Speaking Skills Problems Encountered by Iranian EFL Freshmen and Seniors from Their Own and Their English Instructors' Perspectives

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Abstract

The present study investigated the speaking skills problems faced by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors from their own and their English instructors' perspectives. To this end, 238 Iranian EFL students (138 freshmen and 100 seniors) and 30 English instructors from various universities participated in the study by completing a validated speaking skills problems questionnaire. To triangulate the data, 30 EFL students (15 freshmen and 15 seniors) and ten English instructors, selected randomly from among the participants of the study, also sat a semi-structured interview. The results of the study revealed that some socially-related and instructor-related problems, the lack of teaching facilities, and the curricula of the education system of the country were among the major problem-creating factors for the freshmen's and seniors' speaking skills. Furthermore, the t-test results showed that overall there was no significant difference between the freshmen's and the seniors' perceptions of their own speaking skills problems. The results of Chi-square analyses of the individual items of the questionnaire indicated that there was no significant difference between the freshmen's and the seniors' perceptions except for item 1 (I am afraid of making mistakes). In addition, the results of one-way ANOVA showed that overall there was no significant difference among the freshmen's, the seniors' and the instructors' perceptions of speaking skills problems.

1 Introduction

Speaking is one of the four macro language skills which are required to be developed in order for EFL/ESL students to communicate effectively in different contexts. Experts assume that the ability to communicate orally is equal to knowing the given language since speaking is the main means of human communication (Lazarton, 2001). However, as some experts in the field maintain, speaking has proved to be a demanding skill for EFL learners. For example, Brown (2001) believes that colloquial language, reduced forms, performance variables, redundancy clusters, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm and intonation are among the characteristics of speaking that contribute to the difficulty of this skill. Lazarton (2001) also believes that spoken English is difficult since it is almost always accomplished through interaction with at least one interlocutor. This necessitates the existence of such factors as monitoring and understanding the other speakers, thinking about one's own contribution, producing the contribution and monitoring its effect, etc. Moreover, in

order for language learners to manage oral communication, they need to produce connected speech, have interaction ability, speak in different contexts, develop a balance between accuracy and fluency, and talk about unfamiliar issues based on their knowledge (Lindsay & Knight, 2006).

Some experts in the field hold that EFL students' speaking skills might be affected by a multitude of factors. Al Hosni (2014) states that EFL students may face numerous problems in the way of developing their speaking skills regardless of their linguistic knowledge. These problems can be traced back to their minimal direct exposure to the target language (Shumin, 1997).

Aleksandrzak (2011) also believes that the source of speaking skills problems in the EFL context is the insufficient speaking varieties and opportunities in the EFL classrooms compared to a multitude varieties and genres in real-life situations. Hojati and Afghari (2013) maintain that speaking skills are under the influence of a number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors such as grammar, vocabulary, pragmatic variables, affective factors, and so forth, which, when combined, compound the problems of speaking skills. Therefore, EFL learners not only need to equip themselves with sufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, but also need to pay due attention to both fluency and accuracy in order to manage meaningful communication (Hinkel, 2006).

Shumin (1997) states that speaking is a demanding skill for EFL learners as they need to have not only grammar and lexical knowledge, but also knowledge of socially-appropriate language. He further adds that age, aural medium, sociocultural and affective factors can affect adult EFL learners' speaking skills. Thornbury (2005) also believes EFL speakers need to have sufficient knowledge of culture, genre, speech acts, register, discourse, grammar, vocabulary and phonology in order to manage oral communication in second language in different real-life situations. Moreover, Wang (2014) notes that cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors could affect the speaking competence of EFL speakers.

1.1 Review of the literature

Bearing the above-mentioned factors affecting speaking skills in mind, some studies have investigated the main factors impeding EFL students' speaking skills. The findings of the bulk of studies conducted on the topic (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005; Derwing & Rossiter, 2002; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2009; Liu, 2006) reveal that EFL students might encounter psychologically-related, linguistically-related, or sociopragmatically-related problems lying in the way of the development of their speaking skills. Regarding linguistic problems, Derwing and Rossiter (2002), for instance, found that EFL learners were not satisfied with their own pronunciation and that they reported communication breakdowns due to their mispronunciation and inaccuracy of suprasegmental features. Concerning language learners' pragmatic knowledge, Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin's (2005) study on 43 high-intermediate ESL students revealed that although students demonstrated some pragmatic knowledge, their speech acts were different from the pragmatic norms of the target language. With respect to psychologically-related speaking problems that EFL learners might encounter, Liu (2006) found that a significant number of Chinese students at all levels of language proficiency experienced anxiety while speaking in English, but the more proficient they were, the less anxiety they experienced.

Senel (2012) conducted a study on 32 Turkish EFL students to investigate their oral communication problems. The findings of the study revealed that the students believed such factors as instructors' interruption and error correction, lack of native instructors, instructors' methods and techniques of teaching, insufficient number of English courses and their inadequate content, and insufficient use of English outside the classroom hindered their progress in oral communication skills. A study on speaking skills problems of 566 Jordanian EFL students by Al-jamal and Al-jamal (2014) also corroborated Senel's (2012) findings to a great extent. The results of their study indicated that the principal problems Jordanian EFL students encountered in the way of developing their speaking skills were excessive use of L1, overcrowded classes and lack of sufficient time to practice speaking.

Hamad (2013) also examined English speaking skills problems of 150 female EFL students studying at the Saudi colleges for girls. The results of the study revealed that speaking skills prob-

lems from the participants' points of view included, among other factors, excessive use of L1, fear of speaking English, not using L1 when it is necessary to clarify some issues, lack of sufficient exercises for developing speaking ability, inefficient teaching techniques of instructors and insufficient time to speak in speaking classes. In the same vein, Soureshjani and Riahipour (2012) conducted an inquiry into 215 Iranian EFL students' and EFL instructors' attitudes regarding speaking skills problems. The findings of the study revealed that students believed that the lack of teaching equipment, class facilities and instructors were among problem-causing factors for the development of their speaking skills while instructors believed that the instructors, the amount of time allocated for speaking classes and the classroom atmosphere were among problematic factors for speaking skills.

As the literature illustrates, a multitude of factors in EFL contexts can thwart EFL students' progress in developing their speaking skills. Therefore, the first step in solving the problems is to identify the problems preventing EFL students from developing their speaking skills.

1.2   Background of the study

In Iran's education system, students begin studying English in middle school, and Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is primarily employed to teach English, which indicates that speaking and listening skills are of secondary importance in the education system of the country. Moreover, in the BA programs in Iran, which normally last for four years in total, Iranian EFL students are supposed to take around 119 English credits, out of which only eight credits pertain to listening and speaking skills courses which have to be taken during the first year of their academic studies.

The rationale for selecting EFL freshmen and seniors for the present study was to investigate whether EFL seniors' perceptions of their speaking skills problems would change after years of study at university level. Moreover, EFL instructors are expected to be cognizant of speaking skills problems faced by EFL students so that they can seek a solution to the problems impeding students' progress in developing their speaking skills. As Shumin (1997) points out, EFL instructors need to examine the factors, conditions and components affecting speaking skills in order to maximize the effectiveness of their instruction. Thus, it is of paramount importance to investigate whether EFL instructors are aware of the speaking skills problems encountered by their Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors.

1.3   Statement of the problem

Speaking is one of the primary elements of communication. In EFL contexts, it requires special attention and instruction. Like other non-natives, Iranian English students might encounter certain problems in developing their speaking skills, which can prevent them from communicating orally when they are required to do so.

1.4   Significance of the study and research questions

To the present researchers' knowledge, several investigations (e.g. Al-jamal & Al-jamal, 2014; Hamad, 2013; Şenel, 2012) have been carried out on speaking skills problems, but few studies have been conducted in the EFL context of Iran. To this end, this study deems it necessary to have an investigation into Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' speaking skills problems impeding their progress. Moreover, little research seems to have been conducted in either the Iranian or non-Iranian context to compare or contrast the speaking skills problems from the freshmen's, the seniors' and their English instructors' perspectives (Hojati & Afghari, 2013). Thus, drawing upon what was mentioned above and to fill the research gap noted, the following research questions were formulated for the present study:

1.   What are the most frequently reported speaking skills problems faced by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors from their own perspective?

2. What are the most frequently reported speaking skills problems faced by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors from their EFL instructors' points of view?
3. Overall, is there any statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' perceptions of their own speaking skills problems?
4. Are there any statistically significant differences between Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' perceptions regarding specific speaking skills problems as measured by individual items of the questionnaire?
5. Overall, are there any significant differences among Iranian EFL freshmen's, seniors' and instructors' perceptions of speaking skills problems?

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

A total of 238 Iranian EFL undergraduate students (138 freshmen and 100 seniors) and 30 English instructors from four state universities (Zanjan University, Bu-Ali Sina University-Hamadan, Shahid Chamran University-Ahvaz, and Khoramabad University) participated in the study. The universities were selected randomly from among the state universities across the country. Moreover, the participants were selected based on cluster random sampling. That is, all the EFL students in the first and last years of their tertiary education (freshmen and seniors) as well as their EFL instructors were selected from the above-mentioned universities. The students' and instructors' age ranged from 19 to 30 and from 26 to 55, respectively. 140 of the students were female and 98 were male; 21 of the instructors were male and 9 were female.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Structured questionnaire

The instrument employed for the data collection was a 35-item speaking skills problems questionnaire (both instructors' and students' versions), adapted from a speaking skills problems questionnaire from Irismet (2006), all the statements of which were negatively oriented on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, the following steps were taken:

1. Before the study began, 20 similar EFL freshmen and seniors and ten similar EFL instructors sat a semi-structured interview. The questions of the semi-structured interview were utilized after they were approved by two experts in the field. The reason behind this was to make sure that all the problems which Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors and their English instructors might face in speaking classes were included in the questionnaire, the main items of which were to be drawn from the interviews.
2. The questionnaire hence constructed was piloted with 73 similar Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors. To further ensure the validity of the questionnaire, exploratory factor analysis was run. Since the results of the factor analyses indicated that some of the items correlated poorly with others, nine of the items with low anti-image correlation were omitted from the 41-item speaking skills problems questionnaire and three new items (i.e. My instructors do not teach us how to express appropriate speech acts; My instructors do not tell us what to do when we cannot find the correct and appropriate word, structure and sentence during our speaking; and there is no cooperation spirit among my classmates in my speaking classes) were added. Thus, the questionnaire was finally based on 35 items. Then, it was validated and factor analyzed for the second time with 154 EFL freshmen and seniors from the same population, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were calculated, the results of which are summarized in Table 1. As indicated in Table 1, the results show an acceptable KMO index

(0.71). Principal component factor analysis was also conducted, the results of which are presented in Appendix A.

Table 1. The results of the KMO and Bartlett's test for speaking skills problems questionnaire

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.71
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Approx. Chi-Square	1.38
df	5 95
Sig	.000

3. The reliability of the questionnaire (Appendix B) was also calculated using Cronbach's Alpha, which shows that the questionnaire possessed an acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.72$).

2.2.2 Semi-structured interview

To maximize the validity of the data, to make the findings more generalizable and to have a more in-depth analysis of the participants' speaking skills problems, the data collection procedure was triangulated. That is, 30 EFL students (15 freshmen and 15 seniors) and ten EFL instructors, selected from among the participants of the study based on stratified random sampling, also sat a semi-structured interview in addition to filling out the questionnaire. Attempts were made to select participants from all the above-mentioned universities. Moreover, the open-ended and opinion-based questions of the semi-structured interview were utilized, after they had been approved by two experts in the field.

2.3 Procedure

As already mentioned, first, 238 Iranian EFL students (138 freshmen and 100 seniors) and 30 EFL instructors from different universities across the country were selected based on cluster random sampling. Second, the questionnaire (both instructor's and student's versions) was administered to the EFL students, who were told there would be no right/wrong answers, and also received an assurance that their answers would have no effect on their academic scores, as well as to the EFL instructors in the classroom. Although the required instruction was given on the front page of the questionnaires, the participants were provided with further explanation on how to complete them. They were also informed that there would be no time limit for completing the questionnaires; however, it took, on average, 15 minutes to complete the questionnaires. Finally, 30 EFL students (15 freshmen and 15 seniors) and ten EFL instructors (from whom informed consent had already been obtained), selected based on stratified random sampling from among the participants of the study, sat a semi-structured interview around a week after the questionnaire administration.

2.4 Data analysis

2.4.1 Quantitative analysis

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) was applied to address the first two research questions. That is, speaking skills problems with higher means were considered to be principal speaking problems from Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' and EFL instructors' points of view. To answer the third and fourth research questions, independent samples t-test and Chi-squire

analysis were employed, respectively. To address the last research question, a one-way ANOVA was employed.

2.4.2 Qualitative analysis

The participants' responses to the interview questions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Then, the common patterns and recurring themes of the responses were identified, coded, "quantitized" (Dörnyei, 2007) using NVivo software, and were subjected to frequency analysis. Finally, both the qualitative and quantitative results of the study were analyzed and discussed.

3   Results

3.1   Questionnaire results

The results of the first research question, which set out to investigate Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' most frequently reported speaking skills problems from their own perspectives, are summarized in Tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 2. Iranian EFL freshmen's most frequently reported speaking skills problems from their own perspective

Rank	No. of item	Mean	SD	No. of respondents
1	28	3.62	1.09	138
2	29	3.31	1.08	138
3	11	3.30	1.10	138
4	25	3.29	1.21	138
5	1	3.26	1.11	138
6	23	3.23	1.18	138
7	6	3.20	1.18	138
8	7	3.18	1.26	138

Table 3. Iranian EFL seniors' most frequently reported speaking skills problems from their own perspective

Rank	No. of item	Mean	SD	No. of respondents
1	22	3.76	1.72	100
2	28	3.66	1.01	100
3	29	3.63	0.97	100
4	25	3.58	1.21	100
5	7	3.33	1.16	100
6	27	3.32	0.97	100
7	11	3.27	1.16	100
8	6	3.10	1.24	100

As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, the following speaking skills problems were commonly shared by both freshmen and seniors:
1. Insufficient speaking and listening courses in the BA program;
2. Inefficient educational system of the country;
3. Lack of two or more speaking instructors teaching speaking;
4. Inefficient and insufficient facilities in language laboratories;
5. Difficulty in finding the opportunity to practice one's English outside the classroom; and
6. Inefficient speaking classes

The above-mentioned findings demonstrate more or less all the problems which are commonly shared by the freshmen and seniors pertaining to the education system of the country and inefficient facilities.

The results of the second research question, which explored Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' most frequently reported speaking skills problems from EFL instructors' perspective, are reproduced in Table 4.

Table 4. Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' most frequently reported speaking skills problems from English instructors' perspective

Rank	No. of item	Mean	SD	No. of respondents
1	29	4.38	1.12	30
2	33	4.30	0.94	30
2	26	4.30	0.85	30
3	32	4.16	0.71	30
4	1	4.07	0.86	30
5	35	3.92	0.75	30
6	3	3.84	0.80	30
6	4	3.84	0.89	30

As can be seen from Table 4, Iranian EFL instructors' view of the most important speaking skills problems of their EFL students included:

1. Inefficient educational system of the country;
2. Students' thinking in their mother tongue during speaking English;
3. Over-crowded classes;
4. Students' lack of collocational knowledge;
5. Students' being afraid of making mistakes;
6. Students' mispronunciation;
7. Shyness; and
8. Low self-confidence

Given the aforementioned speaking skills problems by the instructors, one of the problems (i.e. inefficient educational system of the country) was shared with those mentioned by freshmen and seniors. That is, both instructors and students unanimously agree that the education of the country is not efficient enough to contribute to Iranian EFL students' progress in developing their speaking skills.

To answer the third research question as to whether, overall, there was any statistically significant difference between the freshmen's and the seniors' perceptions of speaking skills problems, an independent samples t-test was run, the results of which are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. T-test comparing EFL freshmen's and seniors' views of speaking skills problems

Student	Mean	SD	N	t	dfSd	Error difference	Sig (2-tailed)
Freshmen	2.96	0.24	138	.362	236	.064	.71
Seniors	2.94	0.29	100				

As the results in Table 5 indicate, overall, there was no statistically significant difference between the freemen's and the seniors' perspectives regarding their speaking skills problems (df= 236, t= 362, sig= .718>0.05).

In order to answer the fourth research question (i.e. to compare specific speaking skills problems of the freshmen and seniors), a Chi-square analysis was run on each individual item of the questionnaire, only those results of which that were significant are presented in Table 6 for the sake of brevity.

Table 6. Chi-square analysis comparing EFL freshmen's and seniors' perceptions of their own speaking skills problems

No. of item	Percentage		Pearson Chi-square value	Df	Sig
	Freshmen	Seniors			
1	5% SD	19% SD	15.22	4	.004

Note. SD: strongly disagree

As Table 6 displays, there was no statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' perception of their specific speaking skills problems regarding only item 1 (I am afraid of making mistakes) ($X^2(4, N=238) = 15.221$, p =.004).

In order to answer the fifth research question as to whether there were any significant differences regarding the perception of the freshmen, the seniors and the instructors on the freshmen's and seniors' speaking skills problems, a one-way ANOVA was run, the results of which are summarized in Tables 7 and 8.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for the EFL freshmen's, seniors', and instructors' perspectives on speaking skills problems

Subjects	Mean	SD	N	Std.Error
Freshmen	2.96	0.24	130	0.041
Seniors	2.94	0.29	100	0.049
Instructors	3.07	0.93	30	0.158

Table 8. One-way ANOVA comparing the EFL freshmen's, seniors' and instructors' perspectives on speaking skills problems

	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.349	256	.174	.508	.603
Within Groups	34.98	2	.343		

As indicated in Table 8, overall, there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in terms of their perception of EFL freshmen's and seniors' speaking skills problems ($F(2, 256) = .508$, p = .603).

3.2   Interview results

As already stated, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 15 EFL freshmen, 15 EFL seniors, and ten EFL instructors, selected based on stratified random sampling from among the participants of the study, the results of which are presented in Tables 9, 10 and 11, respectively. In the aforementioned Tables, "F" and "P" stand for the frequency and percentage of the recurring themes of the responses, respectively.

Table 9. EFL freshmen's responses to the semi-structured interview questions

No. of the question	Response	F	P
1	Low self confidence	3	20
	Getting anxious when called on to speak	2	13
	Being afraid of making mistakes	8	53
2	Having no chance to speak outside the classroom	9	60
3	Lack of cooperation among students	3	20
	Being distracted by one's classmates	6	40
	The classmates' unwillingness to speak	2	13
4	Unfriendly atmosphere of the classroom	3	20
5	Lack of due focus on speaking skills in educational system of Iran	12	80
6	Lack of facilities in language laboratories	9	60
	Instructors' negligence to use facilities	8	53
7	Being confused by different accents of instructors	2	13
	Instructors' negligence to care about students' face	1	7
	Instructors' negligence to teach language functions	1	7
	Getting threatened by instructors to speak	1	7
	Being ignored in the classroom	1	7
8	The speaking course book being inappropriate in terms of its proficiency level	9	60
9	passive vocabulary knowledge	2	13
	Not having sufficient vocabulary knowledge	8	53
	Not having sufficient grammar knowledge	5	33
	poor pronunciation	5	33
10	Inappropriate time of speaking classes; classes held early in the morning (8 am) or early in the afternoon (2 pm)	12	80
11	Insufficient courses in speaking and listening in BA program	14	93

In sum, as is evident from Table 9, the Iranian EFL freshmen's speaking skills problems are reportedly attributable to their insufficient courses in speaking and listening in the BA program (i.e. item No. 11), inappropriate time of speaking classes (No. 10), lack of due focus on speaking skills in educational system of Iran (No. 5), having no chance to speak outside the classroom (No. 2), lack of facilities in language laboratories (No. 6), inappropriate speaking courses in terms of their proficiency level (No. 8), being afraid of making mistakes (No.1), instructors' negligence to use facilities (No. 6), instructors' inappropriate method of teaching (No.7), and lack of vocabulary knowledge (No. 9).

Although some of the speaking skills problems reported by the freshmen are associated with the instructors' teaching methodology, being afraid of making mistakes and lack of vocabulary knowledge, the findings indicate that education system and facility related problems are among the principal speaking skills problems, which corroborates what the freshmen reported in the questionnaire to a great extent.

As indicated in Table 10, Iranian EFL seniors mostly blamed such factors as lack of extensive speaking practice opportunities (item No. 2), lack of due attention to speaking skills in the educational system of the country (No. 5), lack of spoken vocabulary knowledge (No. 9), insufficient speaking courses in the BA program (No. 11), inappropriate time of speaking classes (No. 10), lack of efficient and sufficient facilities in language laboratories (No. 6) and lack of sufficient grammar knowledge (No. 9).

The findings illustrate that EFL seniors also consider education system and facility related problems as the main stumbling block to their speaking skills, substantiating what they reported in the questionnaire to a great extent.

Table 10. EFL seniors' responses to the semi-structured interview questions

No. of the question	Response	F	P
1	Shyness, low self-confidence and anxiety	5	33
2	Not having enough opportunity to speak English out of class	14	93
3	Students' negligence to take English classes seriously	5	33
4	Unfriendly behavior of the classmates	2	13
5	Lack of due focus on speaking skills in educational system of Iran	14	93
6	Lack of efficient and sufficient facilities in language laboratories	9	60
7	Instructors' having poor pronunciation	5	33
	The class being teacher-centered	2	13
	Instructors not encouraging us to speak	5	33
	Instructors not having good command of speaking skills	2	13
	Instructors not giving us enough opportunity to speak	2	13
	Instructors not correcting us	3	20
	Instructors putting less emphasis on speaking	2	13
	Instructors' inappropriate methods of teaching speaking	2	13
	Instructors not paying enough attention to me	2	13
	Instructors pushing us to speak which makes me anxious	2	13
8	No problem reported	0	0
9	Not having sufficient vocabulary esp. spoken vocabulary knowledge	11	73
	Poor pronunciation	5	33
	Not having enough grammar knowledge	8	53
	Not having collocation knowledge	2	13
	Lack of sufficient listening	3	20
10	Inappropriate time of speaking classes; classes being held early in the morning (8 am) or early in the afternoon (2 pm)	9	0
11	Insufficient courses in speaking and listening in BA program	11	73

As indicated in Table 11, EFL instructors believed the freshmen's and seniors' speaking skills were negatively affected by being afraid of making mistakes, shyness and low self-confidence, not finding the chance to speak outside the classroom, lack of due focus on speaking skills in the educational system of Iran, students thinking in Persian when speaking in English, lack of cooperation spirit (i.e. pair/group work) among students, lack of efficient facilities in language laboratories, students' lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, students' poor pronunciation and insufficient speaking and listening courses in the BA program.

The above-mentioned findings show that although instructors revealed that the inefficient education system of the country and the lack of facilities are among speaking skills problems, matching what the EFL students stated. They believed that psychologically- and linguistically-related problems are among the main speaking skills problems as well, corroborating the findings of the questionnaire.

Table 11. EFL instructors' responses to the semi-structured interview questions

No. of the question	Response	F	P
1	Being afraid of making mistakes, shyness and low self confidence	8	80
2	Students not finding the chance to speak outside the classroom	8	80
3	Lack of cooperation spirit among students	6	60
4	Competitive situation leading to unfriendly atmosphere	1	10
5	Lack of due focus on speaking skills in educational system of Iran	8	80
6	Lack of efficient facilities in language laboratories	6	60
7	Instructors' pronunciation not being good enough	1	10
8	No problem reported	0	0
9	Students not having sufficient vocabulary and collocational knowledge	6	60
	Students thinking in Persian when speaking in English	8	80
	Students not having sufficient grammar knowledge	6	60
	Students' poor pronunciation	7	70
10	Inappropriate time of speaking classes	4	40
11	Insufficient courses in speaking and listening in BA program	7	70

4 Discussion

The results of the questionnaire, corroborated by the interview findings, indicated that Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors basically shared the same speaking skills problems. This means that Iranian EFL students' speaking skills problems probably continue to exist even after several years of studying at university level.

The first speaking skills problem commonly shared by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors was the difficulty in finding the opportunity to practice English outside the classroom. Senel's (2012) study on 32 Turkish EFL students also indicated that one of their oral communication problems was the lack of L2 use outside the classroom, a problem rampant in most EFL contexts. However, in the context of Iran, it seems the problem is even more serious, as Iranian EFL students cannot find opportunities to have direct contact with native speakers of English owing to the current political issues, which has led to the decrease of native English tourists in Iran. In the interview, an individual participant also mentioned: "I cannot find a partner with whom I can practice my speaking skills outside class." Thus, encouraging students to hold debate and discussion sessions outside the classroom could be facilitative in the EFL contexts where students have less opportunity to practice their speaking.

The second speaking skills problem commonly shared by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors was inefficient speaking classes. The participants in the interview stated this is due to the techniques and unauthentic materials and/or tasks their instructors employ in speaking classes, which seems to stem from the instructors' lack of practical and theoretical knowledge in teaching speaking skills. Corroborating this, Kayi (2006) believes that although speaking skills play an important role in human beings' communication, EFL instructors typically fail to focus appropriately on this skill; rather, they primarily focus their attention on drills, repetition, and the memorization of English conversations. He further suggests that EFL instructors employ techniques such as discussions, role plays, simulation, information gap, brain storming, storytelling, interviews, story completion, reporting, playing cards, picture narrating, picture description, and so forth, to help EFL students develop a good command of spoken English.

The third speaking problem commonly shared by the majority of Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors was the lack of team-teaching in teaching speaking. The EFL freshmen and seniors believed that it would be more fruitful if there were more than one instructor teaching English speaking so that they could be provided with different speech models, which could give them a more comprehensive picture of English pronunciation, accent, lexical resources, grammatical repertoire, discourse management, and so forth.

The fourth speaking skills problem commonly shared by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors was the lack of efficient and sufficient facilities in language laboratories. In the interview, the participants mentioned that the audio-visual facilities are insufficient, outdated and inefficient. A large body of research indicates that there is a positive relationship between students' achievement and the quality of university facilities. The results of Uline and Tschannen-Moran (2008), for instance, showed there was a link between the quality of university facilities and students' achievement. Of course, it should be noted that facilities do not merely include laboratories and that there might be no unanimous agreement today on the effectiveness of language laboratories, in particular, as contributing much to enhancing aural-oral skills. However, language laboratories should provide the opportunity for EFL students to improve their speaking skills. That is, an ideal language laboratory should have sufficient and efficient audio-visual equipment such as video projectors and computers, as well as language software such as pronunciation checkers, and also provide EFL students with Internet access so that they can have access to authentic materials and be exposed to real-life situations.

The fifth speaking skills problem reported by both Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors was insufficient speaking courses in the BA program. In the BA program of the English language in Iran, EFL majors are only supposed to take listening and speaking courses 1 and 2 (eight credits in total) which students did not find sufficient to develop their speaking skills. This implies that the curriculum designers and educational policy makers of the English language in the country should exert more emphasis on speaking courses in the curricula and syllabi.

The sixth speaking skills problem commonly reported by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors was the inefficient educational system of the country. In Iran's schools, where teachers gives minimum emphasis on speaking skills (Azizifar, 2009; Azizifar, Koosha & Lotfi, 2010), GTM is the common method of language teaching. Consequently, when students start their tertiary education as English students, they encounter serious problems in their speaking classes. Therefore, English education policy makers need to strike a balance among all four macro language skills. However, as Farhadi, Hezaveh and Hedayati (2010) maintain, changing an educational system is not an easy task and requires enough evidence of the new theoretical framework, teacher training, materials development, facilities, assessment procedure, administration, and so on.

Although some of the speaking skills problems were commonly shared by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors, there were some speaking problems that were exclusive to either the freshmen or the seniors, which are presented and discussed below.

Although being afraid of making mistakes was considered by freshmen as the principal problem in the way of their speaking skills, psychological factors were not regarded by the majority of Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors as prime causes preventing them from progressing in developing their speaking skills. The findings of this study partly stand in contrast to those of Jamshidnejad (2010), who indicated that Iranian EFL students' major speaking problems were attributed to the psychological factors, and also contradict the findings of Soo and Goh (2013), who also revealed that Malaysian EFL students' reticence was due to affective factors. However, the findings of the present study are in line with those of Liu (2005) as well as Grengersen and Horwitz (2009), indicating that being afraid of making mistakes was among psychological factors affecting negatively students' participation in speaking classes. The reason for the freshmen being afraid of making mistakes can be justified by the premise that they might not be thoroughly familiar with the new academic context they have recently entered. Scrivener (2011) holds that students sometimes cannot employ their full knowledge repertoire in speaking, since they might be afraid of being laughed at or sounding ridiculous. Therefore, in order to avoid embarrassment, they might not be willing to speak. EFL instructors should thus create a friendly and safe atmosphere for students to take part in class discussions. The EFL freshmen believed their instructors made use of uninteresting topics for discussion in speaking classes. Therefore, their EFL instructors need to know about the area of their students' interests in order to provide them with topics which can motivate them to participate in class discussions. As Nunan (1999) maintains, interesting topics are prerequisite for effective motivation. Moreover, sometimes, speaking activities or topics for discussion are not as interesting and communicative as EFL instructors may think. That is, the topics and speaking

activities are not challenging and lead students to only say "Yes" or "No" or give short answers, which they do readily and then remain silent and feel bored.

The EFL seniors believed their instructors neglected to teach the use of oral communication strategies (CSs). This might imply that their EFL instructors are not thoroughly aware of the significant effect of oral CS instruction on speaking skills. Zhang and Goh (2009) believe that EFL instructors need to increase EFL students' oral communication strategy repertoire and enhance their confidence to make efficient use of these strategies. Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991) also maintain that oral communication strategies can contribute to the EFL learners' fluency and conversational skill. However, language instructors usually neglect to consider the important role of CSs in EFL students' speaking skills. Furthermore, the EFL seniors were not satisfied with the time of their speaking classes held either early in the morning (8 a.m.) or immediately after lunch (2 p.m.), because they stated that they felt sleepy and lethargic and were not thus willing to communicate.

Although the majority of the speaking skills problems faced by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors are rampant in every EFL context, it seems some problems in the way of Iranian EFL students' speaking development are primarily endemic to the Iranian context, namely the inefficient education system of the country, inappropriate methods employed for teaching speaking skills and an inadequate focus on speaking skills. This suggests that the root of the problem cannot be eradicated unless a revolution occurs in the current education system of the country, in general, and in its curriculum, in particular. That is, more emphasis on speaking skills from the primary school onwards and a shift of attention from GTM to communicative language teaching (CLT) can enhance the situation to a great extent.

The second research question of the present study aimed at investigating the speaking skills problems faced by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors from their EFL instructors' perspective. The results of the semi-structured interview with ten EFL instructors also corroborated, to a great extent, what they reported in the questionnaire.

Although one of the speaking skills problems reported by the majority of the EFL instructors was in line with what the majority of the EFL freshmen and seniors reported, the bulk of the EFL instructors believed that psychological and linguistic factors were also among the most trouble-making factors which prevented students from making progress in speaking, while the majority of the EFL students did not believe so, except for "being afraid of making mistakes," which the EFL freshmen reported as their most-impeding psychological problem in speaking classes.

It seems that the EFL freshmen and seniors either were not aware of their poor pronunciation or were not willing to report it in the questionnaire, while the EFL instructors believed their EFL students did not possess a good command of English pronunciation. The instructors might thus need to raise their EFL students' awareness of their pronunciation problems. Moreover, the EFL instructors believed that their EFL students thought in Persian when they spoke in English, a problem which becomes readily evident if one teaches English as a foreign language in Iran, even for just a short period, due to mother tongue interference.

The third research question was concerned with whether, overall, there was any statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' perceptions of speaking skills problems. As the results indicated, there was no significant difference between the perceptions of the two groups about speaking skills problems. To the present researchers' knowledge, few studies have investigated the differences between EFL freshmen and seniors regarding their perceptions of speaking skills problems. Therefore, this study might pave the way for further research in this regard. The results might imply that, overall, both Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors encountered approximately the same kind of speaking problems. This might suggest that, even after years of study at university, Iranian EFL seniors still continue to face the same speaking skills problems as their EFL freshmen counterparts do, something that requires more investigation, consideration and attention if we are to avoid wasting human and financial resources, time, efforts, and so on.

The fourth research question sought to investigate whether there were any statistically significant differences between Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' perceptions regarding specific speaking skills problems as measured by individual items of the questionnaire. As the results revealed, there were no significant differences between Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors in this

respect except for item 1 (i.e. I am afraid of making mistakes). As already mentioned, no empirical study could be found to have comparatively investigated speaking problems of the EFL freshmen and seniors in Iranian context. The results of the study showed that Iranian EFL freshmen were more concerned with making mistakes than their senior counterparts. This might be justified by the premise that because freshmen are not fully acquainted with the new academic context they have recently entered, they might be afraid of losing face or being evaluated negatively, especially by their opposite-sex classmates, most plausibly due to the co-education system they encounter for the first time when they enter university.

The fifth research question aimed at investigating whether there were any significant differences among Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' perceptions of speaking problems and those of their English instructors. The results revealed that there was no significant difference among these three groups in this regard. To the researchers' knowledge, little research was found to have investigated speaking skills problems from the above-mentioned groups' perspectives. However, a few studies have been conducted investigating speaking skills problems from EFL students and EFL instructors' viewpoint. For example, Soureshjani and Riahipour (2012), investigating demotivating factors affecting Iranian EFL students' speaking skills from their own and their EFL instructors' points of view, revealed that there was a significant difference between the two groups on the issue. The results of Hojati and Afghari's (2013) study on Iranian EFL students' linguistic speaking skills problems from their own and their EFL instructors' perspectives also indicated that grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency were among factors causing problems for Iranian EFL students' speaking skills. Students' points of view differed significantly from those of their EFL instructors in terms of speaking skills problems, except for such problems as students' lack of grammar knowledge about which both instructors and students had the same view.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary and implications of the study

The findings of the study revealed that many of the speaking skills problems were commonly shared by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors. Moreover, the results showed that although one of the speaking skills problems (i.e. inefficient educational system of the country) reported frequently by instructors was in line with what the majority of the EFL freshmen and seniors reported, the majority of the EFL instructors believed some psychological and linguistic factors were also among the trouble-making factors which prevented students from making progress in speaking. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that there were no significant differences between Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' perceptions of their speaking skills problems. In addition, the results indicated that there were no significant differences between Iranian EFL freshmen's and seniors' perceptions regarding specific speaking skills problems except for item 1 (I am afraid of making mistakes). Finally, the findings of the study revealed that, overall, there were no significant differences among Iranian EFL freshmen's, seniors' and EFL instructors' perceptions of speaking skills problems.

Some practical implications for language teaching could be suggested based on the findings of the study. Firstly, the findings of the present study could encourage English education policy makers, curriculum developers, syllabus designers and materials developers to consider more efficient and sufficient speaking courses in the BA program in order to meet the speaking skills needs of students majoring in the English language. They are additionally recommended to strike a balance among all four macro language skills in junior and senior secondary school English education and to pay due attention to aural-oral skills, something that for the time being seems to be neglected. Secondly, the findings of the study might suggest that program administrators consider sufficient and appropriate time for speaking classes. That is, they are suggested to hold the speaking classes at appropriate time, when students have sufficient energy and are more willing to take part in class discussions, which seems to be easy to implement. However, it seems that the students' needs are not taken into account. Thirdly, EFL instructors need to encourage EFL students to create the op-

portunity for themselves to practice their speaking outside the classroom extensively. Fourthly, the findings might suggest that EFL instructors raise EFL students' awareness of their lack of linguistic knowledge and warn them not to overestimate their linguistic knowledge in speaking. Fifthly, the findings might also imply that administrators equip language laboratories sufficiently and efficiently in order to accelerate EFL students' speaking skills progress. Finally, the results also suggest that EFL instructors mitigate freshmen's phobia about making mistakes and encourage them to consider the phenomenon as a natural process of language learning.

5.2   Suggestions for further research

Although the present study has attempted to investigate the freshmen and seniors' speaking skills problems thoroughly, it seems further research is required to have a better picture of the issue. Therefore, the following suggestions are proposed:

1.   Investigation can be conducted into how Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors cope with their own speaking skills problems.
2.   Other data collection methods, namely, observation and diary writing, can also be employed in order to investigate the speaking skills problems comprehensively.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Factor loadings for rotated factors

No. of Items	Factor loadings								Communality
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
10	.680								.56
24	.640								.69
12	.617								.65
18	.524								.53
14	.502								.53
20	.449								.62
23		.664							.58
19		.649							.52
15		.617							.49
17		.497							.57
03			.815						.76
05			.798						.72
02			.661						.67
04				.734					.67
01				.555					.68
06				.497					.54
34					.703				.59
32					.677				.61
30					.668				.66
07						.826			.70
09						.609			.60
03							.812		.76
23							.677		.58
31							.456		.61
08								.768	.67
13	.417							-.500	.53
Eigenvalues	2.21	2.09	2.02	1.78	1.77	1.69	1.63	1.58	
% of variance	6.33	5.97	5.97	5.09	5.08	4.84	4.05	4.52	

Appendix B

Speaking Skills Problems Questionnaire (student and teacher versions)

	NO.	Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
Affective-related problems	1	I/students am/are afraid of making mistakes.					
	2	Some of my classmates/students speak very effectively, but I cannot. This demotivates me.					
	3	Shyness prevents me/students from speaking.					
	4	I/students cannot speak well in the classroom because my/their self-confidence is low.					
	5	My/students' anxiety is too high. This prevents me/them from speaking well					

Socially-related problems	6	I/students have difficulty finding opportunities to practice my/their speaking outside the classroom.					
	7	My/_ speaking classes are /were not useful enough to help us/students communicate with English speaking people.					
	8	I do not think I/they will make use of English speaking skills in my country.					
	9	There is no cooperation spirit among my classmates/students in my/- speaking classes.					
Instructor –related problems	10	My instructors/I do not have a good command of English speaking skills.					
	11	It would be better if there were more than one instructor teaching speaking so that they could provide a speech model for students.					
	12	My instructors/I make too much use of our/students' mother tongue in the classroom.					
	13	My instructors' pronunciation is not good enough to be a model for us.					
	14	My instructors/I do not encourage students to speak.					
	15	The/My intervention and error correction of _ / my instructors is too harsh.					
	16	My instructors/I do not show the tendency to speak English with me/students outside the classroom when I/they try to do so.					
	17	My instructors/I neglect to focus on idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and collocations.					
	18	My classes are teacher-centered; therefore, I/students cannot find the chance to express my/their ideas and participate in class discussion activities.					
	19	My speaking instructors/I spend/spent a large proportion of class time asking questions about things to which they/I already knew the answers; therefore, no real communication takes/took place.					
	20	My instructors/I do not encourage any group work or pair work; this inhibits student-student interaction in class.					
	21	My instructors/I do not teach us/students how to express appropriate speech acts (e.g., greeting, complaint, refuse invitations or offers and so on).					
	22	My instructors/I do not tell us/students what to do when we/they cannot find the correct and appropriate word, structure and sentence during our/their speaking. In other words, they/I do not teach us/them oral communication strategy use.					
	23	My instructors/I do not present interesting topics for discussion.					
	24	My instructors/I put less emphasis on					

		speaking skills in comparison to other skills.					
Iran educational system and facility-related problems	25	There are not enough and efficient facilities in language laboratory.					
	26	Our class/classes is/are overcrowded.					
	27	The time of our/- speaking classes is not/was not appropriate. That is, our speaking classes are/were held at the time when we/students do/did not have enough energy to participate effectively in class discussions.					
	28	Only speaking and listening 1 and 2 courses in BA program cannot help us/students to develop our/their speaking ability.					
	29	Educational system of Iran has contributed to my/students' lack of speaking ability.					
Linguistically-related problems	30	My poor/students' general English knowledge results in my/their having difficulty making questions and directing them to my instructor/their instructor or my/their classmates.					
	31	I/students do not have enough vocabulary knowledge.					
	32	I/students do not have enough knowledge of collocations.					
	33	I/they think in Persian when I/they speak in English, which leads to my/their lack of fluency and naturalness in speaking.					
	34	I/they do not have enough grammar knowledge which leads to lack of accuracy in my/their speaking.					
	35	My/students' pronunciation is not good enough which causes difficulty in my/their communication.					

Appendix C

Interview questions

1. What are some of the psychological problems you/students encounter during speaking in English?
2. What are some of the problems in the way of your/students' speaking caused by Iranian context?
3. Are there any problems in the way of your/students' speaking caused by your/their classmates?
4. Are there any problems in the way of your/students' speaking caused by the atmosphere of the classroom?
5. Are there any problems in the way of your/students' speaking skills related to Iran educational system?
6. Are there any problems in the way of your/students' speaking skills related to lack of facilities? Please explain.
7. Are there any problems in the way of speaking skills related to your instructors and their methods of teaching?
8. Are there any problems in the way of speaking related to the speaking course book?
9. What are your linguistic-related problems affecting your/students' speaking skills?
10. Are there any problems with the time of the speaking classes? Explain please.
11. Can only listening and speaking 1 and 2 courses during BA program improve your/students' speaking ability?