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Examining Iraqi EFL College Students' Perceptions of Productive Skills in Second Language Learning

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فحص تصورات طلبة الجامعات العراقيين الدراسين للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية حول المهارات الإنتاجية في تعلم اللغة الثانية"

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Abstract:
Over the past few decades, educational paradigms have increasingly focused on learner-centered approaches, underscoring the necessity for every EFL student to gain proficiency in the four core language skills: receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). Despite this emphasis, many EFL students encounter persistent difficulties in acquiring these skills. This research endeavors to identify the language skills the skills most commonly utilized among university students. A 16-item questionnaire utilizing a five-point scale (often, frequently, occasionally, rarely, never) was designed to gather data, specifically targeting The skills of listening, reading, and speaking are fundamental to effective communication. skills while excluding writing. The study's sample comprised 60 students from the Department of English, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, for the 2024/2025 academic year. Following a rigorous validation and reliability process for the questionnaire, the findings revealed a weighted mean score exceeding 3 for students' skill usage. This suggests a growing trend of self-directed skill enhancement. The paper concludes by offering specific conclusions, recommendations, and future research suggestions.
Key w ords: prod uctive skills, receptive skills, skills .

المُلخص:
على مدى العقود القليلة الماضية، ركزت النماذج التعليمية بشكل متزايد على المناهج التي تركز على المتعلم، مما يؤكد على ضرورة أن يكتسب كل طالب يدرس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الكفاءة في المهارات اللغوية الأساسية الأربع: المهارات الاستقبالية (الاستماع والقراءة) والمهارات الإنتاجية (التحدث والكتابة). وعلى الرغم من هذا التركيز، يواجه العديد من طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية صعوبات مستمرة في اكتساب هذه المهارات. يسعى هذا البحث إلى تحديد المهارات اللغوية الأكثر استخدامًا بين طلاب الجامعات. تم تصميم استبيان مكون من ١٦ بندًا باستخدام مقياس من خمس نقاط (غالبًا، كثيرًا، أحيانًا، نادرًا، أبدًا) لجمع البيانات، مع استهداف مهارات الاستماع والقراءة والتحدث بشكل خاص مع استبعاد الكتابة. تتكون عينة الدراسة من ٦٠ طالبًا من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية للبنات بجامعة بغداد للعام الدراسي ٢٠٢٤/٢٠٢٥. وبعد عملية تحقق وموثوقية صارمة للاستبيان، كشفت النتائج عن متوسط درجات مرجح يتجاوز ٣ لاستخدام الطلاب للمهارات. يشير هذا إلى اتجاه متزايد نحو تعزيز المهارات ذاتيًا. وتختتم الورقة البحثية بتقديم استنتاجات وتوصيات محددة ومقترحات لأبحاث مستقبلية.
الكلمات المفتاحية: المهارات الإنتاجية، المهارات الاستقبالية، المهارات

1. Inception:

1.1 The Rationale of the study

Mastering english Ianguage skills is crucial for university students, as it significantly enhances their academic performance in both comprehending and producing content. English, as a global language, is a key to accessing

the wider world. The four primary language skills are categorized into two groups: **receptive skills** and **productive skills**. Receptive skills, such as reading and listening, involve processing information without creating new language. In contrast, productive skills, including writing and speaking, require students to generate language (Yule, 1995:4; Harmer, 2007: 246).Despite many Iraqi students having some exposure to English during their primry education, they generally struggle with the language, particularly with these four skills. This ongoing issue in Iraq is largely due to outdated teaching methodologies and curricula that previously dominated the educational system. The traditional **audio-lingual method**, which focused heavily on the memorization of grammatical rules and repetitive exercises, often neglected the other three skills. As a result, teachers placed a disproportionate emphasis on grammar, leaving students with underdeveloped listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. This imbalance is evident in the difficulties students face when trying to use communicative skills effectively.

1.2 Objectives:

The main goals of this research are to:

- Identify the most common English skills used by EFL university students, based on their frequency of use.
- Uncover the specific challenges and obstacles that these students encounter when using their speaking, listening, and reading skills.

1.3 Limits of the study :

This study is limited to the following specific parameters:

- **Participants**: The research focuses exclusively on fourth-year students in the English Language Department at the College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, during the 2025-2024 academic year.
- **Research Instrument**: The questionnaire used for data collection is confined to his study focuses on three key language skills : listening, speaking , and reading. The skill of writing was intentionally omitted because the questionnaire is an adapted version of a tool originally developed by the NCLRC in 2012.
- **1.4 Definition of Basic Terms**

Richards and Schmidt (2002: 293) define a **skill** as "the mode or manner in which language is used." In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), this concept refers to the four core abilities: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.These skills are typically categorized into two main groups:

- **Receptive Skills**: These skills involve a learner's ability to comprehend and process language. Reading and listeni ng are considered receptive skills, as they focus on receiving and understanding a message .
- **Productive Skills** : In contrast, productive skills require students to actively generate language . Speaking and writing fall into this category, where the learner creates and conveys a message to an audience (Professional Knowledge for ELT, 2017).

2. Theoretical Background:

The researchers' decision to focus on these three skills and exclude writing is a specific choice made due to the nature of the questionnaire they adopted. This is a common practice in research to ensure the study remains focused and manageable, as it allows for a more in-depth analysis of the selected skills. Consequently, any findings and conclusions drawn from this study will be limited to listening, speaking, and reading and will not address aspects related to writing proficiency.

2.1 Listening:

Listening is the cornerstone of language acquisition, as it involves comprehending spoken language. It's a fundamental skill we use constantly in our daily lives. As Lindsayy and Knightt (2006: 45) point out, we listen to a vast range of things, from face-to-face conversations and phone calls to public announcements, weather forecasts, music, lectures, and professional advice. Oxford (1993: 206) further argues that listening is a prerequisite for developing speaking, reading, and writing skills. To improve English proficiency, students must cultivate effective listening strategies.

The Role of Listening in Language Learning:

For students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), developing strong listening skills is crucial for effectively processing and utilizing the language they receive. Rost (1994) emphasizes the importance of listening in the classroom, as it provides learners with the necessary language input. In short, effective learning is enabled by comprehensible input at the appropriate level. Therefore, listening is a vital skill in language acquisition (Nunan, 2002).

Listening Processes: Bottom-Up and Top-Down

Nunan (2002) identified two key processes involved in listening comprehension:

• **Bottom-Up Processing**: This is a linear process where listeners build meaning from the smallest units of language upwards. They start with sounds, then move to words, grammatical relationships, and finally, the overall meaning of the message.

• **Top-Down Processing**: This process involves using prior knowledge and general understanding to interpret and make sense of a message. Listeners use their background knowledge to infer meaning and explain the content.However, Nunan concludes that listening comprehension is not solely a bottom-up or top-down process. Instead, it's an interactive and interpretive Listeners use a combination of their existing knowledge and their understanding of language to interpret new messages.

2.2 Speaking :

Spoken language is widely regarded as one of the most challenging skills for language learners to master. Despite its difficulty, it has often been neglected in favor of reading, writing, and even listening instruction, primarily because grammar has a long-standing written tradition (Bueno et al., 2006: 321). In fact, speaking is frequently considered the most crucial of the four skills. A common source of frustration for students is their inability to speak English fluently, even after years of study.

Classroom Interaction and Speaking Proficiency:

Teachers should use curriculum guidelines, such as those that define proficiency levels (A1 , A2 , B1 , B2 , C1 , C2), Teachers often structure their lessons around two main types of interaction in second and foreign language classrooms: **teacher-student** and **student-student**.

Teacher-Student Interaction: This often follows the **IRE (Initiation, Response, Evaluation)** model, where the teacher initiates a question, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates the answer.

• Interaction among students: This is the more prevalent communication pattern in learner-centered classrooms. It is highly beneficial because it increases **student talking time** and allows learners to use the language for practical communication, moving away from traditional, teacher-dominated methods (Aleksandrzak, 2011: 40). Cooperative group work is a prime example of this type of interaction.

2.3 Reading :

• Reading is the ability to comprehend written text, where words and sentences are understood within their context. According to Grabe and Stoller (2002), effective reading depends on foundational skills like Reading comprehension is a cornerstone of becoming a proficient reader. Students who struggle with oral reading and fluency may be unable to move past decoding individual words, which hinders their ability to grasp a text's full meaning. This highlights the vital role of comprehension skills in achieving reading mastery.

• Reading is essentially a process of extracting meaning from a written document. The primary goal is to synthesize the main ideas by understanding the overall context, rather than focusing on the meaning of isolated words or sentences (Woo lley, 2011: 15).

3. Procedures :

3.1 population and sample of the present study :

According to Gay (1996: 128), a **population** refers to the larger group of individuals to whom a study's findings are intended to apply. For this research, the population consisted of all fourth-year students in the English Department at the College of Education for Women during the 2016-2017 academic year. From this group, a **sample** of 60 students was randomly selected to participate in the study.

3.2Validity of the Survey Instrument:

Validity is a measure of how well a test or tool measures what it is intended to measure (Kadhim, 2014, 252). One type, **face validity**, refers to the extent to which an instrument appears to be suitable and relevant to those who will use it, including administrators, teachers, and students (McNamara, 2000: 133).

To ensure the questionnaire's face validity, it was reviewed by a jury of experts in language and linguistics . This panel confirmed its validity and appropriateness for the study. The questionnaire was designed to be completed within 30 minutes, and the items were found to be clear, with students reporting no difficulty in answering them .

3.2 The reliability of the questionnaire:

According to Heaton (1988: 155), **reliability** is established when a test produces consistent results. This means that if the same test is given to the same or similar participants on two separate occasions, the outcomes should be nearly identical. Various methods are used to estimate reliability, including test-retest, split-half, and statistical formulas like the Pearson correlation and Cronbach's Alpha.

Reliability of the Questionnaire:

To determine the reliability of the questionnaire used in this study, the **Pearson correlation formula** was applied. This analysis yielded a reliability coefficient of(**0.76**.) Furthermore, after applying the **Spearman-Brown formula**, the reliability was calculated to be (**0.863**). Both of these results demonstrate that the questionnaire is acceptably reliable for the purposes of this research.

3.3 How the survey was designed and conducted:

Based on the effectiveness of questionnaires in gathering information about attitudes and beliefs (Johnson & Christensen, 2000), a questionnaire was used in this study to assess students' English language proficiency, contributing to the achievement of the specific research objectives.

The questionnaire, adapted from a tool by NCLRC (2012: 14-15), focused on three skills: **listening**, **speaking**, and **reading**, with writing being excluded. It comprised 16 items distributed as follows:

- **Speaking**: 8 items
- **Listening**: 4 items
- **Reading**: 4 items

Students were instructed to rate each statement on a 5-point scale (from **"often"** to **"never"**) to indicate the frequency of their skill use. The rating scale was scored with **"often"** receiving 5 points and **"never"** receiving 1 point. The questionnaire was administered in December 2024 to the 60 college students in the sample.

4. Data Analysis :

4.1 Results:

Using **Fisher's formula** for statistical data manipulation, a weighted mean was calculated for each item. The results indicate that the students' use of the assessed skills is frequent, as evidenced by a weighted mean score of over 3 for all items. This suggests that all skills are being utilized strongly.

The table below presents the weighted mean scores for each EFL skill, with the items arranged in ascending order from the lowest to the highest score.

Teble 1The Weightwd Mean Scores for the Items of EFL Skills Questionnaire

Item rank	Item no	Items	Weighted mean scores	Skill
1	6	I ask a qualified colleague for help when I am not sure how to phrase something.	3.293	Speaking
2	3	monitor listener comprehension to ensure clarity and adjust my communication accordingly.	3.448	Speaking
3	10	I can define new words as I encounter them in a text.	3.517	Reading
4	12	I am able to comprehend the written instructions provided by the author	3.603	Reading
5	5	I rely on using real objects or acting out situations to convey the idea and provide an effective context for my topic.	3.637	Speaking
6	1	I determine my communication goals by first considering what I intend to say.	3.672	Speaking
7	2	Before I speak, I think of useful vocabulary and expressions to use in my talk	3.689	Speaking
8	15	I am able to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words from spoken language and subsequently offer a clear explanation.	3.706	Listening
9	7	When I'm unsure how to say a word or phrase, I consult a dictionary, textbook, or online resource.	3.758	Speaking
10	16	I can provide comprehensive answers to questions after listening to information.	3.793	Listening

11	13	I am able to understand the main points when I listen	3.827	Listening
12	11	I can grasp the main ideas when I listen to a native speaker.	3.913	Reading
13	14	I have no trouble responding to questions based on information I've listened to.	3.982	Listening
14	8	I assess my delivery once I've finished speaking.	4086	Speaking
15	9	When reading, I am able to pinpoint the central theme of a text.	4.120	Reading
16	4	I focus on subjects I'm knowledgeable about and use familiar grammar, which helps make my message clear to others.	4.362	Speaking

4.1.1 Item NO (4):

Item 4, which states, "the researcher focuses on topics that I know how to talk about, and the researcher uses language structure I am familiar with, so that others can understand me," received the highest ranking with a weighted mean score of (4.362). This high score suggests that college students have acquired speaking skills effectively. They employ specific techniques, such as choosing familiar topics and using well-known grammatical structures, to ensure their message is clearly understood by others.

This finding aligns with Thornbury's (2007: 125) model for developing speaking proficiency, which outlines three key stages:

- **Awareness:** Learners first become Taking into account the characteristics of the language you are learning.
- **Appropriation :** They then integrate these new features into their existing linguistic knowledge.
- **Autonomy:** Finally, students gain the ability to use these features independently and spontaneously in real-time communication without assistance.

4.1.2 Item No. 9:

The statement, "When I read something, I can figure out the main idea of the text," ranked second with a score of (**4.120)**. This high score indicates that college students in the study are proficient readers who can effectively grasp the central ideas of what they read.

According to Robel and Connie (2012: 177), strong reading skills are crucial for students to understand the meaning and content of a text. Reading comprehension is a fundamental ability in modern academic settings. Students can enhance these skills in several ways, such as:

- **Building background knowledge** on a topic.
- **Asking questions** related to the text.
- **Making predictions** about the content.
- Utilizing **charts, diagrams, and other visual aids** for clarification.
- Considering the **style and structure of the language** used in the text.

4.1.3 Item No.8

The statement, "After I speak, I rate how well I did," received a high score of (**4.086)**, once again highlighting the prominence of speaking skills among the highest-rated items. This result suggests that the college students in the study possess a high degree of confidence in their communication abilities and actively use **self-assessment** techniques to improve their speaking proficiency.Self-assessment, which is also referred to as self-evaluation or self-rating, is a method where students are asked to judge their own knowledge, skills, and overall performance (Brown, 2005:58). The high score on this item indicates that students are proactively engaging in this reflective process.

4.1.4 Item No. 14:

The statement, "When I hear something, I can answer questions about what I have heard easily," received a score of **(3.982)**. Although this score is high, it ranks below the top scores for speaking and reading. This result indicates that students in the English department are proficient listeners, likely because their curriculum emphasizes listening to authentic materials such as conversations, stories, dramas, and movies. This exposure helps them improve their overall fluency .

Listening is a foundational skill for language acquisition, as it provides the necessary input for developing both comprehension and speaking proficiency (Hassan, 2000: 138). Rost (2002, as cited in Hamouda, 2013: 2) suggests that improving listening skills is key to achieving proficiency in speaking. Furthermore, Teng (1997: 515) highlights the strong connection between the two skills, defining listening as "an active and complex process that determines the level and content of comprehension."

4.1.5 Item No. 6:

The statement, "If I don't know how to say something, I ask a qualified colleague how to say it," received a score of (**3.293)**. This result indicates that students are motivated to improve their speaking skills and rely on their peers for assistance.

This practice is known as **peer assessment**, which Slaving (1997: 500) considers one of the most effective methods in educational history. From a pedagogical perspective, peer assessment fosters a sense of ownership, responsibility, motivation, and self-reflection in students (Falchikov & GoldFinch, 2000: 290). This method is highly recommended by educational experts like Shepard (2000: 10) and Topping (1998: 250) as an efficient classroom assessment tool. It not only empowers students to act as learning facilitators but also provides instructors with a clearer understanding of student progress.

4.1.6 Item No. 3 :

The statement, "I try to figure out if I'm not making sense to the listener so I can correct myself," received a score of **(3.448)**. This indicates that students are self-reliant in their communication. They actively work to identify if their message is unclear and take the initiative to correct themselves. This behavior demonstrates a form of self-monitoring, where learners adjust their speech based on perceived listener comprehension.

4.1.7 Item No. 10:

The statement, "When I read something, I can give the meaning of new words," received a score of (**3.517)**. This item is directly linked to reading comprehension, which is influenced by both the reader's characteristics and the context of the reading situation (De Corte et al., 2001: 540). A reader's **prior knowledge** plays a significant role in how they construct meaning from a text and understand new vocabulary (Lipson, 1983, as cited in Woolle y, 2011: 15).

4.1.8 Item No. 12 :

The statement, "When I read something, I can understand the written instructions of the writer," received a score of (**3.603**), which indicates a strong level of reading skill among the participants.

This finding aligns with modern theories that view skilled readers as active and self-regulating learners (Harris & Pressley, 1991: 392). The ability to reflect on one's own reading process is directly linked to how students construct new meanings. This happens when they integrate new information with their existing knowledge structures. A reader-centered approach to comprehension is inherently motivating because it encourages students to apply strategies that help them monitor their own understanding as they read (Gersten et al., 2001: 279).

4.2 Conclusions :

Based on the results of this study, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Increased Student Autonomy: Students showed an increased ability to improve their skills independently, demonstrating self-reliance in their learning process.
2. Speaking Proficiency: The students' performance in speaking was found to be stronger compared to their other language skills.
3. Impact of Modern Resources: Students are acquiring English language skills more effectively due to the use of modern teaching methods and online resources.
4. Effectiveness of New Techniques: The adoption of modern techniques like self-assessment and peer assessment has a noticeable and positive impact on improving students' performance in both speaking and listening.

4.3 Recommendations:

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are suggested to improve students' English language proficiency:

1. Integrate Listening and Speaking Skills: The positive correlation between listening and speaking skills can significantly enhance language acquisition. It is recommended that educators focus on using integrated skills, where primary language skills (such as reading, writing, and speaking) are taught together in a communicative

context. This approach, as defined by Opp-Beckman and Klinghammer (2006: 28), can be more effective for overall fluency.

2. Promote Reading and Writing Integration: To deepen students' understanding of texts, it is suggested that instructors encourage the integration of reading and writing. This approach can help students better comprehend the meaning of passages and improve their ability to analyze and respond to what they read.

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