

The Oral Proficiency of English Majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the reality of oral proficiency of English majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza. The researcher conducted an oral proficiency test on a sample of (22) sophomore English majors who were chosen from the Faculty of Education at AL-Azhar University-Gaza during the first semester of the academic year 2014-2015. The participants of the study included 12 females and 10 males who were divided according to their cumulative general points average (CGPA) into 11 high achievers and 11 low achievers. The instrument required for the study was an oral proficiency test and two trained English language instructors recorded and analyzed the participants' oral production. The instructors' analyses of the participants' oral production consisted of grammar accuracy, syntactic complexity and fluency. Results revealed that the oral proficiency of high and low achievers of English majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza is not up to the required level of English foreign language learners' level.

Key Words: Oral Proficiency, AL-Azhar University-Gaza

Introduction

Oral proficiency is the student's ability to speak a language in real life settings. It describes how well a student can speak a language in the real world regardless of textbook, grades or class goals. Oral proficiency is the best indicator of mastering a foreign language and students often assess their success in learning a language on the basis of their oral proficiency level. This is quite a motive for English foreign language learners (EFLs) to enhance their English language oral proficiency, which has become a priority for educators in the globe.

August and Shanahan (2008) shed the light on the importance of the oral proficiency of EFLs indicating that reading comprehension skills and writing skills are positively correlated with the oral proficiency. Moreover, Echevaria, Vogt & Short (2013) asserted that the oracy and literacy of English language can be developed simultaneously, and English language learners need instructional accommodations and support to fully develop their oral English skills. They maintained that teachers should make verbal communication more understandable by consciously making modification based on students' level of English

proficiency as it is sometimes difficult for students to learn when their teacher's way of delivering information is too fast, complex, or inarticulate.

A successful oral communication requires interlocutors to know how to make use of the linguistic components of English. In this concern, Florez (1999) mentioned that speaking requires that learners not only know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary, i.e. elements of linguistic competence, but also understand when, why, and in what way to produce language, i.e. sociolinguistic competence.

As students' level of English oral proficiency improves, they start to produce more accurate, complex and fluent utterances. However, most of EFLs take a great deal of psychological preparation and endeavor to develop their oral skills (AbdAlRaheem, 2015). English oral language development is essential to the education of English learners. Virtually all educators agree that such learners need daily oral English practice until some minimum level of competence is reached, (Diaz-Rico, 2013). "As adults spend an average of 70% of their time engaged in some sort of communication, of this an average of 45% is spent on listening compared to 30% on speaking, 16% on reading and 9% on writing," (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2001, p.119). Due to the forgoing mentioned reason, many instructors are eager to find ways to promote oral participation in the classroom as an alternative to lectures (Diaz-Rico, 2013, p.159).

Context of the Problem

Since the scholastic year 2000-2001, English language has been taught as a foreign language from grade (1) till grade (12) in Palestine, so Palestinian students are expected to enhance the four skills of English language and use this language effectively (Abu Luqud et al. 1996:90). The fact is that, according to the records of the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education, school students and tertiary level students, on the same footing, are still struggling with the English language suffering from a lot of difficulties and challenges.

The researcher has taught different English courses at schools in Gaza Strip for seventeen years. He has also been teaching at the Palestinian national universities since 2008. During this period, he noticed that Palestinian English majors suffer poor performance in English language. It has also been observed that those students are not motivated to produce even simple English utterances. And it has been observed that the majority of the Palestinian English Foreign Language Learners cannot produce different English sentences without making errors and that they have difficulties in communicating when using English language (Abu Alyan, 2013; Alhabbash, 2012; El-Nawajha, 2014; Firwana, 2010). Research conducted on Palestinian students also indicated that Palestinian students suffer low level achievement in English language, and it is at the lowest level in Gaza where it is seen as a difficult subject (El-Fagawi, 1993), and many complaints have been raised regarding students' low standard in English language (AlGussain, 2000).

Up to the researcher best knowledge, none of the previous studies which have been conducted in Gaza investigated the reality of English majors' oral proficiency at university level. The current study is concerned with finding out the reality of oral proficiency of English majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza using recent techniques.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following major question.

What is the reality of oral proficiency of English majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza?

To achieve the aims of the study, the researcher addressed the following sub-questions:

1- What are the oral proficiency skills that should be mastered by Palestinian University English majors?

2- What is the actual oral performance of English majors high achievers at AL-Azhar University-Gaza?

3-What is the actual oral performance of English majors low achievers at AL-Azhar University-Gaza?

4- Are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between Al-Azhar University English majors high achievers' oral proficiency and that of the low achievers in favor of the high achievers?

Hypothesis of the Study

1- There are statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between Al-Azhar University English majors high achievers' oral proficiency and that of the low achievers in favor of the high achievers.

Literature Review

Oral Proficiency

A number of educationalists have defined oral proficiency. For example, oral proficiency was defined as, "The ability to communicate verbally in a functional and accurate way in the target language. A high degree of oral proficiency implies having the ability to apply the linguistic knowledge to new contexts (topics) and situations," (Omaggio, 1986) cited in (Stein, 1999). And Viola, (2010) define oral proficiency as the ability to apply oral and written language cues to a variety of settings in order to conduct educated and scholarly exchanges," (p. 9).

In the current study, oral proficiency is used to mean the ability of English majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza to produce accurate, fluent and complex utterances in order to communicate verbally in English language.

Oral Skill

Oral skill is a two-way process between speaker and listener/s and involves the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of listening with understanding. Listening and speaking are interwoven skills and, together, they form the oral activities of English language (Kailani, 2007, p.59). Shi (2007) argued that oral proficiency is a productive skill, so to ensure the fluency and accuracy of utterances, adequate input, language to which students are exposed such as

teachers' talk, listening activities and reading passages, is an essential condition. Developing the oral ability of English learners is very important and necessary to enhance the English proficiency of these learners. Diaz-Rico, (2013) clarifies this importance by saying:

"Oracy skills are essential if English learners are to participate fully in a democratic society. Speaking involves a number of complex skills and strategies-not only the stringing together of words in proper grammatical sequence but also the organizing of those words into coherent, powerful message that help the speaker attain personal goals. Listening and speaking are integral to communicative competence-knowing what to say, to whom, and how to shape that discourse in the most effective way. This ability begins with oracy training in English-language development" (p.137).

The foregoing points illustrates that English foreign language learners should be scaffolded during oral skill tasks. Flavia, (1990) points out the importance of helping English language learners in the process of constructing meaning during listening activities. He illustrates, "Constructing listening instructions are usually limited to what precedes or follows the listening tasks e.g.: introduction of new vocabulary and discussion of a topic"(p.14). Teachers could help students in such activities by developing useful and motivating oral discussion that should directly follow listening tasks. Diaz-Rico(2013)divided listening activities into three types: listening to repeat, listening to understand, and listening for comprehension, (p.138).

During the aforementionedthree types of listening, foreign language teachers should experiment with different methods of evaluating listening comprehension. They can employ several testing techniques to assess students' proficiency in English language(Kailani, &Muqattash, 2009, pp. 24-25).

On the other hand, speaking; the second component of oral skill, is a primary tool for communication, thinking and expressing thoughts and feelings. Chaney & Burk (1998) mentioned that speaking is, "The process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (p.13). In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the more a learner speaks English, the faster he

will learn. So, English foreign language teachers should motivate their learners to speak English language as much as they can.

Speaking practice is a crucial component of communicative competence. It involves a number of complex skills and strategies and spoken discourse can be informal, as conversations between friends, or formal, as in academic lectures. Informal conversations are interactive; speaker and listener share common knowledge and support each other with nonverbal cues. Bailey (2006) mentioned that when interlocutors communicate orally with each other, they tend to experience modified interaction; "Interaction which is altered in some ways to facilitate comprehension of the intended message". Such modifications occur through repetition of the spoken message as well as through three types of conversational moves: (1) clarification requests, interlocutor asks questions for clarification when the whole conveyed message is not comprehended, (2) confirmation checks, the listener wants to make sure that he understands the message and (3) comprehension checks, the speaker wants to make sure that the listener has understood the message(p.125).

Part of the role of the teacher during the above-mentioned speaking tasks is to help students assimilate and produce discourse not only for the purpose of basic interpersonal communication (informal) but also for comprehension and production of cognitive academic language (formal). In addition, the teacher should provide opportunities for students to express themselves in a wide range of language functions, (Diaz-Rico, 2013, p.145).

According to Brown (1994), teaching speaking involves both macro and micro skills. The former refers to producing the smaller chunks of language; phonemes, words collocations, and phrasal units, whereas the latter implies that the speakers should accomplish appropriately communicative functions according to situations, participants and goals. Among the student skills that teachers should try to develop is fluency.

Speaking English fluently is one of the most important characteristics of good English Foreign Language Learners. "Fluency is one of the

most common terms used to describe speech," (Fulcher, 2003, p.28),and fluency was defined by Jones (2007) by saying, "Fluency does not mean speaking really fast without hesitating. It is being able to express yourself despite gaps in your knowledge, despite the mistakes you are making, despite not knowing all the vocabulary you might need," (P.18). In addition,Kailani and Muqattach (2012) said, "Fluency is the speakers' ability to put what they want to say or write into words with ease and correctness" (P.24). Teachers should help students develop their speaking ability during English language classes and they should help students overcome their oral language quietude. Accepting English learners' use of both languages; native language and target language, during instruction may help reduce learners' anxiety about speaking English, (Pappamihiel, 2002).

Like any other skills of the language, speaking ability should be evaluated throughout the teaching and learning process. Thornbury (2005) proposes four categories which can be used to assess speaking ability. The following terms describe these categories:(1)grammar and vocabulary, (2)discoursemanagement, (3) pronunciation, and (4) interactive communication(p.127).

From the classification cited above, one can conclude that speaking is an active interaction between a speaker and listener/s. The speaker must be able to produce fluent speech at different rates of delivery and appropriate and variant usage of vocabulary. In addition, the speaker has to use appropriate pronunciation, grammatical rules, and communicate their opinion effectively. This importance has urged Sato (2010) to assess the following linguistic criteria of oral product; grammatical accuracy, fluency, vocabulary range, and pronunciation as they are considered fundamental components of oral proficiency. Accordingly, the following analytic rating criteria and definitions were adopted: (1) grammatical accuracy means the degree to which the test-taker is exhibiting accurate grammatical structure, (2) fluency means the degree to which the test-taker is maintaining a well-paced flow without lapses pace, (3) vocabulary range means the degree to which the test-taker is demonstrating a wide range of vocabulary, (4)

pronunciation means the degree to which the test-taker is articulating clear pronunciation and intonation patterns, and (5) content elaboration development/comprehension includes the degree to which the test-taker is conveying relevant and well elaborated/developed ideas.

Traits of Oral Proficiency

A considerable volume of literature, which produces interesting findings, has investigated the various traits of oral proficiency. To help understand those traits, Iwashita, (2010) summaries their definitions which help illustrate the four main skills of oral proficiency namely: (1) syntactic complexity, (2) lexical diversity, (3) grammatical accuracy and (4) fluency.

Syntactic Complexity

Speaking studies tackle various definitions of syntactic complexity. Foster and Skehan (1996) refer to syntactic complexity as the elaboration and variation of syntactic patterning. Wolf-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim (1998) clarify that grammatically complex language involves varied and sophisticated structure. While, Ortega (2003) refers to syntactic complexity as the range of forms that surface in language production and the degree of sophistication of such forms (p.492). Length of production unit, amount of embedding subordination and coordination, range of structural types and structural sophistication were the measures used to examine the syntactic complexity in learners' language. These measures were used because it is assumed that learners combine short simple sentences into longer and complex ones as their language develops.

Lexical Diversity

A lot of the previous studies used ratio-based scale to measure lexical diversity. Despite the widespread use of this scale; type-token ratio scale, (Malvern & Richerds, 2002; Vermeer, 2000) raised an important question to see if type-token ratio really measures vocabulary richness or not. A strange result was found by Iwashita et al. (2008) who indicated that the type-token ratio of lower proficiency students was higher than that of higher proficiency students. This may due to the

fact that low proficiency students utter extremely incorrect utterances which include wide variety of unconnected words. Those students, in a try to convey their thoughts or feelings, tend to repeat various utterances which include a sole meaning.

Grammatical Accuracy

Accurate language is that one which is error free. In other words, it does not contain grammatical errors. Empirical studies have investigated the grammatical accuracy of students' speech using two main approaches: (1) global grammar accuracy approach, which has the potential to be the most comprehensive because all errors are considered. However, Elder & Iwashita, (2005) found that researchers, who used this approach, tend not to agree on errors' types which aim at achieving reliability and (2) specific type of error approach, which investigates specific types of errors, does not encounter reliability achieving problems. However, they are narrower and less inclusive of all potential features related to accuracy.

The term error-free clauses was defined as, "A clause in which there is no error in syntax, morphology, or word order," (Ellis, 2005, p.256). This measure has been widely used in task-based research and has been proven to reflect the grammatical accuracy of students' speech (Bygate, 1999; Skehand & Foster, 1997). One way of quantifying accuracy level of a speaker is offered by Kormos and Denese (2004), who suggest measuring the proportion of error-free clauses relative to the total number of a speaker's uttered clauses.

Fluency

Fluency has concerned researchers from different angles. To measure fluency, some researchers tackled the temporal features of speech; words or syllables per minute, and the length or number of pauses (Lennon, 2009). Others investigated the automaticity of producing utterances; how students are able to produce foreign language utterances without attending to rules of the target language grammar (Schmidt, 1992; Towel, Hawkins, & Bazergui, 1996). However, it was empirically concluded that the best predictors of

fluency are: the speaker's amount of talk, speech rate and the mean length of run (Riggenbach, 1991). On one hand, "There is consensus among researchers that the average speech rate of a native speaker lies between 120 to 260 wpm," (Gotz, 2013, p.15). Naturally, the speech rate of a foreign language speaker is lower than this level (Hincks, 2008 cited in Gotz, 2013, p.16). This was illustrated by Koch, (1998) cited in El-Hilaly, (2001) who stated that a foreign language speaker's speech rate ranges from 125-150 wpm. On the other hand, the mean length of run presents the extent to which learners are able to produce segments of a message without pausing while engaged in an oral narrative task (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p.156).

It is clear from the above mentioned brief summary of previous studies which tackled oral proficiency features measuring, that different studies have tackled the oral proficiency using various methods. Some studies stress the use of grammatical accuracy factor with some variation in the contribution of other factors. Other studies which tackled deep analysis of learner performance used vocabulary and fluency as the principle factors. Nevertheless, the studies above revealed that the four different components contribute to the oral proficiency differently according to the proficiency level. Iwashita, (2010) concluded that grammatical accuracy and some features of lexical diversity and fluency varied according to the speaker's oral proficiency level. It was found that there were significant differences between the high and low proficiency groups for word tokens and number of clauses, but not number of talk units (T.U.). This means that high oral proficiency learners produce a significant larger number of smaller units and words, but when the speech samples were measured with a larger unit (T.U.) the difference was not significant.

Teachers can motivate learners to improve the quality of their talk in various ways e.g.: (1) they can slowly introduce events in which they focus on forms. Teachers' recasting of learners' erroneous utterances would encourage learners to focus on the accuracy level of their utterances, (2) teachers could encourage learners to listen and imitate native speakers' speech. This would help improve the fluency

level of the learners, and (3) teachers could encourage learners to plan their participation before start talking. This would help learners to produce more complex and accurate utterances (Delaney, 2012).

It is worth mentioning that course based on interactive communicative-language teaching combined with language-awareness activities seem to be a promising instructional approach for adult English language learners to improve their speaking skills as communicative language teaching emphasizes speaking and listening rather than reading and writing. Although communicative language teaching has traditionally emphasized fluency, accuracy can also be developed, particularly if a language awareness component is central to the instruction (Bailey, 2006, p. 151).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was threefold:

1- Identifying the oral proficiency skills that should be mastered by Palestinian tertiary level English majors.

2- Determining the level of the oral performance of AL-Azhar University- Gaza English majoring high achievers.

3- Determining the level of the oral performance of AL-Azhar University- Gaza English majoring low achievers.

Significance of the Study

This study could be significant since it:

1- Provides English language instructors and curriculum designers with different oral proficiency skills that English majors at tertiary level should master.

2- Widens instructors' and researchers' understanding of oral proficiency and assessing its skills.

3- Reveals the actual oral performance of one of the Palestinian tertiary English major high and low achievers which may guide Palestinian English language faculty members to search new techniques

that could meet students' needs and preferences and enhance their oral proficiency.

Delimitations of the Study

The present study was implemented during the first semester of the academic year 2014/2015. The study was conducted in Gaza Strip and the results of the study can be only generalized within the population of Gaza universities. The participants of this study were sophomore English major students, who studied Conversation Two Course, at Al-Azhar University-Gaza. The study was delimited on measuring the participants' oral proficiency which was measured through assessing: (1) grammar accuracy, (2) syntactic complexity and (3) fluency of the participants' oral production in the oral proficiency test of the study.

Methods & Procedures

The Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were purposively chosen from the Faculty of Education at AL-Azhar University-Gaza during the first semester of the academic year 2014/2015. The students who agreed to do the oral test of the study were 22 sophomore English major students whose age ranged from 20-21. They include 10 males and 12 females. They had learned English for Palestine Curricula from grade one to grade twelve. Those students have also been enrolled in Conversation Two Course.

Instrumentation

The instrument required for the study was an oral proficiency test, which helped assess the students' oral proficiency. The construction of the initial version of the oral proficiency test was based on an oral narrative task, which was used by Delaney, (2012); Iwashita, (2010). This test included the following:

You are going to listen to a telephone call from Brand. Brand is a team leader at a company in Sydney. Raman works in Brand's team. Brand calls Raman and leaves him a voice message. I would like you to

listen to Brand's voice message carefully and try to understand its events as you are going to retell; paraphrase the text events.

Validity of the Oral Proficiency Test

To achieve the face validity, the initial version of the oral proficiency test was distributed to a panel of experts to review it and the test was modified accordingly. The narrative task of the test was adopted and modified according to the jury's suggestions to include two sections: (1) student introduced him/herself and described his university, and (2) a task of retelling a phone message. These two sections were used to motivate students to talk and the students' oral production was recorded and analyzed by two trained English language instructors. The English instructors' analysis of the participants' oral production consisted of grammar accuracy, syntactic complexity and fluency. Appendix (A) presents the final version of the oral proficiency test and appendix (B) presents the audio script of the voice message.

Reliability of the Oral Proficiency Test

The reliability of the oral proficiency test was determined using the test-retest reliability. This test was conducted on a small group of English majoring students as a pilot study. Difficulties and ambiguity of the test instructions were modified. After two weeks the test was conducted on the same small group of English major students. The reliability of the coefficient of the test was 0.85, which indicated acceptable reliability (George & Mallery, 2003. p.231).

In addition, the participants' recorded narratives were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher and another colleague who was trained in analyzing such a narrative, (see appendix C) which presents the participants' oral narrative transcription. The inter-rater reliability between the two analyses of the two instructors was measured and percentage agreement was 92%. Then, the two instructors negotiated the differences between their analyses till they reached consensus on most of their differences.

Implementation

Implementing this study falls in the following steps:

- The researcher informed the English major students at the faculty of Education- AL-Azhar University- Gaza about the aims of the experiment.

- The researcher invited the English majors to volunteer to do the oral proficiency test.

- The researcher administered the oral proficiency test. Students were interviewed individually and their narratives were recorded and analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The quantity of oral production was operationalized as the total number of words produced, amount of talk. On the other hand, the quality analysis of the participants' oral production consisted of grammar accuracy, syntactic complexity, and fluency (Delany, 2012).

- Grammar Accuracy is the ratio of error-free clauses to the total number of clauses uttered by a speaker (see the literature Review of the study) and the term error-free clause was defined as a clause which contains no error in syntax, morphology, or word order. The researcher computed the grammar accuracy of the participants' oral production by counting the number of error-free clauses out of the total number of the participants' oral production..

- Syntactic complexity is the ratio of clauses per a speech unit (AS unit). AS units were identified as, "An AS unit is a single speaker's utterance consisting of an independent clause, or sub-clausal unit, together with any subordinate clause(s) associated with either" (Foster, et al., 2000) cited in (Delaney, 2012). For example the utterance "He thanks his friend" was considered as one AS unit consisting of one clause and received a complexity score of one. The ratio of one clause to one AS unit = one. However, utterances such as: "He asked him to talk to Alison at the reception as she knows good coffees to order food from" were considered one AS unit consisting of four clauses. A learner who produces such four-clause AS units received a complexity score of four.

- In addition to measure the participants' amount of talk, fluency was assessed through measuring its other two temporal variables, namely speech rate and the mean length of run as most of the previous studies have concluded that these two variables are best predictors of fluency

(Lennon, 1990; Riggenbach, 1991). Speech rate was computed by dividing the total number of syllables produced by a learner, amount of talk, by the time it took to produce them by seconds and multiplied it by sixty. The other temporal variable of fluency was the mean length of run, which was calculated as an average number of syllables produced in utterances pauses lasting for .4 seconds or more (Delaney, 2012; Kormos& Denes, 2004).

Findings

Results of the First Question

The first question: what are the oral proficiency skills that should be mastered by Palestinian university English majors?

Reviewing the literature helped the researcher to identify the following oral proficiency skills: (1) grammar accuracy skill, (2) syntactic complexity skill, and (3) fluency skill. For more detail about these skills see the literary review of this study.

The following table shows frequencies and percentages of rate of speech in the oral proficiency test for the participants of the study.

Frequencies and Percentages of Rate of Speech in the Oral Proficiency

Category for Rate of Speech		
	N	%
Slow	9	40.91
Moderate Slow	10	45.45
Average	3	13.64
Total	22	100.00

Results of the above table reveal that most of the participants' level of oral proficiency; rate of speech, falls under the slow and moderate slow levels.

Results of the Second Question

The second question: what is the actual oral performance of English majors high achievers at AL-Azhar University-Gaza?

The Oral Proficiency of English Majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza

To answer this question, the researcher analyzed the oral production of the high achievers whose cumulative general point average (CGPA) is higher than 70, on the oral proficiency test. The researcher computed the means and standard deviation of each dependent variable. Results are stated in the following table.

Means and Standard Deviation of Each Dependent Variable for High Achievers' Oral Proficiency

Variable		Mean	Std. Deviation
Grammar Accuracy		0.74	0.08
Syntactic Complexity		14.14	1.67
Fluency	Amount of Talk	86.91	10.12
	Rate of Speech	79.58	7.76
	Length of run	24.11	4.18

The mean score of the high achievers of the participants of the study in grammar accuracy is 0.74, and that of the syntactic complexity is 14.14. In addition, their mean scores in the amount of talk, rate of speech and length of run are 86.91, 79.58 and 24.11, respectively. The amount of talk of the high achievers of the participants of the study; (86.91 wpm), is smaller than the required level which should be (125 to 150 wpm), (See El-Hilaly, 2001). This result is consistent with AbdAlRaheem(2015) and Vogt & Short (2013) who indicated that EFLs need a great support to develop their oral skills. In addition, this result matches the records of the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education which states that tertiary level students are still struggling with English language suffering from a lot of difficulties and challenges.

The recent level of AL-Azhar University English Majors high achievers' oral proficiency may be due to the traditional method of teaching English language which has been observed by the researcher during conducting the recent study. In such a method, the teaching learning process is dominated by a teacher who seldom provides

opportunities for students to express their thoughts and feeling effectively. This was stated by Kailani & Muqattach (2012) who indicated that traditional language teaching style, which is dominated by a teacher-centered, produces students who suffer weak performance in oral skills (pp. 35-37).

Results of the Third Question

The third question: what is the actual oral performance of English majors low achievers at AL-Azhar University-Gaza?

To answer this question, the researcher analyzed the oral production of the participants of the study, low achievers whose cumulative general point average (CGPA) is lower than 70, on the oral proficiency test. The researcher computed the means and standard deviation of each dependent variable. Results are stated in the next table.

Means and Standard Deviation of Each Dependent Variable for Low Achievers' Oral Proficiency

Variable		Mean	Std. Deviation
Grammar Accuracy		0.54	0.11
Syntactic Complexity		10.73	1.28
Fluency	Amount of Talk	62.82	6.37
	Rate of Speech	58.73	5.21
	Length of run	16.06	2.97

The mean score of the low achievers in grammar accuracy is 0.54, and that of the syntactic complexity is 10.73. In addition, their mean scores in the amount of talk, rate of speech and length of run are 62.82, 58.73 and 16.06, respectively. The amount of talk of the low achievers of the participants of the study; (62.82 wpm), is smaller than the required level which should be (125 to 150 wpm), (See El-Hilaly, 2001). This result matches results of previous studies which stated that the majority of the Palestinian English foreign language students cannot produce different English sentences without making errors for they have difficulties in communicating when using English language (Abu Alyan, 2013; Alhabbash, 2012; El-Nawajha, 2014; Firwana, 2010).

Also, this result matches the result of El-Fagawi (1993) who indicated that Palestinian students suffer low level achievement in English language, and it is at the lowest level in Gaza where it is seen as a difficult subject.

The weak level of AL-Azhar University English Majors low achievers' oral proficiency could be attributed to the lack of varied and recent teaching aids that motivate students to be engaged in teaching activities. Eighty-two percent of the low achievers of the participants of the study mentioned that the teaching learning environment which they have experienced does not motivate them to participate nor it helps enhance their oral proficiency as it does not suit their needs and preferences. In such a teaching environment, they have been allotted a few opportunities to speak and be evaluated. They added that their role during oral skills activities is largely passive. Their instructor has just used the assigned text-book activities and has never provided them with other learning resources. The researcher could safely conclude that this style of teaching is among the other reasons which negatively affect students' oral proficiency level.

Results of the Fourth Question

The fourth question is: are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between Al-Azhar University English majors high achievers' oral proficiency and that of the low achievers in favor of the high achievers?

To answer this question the researcher tested its hypothesis; there are statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between Al-Azhar University English majors high achievers' oral proficiency and that of the low achievers in favor of the high achievers, using the independent sample T-Test. Results of this test are stated in the following table.

Result of Independent Samples T- Test for High and Low Achievers' Oral Proficiency

Variable	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-Test	P-Value	Eat Square	The differences size
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Grammar Accuracy		Low	0.54	0.11	-6.855	0.000*	0.531	Moderate
		High	0.74	0.08				
Syntactic Complexity		Low	10.73	1.28	-7.600	0.000*	0.579	High
		High	14.14	1.67				
Fluency	Amount of Talk	low	62.82	6.37	-9.443	0.000*	0.680	High
		high	86.91	10.13				
	Rate of Speech	low	58.73	5.21	-10.463	0.000*	0.723	High
		High	79.58	7.76				
	Legth of run	Low	16.06	2.97	-7.366	0.000*	0.564	High
		High	24.11	4.18				

* The mean difference is statistically significant at 0.05 level.

The above table shows the result of independent samples T-Test for high and low achievers in the oral proficiency tests. For the variable "Grammar Accuracy", the means equal 0.54 and 0.74 for low and high achievers, respectively. The value of the T-test equals -6.855, with p-value (0.000*), which is smaller than 0.05. This implies that there is a sufficient evidence to conclude that the mean of grammar accuracy is significantly different between high and low achievers. In other words, there is significant difference in the mean of grammar accuracy between high and low achievers groups. Since the sign of the T-test is negative, then the mean of grammar accuracy for high achiever group is significantly greater than that for low achiever group.

Similarly, for the other variables, the p-value for each of the other variables in high and low achiever groups is smaller than 0.05. This implies that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the mean of each of the other variables is significantly different between high and low achiever groups. In other words, there is significant difference in the mean of each of the other variables in high and low achiever groups. Since the sign of the T-test is negative, then the mean of each of the other variables in high achiever group is significantly greater than that for low achiever group.

The above information confirms the hypothesis of the study, and proves that the mean score of oral proficiency result exam of the high

achievers of the participants of the study is greater than that of the low achievers. This result is in agreement with that of Iwashita (2010) who ensures that grammatical accuracy and some features of lexical diversity and fluency varied according to the speaker's oral proficiency level. In addition, the result reported here is in line with the finding of a recent study by Biswas (2015) who contends that high achievers have better study orientation than the low achievers. This result also confirms the normal expectation of educationalists who state that the performance of high achievers is better than that of low achievers.

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the reality of oral proficiency of English majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza, and it has come up with the following findings:

1- Investigating the oral proficiency of English majors at university level includes the following traits: (1) grammar accuracy, (2) syntactic complexity, and (3) fluency.

2- The level of oral proficiency of English majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza is not up to the required level of English foreign language learners' level.

3- Most of the participants' level of oral proficiency; rate of speech, falls under the slow and moderate slow levels.

4- The amount of talk of the high achievers of the participants of the study; (86.91 wpm), is smaller than the required level which should be (125-150 wpm).

5- The amount of talk of the low achievers of the participants of the study; (62.82 wpm), is smaller than the required level which should be (125-150 wpm).

6- The oral proficiency level of the high achievers of the participants of the study is greater than that of the low achievers.

Recommendations

In the light of the results of the study, the following recommendations seem pertinent:

1-Instructors of oral proficiency courses; courses which tackle listening & speaking skills, at various Palestinian faculties and colleges should focus upon their learners' grammar accuracy, syntactic complexity and fluency which are the main traits of oral proficiency.

2-Training programs that aim at enhancing EFL instructors' use of communicative methods which aim at enhancing learners' communicative competence should be designed and conducted.

3-Recent motivating techniques of teaching oral skills should be used to motivate students to produce more accurate utterances.

4-Courses of teaching oral skills at higher education and the methods of teaching and evaluation oral skills of EFL learners should be reviewed regularly according to recent theories of instruction.

5-It is important for English language teachers to create a teaching/learning environment in which learners feel safe and confident. In such an environment, learners are sure that their oral contributions will be valued and their low quality participations will be encouraged and remedied.

6-Resources of digital learning should be designed to suit learners' needs and preferences, and forums that aim at enhancing learners' oral proficiency should be used.

7-Higher education instructors should be trained on using digital learning that helps enhance different EFL learners' skills.

8-Studies on oral proficiency should be expanded using digital teaching systems.

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Appendix "A"

The Oral Proficiency Test

Dear English Majors,

This test is designed as a main tool of a study entitled "**The Oral Proficiency of English Majors at AL-Azhar University-Gaza**".

The test aims at measuring your oral proficiency level. It is important to know that this test result does not affect students' academic average evaluation and it is just used for the purpose of this study. Your participation in this exam is highly appreciated.

The Researcher

Mohamed Sha'at

A- The Examiner Instructions:

- 1- Welcome the examinee.
- 2- Ask the questions one by one.
- 3- Allow the examinee one minute to prepare a talk about the topic.
- 4- Listen to the examinee and do not interrupt him while talking.
- 5- Thank the examinee and wish him a good luck.

B-The Examinees' Instructions:

This exam includes two phases:

1- The first phase gives students the chance to answer general questions about themselves.

2- At the second phase students will listen to a person trying to leave a voice message for his friend. You are advised to listen attentively and try to understand every detailed information as you will be asked to retell its events.

Oral Proficiency Test Questions

Phase One 2-3 minutes

1- Introduce yourself. You may say where are you from? Do you like your town? Why? What do you do? Also you may add any information about yourself.

3- How would you describe your university?

4- Is there anything you would like to add?

Phase Two 7-8 minutes

You are going to listen to a telephone call from Brand. Brand is a team leader at a company in Sydney. Raman works in Brand's team. Brand calls Raman and leaves him a voice message. I would like you to listen to Brand's voice message carefully and try to understand its events as you are going to retell; paraphrase the text events.

Thank you very much for your participation in this exam

Appendix (B)

The Audio Script of the Voice Message

Hi Ramon. It's Brand here. Look, I'm afraid I won't be in today. My son is a bit crook and he's off school I have to stay home to look after him. I'm really sorry to leave this message for you, but I've got to take my son to the doctor. Er, do you remember the training session next week? You know the one about the new computer system? I've organized the trainer so there's no need to contact him and I've booked the room, but there are a few other things that need doing. I need you to organize the projector that goes with the laptop, er, you can do that with reception. And you'll need to sort out lunch for about ten people. Yes, that's right-there'll be ten of us. Talk to Alison at reception-she'll know some good coffees we can order from. Oh and stationery. Yes I need you to make sure that everyone has a notepad and a pen and one of those—er what do you call them? Er sorry, I'm not thinking very clearly this morning--- you know, one of those big things, like a pad of paper for writing up notes—er flip charts- that's what we call them. Yeah, um a flip chart would be very useful-one is enough, er, with some marker pens to write on it. Really, really sorry to leave all these notes instructions for you on a phone message, Ramon, but I'm sure you'll know what to do. Er, might call you back this arvo and see how you've got on. Bye for now. (Logan &Thaine, 2008, p.97).

Appendix (C)

Sample of Students' Answers on the Oral Proficiency Test

Sample of Low Achiever Students' Responds:

S.1 My name is (I learn I mean study no) I am a student in Al-Azhar University. I like it very much. It is a big university. Hmm... (I listened sorry) I heard a person phoned leave message because not coming. He said, "You prepare food ten person"..eeee.... yes my son I look after he.eeee.... Alison knows good coffees. Be sure everyone has a pen and ..eeee... a paper. Sorry Ramon.

(.63 seconds) (59 words)(4 pauses)

S.2 My name iseeee... I study English at Al-Azhar University. There are too many (learners) students here. Well a man phoned ...eeee.. another man and said him sorry I am ...eeerrr....not coming. My son is ill (or sick). You make the training next week. You should bring pens and papers to the people. Do is prepare food foreeerrr.... ten people. Sure he know what to do. I am so sorry ..eeeeee not coming.

(.63 seconds) (65 words) (5pauses)

Sample of High Achiever Students' Responds:

S.12 I am and I am from Palestine. I live in Gaza and I learn English language at AL-Azhar University, Faculty of Education. I like this faculty very much and most of my colleagues do so.

Eeee..... Brand, a manager of a company, left Ramone a voice message. He said he won't be able to come. His son is ill. He ...eee... ordered Ramone to prepare pens and paperseee... and the food for the men. Eeee... Ramone you can ask the secretary, Alison, to give him a hand. Brand said he will call Ramone later. He said ...eee... sorry Ramone I did a trouble to you forgive me.

(.67 seconds) (104 words)(5 pauses)

S.13. My name is I'd like to say something about myself. I am from Gaza Strip and I live in Gaza City. ...eee... I am a student at AL-Azhar University and I learn English there.

Eeee... ok I am not guessing the message but the man called his friend because his son is sick and he wants to take him to hospital andeee... he can't be for a meeting or ...eee.. so he asked his friend or an employer for him to help two things for him like ... eee.. he asked him to Sorry.

(.70 seconds) (92 words)(5 pauses)