

RESEARCH PAPER

Challenges in Teaching and Learning Speaking Skill at Tertiary Level EFL learners in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses the pedagogical and methodological issues of teaching and learning English speaking skills by tertiary-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Bangladesh. Mixed-methodology was used to conduct the study, which included both qualitative and quantitative research designs. In particular, a questionnaire was distributed among 100 English major students who were selected randomly, and 10 English language teachers who were selected purposefully from two public universities. Prior to conducting the study, the reliability and validity of the questionnaire were tested using Cronbach Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted, which were found to be satisfactory ($\alpha = 0.79-0.88$; CR = 0.83–0.91; AVE > 0.50). The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data were obtained from the interviews with participants, which were thematically analyzed. The results of the study revealed several issues affecting the ability of tertiary-level EFL learners in Bangladesh to speak English effectively, including a predominant use of teacher-centered instruction, a lack of opportunities provided by teachers to develop students' speaking skills, the insufficient attention paid to speaking skills in the English language curriculum and assessments, large class sizes, a lack of exposure to the target language, and speaking anxiety. The study proposed several solutions to the issues, including shifting to learner-centered communicative language teaching, incorporating speaking skills into the English language curricula and assessments, and providing professional development opportunities for English language teachers and institutional support.

Keywords: English speaking skills, EFL learners, tertiary education, communicative language teaching, speaking anxiety, Bangladesh, mixed-methods research

Introduction

In Bangladesh, speaking skills are very important in tertiary level English education that it places students at the center of academic success and professional communication (Richards, 2008). Yet, at this level too many learners do not speak sufficiently freely or of sufficient length to secure even basic interactions (Bygate, 2001), despite having had years of formal English language training. A crucial part of this issue is that opportunities to use the language in an authentic way also face dire limitations due to few chances of exposure outside preprogrammed classroom establishment (Savignon, 2002). Moreover, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) in Bangladesh has a long

tradition and English teaching at the tertiary level has been largely grammar-oriented, focusing on accuracy rather than communicative competence. These practices tend to sideline speaking activities paying lip service to oral skills while restricting opportunities for successful verbal interaction (Brown, 2007; Ur, 2012). Also, because of lack of real-life situations and interactive classroom techniques like pair work, group discussion and role-plays; there is less place for learners to develop their speaking fluency and confidence (Littlewood, 2004). Along with the pedagogical problems, psychological aspects are one of the main barriers to the effective speaking skill. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986)

observe that students often feel anxious about speaking English they fear making mistakes and lack self-confidence in the context classroom; all of which reduces risk-taking in classrooms. The presence of peer pressure and absence of supportive speaking surroundings in Bangladeshi EFL context also exacerbates this anxiety (Zaman & Akter, 2018). This multilayered problem has, therefore, created an immediate imperative to explore why speaking skills are taught and learnt the way they are in higher education contexts of Bangladesh. This study aims to explore these questions in greater detail and provides answers by suggesting practical, locally relevant recommendations for improving tertiary-level EFL learners English speaking performance.

Literature Review

For a long time, speaking has been viewed as the most essential yet challenging target skill for learners in numerous EFL settings. Richards (2008) claims that an undergraduate student in colleges should not only be capable of expressing their thoughts by speaking but also be able to speak and engage in academic talk, discussions and present their texts confidently. So mastering speaking is not merely about gaining language knowledge but the function of appropriate occasions for consummate communication, student personage and positive pedagogy. Studies also have identified different pedagogical, psychological and contextual perspectives with an impact on the teaching and learning speaking skills—especially regarding EFL situation alike as in the case of Bangladesh. Speaking is the most common and largest skill in a foreign language, we all recognize.

Speaking – oral communication is a productive language skill which includes vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency and interactional competence (Bygate, 2001). According to Richards (2008), communicative competence is not about being grammatically correct but also using language in various contexts and situations as they appear in real life situation. So this is beginning with the end in mind that direct instruction should be grounded at preparing students to communicate full of meaning rather than grammar. Another example of this is found in note (2002), who notes that CLT, the most prominent approach to unmarked interaction by learners in real-world second language communication places speaking at the heart of materials for language learning.

Challenges in Teaching Speaking Skills

Previous research has revealed that speaking is still predominantly a teacher-centered and exam-centric approach in EFL classes. Control group students are largely taught through grammar translation method and lecture-based approach to English (Rahman, 2010), which restrict the communicative activities that are essential in developing communicative oral proficiency. As Brown (2007) says, teaching speaking has to be done in the classroom by interaction and this can only occur through group discussions; role-play; interviews and other

Challenges in Teaching and Learning Speaking Skill at Tertiary Level problem tasks. Nevertheless, you typically want to skip conducting these actions because huge group sizes and constrained instructional time often leads teachers to stay with more traditional layouts.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is recommended and treats it as an ideal way to improve speaking. Ellis (2003) stated that tasks should be meaning-focused, in which the learners use English not just with grammar rules they memorize. In the same way, Littlewood (2004) claims that it is through task-based activities, which permit occasions for spoken and communicational engagement that promote interaction and communication among learners. Nevertheless, TBLT has not yet been widely implemented in the tertiary education context in Bangladesh due to (a) inadequate professional training of teachers to enable implementation and classroom practices that are based on principles rather than form; (b) lackluster existing curricula that mainly focus on coverage of content; and (c) communication-focused assessments, which unfortunately favor written/examination formats.

Psychological Factors Affecting Speaking Performance

Psychological barriers have a huge effect on the performance of learners during speaking. One of the most widely studied factors is Foreign Language Anxiety. The fear of speaking a foreign language, negative expectations or apprehension when unable to communicate in a foreign language as well as anxiety related to testing can be viewed together under the term "foreign language classroom anxiety," according to Horwitz. (Horwitz & Cope, 1986) Highly anxious learners are very likely to avoid such speaking tasks, resulting in lower levels of participation and overall scores on oral proficiency.

In the context of EFL in Bangladesh, apprehension to make grammatical errors, vocabulary unavailability, no-control over accent and peer observation further add fuel to establishing speaking anxiety (Zaman & Akter, 2018). Low achievers are also trained on the belief that they have low self-esteem, because they feel reluctant to speak in class even if they know it all about that language. According to Bedford and Brown (2007) creating a supportive classroom environment and giving constructive feedback to students will help reduce learner anxiety in the process of active learning.

The ways and benefits of Interaction in a Classroom Environment —Supportive environment in class either —Made a very important factor in developing speaking skills. Ur (2012: 120) states 'the more students have the chance to talk in pairs or groups, and through other interactive classroom tasks, the better their oral communication. Their communicative competence enables them to be fluent not only in language but also in using it meaningfully, and thus improves their confidence as learners, apart from boosting their motivation. They, on the other hand, restrict how much speaking in English

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students can get in classrooms characterized by teacher talk.

The pedagogical conditions, outside class exposure toward communication in English also limit learners from some realistic communicative scope (Rahman, 2010) within the perspective of Bangladesh. This lack of practice has significant repercussions for learners' fluency and communicative confidence. Regular and meaningful communication is essential for developing communicative competence in foreign language (FL) classrooms, which often fail to provide sufficient opportunities for authentic interaction (Sandra J. Savignon, 2002).

The Bangladeshi Tertiary-Level Context

Research into tertiary-level English education in Bangladesh indicates that students continue to demonstrate a dissonance between their theoretical knowledge and their practical communicative competence. Students learn English as part of their education for years but experience limited use in communication and focusing on passing exams means many graduate without ever learning to speak properly (Rahman, 2010; Zaman & Akter, 2018). The bulky reality of large classes, little classroom interaction and no English-speaking environment continue to hinder the prospects of spoken instruction in huge ways. Moreover, institutional checks like curriculum development through teacher preparations and evaluation process continue to govern how speaking is taught. Although communicative approaches have entered the English language curriculum ever since, they have not found their way into many classrooms because of the institution's continuing focus on written exams over oral communication.

Research Gap

Although earlier research has looked into different aspects such as speaking anxiety, communicative language teaching, and teaching-learning practices in EFL contexts separately, little is known about the interrelated pedagogical, psychological and contextual issues concerning both the teachers of speaking skills at tertiary levels and also the learners of such speaking skills in Bangladesh. In the Bangladeshi higher education setting both learners challenges or teacher approaches as separate dimensions has been investigated by most of the research done till date but interaction between the two have not been given proper attention. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge the gap concerning teachers and learners

Challenges in Teaching and Learning Speaking Skill at Tertiary Level challenges and aims at finding context specific solutions for improving speaking instruction that contribute positively to the talking proficiency of tertiary level language learners.

Methodology

For this very reason, the study adopted mixed methods in order to understand the comprehensive context of teaching and learning English speaking skills at tertiary-level institutions in Bangladesh. Samples were taken from specific universities using quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate students and teachers.

Research Design

A mixed-methods design was chosen for this study, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. This approach allowed for a triangulated understanding of the problem, enabling the researcher to validate findings and explore deeper insights into classroom practices, student perceptions, and institutional factors affecting speaking skill development. The study examined several variables affecting speaking skill development. Independent variables included teaching methods, teacher experience, classroom environment, student motivation, and exposure to English. The dependent variables were students' speaking fluency, accuracy, and confidence. Intervening variables such as socioeconomic background, institutional support, class size, and time for speaking practice were also considered.

Reliability and Validity

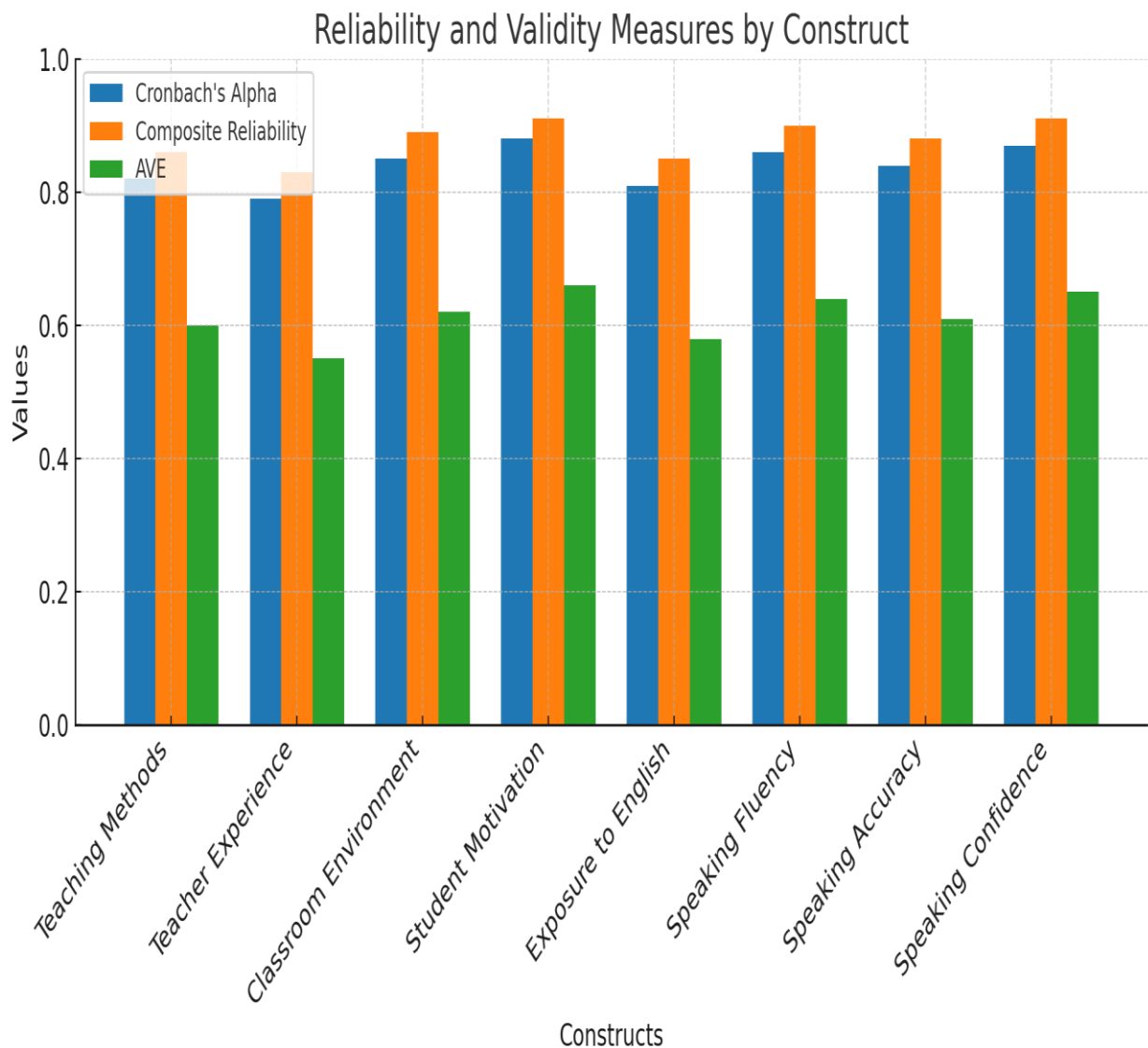
To ensure the robustness of the study, we assessed the internal consistency and validity of our measurement instruments. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for all key constructs to measure internal consistency. As shown in the table below, all variables demonstrated strong reliability, with coefficients ranging from 0.79 to 0.88, well above the generally accepted threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). For instance, Student Motivation showed the highest consistency ($\alpha = 0.88$), while Teacher Experience also remained high ($\alpha = 0.79$). In addition to internal consistency, we verified the measurement model using Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All CR values fell between 0.83 and 0.91, indicating dependable measurement. Furthermore, convergent validity was established as the AVE for all constructs exceeded the recommended 0.50 threshold (Hair et al., 2019), confirming that the latent constructs explained more than half of the variance in the indicators

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Teaching Methods	0.82	0.86	0.60
Teacher Experience	0.79	0.83	0.55
Classroom Environment	0.85	0.89	0.62
Student Motivation	0.88	0.91	0.66
Exposure to English	0.81	0.85	0.58
Speaking Fluency	0.86	0.90	0.64

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Speaking Accuracy	0.84	0.88	0.61
Speaking Confidence	0.87	0.91	0.65

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Measure	Observed Range	Recommended Threshold	Interpretation
Cronbach’s Alpha (α)	0.79 – 0.88	≥ 0.70	All constructs show strong internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).
Composite Reliability (CR)	0.83 – 0.91	≥ 0.70	All constructs exceed the benchmark, indicating stable and dependable measurement.
Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	0.55 – 0.66	≥ 0.50	All constructs meet the criterion, confirming convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019).
Overall Conclusion	—	—	Measurement model is both reliable and valid for assessing the study’s constructs.



Research Sites

It was conducted in two top public universities of Bangladesh, viz: The Dhaka University & Barishal University. Their student compositions and being emblematic of great speaking-related challenges posed by English departments and the other students in these institutions make them apt tangible case studies.

Participants

A total of 100 undergraduate English major students participated in the study. They were selected using random sampling to ensure a range of backgrounds, academic levels, and speaking proficiency levels. Also, Brown et al. In (2017) analyzed 10 English language teachers purposely sampled for educational experiences

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teaching speaking or oral communication courses at tertiary level. This was key for tasking and to comprehend institutional constraints.

Data Collection Instruments

In this study, variable structured questionnaire was used to collect the data from student participants and semi-structured interviews were conducted with teacher participants on the topics of questionnaire. A hundred students answered a written, multiple-choice and Likert-scale questionnaire. These covered aspects such as speaking to someone difficulty, students' exposure to English out of class, practice and motivation in the classroom with the purpose of finding out how much opportunity and advantage for speaking English.

Furthermore, 10 semi-structured interviews were implemented with English teachers. Interviews were primarily imperative on pedagogy, large or resource deficient classroom challenges, student participation and institutional support. Similarly, teachers were asked to suggest improvements in spoken instruction. It consists of both quantitative data and qualitative insights using a combined method.

Data Analysis

For quantitative data from student questionnaires, descriptive statistics of exploratory data were performed (for example frequency, percentage and mean scores for trends and challenges in developing speaking skill). Qualitative content analysis was conducted on teacher interviews. All of the interviewees' written in percent that were used for both coding and analysis were word-for-word transcribed, along with being placed into broad thematic categories to discuss ways that teachers actualize speaking instruction (what factual-based information they provided regarding classroom issues present in their classes) as well as how they might meet some of these teacher concerns (as relieved requests).

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and all subjects were aware that the study aimed to be observational in nature. Appropriate informed consent was obtained prior to data collection process. All data were handled confidentially and participants and institutions anonymized according to ethical guidelines. Respondents were also informed they could end participation in the study at any point without penalty.

Results and Discussion:

Teacher-Centered Teaching Approaches

According to the statistics, about 55% of university English classes are taught from a mainly teacher-centered perspectives. Survey data indicate teachers primarily monopolize classroom discourse through lecture and explanation, while students are relegated to passive recipients. This restricts active language use, which is important to build speaking skills.

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These types of practices may impact the ones variables, as limited participation does not allow students to produce output in real-time instances and consequently affect their speaking fluency and confidence. Teachers' interview data reflect supporting evidence for lecture reliance; numerous instructors cited large class size hurdles and limited time as justifications for 'lecture-prone' techniques. The findings align with previous studies indicating that teacher-fronted teaching in EFL contexts decreases student engagement (Ur, 2012; Harmer, 2007).

Further, 58% of students reported being given few chances to speak English in class. It supports the fact that communicative activities such as, pair work, group discussions and role-plays are rarely applied in the classroom which is very much against Communicative Language Teaching method (CLT). Consequently, students establish very little practice in spontaneous communication which has an effect on fluency.

Limited Speaking Activities In The Curriculum

The gaps in the skills are unmatched as seen through the curriculum analysis. Initially, 80 % of this is at grammar, reading and writing with only 20% assessing talking activities. This is the same frugal balance, but it is nonsensical and exemplifies an aspect-oriented style of instruction preferred in exam-oriented systems. Restricting this to speaking means more compromise on fluency or accuracy as students are given spaces in which they can no longer work focused cases such as pronunciation, structures and instantaneity in practice. This is echoed in the student data, which shows that 72% state speaking activities are part of their classes only infrequently or not at all and 65% do not formally assess a student's speaking skills. Interviews with teachers also provide additional evidence that assessment practices privilege written performance, for example evaluation of speaking is regarded as time-consuming within large cohorts. This is related to negative washback, where anything that is not tested receives less emphasis in the classroom (Hughes 2003).

Focus of University Syllabuses

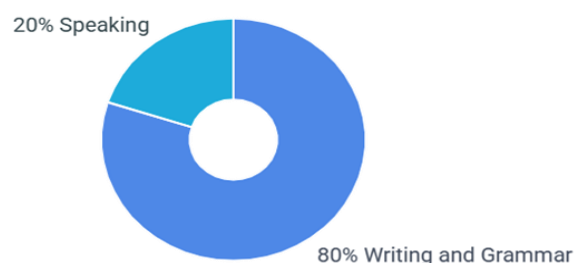


Figure 1: Inadequate Speaking Activities in the Curriculum

These findings collectively suggest that current teaching approaches and curricular priorities are insufficient in addressing the development of speaking skills among EFL learners at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. There is a pressing need for a shift towards more learner-centered,

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communicative, and assessment-inclusive approaches to foster effective oral communication skills in English.

Large Class Sizes and Their Impact on Speaking Practice

The results show that large class sizes are a major institutional constraint. Approximately 62% of students reported being in classes with more than 50 students, while 28% reported class sizes of 40–50 students. Only 10% experienced relatively smaller classes. This directly affects the intervening variable of **time for speaking practice**, as teachers are unable to allocate sufficient time for individual participation. Consequently, 70% of students reported that they rarely have opportunities to speak English in class.

Teachers also highlighted in interviews that managing interactive activities in large classrooms is challenging, often forcing them to adopt lecture-based approaches.

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These conditions significantly hinder the development of speaking fluency and confidence, as students receive limited opportunities for meaningful practice (Harmer, 2007; Richards, 2008).

Inability to Provide Personalized Feedback

The findings indicate that 68% of teachers are unable to provide individualized feedback during speaking activities due to large class sizes and time constraints. Similarly, 74% of students reported that they rarely receive specific feedback on their spoken English. This lack of personalized feedback directly impacts students' **speaking accuracy and confidence**, as learners are unable to identify and correct their errors effectively. Teacher interviews reveal that feedback is often generalized rather than tailored to individual needs, which limits its effectiveness.

Impact of Overcrowded Classrooms on Speaking Time

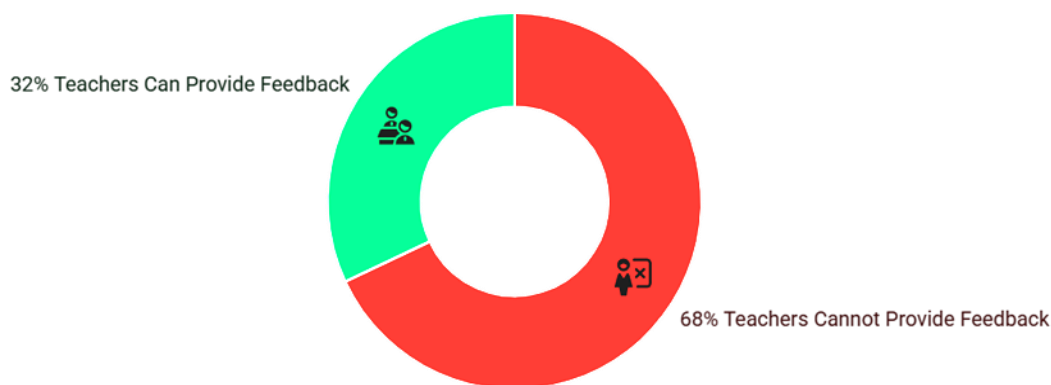


Figure 2: Inability to Provide Personalized Feedback

As a result, individual assistance is required for students, particularly beginners, to improve their skills (Ur 2012; Ellis 2003).

Limited Teaching Resources and Facilities

The study also clearly identifies the gaps in instructional resources which indicate the moderating variable institutional support. Their study revealed that 87 percent of the students said their classrooms were not equipped with critical facilities, just 3 percent received multimedia projectors and audio-visual aids followed by language labs (in 12 per cent). Only 13 percent said they had access to such. In addition, 81% of them reported that they had never implemented a language laboratory or audio-based learning materials to enhance their speaking practice. The study reinforced one of the key findings from dozens of interviews with teachers: The cultural limitations to using participatory and tech-driven teaching methods stem largely from resource constraints.

But, as far as fluency and pronunciation are concerned, they are lacking the resources for these aspects, since

students could learn to pronounce things better if they had more exposure to real language input (listening-based practice). The finding is consistent with studies that point to the need for institutional support when aiming to contextualize communicative language teaching (Rahman, 2010; Richards, 2008).

The fear of failure and low self-esteem

Another main barrier to the development of speech was psychological. The mean confidence for using English speaking is 50 while the percentage of students reported low usage in these aspects was around 70%. The rationale relates in this sense because learners who are nervous will tend to avoid speaking, so speak confidence is directly affecting fluency which is the dependent variable. One quarter of the students were comfortable "speaking English in class

Many teachers from interviews also showed that fear of making mistakes, act as paralyze which was the main reason for participation for students and this absence of supportive environment plays significant role.

Students' Fear of Speaking English

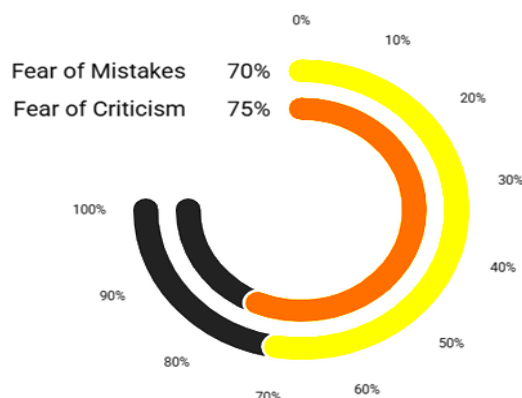


Figure 3: Students' Fear of Speaking English

These results are consistent with research on foreign language anxiety, which identifies fear of negative evaluation as an important obstacle to oral production (Horwitz et al., 1986). If a learning environment is not psychologically safe, students are unlikely to practice speaking in meaningful ways.

No exposure to native English-speaking environments

They also show that there is very little English exposure outside of the classroom. Only 12% used English occasionally during the daily communications outside academic settings, while around 78% of the students reported that they use Bangla more in their day to day life. Only a small portion (10%) reported frequent engagement via media and online with the English language. This finding is observable from the independent variable of exposure to English, which is an indispensable factor for language acquisition. In almost all second language acquisition situations, limited exposure is a huge barrier to the development of speaking fluency and communicative competence.

Communication in Daily Life

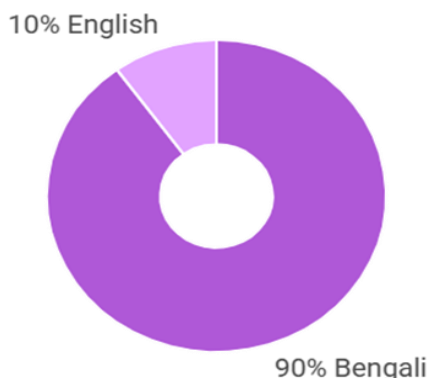


Figure 4: Daily Life Communication

About 10 percent of it will actually be in English; the other approximately 90 percent would need to be Bangla. This is because also what students learn about grammar and vocabulary never get integrated into their speaking

Challenges in Teaching and Learning Speaking Skill at Tertiary Level skills as fluency can only be acquired through extensive practice (Ellis, 2003; Littlewood, 2004).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, some recommendations have been proposed to improve English speaking skills teaching and learning at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. The approach to English rendering should first shift from an instructor-centered structure or a perfection and learners-focused structure. Classes should already be heavily dominant on methods such as pair work, group discussions and role-plays in the first place providing students more practice (student-talk being paramount).

Second, greater emphasis should be placed on speaking skills both in curriculum and assessment. More speaking also means less conventional classwork (which is something well done by the Ember theory of English meaning integrating starting next week) and having some introduction to this formal assessment for oral would really mean it gets treated with the same respect as other comprehensible skills in language.

Thirdly, large class sizes (and some solutions such as structured group work and peer interaction within them, and the possibility of classes focused on speaking skills only) should be dealt with. Teacher training programs need to be strengthened too, with an emphasis on providing instructors with strategies for conducting communicative activity in large classrooms.

Fourth, tasking universities to give access into supply for exposure of real input and practice with speaking English, those schools have to make the teaching resources accessible such as multimedia tools, audio-visual materials and Language laboratories.

Yet another head massage might be to aim at reducing student anxiety when they speak in class by pollinizing a non-threatening and supportive atmosphere where errors are not silenced but factored in as part of the learning journey taking part in communicative based activities. It is also necessary to inspire students to expand their exposure with English outside the classroom space using clubs, media, and digital platforms.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. It was conducted in only two public universities in Bangladesh with a relatively small sample of 100 students and 10 teachers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The use of self-reported questionnaires may have introduced response bias, while the cross-sectional design captured participants' perceptions at only one point in time. Additionally, the study focused solely on English major students and did not include classroom observations or examine individual learner differences and institutional variations that may influence speaking skill development.

Conclusion

The current study, employing a mixed-method approach, explored the barriers to enhancing English speaking fluency at higher educational institutions in Bangladesh. The results indicate that teacher-centered teaching practices, the availability of opportunities to practice oral language and classroom input, along with curriculum features such as the quality and quantity of speaking practice provided, class sizes, short-resource teaching contexts (including access issues to context-formulated reading materials in English language development (ELD)) and psychological factors were significantly related to students' gains in fluency, accuracy and confidence in their spoken skills. In addition, limited opportunities for using English outside the lesson stunted the learners' communicative skills. In general, the main conclusions drawn from this research indicate that a systematic approach integrating English speaking development with pedagogical reform to more closely align curriculum and assessment practice, along with institutional support and a supportive learning environment is necessary. All these domains of interest will be based on an issue: developing students' communication skills in the oral form of English.

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