

Original Paper

University Graduates' Perception about the Effect of EFL Speaking Skills on Employability

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Abstract

This paper explores the perception of Bahraini graduates from the University of Bahrain on the speaking skills they acquired in EFL courses in higher education and to what extent it served them in job interviews and at work. The study employed an online survey to collect data from Bahrainis who have graduated from the University of Bahrain in the last five years, and 214 responses were collected. The results showed that the majority of participants thought that university EFL courses should focus more directly on English speaking skills as they affected their success in job interviews and for work. According to the participants, the three major obstacles to improving English speaking skills required for increasing employability in EFL courses were that these courses were mostly based on indoctrination, that students rarely found a chance to talk in class and also that topics were far from verbal communication needs at work. The study suggested some in-class strategies for improving English speaking skills and also recommended either making speaking a compulsory graded component of EFL courses and/or adding a compulsory English speaking course to the university programmes.

Keywords

employability, English language skills, speaking skills, language fluency, higher education

1. Introduction

1.1 English at Higher Education and at Work in Bahrain

While Arabic is the official language of the Kingdom of Bahrain and the main medium of instructions in government schools in Bahrain, English is the medium of teaching in most of the programmes in all universities in the Kingdom, including the University of Bahrain, the oldest and largest university in the

Kingdom of Bahrain, and the only public government in the Kingdom to date. The excluded programmes from this are that of the College of Law and the programmes offered by the College of Arts other than the ones offered by the Department of the English Language and Literature. All the colleges of the university, including the ones with Arabic curricula, have two or three compulsory English language courses included as part of the programme requirements. The content and structure of courses differ from one college to another as per each college's requirements.

When it comes to career, Arabic is used in formal communication in and among government institutions; however, that excludes medical and technical communication and reporting, while private businesses prioritize English language communication. In addition, a large number of job interviews are conducted in English, all of which makes English an important requirement for recruitment in Bahrain. Furthermore, Bahrain is a multicultural country and English language is used in everyday life communication in many places, such as restaurants, convenience stores, and many other shops. English has a similar status in many countries, especially ones with open market and multicultural nature like the Kingdom of Bahrain. As Kitao (2006) asserts, English is the language that is used most in the fields of news and information, business, diplomacy, professions, travel and also entertainment.

1.2 English Language Skills and Employability

A large number of studies confirm that English language skills are highly important for employability not only in countries where English is the native language, but also in countries where English is the business language by choice (Clark & Paran, 2007; Shafie & Nayan, 2010; Zainuddin, Pillai, Dumanig, & Phillip, 2019; Clement & Murugavel, 2015; Arkoudis, Baik, Bexley, & Doughney, 2014; Thomas, Piquette, & McMaster, 2016; Durga, 2018). This is different from the language being an official language. For instance, a study conducted in Indonesia has concluded that speaking was considered the most important by both students and employers in the field of hospitality, while students and employers in the field of service and trading prioritised listening and reading skills (Rido, 2020). Another study conducted in Malaysia found that students and employers confirmed the role of English language in employability (Zainuddin, Pillai, Dumanig, & Phillip, 2019). Also, graduates participating in a study conducted in Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia, expressed their need for better spoken communication skills in English language (Kumar, 2020). The same study highlighted the lack of the participants' awareness of word choice with different people (Kumar, 2020).

The importance of employability is agreed upon by policy makers in higher education and by scholars (Peters, Nelissen, De Cuyper, Forrier, Verbruggen, & De Witte, 2019). Lowden, Hall, Eliot and Lewin (2011, p. 6) define employability as

develop within a particular job and have the ability to move on to a new sustainable employment if required. This involves possessing particular knowledge, skills and attitudes with an ability to deploy them and market them to employers.

In their definition of employability, Shafie and Nayan (2010, p. 119) highlight that employability are the skills are needed for "many different occupations".

1.3 Speaking Skills Being the Most Prominent

While all language skills are important and needed, the productive ones, speaking and writing, are very crucial as they are what gets evaluated and observed. In formal communication and most jobs writing skills are the most difficult to master for many people. However, speaking skills are somehow the façade of one's language competency. A survey of language requirements in industrial sectors in Kadeh, Malaysia, where the status of English is similar to it in the Kingdom of Bahrain, found that administrators emphasised the need for candidates to be able to express ideas verbally in English (90%), and to be able to make presentations using English (90%) (Irham, Shafinah, & Azhari, 2007). Interestingly, the same survey resulted in giving lower priority to writing report in English (60%), to speaking English fluently (60%), having a good command of English language grammar (30%) and to having persuasive skills in English language (30%) (Ishak, Salleh, & Hashim, 2007).

A number of employers in the Gulf States explained that the core communication skills they require are "inter-alia, making presentations, taking part in technical discourse, confidently explaining and justifying actions, processes and decisions to co-workers and line-managers and communicating effectively across a multi-cultural/ multi-national workforce" (Thomas, Piquette, & McMaster, 2016, p. 2), all of which mainly fall under speaking skills. Another study conducted in Malaysia found that there was "a slightly higher level of incompetence is found in such skills as critical analysis, problem solving, decision making, and oral communication – skills in which employers rated as of especial importance" (Wye & Lim, 2009, p. 89). Again, oral communication skills are highlighted as very important and as being not sufficiently mastered by university graduates.

Job interviews in particular are a source of anxiety and discomfort to many job seekers, even when conducted in the native language of the candidate. The avoidance of speaking in English at university can be due to anxiety. A study conducted by Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) concluded that EFL learners speaking anxiety can be caused by their concern about pronunciation, the fear of immediate questions, and the fear of making mistakes and of receiving negative evaluation. McCarthy and Goffin (2004) suggest that interviews increase anxiety due to the fact that applicants feel that they have no control over the situation. The relationship between employability and different English language skills have been a major interest of EFL, and higher education institutions, including the University of Bahrain, has been putting this among their priorities when designing, assessing and upgrading a programme they offer. This study seeks to explore the perception of Bahraini graduates from the University of Bahrain about the language skills they acquired in higher education and to what extent they served them in job interviews and at work. The findings should make a contribution to the whole theme of employability of the graduates of this university, something along which other studies of other perspectives and other skills should collaborate to provide data upon which to take action whether by programmes' designer or by individual instructors. This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the perception of Bahraini graduates from the University of Bahrain on the speaking skills they acquired in higher education?

- 2) To what extent it served them in job interviews and at work?
- 3) What could have hindered the development of English speaking skills during university EFL courses to suit the requirements for employment?
- 4) Is there a significant relationship between being employed since graduation and self-evaluation in speaking compared to other skills?

2. Method

This study employed a quantitative descriptive approach. It employed an online survey sent to Bahraini students who have graduated in the last five years from different colleges at the university of Bahrain and aimed at probing how their English language speaking skills served them both in job interviews and in their career, what difficulties they faced and how they would think university courses could have helped them better master this skill.

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study included 214 graduates, 159 females and 55 males, of the University of Bahrain. They graduated between the years of 2015-2020 (Table 1) and from nine different colleges (Table 2). Those who applied for jobs since graduation are 191 (89%) participants, 177 (82%) of them attended job interviews. Out of the total 126 (59%) are employed. 22% of the graduates had their job interviews in English, 58% of them had most of the interviews in English, whereas only 20% of them had their interviews in Arabic.

Table 1. Participants' Year of Graduation

Year of Graduation	Frequency	Percent
2015	18	8.4
2016	27	12.6
2017	22	10.3
2018	37	17.3
2019	48	22.4
2020	62	29.0
Total	214	100.0

Table 2. Colleges Participants Graduated from

College Graduated From	Frequency	Percent
Arts	76	35.5
Engineering	38	17.8
Business Administration	19	8.9
IT	32	15.0
Science	21	9.8
Law	6	2.8
BTC	10	4.7
Applied Science	1	.5
Sports and Health Science	11	5.1
Total	214	100.0

2.2 Data Collection Instruments

An online survey using Google Form was designed. The survey was developed by the research and then validated by an expert in the field. Some of the items were revised and improved accordingly. The survey was written in both Arabic and English to ensure graduates of all levels of language competency would feel comfortable with reading through. This way, the responses should be more representative of a wider spectrum of the Bahraini graduates. The survey was translated from Arabic into English by a translator and then from English to Arabic by another to ensure trustworthiness of translation.

In addition to a short introductory paragraph, the online survey consisted of four sections. The first section collected demographic information about the participants: age, sex, college they graduated from, year they graduated, employment, whether they had to job interviews, and the language of job interviews. The second section consisted of 12 items about the participants' overall view of his or her English-speaking skills their competence and the importance of English language speaking skills for employability. Eleven of these items were to be scaled on a 4-point Likert scale, which is also known as a forced Likert scale, as it does not have a neutral option and forces the participants to take a stance of the item being evaluated. The four points used were: *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*.

The third section consisted of 22 items for which the participants were requested to evaluate how they thought EFL courses equipped them with English-speaking skills for job interviews and workplace. The participants were asked to choose from a scale consisting of the following options: *equipped me extremely well*, *equipped me well*, *somewhat equipped me*, and *did not equip me well*, *did not equip me at all*. The last section was a need analysis. It consisted of two parts, the first of which provided a total of 13 items from which the participants chose if they believed to have impeded their English speaking skills (and a space was provided for any other input); the second part consisted of a list of 12 teaching strategies that could improve English speaking skills and participants were asked to rate them on a on a 4-point

Likert scale. A space for further addition to this list was provided. The survey added an optional space for any further comments or suggestions. Apart from this optional space, responding to all the other items was made mandatory in order for the survey to be submitted. Emails were collected for verification and to reduce chances of the same student filling the survey more than once.

2.3 Procedure

The online survey link was sent via email to former students whose contacts the researchers had, a hyperlink made available via WhatsApp with a short note indicating that it is a survey in Arabic for Bahrainis who graduated from the University of Bahrain between 2015 and 2020. Those former students were asked to snowball the survey for those they knew. Then a descriptive analysis of the data was made.

3. Findings

The participants in this study compared their level of English conversation to their reading and writing skills (Table 3); 45.3% of the participants believed that their reading and writing was same as speaking in English, 37.4% indicated that they were weaker in speaking English, and only 17.3% of them trust that their English speaking skills were better than my reading and writing skills.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Participants Level of English Reading and Writing Skills Compared to English Speaking

No.	Statements	Frequency	Percent
1.	My reading and writing skills are same as speaking in English	97	45.3
2.	I am weak in speaking English	80	37.4
3.	My English speaking skills are better than my reading and writing skills.	37	17.3
	Total	214	100.0

As for the importance of English speaking skills, participants indicated that EFL courses should focus directly on English conversation ($Mean = 3.62$, $SD = 0.63$). They also confirmed that English speaking skills were essential at work ($Mean = 3.59$, $SD = 0.64$), and that conversation skills generally affected their success in job interviews ($Mean = 3.47$, $SD = 0.74$). However, they stated that they needed more post-graduate training in English speaking skills ($Mean = 3.22$, $SD = 0.93$) because English speaking skills affected their career development ($Mean = 3.62$, $SD = 0.80$) and in particular affected their success in job interviews ($Mean = 3.17$, $SD = 0.80$). They believed that English conversation training was a skill to learn after graduation with practice ($Mean = 3.05$, $SD = 1.01$). Table 5 shows the participants responses to each option of Likert scale (SA = Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of the Importance of English Speaking Skills

No.	Statements	% *	Mean	SD
1	English courses should focus directly on English conversation education.	91%	3.62	0.63
2	English speaking skills are essential at work.	90%	3.59	0.64
3	Conversation skills generally affect my success in job interviews.	87%	3.47	0.74
4	I need more postgraduate training in English speaking skills.	81%	3.22	0.93
5	English speaking skills affect my career development and career.	81%	3.22	0.80
6	English speaking skills in particular affect my success in job interviews.	79%	3.17	0.80
7	English conversation training is a skill to learn after graduation with practice.	76%	3.05	1.01

* Percentages are calculated by dividing the mean by 4, multiplied by 100.

Table 5. Percentages of Responses of the Importance of English Speaking Skills

No.	Statements	Rank*			
		SA	A	D	SD
1	English courses should focus directly on English conversation education.	69%	26%	4%	1%
2	English speaking skills are essential at work.	66%	28%	5%	1%
3	Conversation skills generally affect my success in job interviews.	59%	32%	7%	3%
4	I need more postgraduate training in English speaking skills.	50%	31%	12%	7%
5	English speaking skills affect my career development and career.	42%	42%	13%	3%
6	English speaking skills in particular affect my success in job interviews.	38%	44%	14%	3%
7	English conversation training is a skill to learn after graduation with practice.	44%	26%	21%	9%

Question #1 What is the perception of Bahraini graduates from the University of Bahrain on the speaking skills they acquired in higher education?

From the point of view of the Bahraini graduates of the University of Bahrain who participated in the survey about the EFL courses, 53% thought they had enough English conversation practice during university courses as a whole ($Mean = 2.12$, $SD = 0.92$) and 46% stated that they had enough English speaking practice during the University's EFL courses in particular ($Mean = 1.85$, $SD = 0.85$). Furthermore, 70% of the participants felt good about their language when they spoke to others in English ($Mean = 2.78$, $SD = 0.88$) although many of them said they got nervous when they talked to others in English ($Mean = 2.42$, $SD = 1.03$). The participants were also asked if the university's courses prepared them in some skills that might help in their application for jobs and to work. On average, 67% said that university courses prepared them well in language capacity (terminology) ($Mean = 2.67$, $SD = 0.84$). In terms of pronunciation of words, 62% said that courses prepared them well ($Mean = 2.48$, $SD = 0.91$). As for the accent, 9% said courses prepared them well, 28% prepared to some extent, 37% limited preparation, while only 23% said courses did not prepare them at all. In tone and interaction, 15% said courses prepared them well, 25% prepared to some extent, 37% limited preparation, while only 23% said courses did not prepare them at all. Almost similar results with fluency and audacity and understanding the differences in the language used to communicate with different official levels. Table 7 shows the participants responses' to each option of Likert scale

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of University's Courses Preparation in English Speaking Skills

No.	Statements	%	Mean	SD
1	I had enough English conversation practice during university courses as a whole.	53%	2.12	0.92
2	I had enough English speaking practice during the University's English speaking courses.	46%	1.85	0.85
3	I feel good about my language when I speak to others in English.	70%	2.78	0.88
4	I get nervous when I talk to others in English.	61%	2.42	1.03
5	Language capacity (terminology).	67%	2.67	0.84
6	Pronunciation of words.	62%	2.48	0.91
7	Tone and interaction.	58%	2.32	0.99
8	Understand the differences in the language used to communicate with	57%	2.29	0.97

different official levels.

9	Fluency and audacity.	57%	2.28	1.03
10	Good and empowered accent.	55%	2.21	0.93

Table 7. Extent to Which the University Courses Preparation to Use the English Language at Work and Formal Interactions

No.	Statements	Prepared me well	To some extent	Limited preparation	Did not prepare me
1	I had enough English conversation practice during university courses as a whole.	6%	32%	31%	31%
2	I had enough English speaking practice during the University's English speaking courses.	3%	19%	36%	41%
3	I feel good about my language when I speak to others in English.	21%	43%	28%	8%
4	I get nervous when I talk to others in English.	17%	41%	35%	7%
5	Language inventory capacity (terminology).	17%	41%	35%	7%
6	Pronunciation of words.	13%	37%	34%	16%
7	Tone and interaction.	15%	25%	37%	23%
8	Understand the differences in the language used to communicate with different official levels.	12%	29%	34%	25%
9	Fluency and audacity.	15%	26%	31%	28%
10	I had enough English conversation practice during university courses as a	9%	28%	37%	26%

whole.

Question #2 To what extent it served them in job interviews and at work?

When it comes to the participants' perception about the extent to which the university courses prepared them to use the English language conversation at work and formal interactions, only 13% of the participants believed that they were well prepared to read orally and present in front of others, 33% said the preparation in this regard was limited, and 27% thought they were not prepared to read orally and present in front of others. Most of the participants indicated that university courses did not prepare them to discuss a topic without prior preparation (36%) and that they were not prepared to dissent an opinion in a formal way (43%) and not prepared to show dissatisfaction with an acting or an opinion in a formal and polite way (36%). In most of the items mentioned in the table below, participants indicated that university courses had limited preparation to use the English language conversation at work and formal interactions. Participants indicated somehow similar ratings for some of the items related to university courses preparation; *prepared them well* (25%), *to some extent* (27%), and *limited preparation* (32%) for project presentation and research without direct reading of written text, *prepared them well* (25%), *to some extent* (29%), and *limited preparation* (24%) for greetings and getting to know people in public, *prepared them well* (23%), *to some extent* (28%), and *limited preparation* (28%) for expressing satisfaction, gratitude and thanking others, *prepared them well* (25%), *to some extent* (29%), and *limited preparation* (30%) for showing my knowledge and skills of my specialty. *Prepared me well* was the least rated option for almost all of the items in Table 8.

Table 8. Extent to Which the University Courses Preparation to Use the English Language at Work and Formal Interactions

No.	Statements	Prepared me well	To some extent	Limited preparation	Did not prepare me
1	Oral reading and presenting in front of others	13%	27%	33%	27%
2	Project presentation and research without direct reading of written text.	25%	27%	32%	16%
3	Discussing a topic without prior preparation.	7%	27%	29%	36%
4	Dissenting an opinion in a formal way.	11%	16%	30%	43%

5	Greetings and getting to know people in public.	21%	29%	24%	26%
6	Showing dissatisfaction with an act or an opinion in a formal and polite way.	13%	18%	31%	37%
7	Expressing satisfaction, gratitude and thanking others.	23%	28%	28%	21%
8	Inquiring about tasks assigned to me to seek clarification and guidance.	18%	29%	29%	24%
9	Expressing regret and sympathy to co-workers in the event of difficult circumstances.	15%	20%	29%	36%
10	Showing my knowledge and skills of my specialty.	25%	29%	30%	16%
11	Showing my social skills.	14%	24%	32%	30%
12	Showing how excited I am to work in the place I belong to.	12%	25%	31%	32%
13	Showing my enthusiasm and desire for self-development.	16%	25%	29%	31%
14	Discussing my views and putting forward new ideas and suggestions.	15%	31%	31%	22%
15	Explaining how I work in my specialty for someone who needs clarification or guidance.	17%	32%	29%	22%
16	Politely requesting something, asking for help or explanation from others.	23%	34%	24%	20%

Question #3 What could have hindered the development of English speaking skills during EFL university courses to suit the requirements for employment?

When asked what they thought hindered them in EFL courses from improving their English speaking skills that are needed for employment, more than 50% of the participants indicated that the reason was

that EFL courses were based on indoctrination and that they rarely found a chance to talk during the sessions. The other most important hindrances from their perspective were that the courses depended on listening to the instructor and that they were not talking to the instructor (47%) and that English course topics were far from verbal communication needs at work (45%). Also, the fact that students felt embarrassed to speak English in front of classmates (37%) was one of the prominent hindrances. A positive result was that only a small number of the participants believed that instructors were not weak in conversation or their language is not good (11%) or that instructors gave negative comments from the instructor that made students stop participating (13%).

Table 9. Hindrances of the Development of English Speaking Skills in University EFL Courses in Participants' Viewpoint

No.	Statements	Frequency	Percent
1	Courses are based on indoctrination, and we rarely find a chance to talk during the sessions.	125	58%
2	The courses depend on listening to the instructor and we are not talking to the instructor	100	47%
3	English course topics are far from verbal communication needs at work	97	45%
4	The conversation didn't have grades that students didn't fill, although there was an opportunity to apply during lectures.	80	37%
5	Embarrassed to speak English in front of classmates	80	37%
6	Weak linguistic vocabulary (terminology)	69	32%
7	Embarrassed to speak English in front of the instructor	50	23%
8	There were wide differences in the performance of different instructors and the level of education and training was not close in the different groups of the same course	49	23%
9	English course topics are out of specialty	47	22%
10	Poor grammar level	39	18%
11	Negative comments from the instructor that made students stop participating	27	13%

12	The instructor was weak in conversation, and his language is not good.	24	11%
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The participants were then given a list of teaching methods used in EFL courses to improve the English speaking skills (such as group discussion, individual presentation) and were asked to pick the ones they thought to have been most effective. Interestingly, participants indicated that all those methods were important to improve their English conversation as each option was ticked by more than 70% of the participants with a Mean range of 3.36 to 2.88 (Table 10). The two items that received the highest level of agreement among the participants were individual oral presentations and discussion with the instructor during the sessions, while reading out loud in class and group studying after class were the methods that received the lowest approval.

Table 10. Participants' Opinion about How Certain EFL Teaching Methods Helped in Improving Their Speaking Skills

No.	Statements	%	Mean	SD
1	Group discussions in lectures with the instructor.	84%	3.36	0.93
2	Individual presentation of projects.	84%	3.35	0.84
3	Providing a number of terms related to the lesson with its meanings and the way it is pronounced to students before each new unit.	81%	3.25	0.96
4	Learning grammar in English.	81%	3.24	0.93
5	Making watching documentaries or listening to educational audio recordings part of the curriculum within the duties.	80%	3.21	1.01
6	Giving students points on the conversation in each English course.	80%	3.18	0.98
7	Instructors correcting the pronunciation of students and in particular some key terms.	79%	3.17	1.04
8	Making an oral presentation of the projects collectively.	79%	3.15	0.90
9	Group discussions with students at the time of lectures.	78%	3.13	1.02
10	Reading aloud in the lectures for parts of the lesson text.	77%	3.07	0.94
11	Reading aloud in groups in lectures for parts of the text of the lesson.	72%	2.89	1.00

12	Group study after lectures.	72%	2.88	1.04
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Table 11. Participants' Opinion about Which Teaching Methods Helped in Improving Their Speaking Skills

No.	Statements	SA	A	D	SD
1	Individual presentation of projects.	52%	36%	5%	6%
2	Making an oral presentation of the projects collectively.	41%	41%	10%	8%
3	Reading aloud in the lectures for parts of the lesson text.	38%	39%	14%	9%
4	Reading aloud in groups in lectures for parts of the text of the lesson.	32%	36%	19%	12%
5	Group discussions in lectures with the instructor.	59%	28%	5%	9%
6	Group discussions with students at the time of lectures.	47%	31%	9%	12%
7	Providing a number of terms related to the lesson with its meanings and the way it is pronounced to students before each new unit.	52%	29%	9%	9%
8	Learning grammar in English.	50%	30%	12%	7%
9	Making watching documentaries or listening to educational audio recordings part of the curriculum within the duties.	53%	26%	10%	11%
10	Instructor correcting the pronunciation of students and in particular some key terms.	51%	28%	8%	13%
11	Giving students points on the conversation in each English course.	50%	28%	14%	9%
12	Group study after lectures.	35%	31%	20%	14%

* SA: Strongly agree, A: Agree, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree.

The participants were then asked to choose between four possible general approaches for developing conversation training in EFL courses at university. The approach that was chosen the most (31%) suggested adding a compulsory English conversation course, followed by the option of changing the course contents with something new (29%), then came adding compulsory conversation content with the course (22%), and least chosen approach was adding optional English conversation course (16%). This confirms that the graduates realised the need for having conversation compulsory and graded in one way or another to push the students, especially the timid ones, to put efforts into practicing and participating.

Table 12. Participants' Opinion about EFL Course Structuring Amendments Required to Enhance Speaking Skills

No.	Statements	Frequency	Percent
1	Adding a compulsory English conversation course	66	31%
2	Changing the course contents with something new.	61	29%
3	Adding compulsory conversation content with the course	47	22%
4	Adding optional English conversation course	34	16%

Question # 4 Is there a significant relationship between being employed since graduation and self-evaluation in speaking compared to other skills?

The results show that there is no significant relationship between being employed since graduation and self-evaluation in speaking compared to other skills $\chi^2_{(2)} = 1.512$, $P > 0.05$. Since over 80% of the participants attended job interviews, it seems that job interviews have provided them with a good exposure to English Language Speaking requirements or expectations for work and thus their responses of the ones who got employed did not vary significantly than those who had not been employed yet.

Table 12. Cross Tabulation of the Level of English Conversation and Employment Since Graduation

			Have you been employed since graduation?		Total
			Yes	No	
Compared to your level of English reading and writing skills, how would you describe your level of English conversation?	My English speaking skills are better than my reading and writing skills.		22	15	37
	My reading and writing skills are same as speaking in English		61	36	97

	I am weak in speaking English	43	37	80
Total		126	88	214

Table 13. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.518 ^a	2	.468
Likelihood Ratio	1.516	2	.469
Linear-by-Linear Association	.707	1	.400
N of Valid Cases	214		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.21.

4. Discussion

Based on the findings of the survey the paper's three questions can be answered and, accordingly, recommendations for applicable strategies to improve teaching English language speaking can be presented.

1) *What is the perception of Bahraini graduates from the University of Bahrain on the speaking skills they acquired in higher education?*

In general, the perception of the graduates of the University of Bahrain has not deviated from the general perception of EFL students presented in other studies presented in the literature review as they felt they required more focus on speaking skills. This perhaps brings to attention that the pressure on EFL courses to deliver most when it comes to reading and writing skills leaving less space for speaking practices is a universal recurring issue in EFL courses in higher education. Having said that, however, the participants in this study were generally content with the EFL courses and no strong disapproval was sensed in their responses. This confirms that EFL courses in the University of Bahrain courses are generally beneficial, and this makes implementing improvements rather easy and straightforward.

2) *To what extent it served them in job interviews and at work?*

As Table 8 illustrated, expressing emotions (showing sympathy, enthusiasm, excitement, and disagreement) were relatively more difficult to the participants in comparison to the ones which are more regular (presentation, explaining a topic related to specialty, expression gratitude, requesting something,

putting forward a suggestion). This can be justified by the fact that academic settings provide more space for practicing the second group of speaking skills and less for the first. This gap can be filled by intentionally practising and teaching conversational skills for the missing or less recurring situations. This is important as one aspect that employers assess is the exhibition of one's enthusiasm and for signs of sociability.

3) *What could have hindered the development of English speaking skills during university years to suit the requirements for employment?*

Being job seekers or recently employed Bahraini graduates of the University of Bahrain, the participants have shared valuable experiences and perceptions, which are valuable for understanding the EFL speaking on employability in the Kingdom of Bahrain. When asked what they thought hindered the development of English speaking skills during university years, the three items that were most frequently chosen were the following:

- Courses are based on indoctrination, and we rarely find a chance to talk through it.
- The courses depend on listening to the instructor and we are not talking to the instructor.
- English course topics are far from verbal communication needs at work.

For the first two hindrances, there are various strategies that are already applied in some courses that the participants confirmed being most effective: individual oral presentations, discussion with the lecturer and group discussions. Instructors can make sure that these three are implemented in the EFL courses, whether as formative or accumulative assessments, as most appropriate for the course's nature and purpose. The third hindrance can be overcome by adjusting the courses to be English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and have grammar, writing and speaking taught in the students' speciality-relevant context. As the survey of the industrial sector in Malaysia has confirmed (Shafie & Nayan 2010), EOP courses are likely to increase undergraduates' employability skills.

At the same time, the items that were less frequently chosen were the following:

- Negative comments from the instructor that made students stop participating.
- The instructor was weak in conversation, and his language is not good.

This confirms an overall approval of the academic team qualifications and established rapport with students and that what is needed most is some practice strategies within class and introducing speciality-related situational conversation practices and instructor-student discussions in class.

The findings above lead us to reassess the methods and strategies used in teaching or practicing English speaking skills in university courses. Interestingly, while a large number of students refrain from speaking in class for various reasons, the graduates reinforced the importance in class student-lecturer conversations. However, while students also prefer and press for collective project oral presentations and prefer them to individual oral presentations, the graduates participating in the study gave more points to individual presentations compared to collective presentations when it comes to evaluating teaching methods impact on speaking (52 % for strongly agree and 36 for agree when it comes to individual presentation, and 41 % and 14 % for collective presentations). It is important, though, to highlight the fact

that the 12 methods proposed for teaching speaking (see Tables 10 and 11) have received high levels of approval, something which reflect participants' positive attitudes towards actively being involved in the learning and training process.

While the idea of having a course devoted to speaking skills seems very enticing (and which seemed to appeal to the participants in this study), this might need some time to implement in running university programs. It would, however, be worthwhile to bear in mind when designing new programmes or updating running programmes. Meanwhile, however, it would be useful to consider strategies to implement within the currently running courses in approved curricula and course structure. Different researchers have suggested various strategies that can be employed in class to actively involve students in speaking practices. There are practices that do not require too much preparation, nor do they require any special budgets or equipment, something that makes adapting them easy to implement with minimum changes or adjustments to courses' outline.

EFL studies constantly stress the importance of the combination of confidence and well-designed practices (Bailey, 2005; Patil, 2008; Zhang, 2009), in addition to which Boonkit (2010) adds the creativity of the topic as a way to encourage oral engagement in class. Lourdunathan and Menon (2017) stress the positive effect of including cooperative learning and peer support in encouraging discussion in class, and emphasise supporting students with relevant vocabulary, something which should encourage them to use more demanding interaction strategies.

Another strategy that has been proven to make a significant difference on students' performance is called Near Peer Role Models (NPRMs), by which fluent students are chosen to help and train their peers (Bandura, 1977; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Murphey and Arao (2001, p. 3) describe an NPRM as someone who is close to his or her tutee in "age, ethnicity, gender, interests, past or present experiences and also proximity and in frequency of social contact." This strategy appears to reduce anxiety and self-consciousness. What makes it even more worthwhile is the fact that it reduces the pressure off the instructor and activates fluent learners as additional source of instruction and support.

One other strategy that is particularly used for improving pronunciation is Hyper-Pronunciation Training Method, which is a one of the methods that has been recommended and tested by several researchers (Celce-Murcia & Goodwin, 1996; Nagamine, 2011; Lu, Wang, & De Silva, 2012). This method employs exaggeration of the pronunciation segment that is intended to be taught at the first stage (for example, the intonation or certain difficult vowels or consonants) and once the learner manages to master the exaggerated pronunciation, he or she is directed to reduce the exaggeration to match the natural native-like pronunciation.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has explored the perception of Bahraini graduates from the University of Bahrain about the language skills they acquired in higher education and to what extent it served them in job interviews and at work. It has employed an online survey that was sent to university graduates via email and using

Whatsapp messages. The results showed that the majority of participants thought that EFL courses should focus directly on English conversation because it affects their success in job interviews and because it is essential for their work later. According to the participants, the university EFL courses preparation to use English language conversation at work and formal conversations were limited to some extent, although they were partially good at enabling students to make oral presentations and to talk about a topic in the field of their speciality. What participants said to have hindered them most from improving their English speaking skills during their study at the university was that university courses are mostly based on indoctrination, that the courses depended on listening to the instructor and that topics were far from verbal communication needs at work.

The researchers recommend adding speaking tasks to formative and summative assessments all the general English courses, Literature, ESP courses, and project writing courses. The assessment can start as simple as assigning a number of passages related to the course themes to be practiced and then random passages be assigned in class to be read loud, group sing-along some popular songs, prepared role-plays (even if one theme per course) with the instructor providing a list of relevant expressions and vocabulary, discussing a topic orally in class (debating), etc. The percentage of total grade based on oral participation should be bigger in third- and fourth-year courses. Instructors do not have to always prepare new or separate materials for speaking or reading-out-loud practices, but can use the available course materials and topic, by lending some space to the students to share the materials and discuss it orally. However, this should not convert the sessions into unguided chit chat sessions where the discussions do not build any skills or competencies.

It is advised to make sure the topics taught in EFL courses at university are either related to the specialty of the students or to prospective careers, something which should increase engagement and thus enhance participation in general and in speaking and conversations in particular. It is also important not to scold or embarrass a student when participating no matter how grave the mistake is. Feedback and directions are necessary to grow and improve; however, they should reflect no mockery or disapproval or disappointment in order to secure continual participation.

Increasing employability is not only by preparing students for the market and existing jobs, however. As Kumar (2007) stresses, higher education should prospectively prepare students for jobs that are anticipated to appear in the future and prepare them with the technology and critical thinking required for prospective jobs. This means a graduate is expected to be more actively involved in conversations and discussions.

The researchers recommend exploring the topic from the perspective of employers in the Kingdom of Bahrain to reach standards and a list of well-defined requirements that can have university EFL courses' outcomes measured against.

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