

Investigating Linguistic Barriers against Communicative Ability: A Case Study of Secondary School Students in Sudan

تقصي العوائق اللغوية تجاه القدرة التواصلية
(دراسة حالة لطلاب المدارس الثانوية في السودان)

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Abstract

The following paper deals with the linguistic factors that constitute a hindrance to the communicative competence in English of high school students in Sudan. It pinpoints specific linguistic problems that contribute to the students' inability to achieve communicative competence in English; and it makes some recommendations to overcome this issue. Grounded in both a quantitative and qualitative approach, two different instruments were used. A questionnaire was addressed to EFL teachers on the

one hand, and a test was given to high school students on the other hand. Both population samples willingly lent themselves to the research project. The findings clearly evidence the existence of a set of language barriers that hinder students' communicative competence. The paper comes up with a number of recommendations.

Keywords: abilities – barriers – communicative – competence – education – linguistic – oral – proficiency – skill – strategy.

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المخلص

المنهج الكمي والنوعي. تم توجيه استبيان إلى معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من ناحية، وتم إجراء اختبار لطلاب المدارس الثانوية من ناحية أخرى. شاركت كلتا العينات (معلمين وطلاب) عن طيب خاطر في مشروع البحث. تشير النتائج بوضوح إلى وجود مجموعة من الحواجز اللغوية التي تعيق كفاءة الطلاب في التواصل. وتضمنت الورقة عدة توصيات..

تتناول الورقة التالية العوامل اللغوية التي تشكل عائقاً أمام الكفاءة التواصلية في اللغة الإنجليزية لطلاب المدارس الثانوية في السودان. تشير هذه الورقة إلى المشكلات اللغوية التي تساهم في عدم قدرة الطلاب على تحقيق الكفاءة التواصلية باللغة الإنجليزي، وتقدم بعض التوصيات للتغلب على هذه المشكلة. تم استخدام أداتين مختلفتين تركزان على كل من

1 - Introduction

Communication is essential to social life. Today, English has become the top international language of communication (Seidlhofer 2005). Among the 4,000 to 5,000 living languages, English is, by far, the most widely used one (Broughton *et al.* 1978: 1). The hegemony of English in the world has made this international language a medium in global communication, or a global *lingua franca*. As a result, many countries around the world, Sudan included, have given it a prominent place in their curricula as well as in their education policies.

The Republic of Sudan has historic relationships with the English language. Indeed, English came to Sudan with the colonial army in 1898, a date which marks the beginning of the British colonialism that introduced Western-type education based on the hegemony of the English language (Elnoor 2011). Great Britain occupied Sudan and ruled it up to 1953, a landmark in the history of this country in northeastern Africa as it was granted self-government. Independence was not proclaimed until 1956. For several decades, English was the official language in Sudan.

After independence, English remained the official language for several decades. Accordingly, it was the medium of communication at all levels of the administration, as well as the language of instruction. Up to 1948, all school subjects were taught in English, except Arabic and Islamic studies. In 1949, a linguistic policy initiated by the government eventually substituted English with Arabic, the “natural” lingua franca of Sudan, a multicultural and multi-ethnic country bordered by two Arab countries (Egypt and Libya), four non-Arab countries (South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, The Central African Republic), and one country where Arabic shares the status of official language together with French (The Republic of Chad).

The British cultural heritage in Sudan can still be effectively felt in various domains. As a case in point, the British Council is part of the major educational institutions in the country. As the United Kingdom’s international organization for cultural relations and educational opportunities, the British Council has been developing policies to promote education and global citizenship in Sudan for several decades, just as in many other countries on the continent.

For a sustainable integration of the English language in the education system in Sudan, researchers and other public education actors constantly carry out reflections, not only as part of continuous professional development for public education professionals in general, and for EFL teachers in particular; but also as part of proficiency development for learners. Despite all the salutary efforts made by the various actors, there still remains a vast gap to bridge and a considerable way to go to reach standards.

2 – Background to the Study: EFL in the Sudanese Context

Taught as a foreign language in Sudan, English occupies a prominent position in the education system. Despite the considerable efforts made by the government, there are still a lot of challenges to meet at many levels. As a case in point, there is a discrepancy between the educational realities in Sudan and the exigencies of teaching standards. For instance, as far as ELT is concerned, there is no consistency in the teaching workforce as three categories of EFL teachers can be identified: trained teachers whose

major is English and who are well equipped to develop relevant teaching strategies; untrained teachers whose major is English, and some of whom are unequipped to tackle pedagogical issues head-on; and untrained teachers whose majors are other subjects than English.

English Language Teaching (ELT) in Sudan is characterized by a set of problems that have an impact on the students' communicative competence.

2.1 - Statement of the Problem

Currently, Sudanese students begin to study English when they reach the fifth grade of the elementary level. English is regarded as a foreign language and is generally treated as an academic subject in schools. In most cases, however, English is not the medium of teaching and learning, and it is not widely used outside the classroom.

Most English teachers focus on improving the reading and writing skills, and do not take into account the importance of the speaking and listening skills. The teaching of the oral skill in Sudanese schools is mostly ignored.

According to Al Mofarreh (2005), the goal of teaching speaking is to improve the students' ability to communicate. This is necessary for the students to be able to express themselves, communicate with English speakers, and improve their understanding of the culture of other nations. Moreover, Dosari (1992) states that EFL is taught in order to enable students to communicate with other English speakers, and to offer them a window on the world. However, by the time they reach secondary education, Sudanese students still grapple with a lot of difficulties regarding English in general, and communication in English in particular. They cannot speak English accurately and fluently: "*The student is likely to take about 1100 hours of English in public schools and still not be able to utter even a few correct sentences*" (Sheshsha 1982: 14). Such a problem is a major concern for teachers of English in secondary schools. These teachers overlook the speaking skill, either because they do not know how to teach it, or because they face some obstacles, or else still they come up with

irrelevant solutions to address the causes of weakness in speaking. In any case, teachers fail to address the issue of the speaking skill the way they should.

Multiculturalism invites itself in the classroom in Sudan. The EFL teacher may have in his classroom students belonging to a wide range of ethnic groups, including Arab and non-Arab learners. Furthermore, the teacher – himself from a different ethnic group – may use in the classroom teaching materials completely disconnected from the learners' cultural realities, which causes a crucial lack of motivation on the latter's part. The issue of multiculturalism is not specific to Sudan; it is common to all the countries around the Red Sea region and the Arabian Peninsula. Shah, Hussain, Nasseef depict the case of Saudi Arabia: "*In an EFL classroom, teacher, learner and the course book may share three different social and cultural backgrounds*" (2013: 105). The cultural environment does not play in favour of an active use of English outside the classroom as the students are exposed to a multitude of cultures and languages in Sudan. As a result, many of them naturally practice code-switching.

2.2 – Research Questions and Significance of the Study

The following study aims to investigate the barriers that hinder communicative abilities associated with English as a foreign language in secondary schools in the district of Bahri, in the north of Sudan. The study will address the following questions:

- 1 – What type of barriers obstruct high school students' communicative competence?
- 2 – To what extent do such barriers hinder the Sudanese secondary students' communicative competence?
- 3 – What are the methods and approaches adopted in teaching the speaking skill to secondary students in Sudan?

The research questions explore the issue of the hindrance to the Sudanese secondary students' effective communication in English, more specifically their speaking abilities in an EFL context. They highlight the types of obstacles that make speaking difficult for secondary students in Sudan. The issue of the scope of the hindrance to the students' speaking

abilities is also addressed in this study. The teaching methods, strategies and activities used in the classroom to develop the students' speaking abilities are analyzed.

The shaping of these research questions is propped up by a set of hypotheses formulated after field observations and discussions with both instructors and learners. The first hypothesis is the existence of language barriers that hinder the secondary students' communicative competence in English in Bahri, Sudan. The second hypothesis is that these secondary students often encounter barriers that constitute major obstacles in the language acquisition processes. The third hypothesis is that EFL teachers in Sudan do not use appropriate methods, strategies and activities to teach the speaking skill.

Accordingly, the objective of the following study is to investigate the speaking difficulties faced by EFL secondary school students in Bahri, the factors that cause those difficulties, and the methods adopted in the teaching of the oral skill.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it intends to raise awareness of the communicative difficulties of the secondary school students in Bahri, Sudan. Through its findings, the paper comes up with practical recommendations to overcome the learners' communicative incompetence. It is, therefore, important for all the actors involved in the field of education. The study can help teachers rethink the strategies, activities, methods and approaches they use to teach the speaking skill for the great benefit of learners. It provides insight and direction to material designers in the production of books for the teaching of the speaking skill. It seeks to assist the work of curriculum designers too.

3 – Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

This section deals with the basic concepts used in this study as terms of reference, it also reviews the research conducted on the issues of oral proficiency and communicative competence. Speaking and writing are referred to as the “productive skills”, compared to reading and listening known as the “receptive skills”. In this study, which deals with language

production, speaking is given precedence over writing, though the latter is taken into consideration.

3.1 - Conceptual Framework

The phrase “linguistic barriers”, also known as “language barriers”, used in this study specifically refers to all types of language-related obstacles that hinder learning and understanding. It points to factors that disturb or do not foster the production of language in a written or oral context. The term also involves impediments that appear to block communication in a non-native environment.

Speaking is a basic skill in communication among people in society; it refers to *“the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts”* (Chaney and Burk 1998: 13). The form and meaning of speech depend on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes of speaking. Speaking is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving (Flores and Ann 1999).

The speaking skill involves a number of sub-skills such as pronunciation, fluency, intonation, stress patterns, and so on. Levelt (1989) suggests four main processes of speech production. These are *conceptualization, formulation, articulation, and self-monitoring*. In turn, Zuraidah singles out the specificity of the speaking skill: *“Speaking is a productive skill which requires a lot of back-up factors like knowledge, confidence, self-esteem and enthusiasm”* (Zuraidah 2008: 1). Allen and Corder recall: *“Speech is the primary medium in that it is older and more widespread than writing, and children always learn to speak before they learn to write”* (1975: 26). However, the teaching of this basic skill is often overlooked in ELT. Abu-Ghararah draws attention on the fact that the speaking skill is ignored in schools. Indeed, as he explains: *“Speaking is generally discouraged in schools and classrooms. Speech in class is used only when learners are called upon to repeat or answer a question”* (Abu-Ghararah 1998: 33). Egan shares this viewpoint as he claims that speaking is the heart of second language learning and that, despite its importance, it was

until recently largely ignored in schools and universities (1999: 277). Yet, speaking is considered to be important in the development of the other language skills. As a matter of fact, Cayer, Green and Baker (1971) highlighted the relationship between speaking and the other language skills and showed that speaking can improve both reading and writing.

The concept “communicative ability” refers to “communicative competence”, which is at the core of oral proficiency as it props up an effective speech act. The concept “communicative competence” was coined by the anthropological linguist Dell Hymes (1972). It was coined in response to Noam Chomsky who put the emphasis on the notion of “linguistic competence”, which refers to the rules for describing sound systems and for combining sounds into morphemes and morphemes into sentences. Chomsky was a formal linguist in the strict sense of the term; he theorized that language structure and its acquisition were context-free. Hymes did not subscribe to that theory at all. Instead, he considered context to be prominent in language acquisition and language use. As a result, Hymes added to Chomsky’s concept of linguistic competence, the notion of sociolinguistic competence, which refers to the rules for using language appropriately in context (Celce-Murcia 2007: 42).

Since its coinage in 1972, the concept of communicative competence has evolved over time, a numbers of contributions have been made in applied linguistics, and models have been developed to back up the approach to ELT known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Canale and Swain (1980) developed the first comprehensive model of communicative competence regarding language pedagogy. According to their model, which was further developed by Canale (1983), communicative competence has four components:

1 – *Grammatical competence*, which refers to the knowledge of the language codes (grammar rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, etc.).

2 – *Sociolinguistic competence*, or the knowledge of the sociocultural code of language use (appropriate application of vocabulary, register, politeness and style in a given situation).

3 – *Discourse competence*, referring to the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohesive texts (for instance, political speech, poetry, etc.).

4 – *Strategic competence*, or the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, enabling the learner to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns occur and enhancing communication efficiency.

Bachman and Palmer (1996) revised Canale and Swain's model and came up with two main components, *Organizational knowledge* and *Pragmatic knowledge*, each one subdivided into sub-components. Other revisions have also been made by other linguists (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell 1993: 15-16).

3.2 – Literature Review

Effective oral communication is a major issue in ELT, and a lot of studies have been conducted to help diagnose the problems faced by the EFL learners. Some of these studies are concerned with the Gulf States, others explore the region around the Arabian Peninsula, and still others focus on the Red Sea area. Sudan, which this study is concerned with, is located in that very region. In their study of the factors that impact EFL learners in the Saudi Arabian context, Shah, Hussain and Nasseef recall the commitment of the Saudi Ministry of Education to “*improve learners' proficiency and enhance teachers' pedagogical skills*” (2013: 105), they also identify a set of factors that limit the learners' chance to interact in English and achieve communicative competence. Al Hosni (2014) investigated the speaking difficulties encountered by young EFL learners in Oman.

The teaching of the speaking skill is a prominent issue in EFL. It is intended to help students improve their communicative ability; and therefore, it is not an easy task. Cited by Wang, Bygate makes a “*distinction between knowledge about a language, and skill in using it*” (2006: 47). To better help grasp this distinction, he uses an analogy: there is a distinction between the knowledge of the controls of a car and the skill required to

drive a car. In other words, to teach speaking means to train the learners to speak, and not to teach them about speaking. Nunan – quoted by Kayi – explains what teaching the speaking skill is all about. Teaching speaking means teaching students:

[...] to produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns, to use word and sentence stress, to select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter, to organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence, to use language as a means of expressing values and judgments, and to use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses, which is called fluency (Kayi 2006: 1).

Teachers should pay more attention to the speaking skill. In this respect, Kayi comes up with some important recommendations for teachers (Kayi 2006: 4):

- 1 – Provide maximum opportunity to students to speak the target language by providing a rich environment that contains collaborative work and authentic materials.
- 2 – Try to involve each student in every speaking activity and practice different ways of student participation.
- 3 – Reduce teacher speaking time in class while increasing student speaking time.
- 4 – Do not correct students' pronunciation mistakes very often while they are speaking.
- 5 – Diagnose problems faced by students who have difficulties in expressing themselves in the target language, and provide more opportunities to practice speaking.

Yan (2007) observes that since the purpose of learning English is to communicate with others, it is important to help learners build up confidence and to encourage them to be more willing to exchange their ideas in the target language. Thus, he concludes that accuracy and fluency should be integrated in classroom activities.

Teaching the speaking skill aims at developing the students' communicative competence. Al Hosni (2014: 23) reminds that oral

communication instruction was neglected in the past due to the misconception that communicative competence develops naturally over time and that the cognitive skills involved in writing automatically transfer to analogous oral communication skills (Chaney and Burk 1998). Through communication, learners will integrate separate structures into a creative system for expressing meaning (Littlewood 1984: 91). Speaking is the most important skill because people who master a language are primarily referred to as “speakers” of that language (Ur 1996). Using a language is, therefore, more important than just knowing about it (Al Hosni 2014: 23). In other words, there is no point knowing a lot about a language if you cannot use it (Scrivener 2005: 146).

Ur (1996) identifies many factors that cause difficulties in speaking. These factors include inhibition, low or uneven participation, and mother tongue use. Focusing on the specific case of Arab learners of English, Rababah (2005) lists among these factors the teaching strategies, the curriculum, the environment, and the learners themselves. For example, lack of motivation, poor linguistic competence, or inadequate strategic competence on the learners’ part can put a curb on interaction. Teacher-training programs sometimes fail to change the teachers’ methodologies (Rabah 2005). Furthermore, in a context where all the subjects are in Arabic except English, exposure to the English language appears to be insufficient. The lack of a target language environment is another crucial problem, resulting in a lack of opportunities to use English in real-life situations.

4 – Methodology

As shown by its title, the present research paper is a case study conducted in Bahri, Sudan; it is carried out among secondary school students learning English as a foreign language. Two methods were adopted for collecting data, to test the hypotheses of the present study.

4.1 – Data Collection Instruments

A paper-based questionnaire was used in this study as research instrument. This questionnaire was designed to test our hypotheses formulated after class observations conducted and discussions held with both students and teachers over time. The questionnaire was addressed to

EFL teachers in some Sudanese high schools in Bahri with different levels of qualifications and different teaching experiences. These teachers were requested to answer questions about the language barriers that hinder the communicative abilities of the Sudanese high school students according to their experience. The questionnaire contains four parts. The first part is about their teaching experience. The second part is about the highest degrees they earned. The third part is about questions they had to answer by ticking one of the following: *strongly agree, agree, neutral, strongly disagree*. The fourth part is about open-ended questions. With the paper-based teacher questionnaire, which provided us with data, we conducted analysis on the basis of a quantitative method.

A written test was administered to high school students within the same area, Bahri. The test was made up of eight different types of questions the students were requested to answer. The qualitative analysis of the answers allowed to collect data about the students' communicative competence in English. The writing test allows to effectively assess the students' communicative competence without any external influence such as teacher presence during oral test.

4.2 - Data Collection Procedures

The sample size among the students is 150, essentially constituted of first-year high school student. These students were chosen randomly and given the test. As for the instructors, a sample size of 50 randomly chosen EFL teachers was targeted to fill in the questionnaire. The purpose of using two different types of instruments is to get data from different perspectives. The data obtained from the two types of instruments were analyzed statistically by the recognized Statistical Package for Social Studies (SPSS). It is a software programme used for data analysis, and which yields results in terms of frequencies, percentage, median, and standard deviations.

We acknowledge that the study presents a few limitations. First, the study sample is taken from Bahri. Therefore, the findings are only applicable to that place. Second, the study is conducted in high schools. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to all levels of education in Sudan.

Third, the study is conducted among EFL students whose mother tongue is Arabic. Speakers of dialects other than Arabic in Bahri have not been taken into consideration in the study.

5 - Data Analysis, Discussion and Recommendations

This section deals with the analysis of the data collected in this study. For editorial reasons, we are not in a position to present all the data collected. Indeed, due to space constraints, a representative sampling has been made in the overall data collected.

5.1 - Data Analysis

The teacher questionnaire was addressed to 50 EFL teachers in Bahri with different teaching experiences. Table 1 shows that 38 teachers (76%) have more than 10 years of professional experience. Six teachers (12%) have a professional experience extending between two and five years, five teachers (10%) between six and ten years. Only one teacher has completed one year of practice.

Teaching Experience	Frequency	Percentage
One year	1	2.0
From 2-5 years	6	12.0
Valid From 6-10 years	5	10.0
More than 10 years	38	76.0
Total	50	100.0

Table 1: Teaching experience

Among the 50 EFL teachers, two teachers (4%) have an *intermediate diploma* and four teachers (8%) a *public diploma*. Seventeen teachers (34%) hold a Bachelor degree and 14 teachers (28%) a Master degree. The teachers holding a PhD degree are 13, which represents 26%. In the Sudanese education system, the intermediate diploma is a certificate you get after a two-year training period in an education institute when you complete secondary education, and which allows you to teach in primary or intermediate schools. As for the public diploma, it is a university certificate

delivered to Bachelor degree holders who have succeeded in the preparatory courses for the Master level programme.

	Degree	Frequency	Percent
Valid	Intermediate diploma	2	4.0
	Public diploma	4	8.0
	B.A. degree	17	34.0
	MA degree	14	28.0
	PhD degree	13	26.0
	Total	50	100.0

Table 2: Teachers' Degrees

The above-mentioned data related to the teachers' degrees and their professional experience ensure a variety of views and perspectives.

Table 3 shows the importance of learning speaking skills in high school. Indeed, 39 teachers (78%) *strongly agree* on the importance of learning speaking skills in high school and 7 teachers (14%) *agree*, which is equal to a total of 46 teachers (92%) out of 50. On the other hand, 1 teacher (2%) *strongly disagrees*, 1 teacher (2%) is neutral and 2 teachers (4%) *disagree*.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	2.0	2.0
	Disagree	2	4.0	4.0
	Neutral	1	2.0	2.0
	Agree	7	14.0	14.0
	Strongly Agree	39	78.0	78.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0

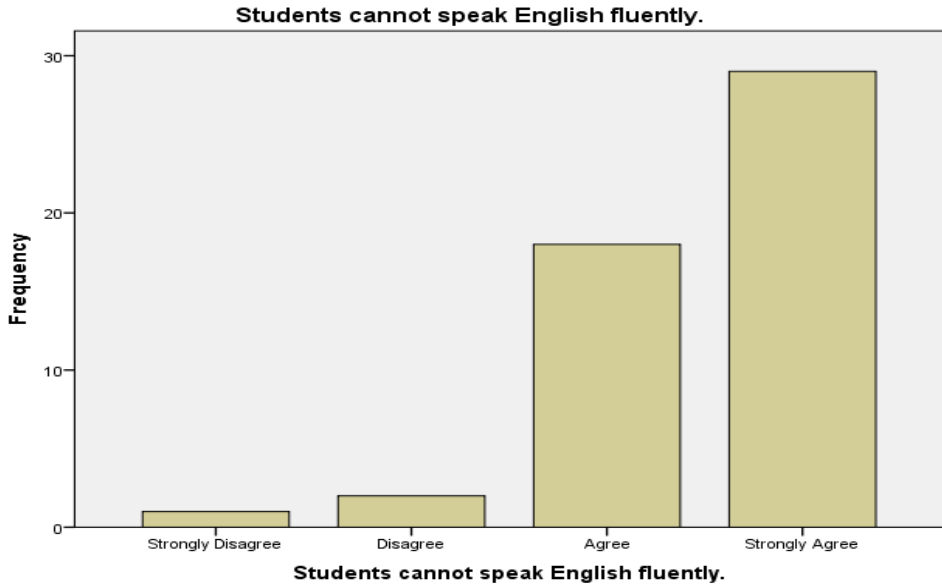
Table 3: Importance of learning speaking skills in high school

The 50 teachers have expressed themselves freely about the communicative competence and the oral proficiency of the high school students in Bahri regarding the English language. Evaluating the students' fluency, 29 teachers (58%) *strongly agree* that students cannot speak English fluently and 18 teachers (36%) *agree*, which is equal to a total of 47 teachers (94%) out of 50. Only 3 teachers *disagree*, and one of them teacher *strongly disagrees* (2%).

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
Disagree	2	4.0	4.0	6.0
Agree	18	36.0	36.0	42.0
Strongly Agree	29	58.0	58.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: Students cannot speak English fluently

On the basis of the data presented in Table 4, the following diagramme has been generated.

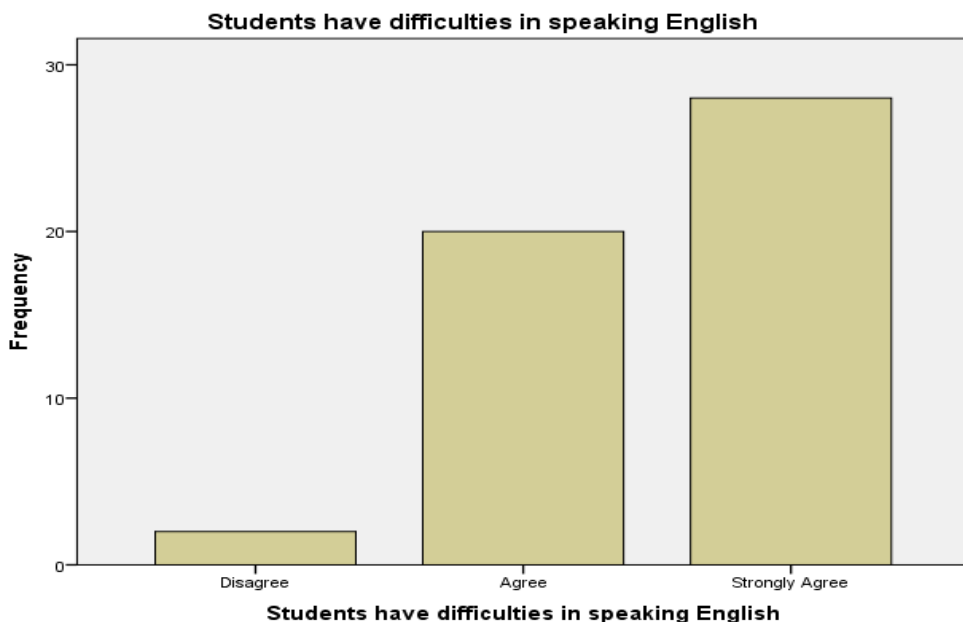


Beyond the problem of fluency, students have other serious problems of oral communication in English. Table 5 shows that a total of 48 teachers (28+20 teachers) find that students have difficulties in speaking English; these teachers form 96% (56%+40%) of the total number of teachers. Out of the 50 teachers only 2 disagree (4%).

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	4.0
	Agree	20	40.0
	Strongly Agree	28	56.0
	Total	50	100.0

Table 5: Students have difficulties in speaking English

The bar graph below is the representation of the data collected in Table 5.

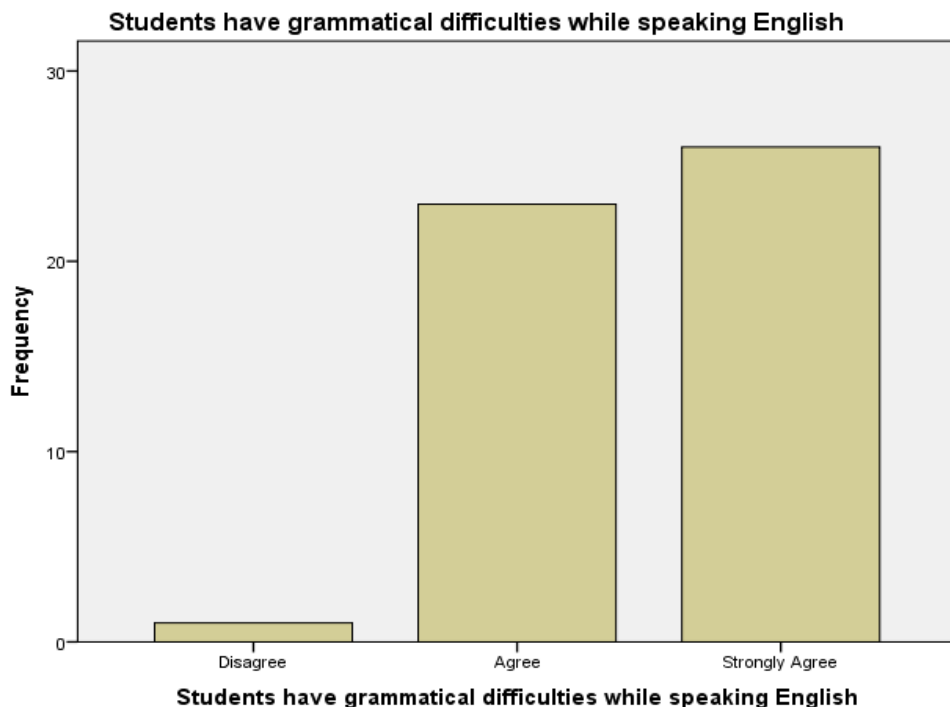


As can be seen in Table 6 below, a total of 49 teachers (26+23) consider that students face grammatical difficulties when they communicate in English. This corresponds to 98% of the total number of teachers (52% + 46%). Only one teacher *disagrees* (2%).

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
Agree	23	46.0	46.0	48.0
Valid Strongly Agree	26	52.0	52.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: Students have grammatical difficulties while speaking English

Here is the bar graph corresponding to the representation of the data in Table 6.



Grammar is not the only problem students face. Vocabulary is also a big challenge for them. Indeed, 37 teachers (74%) *strongly agree* that students' vocabulary problems account for their communicative difficulties, 10 teachers (20%) *agree*, 1 teacher (2%) *strongly disagrees* and 2 teachers (4%) *disagree*.

Coming to the teachers' attitude in the classroom, Table 7 shows that almost all the teachers agree that the Arabic language is used in the English class. Indeed, 29 teachers (58%) *strongly agree*, 19 teachers (38%) *agree*. There is only one teacher who *disagrees* (2%); one teacher is *neutral* (2%).

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	1	2.0
Neutral	1	2.0
Valid Agree	19	38.0
Strongly Agree	29	58.0
Total	50	100.0

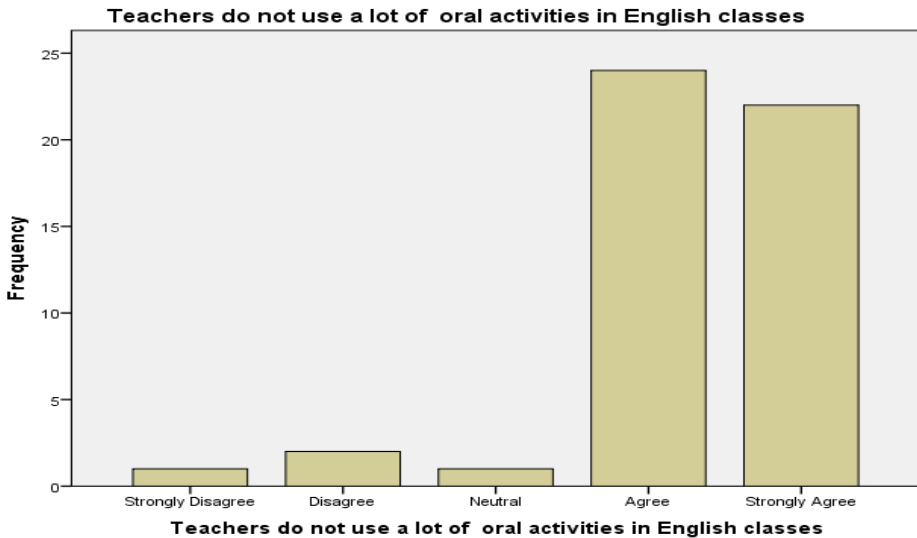
Table 7: Teachers speak Arabic in the classroom

Oral activities are ignored during the English class. Indeed, 22 teachers (44%) *strongly agree* that teachers do not use a lot of oral activities during the English class, 24 teachers (48%) *agree*. This corresponds to a total of 46 teachers (92%) who agree. On the other hand, 1 teacher *strongly disagrees*, 2 teachers disagree and 1 teacher is *neutral*. Table 8 displays the data.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	1	2.0
Disagree	2	4.0
Valid Neutral	1	2.0
Agree	24	48.0
Strongly Agree	22	44.0
Total	50	100.0

Table 8: Teachers do not use a lot of oral activities during the English class

The diagramme corresponding to Table 8 is presented below.



Furthermore, 48 teachers (96%) consider that lack of training contributes to creating barriers against the students' oral proficiency, the same number of teachers (96%) say students speak Arabic inside and outside the classroom. On the other hand, 42 teachers (84%) confirm that teachers usually translate English words into Arabic during English lessons.

Analyzing a sample of the Students' performance in the test

The students' communicative competence has been tested. Their performance is analyzed in Grid A, which gives the results of the letter-writing question (out of 20 marks).

Descriptive Statistics							
	N	Range	Minim.	Maxim.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Letter Writing	150	19	0	19	6.99	6.125	37.510

Grid A: Results of the letter-writing question

The marks of the students range between 0 and 19. The mean – or statistical average – for the letter-writing question is 6.99 and the standard deviation is 6.125. The mean 6.99 is considered to be very low according to the standards of the ministry of education. This undeniably requires remedial action to build and improve the students' letter writing skills. The Standard Deviation of the letter-writing question is 6.125, which means that there are differences between the students writing skills. As noticed from the test papers, just a few students are good at letter writing, whereas the majority of them are very weak.

Grid B shows the data collected from the students' answers to the sentence-building question (out of 10 marks).

Grid B: Results of the sentence-building question

Descriptive Statistics							
	N	Range	Minim	Maxim.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Sentence Making	150	10	0	10	3.86	2.759	7.611

The students' marks range between 0 and 10. The mean for the sentence-building question is 3.86 and the standard deviation is 2.759. The mean 3.86 is very low according to standards of the ministry of education. Remedial action is also required here to improve the students' sentence

building skills. The standard Deviation – 2.759 – indicates that there are differences between the students' skills in sentence building.

Grid C below is about the students' answers to the dialogue completion question (out of 10 marks).

Grid C: Results of the conversation completion question

Descriptive Statistics							
	N	Range	Minim.	Maxim.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Conversation Completion	150	10	0	10	3.37	2.955	8.730

As can be seen in Grid C, the students' marks range between 0 and 10. The mean is 3.37 and the standard deviation is 2.955. The mean 3.37 is very low. The standard deviation 2.955 indicates that there are differences between the students' dialogue completion skills. It clearly appears from the students' answers that some of them can successfully deal with dialogue completion questions in English, whereas other students face comprehension difficulties and vocabulary problems, which reflects communicative incompetence on their part.

5.2 – Discussion and Recommendations

Starting from the teacher sample, 76% of the teachers have more than 10 years of professional experience; which means they have good knowledge of the students in Bahri. Only one teacher has one year of practice. These teachers have different educational backgrounds, as shown by the wide range of degrees covered: Intermediate diploma (4%), Public diploma (8%), Bachelor degree (34%), Master degree (28%) and PhD degree (26%). The variety of these data related to the teachers' degrees and their professional experience ensures a diversity of views and therefore the validity of the teacher sample.

The importance of the speaking skill in high school is confirmed by the teaching workforce as evidenced by 92% of them. As a result, it

should be given a prominent place during the English classes. However, such is not the case on the field. A close analysis of the students' communicative competence clearly reveals crucial problems regarding this issue. First, 94% of the teachers accept that students cannot speak English fluently. Second, 96% of the teachers diagnose a poor speaking ability on the students' part. Students face difficulties in oral communication. These figures require taking measures to reverse the situation.

Among the causes of the students' problems of communicative competence, we can mention the specific case of the sub-component known as *linguistic competence*. Students have communication problems related to vocabulary and grammar. Indeed, 98% of the teachers confirm that students face grammatical difficulties when they speak English, in addition to the already existing vocabulary problems they have, and which are acknowledged by 94% of the teachers. Grammar and vocabulary are among the key constitutive elements of linguistic competence. As can be seen, it clearly appears that barriers against communicative competence exist for students. These problems of communicative competence highlighted by teachers regarding the specific case of the speaking skill are confirmed by the results of the students in the writing test. Indeed, the low statistical mean of the letter-writing question (6.99 out of 20), the low mean of the sentence building question (3.86 out of 10), and the low mean of the conversation completion question (3.37 out of 10) confirm the students' lack of communicative competence in a writing context. The conversation completion question aims at testing the sub-components of communicative competence known as strategic competence and socio-linguistic competence.

In view of all this, we highly recommend that teachers should develop strategies in the classroom to develop the students' communicative competence. To do so, they should promote oral activities during the English class. The figures show that 92% of teachers do not give importance to oral activities, which literally means that they do not teach it. Such activities undeniably contribute to developing communicative competence. As a result, teachers should design relevant didactic activities aiming at

developing communicative competence, more precisely still oral proficiency. This calls for the need to organize training workshops and seminars for the great benefit of teachers. As shown by the figures, 48 teachers (96%) consider that lack of training contributes to creating barriers. In the past, in-service training was often carried out by inspectors to help EFL teachers in Sudan address the pedagogical issues they faced in their daily classroom practice. Unfortunately, this salutary initiative has surprisingly been cancelled for various reasons, which is definitely a negative game changer in the pursuit of quality-assurance objectives in the Sudanese education system.

At the institutional level, sustainable education policies should be developed to back up the education system. A national syllabus for the English language should be devised and put at the teachers' disposal. This syllabus should ensure pedagogical guidance by setting unequivocal didactic objectives and clear course specifications, and by singling out the competences to teach students as well, particularly communicative competence.

To change the situation prevailing over, teachers are expected to change their attitude too. As shown by the data, 96% of the teachers speak Arabic during the English class. This constitutes a language barrier hindering the students' communicative competence. Research conducted in the field of EFL shows that using the students' first language (L1) in the English class can be a godsend, or an asset. However, EFL teachers must not overuse it. In other words, teachers in Bahri should be careful and give precedence to the English language when communicating with the students. In systematically speaking with students in Arabic during the English class, teachers set up language barriers that truly hinder any attempt to develop communicative competence.

6 – Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate the linguistic barriers encountered by high school students in Bahri, Sudan. A set of hypotheses were formulated on the basis of the outcome of classroom observations. The data collected from the teacher questionnaire and the students' test confirm our hypotheses. Indeed, there are barriers that hinder the high school students' communicative competence in English. Students encounter language barriers that constitute major obstacles in oral skill acquisition processes. The speaking skill is relatively ignored in Bahri high schools, teachers do not propose a lot of oral activities during the English class; and on the rare occasions they deal with speaking activities, they do not use appropriate methods and approaches. Most teachers focus more on the reading and writing skills rather than on speaking. Students are silent in the classroom most of the time. They rarely engage in oral activities, and they use Arabic during English classes. Sudanese students from Bahri have a low oral proficiency level in English.

It is true that the study presents a few limitations as it is restricted to Bahri, and it is addressed to Arabic-speaking students. Measures should be taken to lift up the barriers for the development of the students' communicative competence. These measures concern teachers and their classroom practices as well as decision-makers.

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