners will not learn or speak the language. They remarked that if the teacher gives them more chance to speak English and uses different tasks then they will speak the language. They also said that if the teacher corrects their errors this will give them more motivation to speak.

5 DISCUSSION

Overall, the learners in this study had positive views about learning to speak English. These positive views were clear in the way the learners talked about the three speaking tasks they experienced in this study. They said that they enjoyed the tasks and my observations confirmed that they responded well to them.

The learners also agreed that speaking in English presents many challenges for them and most of the learners identified several common areas of difficulty in speaking. However, learners felt that pronunciation and understanding of meaning were their main problems in speaking; the learners themselves were more concerned about their use of vocabulary than their grammar.

The learner interviews confirmed my view, as a teacher, that learners of English in Oman often do not have opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. For many learners the course book is the only place where they meet English. More generally, learners often depend solely on the school for learning English.

One recurrent theme in the findings related to errors. The learners reported in the questionnaire that were afraid of making errors and that this deterred them from contributing orally in class. At the same time, though, they expressed positive views about teacher correction of their spoken errors. This is interesting as one might expect correction to have a negative effect on learners' motivation to speak (see, for example, Numrich, 1996). In this class, the opposite seemed true and learners

reported being motivated when their errors were corrected. Perhaps it is not just a matter of whether or not the teacher corrects learners, but how correction is handled, though this is not an issue I examined here.

A number of insights emerged here too regarding what learners thought the teacher could do to encourage them to speak English in class. Minimizing the use of the L1 seemed to be a key issue for the learners, but they also felt that if teachers encouraged them to speak English more and gave them a sense of belief in their own abilities then they would be more motivated to try to speak English.

5.1 Limitations

In considering these findings we must of course remember that this was a small-scale descriptive study conducted in a very specific context and with a limited number of participants. Thus, although I feel that the findings are of interest and relevance to both learners and teachers in Oman generally, I cannot claim that the beliefs of the learners reported here are typical of others in the country.

Although I set out to draw on three sources of data, the questionnaires emerged here as the main source of insight into learners' beliefs about speaking English. The observations provided some evidence of how the learners responded to the tasks and were useful in generating questions for the interviews; but the interviews did not generate as much data as I had expected; this may have been due to my own inexperience as an interviewer as well as to students' being shy because they were recorded.

6 CONCLUSION

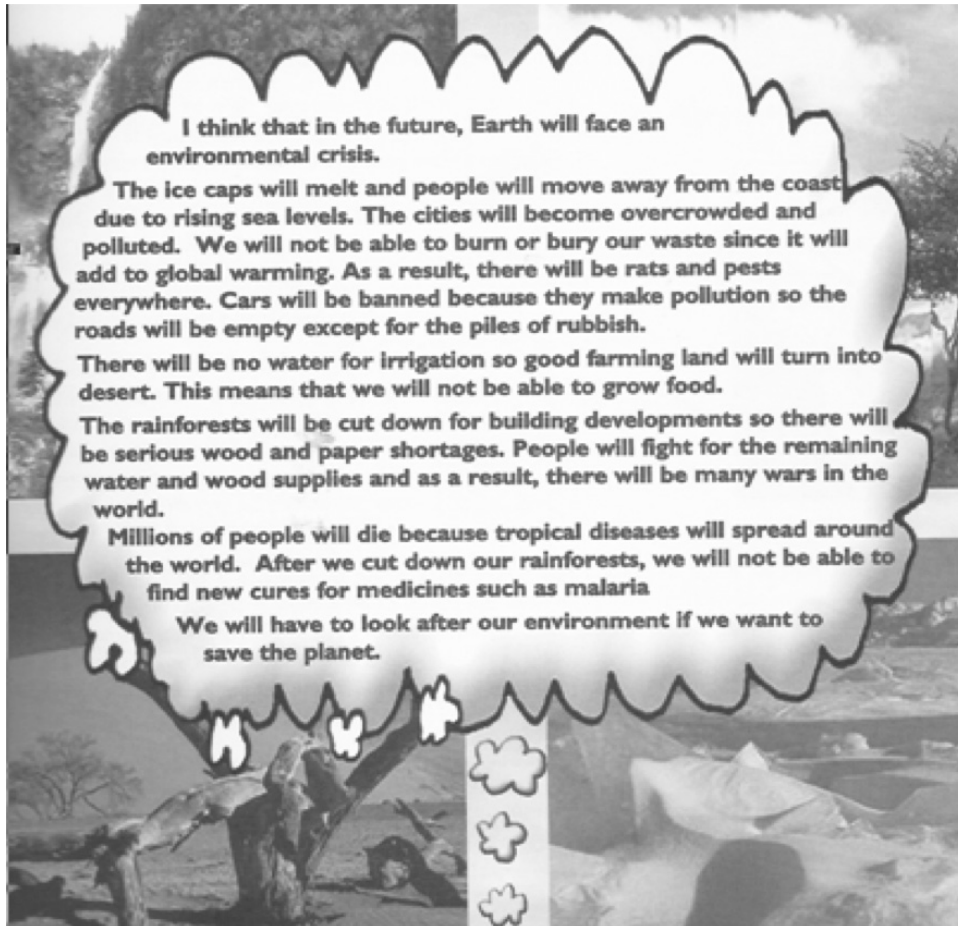
This exploratory study suggests that examining learners' beliefs about speaking English can generate insights which are valuable for both teachers and syllabus designers. Further systematic research of this kind can examine in more detail some of the questions raised here: How do Omani learners feel about speaking English? What factors affect their feelings? What do they feel teachers can do to motivate them to speak English? The answers to these and related questions can contribute to current efforts in Oman to raise the level of spoken proficiency among learners of English.

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APPENDIX 1: EXAMPLE OF SPEAKING TASK



Work in groups and think about what you want to do to take care of your environment. Use the words below to help you.

reduce	reuse	recycle	pollution
trees	animals	water	papers
cans and bottles	seas	food	

APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. According to the task (showing them the activity) did you enjoy it?
2. What did you enjoy most about it?
3. Why did you not enjoy it?
4. What do you think is good about such tasks?
5. What problems did you encounter during the task?
6. Was it easier/ harder than expected?
7. What did you find easy?
8. What did you find hard?
9. Do you feel embarrassed when you make mistakes in front of the teacher or class mates?
10. Why do you get this feeling?
11. Is accuracy of pronunciation and grammar important when you speak English?
12. Why do you think they are important?
13. During speaking activities, what difficulties do you face?
14. Why do you think you face them?
15. Does the teacher correct your mistakes while doing the task?
16. Does she give you any support during the activity?
17. Is there anything else she could do to motivate you to speak English?
18. How could she help?
19. Do you feel it is important to learn to speak English?
20. Why do you feel it is or is not important?
21. Is there anything else you want to say about learning to speak English?