

Teachers' Oral Feedback Impact on EFL Students' Oral Proficiency. Case of Undergraduate Classes of the English Branch at MKU of Biskra.

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Abstract :

As English has become the world's language of wider communication, more and more BAC holders enroll in the English programmes at the Algerian universities. Large classes appear, therefore, to characterize most of the English departments across the country, which minimize the chances for students to be proficient speakers of English. Optimal learning of English, however, requires a balanced mastery of the four skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing). Nonetheless, this paper concerns itself with probing students' attitude towards and reception of the speaking skill. Intuitively, students do not seem to be aware of the importance of being orally proficient in English. From an insider perspective, we have noticed that poor oral proficiency characterizes the vast majority of the undergraduate students of the English Branch at Mohamed Khider University of Biskra. Throughout the current paper, we made it our point to address two main questions: (1) to what extent are the students aware of the speaking skill importance? (2) to what extent is the teacher's oral feedback effective and influential in improving the students' oral proficiency? We believe that if the students receive immediate oral feedback and take it into account seriously, there will be a significant improvement in their oral proficiency. Key words: Teachers' feedback, Impact, EFL Students, Oral Proficiency

الملخص :

بما أن الإنجليزية قد أصبحت لغة التواصل الأوسع فإن حملة البكالوريا لا يتوانون على الالتحاق بشعب تدريس هذه اللغة . مما أدى لاكتظاظ الأقسام بالتالي فرص أقل لتعلم. لتعلم لغة أجنبية فإن ملكة القدرات الأربع تصبح ضرورة ملحة. تركز هذه الورقة على اتجاهات الطلبة فيما يخص تقبل قدرة التواصل بالإنجليزية. يبدو أن الطلبة لا يدركون أهمية القدرة على التواصل و إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية. من الملاحظ أن رداءة التحادث بالإنجليزية صفة طاغية على طلبة الإنجليزية بجامعة محمد خيضر . الكلمات المفتاحية: ردود فعل المعلمين، والأثر، طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الكفاءة عن طريق الفم

Introduction

From an insider perspective and as an EFL teacher, I strongly believe in the impact of the oral feedback on the students' oral proficiency level. My own experience in teaching different courses to different levels strengthened my belief and led me to write this paper. Throughout the three academic years (2011/2012, 2012/2013, and 2013/2014), I taught 2 groups oral expression for their 3 years of the license degree and provided them with oral feedback whenever needed; by the end of each year, I have noticed that their oral proficiency level is improving gradually. In the present work, I attempt to: investigate the impact of teachers' oral feedback, b) measure the students' attitudes towards teachers' oral feedback, and c) sensitize teachers to the importance of planning remedial oral feedback. Differently stated, I tried to discover whether my colleagues plan remedial oral feedback only as oral expression teachers or even if they teach other courses.

1/ EFL Students and the Speaking Skill

As far as EFL classrooms are concerned, speaking attracts the attention of almost all the students. They are interested in this skill in particular because they need to practice the target language fluently and accurately. Unfortunately, despite their strong will to speak correct English, they still commit serious mistakes while speaking. Sometimes, our EFL students are aware of their mistakes but they do not accept their teacher's feedback. Therefore, to raise their awareness about their speaking deficiencies, as EFL teachers, we have to be careful when and how our feedback should be provided. According to Harmer (2007: 97):

When students are involved in a speaking activity such as a role-play or conversation, instant and intrusive correction is often not appropriate since it can interfere with the flow of the activity and inhibit students just at the moment when they should be trying hardest to activate their language knowledge.

Besides, Black and William (1998 cited in Alqahtani, 2010: 215) assert:

We the current researchers realized that some EFL teachers seemed unaware and did not appreciate the process of feedback and, thus, did not care about it although extensive research showed that feedback is of great importance to the language process in general.

This means that not only students' awareness should be raised about the importance of feedback in the classroom, but also teachers' awareness because in some researches the results reveal that some EFL teachers are unaware of how feedback is beneficial for the students.

Undoubtedly, EFL students need the support of their teachers in the first place to take part in some speaking activities. Such encouraging environment if available certainly will enhance the students' participation and reduce their anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Hedge (2000:290) points out:

Students unused to the demands for speaking in public made by the communicative classroom, even if that 'public' is a relatively small number of their peers in group work, may be reluctant to speak up through lack of confidence or fear of 'losing face' by making mistakes.

As a final comment, we should recognize that even if feedback is a part of the teaching learning process, it should give positive results as far as the students' target language proficiency level is concerned.

2/ Feedback and Students' Attitudes

2.1 Definition of Feedback

By definition, feedback is a logical step in the teaching learning process because teachers have taught but students have not learned. Generally, through providing feedback, teachers aim at raising their students' awareness of their language' deficiencies and guide them to improve their level.

Lightbown and Spada (1999 cited in Zhang, Zhang and Ma 2010:1) define corrective feedback as: "any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect". In addition, Ur (1996:242) defines feedback as: "information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance".

From these two definitions, we draw the conclusion that the main objective behind providing feedback is the improvement of the students' level.

2.2 Students' Attitudes towards Teachers' Feedback

Providing feedback is the responsibility of the teacher in the first place. In other words, to draw our students' attention to their speaking errors is our mission as EFL teachers since the classroom may be the only environment where the students can practice the language.

Hedge (2000:288) asserts that "in many foreign language situations, where there is little exposure to English or practice available in the community, error correction is an expected role for the teacher". In the same vein, as a feedback provider, the EFL teacher should know when to correct his/her students' errors to improve their level; otherwise his/her correction will be negatively received.

Harmer (2001:276) points out that "when students are in the middle of a speaking activity, over correction may inhibit them and take the communicativeness out of the activity. On the other hand, helpful and gentle correction may get students out of difficult misunderstandings and hesitation". Besides, Black and William (1998: 9 cited in: Askew , 2000:8) state that "feedback to any pupil should be about the particular qualities of his or her work, with advice on what he or she can do to improve, and should avoid comparisons with other pupils".

Differently couched, teachers should plan their remedial oral feedback taking into consideration their students' differences in terms of age, sex, and mental abilities to avoid any misunderstanding and make the feedback fruitful. Furthermore, throughout this investigation we aim at reaching

positive results in what concerns our students' oral proficiency level. Brookhart (2008:30) summarizes the benefits of good feedback as follows:

“Your feedback is good if it gets the following results:

- _ Your students do learn. Their work does improve.
- _ Your students become more motivated. They believe they can learn, they want to learn, and they take more control of their own learning.
- _ Your classroom becomes a place where feedback, including constructive criticism, is valued and viewed as productive”

All in all, feedback should come to increase students' motivation, self-confidence and responsibility of learning, as to decrease their anxiety and fear of making mistakes.

3/ Methodology

3.1 Main Questions

The present work seeks to answer the following questions:

Q1: Do all EFL teachers provide Oral feedback in their classrooms?

Q2: Are our EFL students aware of the Oral feedback impact on their Oral Proficiency Level?

Q3: Do our EFL students take into consideration their teachers' oral feedback?

3.2 Research Hypothesis

We hypothesize that if EFL teachers provide effective oral feedback, EFL students' oral proficiency level will improve.

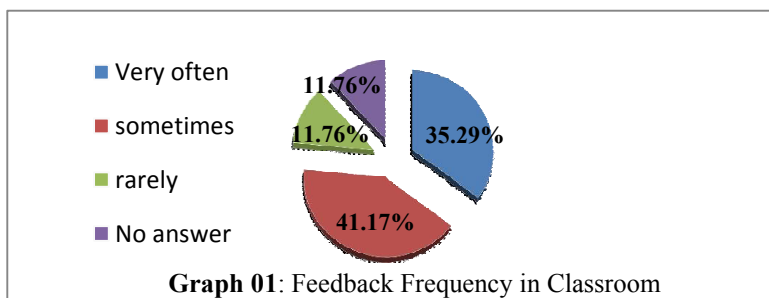
3.3 Respondents and Data Collection Instrument

The participants of this study are the full-time teachers of the English Branch at Mohamed Khider University of Biskra (26 teachers) and 2 groups (64 students) of 3rd year classes of the same branch. To collect the required data, we relied mainly on a questionnaire administered to both participants: teachers and students. The handed-back questionnaires are 10 from the teachers and only 17 from the students.

4/ Discussion of the Findings

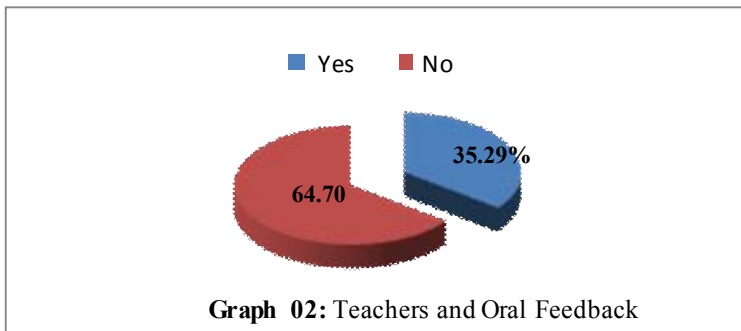
4.1 Analysis of the students' questionnaire

Q1: How often do you receive oral feedback in classroom?



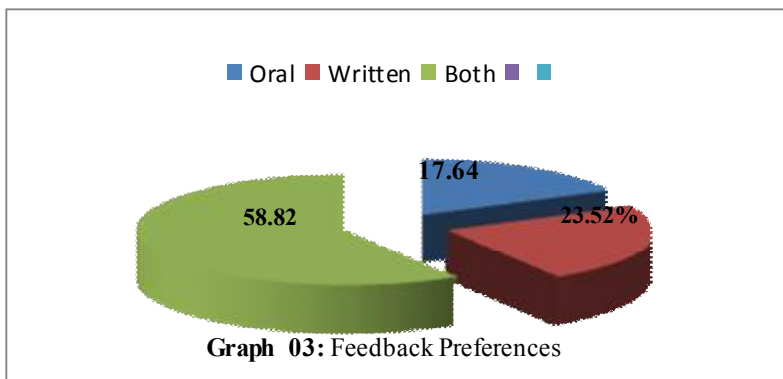
Graph 01 demonstrates the frequency of receiving oral feedback in classroom. The results reveal that 35.29% of the surveyed students state that they receive oral feedback very often. 41.17% of them say sometimes, 11.76 % say rarely, and 11.76 did not answer the question at all. From our participants' answers, we confirm that all our colleagues provide oral feedback in their classrooms. This means that both teachers and students recognize the importance of oral feedback.

Q2: Do all your teachers provide you with oral feedback? Yes/ No



As indicated in Graph 02, the majority of our respondents (64.70 %) state that not all of their teachers provide them with oral feedback, whereas 35.29 % of the students state the opposite. Indeed, those 35.29 % of the participants confirm that they receive feedback from their teachers of different courses such as: Written Expression, Oral expression, ESP, Linguistics, Pragmatics, Phonetics and Didactics. Therefore, all EFL teachers, regardless of the courses they teach, they are aware enough of how beneficial is the oral feedback for the improvement of their students' oral proficiency level.

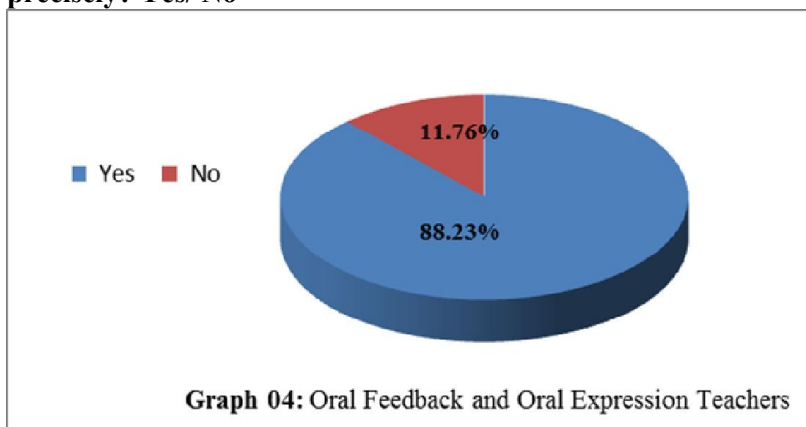
Q3: Which type of feedback do you prefer?



As far as the preferable type of feedback is concerned, Graph 03 shows that 58.82 % of the participants prefer both types oral and written, 23.52 % of them prefer written feedback and the others with 17.64 % prefer the oral one. The reasons behind their preferences are summarized in table 01:

Type of Feedback	Students' Reasons
Oral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> _ improving the speaking skill (fluency). _ willingness of speaking English spontaneously.
Written	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> _ improving the writing skill. _ It is private (between you and your teacher).
Both	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> _ Written feedback enriches my vocabulary. _ Written feedback helps to write without mistakes. _ Oral feedback enhances my speaking fluency. _ Oral feedback to speak as natives. _ Both of them are beneficial. _ Both of them are necessary to acquire a foreign language.

Table 01: Students' Reasons and Feedback Preferences
Q4: Do you receive oral feedback from your oral expression teacher precisely? Yes/ No



Question item 04 targets to tease out information about teachers' feedback and whether students are aware of the issue in question. Graph 04 shows that the vast majority of the students (88.23 %) point out that they receive oral feedback from their teacher of oral expression precisely and only 11.76 % of the students say the opposite. This indicates that oral expression teachers give a special interest to oral feedback.

A follow-up question is added to question 04 asking students about their oral proficiency level improvement. Those 88.23 % of our participants justify their answers as follows:

Our oral proficiency level has improved because of:

- _ listening to native speakers
- _ listening effectively to the teacher
- _ having role plays through which they seek new information and discover new vocabulary.
- _ communicating and exchanging ideas with peers.
- _ avoiding mistakes through repeated correction.
- _ feeling at ease when interacting with the teacher.
- _ encouraging environment raises self-confidence.
- _ practicing different activities enriches students' knowledge.

As a final analysis, it appears that extra-curricular activities (such as listening to non native speakers thanks to movies, etc.) back up teachers' efforts to remedy students' oral deficiencies.

Q5: How do you evaluate your oral proficiency level?

As for this question, the students are asked to evaluate their oral level in terms of: proficiency, self-awareness, self-perception, and self-evaluation. Indeed, they supplied us with different answers depending on their own perspectives. Most of them agree that they have an "average" level. Some others think it is "good". And still some others believe that only their teachers who are able to assess their oral proficiency level, which indicates their inability to have a precise idea of their proficiency.

The most important point we have noticed from the data collected that there is an improvement whatever its degree is. Those answers were explained as summarized in the following table:

Average level	Good level
Because we : _ Feel shy to express my opinions. _ Lack self-confidence in speaking fluently. _ Still need more practice to speak correct English.	Because we : _ Are able to speak without mistakes. _ Are able to speak in front of others without hesitation. _ Become good in listening. _ Get rid of papers during oral presentation.

Table 02: Students' Evaluation of their Oral Proficiency Level.

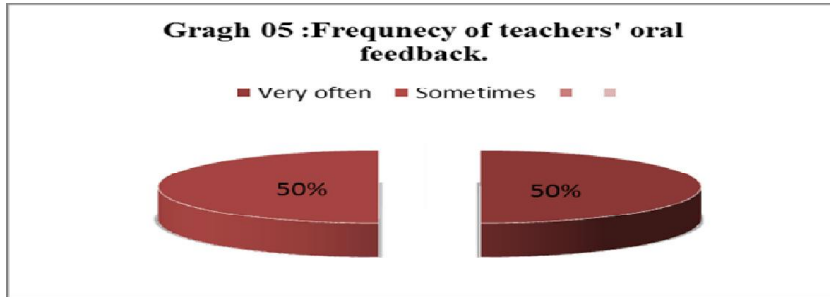
By the inclusion of this question item, the present research wishes to verify whether ELLs are aware of:

- _ their proficiency in the target language.
- _ perceptions of their skills and abilities.
- _ ability in the target language to define the degree of their oral proficiency.

From the table above, we discover that the students still lack interactional and interpersonal skills. Also, they do not understand with ease the rich vocabulary because of their unawareness of the grammatical structure and pragmatic intentions of the target language.

4.2 Analysis of the Teachers' Questionnaire

Q1: How often do you provide oral feedback in the classroom?

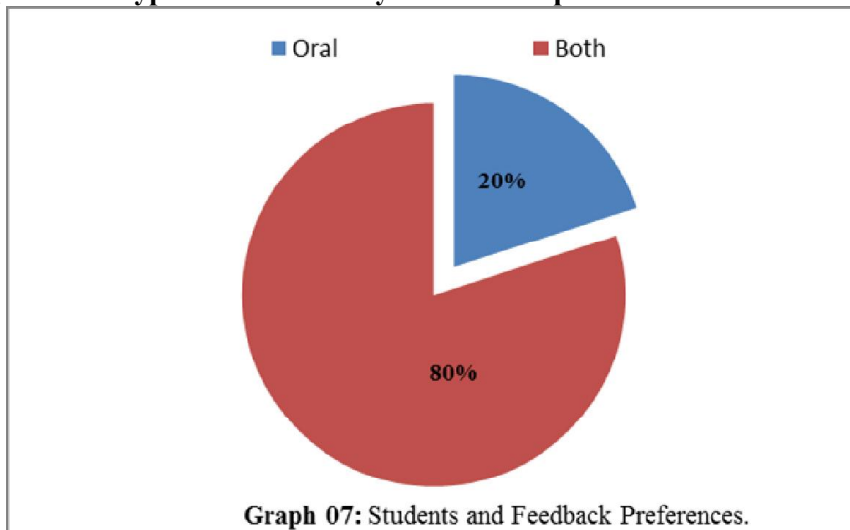


Graph 05 indicates that the frequency of teachers' oral feedback is between "very often" and "sometimes". 50% of respondents provide oral feedback very often and 50% provide it sometimes. These results show how aware are the teachers of the oral feedback importance to their students' language learning.

Q2: Do you think that providing oral feedback has an impact on your students' oral proficiency? Yes/ No

Graph 06 demonstrates that the majority of the surveyed teachers (80%) believe that providing oral feedback has impact on their students' oral proficiency. 10% of the teachers said NO and 10% of them did not answer the question .From this we recognize that our colleagues provide oral feedback in their classrooms on the basis that it is strongly affects their students oral proficiency .They consolidate their belief with the following reasons .Providing oral feedback is beneficial in terms of:

- _raising the students' awareness about some aspects of language.
- _fostering the correct linguistic behavior.
- _drawing the students' attention to their weaknesses and strengths as well.
- _encouraging students to adjust and improve their performance taking into account the teachers' recommendations and comments.
- _motivating students to acquire new vocabulary.
- _helping students to get used of avoiding mistakes.

Q3: Which type of feedback do your students prefer?

This question item targets the students' preferences in receiving corrective feedback. The solid majority (80%) of the teachers state that their students prefer to receive both kinds of feedback 'oral and written', whereas only 20% of the teachers who have noticed that their students prefer the oral feedback. They expressed their explanations in the following statements:

_ Oral feedback constitutes an immediate and instant orientation, which is likely to have an instant effect on the ground, whereas written feedback is a memorable instruction to which the student could return at anytime.

_ It depends on the activity and the performed task .Sometimes an oral feedback is sufficient but most of the time the written one has more impact on learners because they internalize it in their long term memory and whenever needed it comes naturally to them.

_ Vocabulary- building feedback occurs when ELLs do not use the appropriate word. In other words, when they fail to communicate or as a post activity we can remedy some of the learners' lexical breaches, the learners' misuse of the vocabulary.

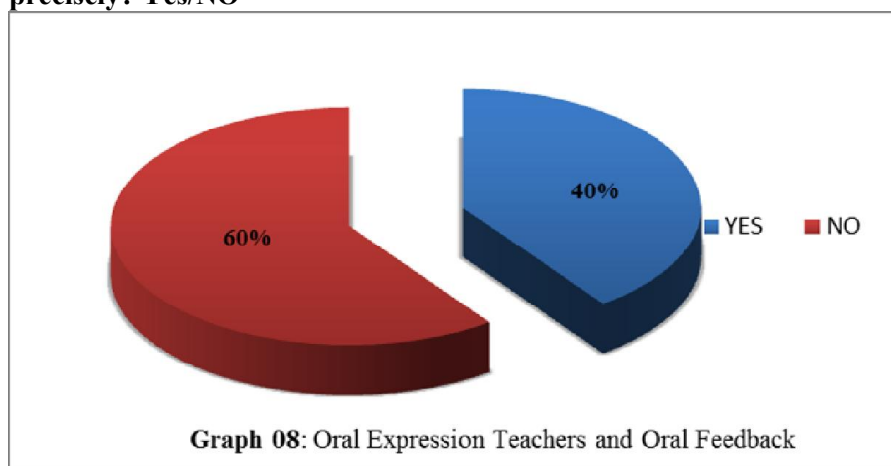
_ It depends on the situation we are in, or it depends on the time allotted.

_ Oral feedback is given immediately and received positively by students. Giving oral comments one-on-one with students allowed for turn-taking and exchange of opinions for better understanding of the given feedback.

_ They need to hear, speak ,and write the given feedback to be able to internalize it in the long term memory (LTM)._ It depends on the content of the feedback and its timing, usually they prefer the written feedback because of their classmates' reactions or their feeling of anxiety.

_ Auditory and visual learners may find oral feedback very useful; however, the rest may rely more on written feedback because they fail to remember their lessons.

Q4: Do you provide oral feedback as an oral expression teacher precisely? Yes/NO



As indicated in graph 08, 40% of teachers say YES and 60% of them say NO. Undoubtedly, this reveals that the surveyed teachers are not only teachers of oral expression but also of other courses. Those who teach oral expression provide their own explanation as well as those who teach other courses as displayed in the following table:

_Oral Expression Teachers	_Teachers of Other Courses
<p>_ I often looks forward to having my students ameliorate their performances; therefore, I do my best to make comments, recommendations, and suggestions as forms of feedback.</p> <p>_ Expressing oneself and oral feedback go hand in hand.</p> <p>_ Feedback is part of any learning task whether oral or written.</p> <p>_ I teach only oral expression as TD sessions, for the lectures, we can't provide feedback.</p>	<p>_Written expression, Grammar, Research Methodology because they need it for they are being evaluated in writing.</p> <p>_Phonetics: to correct the mispronunciation of words (Grammar or written expression).</p> <p>_ Oral expression forms part of the teaching process in the literature module, especially when it comes to poetic devices which are associated with oral proficiency.</p> <p>_ In literature and linguistic modules .I personally provide oral feedback to reinforce what has been covered and to check if it is possible to move onward.</p> <p>_ Oral feedback is sometimes given in Study Skills module to correct or remind students about some of the rules and norms of language, but not explicitly.</p>

Q5: How do your students receive your feedback?

For this open-ended question, we have received a variety of answers that come to confirm the students' positive attitude towards their teachers' feedback. The teachers state the following:

- _ Students appreciate receiving feedback especially the written one.
- _ Students feel more motivated each time they receive feedback.
- _ Students feel enthusiastic and inclined to take the provided feedback into consideration.
- _ Students feel comfortable and at ease when receiving feedback.
- _ Students trust their teachers because they are so for their own good.

The surveyed teachers add that:

- _ Students need to be prepared to accept to be corrected either by the teacher or by their peers.

_ Students receive feedback positively if it a compliment or praise, and negatively if it is a criticism.

Q6: At the end of each academic year, have you noticed any improvements at the level of your students' oral proficiency level? Explain.

On the one hand, most of the teachers (80%) state that there is an improvement of the level of their students' oral proficiency level. They find out there is a relatively explicit progress in terms of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. Besides, they have noticed a remarkable decrease in psychological factors such as anxiety and fear of speaking in front of the others. Furthermore, students' self-confidence increases noticeably since they become able to discuss and express their opinions and thoughts comfortably.

On the other hand, other teachers (20%) point out that there is a slight improvement which is not very significant. They state that there is a lack of efforts made by students to improve themselves even if the teacher constantly gives feedback. In addition, the class size, i.e huge numbers of students per group frustrates the teacher to spend time on one-to-one corrective interaction.

Q7: As an EFL teacher, how do you evaluate your students' oral proficiency level?

Almost of the surveyed teachers agree that their students' proficiency level is medium. They think that this level is affected by many factors such as: large classes, settings, lack of materials, etc. Some of the teachers prepare evaluation rubrics focusing on fluency, accuracy, grammar, and lexis. Still some other teachers think that evaluating the students' oral feedback is not an easy task.

Q8: According to your experience in teaching English at University level, what would you recommend to improve your students' oral proficiency level?

Indeed, the teachers provide a set of recommendations that may help enhance their students' oral proficiency level. We state them as follows:

- **Build teacher-student rapport, build students' self-confidence, train students to accept feedback, feedback should be student friendly, feedback should be offered not imposed, and feedback should not be learner-intimidating. I recommend to them:**

1- Select the topics in which they feel they are really interested.

2- To vary their source of knowledge and to speak or try to speak English inside the class and outside of it.

3- To create groups if individuals work is not helping enough.

- **_Increasing emphasis on listening.**

_ Teaching/ introducing communicative strategies.

_ Modify the syllabi of phonetics and grammar to fit real life situation and students' needs.

- **Practicing English not only in class but also outside with peers, classmates and online chat. Listening to authentic language is also recommended.**
- **I would recommend collaboration and careful instruction design as well as testing design.**
- **Students are asked to watch videos at home and many other types of authentic materials, but they must be followed by activities and class discussion.**
- **To make them listen to native speakers of English as much as possible**
 - **To involve them in lessons as active students.**
 - **To give feedback (oral or written) in every module.**
 - **To train them to speak spontaneously.**

- Use a lot of listening tasks to develop their listening abilities because it is essential in communication. It helps them use different strategies concerning this skill.
 - Expose learners to the different aspects of the spoken language, this can help them develop both speaking and listening relates situations similar to real ones in the class to enable them interact.
 - Encourage them to have native speakers' friends.
- I recommend that students should be given more room, i.e., opportunities to interact with each other and with the teacher. The teaching of oral expression should be more systematic and functionally-based.

Conclusion

At the end of this study, we come to the conclusion that teachers' effective oral feedback has a great impact on the improvement of EFL students' Oral Proficiency Level. Besides, we discovered that our students are aware of the importance of Oral Feedback since its ultimate objective is to lead them improve their language performance and proficiency. Brookhart (2008:1) asserts that: Feedback says to a student, "Somebody cared enough about my work to read it and think about it! "Most teachers want to be that somebody. Feedback matches specific descriptions and suggestions with a particular students' work. It is just-in-time, just-for-me information delivered when and where it can do the most good". This summarizes that teachers' feedback is a positive step in the teaching learning process that is beneficial for both teachers and learners and it should span as long as it takes.

Recommendations

The results of the present study urge us to state the following recommendations so that to help our students improve their Oral

Proficiency Level:

Novembre 2016

119

1/ Students' linguistic and socio-linguistic deficiencies need to be systematically: collected, analyzed, and categorized.

2/ Corrective Oral Feedback (COF) needs to accommodate the needs above (i.e., teachers should tailor their COF according to students' weaknesses.

3/Teachers should plan summative assessment of their COF.

4/Teachers should encourage students to analyze their own linguistic and socio-linguistic deficiencies.

5/ Teachers should urge students to research their weaknesses.

6/ Teachers should motivate students to use authentic materials to gain proficiency in the target language.

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