

# Speaking Problems in English and Solutions: Scrutinizing Students' Perspective

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## Abstract

*In Bangladesh, private university sectors have observed several modifications with the initiation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The communicative approach is expected to form such an ambiance in the language classrooms where anxiety, fear, and boredom are minimized, and students are not under the influence of the affective factors at a tertiary level. This paper intends to explore the reasons that the students' background and affective factors affect highly on the speaking skills of the undergraduate level learners, and it aims to find solutions to these problems from the students' perspectives. To collect the data, researchers used a questionnaire to specify major problems faced by the tertiary level learners in speaking English and strategies to overcome those from their viewpoints. The survey shows, in many cases, anxiety, fear and hesitation and performance pressure hinders the speaking of individuals, whereas, if the speaking situation is friendly and provide a platform to uninterrupted speaking with constructive feedback, it may facilitate learners speaking. In the end, analyzing the results, the researchers have discussed some effective solutions from their experiences to overcome these affective states among adult learners.*

**Keywords: Speaking, anxiety, fear, performance pressure, facilitate speaking.**

## Introduction

Appropriate utilization of the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in any context can make communication successful. However, as with the growing transition from GTM to CLT in the language teaching and learning arena, speaking is being considered a crucial skill to be developed among the learners. In the Bangladeshi context, Bangla is the national and official language. English is used mostly for functional purposes, not widely as a means of communication. The education system is divided into three sections in the country -Bangla Medium, English Medium, and Madrassa system. However, at the tertiary level, in public and national universities, English is not always the medium of instruction in non-English major classes. But, in private universities, the scenario is the opposite. Students have to submit their assignments in English, do regular class presentations in English, and write exam answers in English. In the private job sector, people skilled in English, especially the productive skills, are getting preference. In proficiency tests like IELTS and TOEFL, English skills are required again. People who have studied or worked abroad and have settled in Dhaka, have created a community which uses English frequently in its conversations. If we take into consideration the present condition of English language in the country, it is very important to find out even if studying for years English as a compulsory subject, in tertiary level, what are main causes of speaking in English, and what can be the prospective ways to overcome those according to the students.

Language learning is a procedure that involves several factors such as motivation, attitude, anxiety, and so on. The concept of an Affective Filter was first propounded by Dulay and Bart (1977, cited in Du 2009) and then incorporated by Krashen as one of his five input Hypotheses. According to Krashen 1982, human beings can acquire second languages only if they can attain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to permit the input inside. Krashen's theory of the Affective Filter Hypothesis has included motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence as affective variables to learn a second language successfully. As stated by Krashen (1982), affective filters regulate the level of achievement in language acquisition. He said, "Those with attitudes more conducive to SLA will not only seek and obtain more input, but they will also have a lower or weaker filter" (Krashen, 1982, p.31)

As Rod Ellis opines, "The filter controls how much input the learner comes into contact with, and how much input is converted into the intake. It is 'affective' because the factors which determine its strength have to do with the learner's motivation, self-confidence, or anxiety state. Learners with low anxiety have low filters and so obtain and let in plenty of input. Learners with low motivation, little self-confidence, and high anxiety have high filters and so receive little input and allow even less in." (Understanding 263)

In Bangladeshi private university classroom context, among students, some negative factors work as a hindrance. In many cases, lack of motivation, anxiety, or dislike of the second language culture prevents the learner from making use of available input, thereby affecting the learner's progress regarding the acquisition though not necessarily to learning (Willis, 1997, p.87).

### **Review of the Literature**

According to Bygate (1987, p.7, cited in Kabir, 2014) has stated that "Speaking is in many ways an undervalued skill" in the ESL and EFL countries. This has been proven through several types of research done by many academics. For instance, Sato (2003, as cited in Kabir, 2014) has found that lots of Japanese learners of the English language

are excellently skilled in reading and writing but quite poor in listening and speaking. This researcher has discussed several common reasons for which the Japanese students encounter face difficulties in speaking English. Quietness and shyness in class, irrelevant classroom practice, Grammar Translation Method (GTM), large class size, fear of criticism, and anxiety in speaking are responsible for the lower speaking rate of Japanese EFL students (Sato, 2003, p.5).

The situation is the same in Hong Kong, which has a mono-cultural and mono-lingual environment. Gan (2011, cited in Kabir, 2014) has conducted a study on 20 would-be graduates who were at the end of their four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) in the English language. The major finding reveals that the students of Hong Kong rarely obtain any environment where they can smoothly practice English speaking outside their classroom (pp. 54-55). Additionally, they have massive problems with vocabulary knowledge. For instance, a student, named by Jane, has shared that when it comes to speaking, some words and phrases never come to her mind, and as a result, she cannot express what she intends to mean precisely (Gan, 2011, cited in Kabir, 2014).

In a research paper named Teaching Oral Communication: A methodological framework, conducted by Littlewood (1992), it has been discovered that although the environment is of crucial importance to learning any foreign language, nonetheless, despite this, many students have scarcely any opportunity to practice the (target language) outside the classroom, and therefore, they find it strenuous (p. 53). On top of that, the students are immensely criticized if they make errors. Regarding this, Tsui (2001) has expressed that ESL learners are the victim to be more vulnerable to criticism and negative evaluation while speaking (as cited in Gan, 2011, p. 54). Hence, the negative evaluation makes students' affective filter high and reduces the (second language) L2 production.

Another research by Svetlana, Timina and Butler's (2011, as cited in Kabir, 2014) on 70 masters students at Shih Chien University in Taiwan has noted that learners' reluctance and anxiety to speak, lack of motivation, rote learning and unpleasant and

embarrassing topics hold them back from speaking English with ease.

Bangladesh's neighboring country, India (where English is treated as the Second Language), also has some problems regarding speaking English among the learners. To illustrate, Hanumantharao (2011, para. 19. cited in Kabir, 2014) has conducted a study where she talked thoroughly about some challenges in teaching and learning English in India. From her study, lack of motivation, crowded classroom, fear of losing face, and learners' anxiety are some of the common challenges faced by the Indian ESL students. However, it is discussed from the teacher's perspective, that is why her major focus was problems of teaching speaking.

Scrivener (1994) has asserted, "EFL learners generally do not have adequate access to practice TL in the classrooms" (p. 161). Thus they feel uncertain, nervous, and get scared to speak English. In line with that, Larsari (2011) has reviewed an article and has denoted that the EFL and ESL students do not get a proper environment in class to practice English speaking. However, Bangladeshi English learners also encounter similar challenges in learning, speaking, and practicing English in and out of the classrooms.

Similar to any (English as Second Language) ESL and (English as Foreign Language) EFL student, most of the Bangladeshi students suffer from the inadequacy of vocabulary, poor pronunciation skills and fear of speaking in front of a large number of people. Arjun (2011, cited in Kabir 2014) has pointed out that "While commenting on the ESL learners' competence in speaking ....language instructors frequently complain that the learners are lagging because of having an inadequate stock of vocabulary" (p. 52). Moreover, large classes are causing a severe problem to practice speaking English to the learners. Concerning the number of students in a language classroom, Sinha (2001, cited in Kabir 2014) has stated that "In a language classroom, we need a limited number of students' (p. 173). Sadly, in real life, almost all English classrooms in the public educational institutions in Bangladesh are over-peopled and mostly have as many as 200 students in them (Siddique, 2004, p.3, cited in Kabir 2014).

Another research by Basir and Ferdousy

(2006) has shown that the numbers of students in the language classroom vary from 45 to 91, where 60% of language instructors believe that this is a large classroom scenario. However, regular communication in English would resolve this problem. But sadly, the Bangladeshi students do not get a sufficient amount of opportunity to use English for communicational purposes in class.

Besides, Chowdhury and Shaila's (2011, cited in Kabir 2014) investigation on the Bangladeshi SSS and HSC students have found that these learners do not practice speaking skills in their classrooms. Consequently, they do not feel relaxed and assured of speaking English. This makes the students stressed, nervous, and gradually, it lessens the production of English speaking.

The peers can also affect the speaker intensely, opines Chowdhury and Shaila (2011). They also have mentioned that in the large classes when a student starts speaking English, his/ her classmates make fun of her/ him when the speaker particularly makes mistakes. This is where that particular student becomes demotivated, gets nervous, and afraid to speak English again. It has also been observed that the teachers do not show support most of the time.

According to Siddique (2004, p. 2), "Bangladesh is one of the few countries of the world where teachers can start teaching without any formal training." This is also a barrier for the students because some teachers practice inappropriate techniques and materials in a language class, which several learners find demotivating and ineffective.

In Bangladesh, often students are ridiculed whenever they try to speak English with friends and in public places as some people think those students just try to show off or become ultra-smart. In such an unfriendly environment, many Bangladeshi students become quite demotivated in speaking or practicing English for which they are gradually becoming hesitant and afraid to speak before a large audience. Regarding this, Ahmed (2006, p. 4 cited in Kabir 2014) said, "Most of the Bangladeshi students are very reluctant to speak in English irrespective of their proficiency in one or the other skill."

Siddique (2004) has regulated a study in Bangladesh and found out, administrative context, teacher-centered classrooms, large classes, and

cultural conflicts are the most common challenges for the Bangladeshi students to speak English.

Ahmed's 2006 study (cited in Kabir 2014) and Chowdhury & Shaila's 2011 research has identified that the big classrooms, lack of self-confidence, co-operative peers and unsupportive communicative environment, students' shyness are the main hindrances behind Bangladeshi students' learning and speaking English. (Cited in Kabir 2014)

Kabir (2004) shows that Bangladesh has a well-informative English for Today (EFT) book to teach spoken English from primary education, but it has been neglected in the Bangladeshi classroom from the root level. The literature review here gives us the entire picture of the associated fields for teaching and learning spoken English in the Bangladeshi context.

### **The Rationale of the Study**

The gap between this research is, these difficulties and solutions never discussed from the student's perspective. Hence researchers of this paper attempt to find out the perspective of a private university student at the very beginning of their academic study, which will help both teacher and student to work towards to lower their affective states.

### **Research Questions**

In light of what has been discussed above, the researchers have formed the following questions:

1. What are the problems that cause hindrance in speaking English among the new undergraduates?
2. How these problems can be overcome from the perspectives of the learners?

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Participants**

The survey was conducted in a private university where 81 students are randomly chosen. All of the samples have completed their Higher Secondary Certificate (H.S.C) examination and enrolled in different subjects like Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Computer Science and Engineering, Civil Engineering, Architecture, and Department of English. Subjects are both male and female aged around 18 to 20. All of them are freshmen, and most of them have a common curriculum in Bangla

medium background. Some of them have a diploma in their respective subjects. It is also relevant to mention that a compulsory English course (part 1 and part 2) was common to these subjects in their secondary and higher secondary levels.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected using a quantitative survey questionnaire. This questionnaire has 26 questions, which are ranged from 5 point scale format, which ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' The responses were rated as strongly agree =5, agree=4, neutral=3, disagree=2, and strongly disagree=1. The questionnaire was influenced by the survey done by Urme (2013). However, it did not blindly follow the survey. The researchers, rather, modified the entire questionnaire to make it more appropriate to its context.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

The survey shows that 47.65% and 36.22% of students agree and strongly agree with the first statement (item 1: I am learning English to get a good job with practical benefits), which discloses their true purpose of learning English. Only a considerate amount of participants (42.79%) have strongly agreed with the second question (item 2: I want to speak English to settle in abroad), whereas 46.50% strongly disagreed with the mentioned idea. However, it has been observed that the majority of the students do not believe that they are studying English to read English books and watch movies easily (item 3). This is because they learn English by doing these activities, not they study English to do so. These three statements reveal the learners' purpose and inner motivation for learning English in a university phase. However, from the fourth to sixteenth question, although they are happy with their English class and teachers' feedback, they are still having problems during speaking English fluently and accurately. The researchers developed these statements considering the students' points of view so that the real scenario from their perspectives can easily become visible. Table 1-2 displays the results of the questionnaire survey. The percentages means, and standard deviations for each of the responses on the Likert scale are shown here.

Table 1

	Sample (81)						
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree		
	%	%	%	%	%	Mean	SD
Item1	30.00	34.00	34.50	47.65	36.22	4.1358	.97151
Item2	46.50	36.38	43.00	38.13	42.79	3.7901	1.16957
Item3	56.00	44.55	43.47	42.29	32.71	3.6914	.99551
Item4	38.00	31.50	44.60	50.11	34.18	4.2346	.93904
Item5	.	.	44.60	42.29	39.46	4.4444	.61237
Item6	.	31.57	53.07	40.76	37.35	3.9753	.92162
Item7	33.89	42.57	39.89	40.10	47.70	3.0000	1.22474
Item8	45.55	42.65	42.82	38.34	36.57	2.9753	1.24474
Item9	30.33	35.00	43.57	46.84	36.85	4.0617	1.06473
Item10	12.00	20.00	44.94	46.64	30.05	3.9877	.81385
Item11	15.00	49.71	28.50	43.08	40.38	4.0123	.94199
Item12	37.50	47.86	29.56	41.38	38.54	3.3086	1.23128
Item13	24.80	43.67	42.85	41.37	40.57	3.3704	1.15590
Item14	38.50	39.64	31.13	48.42	33.40	3.6543	1.01440
Item15	38.40	41.57	36.71	42.12	42.87	3.4815	1.16309
Item16	25.63	47.88	39.65	44.34	40.00	3.4938	1.20544

\*SD = standard deviation. %: Percentage

Table 1 includes all 16 questions which measure the students' motivation for studying English and problems encountered while speaking. In response to item 5 (The English teachers' feedback helps me in a positive way) and item 6 (Higher grades make me want to learn English more), it is seen that no one strongly disagreed to the given ideas, rather for these two items 44.60% and 53.07% participants remained neutral respectively. However, for item 5, 42.29% students agreed which means they believe that teachers' feedback has positive effects on their improvement in speaking English and for item 6, 40.76% students agreed that higher grade does make them learn English more, however, higher grade does not motivate students to study English more for 31.57% students as shown in the table above.

In response to question 7 (item 7: I feel stressed when someone in my class speaks English fluently), 47.70% of students strongly agreed to the idea, which exhibits that most of the students internally feel very anxious when others speak better than them. A majority of students have revealed that they do not feel shy to speak English in a group discussion of known people (item 8), but they feel very hesitated

when they are required to speak English in front of a large audience (item 9). This is where "hesitation" becomes a major part of their anxiety, which is a hindrance to fluent speaking. The analysis for item 10 (I look for words when I start a conversation in English) reveals that 46.64% of students grope for words while speaking English or becomes lost in conversation. This means they lack a huge amount of vocabulary in English. Good knowledge of lexis can help the students improve their speaking ability.

In response to items 11, 12, 13, and 14, a substantial amount of students either agreed or disagreed; only some remained neutral. This part of the analysis shows that even after studying English for 12 years, the speaking capabilities of these students are not up to the mark. Most of the students agreed that they still have a fear of criticism and become very worried about making errors in speaking.

With regards to item 15 (I am afraid of being laughed at for making mistakes during speaking English.) and item 16 (I lose my confidence when the people stare at me once I start speaking English.) 42.12% and 44.34% participants agreed respectively

which lets us know about the learners' awareness of for these two items are 3.4815 and 3.4938 separately. having low confidence in public speaking. The mean

**Table 2**

	Sample (81)						
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree		
	%	%	%	%	%	Mean	
						SD	
Item17	.	.	40.19	45.15	32.19	3.8765	.71384
Item18	23.00	25.50	34.80	43.57	38.20	4.0988	.71772
Item19	23.00	39.67	17.20	44.91	41.21	4.2963	.84327
Item20	.	.	4.00	42.45	41.41	4.4568	.54885
Item21	.	.	34.00	45.45	38.40	4.2099	.70207
Item22	.	.	45.86	42.38	36.64	4.1728	.70339
Item23	.	47.33	36.71	42.46	40.70	3.9630	.78174
Item24	.	.	42.40	42.74	36.83	4.0988	.68200
Item25	.	12.00	41.73	43.28	37.35	4.1235	.67791
Item26	.	.	43.86	45.28	35.66	4.3457	.63562

\*SD = standard deviation; %: Percentage

Table 2 has a total of ten questions (from item 17 to item 26), which shows the student's beliefs about the strategies which can be maintained to overcome the speaking difficulties. No students strongly disagreed to ideas mentioned in the second part of the questionnaire except for item 18 (Students should communicate in the 'Target Language' (TL), for example in English, outside the classroom whenever they get opportunity.) and item 19 (Students should watch English movies with and without subtitles to understand how the native speakers speak.) Moreover, for item 17, 20, 21, and 22, not a single participant either disagreed or strongly disagreed. 45.15% of students realize that they should not be too much worried about the errors made in conversation. The analysis shows that 42.45%, 45.45%, and 42.38% students believe that students should listen to English songs with lyrics, they have to give more presentations in English to develop better and the teachers need to focus on the students' pronunciation skills heavily because pronunciations are of utmost importance in English speaking.

However, in response to item 23, 47.33% of students disagreed with the idea where it is said that teachers should not interrupt them during the speaking. 42.46% of students, however, agreed to this statement. This means in case of an interruption in free speech; students get divided in their opinions.

Many of them think, if teachers interrupt them in speaking to correct mistakes, they will learn better.

As for item 25 (Classroom environment should be as encouraging as possible to make the students less anxious during the speaking.), the mean is 4.1235. Here, 43.28% of students agreed to this statement, whereas 41.73% stayed neutral. 37.35% of students strongly disagreed with this notion, which reveals that students want to stay as relaxed as possible in a classroom during speaking English.

In response to item 26 (Varieties of activities can encourage the students to speak in English in front of the audience.) 45.28% agreed, and 35.66% of participants strongly agreed to it, while 43.86% of them remained objective. This may happen due to the mindsets of the students where some students may like different types of activities in speaking practice, whether others may not. However, no one either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This shows that students like in-class activities that may help them talk more in English.

### Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper reflects the presence of speaking-in-class difficulties through the perspectives of undergraduate students in a compulsory English course context. Eighty-one students are given the questionnaire to conduct the research. The survey data

reveal that the students in the Bangladeshi context suffer from various hurdles while speaking in class. Some of those apprehensions often affect students' communication in English to some extent. Because of this anxiety with a poor English background, they lack self-confidence and lack the motivation to use English. Sometimes, eye contact with classmates can make some of them nervous during speaking in English. Using the target language with non-major students, the technical terms are not always clear to them, hence making small groups practice English among themselves can boost up their confidence.

Furthermore, the results of the student interview data demonstrate some anxiety-coping strategies can be employed (i.e., social, affective, metacognitive, compensatory, cognitive, and memory-related strategies). The majority of the students believe that vocabulary focus, audiovisual focus, self-practice, social focus, meta-cognitive focus, compensatory focus, and affective focus can reduce the anxious states while they are speaking English. Vocabulary repertoire and classroom environment are considered as essential tools to eradicate speaking anxiety.

Moreover, presentation and pronunciation skills should be emphasized at the very beginning of their academic studies. If these practices are maintained, students' inner hesitation and anxiety will be reduced to a substantial extent in the case of speaking English. If the students feel teachers empathize with them, they might feel relax while speaking in English. Several students encouraging classroom environment and constructive feedback can help them to develop their anxiety coping strategy.

These recommendations can help the teachers to redesign the courses for EFL/ESL. Instructors should identify students having anxiety over oral production and low self-image, seek for the appropriate strategies that they can assist students in eradicating anxiety and ensure a pleasant and boosting classroom atmosphere for them to exercise the target language.

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