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Students' Perceptions of Speaking Materials' Alignment with Communicative Needs: A Focus Group Investigation

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated how second- and third-stage English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at the University of Duhok (UoD), English Language Department, evaluated the speaking materials used in their first semester in relation to their communication requirements. The study conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with 24 students (12 females and 12 males, respectively) who were chosen from a total of approximately 250 students. Thematic analysis of focus group discussion transcripts concentrated on understanding students' experiences regarding the materials based on academic and professional usability and cultural match, as well as assessment procedures. The study demonstrated that students gained confidence through the materials, yet many students questioned their connection to practical situations and cultural alignment, as well as testing procedures, particularly students in the third stage. Third-stage students expressed a preference for authentic materials along with topics focused on achieving fluency above everything else. Second-stage students valued teacher assistance more than anything else. Students progressively altered their perceptions of speaking materials during their linguistic development and their increased need for communicative abilities. The evaluation process shows that student feedback helps educators develop speaking materials by matching it with the students' miscellaneous needs at the College of Basic Education.

تصورات الطلاب حول توافق الأدوات الناطقة مع
احتياجات التواصل: دراسة جماعية مركزة

الباحث بختيار شاهين محمد شريف/ كلية التربية الأساسية –جامعة دهوك
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المُستخلص

بحثت هذه الدراسة النوعية في كيفية تقييم طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في كلية التربية الأساسية، جامعة دهوك، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، في المرحلتين الثانية والثالثة، للوسائل الشفهية المستخدمة في الفصل الدراسي الأول، وفقًا لمتطلباتهم التواصلية. أجريت الدراسة من خلال مناقشات جماعية مركزة مع 24 طالبًا (12 أنثى و12 ذكرًا على التوالي) تم اختيارهم من إجمالي 250 طالبًا تقريبًا. ركز التحليل الموضوعي لسجلات المناقشات الجماعية المركزة على فهم تجارب الطلاب للوسائل التي تعتمد على قابليتها للاستخدام الأكاديمي والمهني والتوافق الثقافي، بالإضافة إلى إجراءات التقييم. أظهرت الدراسة أن الطلاب اكتسبوا الثقة من خلال وسائل التعليم، إلا أن العديد منهم شكك في ارتباطها بالمواقف العملية والتوافق الثقافي، بالإضافة إلى إجراءات الاختبار، وخاصةً طلاب المرحلة الثالثة. أعرب طلاب المرحلة الثالثة عن تفضيلهم للمواد الحقيقية، إلى جانب المواضيع التي تركز على تحقيق الطلاقة اللغوية فوق كل اعتبار آخر. وقيم طلاب المرحلة الثانية مساعدة الأساتذة أكثر من أي شيء آخر. وقد غيّر الطلاب تدريجيًا تصوراتهم للمواد الشفهية خلال تطورهم اللغوي، وتزايدت حاجتهم إلى مهارات التواصل. تبين عملية التقييم أن ردود الطلاب تساعد الأساتذة على تطوير وسائل التحدث من خلال مطابقتها مع الاحتياجات المتنوعة للطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية : وسائل التحدث، الاحتياجات التواصلية، تصورات الطلاب، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، مناقشات المجموعات المركزة

1. Introduction

Instructional materials play a crucial role in determining the success of language education for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Tomlinson, 2011). High-quality language education has become an immediate necessity within Duhok in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. All students need functional English language abilities to fulfill educational requirements as well as meet the requirements of an internationalizing world economy and changing local employment market.

The essential competencies needed for effective communication consist of fluency, linguistic accuracy, and sociocultural awareness according to Bygate (2001), Harmer (2007) and Richards and Rodgers (2014). Students must build three fundamental abilities which include maintaining fluid conversation skills and improving their

language abilities while achieving proper pronunciation during different types of communication situations. Materials for teaching need to be designed to provide actual usefulness to learners. The development of communicative competence requires materials that promote real-life application according to both Hedge (2000) and Nunan (1991). The University of Duhok (UoD) EFL learners need to develop oral communication skills due to their fundamental learning objective.

Students at UoD encounter difficulties when they try to transfer their classroom speaking skills into genuine real-life situations. The assessment of current speaking materials becomes necessary since they potentially fail to support students in developing communicative competencies. The educational curriculum focuses on communicative competence development, yet research investigating students' practical experiences with the materials remains scarce—especially regarding their practicality, cultural appropriateness, and how well they match learners' needs. Currently, second- and third-stage students primarily use *Communicate: Listening & Speaking Skills* (Pickering, 2012) and *Q: Skills for Success: Listening and Speaking Level 3* (Craven & Sherman, 2022), respectively, as the core materials for speaking instruction.

The increasing interest in learner-centered method has created the necessity for students ' improved perspectives during assessing classroom materials. Student feedback lets educators develop educational approaches which prove more useful and appropriate to improve students' communication performance levels and build their self-assurance in real-life scenarios.

1.1 Research Problem

While the English Department at UoD offers a dedicated Listening and Speaking course, concerns remain about students' development of effective oral communication—particularly regarding fluency, pronunciation, and confidence. A critical question arises: Do the current speaking materials truly meet the communicative needs of students?

Despite the use of multiple speaking materials, there is a lack of research into how students themselves perceive these materials in relation to their everyday and professional communication goals. This study aims to address that gap by investigating

second- and third-stage students' perceptions of the speaking materials used during the first semester of their current academic stage, with a focus on alignment with their communicative needs.

1.2 Research Question

This study aims to answer the following question:

How well do second- and third-stage students perceive that their speaking materials address their communication needs?

1.3 Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore how undergraduate students from the second and third stages perceive the extent to which first-semester speaking materials support their academic and practical communication needs. In particular, it investigates how well these materials align with students' communicative requirements, thereby addressing the gap in existing research on student-centered evaluations of speaking instruction.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The assessment process conducted by students regarding their speaking materials creates essential feedback that benefits both education instructors and curriculum development teams. Instructors can use practical insights about materials as observed by learners to choose better pedagogical approaches and learning materials. These findings directly support UoD and other institutions teaching EFL in comparable contexts to improve their teaching quality. The research expands existing knowledge by studying Kurdish-speaking EFL learners while showing how their speaking materials match or differ from their genuine communication needs in real-life settings. The study shows both positive and negative aspects of present materials which will create essential foundations for future improvements in educational content development and teaching practices.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The research examines students in the second and third stages of the English Department at the College of Basic Education at the UoD during the academic period of

2024–2025. The study investigates student perceptions regarding the speaking materials from their first semester and their connection to academic and daily communication requirements.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review
2.1 Introduction: The Importance of Learner Perceptions in Speaking Materials Evaluation

The evaluation of EFL speaking materials depends on expert analysis together with pedagogical frameworks according to Richards (2019) and Tomlinson (2011). Learning perceptions matter equally to the development of motivation because they shape both student engagement and educational results (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Assessing student experiences of these materials provides fundamental knowledge about their practical implementation as part of instructional design. This segment reviews fundamental frameworks about communicative competence followed by principles from the field of second language acquisition and an examination of learner perceptions during materials evaluation along with research that validates FGDs in data collection.

2.2 Defining Communicative Needs in EFL

Real-world language use requires all three components of communicative competence, which include linguistic elements together with sociolinguistic aspects as well as strategic abilities (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). The speaking materials, according to Richards (2008), must transcend structural exercises and vocabulary charts to enable students to accomplish various tasks that help them:

- Express opinions and emotions,
- Navigate social and cultural contexts,
- Apply communication strategies to overcome linguistic barriers

With this knowledge of communication demands, this study evaluates whether the present speaking materias at the UoD help students to efficiently perform communicative tasks in both academic and occupational environments. This theoretical

framework guides the research question directly, which seeks to know how well students think that their materials address real-world communicative demands. The qualitative study's data analysis has shown four major thematic areas: (1) Perceived Impact of Materials on Communicative Skills Development, (2) Identified Limitations in Addressing Communicative Needs, (3) Perceptions of Cultural Relevance in the Materials, and (4) Opportunities for Self-Assessment and Feedback. In Theme 1, the sub-themes that were found there are *Enhanced Speaking Confidence and Pronunciation*, *Practical Application through Interactive Learning* and *Vocabulary Acquisition and Practical Use*. The major features of communicative competence that are signified by these sub-themes are strategic competence (e.g., building confidence), sociolinguistic competence (e.g., engaging in role-plays and realistic simulations) and linguistic competence (e.g., vocabulary development and contextual application).

These dimensions are also presented in the graphical theme map (refer to Figure 1 in Section 4.1), which is the visualization of the relationship between the themes and sub-themes identified and the theoretical model of communicative competence. As a result, the framework was not only the basis of the study design but also the root of the thematic coding and interpretation of the focus group data, which guaranteed that the findings were not only conceptually and pedagogically well-founded but also stayed conceptually and pedagogically
coherent.

2.3 Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Speaking Development

SLA theories provide a foundation for evaluating speaking materials in EFL contexts. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input slightly above the learner's current level. Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis highlights the need for learners to produce language actively, while Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis supports the value of meaningful communication and negotiation of meaning. These theories collectively justify the focus on materials that promote interaction, fluency, and task-based speaking. Furthermore, affective factors like motivation and anxiety influence students' willingness to engage in speaking activities. This theoretical grounding informs the study's goal of examining whether speaking

materials facilitate active, confidence-building communication aligned with learners' needs.

2.4 The Significance of Learner Perceptions in Materials Evaluation

Learner perceptions are not merely opinions; they reflect whether key SLA and communicative principles are successfully realized in the classroom. If students perceive materials as mismatched to their needs, it can result in reduced confidence, low motivation, and diminished fluency (Mishan & Timmis, 2015). The current study explores these perceptions directly, aligning theoretical principles with lived student experiences. As such, the research question integrates learner perception as a valid and theory-driven indicator of communicative alignment and material effectiveness.

2.5 Qualitative Approaches to Understanding Learner Perceptions: The Role of Focus Groups

Qualitative methods, for example, FGDs, reveal in-depth information about students' experiences with educational materials. FGDs make it possible for group members to discuss and share complex ideas, leading to a better shared understanding (Bryman, 2016; Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). EFL researchers have found that FGDs are useful for understanding learners' opinions on speaking instruction. Dincer and Dariyemez (2020) used FGDs to find out which aspects of speaking lessons are most important, including authentic materials, relevance to context, and learner involvement, which are also the focus of this study. The current study uses FGDs to go beyond earlier studies by investigating how UoD students perceive speaking materials in light of their communicative requirements.

2.6 Previous Studies on Learner Perceptions of Speaking Materials

Literature about materials evaluation has reached extensive dimensions yet only a small number of studies examine the developmental alignment between speaking materials and learner perceptions. Several related investigations have generated useful findings.

- **Ramadhan and Hussein (2020)** performed a mixed-methods study at the UoD in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to evaluate the combination of listening and speaking skills. The research data established that interactive learning with peers and social media communication with native speakers led to better speech proficiency. This local study conducted in the same institutional and regional setting of the current research validates communicative approaches and confirms the importance of interactive speaking activities for Kurdish EFL education.

- **Riadil (2020)** investigated speaking challenges of EFL learners at Tidar University in Indonesia through questionnaire research. The students reported inadequate vocabulary and pronunciation support as weaknesses of current speaking materials which affect their communicative competence development.

- **Hadijah and Musfirah (2022)** conducted research to investigate how small group discussions affect speaking skills of learners. Students boosted their competence together with their speech fluency because of learner-centered educational materials containing regular speaking practice opportunities.

- **Huynh and Dan (2022)** investigated how authentic materials enhance intercultural competence development in Vietnamese students learning English as a foreign language. Students welcomed culturally diverse materials because these elements boosted their motivation and helped them better understand the context while demonstrating the worth of materials that mimic actual communication.

- **Hussein (2024)** conducted an experimental research study to determine how Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) impacted English language communication skills among Iraqi EFL learners. The research confirmed that students trained with CLT-based methods achieved superior fluency together with higher confidence levels instead of traditional educational approaches. The research emphasizes the importance of communicative frameworks as tools for improving practical speaking abilities, thereby supporting the main focus of this

study about students choosing real-world speaking materials.

Some research such as Bondouck and Sabuncuoglu (2022) examined speaking activities from the instructor's perspective regarding pair and group work. The research provided instructive pedagogical information but failed to assess how learners judge the speaking materials directly.

Research has shown that learner perceptions of speaking materials' usefulness and relevance and interactivity demands more attention in Iraqi Kurdistan. The current research intends to bridge this knowledge gap.

2.7 Conclusion and Relevance to the Study

The research investigation demonstrates that communicative needs play a central role in EFL instruction while learner perceptions serve as essential factors for teaching material evaluation. FGDs as qualitative research methods help researchers obtain deep insights regarding learners' perceptions. The current research adds to this academic field by analyzing second- and third-stage students at the UoD's College of Basic Education, English Department about their speaking materials' correspondence to their communicative needs through FGDs as the main data collection method. This research investigation yields critical information to help teachers and materials developers improve the usefulness and effectiveness of speaking materials used in EFL settings.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current study used a qualitative research design to deeply study second- and third-stage EFL students' experiences with first-semester speaking materials that should align with their communicative needs. The current study used a qualitative design as an optimal method to investigate deeply students' perceptions about first-semester speaking material suitability for their communicative needs at second- and third educational levels. Qualitative research produces an in-depth comprehension of participants' interpretations about their experiences by exploring their subjective understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The choice of a qualitative approach through FGDs proved appropriate because

students needed to share their subjective perceptions, which led to uncovering complex understandings.

3.2 The Sample of Participants

A total of 24 students (12 second stage and 12 third stage; of approximately 250 students from the English Department at the University of Duhok (half male, half female) were chosen. First, participants were stratified according to perceived speaking proficiency as determined by instructors and student self-reporting, and then randomly selected within each stratum to achieve diversity and eliminate bias. Gender balance was maintained in the sample, but it was not a primary focus of the study.

3.3 Research Instrument

The primary instrument for data collection in this study was a semi-structured focus group discussion (FGD) protocol. This protocol consisted of a series of semi-structured prompts designed to elicit students' perceptions and experiences related to their first-semester speaking materials. The prompts focused on key areas of interest, such as: (a) students' perceptions of how well the materials addressed their real-world and academic speaking goals, and the strengths of the materials in this regard, (b) the extent to which the materials were designed to address cultural relevance in real-world communication contexts, (c) the availability and usefulness of self-assessment opportunities within the materials, with specific examples provided by the participants, and (d) any challenges students encountered while using the materials. The semi-structured nature of the protocol allowed for flexibility in the discussion, enabling the facilitator to probe further into interesting points raised by the participants and to adapt the order of questions as needed to maintain a natural flow of conversation.

3.4 Validity of the FGD Prompts

Multiple steps were implemented to improve the validity of the FGD prompts. First, the prompts were carefully designed to ensure alignment with the research question, specifically addressing students' perceptions of how well speaking materials meet their communicative needs. The prompts were also grounded in the theoretical framework of

communicative language teaching (CLT) and principles of effective materials design, allowing for an exploration of key aspects such as communicative competence and material relevance. Additionally, the discussion tool underwent expert review by a panel of jury members, whose feedback helped assess clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility, leading to refinements in the final protocol. Finally, a pilot test was conducted on 17 February 2025 with a small group of students (4 students) from second and third academic stages to identify any ambiguities in the questions and evaluate the discussion's flow and duration. Insights from this pilot phase informed minor adjustments to the prompts and overall procedure.

3.5 Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

3.5.1 Link Between Discussion Prompts and Emergent Themes

In order to ensure transparency during the thematic analysis, Table 1 in sub-section 4.2.3 shows how the study's design contributed to each emerging theme. To provide more context, a supplementary table included in the appendices provides quotations from participants and their assigned codes for Theme 1.

Table 1
Alignment of Discussion Prompts and Emergent Themes

Reframed Prompt (General Focus)	Emergent Themes
Evaluation of semester materials in relation to communicative goals	Theme 1: Perceived Impact of Materials on Communicative Skills Development; Theme 2: Identified Limitations in Addressing Communicative Needs
Examination of cultural relevance in speaking materials	Theme 3: Perceptions of Cultural Relevance in the Materials
Presence of self-assessment mechanisms in course content	Theme 4: Opportunities for Self-Assessment and Feedback

3.5.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through FGDs conducted with carefully chosen student participants during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. The FGDs took place across four separate sessions on 23-24 February 2025. The first two sessions were

conducted with second-stage students, and the last two sessions were conducted with third-stage students. Each discussion lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. The recordings were transcribed using automated transcription software (e.g., Transkriptor, TurboScribe), followed by manual verification.

Even though the FGDs were held within a short timeframe in February 2025, the determination of data saturation was made during the post-collection analysis. Transcribing and coding of all four FGD sessions revealed that the final transcripts did not introduce any new codes or themes. The use of semi-structured prompts that covered the research question in detail resulted in diverse and in-depth responses from the participants. The consistent patterns and repeated themes across participants proved that thematic saturation had been attained, which confirmed the data collected was enough to answer the study's research questions.

3.5.3 Data Analysis Process

The researcher conducted thematic analysis of their transcripts by employing the Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 87–88) six-phase framework. The phases were as follows:

1. **Familiarization with the Data**: Repeated reading of recorded transcripts by the researcher enabled deep engagement with the gathered data.
2. **Coding**: Data analysis involved coding specific segments throughout the data which received assigned labels.
3. **Searching for Themes**: An examination of code patterns and relationships took place as part of theme identification.
4. **Reviewing Themes**: A review process was conducted to refine themes by evaluating both the extracted codes and larger dataset information.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes**: A process of defining and naming every theme involved assigning it a direct descriptive name.
6. **Final Analysis and Reporting**: The researchers selected representative data excerpts to illustrate each theme and integrated interpretations which addressed the research question.

Thematic analysis represents "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79). This method guided the entire research process.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. Prior to their participation, all students were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the commencement of the FGDs. To maintain anonymity, each participant was assigned a code label (e.g., *P1–M 2nd Stage*), where P stands for Participant, M/F indicates gender, and "2nd Stage"/"3rd Stage" refers to academic level. All audio recordings and transcription data have been stored securely in a password-protected digital folder and will be retained until the study and related publications are completed, after which they will be permanently deleted. The study adhered to ethical procedures established by UoD while following human participant research guidelines established by British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018).

4. Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1 Introduction to Findings

A thematic analysis research approach delivered findings from focus groups involving second- and third-stage undergraduate EFL students studying at the College of Basic Education within the University of Duhok. The participant identification system consists of (P#–Gender Stage) with P representing Participant and M/F representing male or female and 2nd/3rd Stage representing academic stages.

The research objective focused on assessing how effectively the speaking materials meet their communicative requirements. The study revealed four primary themes that provided valuable information about student interaction with speaking-related materials. The following subsequent sections analyze each theme through real comments from participants.

The thematic map presented in Figure 1 specifically illustrates Theme 1 and its sub-themes, mapping them onto core components of communicative competence—strategic, sociolinguistic, and linguistic. It does not depict the other key themes that emerged from the FGDs. This mapping illustrates how learners' experiences reflect these theoretical dimensions. The diagram serves as a sample of how the thematic analysis was conducted and is provided for transparency. The other themes are discussed in the text but are not visually represented in this diagram. Further details of Theme 1, including direct participant quotations and associated codes, are provided in a table (see Appendix A).

Figure 1
Thematic map of Theme 1 and its sub-themes, aligned with components of communicative competence.
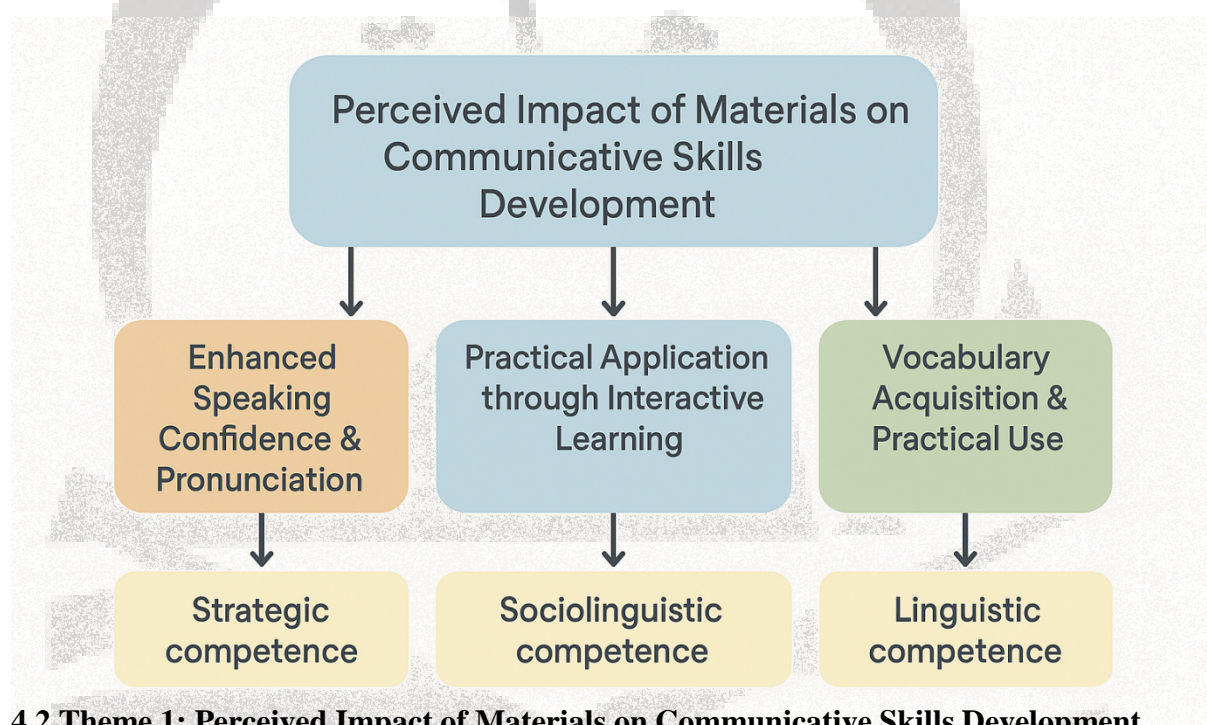
4.2 Theme 1: Perceived Impact of Materials on Communicative Skills Development

Students in their second- and third-stage of education evaluated how first-semester speaking materials enhanced their development of communicative skills such as speaking confidence and pronunciation together with practical language application and vocabulary acquisition.

4.2.1 Enhanced Speaking Confidence and Pronunciation

The second-stage students credited their development of speaking confidence, together with pronunciation, to teacher encouragement along with structured classroom interaction. The participant (P3-F 2nd Stage) noted, *"Teacher support for fearless communication and pronunciation instruction had a major role in developing my confidence"*. Another (P1-F 2nd Stage) mentioned, *"Speaking with the teacher alone really helped me feel more confident for the speaking exams."* The responses from these participants indicate that they depend on teacher-directed support together with guided practice because they are at an early stage of language development. Students in their third stage of development valued authentic materials together with independent learning activities above all else. A third-stage participant (P12-F) noted:

> *Native speaker videos within the speaking course provided me with significant help. Watching native speakers articulate their thoughts naturally and pronounce their words provided me with a specific objective. My attempt to imitate their speaking patterns and emphasis in speech significantly improved my own speaking.*

This development signifies students will become more independent in their use of natural language models as their educational level advances. According to participant (P4-M 3rd Stage), *"A teacher like Mr. X or Mr. Y holds greater value compared to selecting superior learning materials."* Most third-stage participants showed growing interest in language materials which depict authentic language patterns.

4.2.2 Practical Application through Interactive Learning

The participants from the second and third stages identified beneficial active teaching approaches that integrated or supplemented the speaking materials. Second-stage participants observed concrete advantages of these activities that helped their communicative growth. According to the participant (P8-M 2nd Stage), *"Role-plays focusing on newspaper reports allowed me to develop natural communication abilities as well as vocabulary skills. And group activities like budget allocation scenarios also*

improved my confidence and speaking skills." Another student (P2-M 2nd Stage) said, *"Debates on topics such as 'Don't judge a book by its cover' improved my grammar and fluency."*

The third-stage students demonstrated an understanding of practical applications by considering their relation both to present reality and future communication requirements. One participant (P10-M 3rd Stage) described role-playing activities that involved students*: "We role-played as a store owner or student or worker,"* because they delivered realistic simulations of actual scenarios. Another participant (P1-M 3rd Stage) commented, *"The group discussions, even on simple topics, helped us learn how to express our ideas clearly, which is important outside the classroom too."* The participants in the third stage appeared to understand better how the interactive activities directly connected to their readiness for post-academic communication skills development.

4.2.3 Vocabulary Acquisition and Practical Use

Vocabulary acquisition and its practical application were highlighted by students from both the second and third stages, although the emphasis and specific benefits noted differed somewhat. Third-stage students were particularly vocal about the materials' role in expanding their vocabulary and facilitating its use in various contexts. One student (P5-F 3rd Stage) noted, *"I learned new vocabulary from the book... I used them in daily conversations and during my exams."* Another student (P9-M 3rd Stage) appreciated the textbook's structured organization: *"Dividing content into sections like vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar... That was very helpful,"* suggesting a conscious effort to learn and apply new words systematically.

While second-stage students did not emphasize as heavily on vocabulary acquisition as a primary outcome, some did acknowledge its connection to practical communication within interactive activities. For example, a second-stage participant (P6-M), when discussing role-plays, stated: "Role-plays helped me with real-world communication and vocabulary." Another second-stage student (P3-F) noted, "*Sometimes in the debates, I had to learn new words to explain my points better."* This indicates that vocabulary learning was occurring for second-stage students, often

embedded within communicative tasks, whereas for third-stage students, it appeared to be a more consciously recognized and explicitly applied outcome of engaging with the materials.

4.3 Theme 2: Identified Limitations in Addressing Communicative Needs

This theme focuses on the aspects where students perceived the first-semester speaking materials as falling short in adequately addressing their communicative needs, highlighting areas for potential improvement. While limitations were identified by students in both stages, the nature and focus of these concerns often differed, reflecting their varying levels of linguistic development and communicative priorities.

4.3.1 Outdated Materials

Concerns regarding outdated materials were primarily voiced by second-stage students. One participant (P7-M 2ⁿᵈ Stage) stated: *"The book helped improve my confidence, listening, and speaking skills, but it is outdated. The textbook edition is from 2012 or 2014, and some words have changed in meaning."* Another student (P6-M 2ⁿᵈ Stage) echoed this sentiment, criticizing *"the textbook design [as] outdated, with irrelevant or low-quality pictures,"* and added that *"some exercises felt too basic for college-level students."* These critiques suggest that the currency and relevance of the materials were salient issues for students at this stage.

In contrast, third-stage students did not explicitly raise the issue of outdated content as a significant limitation in their discussions. This difference might indicate that as students progress, other aspects of the materials' effectiveness (e.g., advanced exercises, supplementary materials) become more prominent in their evaluation—or that more updated materials were used in later stages.

4.3.2 Need for More Advanced Content vs. Issues with Clarity

The perception of needing more advanced content was expressed by some second-stage students, while third-stage students highlighted issues with the clarity of certain material. One second-stage student (P10-M) suggested: "*For second-semester, the book should be more advanced to ensure continuous improvement in communication,*

speaking, and listening skills." This reflects a desire for materials that continue to challenge and push their developing language abilities. Conversely, a third-stage student (P1-F) noted that *"Some phrases were challenging, like idioms, and they weren't always explained well,"* indicating that certain expressions or vocabulary in the materials may have hindered comprehension for more advanced learners if not adequately scaffolded. This contrast suggests that while second-stage students looked for more complex input, third-stage students focused on the need for better support and clarity within the existing challenging content.

4.3.3 Insufficient Focus on Speaking Skills

The concern about an insufficient focus on speaking skills was predominantly raised by third-stage students. One student (P11-M 3rd Stage) noted: *"I don't think the book is designed to improve speaking skills... students often revert to their native language because there aren't enough activities that really make us speak."* This suggests a perceived disconnect between the materials' content and the specific goal of enhancing oral communication at a more advanced level. Another participant (P7-F 3rd Stage) showed this concern: *"I think college was not too helpful in improving our English and speaking... The materials were not so helpful, only a little bit."* Additionally, a third stage student (P9-M) provided a mixed evaluation, praising the course structure and teacher's input but indirectly suggesting that speaking development depended heavily on the teacher rather than the materials themselves: *"The most important part was Mr. X himself... He divided us into groups and gave us timed speaking activities."* This reliance on the teacher highlights a perceived absence of integral support for speaking practice in the textbook.

While second-stage students appreciated the speaking practice they received (as noted in Theme 1), they did not explicitly critique the overall focus on speaking within the materials. This difference might reflect the evolving expectations of learners as they progress and seek more targeted speaking development.

4.3.4 Engagement Issues with Certain Materials and Language Variety

Engagement with certain materials was a notable limitation for third-stage

students. A participant (P10-M 3rd Stage) stated: *"Some materials, like grammar and translation, don't really engage students... they look plain, and we don't see how they help us speak better."* Furthermore, another third-stage student (P6-M) pointed out a preference for language variety, stating, *"We prefer American, but our textbook is in British English, which sometimes feels less relevant to what we watch and hear."* In contrast, second-stage students did not explicitly mention issues of engagement with specific material types or preferences for language variety as significant limitations affecting their speaking development. This could indicate that basic engagement with the novelty of learning and the core content was more salient at the earlier stage.

4.3.5 Gaps in Real-World Application

The feeling that the materials did not adequately prepare them for real-world communication was primarily expressed by third-stage students. One student (P7-F 3rd Stage) noted: *"The materials were not so helpful in making us able to speak outside the class. The situations in the textbook felt very academic or basic."* This suggests a desire for more authentic and practical communicative scenarios as students approach a level where they might use English more frequently outside of academic contexts. Another participant, (P10-M 3rd Stage), added to this opinion by remembering: "There was one subject, Debates. It was first year... So there's also imitation going on in the process of learning the subject." This mention of a different subject that he exposed, where active speaking was practiced through role-play, is simple evidence that there were speaking tasks from the textbook that were not as realistic as the former in nature. Moreover, this lack of full engagement with practice also implies the vocal limitations of the educational material in being a part of the preparation process for dynamic, real-life communication.

Second-stage students, while valuing practical application (as seen in Theme 1), did not explicitly identify a gap in preparing them for real-world speaking as a major limitation of the materials.

4.3.6 Classroom Dynamics and Participation

Interestingly, a limitation related to classroom dynamics and participation was specifically highlighted by second-stage students. One participant (P5-M 2nd Stage)

recommended, *"Reduce class sizes to improve participation and engagement,"* while another (P4-F 2nd Stage) echoed this sentiment, stating, "*Focus on reducing class sizes to allow more speaking opportunities."* This suggests that for second-stage students, the structural constraints of the learning environment, such as class size, were perceived as significant barriers to developing their speaking skills, potentially overshadowing some limitations of the materials themselves. Third-stage students did not raise this issue as prominently, perhaps indicating a greater focus on the content and design of the materials at their more advanced stage.

The research enabled deeper understanding of students' subjective assessments at different skill levels by showing their complete statements about speaking materials limitations across FGDs through comparative analysis. The varying student insights reveal the changes in educational goals along with obstacles that occur during EFL learning progression.

4.4 Theme 3: Perceptions of Cultural Relevance in the Materials

This theme investigates student assessments of cultural content in the first-semester speaking materials provided to their current educational level. Students in both second- and third-stage reported initial limitations of the materials but the third-stage students observed instructors making continuous improvements by adding culturally relevant content in the present (second) semester.

4.4.1 Initial Cultural Gaps and Superficial Treatment

First semester speaking materials received criticism from students of both stages because it contained minimal cultural content which was often superficial. The participants of the second stage commented on several occasions that almost none of the teaching materials had any culturally relevant material. The speaking course materials did not adopt any topics relevant to Kurdish or other cultures. One participant (P4-F 2nd Stage) noted, *"The course book talks about Western culture in its dialogues but it doesn't give an explanation so we don't know the meaning."* Some students (not all) stated that the speaking course materials include topics about the culture awareness but the materials don't provide enough input. P12-F (2nd Stage) remarked, *"The materials mentioned*

cultural differences, such as avoiding eye contact, but didn't provide enough context to help us adapt our communication style."

Students from the third stage had similar complaints about the materials. P2-F (3rd Stage) said, *"In the first semester we didn't have much on other cultures, it was AI, weather, money etc.,"* Another participant, P12-F (3rd Stage), said, "Yes, I agree. For example, they told us that in America, asking a girl her age is not polite. In China, people also consider it rude." These answers show that while cultural notes came up sometimes, they did not become a real part of how people communicated. The fact that students in the second and third stages had the same view suggests the first teaching materials did not have enough cultural information to help with learning how to communicate well.

4.4.2 Teacher Adaptation and Improved Cultural Exposure in the Second Semester

Students in their third stage of education expressed concerns about cultural irrelevance in the first semester but noted that teacher-led changes during the current (second) semester had improved the situation. One participant, (P10-M 3rd Stage), said, *"The teacher now presents videos to students during the second semester which showcase Mexican schools and distant locations."* The additional cultural content outside the textbook proves beneficial to students. The instructors demonstrate active involvement in adding supplementary materials to fill cultural gaps that existed previously.

The third-stage student (P9-M) observed, *"The materials now feature diverse cultural content, including the Spanish Tomato Festival. It is good that the number of cultural discussions has increased since the previous semester."* This shows that the first-semester materials stayed restricted, but the second semester expanded its cultural content through teacher-led initiatives instead of curriculum changes.

In contrast, second-stage students did not provide similar feedback regarding improvements in diverse cultural exposure within the context of their first-semester materials, suggesting that these enhancements might have been more prominent in later stages of the curriculum.

4.4.3 Integration of Local Culture (Highlighted by Third Stage)

The integration of local Kurdish culture was specifically highlighted as a positive

aspect by third-stage students, particularly in the context of activities beyond the first semester materials. One third-stage student (P8-F) shared: *"Last year, the teacher allowed us to prepare presentations on specific celebrations, like Newroz."* Another participant (P9-M 3rd Stage) added: *"Presentations were about events and places in Kurdistan, or famous figures like Qazi Muhammad."* This focus on local culture was seen as increasing relevance and fostering cultural identity among the more advanced learners. Notably, second-stage students did not mention a similar emphasis on local culture within their reflections on the first-semester speaking materials, indicating that this aspect might have been introduced or emphasized more in the later stages of their study.

By presenting the perspectives of both second and third-stage students for the initial cultural gaps and then highlighting the improvements primarily noted by the third stage, this analysis provides a clear comparison of how cultural relevance was perceived across the different levels and how the curriculum appeared to evolve in addressing these needs.

4.5 Theme 4: Opportunities for Self-Assessment and Feedback

This theme examines the students' perceptions of the opportunities provided by the first-semester speaking materials for self-assessment and the role of feedback from peers and teachers in their learning process. Students at both second- and third-stage levels participated in different assessment and feedback methods yet their perceptions of the structured opportunities in the materials showed distinct variations.

4.5.1 Structured Opportunities and Independent Strategies

Students in the second stage noted that practice and feedback opportunities existed in or alongside the materials. One participant (P7-M 2nd Stage) mentioned, *"There are review parts in the book, and we listened to the sounds to check our pronunciation and fluency."* One participant (P10-M 2nd Stage) explained, *"At times we work in pairs and give each other feedback on our speaking tasks."* Second-stage students employed independent monitoring strategies alongside the structured components they provided feedback on. One student (P11-F 2nd Stage) stated, *"I recorded myself to check my pronunciation and fluency."* Another participant (P9-F 2nd Stage) mentioned a different

method: *"I practiced in front of a mirror to improve my body language and confidence for presentations."* The second-stage students made use of available materials and their own methods to improve their learning with the limited self-assessment tools in the materials.

In contrast, the review sections and audio files did not seem important self-assessment tools for the students in the third stage for the materials. Their attention was mainly on outside feedback systems, as seen in the next few sections.

4.5.2 Reliance on Peer and Teacher Feedback

The second- and third-stage students acknowledged feedback from peers and teaching staff as core to their learning process. A student (P10-M 2nd Stage) said: *"We sometimes worked in pairs and gave each other feedback on our conversations."* Peer feedback was an element of their learning practice. Another 2nd Stage participant (P3-F) added: "Some of the pronunciation practice provided in the textbook helped improve the clarity of my speech when communicating with non-Kurdish English speakers," thus demonstrating how these materials helped them respond and make sense of feedback.

However, third-stage students were more focused on feedback from their peers and teachers as the most valuable assessment of their speaking. One student (P3-M 3rd Stage) stated, *"When we worked in pairs, we corrected each other's mistakes,"* highlighting the active role of peer correction. Teacher feedback was also crucial for this group. The participants mentioned, *"The teacher gave us feedback to improve for the next exams"* (P3-M 3rd Stage*)* and *"He sent us feedback over the WhatsApp group"* (P2-F 3rd Stage). Third-stage students seem to need feedback from other sources more than the earlier group. These sources could be teachers, professionals, or group mates only.

4.5.3 Lack of Formal Self-Assessment Opportunities

While students of the second stage had used a mixture of structured tools and independent strategies (as described in 4.5.1), students of both stages had been greatly dependent on peer and teacher feedback to facilitate their progress (4.5.2), the third-stage students were more vocal about a conspicuous gap: the absence of the formal opportunities for self-assessment in their materials. In contrast to the second-stage

learners who used review sections and audio files, even informally, students of the third stage explicitly declared that their materials did not allow them to conduct self-evaluation in a systematic manner. One student (P7-F 3rd Stage) said, *"Last semester the materials did not have sections for students to assess their speaking abilities."* This statement demonstrates their awareness of this missing feature. Another student (P9-M 3rd Stage) explained that studying from the book alone was not enough: *"If you just read the book on your own, it's not helpful. You need a teacher to guide you."* These responses suggest that third-stage students felt a greater need for structured self-assessment tools and instructional guidance, which they believed the current materials lacked.

4.6 Evolution and Key Findings

According to the FGD analysis, there is a well-defined shift in how learners interact with speaking tasks as they move from the second to the third stage. Second-stage learners said they felt more confident and accomplished better pronunciation and fluency, mainly because of help from teachers and structured lessons. They mentioned a few problems as well, such as materials that were not modern, tasks that were not challenging, and few instances for realistic speaking activities.
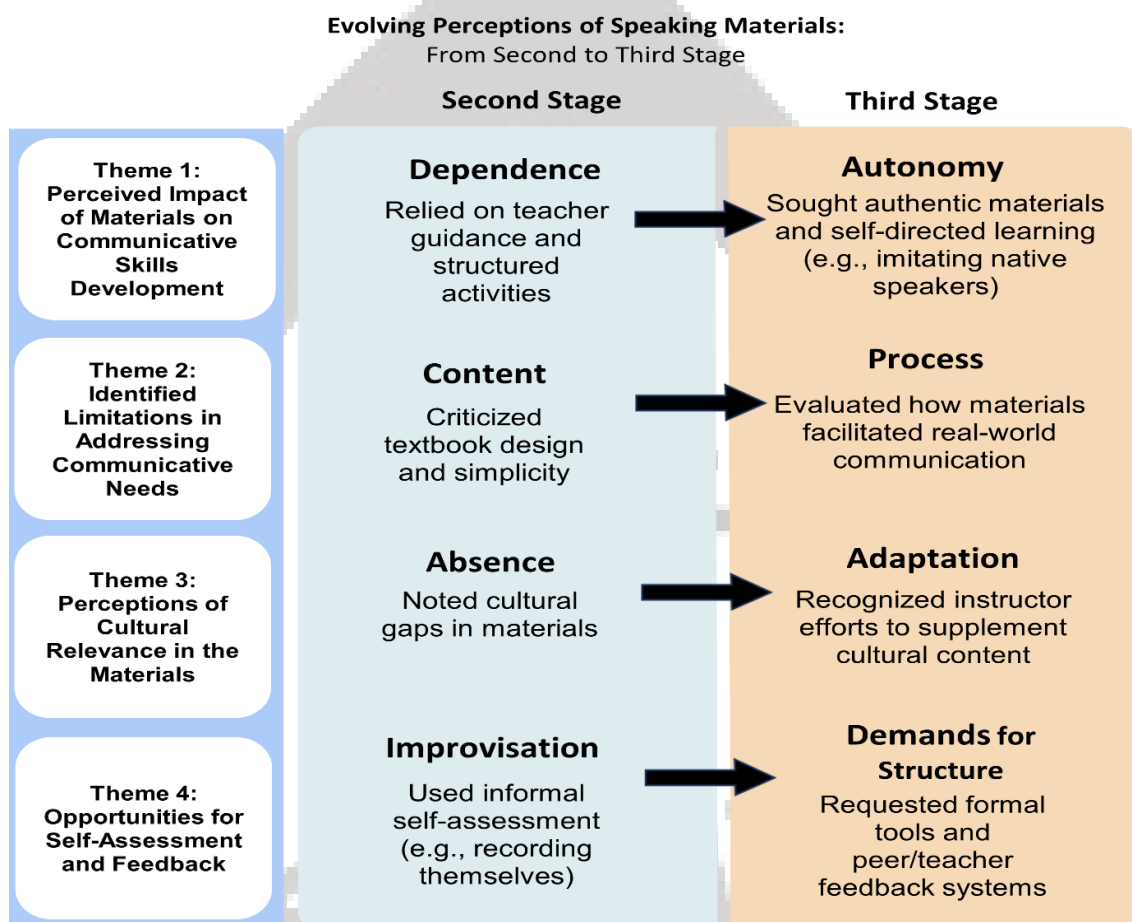
On the other hand, students in the third stage were more mindful about their thinking processes. They criticized the materials for poor language as well as for not being useful for real communication. They cared about having independence, cultural relevance, and feedback that was organized. A number of learners mentioned that teachers used videos and other cultural sources to make up for shortcomings in the textbooks. Figure 2 shows how learners in the two stages differ in their views on important aspects of communication.

The progression follows communicative competence models (like Canale & Swain, 1980), and it demonstrates a change from concentrating on language to concentrating on social and strategic skills. Students at the early stages responded well to tasks that focused on language skills, but as learners progressed, they preferred things that let them practice self-direction and critical thinking. In concentrating on developmental stages, some minor trends related to gender were detected as well. It was clear that several female participants preferred more feedback and help with

pronunciation, proving that gender could make a difference in learner choices and requiring more in-depth study.

Figure 2
Evolving Perceptions of Speaking Materials: From Second to Third Stage

Evolving Perceptions of Speaking Materials:
From Second to Third Stage

	Second Stage	**Third Stage**
Theme 1: Perceived Impact of Materials on Communicative Skills Development	**Dependence** Relied on teacher guidance and structured activities	**Autonomy** Sought authentic materials and self-directed learning (e.g., imitating native speakers)
Theme 2: Identified Limitations in Addressing Communicative Needs	**Content** Criticized textbook design and simplicity	**Process** Evaluated how materials facilitated real-world communication
Theme 3: Perceptions of Cultural Relevance in the Materials	**Absence** Noted cultural gaps in materials	**Adaptation** Recognized instructor efforts to supplement cultural content
Theme 4: Opportunities for Self-Assessment and Feedback	**Improvisation** Used informal self-assessment (e.g., recording themselves)	**Demands for Structure** Requested formal tools and peer/teacher feedback systems

5. Discussion

5.1 Perceived Alignment and Skill Development

The results of the study show that the students believed the speaking materials had assisted them in confidence building and improved pronunciation, practical linguistic skills-related use, and vocabulary understanding in addition to helping them build skills that would communicate with their peers. The idea of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Harmer, 2007) is that a language can be used meaningfully for

communication. The new theories on scaffolding instruction (Van de Pol et al., 2010) claim that second-stage students require teacher guidance due to research evidence that early learners benefit from interaction with support. Third-stage students value actual material consistent with studies connecting real-world input to communicative competence development (Gilmore, 2007). The stages have different priorities regarding materials, which suggests possible differences in recognizing material appropriateness towards specific developmental needs.

5.2 Limitations in Addressing Communicative Needs

Students detected multiple constraints in the materials that blocked their complete communicative need fulfilment. The students at the second stage emphasized the need for contemporary content because outdated materials do not meet their learning requirements (Tomlinson, 2011). Student perceptions from the third stage show that speaking instruction is insufficient and real-world uses should be given greater emphasis since progressive learners need practical communication preparation. The materials show weaknesses in their ability to serve the changing communication requirements of students who advance in their learning journey.

5.3 Cultural Relevance and Real-World Application

The initial findings from both stages, which revealed insufficient cultural content in the materials emphasize the necessity of using relevant cultural elements that align with actual communication practices (Kramsch, 1993). The observed positive developments among third-stage students throughout curriculum development demonstrate an attempt to enhance this alignment. Later phases incorporating Kurdish traditional elements demonstrate the essential nature of culture-based teaching approaches to promote student interest and self-identification (Byram, 1997) even though the first-semester program did not deliver this learning opportunity.

5.4 Self-Assessment and Feedback for Communicative Development

The second-stage students demonstrate self-monitoring skills through independent methods which reveals their practical learning approach. Learner autonomy

in self-evaluation seems to have a potential weakness because third-stage students heavily depend on both peer and teacher feedback during first-semester without formal self-assessment tools. Beyond classroom instruction, the materials should incorporate structured self-assessment procedures to match findings from Ur (2012) about effective language learning while developing student autonomy in communication skills.

5.5 Implications for Pedagogy and Curriculum

Research findings demonstrate that the UoD needs adaptable material design for its speaking programs. Curriculum developers should integrate contemporary, authentic materials that support real-world communication and reflect diverse cultural contexts. These materials must be tailored to serve students at varying proficiency levels. Critical elements to consider in material design include the systematic inclusion of cultural content, built-in assessment tools, and digital platforms to promote self-regulated learning.

In addition, teacher training programs should go beyond classroom strategies and focus on developing educators' skills in adapting and supplementing speaking materials in response to learner needs. Training should also address how to implement self-assessment mechanisms and technology-enhanced speaking tools effectively. Furthermore, student involvement in the evaluation and co-development of materials should be encouraged, ensuring that content remains relevant and aligned with learners' communicative priorities.

5.6 Conclusion

This research has investigated the perception of EFL students at the College of Basic Education, English Department, University of Duhok (UoD), towards the match between their first-semester speaking materials and their communicative needs. Students had better foundational competencies including vocabulary, confidence, and pronunciation. They, however, also noted that there are large gaps in real-world applicability, cultural content, and structured assessment. Whereas second-stage students focused on the necessity of teachers' support and available content, third-stage students required natural communication tasks, feedback options, and culturally-enriched

materials. These changing needs emphasize the need to make speaking materials developmentally appropriate and engage learners in the assessment process.

However, the findings may not be widely generalizable because the sample size was small and the study was set in UoD's College of Basic Education in a particular region. Hence, it is important to be cautious when applying them to EFL contexts outside of UoD. In addition, even though stratified random sampling was used, the initial nomination of candidates by instructors could have resulted in a positive bias and is considered a limitation. Even so, this study provides useful insights for updating curricula and teaching methods in similar education environments.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Studies

Future research can use longitudinal designs to see how student perceptions of speaking materials evolve across academic levels, how a communicative need changes over time, and how the course materials should be modified accordingly. Then, looking into the extent to which the teacher makes changes to the materials and their pedagogical impact on the speaking performance of learners is also crucial.

Moreover, research is still required that aims to check if the use of digital platforms and self-assessment tools is a good way to facilitate communicative autonomy and enhance performance. Multinational and multicultural studies are important to shed some light on context-specific problems and may also share some solutions, especially those that relate to authenticity, cultural alignment, and learner engagement.

On top of that, the upcoming research should explore the matter of gender-based differences more systematically, looking into the changes that can be observed in the participation of male and female students with the teaching materials and the way they are taught. And finally, learners' involvement in the evaluation and correction of materials can make the learning environment more flexible and student-centered.

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Appendix A

A Sample of Emergent Theme 1 – Perceived Impact of Materials on Communicative Skills Development

Quote (Participant Excerpt)	Code	Sub-theme	Theme
Teacher support for fearless communication and pronunciation instruction had a major role in developing my confidence" (P3-F 2nd Stage)	Teacher support in confidence building	Enhanced Speaking Confidence & Pronunciation	Perceived Impact of Materials on Communicative Skills Development
"Role-plays focusing on newspaper reports allowed me to develop natural communication abilities as well as vocabulary skills. And group activities like budget allocation scenarios also improved my confidence and speaking skills." (P6-M 2nd Stage)	Role-play practicality	Practical Application through Interactive Learning	Perceived Impact of Materials on Communicative Skills Development
"I learned new vocabulary from the book... I used them in daily conversations and during my exams." (P5-F 3rd Stage)	Contextual vocabulary transfer	Vocabulary Acquisition & Practical Use	Perceived Impact of Materials on Communicative Skills Development

Appendix B

Participant Demographics by Stage of Study and Gender (N = 24)

Characteristic	Second Stage (n = 12)	Third Stage (n = 12)	Total (N = 24)
Stage of Study	12	12	24
Gender	6 Female / 6 Male	6 Female / 6 Male	12 Female / 12 Male