

## **Towards a Better Fluency in English as a Foreign Language: A Case Study of Sudanese Students at Sub Rural Secondary Schools**

**Elsadig Mohamed Khalifa Gawi**

College of Arts and Sciences, Mandaq, Al Baha University, Saudi Arabia  
sadig\_99@yahoo.com

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**Abstract:** *This study is going to help in developing EFL students' fluency in English Language and to identify the reasons of their performance weakness and try to find solutions. The sample of this study consists of Sudanese students and teachers distributed in ten secondary schools in At-Tadamun Locality. As tools for data collection, the researcher uses teachers' questionnaire. Frequencies, t-test and SPSS are used to analyze the data. The current study concluded that students' fluency is very weak in English language even after leaving schools after eleven years of learning English. In addition, the performance of students in secondary schools is not satisfactory.*

**Keywords:** *At-Tadamun Locality, fluency, performance, psychological factors.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The importance of English language in Sudan has increased recently as a result of the importance of English for business, transport, science and technology, and as a medium of instructions in various colleges in many Sudanese universities, and for general communication where English rather than Arabic is to be used.

As it was mentioned in the abstract, the principal aim of this thesis is to develop EFL students' spoken language skills and to permit individuals to communicate with each other fluently and effectively in the personal and professional situation of daily life. In adopting these aims, the following section is going to review the previous literature concerning the field of fluency and spoken language in general.

### **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1. Definitions of the Term Fluency**

It is very important to have clear definitions of the term fluency. According to Oxford English dictionary fluency is:

1. speaking or writing in an articulate and natural manner. 2. used language easily and accurately.
2. In addition, fluency means speaking without hesitating too much, making very few mistakes, being very easy to understand others and understanding the majority of what is said to you in normal and casual contexts.
3. It is defined by *Van E. and Alexander (1977)* as a reasonable speech with sufficient precision, with reasonable correctness (grammatically, phonologically, lexically).
4. According to the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* fluency is the ability to produce written and/or spoken language with ease...speak with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary and grammar...communicate ideas effectively, and produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication.
5. Fluency can be thought of as the ability to keep going when speaking spontaneously (Gower, Phillips and Walters, 2004)

When a student speaks fluently, he could get the message across with whatever resources and abilities they have got regardless of grammatical and other mistakes. Accordingly, the speaker should not be corrected during speaking activities. However, in feedback afterwards the teacher can comment favorably on any strategies the student used to increase his fluency. Take the following examples:

- a. The use of natural-sound incomplete answer:
  - Teacher: When did you go?
  - Student: On Monday. Not (I went on Monday).
- b. The use of some common expression such as; I see what you mean; never mind; what's the matter.
- c. The use of communication strategies such as asking for clarification like:
  - Don't understand.
  - Do you mean ...?
  - May I remind you of ...?
- d. The use of hesitation devices such as: well, let's see, etc.
- e. The ability to paraphrase. This involves gestures, mimes, smiles, etc. to explain the meaning.
- f. The use of some useful expressions like: That reminds me ....., By the way..., Talking of,

When introducing a topic use expressions like: Still ..., Anyway ..., Really .., .etc.

When finishing a topic use: and well.., must go, Nice to meet you, .etc. when finishing a conversation.

Students clearly transfer many of their speaking skills when they speak English language (Roger Gower et al; 1983: 19). To quote from a paper by Thomas Hawas and Sara Thomas (1994) "Teachers involved in developing spoken language skills in ESL/EFL learners often find themselves in a paradoxical situation. There seems to be a conflict between the learners' perception that fluency and natural-ness in spoken English are preeminent badge of success in learning the language and their disinclination to participate in activities designed to develop competent speaking skill. This suggests a need to reexamine our practice to see how we can exploit the motivation inherent in the learners' positive perceptions of the ability to speak English fluently".

According to the David Crystal's views (1993: 287) fluency disorder, in the language context, can be caused by the great lack of the ability to communicate easily, rapidly, and continuously. The difficulty is raised when the speaker is not able to control the rhythm and timing of stuttering. This phenomenon is difficult to summarize because it involves several kinds of non-fluency which vary from a speaker to another. Look at the following examples:

- a. The abnormal repetition of sounds, syllables, or phrases; e.g.
  - p.p.please c.come here!
- b. Sounds may be abnormally lengthened, e.g. sssee where the initial [s] takes a long time, often with unknown rhythm.
- c. The speaker is often unable to release the articulated sounds. Instead, he uses facial expressions and body language.
- d. The use of strange intonation and speed of speech and words reflect erratic stress patterns.
- e. Words and phrases may be left unfinished.
- f. Avoid using difficult words and phrases which consists of difficult sounds and replace them by unstable word, for example, if a speaker has a difficulty in pronouncing [p] sound, he would always replace the word "policeman" as an example by "officer of the low".

The fluency disorder can be found in young children, deaf people and hesitant speakers which lead to irregular speech. However, one can achieve fluency in spoken language when he possesses the knowledge of a considerable number of English words and a good pronunciation so as to speak fluently and accurately. A fluent speaker, therefore, should control the sound system and the structure of a foreign language.

### **2.2. The Importance of Spoken Language**

For most of human history, communication between people was (face-to-face) because the only type of language you take part in the way of living was represented by that language (Bloomfield, 1933).

According to Dr. Al Khuli (1997:2-3), language is basically oral. The spoken language is emphasized by the following points:

1. Historically, man started speaking before writing.
2. Everyone speaks his first language before going to school and learn the skill of writing.
3. There are always millions of illiterate people who can speak their native language without writing it.
4. The educated people do not practice writing daily, but they involved in everyday communication.

To show how a spoken language is important, let us imagine our life without speaking. In fact, language is the backbone of our life; with language we can convey our opinions, information and sciences from age to age, from place to another, from generation to generation and from community to another. Without spoken language, there would be no teaching, no songs, and no cries. With a spoken language, we express our feelings, ideas, needs, attitudes, and ask for our rights, with a spoken language, we can sing and say poems, indeed, language flourish our life. However, people differ in mastering the speaking skills. Some of them speak the language fluently and others commit many mistakes while speaking.

In recent years, education planners have begun to recognize the complexity of the language demands being made in schools and then universities; and to realize the progress in many areas of curriculum. This greatly depends on a satisfactory foundation of linguistic skills. The traditional emphasis on literacy has been supplemented by an emphasis on aural-oral approach: the ability to listen and speak fluently.

### **2.3. Developing Students' Speaking Abilities**

Learning to speak a foreign language fluently requires more than knowing its syntactic and semantic rules. In addition, learners should acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in context of structural interpersonal exchange in which many factors interact (Halliday, 1985). Therefore; it is difficult for EFL learners, especially the adults, to speak the target language fluently and appropriately. In order to develop students' fluency, it is necessary to test the factors that affect learners' oral communication, component underlying speaking proficiency, and specific skills of strategies used in communication.

Speaking a foreign language is difficult for FL learners because effective oral communication requires the abilities to use the target language appropriately in social interactions. This process involves not only verbal communication but also paralinguistic elements such as gestures, body language, facial expressions, etc. to convey a message directly without any accompanying speech. Brown (1994: 241) argued that: "there is tremendous variation cross-culturally and cross-linguistically in the specific interpretations of gestures and body language" .

Due to the lack of the linguistic environment, exposure to the target language, and contact with native speakers students' performance is weak in spoken English and fluency.

In fact, students need explicit instruction to practice speaking skills. It can be assumed that, fluency can be developed by assigning students general topic to discuss or by raising a topic for discussion.

## 2.4. Mastery of a foreign language

Charles Fries (1967:77) noted that “if mastery of a language is taken to mean the ability to use or understand “all the words” of a language, then none of us can be able to have mastered his own language”. Thus, mastery of the language means something different than knowing “all the words” of the language. Whenever we think of language, we usually think of mastering the vocabulary of that language. However, in learning a foreign language the main problem is the mastery of the sound system. This helps the learner to understand the stream of the speech, to hear the distinctive sound features and to approximate their production. It is also means the mastery of the features of the arrangement that constitute the structure of the language Smolenski (1993: 41). This degree of mastering a foreign language can be achieved by speakers by means of a scientific approach with satisfactory selected and organized materials within a limited time.

This is, according to Fries, does not mean that the learner will become a fluent speaker for all situations, but he can be able to build and control his vocabulary and develop his spoken language rapidly.

## 2.5. Communication strategies

In communication, many speakers face some difficulties in expressing their thoughts due to the defects in their linguistic competence. To get the required meaning, the speaker may try to match the language items to the situation to solve such problem immediately (Littlewood, 1996: 30). Examples of some communication strategies:

- a. Avoid communication: when the speaker of English has some weaknesses in his vocabulary, he may try to avoid the occasions which lead to that difficulty.
- b. Adjust the message: when the communication takes place and the speaker faces a problem, he may try to alter the meanings which he intends to communicate by omitting some items of information or by simplifying the ideas which he wants to convey. This strategy does not caused by a defect in language use, but it may be a need for learners who are seeking linguistic fluency.
- c. Using paraphrase: A speaker of English may use paraphrase in order to convey the meaning he wants to communicate as using circumlocution or description, for instance, if the speaker forget a word like “car-seat-belt” he may say: I’d better tie myself in (Littlewood, *ibid*). .
- d. Using Approximation: A speaker may try to use general word similar to the correct word such as using some vegetables instead of the word carrots.
- e. Creating new vocabulary: when a speaker wants to express a definite meaning, he may create a new word or phrase just by translating it into the native language word literally. For example, an Arabic speaker of English may who does not know the word “dream” may use the word “sleeping ahlam” as a literal translation.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Methods Used

This is an empirical study in which the researcher uses different methods such as frequency tables, t-test, percentage, and SPSS to analyze the data in order to find out results and interpretations to them.

### 3.2. Population of this Thesis

The population of this study is English teachers in At-Tadamun Locality’s schools and the students in those schools. The sample has been selected randomly from ten schools.

### 3.3. Tools for Data Collection

The data of this study is taken through teachers’ questionnaire:

The questionnaire consists of fourteen items which cover most of the language skills that are argued to effectively contribute to the element of fluency. The feedback is taken from fifty English teachers who teach English language in secondary schools. The questionnaire is valid and reliable. Fifty three papers were distributed to 53 English teachers, only 50 of them responded and their papers were analyzed by the investigator.

To help in measurement, the researcher gives the following degrees successfully:

	ABCD			
	4	3	2	1
A	means	strongly agree	given	4 degree
B	means	agree	given	2 degree
C	means	disagree	given	3 degree
D	means	strongly disagree	given	1 degree

#### **4. DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS, AND DISCUSSION**

##### **4.1. The Analysis of Teachers' Questionnaire in Terms of Hypotheses**

*4.1.1. The first hypothesis: Most of Sudanese students in secondary schools are not fluent in English even after leaving schools.*

To examine this hypothesis, the investigator analyses questions (1-5) which have strong relations with this hypothesis. The following frequency table is used to affirm the validity of this hypothesis:

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Q1	8(16%)	19(38%)	17(34%)	6(12%)	50(100%)
Q2	30(60%)	15(30%)	4(8%)	1(2%)	50(100%)
Q3	6(12%)	19(38%)	14(28%)	11(22%)	50(100%)
Q4	18(36%)	22(44%)	8(16%)	2(4%)	50(100%)
Q5	21(42%)	25(50%)	4(8%)	0 0	50(100%)

*Frequency table (4.1)*

In the frequency table above, the researcher uses the frequency and percentage to each question. Most of the teachers agree in defining the students' fluency. These results confirm the validity of the first hypothesis.

*4.1.2. The second hypothesis: Students' speaking skills are affected greatly by some psychological factors:*

To test the validity of this hypothesis, the following frequency table is used to analyze questions (6-10) which related to psychological factors.

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Q6	5(10%)	1(2%)	8(16%)	36 (72%)	50 (100%)
Q7	21(42%)	22(44%)	7(14%)	0(0%)	50 (100%)
Q8	25(50%)	25(50%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	50 (100%)
Q9	13(26%)	34(68%)	3(6%)	0(0%)	50 (100%)
Q10	15(30%)	31(62%)	4 (8%)	0 0	50 (100%)

*Frequency table (4.2)*

In table (4.2) above, frequencies and percentage are used to analyze questions (6-10). The results show that most of the teachers agree in defining the speaking skills according to the psychological factors. Concerning question 6, the expected result is negative (27% of the samples answered by disagree. This means that the second hypothesis is affirmed by the majority of the participants.

*4.1.3. The third hypothesis: The performance of students in secondary schools is not satisfactory:*

Table (4.3) below examines the third hypothesis which related to the students' performance:

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Q11	8 (16%)	27(54%)	11(22%)	4 (8%)	50 (100%)
Q12	3 (6%)	6(12%)	16 (32%)	25 (50%)	50 (100%)

The frequency table above shows that the majority of the participants support the validity of this hypothesis. It is clear that 70% of them agree on the importance of developing the performance of students.

4.1.4. *The fourth hypothesis: Teachers do not play an affective role in handling the spoken skills in the classroom.*

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Q13	7(14%)	23(46%)	9(18%)	11(22%)	50 (100%)
Q14	16(32%)	23(46%)	7(14%)	4(8%)	50 (100%)

To test the acceptance of the fourth hypothesis, frequency table (4.4) above is used. The results indicate that the majority of the teachers (60%) criticize the role of the teachers in handling the speaking activities during the class. These findings confirm the validity of the fourth hypothesis.

**4.2. The Analysis of the Teachers’ Questionnaire in Terms of Some Teachers’ Variables**

In this section the researcher uses SPSS to analyze the data gathered through the questionnaire according to some teachers’ variants such as; their age, experience, and qualifications:

4.2.1. *There are no differences which have statistical indication between teachers in defining students’ speaking skills in secondary schools according to the teachers’ age variable:*

To investigate the validity of this variable, the value of (t-test) has been counted to indicate the differences between means. The following table (4.5) clarifies the results of the procedure:

Dimension	Source of variation	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	significance
Fluency	Between groups	,853	2	0,426	,182	,835
	Within groups	110,367	47	2,348		
	Total	111,220	49			
Psychological problems	Between groups	6,962	2	3.481	1,416	,253
	Within groups	115,538	47	2,458		
	Total	122,500	49			
Performance	Between groups	,543	2	0,226	,074	,929
	Within groups	144,367	47	3,072		
	Total	144,820	49			
Total	Between groups	,494	2	00,247	,010	,990
	Within groups	1148,726	47	24,441		
	Total	1149,220	49			

The findings show that the significance in all dimensions is more than (,05). This is calculated by dividing the sum of squares by (df) to give the mean of square. This gives us frequencies and the significance of the dimensions. This result confirms this hypothesis according to teachers’ ages in three dimensions: fluency, psychological problems, and students’ performance.

4.2.2. *There are no differences which have statistical indication between teachers in defining students’ speaking skills in secondary schools according to the teachers’ experience variable. The following table (4.6) is used to analyze this hypothesis:*

Dimension	Source of variation	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	significance
Fluency	Between groups	2,333	3	0,778	,329	,805
	Within groups	108,887	46	2,367		
	Total	111,220	49			
Psychological problems	Between groups	6,131	3	2.044	,808	,496
	Within groups	116,369	46	2,530		
	Total	122,500	49			
Performance	Between groups	10,273	3	3,424	1,171	,331
	Within groups	134,547	46	2,925		
	Total	144,820	49			
Total	Between groups	5,940	3	01,980	,080	,971
	Within groups	1143,280	46	24,854		
	Total	1149,220	49			

Table (4.6) above clarifies the results of (t-test) to evaluate students’ speaking skills in relation to teachers’ experiences.

Looking at table (4.6) above, the significance is more than (,05) in all domains. These results confirm that there are no actual differences which have statistical indication between teachers in defining students’ speaking skills in secondary schools according to the teachers’ experience variable in all dimensions: fluency, psychological factors, and performance.

4.2.3. *There are no differences which have statistical indication between teachers in defining students' speaking skills in secondary schools according to the teachers' qualifications variable. The following table (4.7) is used to analyze this hypothesis:*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Source of variation</b>	<b>Sum of square</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>significance</b>
Fluency	Between groups	1,939	1	1,939	,852	,361
	Within groups	109,281	48	2,277		
	Total	111,220	49			
Psychological problems	Between groups	0,599	1	,599	,236	,630
	Within groups	121,901	48	2,540		
	Total	122,500	49			
Performance	Between groups	0,419	1	,419	,139	,711
	Within groups	144,401	48	3,008		
	Total	144,820	49			
Total	Between groups	,809	1	,809	,034	,855
	Within groups	1148,411	48	23,925		
	Total	1149,220	49			

Table (5.7) above shows that the significance in all domains is more than (,05) which means that there are no differences between teachers in defining students' speaking skills according to their qualifications variable in all dimensions: fluency, psychological factors, and performance.

It is very clear that from tables (5, 6, &7) above, there are no differences that have statistical indications among teachers of English in defining the students' speaking skills, according to their ages, experiences, and qualifications, as they have been measured by (t-test). According to these results, all the hypotheses of this study were confirmed and supported.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

After interpreting the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn from them:

1. It is concluded that Sudanese students do not use the target language in their daily life. They consider it as a school subject.
2. Teachers do not motivate students to speak fluently. They corrected them during the speaking activities.
3. The results show that most of the students do not respond to the speaking activities and the majority of them are not fluent in English language even after leaving schools. It is becomes clear that the performance of the students in secondary schools is not satisfactory.
4. Teachers do not use spoken activities appropriately and effectively in their classes due to the defect in training.
5. It is summed up that the spoken activities given to students are not appropriate in content and in the degree of difficulty.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

To achieve the aims of this study, the following points are thoroughly recommended to English teachers:

1. Students should be able to:
  1. Talk clearly about experience and ideas.
  2. Engage with and enjoy speaking skills in all its varieties.
  3. Understand, respond to, and use oral language fluently and effectively.
  4. Develop skills that enable them to develop their thoughts, ideas, and feelings clearly and appropriately.
2. In order to develop these skills and strategies students will need:
  1. Structured, planned, and meaningful tasks within the classroom environment to practice speaking skills to acquire confidence.
  2. To develop their oral language techniques.
  3. The speaking skills must be understood, modeled, taught and practiced within the classroom.

3. Teachers should

1. Encourage students to bring their ideas and background knowledge into class learning activities.
2. Be facilitator and a responsive listener to students' talk.
3. Nurture a suitable environment where students feel free to express themselves without fear or shyness.
4. Provide opportunities for speaking, discussion, expression of ideas, and opinions across the whole curriculum.
4. Teachers should use group work to help students to speak fluently through sharing knowledge and thinking.
5. Through participating in group work and discussion, students can develop cooperative attitudes and behaviors.
6. In order to achieve better performance, attention should be paid to the teachers' qualifications, training, and educational environment.

## 7. DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This study is considered a pioneer study in the situation of developing students' fluency and speaking skills in general in geographical secondary schools in Sudan. In order to check if resemble studies happen; similar studies can be done in the model secondary schools, private education, and the university level.

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## Appendices

Appendix. 1

### Teachers' questionnaire

Teacher's name (optional) .....

**Sex:** a. Male [ ] Female [ ]

**Age:** a. 20 – 30 [ ] b. 30 – 40 [ ] c. more than 40 [ ]

**Qualifications:** a. Bachelor [ ] b. Master [ ]

**Experience:** a. 5 - 10 [ ] b. 10- 15 [ ] c. More than 15 [ ]

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This questionnaire helps in the research to evaluate Sudanese students' fluency at secondary schools. Can you please, give your input by answering the following questions to contribute to this study?

Choose **A, B, C,** or **D** answer according to how far you agree with each of them and write it in the box.

<b>A</b> strongly agree	<b>B</b> agree	<b>C</b> disagree	<b>D</b> strongly disagree
1. Ignoring errors makes the speaker more fluent			[ ]
2. Watching TV, movies, etc. helps students to speak English fluently			[ ]
3. A student can learn to speak English fluently without lessons			[ ]
4. Students of intellectual abilities can successfully learn and speak English fluently without lesson			
5. To develop fluency teachers must generate a need to speak			[ ]
6. Encouraging speakers is not important			[ ]
7. The lack of interest and motivation can be the main cause in the lack of using the language			[ ]
8. Motivation helps students to develop their fluency			[ ]
9. Shyness and fear are the main causes of the students' weakness in speaking			[ ]
10. Hesitation is a hindrance towards a fluent language			[ ]
11. Students' communicative competence can be developed by practicing speaking activities			[ ]
12. Time given for teaching spoken language is sufficient			[ ]
13. Teachers ignore the speaking activities in their syllabus			[ ]
14. Most of the students do not like to use the language even in their English classes			[ ]

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



**Name:** Elsadig Mohamed Khalifa

**Nationality:** Sudanese

**Date of Birth:** 1970

**Marital status:** Married

**Mobile:** 00966501389035

PhD in Applied linguistics – University of Gezira, June (2011)

- Master of English language Nile Valley University Sudan (2007 )
- Master of Arts – University of Khartoum –( 1997 )
- Bachelor of Arts – English language (Honors Degree) University of Khartoum– 1994
- Assistant professor – College of Arts and Sciences, Almandaq, AlBaha University, KSA- 2013-2015