

Speaking Skills Problems Encountered By Non-Native Arabic Learners At Universities In Northeast China

Bingxin Gu¹, Wail Muin Ismail²

^{1,2}Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Malaysia
e-mail: 1208019088@qq.com*¹, wailismail@um.edu.my²

Abstract

Speaking skills are critical in second language acquisition. This study investigates the most common speaking skills problems among non-native Arabic learners in universities in Northeast China and the differences between speaking skills problems based on gender and academic level. A quantitative research design was adopted. It used the questionnaire to collect data. The sample of this study included 104 Chinese students who learn Arabic from two universities in Northeast China. The results indicate that the most common problems with Arabic speaking skills are a lack of vocabulary, opportunities to meet native Arabic speakers, fear of mistakes, teacher-centered classes, and the teacher using too many students' native languages in the classroom. Besides that, the results show no statistically significant difference in Arabic speaking skills problems based on gender. However, the findings show statistically significant differences in Arabic speaking skills problems based on the academic level. The learners of the second year have more Arabic speaking skills problems than the learners of the first year, and the learners of the third year also have more Arabic speaking skills problems than the learners of the first year. According to the findings, the study suggests recommendations for Arabic learners, instructors, and policymakers in universities in non-Muslim gathering areas in Northeast China.

Keywords: Arabic Language; Speaking Skills; Non-Native Arabic Learners; Northeast China

INTRODUCTION

China has continued to cooperate with Arab countries in energy and infrastructure fields in recent years. According to a report about China-Arab Cooperation in the New Era (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2022), the trade volume between China and Arab countries arrived at 330.3 billion US dollars in 2021, and China has signed cooperation agreements with 20 Arab countries and the Arab League to develop the One Belt One Road. Thus, the demand for Arabic language learning has been growing significantly in China, influenced by factors such as increased economic and cultural exchanges with Arabic-speaking countries. The increasing demand for Arabic language education has led to a growing number of Arabic language study programs at universities in China. According to a document from the Ministry of Education of China, there are over 40 formal universities in China offering four-year Bachelor of Arabic language study programs until 2021.

Although Northeast China is not a Chinese Muslim gathering area, and most learners of these universities who study the Arabic language are non-Muslims, Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning provinces all have more than a university offering Arabic language study programs for undergraduates. Furthermore, some universities in

Northeast China have also opened Arabic courses on economics and international politics and actively promoted Arabic and English as bilingual teaching. Therefore, more and more Chinese are interested in the Arabic language because they want to get competitive salaries and good positions (Al-Nahdi & Zhao, 2022; Kouihi, 2019).

Language learners want to have fluent speaking skills in communication (Richards & Renandya, 2002). However, the Arabic language has a complex linguistic structure, so learning this language is very challenging, especially in speaking (Ahmed, 2023) (Attia & Somers, 2008) (Ryding, 2014). Arabic uses several sounds pronounced way back in the throat, which is very tricky and difficult for a non-native speaker to make (Alsrhid, 2013). Thus, it has been a common complaint that Arabic learners in China are often frustrated and feel anxiety (Lian, 2021) (Al-Nahdi & Zhao, 2022).

Also, if learners have poor speaking skills, normally they are unable to participate in speaking activities in class discussions effectively (Yasmin et al., 2024) (Salleh, 2006). Besides that, Sang (2017) pointed out that learners' limited speaking skills will have a negative influence on their academic performances, social conversations, and career development. Despite this, lecturers often disregard and ignore speaking skills and focus more on other language learning areas such as reading, writing, or grammar, because usually there is no assessment of speaking skills in the final examinations in the school (Baker & Westrup, 2003). Furthermore, Amilrudin (2003) found that not only new learners not also advanced learners are not willing or feel shy to speak Arabic in front of others. Al-Omari's study (2020) shows there are statistically significant differences in educational communication skills and problems due to gender and academic level.

Previous studies have researched Arabic education in universities in China (Fengmin & Zhe, 2019), especially in Chinese Muslims living areas in China such as Gansu province (Male, 2023), and focused on challenges for non-native Arabic learners in China (Hao & Ismail, 2011; Kouihi, 2019; Lian, 2021), there have been limited studies concerned on Northeast China for those non-Muslim gathering areas. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the most common Arabic speaking skills problems in universities in Northeast China, and whether there is a statistically significant difference based on gender and academic level.

METHOD

The researchers conducted quantitative research by using questionnaires. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. In part A, participants were required to provide gender and academic level information. While in part B, includes 26 items. The content of part B was developed by Al-Roud (2016), also referred to by Afshar and Asakereh (2016). After the pilot test, 3 items were deleted because of low anti-image correlation, and 4 new items (i.e. My classes are teacher-centered, therefore, I can't find the chance to express my ideas; My instructors do not teach us how to express appropriate speech acts; My instructors do not encourage speaking in the class) were added. Santos (1999) states that Cronbach's alpha is considered a measure of scale reliability, and above 0.70 is acceptable. Thus, the questionnaire of this study was finally based on 26 items. The following Table 1 represents the reliability test results of the instrument.

All the items in the questionnaire were scaled by a 5-point Likert rating scale. In addition, all the content in the questionnaire is in English but with Chinese translation, considering the non-native Arabic learners are all Chinese students. The questionnaire

has been reviewed by two experts in Arabic language education and a teacher with more than 30 years of Arabic teaching experience in China.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha for the Reliability of the Study

Domain	Cronbach's alpha	No. of items
Linguistic domain	0.738	6
Psychological domain	0.726	7
Instructor domain	0.753	9
Social domain	0.731	4
The whole instrument	0.735	26

The sample was chosen randomly from the students of language faculties who study Arabic language at universities in Northeast China. The researcher asked the lecturers to help give out the paper questionnaires to Arabic learners after getting permission. In this study, the participants were 104 Chinese undergraduate students who learned Arabic from a university in Jilin province and a university in Heilongjiang province in Northeast China. They respectively from Year one (N=28), Year two (N=26), Year three (N=27), and Year four (N=23) grades, males (N=44) and females (N=60). After collecting data, the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) was used in the study to analyze the data. SPSS provides convenient ways to explore relationships between variables and compare groups (Ma, 2015).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Most Common Speaking Skills Problems

The data is analyzed by using descriptive statistics. The researcher arranged the items according to the value of the mean as the following Table 2 shows.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Level of Problem for the Items

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Level of problem
1	I do not have enough vocabulary knowledge.	4.077	0.889	High
2	Lack of opportunities to meet native speakers of the Arabic language.	3.683	1.134	High
3	I am afraid of making mistakes.	3.673	1.194	High
4	My classes are teacher-centered; therefore, I cannot find the chance to express my ideas.	3.625	1.142	High
5	My instructor uses too much students' native language in the classroom.	3.548	1.230	High
6	I lack interest in Arabic speaking skills.	3.125	1.305	Mid
7	I have difficulty finding opportunities to practice my speaking outside the classroom.	3.010	1.485	Mid
8	My pronunciation is not good enough.	3.000	1.455	Mid
9	It is difficult for me to understand the accent of a native speaker of the Arabic language.	2.837	1.330	Mid
10	I lack confidence when I try to speak the Arabic language.	2.760	1.504	Mid
11	The error correction of my instructor is too harsh.	2.721	1.410	Mid
12	My instructor does not encourage speaking in class.	2.663	1.235	Mid
13	I feel shy when I speak in the Arabic language.	2.654	1.164	Mid
14	I don't have enough grammar knowledge.	2.635	1.239	Mid
15	I feel anxiety when I try to speak the Arabic language.	2.596	1.348	Mid

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Level of Problem for the Items (Continued)

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Level of problem
16	I do not have enough knowledge of constructing sentences.	2.587	1.187	Mid
17	A criticism of who speaks the Arabic language from surrounding people.	2.567	1.237	Mid
18	I lack the motivation to speak in the Arabic language.	2.548	1.357	Mid
19	My instructor does not listen carefully to the student's speech to understand their errors.	2.548	1.214	Mid
20	My instructors do not teach us how to express appropriate speech acts (e.g., greeting complaints or offers and so on).	2.548	1.181	Mid
21	I feel weak in understanding the expressions and concepts of the Arabic language.	2.452	1.198	Low
22	My instructor's pronunciation is not good enough to be a model.	2.423	1.012	Low
23	My instructor's speech is not appropriate to the level of students.	2.356	1.051	Low
24	Lack of Arabic language conversation at home.	2.337	1.179	Low
25	I feel confused when I speak the Arabic language.	2.308	1.006	Low
26	My instructor does not have a good command of Arabic speaking skills.	2.183	1.260	Low

Table 2, shows the highest level of Arabic speaking skills problems is I don't have enough vocabulary (mean=4.077), indicating that this problem is very common among Chinese Arabic learners in Northeast China. If the scores are closer to the mean, there is a lower deviation. Besides that, there are a total of 5 Arabic speaking skills problems are at a high level of problem. The mean range is around 3.50-4.49, it considers the level of the problem to be high and the problem is common. Therefore, the following problems are the most common speaking skills problems among non-native Arabic learners from universities in Northeast China:

1. I do not have enough vocabulary knowledge.
2. Lack of opportunities to meet native speakers of the Arabic language.
3. I am afraid of making mistakes.
4. My classes are teacher-centered; therefore, I cannot find the chance to express my ideas.
5. My instructor uses too much students' native language in the classroom.

As Al-Batal (2006) pointed out, to speak a language fluently, at least requires to know about 3000 to 3500 words. However, not only because of the large size vocabulary of the Arabic language, learners also have to be familiar with the grammar and morphology knowledge of Arabic vocabulary when they try to speak Arabic. Therefore, Arabic vocabulary is a big challenge for non-native learners. This finding is similar to Salleh's (2006) and Yahaya et al.'s (2019) study in Malaysia and Lubis et al.'s (2022) study in Indonesia which also found lack of vocabulary is a common speaking problem encountered by non-native Arabic learners.

Besides that, Lack of opportunities to practice speaking with native speakers will affect learners' speaking skills. The social environment is very important in the language learning process (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994), however, Arabic is a foreign language in China, and Northeast China is not a Muslim living area, so it is difficult for these Arabic

learners to have enough opportunities to speak Arabic outside the classroom or talk with native Arabic speakers in their daily life. This finding supports Kouihi's study (2019) in Shenyang in Northeast China, the little exposure to the target language is a factor that affects learning Arabic for Chinese.

According to Rosa (2023), fear of mistakes is one of the main reasons that learners are reluctant to talk in class. Chinese learners are worried about classmates will make fun of them when they make mistakes in the class (Wang & Liu, 2024). Thus, when talking with native Arabic speakers, Chinese Arabic learners will feel embarrassed if they make mistakes. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) explained that this kind of fear of making mistakes is often related to negative evaluation. If learners are too concerned about how others will judge them they will be afraid to make mistakes in front of people (Al Nakhlah, 2016).

Except for these problems, there are some instructor-related problems. As Jiang and Luo (2024) mentioned, the time class is 90 minutes, only with a 10-minute break at universities in China, therefore, the instructor will talk more in the class as much as possible or talk all the time to explain the knowledge, and let the learners take notes. Thus, in the form of a teacher-centered class, Chinese Arabic learners may not have the chance to express their ideas. Last, this study indicated that the instructors used too much Chinese language in teaching Arabic at universities in Northeast China. This result may be because these Chinese Arabic learners are not Muslims, and they are beginners, so instructors tend to speak more Chinese language to translate and explain grammar clearly in the process of Arabic-speaking teaching. These findings are similar to Lubis et al.' (2022) study conducted in Indonesia which also found teacher's teaching styles and methods in the classroom were the common problems that affected non-native learners' Arabic-speaking learning.

Gender Variable

Table 3 shows the results of the t-test of speaking skills problems among participants due to gender variables. The mean score of males is 2.921, the mean score of females is 2.755. Although it is different in mean scores among females and males, the results of the T-test are not significant ($P=0.061$, $P>0.05$). Thus, there is no statistically significant difference between females and males in the Arabic speaking skills problems among non-native Arabic learners from universities in Northeast China.

Table 3. T-test of Arabic Speaking Skills Problems Due to Gender Variable

Gender	No.	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig
Males	44	2.921	0.386	1.893	102	0.061
Females	60	2.755	0.480			

This result could be attributed to the educational environment of the study samples including females and males are all similar (Mahmoud, 2015). The main Arabic teaching textbooks are the same in China, and the instructors are same in the universities. As Mahmoud (2015) explained the social environment outside the classroom for these samples including females and males in the study is also similar. The Northeast area of China is not a Chinese Muslim gathering place (Kouihi, 2019), so there are not so many native Arabic speakers living there, the whole Arabic language learning environment is the similar for males and females.

Academic Level Variable

As can be seen in Table 4, the mean score of the first-year learners is 2.566, the mean score of the second-year learners is 2.941, the mean score of the third-year learners is 2.906 and the mean score of the fourth year learners is 2.918. The mean score is different for different academic levels. Thus, the One-way ANOVA test is used, and Table 5 shows the results. Therefore, there is a statistically significant difference between the four different year groups in speaking skills problems among non-native Arabic learners from universities in Northeast China ($p=0.003$, $P<0.05$).

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations of Arabic Speaking Skills Problems Due to Academic Level Variable

Academic level	No.	Mean	SD
The first year	28	2.566	0.389
The second year	26	2.941	0.385
The third year	27	2.906	0.399
The fourth year	23	2.918	0.526
Sum	104	2.825	0.448

Table 5. One-way ANOVA Test Between Means of Arabic Speaking Skills Problems Due to Academic Level Variable

Source of variance	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.624	3	0.875	4.850	0.003
Within Groups	18.035	100	0.180		
Total	20.660	103			

Table 6. The Results of Multiple Comparisons

	(I) Academic level	(J) Academic level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Tamhane	The first year	The second year	-0.37627*	0.10550	0.005
		The third year	-0.34142*	0.10641	0.014
		The fourth year	-0.35350	0.13204	0.063
	The second year	The first year	0.37627*	0.10550	0.005
		The third year	0.03485	0.10779	1.000
		The fourth year	0.02277	0.13316	1.000
	The third year	The first year	0.34142*	0.10641	0.014
		The second year	-0.03485	0.10779	1.000
		The fourth year	-0.01208	0.13388	1.000
	The fourth year	The first year	0.35350	0.13204	0.63
		The second year	-0.02277	0.13316	1.000
		The third year	0.01208	0.13388	1.000

Note. *. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Based on Table 6, it is obvious that there is a statistically significant difference between the group of the first year and the second year ($P=0.005$, $P<0.05$). When Chinese Arabic learners of the second year compared to the first year, the mean difference (I-J) is 0.37627, which indicates that Chinese Arabic learners of the second year have more Arabic speaking skills problems compared to the first year. Also, there is a statistically significant difference between the group of the first year and the third year ($P=0.014$, $P<0.05$). When Chinese Arabic learners of the third year compared to the first year, the

mean difference (I-J) is 0.34142, which indicates that Chinese Arabic learners of the third year have more Arabic speaking skills problems compared to the first year.

The findings indicate that the Arabic speaking skills problems have not decreased with the increase in grades, Amilrudin's study (2003) also found that. This situation may be caused by different curriculums and teaching objectives in different grades (Biggs, 2003). The first-year learners have an Arabic speaking course and a listening course in a week with a native Arabic instructor in the universities in China, however, the other-year learners only have one speaking course in a week. In the second years and third years at universities, learners must do lots of training in writing and reading to pass the Arabic Majors Band 4 Test in China. This test is a written test; therefore, the curriculums and teaching objectives are more focused on training writing and reading skills, rather than training speaking skills, which limits the development of learners' speaking ability.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the most common speaking skills problems encountered by non-native Arabic learners in universities in Northeast China. Based on the findings, Chinese Arabic learners and instructors should realize the importance of vocabulary in second language acquisition. It is recommended that Arabic instructors encourage learners to read a variety of reading materials such as newspapers, magazines, and storybooks to help them increase their vocabulary. Besides, Multimedia and Internet resources are effective tools for learning to speak, and adding more Arabic audio-visual materials is also a good way for instructors in universities in Northeast China (Kouhi, 2019). Because the learning environment is important for non-native learners (Yahaya, 2019). Marsiah et al. (2019) argued that mistakes are unavoidable during speaking especially for non-native speakers, so learners should try to talk more in Arabic. Also, the study suggests that Arabic language instructors should encourage learners to participate more in the class. Instructors could use learner-centered strategies and give learners more opportunities to express themselves (Matukhin & Bolgova, 2015). Adnan et al. (2014) pointed out that with more communication in the classroom, Arabic learners will be more familiar with speaking the target language. In addition, to release Chinese Arabic learners' language learning anxiety (Lian, 2021), instructors should make learners feel comfortable when they speak Arabic, and praise and appreciate learners who make any slight improvement to improve their self-confidence.

Besides that, the study found there is a statistically significant difference in Arabic speaking skills problems based on the academic level. Thus, Arabic instructors are supposed to pay more attention to their teaching strategies and objectives according to the different levels of speaking skills problems of different grades. Policymakers should arrange more time for Arabic speaking skills in the course schedule, especially for Arabic learners in their second and third year in universities in Northeast China. This study was only conducted in Northeast China; thus, similar studies could be conducted at more universities in other areas of China to investigate whether the problems affecting the mastery of non-native learners' Arabic speaking skills are similar. Also, future studies could evaluate the learning and teaching strategies to address speaking problems and improve speaking skills among Chinese Arabic learners in China.

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