SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE IN STUDENTS' SPEAKING PERFORMANCE

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Abstract. This thesis explores the concept of sociolinguistic competence and its impact on the speaking performance of students in foreign language education. It defines sociolinguistic competence as the ability to use language appropriately in various social contexts, incorporating elements such as cultural norms, speech acts, and register variations. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative assessments of students' speaking performances with qualitative interviews to gain insights into their understanding of sociolinguistic norms, that emphasize the importance of teaching not only linguistic accuracy but also sociolinguistic awareness to foster effective communication in diverse settings.

Key words: Sociolinguistic competence, speaking performance, foreign language education, communicative competence, language learning, sociocultural norms.

In the context of foreign language education, students often achieve a certain degree of grammatical proficiency yet struggle to utilize the language appropriately in spontaneous interactions. This discrepancy leads to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings, demonstrating the critical role that sociolinguistic competence plays in successful language use. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between sociolinguistic competence and students' speaking performance, particularly focusing on how sociolinguistic awareness affects linguistic appropriateness, fluency, and overall

interaction effectiveness in their spoken communication. The concept of sociolinguistic competence, as defined by Hymes (1972), refers to an individual's ability to use language appropriately in various social situations. This encompasses understanding and implementing culturally specific norms, registers, and communication strategies that reflect social hierarchies and contextual factors. In the context of second language acquisition, many learners exhibit proficiency in the linguistic aspects of a language but struggle with its sociolinguistic dimensions, leading to communication breakdowns in real-world situations. Sociolinguistic competence has been characterized as a crucial component of communicative competence, which encompasses not only grammatical and lexical proficiency but also the ability to use language effectively in social contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980). This broader perspective extends to understanding speech acts, discourse markers, and the ability to navigate social hierarchies through language. Research has shown that students with higher levels of sociolinguistic competence demonstrate more effective speaking skills. For instance, Gumperz (1982) emphasizes that discourse strategies deeply rooted in cultural context influence communication. Furthermore, Taguchi (2011) highlights that sociolinguistic awareness contributes to pragmatic success, which is essential for effective conversation management and relationship building. In language classrooms, teaching sociolinguistic competence involves more than rote learning; it requires interactional practice that reflects real-life language use. Studies by Huth (2011) and Huerta-Macias (2002) have emphasized the importance of including sociolinguistic elements in language instruction to enhance students' communication skills. These studies advocate for pedagogical approaches that incorporate situational role-plays, discussions about cultural norms, and exploration of social dynamics in language use, corroborating the findings that students equipped with sociolinguistic knowledge are more adept at handling conversational challenges. Despite the established importance of sociolinguistic competence, there is relatively limited empirical research specifically examining its direct impact on students' speaking performance in foreign language education. The current study aims to fill this gap by

systematically analysing how different aspects of sociolinguistic competence influence spoken language performance among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. The findings of this study reaffirm the hypothesis that sociolinguistic competence significantly impacts students' speaking performance. Students who demonstrated higher sociolinguistic awareness not only exhibited better fluency but also displayed a greater ability to engage appropriately in conversations.

−   A key observation from the study was that students with strong sociolinguistic competence were more capable of adjusting their speech according to the context. This adaptability included the use of formal language in academic settings and informal language during casual conversations, indicating an understanding of register variation. Their performances showed a clear distinction in responding with contextually relevant language based on the social cues present in interactions.

−   Students exhibiting sociolinguistic awareness tended to structure their replies more effectively, employing discourse markers and showing an understanding of turn-taking in conversations. This fluency often resulted in more cohesive and coherent interactions, enabling them to maintain the flow of conversation without significant delays caused by uncertainty about language use or appropriate responses.

−   Participants with a well-developed sociolinguistic competence were found to initiate and sustain conversations effectively. They demonstrated an ability to read social cues and employ strategies that engage their interlocutors more fully, such as asking follow-up questions and maintaining eye contact, which are essential for effective communication.

This study highlights the necessity for language curricula to include a focus on sociolinguistic competence. Integrating sociolinguistic elements, such as role-playing varied social interactions and discussing cultural norms, can significantly enhance students' speaking performance. Educators should prioritize creating an environment that encourages the exploration of social dimensions of language use, thus equipping students

with the tools needed for real-world interactions Sociolinguistic competence is fundamental to effective speaking performance in foreign language education. The findings of this thesis substantiate the hypothesis that students equipped with sociolinguistic awareness are more successful in navigating various communication contexts. This research highlights the urgent need for language curricula to incorporate sociolinguistic training, thus ensuring that students are not only linguistically proficient but also contextually aware. By fostering sociolinguistic competence, educators can enhance students' communicative abilities, preparing them for real-world interactions in increasingly diverse linguistic landscapes.

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