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جامعة عين شمس

## "Investigating EFL Skills Used by Iraqi College Students"

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### Abstract:

In recent decades, attention has been directed to student-centered instruction so that every EFL student needs to master the four language skills (receptive skills: listening, reading, and productive skills: speaking and writing). EFL Students face difficulties in learning these four skills. This study is an attempt to investigate the most frequently applied skills used by college students. To achieve the objectives of the study, a questionnaire that includes 16 items with the five point scale (often, frequently, occasionally, rarely, never) has been adopted; these items test the three skills (listening, reading and speaking without writing).

The sample of present study comprises 60 students from the Department of English, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad during the academic year 2016/2017. After ensuring the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, the questionnaire was applied on the sample. The results show that the students' use of EFL skills offers a weighted mean score of more than 3. This is an indication that students start to improve their skills depending on themselves. At the end, conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions are offered.

**Key words: productive skills, receptive skills, skills.**

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Rationale of the study

Learning English language skills plays the essential role in improving college students' performance in both the recognition and production fields. Besides, English language is an international language and it is considered to be as the major window to the world.

Reading and Listening are described as the receptive skills whereas writing and speaking are considered to be the productive skills (Yule, 1995:4). Receptive and productive skills are called as communication skills. The former skills are these in which students receive and process the information but do not produce the language, while the latter skills request production only like conversation (Harmer, 2007: 246).

Iraqi students are not good at English language in general, and learning the four skills in particular. Although most students studied English primary schools, the problem is an unsolved matter in our country Iraq because of our old teaching methods and curriculum used in schools previously which focused on grammatical rules memorization and practice exercises only (i.e., teaching by the audio lingual method). That is to say the main emphasis by teachers of English was based on one skill (grammar), whereas the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) were less emphasized. Therefore, students' facing difficulties can be clearly seen in the communicative skills usage.

### 1.2 Objectives

The objectives of the study are the followings:

- Determining the English skills that most frequently used by EFL college students according to their frequencies.
- Discovering the difficulties that are related to speaking, listening, and reading skills for the college students.

### 1.3 Limits of the study

The present study is limited to

- Students in the fourth year at the Department of English Language \ College of Education for Women \ University of Baghdad during the academic year (2016-2017).
- The questionnaire is restricted to the three skills (listening, speaking, and reading) except writing as it is adopted from NCLRC (2012: 14-15).

### 1.4 Definition of Basic Terms

**Skills** is a term that is defined by Richards and Schmidt (2002:293) as "the mode or manner in which language is used". It represents the four skills of EFL: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

**Receptive skills:** these skills require student to understand and receive language; reading and listening are receptive skills (Professional Knowledge for ELT, 2017: online course).

**Productive Skills:** these skills require students to produce language;

speaking and writing are receptive skills. The speaker and writer create and communicate a message (Professional Knowledge for ELT, 2017: online course).

## 2. Theoretical Background

The researchers present important details about listening, speaking, reading skills except writing because the adopted questionnaire includes just these three skills.

### 2.1 Listening

Listening skill, as it is known, is a comprehended speaking language. Listening is the fundamental skill, presented in many activities we implement over our lives, as Lindsay and Knight (2006: 45) shows:

**We listen to a wide variety of things, for example; what someone says during a conversation, face to face or on the telephone; announcements giving information, for example, at an airport or railway station; the weather forecast on the radio; a play on the radio; music; someone else's conversation; a lecture; professional advice, for example, at the doctor's, in the bank; a taped dialogue in class.**

Oxford (1993:206) also claimed that "speaking, reading, and writing skills are developed depending on listening skill as an essential one. To highlight interest to listening skills, English proficiency for students is developed depending on known listening strategies."

For EFL students learning, consciousness and utilize effective listening skills would support them in using the language input they received in a good way. Rost (1994: online) also determined the importance of listening in language classroom as the provider for students input. In summary, comprehensible input at the right level enables learning to be effective. As a result, listening is an essential and vital skill in the acquisition of languages (Nunan, 2002: online).

Nunan (Ibid) "has pinpointed out both the bottom-up and top-down processes. Bottom-up processing indicates earning the message meaning based on the incoming language data from sounds to words, grammatical relationships, and at last meanings. That is, the procedure is in a linear fashion. The meaning itself was obtained as the last step in the procedure. Furthermore, top-down processing indicates earning scheme which was known as students' background education and universal understanding to conclude the meaning from and explain the message. In addition to, listening comprehension is neither top-down nor bottom-up processing. It is receptive, explanatory process where listeners utilize both previous knowledge and linguistic knowledge to create sense of the incoming message".

### 2.2 Speaking

Spoken language is one of the most complicated skills language

students have to face. However, it has traditionally been obligated into the background while teachers of English have spent all their classroom time attempt to teach their students how to write, read and sometimes even listen in L2 because grammar has a long written tradition (Buenoetal, 2006: 321). Speaking is mostly thought to be the most important of the four skills. Infact, one disappointment commonly expressed by students is that they cannot speak English; in spite of they have spent years in studying it.

Teachers should follow the portfolio or inside the curriculum content specification as a guideline lesson. The levels A1,A2, B1, B2,C1, C2 refer to tasks that students can perform (document) . Second and foreign language classrooms depends on two basic types of interaction: teacher-student and student- student interaction: IRE model (teacher initiation, student response, teacher's evaluation of that response) for teacher-students interaction. Student-student interaction is the common pattern of communication in learner-centered classrooms, since it extend student talking time and enable student use language for learning, as opposed to the traditional method of teaching. Working in groups on cooperative(Aleksandrzak, 2011:40)

### 2.3 Reading

The reading skill is the ability to understand what we read in which words have context and texts have meaning. "Reading skills let readers read and learn effectively. These skills are, basically, depend on previously stages of reading development, including oral reading and reading fluency. Without developing these earlier reading skills, students should continually center on decryption letters and words, instead of progressing to meaning and understanding. Reading comprehension skills become very important for students to be effective readers (Grabe&Stoller, 2002: online)".

Reading skill is the procedure of gaining meaning from text. The aim, as a result, is to gather main idea depending on understand of what is explained in the text rather than to gain meaning from separated words or sentences (Woolley, 2011:15).

## 3. Procedures

### 3.1 population and sample of the present study

A population is a number of people that are located close to gather which researchers would like the results of the study to be generalized (Gay, 1996:128). The population of the study is fourth-year students at the Department of English/ College of Education for Women during the academic year 2016/2017. The sample is randomly selected from this population. The total number of the sample was 60 students.

### 3.2 Questionnaire Validity

Validity is defined as a reflection of how fully it gauges what it is designed to measure (Kadhim, 2014,252). According to McNamara (2000: 133) face validity is "the extent to which an instrument meets the expectations of those involved in its use, e.g. administrators, teachers, candidates and test score users". In order to ensure the face validity, the

questionnaire is exposed to a jury<sup>1</sup> of experts in language and linguistics who agreed upon its validity and suitability. The time needed to complete the questionnaire items is 30 minutes. As for the clarity of the items, it is noticed that most of the items are clear and the students found no difficulty in answering the questionnaire items.

### 3.2 Questionnaire Reliability

Heaton (1988: 155) explains that reliability can be identified if the same test is presented to the same subject or matched subjects on two different opportunities, it must produce equal results: several methods for estimating reliability, such as test-retest, split-half, Pearson formula, and alpha-Cronbach methods.

For the questionnaire reliability, the Pearson correlation formula is used; it is found out that the questionnaire reliability is 0.76. After applying the Spearman Brown formula, it is found out the questionnaire reliability is 0.863. This shows that the questionnaire is acceptable and quite reliable.

### 3.3 Description and Administration of the Questionnaire

Questionnaire is an effective method to obtain a variety of data, for instance: attitudes, beliefs, values, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions (Johnson and Christensen, 2000:86-93). To achieve the objectives of this research, a questionnaire is adopted to be a tool of collecting information about students' levels in English language skills.

The research adopts a questionnaire to compare the data obtained. It includes three skills (listening, speaking, and reading, excluding writing as it is adopted from NCLRC (2012: 14-15). It consists of 16 items divided into eight items for measuring speaking, four items for measuring listening, and four items for measuring reading. Students are asked to rate each statement from (often, frequently, occasionally, rarely, and never) according to the frequency of use. It is worth to mention that often receive 5 points and never receive only 1 point. The questionnaire is applied on 60 college students during December 2016 (see Appendix 1).

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1 Results

Using Fisher's formula to manipulate the data statistically and establish the weighted mean for each item, it is proved that the students use the skills with weighted mean score of more than 3, i.e., all items are strong ones. The following table shows the weighted mean scores of EFL skills, and the items are organized from lower to higher score.

**Table 1**

**The Weighted Mean Scores for the Items of EFL Skills Questionnaire**

Item rank	Item no	Items	Weighted mean scores	Skill
1.	6	If I don't know how to say something, I ask qualified colleague how to	3.293	Speaking

		say it.		
2.	3	I try to figure out if I am not making sense to the listener so I can correct myself.	3.448	<b>Speaking</b>
3.	10	When I read something, I can give the meaning of new words	3.517	<b>Reading</b>
4.	12	When I read something, I can understand the written instructions of the writer.	3.603	<b>Reading</b>
5.	5	I use real objects or act out the situation to illustrate and put into context what I am talking about.	3.637	<b>Speaking</b>
6.	1	I decide my goal for speaking by thinking about what I want to say, i.e., in communication	3.672	<b>Speaking</b>
7.	2	Before I start speaking, I brainstorm words and phrases I can use when I'm talking	3.689	<b>Speaking</b>
8.	15	When I hear something, I can figure out the meaning of new words, then give a clear explanation about it	3.706	<b>Listening</b>
9.	7	If I don't know how to say something, I look it up in reference materials (dictionary, textbook, computer program, etc.).	3.758	<b>Speaking</b>
10.	16	When I hear something, I can answer questions completely	3.793	<b>Listening</b>
11.	13	When I listen to something, I can figure out the most	3.827	<b>Listening</b>

		important thing the native speaker is saying		
12.	11	When I read something, I can answer questions then clearly	3.913	<b>Reading</b>
13.	14	When I hear something, I can answer questions about what I have heard easily	3.982	<b>Listening</b>
14.	8	After I speak, I rate how well I did.	4.086	<b>Speaking</b>
15.	9	When I read something, I can figure out the main idea of the text.	4.120	<b>Reading</b>
16.	4	I focus on topics that I know how to talk about, and I use language structures I am familiar with, so that others can understand me.	4.362	<b>Speaking</b>

**4.1.1 Item NO 4 "I focus on topics that I know how to talk about, and I use language structure I am familiar with, so that others can understand me"**

This item ranked the first and has gained (4.362). This means that speaking skill is acquired by college students and they use techniques of speaking and select the subject that can speak in it to be understood by others."According to Thornbury(2007: 125) the produce of developing speaking comprehension consists of three stages:

- Awareness – students are made conscious of target language knowledge characteristics,
- Appropriation – these characteristics are merged into their present knowledge-base,
- Autonomy – students develop the capacity to mobilize these features under real-time conditions without assistance".

**4.1.2 Item No. 9 "When I read something, I can figure out the main idea of the text."**

This item has got the second and scored (4.120). This item is related to reading skill. This result proves that college students are good reader to receive and understand the main idea of what they read.

Roehl and Connie (2012:177) explain that reading skills are essential if students understand the meaning of the text and content. "Reading

comprehension is fundamental in the modern academic situation. Students can be assisted in the development of reading skills in different manner, depending the improvement of background knowledge, helping them to ask related questions of the text, making anticipating, illuminating charts and other clarification included in the text, as well as that the style of language is utilized in the text.

#### **4.1.3 Item No.8 "After I speak, I rate how well I did."**

Again, speaking skill is appeared to occupy the highest scores that has gained (4.086) among other skills because of college students have high confidence to communicate and assess their speech using self-assessment techniques to master this area as much as possible.

Self-assessment, also known as self-evaluation, or self-rating, is defined here as a tool in which students are requested to rate their own knowledge, skills, and performance (Brown, 2005:58).

#### **4.1.4 Item No. 14" When I hear something, I can answer questions about what I have heard easily"**

This item has scored (3.982). It is related to listening skill which comes after speaking and reading in scoring in spite of the highest mean score of the above items. This means that students of English department are good listeners because of their curriculum emphasize on listening skill to native speakers by listening to conversations, story, drama, novels, and movies to speak fluent well.

As Hassan (2000: 138) pointed out that "listening comprehension supplies appropriate conditions for language acquisition and of other language skills". Listening, therefore, is fundamental for both receptive skill and spoken language proficiency. Rost (2002 as cited in Hamouda, 2013:2) indicates that improving proficiency in listening is the clue to obtaining proficiency in speaking.

Teng (1997:515) shed light on the listening and speaking skills relationship. She stated that "listening consists of active and complex processes that would determine the level and content of comprehension".

#### **4.1.5 Item No. 6 "If I don't know how to say something, I ask qualified colleague how to say it"**

This item has scored (3.293). Again, speaking skill is appeared because students have motivation to speak fluently depending on qualified colleague to master speaking skill. Slavin (1997: 500) refers to peer-assessment as one of the best and ideal successfulness in educational history. Pedagogically, peer-assessment develops learning of student through "a sense of ownership and duty, motivation, and reflection of the students' own learning" (Falchikov & Gold Finch, 2000: 290). This type of assessment is recommended by Shepard (2000: 10) and Topping (1998:250) as one of the efficient method for classroom assessment. It can also be believed as a chance for students as learning facilitator and also used as a tool for instructors to obtain a more clear and obvious picture of learners'

performance.

**4.1.6 Item No. 3 "I try to figure out if I'm not making sense to the listener so I can correct myself"**

This item has scored (3.448). Students are depending on themselves to guess the unknown meaning and try to correct themselves.

**4.1.7 Item No. 10 "When I read something, I can give the meaning of new words"**

This item has scored (3.517). Reading comprehension depends on reader-related and situational factors (De Corte et al, 2001:540). The person's prior knowledge has an effect on the types of meaning that is formed in his head (Lipson 1983 as cited in Woolley, 2011: 15).

**4.1.8 Item No. 12 "When I read something, I can understand the written instructions of the writer"**

This item has scored (3.603). Reading skill is emerging. "Recent theoretical perspectives view skilled readers as being active and self-regulating students (Harris and Pressley 1991:392). The notion that students actively construct new meanings by assimilating or accommodating new knowledge with old knowledge structures is related directly with their ability to reflect upon the reading skill. A reader centered approach to making meaning is intrinsically motivating because it promotes the application of strategies that foster self-monitoring of reading comprehension (Gersten et al. 2001: 279)".

**4.2 Conclusions**

Based on the results of the present study, the conclusions can be summed up as follows:

1. Students started to improve their skills depending on themselves.
2. The performance of students in speaking skill is better than other skills,
3. The English skills are acquired by EFL students because of using new methods in EFL teaching, and internet resources.
4. The effect of updating techniques such as self-assessment and peer-assessment can be clearly noticed in improving students' performance in both speaking and listening skills.

**4.3 Recommendations**

The following recommended

1. Interference between listening and speaking skills in learning English language can affect positively students' proficiency. Learning integrated skills enable students' mastering the foreign language. Opp-Beckman and Klinghammer (2006:28) define integrated skills as primary language skills such as (reading, writing, speaking, etc.) used together for communication. Thus, it is recommended by EFL instructors' shedding light on the usage of the integrated skills in their classes.
2. Interference between reading and writing to understand the reading text can increase students' ability to know the meaning of passages.

Therefore, it is recommended EFL school teachers put a heavy emphasize on those two skills.

3. Cooperative learning is active in Iraqi classrooms. Students workingtogether enablethem overcome the difficulties they face. Thus, it is highly recommended students' work in groups or pairs to develop the four skills.

### الملخص

استقصاء مهارات اللغة الانكليزية المستخدمة من قبل طلاب الكلية العراقيين  
ميساء رشيد عبد المجيد  
شهد حاتم كاظم

في الاونة الاخيرة، توجه الاهتمام نحو التعليم الذي يرتكز على الطالب، لذلك كل طالب دارس للغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية يحتاج ان يسيطر على المهارات الاربعة (الاصغاء والقراءة ( المهارات الاستيعابية) والتحدث والكتابة (المهارات المنتجة). حيث يواجه الطلاب الدارسون اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية مشاكل في تعلم هذه المهارات الاربع، ولذلك هدف هذه الدراسة الى محاولة استقصاء مهاراتاللغة الانكليزية الأكثر استخداما من قبل طلاب الكلية العراقيين حسب تكراراتها، من أجل تحقيق هدف الدراسة، قام البحث بعمل استبانته تحتوي على ١٦ فقرة ومقياس ذو ٥ درجات

(often, frequently, occasionally, rarely, never) ، تختبر هذه الفقرات

المهارات الثلاثة (الاصغاء ، القراءة ، والتحدث، باستثناء الكتابة).

تتكون عينة الدراسة من (٦٠) طالبا من قسم اللغة الانكليزية، كلية التربية للبنات - جامعة بغداد خلال العام الجامعي ٢٠١٦/٢٠١٧، بعد التحقق من صدق وثبات الاستبانة، تم تطبيقها على عينة الدراسة، بعد تحليل نتائج الاستبيان تبين ان الطالبات يستخدمن المهارات الثلاثة بوسط حسابي اكثر من (٣). هذا ما يدل على أن الطالبات بدأوا بتطوير مهاراتهم بانفسهم. وفي النهاية ، تم وضع الخاتمة، والتوصيات والاستنتاجات.

الكلمات الدالة:المهارات المنتجة، المهارات الاستيعابية، المهارات

<sup>1</sup>the jury members are:

1. Prof. ShathaKadhim Al-Saadi (College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad).
2. Asst. Prof. Jinan Ahmed Khilil (College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad).
3. Asst. Prof NarmeenMahmood Mohammad (College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad).
4. Instr. Fatima KhudairHasoon(College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad).

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## Appendix 1

### The Questionnaire items "

Items LS	Often	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
I decide my goal for speaking by thinking about what I want to say, i.e., in communication					
Before I start speaking, I brainstorm words and phrases I can use when I'm talking					
I try to figure out if I'm not making sense to the listener so I can correct myself.					
I focus on topics that I know how to talk about, and I use language structures I am familiar with, so that others can understand me.					
I use real objects or act out the situation to illustrate and put into context what I am talking about.				+	
If I don't know how to say something, I ask qualified colleague how to say it.					
If I don't know how to say something, I look it up in reference materials (dictionary, textbook, computer program, etc.).					

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	After I speak, I rate how well I did.					
	When I read something, I can figure out the main idea of the text.					
	When I read something, I can give the meaning of new words					
	When I read something, I can answer questions then clearly					
	When I read something, I can understand the written instructions of the writer.					
	When I listen to something, I can figure out the most important thing the native speaker is saying					
	When I hear something, I can answer questions about what I have heard easily					
	When I hear something, I can figure out the meaning of new words, then give a clear explanation about it					
	When I hear something, I can answer questions completely					