Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327

Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Volume 15. Number 4, December 2024 Pp.352-363
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol15no4.22

Female Saudi Students' Attitudes Towards Speaking English with Native Speakers vs Non-Native Speakers of English

Jwahir Alzamil
Department of Foreign Languages
Taif University, Saudi Arabia

Received: 08/20/2024 Accepted:11/5/2-24 Published: 11/15/2024

Abstract

Second-language learners of English try to master and improve their English-speaking skills. This study investigated female Saudi university students' attitudes towards the following: a) speaking English in general; and b) speaking English with native speakers vs. non-native speakers. It can be vital to understand students' attitudes to help them improve their ability to communicate effectively and express their thoughts clearly and easily. Data was collected from 112 female Saudi students at Taif University, using a closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The participants were asked about (a) their attitudes towards English speaking skills in general; (b) their attitudes to speaking English with native speakers; (c) their attitudes to speaking English with non-native speakers; and (d) how they felt about improving their English-speaking skills. Data collected by the questionnaire indicated that they were optimistic about the importance of English-speaking skills; b) had positive attitudes towards speaking with native speakers, which was not the case when they considered speaking with non-native speakers; c) felt nervous towards speaking with non-native speakers, who tended to be critical of their language skills; and d) preferred English activities to be with native rather than non-native speakers.

Keywords: attitudes, difficulties, English speaking, female Saudi students, native speakers, non-native speakers

Cite as: Alzamil, J. (2024). Female Saudi Students' Attitudes Towards Speaking English with Native Speakers vs Non-Native Speakers of English. *Arab World English Journal, 15*(4):352-363. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol15no4.22

Introduction

The English language is considered international and is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world (Sinaga & Sinaga, 2021). It can be taught as a Second Language (L2) or as a foreign language, depending on the country. English is taught as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia (Al-khresheh, 2020). One of the main goals of teaching English, according to the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education (Ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013), is to help students master the four skills in English (writing, reading, speaking and listening). However, speaking skills, which are the focus of this study, can be seen as among the most challenging skills to master for learners of both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) (Ilmiah, et al., 2024; Soomro & Farooq, 2018; Zhang, 2009). It is also the most important of the four skills (Ali et al., 2019; Khamkhien, 2010; Makarim, 2024). As Alhmadi (2014) suggests, female Saudi students struggle with speaking English. This study therefore investigates whether conversation with either native or non-native speakers of English can play a role in improving their speaking skills.

This study addressed several questions related to female Saudi university students' attitudes towards English speaking skills:

a. How do female Saudi university students think about English-speaking skills in general?

b. What do female Saudi university students think about speaking English with native English speakers?

c. What do female Saudi university students think about speaking English with non-native English speakers?

d. How do female Saudi university students feel about improving their speaking skills?

The answers to the above research questions could provide curriculum designers in Saudi schools and universities in Saudi Arabia with data to help them improve Saudi students' English-speaking skills.

Literature Review

Speaking is a communication process that conveys ideas and feelings verbally (Miranda & Wahyudin, 2023; Said et al., 2021). This skill can be improved by oral communication. However, the ability to speak English as an L2 is among the most complex of all English language teaching activities (Al-Sibai, 2004). Its main aim is to enable students to speak the language correctly in different social contexts (Richards, 2008). However, to achieve this aim, it may be essential to know whether students have speaking difficulties. If so, we can begin to identify the issues and the reasons they occur (Inayah & Lisdawati, 2017).

In her attempt to discover factors that affect students' speaking competence and their reasons for preferring to remain silent, Alhmadi (2014) investigated speaking skills issues among ten classes of female foundation-year EFL university students at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia. Each class contained thirty students. She found a number of factors that affected students' English language speaking: a) anxiety, b) lack of motivation, and c) lack of communication.

Bani Younes and Albalawi (2016) studied the English language speaking problems encountered by 350 female Saudi EFL preparatory year students at Tabuk University. The researchers collected their data utilizing a questionnaire and observation. The results showed that there were a number of barriers that affected students' speaking performance. For example, 90%

feared making mistakes and 85% felt shy about speaking. Other students reported issues related to anxiety and lack of motivation and confidence.

Inayah and Lisdawati (2017) did a study on speaking skill barriers at a college in Indonesia. The participants were observed and given a questionnaire. The results showed that students were not interested or motivated to perform speaking activities. They also lacked confidence, which made it hard for them to speak English, even though 70% held positive attitudes toward the need to speak English fluently.

Drawing on a sample of 184 male and female EFL students at Taif University in Saudi Arabia, Soomro and Farooq (2018) conducted a study of attitudes to difficulties in speaking English. The results showed that the participants suffered from a lack of motivation and confidence, fear of making mistakes and insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, which in turn prevented them from constructing error-free sentences. All this made it challenging for them to master speaking English.

Ali et al. (2019) conducted a similar study with 100 Saudi male and female university students, enrolled on an intensive programme at the University of Bisha in Saudi Arabia, which also investigated barriers to speaking English. The data, which was collected with a questionnaire, showed that men and women had the same perceptions of learning to speak English; the study's overall results were similar to those of the studies outlined above regarding EFL students' speaking difficulties and included peer criticism, lack of motivation and confidence, the absence of language laboratories, lack of a supportive environment and no guidance from teachers.

In general, all the above studies indicated that EFL students who wanted to acquire English-speaking skills frequently encountered difficulties. However, their attitudes to speaking English to native and non-native speakers have been overlooked, as have questions about whether they find it difficult and what issues they experience, leaving a gap in the literature. Investigating these issues may provide us with insights regarding the sensitivity of L2 learners to native versus non-native interlocutors. This study represents an effort to overcome this lacuna.

Methodology

The study collected data from 112 randomly selected participants using an online closed-ended questionnaire. This was followed up with a number of in-person semi-structured interviews for which participants were selected randomly. The data was subsequently analysed statistically using a series of Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests to examine differences in participants' attitudes to speaking English with native versus non-native English speakers.

Participants

The participants were 112 female Saudi university students aged 18-20 who were freshmen at Taif University and had studied English at school for almost 9 years. They were recruited randomly and were studying different majors. To improve the homogeneity of the sample, the participants were asked whether they had studied in English-speaking countries. Those who had studied abroad were screened out as they may have had different perceptions.

Research Instruments

The study's instruments were a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Data was collected with an online attitudinal questionnaire containing 22 items regarding the female Saudi university students' attitudes towards English language speaking skills, designed to address the

following four constructs: students' attitudes towards English speaking skills in general; their attitudes to speaking English to native speakers; their attitudes to speaking English to non-native speakers; and their attitudes towards improving their English-speaking skills. Participants were asked to respond by selecting one from a range of options on a five-point Likert scale. They were asked to choose whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, had no opinion, agreed or strongly agreed with each item in a series of statements. This scale has been used in the vast majority of research studies that use questionnaires because it is considered to be highly reliable (Taherdoost, 2019).

The semi-structured interview was conducted to get the participants' attitudes to speaking English in general and speaking English with native vs. non-native speakers. Interviews were carried out in Arabic to enable participants to communicate easily; statements relevant to the present study were then translated into English by the researcher.

Research Procedures

This study addressed ethical considerations by providing participants with information about the purpose of the questionnaire, asking for their consent, and informing them that they could withdraw from the study if they wished. All the students who agreed to participate in the study were then asked to respond to the questionnaire. Nine were subsequently chosen at random to take part in an interview.

Results

This section discusses participants' responses to the four constructs tested by the questionnaire: a) English speaking skills; b) speaking with native speakers; c) speaking with non-native speakers; and d) speaking skills activities. The tables in Appendix A show the number of responses under each point of the five Likert-scale options and percentage scores (the number of responses divided by 112).

The results in Table One shows that most of the participants perceive speaking skills to be the most essential skills to learn, even though they are challenging. They are also the most widely used skills.

Table Two shows that the majority of the participants had positive attitudes towards speaking with native English speakers but most also found them difficult to understand. Fewer than 35% of the participants said that they felt nervous about speaking to native speakers. The vast majority of them said they enjoyed talking to native English speakers.

Table Three reveals that the participants expressed negative attitudes towards speaking English with non-native speakers even though the vast majority also claimed that they were able to understand their English. Most of them also said that they felt nervous about speaking to non-native speakers.

The participants' responses to the statements in construct two and three were statistically compared. Multiple Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests were conducted as the data was not normally distributed. The Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests reported in Table Four shows that the differences in the participants' views about speaking with native vs. non-native speakers were statistically significant.

Table Five indicates that most participants felt that they benefitted from speaking activities but they seemed to be divided on whether they felt nervous about speaking activities. Many of them wanted to concentrate on improving their speaking skills all the time. The vast majority of

the participants thought that their English skills would only improve if they spoke with native English speakers. A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test was run to compare statements 5 and 6. The results showed a significant difference ($Z = -7.256$, $P < .001$).

Discussion

In this section, the results of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews are discussed. The questionnaire responses for each construct are discussed separately.

Concerning the researcher's four questions, the data showed that: a) the participants agreed that English-speaking skills are essential; b) the participants preferred to speak English with native rather than non-native speakers; and c) the participants had positive attitudes towards speaking activities which they believe improve their speaking skills. The findings are discussed in detail below.

About construct one, most participants agreed with statement 1 (around 92%) that English speaking skills are the most important to master. Yet, most (around 64%) also agreed with statement 2 that they are the most difficult skills to learn and disagreed (around 76%) with statement 3, that they are the easiest skills to acquire. For statement 4, about 80% of the participants thought that speaking skills are the most-used of all the English language skills. These findings were supported by several answers to one of the interview questions, which asked what they thought about speaking skills:

> 'Speaking English is the most important skill to me in English.'
>
> 'If I am good at speaking English, that will be enough for me.'
>
> 'Speaking English is more difficult than all other skills.'
>
> 'I am still struggling with speaking English as it is difficult.'
>
> 'One is forced to speak English in different contexts and situations. You have to master it so you do not embarrass yourself.'

These findings confirm that most of the participants believed that although it is difficult, speaking English is an important skill that they need to master. This is in line with the findings of Inayah and Lisdawati (2017).

For construct two, which was about speaking to native speakers, about 83% felt optimistic about wanting to talk with native speakers (statement 5) and around 60% thought that although speaking with native speakers was challenging it did not make them nervous (statements 6, 7 and 8). Although speaking with native speakers comes with some drawbacks, about 75% responded that they would enjoy speaking with native speakers (statement 9). In comparison, about 67% thought it was difficult to understand them. It is apparent from the responses to the statements designed to test this construct that Saudi students have positive attitudes towards speaking with native speakers.

Concerning construct three, although around 65% expressed negative attitudes towards the desire to speak with non-native speakers (statement 11), approximately the same proportion (about 66%) did not feel not challenged by the prospect of speaking with non-native speakers (statement

12). About 75% felt it would be easy talking to non-native English speakers (statement 13) but also that they would feel nervous (statement 14). Around 72% disagreed with statement 15, concerning their enjoyment of speaking with non-native speakers, even though around 78% thought they would be easy to understand (statement 16).

Participants' attitudes to speaking with native and non-native speakers were statistically significant; that is, participants preferred to talk with native rather than non-native English speakers. However, most also said it was challenging to understand native speakers, which was not the case with non-native speakers. This suggests that ease of comprehension does not hinder their desire to speak. On the other hand, nervousness indicated their preference about who to speak to. They were nervous about speaking with non-native speakers, which spoiled their enjoyment. The opposite was true for native speakers. The questionnaire did not reveal any other information about the participants' choices but several quotes from their interviews may provide further insight:

> 'I always think that my speaking will not improve as long as I speak to my Saudi friends.'
>
> 'I do not like to speak with my Saudi friends as they always try to find my mistakes.'
>
> 'Native speakers make me feel more comfortable as they do not look for my mistakes and they complement my language although it is not good.'
>
> 'I once spoke with a native speaker, which was a great experience, although they spoke too fast.'
>
> 'Non-native speakers tend to correct my mistakes to show that they are better than me.'

It can be noted from the quotes above that the participants had positive attitudes towards speaking with native speakers even though many had not spoken to native speakers for quite some time. Those who had spoken to native speakers said that, unlike non-native speakers, they tended not to criticize their speaking competence. The participants were complimentary about the experience and said that it was very beneficial.

Concerning construct four, about 54% expressed positive attitudes towards speaking activities (statement 17). However, about a third of the participants neither agreed nor disagreed with statements 17 and 18, both of which were related to whether speaking activities improve their English. Approximately the same number expressed neither agreement nor disagreement with statement 19, which was about whether speaking activities make them nervous. It is possible that some of them were uncertain and did not know whether the speaking activities in question were with native or non-native speakers of English. Their views were clearer concerning earlier statements that contained the words 'native and non-native speakers'. This did not prevent the participants (around 72%) from agreeing with statement 20 regarding the need to concentrate on improving their speaking skills. About 75% agreed with statement 21, that speaking with native speakers is more beneficial than speaking with non-native speakers. This was further confirmed by the approximately 72% who disagreed with statement 22 that speaking to non-native speakers is more beneficial than speaking with native speakers. These strong views about statements 21 and

22 were confirmed by statistical analyses which showed that the participants preferred speaking with native English speakers. A number of quotes from the interviews support these findings, as can be seen below:

> 'I hope that there will be a way to do my speaking activities with native speakers.'
>
> 'I believe that if speaking activities involve native speakers, it will be much better.'
>
> 'I think that schools should hire native speakers to speak with students.'

This study produced results similar to those produced by other studies and reinforced the finding that EFL students find it difficult to master English speaking skills (e.g., Alhmadi, 2014; Ali et al., 2019; Bani Younes & Albalawi, 2016; Inayah & Lisdawati, 2017; Soomro & Farooq, 2018). Alhmadi (2014) found that her participants suffered from anxiety and a lack of motivation to speak in English. However, she did not illustrate whether these views related to native or non-native English speakers. In the present study, few of the participants showed an interest in speaking with non-native English speakers. They also had different views about speaking activities for which they had not been provided with details. Their relative lack of motivation to engage in speaking activities supports the findings of researchers such as Inayah and Lisdawati (2017) and Soomro and Farooq (2018). The finding that participants were uncomfortable speaking to non-native English speakers, who corrected their mistakes, also aligned with those of other studies (e.g., Ali et al., 2019; Bani Younes & Albalawi, 2016; Soomro & Farooq, 2018) which found that a fear of making mistakes led to a lack of motivation. The studies mentioned above were carried out in EFL contexts with only non-native speakers. Different results may have been achieved if they had been asked to express their attitudes towards speaking with native speakers. The present study found that participants' views differed according to whether speaking took place with native or non-native English speakers. Schools should consider providing students in EFL contexts with opportunities to interact with native speakers, and then investigate whether their speaking skills improved because of this. It should be noted that the present study was conducted with female participants. Future studies should compare male and female participants' views to find out whether there are differences in their attitudes towards speaking English with native versus non-native speakers.

Conclusion

The main aim of the present study was to investigate female Saudi students' attitudes towards: a) English speaking skills; b) speaking with native speakers; c) speaking with non-native speakers; and d) speaking skills activities. The present study recruited 112 female Saudi students and used a 22-item closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. This is the first study that addresses L2 learners' perception of talking with native versus non-native speakers. The results showed that female Saudi students: a) had positive attitudes towards L2 English speaking; b) preferred speaking to native speakers over non-native speakers; c) considered speaking to native speakers beneficial; and d) preferred to engage in speaking activities with native over non-native speakers.

Funding: This research is not funded.

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Authenticity: This manuscript is an original work.

Artificial Intelligence Statement: AI and AI-assisted technologies were not used.

About the Author:

Dr. Jwahir Alzamil is an associate professor of applied linguistics in the Department of Foreign Languages at Taif University in Saudi Arabia. Her research interests center around applied linguistics. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6632-3924

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table 1. *English speaking skills construct*

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
1. English speaking skills are the most important skills to learn.	1/112 1%	4/112 3.6%	4/112 3.6%	15/112 13.4%	88/112 78.6%	4.65	.79
2. English speaking skills are the most difficult to learn.	18/112 16.1%	16/112 14.3%	6/112 5.4%	15/112 13.4%	57/112 50.9%	3.69	1.58
3. English speaking skills are the easiest to learn.	76/112 67.9%	9/112 8%	8/112 7.1%	8/112 7.1%	11/112 9.8%	4.17	1.38
4. English speaking skills are the most used skills.	2/112 1.8%	10/112 8.9%	10/112 8.9%	12/112 10.7%	78/112 69.6%	4.38	1.08

Table 2. *Speaking with native speakers construct*

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
5. I like to speak English with native English speakers.	3/112 2.7%	5/112 4.5%	11/112 9.8%	21/112 18.8%	72/112 64.3%	4.38	1.02
6. I find it difficult to understand native English speakers' spoken language.	25/112 22.3%	10/112 8.9%	9/112 8%	25/112 22.3%	43/112 38.4%	2.54	1.60
7. Understanding native speakers' spoken English is easy.	30/112 26.8%	33/112 29.5%	10/112 8.9%	6/112 5.4%	33/112 29.5%	2.81	1.61
8. I feel nervous when speaking to a native English speaker.	30/112 26.8%	37/112 33%	6/112 5.4%	10/112 8.9%	29/112 25.9%	2.74	1.58
9. I enjoy speaking to native English speakers.	11/112 9.8%	15/112 13.4%	2/112 1.8%	32/112 28.6%	52/112 46.4%	3.88	1.38
	24/112	51/112	5/112	12/112	20/112	2.58	1.41

10.It is easier to understand spoken English when the speaker is a native English speaker.	21.4 %	45.5 %	4.5%	10.7 %	17.9 %		

Table 3. *Speaking with non-native speakers construct*

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
11.I like to speak English with non-native English speakers.	41/112	32/112	15/112	13/112	11/112	2.29	1.33
	36.6%	28.6%	13.4%	11.6%	9.8%		
12.I find it difficult to understand non-native English speakers' spoken language.	27/112	48/112	6/112	11/112	20/112	3.46	1.42
	24.1%	42.9%	5.4%	9.8%	17.9%		
13.Understanding non-native speakers' spoken English is easy.	8/112	11/112	9/112	44/112	40/112	3.87	1.21
	7.1%	9.8%	8%	39.3%	35.7%		
14.I feel nervous when speaking to a non-native English speaker.	15/112	8/112	4/112	43/112	42/112	3.79	1.37
	13.4%	7.1%	3.6%	38.4%	37.5%		
15.I enjoy speaking to non-native English speakers.	52/112	29/112	10/112	16/112	5/112	2.04	1.24
	46.4%	25.9%	8.9%	14.3%	4.5%		
16.It is easier to understand spoken English when the speaker is a non-native speaker of English.	4/112	6/112	15/112	22/112	65/112	4.23	1.10
	3.6%	5.4%	13.4 %	19.6 %	58%		

Table 4. *Comparisons between speaking with native and non-native speakers*

Speaking with native speakers	Speaking with non-native speakers	Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks results
5. I like to speak English with native English speakers.	11. I like to speak English with non-native English speakers.	Z = -8.080 *P* < .001
6. I find it difficult to understand native English speakers' spoken language.	12. I find it difficult to understand non-native English speakers' spoken language.	Z = -4.296 *P* < .001
7. Understanding native speakers' spoken English is easy.	13. Understanding non-native speakers' spoken English is easy.	Z = -4.871 *P* < .001

8. I feel nervous when speaking to a native English speaker.	14. I feel nervous when speaking to a non-native English speaker.	Z = -4.739 *P* < .001
9. I enjoy speaking to native English speakers.	15. I enjoy speaking to non-native English speakers.	Z = -7.147 *P* < .001
10. It is easier to understand spoken English when the speaker is a native English speaker.	16. It is easier to understand spoken English when the speaker is a non-native speaker of English.	Z = -7.098 *P* < .001

Table 5. *Speaking skills activities construct*

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
17.English-speaking activities improve my English.	6/112 5.4%	7/112 6.3%	38/112 33.9%	25/112 22.3%	36/112 32.1%	3.70	1.15
18.English-speaking activities do not improve my English.	29/112 25.9%	20/112 17.9%	40/112 35.7%	9/112 8%	14/112 12.5%	3.37	1.29
19.Doing a speaking activity makes me nervous.	18/112 16.1%	15/112 13.4%	36/112 32.1%	22/112 19.6%	21/112 18.8%	3.12	1.31
20.I want to focus on speaking skills all the time.	4/112 3.6%	20/112 17.9%	7/112 6.3%	46/112 41.1%	35/112 31.3%	3.79	1.17
21.Speaking with native speakers of English improves my English-speaking skills more than when I speak with non-native speakers of English.	7/112 6.3%	16/112 14.3%	6/112 5.4%	28/112 25%	55/112 49.1%	3.96	1.30
22.Speaking with non-native speakers of English improves my English-speaking skills more than when I speak with native speakers of English.	25/112 22.3%	56/112 50%	17/112 15.2%	3/112 2.7%	11/112 9.8%	2.28	1.14