

# EFL Teachers' Cognitions about Teaching Speaking Skills<sup>1</sup>

Conocimiento de los profesores de  
inglés como lengua extranjera sobre la  
enseñanza de las habilidades orales

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<sup>1</sup> Received: October 26th 2021/ Accepted: May 10th 2022

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to explore EFL teachers' cognitions about teaching speaking. To achieve the purpose, a sequential mixed-methods research strategy was employed. A questionnaire was administered to 192 secondary and preparatory school English teachers while an interview was conducted with four teachers. Descriptive and bivariate analyses were computed for the analysis of the quantitative data, and a qualitative content analysis was used for the qualitative data. The findings revealed that speaking was not the skill teachers enjoyed teaching and learners liked to learn. The teachers considered speaking as the weakest part of their learners. To most of the teachers, learning speaking was different and difficult from learning other language skills. The teachers regarded group discussion as the most effective classroom activity. The teachers' self-concept was optimistic, but they were pessimistic about the students' interest in learning to speak. It was found that most teachers' beliefs were primarily influenced by prior teaching experiences. The teachers ranked the relationship between their beliefs and the classroom practices as fair. Teachers thought the teaching of speaking was predominantly influenced by learner-related factors. Moreover, there were teachers' beliefs that showed statistically significant relationships to their gender and year of teaching experience. The study concludes that the teaching of speaking is still one of the disregarded areas of English language teaching.

**Keywords:** Cognition; EFL teachers; English language teaching; Language skills; Teaching speaking;

## Resumen

El objetivo principal de este estudio fue explorar las habilidades de los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera sobre la enseñanza del habla. Para lograr el objetivo, se empleó una estrategia de investigación secuencial de métodos mixtos. Los participantes fueron profesores de inglés de escuelas secundarias y preparatorias de la Zona de Gurage. Se administró un cuestionario a 192 docentes y se realizó una entrevista a cuatro docentes. Al analizar los datos, se hicieron análisis descriptivos y bivariados para los datos cuantitativos y se utilizó un análisis de contenido cualitativo para los datos cualitativos. Los hallazgos revelaron que hablar no era una habilidad que los maestros disfrutaran enseñar ni los estudiantes aprender. Los profesores consideraban hablar como la parte más débil de sus alumnos. Para la mayoría de los maestros, aprender a hablar era diferente y difícil de aprender comparado con otras habilidades lingüísticas. Además, los profesores consideraron la discusión en grupo como la estrategia más eficaz. A pesar de todos los problemas, el autoconcepto de los docentes era optimista, pero se mostraban pesimistas sobre el interés de los alumnos por aprender a hablar. Se encontró que la mayoría de las creencias de los docentes estaban influenciadas principalmente por experiencias docentes previas. Los maestros expresaron que la enseñanza del habla estaba predominantemente influenciada por factores relacionados con el alumno. El estudio concluye que la enseñanza de la expresión oral sigue siendo una de las áreas desatendidas de la enseñanza del idioma inglés. Con base en los hallazgos, también se recomiendan más investigaciones y capacitación.

**Palabras clave:** Cognición; Profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera; habilidad de habla en segunda lengua; actitudes frente a la enseñanza

## Resumo

O objetivo principal deste estudo foi explorar as habilidades dos professores de inglês como língua estrangeira sobre o ensino da fala. Para conseguir o objetivo, empregou-se uma estratégia de pesquisa sequencial de métodos mistos. Os participantes foram professores de inglês de escolas secundárias e preparatórias da Zona de Gurage. Administrou-se um questionário a 192 docentes e realizou-se uma entrevista a quatro docentes. Ao analisar os dados, fizeram-se análises descritivas e bivariadas para os dados quantitativos e utilizou-se uma análise de conteúdo qualitativo para os dados qualitativos. As descobertas revelaram que falar não era uma habilidade que os professores desfrutaram ensinar nem os estudantes aprender. Os professores consideravam falar como a parte mais débil de seus alunos. Para a maioria dos professores, aprender a falar era diferente e difícil de aprender comparado com outras habilidades linguísticas. Além disso, os professores consideraram a discussão em grupo como a estratégia mais eficaz. Apesar de todos os problemas, o autoconceito dos docentes era otimista, mas mostravam-se pessimistas sobre o interesse dos alunos por aprender a falar. Encontrou-se que a maioria das crenças dos docentes estavam influenciadas principalmente por experiências docentes prévias. Os professores expressaram que o ensino da fala estava predominantemente influenciado por fatores relacionados com o aluno. O estudo conclui que o ensino da expressão oral continua sendo uma das áreas desatendidas do ensino do idioma inglês. Com base nas descobertas, também se recomendam mais pesquisas e capacitação.

Palavras chave: Cognição; Professores de inglês como língua estrangeira; habilidade de fala em segunda língua; atitudes diante do ensino

## Introduction

Although a syllabus is believed to guide the instructional process, there are also aspects that exert considerable influence. In this regard, the study of teachers' cognition has attracted considerable educational researchers' interest. Beginning from the late 1980s, the study of teachers' cognition, which Borg (2003) defined as studying what teachers think, know, and believe, became the focus of educational research. Borg claimed that the dominant idea of the time that teaching is a complex cognitive activity that demands thinking, knowledge, beliefs, and decisions of the teacher was the beginning of the focus of shift from tangible behaviors to teachers' mental lives. Besides, the advancement of cognitive psychology and the popularity of qualitative research methods were the pushing factors for the shift (Kim-Yin, 2006). Accordingly, the shift to teacher cognition researches can be seen as the search for why classroom practices are in the way they are or understanding the factors influencing the hidden pedagogy of the classroom (Burns, 1992).

Though the study of teachers' cognitions seems to be a well-established area of study, there are still issues that the teacher cognition researchers fail to resolve. Besides, the classroom teachers do not unthinkingly implement curricula designed by others. Hence, the study of teacher cognition continues to be a vital area of educational research so far as teaching is done by human beings (Borg, 2009).

In the Ethiopian educational context, teachers' cognition has not been given due attention. The overall educational system is a top-down curriculum with little or no room for teachers' beliefs, opinions, suggestions, and comments (Seyoum, 1996). The classroom teachers, therefore, are disregarded in the core educational decision-making processes like curriculum development, textbook and material preparation and instructional and program designing. Similarly, most studies in Ethiopia are process-product oriented that investigate what the teachers do and what the respective students gain from it (Birhanu, 2012). Hence, the study of teachers' cognitions has attracted few Ethiopian researchers' interests despite its worldwide domination of educational research in general and language studies in particular.

Though teachers are believed to have cognitions about all aspects of their work, the study of teacher cognition about the teaching of speaking is one of the disregarded areas in local and international studies. Borg (2003), for example, review 64 teacher cognition studies in language teaching. Grammar and literacy were the two language teaching areas that have been rewarded significant attention; 22 studies were on grammar while 7 were on literacy instruction of which 5 focused on reading. Contrarily, the teaching of speaking was not included as the reviewer could not find any published work of teacher cognition in the teaching of speaking.

Besides the inadequacy of the studies, those few local teacher cognition studies are broad that do not consider the nature of the mental construct. They focus on investigating the teachers' beliefs about teaching English and their classroom practices (Birhanu, 2012; Awol, 1999). As teacher cognition is one of the difficult areas of educational research due to the intricate and multifaceted nature of mental constructs, the study of teachers' cognitions about teaching English and their classroom practices are extremely wide-ranging. Thus, a study that focuses on a single skill/aspect of language teaching and investigates it comprehensively contributes greatly in providing in-depth understanding. Besides, most of the teacher cognition studies are solely qualitative that comprise few participants and fail to explore shared beliefs.

The interest in the teaching of speaking skills also originated from the challenges the researcher has faced in making students speak English and the assertion that oral communication is the area where most foreign and second language learners encounter difficulty. Especially in countries like Ethiopia where English is not used in the community, the classroom is the most important place to practice speaking. However, the classroom speaking skills lessons may not often be effective as foreign language teachers face difficulties in getting students to speak the language. Ur (1991), for example, indicated four problems in making students speak a foreign language in the classroom: inhibition, having nothing to say, low uneven participation, and mother tongue use. Although it is claimed that students who can speak English have greater chances of further education, finding a job, and gaining promotion (Baker & Westrup, 2003), the teaching of speaking for foreign or second language learners is challenging and students' mastery of oral skills is limited.

The following therefore were the rationales of this study: a) the claim that the teaching of speaking remains unstudied from a teacher cognition point of view, b) speaking is one of the challenging skills for foreign language learners, c) the teacher cognition studies need to focus on a single skill or aspect of the language rather than dealing with broader topics, and d) the teacher cognition studies do not have to focus only on the in-depth understanding of the issue from few participants but need to explore shared beliefs. Hence, this study is an attempt to address these gaps.

## Research Questions

The main objective of this study was to explore EFL teachers' cognitions about teaching speaking. Thus, the following research questions guided the study:

- What cognitions do EFL teachers have about teaching speaking skills?
- Do gender and year of teaching experience significantly affect teachers' cognitions about teaching speaking?

## Literature Review

### Teacher Cognition

The primary focus of foreign/second language teaching researches on observable behaviors and what people do in the classroom, neglecting the teachers' mental lives, was not convincing for the educators in the late 1980s (Kim-Yin, 2006). The idea that teaching is a complex cognitive activity that demands the thinking, knowledge, beliefs, and decisions of the teacher became dominant in the late 1980s (Borg, 2003). Hence, beginning from the late 1980s, studying what teachers think, know, and believe has been the focus of educational research. Borg used 'teacher cognition research' in referring to researches on what teachers think, know, and believe and the relationship of these mental lives to the classroom practices.

In teacher cognition studies, establishing a clear distinction between knowledge and belief is one of the major problems. The issue of subjectivity is often used to differentiate knowledge and belief, but knowledge is also categorized as objective and subjective. Hence, the distinction between subjective knowledge and belief is either blurred or the two concepts stand for a similar concept (Pehkonen & Pietilä, 2003). Besides, in philosophy, knowledge is defined as a justified true belief. Though the terms justified and true are used to show the distinctive features of knowledge, it clearly indicates that knowledge is a type of belief (Yero, 2002). Hence, knowledge is a type of belief in the objective and subjective categorization of knowledge, and belief is a type of knowledge in its philosophical definition. As Woods (1996) stated the boundaries between the two concepts are not also clear when teachers were interviewed to justify their decisions with a reference to their knowledge and beliefs. Woods reported that it was difficult to distinguish what belief and/or knowledge refer to teachers. He further added 'assumption' to the list and used a coined term of the three concepts (Belief, Assumption, Knowledge) BAK. Borg's explanation of teacher cognition as the notion that refers to the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching- what teachers know, believe and think" is comprehensive that governs the assertion of teacher cognition in this study (2003, p. 81).

### Approaches to Teaching Speaking Skills

Different approaches to teaching speaking have been adopted. Rhalmi (2017), for example, reported three approaches: the traditional Present, Practice and Produce (PPP) approach; the Test, Teach, Test (TTT) approach based on the task-based instruction, and the discovery approach based on awareness-raising, appropriation, and automaticity. Talley (2014), on the other hand, classified the approaches to teach speaking into two: explicit and implicit. Predominantly, the approaches to teaching speaking are categorized into two main types: direct approach and indirect approach.

The direct approach to teaching speaking focuses on the practice and development of isolated language forms (Goh and Burns, 2012). The practice involves a reproduction of predetermined language through drills, pattern practice, and structure manipulation. An indirect approach to teaching speaking, on the other hand, focuses on the creation of conditions for oral interaction to enable learners to engage in communicative activities (Richards, 2008; Goh & Burns, 2012). In the indirect approach, fluency is the primary concern, and learners are exposed to authentic and functional language use. Thus, the practice involves real-life communicative activities such as discussion, information-gaps, role-plays, simulation, and so on (Burns, 1998).

Exclusive reliance on one of the approaches to teaching speaking is disadvantageous as both approaches have their limitations (Goh and Burns, 2012). Thornbury and Slade (2006) for example stated that the direct approach focuses on the component of the language while the indirect approach focuses on the context of use. The focus on one aspect of teaching the skill and neglecting the other forces the learners to be good at the area of focus and weaker on the neglected one. Hence, an approach to teaching speaking that combines the features of the two approaches is considered to be the solution. Accordingly, Thornbury (2005) introduced a general approach to teaching speaking that consists of three cyclic stages: awareness-raising, appropriation, and autonomy. Awareness-raising is the first stage during which the learners identify their gaps and familiarize themselves with the knowledge designed to address the gap. Appropriation is the second stage at which the learners integrate the new knowledge into the existing one. At this stage, the learners start progressing from other-regulated practices to self-regulated ones. Autonomy is the final stage during which learners use the newly constructed knowledge in a real-life situation.

## Methods

### Research Design

This study aimed to explore EFL teachers' cognitions about teaching speaking skills. To achieve this purpose, a sequential mixed-methods research strategy was used. As Creswell (2003) stated this is a mixed-methods strategy that gives researchers the freedom to decide on the sequence and priority of the methods. Accordingly, a strategy that employed quantitative data collection and analysis first and also gave priority to the quantitative method was employed in this study.

### Research Sites and Participants of the Study

The study was conducted at secondary and preparatory schools in Gurage Zone, Southern Nations Nationalities Regional State, Ethiopia. 192 English teachers in 62

schools filled in the teacher questionnaire. Of the 192 participants, 139 (72.4%) were males while the remaining 53 (27.6%) were females. For the interview, four English teachers from three schools were chosen. The experienced teachers were purposefully selected to gather in-depth information from teachers with rich insights about the issue under investigation.

## Instruments

### Teacher Questionnaire

The teacher questionnaire was designed to survey English teachers' cognitions of teaching speaking. The questionnaire was prepared by reviewing the existing literature on teachers' cognitions and revision of questionnaires that have been used for similar research intents (Yoneska & Tanaka, 2013; Khader, 2012; Shigeru, 2012; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Johnson, 1992; Horwitz, 1987). The items in the questionnaire were grouped into four categories. The items in the first section were designed to investigate the participants' conceptions of teaching speaking skills in comparison to other language skills. The second section of the questionnaire was intended to explore teachers' cognitions about teaching speaking. It was designed in the form of five point-Likert scales ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". In the third part of the teacher questionnaire, three multiple-choice and four multiple response items were given. Finally, demographic questions were asked. The questionnaire was pilot tested to ensure face and content validity. Accordingly, some modifications were made to the wordings of the items and about 12 monotonous items were deleted. Besides, Cronbach's alpha was computed to determine the reliability of the items. It was computed for the two groups of items independently. The Cronbach's alpha result for the items in the first group was .706 while the result for the Likert-scale items was .722. Accordingly, the results show that the questionnaire has an acceptable degree of reliability as Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.7 is considered to show sufficiently reliable internal consistency (Muijs, 2004).

### Interview

A semi-structured key informants' interview was conducted with four core participants of the study. A semi-structured interview is a balance between structured and unstructured interviews in which guiding questions are prepared in advance that are often developed and elaborated during the interview (Dorneyi, 2007). In qualitative studies, the employment of a semi-structured interview is believed to minimize validity and reliability problems often caused by the overload of information as a semi-structured interview ensures consistency in data collection.

The interview guide was prepared based on the literature review and the data from the survey questionnaire. Afterward, the interview was done after the questionnaire was administered aiming to elicit teachers' cognitions, sources of teachers' cognitions, and espoused contextual factors that affect classroom practices in sufficient depth and breadth. The interviews were recorded with audio-recording material with the consent of the participants. Considering the interest of the participants, the interviews were conducted in English.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics (frequency counts) were computed to summarize teachers' cognitions. Crosstabs and Chi-square tests were also computed to see the relationships between teachers' reports of their beliefs and their gender and year of teaching experiences. Fisher's Exact test was also computed as an alternative to Chi-square tests when the expected counts less than five were more than twenty percent of the cells. A Phi-test was also computed for the variables that showed significant relationships to determine the strength of the relationships.

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data from the key informants' interviews. As Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) explained that qualitative content analysis follows the sequence of coding for themes, looking for patterns, making interpretations, and building theory. Dorneyi (2007) included transcribing the data and came up with four phases of the qualitative content analysis process: transcribing the data, pre-coding and coding, growing ideas and interpreting the data, and drawing conclusions. In this study, the four phases of the analytical process were performed. Having the side-by-side collection and interpretation of the qualitative data in mind, the data analysis was commenced with the verbatim transcription of data from the participants into word processing documents. All the recordings were transformed into texts. Then, the texts were read and re-read in their entirety aiming to be familiar with the data. The reduction and interpretation of the data then started with the initial coding of the text. In the initial coding, the texts were broken into segments, and labeling was given to the segments often by using the participants' own words. For the initial coding, hardcopy printouts of the texts were used, and labeling was given on the margin. Then, the initial codes with common concepts were grouped, and higher-order themes were developed. As the first coding may not always work well, the codes were reexamined and relabeled. The coding was similar to what Strauss and Corbin (1998) mentioned as open, axial, and selective coding of the ground theory analysis.

More importantly, as the researchers' capability to manage excessive amounts of qualitative data manually is the area of difficulty, the data analysis process was assisted with a computerized qualitative data analysis program, OpenCode 4.02

## Results

### The Teaching of the Language Skills and the Status of Speaking

Grammar was chosen by 67 (34.9%) of the respondents as the first aspect of the language they favored teaching the most. It was followed by writing while speaking was ranked third with a percentage of 28.6 and 20.8 respectively. Reading and vocabulary were ranked fourth and fifth with a percentage of 10.9 and 4.7 respectively. None of the participants chose listening as the skill they favored to teach. There was a statistically significant relationship between the skill the teachers favored teaching and their gender ( $P < .05$ ). The skill male teachers preferred to teach the most was grammar. It was followed by writing, speaking, reading, vocabulary, and listening descendingly. On the other hand, females' ranking of their preferences from the most to least chosen was: speaking, writing, reading, grammar, vocabulary, and listening. Similarly, there was a statistically significant relationship between the skill the teachers favored teaching and their experiences ( $P < .05$ ). The least experienced teachers (teachers with 1 to 5 years of experience) favored teaching speaking while the more (teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience) and the most experienced (teachers above 10 years of experience) preferred grammar. As the Phi results show, gender and experiences had moderate relationships with teachers' favorite skills to teach (Phi value  $< 0.5$ ).

Regarding the skill the teachers wanted to improve the most, speaking came first as it was chosen by 72 (37.5%) of the respondents. Writing and reading were the second and third skills the teachers wanted to improve with the percentage of 28.1 and 13 respectively. Vocabulary and listening ranked fourth and fifth while grammar was the least aspect teachers wanted to improve. The skill the teachers wanted to improve and their experiences had statistically significant relationships ( $P < .05$ ). Speaking was the most chosen by the least and most experienced teachers while teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience chose writing. On the other hand, the skill the teachers wanted to improve was not dependent on their gender as the relationship was not statistically significant.

Concerning the skill teachers wanted their students to improve the most, speaking and reading came first and second as they were chosen by 62 (32.8%) and 43 (22.4%) of the teachers respectively. Writing and grammar were chosen by 30 (15.6%) of the participants each as the skills they wanted their students to improve. Vocabulary and listening were the least selected skills. As the Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests show, there was no statistically significant relationship between the skill the teachers wanted their students to improve and their gender. However, teachers' experience had shown statistically significant relationships with their responses to the item ( $P < .05$ ). Teachers with one to ten years of teaching experience wanted their students to improve speaking while those with above ten years of experience chose reading.

As regards the most difficult skill to teach, the majority of the teachers (106/54.9%) chose listening. The participants placed speaking as the second most difficult skill to teach while writing and reading ranked third and fourth. Conversely, none of the participants considered grammar and vocabulary as difficult to teach. As listening was the most difficult skill to teach for the respondents in different groups, there was no statistically significant relationship between teachers' beliefs about the most difficult skill to teach and their gender and years of teaching experience.

A relative majority of the teachers thought that grammar was the first aspect of the language the learners were interested to learn (74/38.5%). It was followed by writing, speaking and reading with the percentage of 28.6, 19.3 and 11.5 respectively. On the other hand, vocabulary and listening were the least chosen ones as vocabulary was chosen by 1.6 percent of the teachers while only 0.5 percent of them went for listening. There was a statistically significant relationship between teachers' beliefs about the skills the learners wanted to learn the most and their gender and experiences ( $P < .05$ ). Male teachers perceived that learners were attracted by grammar while females thought their learners were interested in speaking. As far as their experiences are concerned, the teachers with one to five years of experience believed that the learners were interested in speaking while grammar was chosen by the more and most experienced ones. The Phi-values show that the relationships between teachers' beliefs and their gender and experiences were moderate (Phi value  $< 0.5$ ).

Speaking was chosen by most of the participants (117/60.9%) as the weakest part of their learners. The other oral skill, listening, ranked as the second weakest side of the learners as it was chosen by 56 (29.2%) of the respondents. The remaining four skills/aspects were only selected by about 10 percent of the respondents. Teachers' evaluation of the weakest part of the students did not have statistically significant relationships with their gender and experiences.

Reading was chosen as the first most important part of learning English (44/22.9%). Writing and speaking took the second and third places as they were chosen by 20.8 and 19.3 percent of the teachers respectively. Grammar was the fourth, listening the fifth, and vocabulary the least important aspects of learning English. The teachers' gender and experiences had a considerable impact on their belief about the most important part. As regards their gender, speaking was the most important and writing was the second most important for females, but for males, reading and grammar were the first and second most important parts respectively. As the effect size result shows, the strength of the relationship was moderate (Phi value  $< 0.5$ ). Teachers' years of service had also shown a statistically significant relationship to their beliefs. The teachers into the three categories of service years chose three different aspects. Speaking was the most important for teachers with one to five years of teaching experience, writing for teachers with six to ten years of experience while grammar was for those with above ten years of experience. Reading, which was chosen as the most important based on

the frequency counts, was the second most important for the teachers in the three categories. The Phi-value also revealed that the relationship between teachers' beliefs and experiences was strong (Phi value  $< 0.8$ ).

There were also associations among the skills teachers enjoyed teaching, the skill they thought the learners were interested in, and their beliefs about the most important part of English instruction, and their gender and experience. For example, grammar was an aspect of the language male English teachers enjoyed teaching, thought the learners were interested in and considered as the second most important area of the language. On the other hand, female teachers reported that speaking was the skill they preferred to teach, the learners wanted to learn the most and the most important part of learning English. Regarding experience, speaking was the chosen skill to teach, the favorite skill of the students to learn, and the most important aspect to the least experienced teachers. However, the more and most experienced teachers went to grammar.

Briefly, the results from the items in the first section of the questionnaire revealed the following points about speaking instruction. First, speaking was not a skill most of the teachers enjoyed to teach. It was chosen only by 20.8 percent of the teachers and was ranked as the third skill teachers favored to teach. However, it was the favorite skill to teach for females and the least experienced teachers. Second, speaking was the skill the teachers themselves wanted to improve and required their students to improve the most regardless of their gender and experiences. Third, speaking was perceived as the second most difficult skill to teach following listening. Fourth, most of the teachers believed that speaking was the weakest part of their learners. Though teachers believed that speaking was the weakest side of their learners and wanted them to work on it, they supposed that learners were interested in grammar and writing. Still, females and the least experienced teachers believed that learners were interested in speaking. Lastly, as far as teachers' beliefs about the most important part of learning English is concerned, speaking came third following reading and writing.

As a complement to this part, the four teachers in the qualitative part of the study were asked about the following points: how much they enjoyed teaching speaking, how difficult was teaching speaking, how weak were their students in spoken English, and how interested were their students in learning to speak. The teachers reported that teaching speaking was challenging as it was the skill the learners were uninterested in and had no the required background skill to understand even simple lessons. This contradicted their beliefs about how important speaking skill is to the academic and overall life of the students. T1 for example believed that being able to speak English was the means to show one's competence in the language; T2 and T3 supposed that the mastery of spoken English boosted students' confidence which in turn would help them succeed in academia, while T4 thought oral proficiency played a paramount role in the job-hunting process. Thus, the teachers were not pleased with their experiences of teaching speaking skills.

## Beliefs about What Learning Speaking Meant

The majority of the teachers (71.3%) did not believe that learning speaking was more about learning and memorizing common phrases and expressions. On the other hand, nearly twenty-two percent of the teachers took learning and memorizing common phrases as a key to learning speaking while seven percent of the teachers were uncertain. The item that presented teaching speaking as providing equivalent phrases or expressions in students' mother tongue was one of the items most of the teachers disagreed with as the vast majority of them (98.4%) did not endorse the statement. The statement "Learning speaking is mostly a matter of practicing real-life communicative activities," was accepted by most of the teachers (62%) while 25.5 percent disagreed and 12.5 percent were uncertain.

As the findings from the Chi-square and Fisher exact tests and Phi-values show there were significant relationships between teachers' perceptions of memorization in teaching speaking and their genders. The use of memorization was relatively favored by males over females. The relationship however was modest as the Phi-value was below 0.3. Perceiving the speaking instruction as a matter of practicing real-life communicative activities was a shared one, statistically significant relationships were also found between gender and experience. As far as their gender was concerned, the use of communicative activities was favored by males over females. Of the 119 respondents who agreed with the statement, 84 percent were males while only 16 percent were females. With regard to their experiences, the most and more experienced teachers agreed the most with the statement than the least experienced ones. The influence of gender was moderate as the Phi-value was less than 0.5; whereas, the influence of experience was stronger.

From a multiple-choice item, it was found that the vast majority of the participants (78.6%) accepted that learning English was mostly a matter of practicing the language and being able to use it for communication. Those who considered learning English as learning the grammar of the language and learning and memorizing the vocabulary words were 10.4 and 8.9 percent respectively. On the other hand, translation was chosen only by 2.1 percent of the teachers.

Similarly, the interviewed teachers thought learning speaking was all about practicing the language than the memorization of phrases and the study of equivalents in the students' mother tongue. For T1 and T2, for example, teaching speaking was helping the learners to practice the language by using a variety of classroom activities.

Accordingly, it was possible to say that the teachers' beliefs about what learning English in general and speaking in particular meant matched with the communicative views of language teaching.

## Beliefs about Teaching Speaking in Comparison to other Skills

The majority of the teachers (63%) assumed that learning speaking was different from learning other skills while thirty-three percent disagreed. Besides, the teachers considered speaking as a difficult language skill when compared to reading and writing. This is because most of the teachers (78.1%) believed that it was easier to read and write English than to speak it. Similarly, the findings from one of the multiple items revealed that most of the teachers (57.3%) rated speaking as a difficult skill while it was rated as a medium by about thirty-four percent, as easy by five percent, and as difficult skill by about four percent of the teachers. The statement "Students who are good at speaking are not good at written English," was accepted by most of the participants (55.2%) while about thirty percent disagreed and fifteen percent were uncertain.

The teachers' evaluation of whether speaking was an easier skill than reading and writing and their gender and experience had shown statistically significant relationships. Speaking was easier to the relative majority of males and teachers with six to ten years of experience than to the females and the most and least experienced ones. As the Phi-values indicate, the relationships between teachers' evaluations and their gender and experience were moderate. Besides, the teachers' belief students who were good at speaking were not at written English was significantly related to their gender and experience. The statement was endorsed by a relative majority of males and the most experienced teachers as compared to females and the least and more experienced ones.

To the four teachers as well, teaching speaking was different from teaching other language skills that require teachers' commitment and good command of the language. T1 for example stated the preconditions required for effective teaching speaking skills. These were: teachers' conviction that speaking should be taught in the language class, positive attitude towards teaching speaking, working on students' attitudes towards speaking and cleansing their misconceptions, patience and readiness to pay the prices of teaching speaking as they might be contested by students' lack of interest in learning to speak and different contextual factors. Despite the list of preconditions by all the teachers, they all agreed that teaching speaking lessons required good oral proficiency and understanding of a variety of teaching techniques when compared to teaching the other skills. They have also constantly indicated that teaching speaking to their students was a daunting task. As they indicated, they used to jump speaking lessons of the textbook like their teachers did.

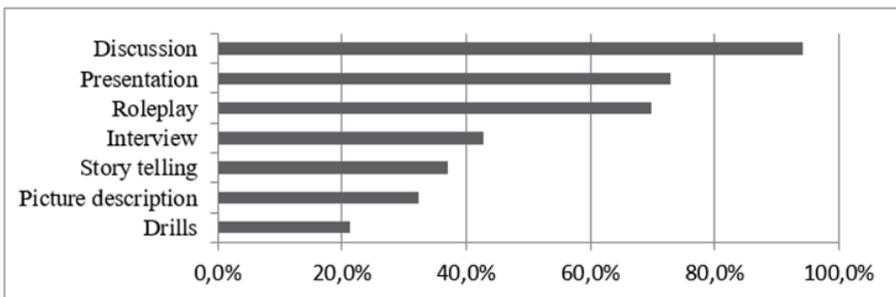
In short, the followings were revealed. First, learning speaking was different from learning other language skills to most of the teachers, a belief which would have a methodological impact. Second, most of the teachers believed that speaking was a difficult language skill by itself or when compared to other language skills. Third, most

of the teachers believed those learners who were good at oral skills were not good at written English.

## Beliefs about the Effective Classroom Activities and Modes of Interactions

Discussion was chosen by the vast majority of the teachers (94.3%) as an effective classroom activity in teaching speaking. Presentation and role-play took the second and third places as they were chosen by seventy-three and seventy percent of the teachers respectively. These were followed by interview and storytelling activities as they were chosen by forty-three and thirty-three percent of the teachers respectively. The classroom activities that were labeled as the least effective in teaching speaking were picture description/narration and repetition of drills.

Figure 1. Teachers' beliefs about the effective classroom activities in teaching speaking



Regarding the modes of interaction, group work was the most chosen mode of interaction as it was chosen by eighty-seven percent of the teachers. Pair-work was ranked as the second effective mode of interaction as it was picked by sixty percent of the teachers. On the other hand, whole-class work was the least chosen mode of interaction during a speaking task.

Group discussion was also the most effective classroom activity in speaking class for the four interviewed teachers. T1 for example mentioned discussion, interview and role-play as effective classroom activities but ranked discussion as the best. T4, on his part, reported that group discussion was the most effective classroom activity in teaching speaking. Discussion was also one of the three (discussion, picture description and presentation) effective classroom activities for T2. Though T3 did not list the activities, he thought that classroom activities that promote interaction are effective to which discussion can be a part.

In short, the discussion was regarded as an effective classroom activity and group work was picked as an effective mode of interaction in teaching speaking by the majority of the teachers. Jointly, group discussion was the effective classroom activity for the teachers in this study.

## Beliefs about the Ability to Learn Speaking

Most of the participant teachers thought that some people were born with an ability that was useful to learn speaking. Those who disagreed with the statement were about sixteen percent while eight percent were uncertain. The teachers' responses to the item that compared girls' and boys' capabilities at learning speaking did not clearly show where most of their beliefs laid. Accordingly, girls were better than boys at learning speaking to forty-five percent of the teachers while thirty-seven percent of them rejected the statement. Most of them (68.2%) thought Ethiopians were not good at learning to speak English. Those who endorsed the statement were only eighteen percent of the teachers while thirteen percent were uncertain.

As the results from the bivariate tests showed, girls were better than boys at learning speaking to the majority of female respondents as 77 percent of them agreed with the statement while only 33 percent of males did. The same was true to the relative majority of the experienced teachers (teachers with six and above years of experience) than to the least experienced ones. The relationships between teachers' evaluation of who was good at learning speaking and their gender and experience were moderate.

## Teachers' Self-concept

The majority of the respondents (68.3%) assumed that they had sufficient English proficiency essential to be good English teachers while only eleven percent disagreed with the statement. The teachers' response to the item that enquired if they believed their oral proficiency could be exemplary to the learners was mixed. The teachers who thought they were fluent and accurate in spoken English and could be role models to the students were about forty-three percent while about forty percent rejected it. As the teachers' response to the last item revealed, most of them (62%) thought they had an adequate methodological understanding that enabled them to use diverse teaching methods in speaking classes.

As the results from the bivariate analysis revealed, the males significantly outperformed the females in their perception of themselves. The majority of the males agreed with the statements that enquired the rating of their English proficiency and methodological understanding than females did. The relationships between male and female teachers' perception of their English proficiency and methodological

understanding were strong (Phi-value < 0.8); whereas, the influence of gender on their belief that their fluency and accuracy could be model to the learners was modest (Phi-value < 0.3).

Like the teachers' gender, their experience has also shown statistically significant relationships with the perceptions of their proficiency and understanding of the speaking skills teaching methods. As the females were outperformed by the males, the least and more experienced teachers were also outperformed by the experienced ones. In other words, the teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience perception of their proficiency and understanding of the teaching methods were by far positive than those with ten and fewer years of experience.

Like those who filled in the questionnaire, the interviewed teachers were also positive about their language proficiency and understanding of the methods. However, the nature of the data gathering instrument gave them the chance to mention some of their weaknesses. T1, for example, said that he lacked commitment and determinations which he believed were mandatory in teaching speaking. T2 also declared that she focused on covering the textbook than helping the learners to understand the lessons. Likewise, T3 reported he was not well prepared for speaking lessons ahead of time.

In general, the majority of the participants were optimistic about their English proficiency and understanding of the speaking skills teaching methods. Moreover, males and the most experienced teachers were more optimistic than the females and the least experienced ones.

## Teachers' Beliefs about the Learners

The vast majority of the teachers believed that the learners were interested in grammar and vocabulary than oral skills. The statement that stated learners considered learning to speak as a waste of time was endorsed by most of the teachers (56.3%) while twenty-seven percent of respondents disagreed. As to most of the teachers (62.5%), the learners thought speaking English perfectly with good pronunciation and fluency was a complex task to achieve. One of the statements the vast majority of the teachers agreed with was the one that talked about learners' fright. To ninety-two percent of the teachers, the learners feared to speak English in front of others. Asked if the learners used translation as a technique, almost half of the respondents (49.4%) affirmed that most students first thought how to say it in Amharic before saying it in English. However, thirty-four percent of the teachers were uncertain about the learners' use of translation as a technique while speaking in English while sixteen percent disagreed. Bearing the amount of time the learners have studied English in mind, most of the teachers (62%) were not satisfied with their students' overall progress. Those teachers who were satisfied with their students' progress amounted to forty-six percent.

In the Chi-square test, the teachers' gender and experiences and their evaluation of how the students consider the ability to speak English have shown statistically significant relationships ( $P$ -value  $< .05$ ). The relative majority of males and the most experienced teachers thought speaking perfectly with good pronunciation and fluency was considered a complex task to fulfill by the learners. The bivariate test was also computed to see which groups of teachers were highly dissatisfied with their students' progress. Males and the most experienced teachers were very much dissatisfied with their students' progress in learning English than the females and the least experienced teachers. The relationship between teachers' dissatisfaction and their gender and experience was strong ( $\Phi$ -value  $> 0.8$ ).

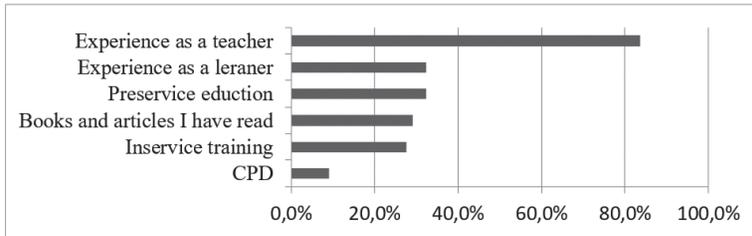
As the findings from the teacher questionnaire, the results from the interview data also showed that the teachers were not pleased with their learners' interest and ability in speaking. As to T1, for example, the learners were simply attending speaking classes because it was part of the syllabus. T2 also indicated that grammar was the only aspect of English language teaching that the students were interested in. T4 viewed the issue differently; he said the learners' had the desire to fluently speak English, but their desire even was naïve as they did not want to practice. Lack of interest was not the only issue the teachers complained about the students but also their lack of the basic background skills and experience of practicing classroom speaking activities. In this regard, T4 indicated his students could not understand the lessons due to their background while T1 labeled his students unfit to the grade level they were in. T3 on his part recommended that intervention is needed from the concerned bodies as the learners' command of English was very poor.

Briefly, the majority of the teachers were pessimistic about the students' interest and courage in learning to speak. On the contrary, they believed that the students were interested in grammar and vocabulary. They were also not satisfied with the overall progress of their learners as far as learning English was concerned.

## **Beliefs about the Aspects that Exerted Influences on their Beliefs**

The vast majority (83.6%) of the teachers thought that their beliefs about teaching speaking skills were very much influenced by their teaching experiences. Of the given alternatives, experiences as a learner at high schools and pre-service education programs in college/university ranked second as they were chosen by an equal number of the teachers (32.3%). The influence of the books/articles the teachers read and in-service training were picked by twenty-nine and twenty-seven percent of the respondents respectively. On the other hand, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) program was the least chosen.

Figure 2. Issues that influence the teachers' beliefs about teaching speaking



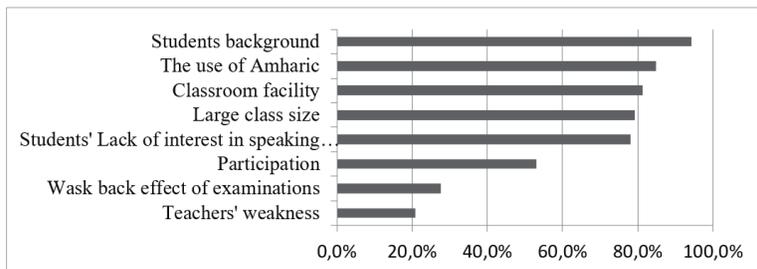
The findings from the teacher questionnaire revealed that the majority of the teacher believed their cognitions about teaching speaking skills was primarily influenced by their teaching experiences. The remaining four aspects (experience as a learner, preservice education programs, books, and training) almost had a similar impact on their beliefs while CPD was the least influencing aspect.

Unlike those who filled in the questionnaire, only one of the four interviewed teachers (T2) mentioned prior teaching experience as the source of his beliefs about teaching speaking. To T1 and T4, own learning experiences exerted the primary influence on their belief about how speaking could be effectively taught. Despite the labeling of own learning experience as the main source, T1 also added workshops and training he took part and the courses he took to the list. T3 on his part reported that in-service training played a pivotal role in shaping his thoughts.

## Beliefs about the Contextual Factors that Influence the Teaching of Speaking

To the vast majority (94.3%) of the teachers, the teaching of speaking was highly influenced by the students' lack of basic background skills. Of the given alternatives, four of them, which were ranked from second to fourth, were picked by a nearly similar number of the teachers. These were: the use of students' mother tongue in the classroom (84.9%), uncomfortable classroom atmosphere and inadequate classroom facilities (81.3%), large class size (79.2%), and students' lack of interest in speaking lessons (78.1%). Besides, the students' low and uneven participation was selected by fifty-three percent of the teachers. The two least chosen contextual factors were: teachers' insufficient oral proficiency and inadequate methodological understanding of teaching speaking (20.8%) and washback effects of national examinations (27.6%).

Figure 3. Teachers' beliefs about the contextual factors that influence the teaching of speaking



In the interview, the nature of the instrument gave the participants the possibility to mention most of the factors they thought were influencing the teaching of speaking. Still, most of the contextual the teachers reported were learner-related. All the teachers, for example, mentioned the following factors: learners' lack of the basic background skills that were required to understand even simple classroom instructions, inexperience in practicing classroom speaking activities, fear of the stage and making mistakes, and lack of interest in speaking lessons. As T1 indicated, the learners' lack of interest in speaking lessons originated from three sources: the focus on standardized tests to which speaking was not a part, hopelessness speaking in English was difficult to achieve even if they learn and practice it, and the misconception that learning English meant all about studying and knowing the grammar and vocabulary of the language. Besides the learners, three of the participants (T2, T3 and T4) reported that some of the speaking contents of the textbook were ineffective. To T3, for example, the textbook did not promote interactions while T4 oral skills were disregarded in the textbook as the focus was on the grammar of the language. T3 and T4 also blamed most of the English teachers for not having the expected command in the language and determination which they thought were fundamentals to teach speaking. Like the learner-related factors, the teachers also agreed that the teaching of speaking was impeded by large class size. As to T4, it was not only the size that impeded the instruction but also the seats as the learners sat on sealed desks which made group discussion, a speaking activity he regarded as the most effective, difficult. T2 and T3 also seemed to be bothered by the school administrators' demand to cover the textbook at any cost within the given time. Finally, T1 indicated that the students' master of speaking was hindered by the school culture. To him, the learners who practice speaking in and outside the classroom were afraid of their peers' criticism as speaking in English was considered showing off one's ability not only by the students but also by the teachers.

In general, the teachers thought that the student-related factors (lack of background, use of mother-tongue, and lack of interest) and the classroom-related

factors (inadequate classroom facility and large class size) played the leading roles in influencing the teaching of speaking. Most of the teachers however did not think that their English proficiency and methodological understanding had that much influence.

## The Relationships between Beliefs about Teaching Speaking and the Classroom Practices

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to rate the relationships between their beliefs how speaking could be effectively taught with the actual classroom practices in a five-point Likert scale item. The result revealed that a relative majority (49.5%) of the teachers believed there was a fair relationship between their beliefs and the classroom practices. However, thirty-one percent of the teachers rated the relationship as poor. Those who regarded the relationships between their beliefs and classroom practices as excellent and good were sixteen percent and two percent respectively.

*Table 1.* Teachers' rating of the relationships between their espoused beliefs and the classroom practices

Item	Ratings	Freq.	Percent
The relationships between teachers' beliefs and the classroom practices	Excellent	4	2.1
	Good	30	15.6
	Fair	95	49.5
	Poor	59	30.7
	Very poor	4	2.1

## Discussions

Speaking was considered as one of the important aspects of English language instruction to the learners' academic achievement and personal success. Besides, speaking was one of the vital productive skills the teachers wanted their students to improve the most. Identifying speaking as one of the most important skills and the teaching of the speaking lessons as a must was not only a shared belief for teachers in this study. Tleuov (2016) and Vibulphol (2004), for example, reported that teachers thought speaking has been one of the most important skills that needed to be learned and practiced. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) and Ur (1991) also stated that speaking is the most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language as success is often measured by how well the learners have improved their spoken ability. The teachers' beliefs about the benefits of speaking also matched with the reports of Baker and

Westrup (2003) that indicated individuals with good speaking skills have greater chances of better education, finding good jobs, and getting a promotion. Accordingly, speaking was the skill the teachers themselves wanted to improve and required their students to improve the most.

Though the teachers agreed on the importance of the ability to speak English and the essentiality of teaching speaking lessons, it was not the skill the teachers enjoyed to teach and the students preferred to learn as they were interested in grammar and vocabulary lessons. The teachers perceived speaking, the skill itself, and the teaching of speaking lessons as difficult when compared to other language skills. These all showed how speaking is overlooked in the instructional process. Likewise, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) and Musliadi (2016) reported that speaking is one of the disregarded areas of English language teaching at schools. It was alarming because speaking was also identified as the weakest part of the learners; it was the weakest but also the disregarded part of the instructional process.

The teachers' beliefs about the purpose of teaching speaking could play pivotal roles in their selection of the classroom activities and their classroom decisions. Therefore, it was important to understand the teachers' beliefs about the objectives of teaching speaking and the areas they wanted to focus on. The teachers in this study believed that developing learners' ability to form coherent connected speech with a normal level of speed, which we literally referred to as fluency, should be the primary focus. The teachers' prioritization of fluency accords with what Brown (1993) said that developing fluency has become a major objective in language teaching methodology. On the other hand, it contradicted with the arguments of educators like Lindahl (2018) who claimed that there should be a balance between fluency (i.e., being able to speak fluidly to convey meaning) and accuracy (i.e., being able to create utterances and pronounce words relatively error-free). However, if teachers' views of the speaking teaching objectives were used alone to match their cognitions with the speaking teaching approaches Goh and Burns (2012) mentioned (direct, indirect, and balanced), the teachers' views went to an indirect approach that prioritizes fluency over accuracy.

The teachers' were against learning and memorizing common phrases and expressions, and providing equivalent phrases or expressions in students' mother tongue in teaching speaking. They rather supported practicing real-life communicative activities. This belief of the teacher matched with the communicative views of language teaching as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) claims learners learn a language through the process of communicating in it rather than studying the given phrases and looking for their equivalents in the students' mother tongue (Richards, 2006; Richards and Rodgers, 1999).

It is assumed that teachers have different levels of language competencies (Shamim, 2008). The teachers in this study were confident that they had sufficient

English proficiency and adequate methodological understanding of teaching speaking which were required to become qualified English teachers. This finding disagrees with the reports by Young et al., (2014) that stated English language teachers knew their command of English was not sufficient for classroom teaching or communication. However, the experienced teachers' optimism than the least experienced ones coincided with what was reported by (Pennington and Richards, 2016).

Skehan (1991:276) stated the following about language aptitude: "there is a talent for learning languages that is independent of intelligence; it varies between people." Accordingly, to the teachers in this study, some students were better in their speaking aptitude (the ability to learn speaking), and speaking aptitude and writing aptitudes were incongruent as those who were good at written English were not good at speaking. By and large, they thought Ethiopians' speaking aptitude was not good.

Previous studies report that discussion exercises were the most preferred and used ones by English language teachers in oral skills lessons (Esayas, 2019; Gudu, 2015; Kaski-Akhawan, 2013). This was true to the majority of the teachers in this study as the discussion was the effective classroom activity and group work was the effective mode of interaction in teaching speaking.

Of the different sources of teachers' cognitions reported by different scholars, the ones by Richards and Lockhart (1996) were common. They identified six sources of teacher cognition which could be categorized into three major sources: own learning experience at primary and secondary schools, pre-service education programs (college and/or university), and teaching experiences. Of these, Borg (2003) reported that prior language learning experiences laid the foundation for teachers' cognitions that are often stronger and resistant to change. However, the teacher believed that their cognition about teaching speaking skills was primarily influenced by their teaching experiences. The remaining four aspects (experience as a learner, pre-service education programs, books, and training) almost had a similar impact on their beliefs while CPD was the least influencing aspect.

Regardless of the length of study, EFL learners have difficulties in using English for academic work and communication (Lee, 2009; Sawir, 2005). This seemed why the teachers were dissatisfied with the students' overall progress. The teachers did not think that the students were even good at the aspects, grammar and vocabulary, they were interested in let alone the skill they disliked. Moreover, the teachers assumed that the learner-related factors (i.e. lack of background, use of mother-tongue, and lack of interest) were the most responsible for the difficulties of teaching speaking.

The debate on the relationships between teachers' cognitions and their classroom practices is yet unresolved as different teacher cognition researchers have reported three forms of relationships: congruent (Mansour, 2009; Pajares, 1992), incongruent (Khader, 2012; Hendric, Harmon, & Linerode, 2004) and mixed (Borg, 2006; Farrell

& Lim, 2005). To the relative majority of the teachers in this study, the relationship between their beliefs and the classroom practices was fair.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Conclusions

Based on the findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

- Though speaking was considered an important part of English language instruction, it was one of the disregarded skills that the teachers did not enjoy teaching.
- The ability to speak English and teaching speaking lessons were difficult tasks for the teachers though they seemed to be confident about their English proficiency and understanding of the speaking skills teaching methods.
- To the teachers, practicing real-life communicative activities was more essential than memorization and translation to teaching speaking.
- Group discussion was an effective classroom speaking activity for the teachers.
- The teachers were doubtful about the relationships between their beliefs about teaching speaking and classroom practices.

### Recommendations

- The following recommendations are given to researchers who are interested in the teaching of speaking:
- It is pivotal to investigate the problems the teachers encounter in teaching speaking and show the possible solutions.
- Studies on why females and least experienced teachers are pessimistic about their English proficiency and understanding of the speaking skills teaching methods than the males and experienced teachers are also required.
- It is also important to study if what the teachers think of the students is real or teacher constructed.

- The practice and contributions of the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) program for the teachers' professional developments needs to be investigated as it was the least chosen regarding its contributions to the teachers' beliefs.
- The study on the relationships between teachers' beliefs about teaching speaking and their classroom practices can also contribute greatly.

The researcher also recommends awareness-raising and professional training to be given to the teachers. Thus, the teacher training colleges and universities or the zonal and Wordea education bureaus need to shed light on the teachers' conceptions of the ability to speak and the teaching of speaking lessons as difficult as that can have methodological impacts.

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