Investigating the Problems Faced by the University EFL Learners in Speaking English Language

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ABSTRACT

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Speaking English is a part of the daily academic life of the EFL learners at the undergraduate level of the major English programs in Bangladesh. This practice sometimes creates many problems for first-year undergraduate public and private university students. Despite its importance, sufficient data about the problems Bangladeshi university students face in speaking English was not found. To investigate the problems of speaking faced by the undergraduate students, the current study applied mixed methods, and eighty-eight students and four teachers from four universities participated in it. The result shows that both public and private university students with English majors face a lot of problems communicating in English. However, this study has found that public university students are slightly more competent in English and face fewer problems than private university students. The participants expressed different insights on the roles of curriculum, teaching techniques, and individual institutions to overcome the students' weakness in English speaking skills. Finally, the study puts forward some very specific recommendations on the basis of the findings for the concerned stakeholders.

Introduction

The English language fluency has been recognized as one of the most important factors to pursue a successful career in Bangladesh, like many regions of the current world (Ahmad, 2008; Hamid, 2012; Hamid, Jahan, & Islam, 2013; Leitner, Hashim, & Wolf, 2016; Rahman & Pandian, 2018). With a British colonial history of about two centuries, English is the most widely used language for business, technology, education, and overall communication after

the only predominant language of Bangla in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2015). Although there is a debate about whether English is an ESL (English as a Secondary Language) or EFL (English as a Foreign Language) here, it is taught as a compulsory subject from the primary level to the higher secondary level of education. English is also used as the medium of instruction at the tertiary level in Bangladesh's public and private universities. There is no doubt in the fact that speaking skill is an important aspect of English communicative competence in the era in which it is the most dominant language of the current world, and Bangladesh is one of the largest countries in the world in respect of population in which the presence of the English language is found widely.

Bangladeshi educational premises adopted a "communicative approach" to language teaching to make English language learning and teaching more effective. The communicative approach aims to teach all four skills of a language so that the learner can have a good command over all the four skills, i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking, while communicating. After four decades of adopting the approach, the state is yet to find that common EFL learners reach a satisfactory level of English language skills (Rahman & Pandian, 2018; Rahman, Islam, Karim, Chowdhury, Rahman, Seraj, & Singh, 2019).

The problem in speaking becomes acute and visible when the learners enter universities where the medium of instruction is English. In Bangladesh, both public and private university first-year English major undergraduate students face problems while speaking English. Surely, it is an eye-catching fact as this is the very discipline in which they intend to complete their graduation. Suppose the major English students face problems in speaking in spite of choosing the subject to study. In that case, it is surely a common problem for all the students, and it indicates the standard of English language teaching (ELT), especially regarding speaking skills, at the secondary and higher secondary levels in Bangladesh. The researchers' own experiences show that EFL learners face some problems while speaking English, especially during the first year of their undergraduate studies in the English department. Moreover, students face problems regardless of the institution type, i.e., public or private. Hence, both public and private universities have been taken into consideration in this study for identifying and evaluating the problems on a general scale.

It has been seen that speaking skill is the most problematic skill for learners even at their tertiary level of education. The learners inside the classroom mostly use English for educational purposes, and when they face problems communicating in English, the whole education process becomes a problem to carry out and bring success. In spite of studying English as a compulsory subject since primary level education, which is also focused on the communicative approach, when the students fail to speak in English, it becomes an alarming issue. Therefore, it requires a study. Focusing on the speaking problems of the undergraduate fresher students of public and private universities will bring out their nature of problems with comparison. The investigation may shed light on eradicating or overcoming problems of the students and find out if any other factors related to institutions, study environment, or peers are related to the problem.

In most cases, in Bangladesh, tertiary-level education is provided in the English language. Moreover, the English-speaking capacity of the newly admitted students of the English departments may indicate the standard and problems of ELT at the secondary and higher secondary levels in Bangladesh. That is why the researchers felt the necessity the identification the problems of the undergraduate fresher students in speaking English. The purposes of the study were not only to analyze the problems of both public and private university students comparatively but also to find some common solutions to those problems.

Literature review

There existing studies on the problems and challenges of teaching and learning spoken English in Bangladesh have not covered the specific group of participants, i.e., the freshers of university English departments, that are addressed in this study. Some studies were conducted in the urban contexts, whereas some others were in rural contexts. Another research was carried out by Hamid (2011) on the problems and English proficiency of EFL learners in the country's rural schools. He analyzed some socio-economic factors that affect English teaching and learning.

Some other studies found the factors like language anxiety or 'English-phobia', family solvency, the educational background of family members, and location of the educational institutions to be crucial factors to affect the quality of ELT and motivation of the EFL learners and the speaking skill was found to be the most neglected language skill in the colleges of rural and urban areas in Bangladesh (Ahmad, 2014; Ahmad, 2017). Hasan and Akhand (2009) conducted a study on the challenges and sustainability of ELT at the college level in Bangladesh. That large-scale study covered all the sixty-four districts of the country, including colleges of both urban and rural areas. Its findings marked that the two factors that affected the teaching and learning of spoken English were the scarcity of appropriate teaching materials and the teachers' low level of ELT competence.

Communicative competence and speaking skills

Communicative competence is one of the most important survival skills in the globalized world. It has been an extensively studied topic in the field of education since the 1970s (Celce-Murcia, 2008). Dell Hymes coined the influential term Communicative competence in the 1980s. As Larsen-Freeman (2011) states, it indicates "knowing when and how to say what to whom, … which focuses on the components of the ability to communicate through a language" (p. 152). It comprises four components according to Canale and Swain (1980): grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Linguistic competence refers to the knowledge of syntax, phonology, vocabulary, and word-formation processes that enable us to use the language for a range of

different purposes and functions. The second ability, sociolinguistic competence, includes the sociocultural knowledge of how to vary the use of language to suit the setting and the

participants. Discourse competence is related to the knowledge of how to produce, differentiate, and interpret various types of texts in different modes, such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Lastly, strategic competence is concerned with the language user's ability to use different kinds of communication strategies to maintain communication to meet the gap caused by limited language knowledge.

Speaking skill is considered a very important skill because it is necessary for oral communication. Speaking is also important because of its use in conversations and describing something, and it also works hand in hand with listening. Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information (Florez, 1999). In addition, speaking is also defined as a productive skill. It is the ability of participants to communicate and express their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and needs in order to make sense of them (Brown, 2004). It goes without saying that the importance of speaking skills is beyond measurement. Speaking skill is also important as it is directly related to communication and interaction. Therefore, competency in any language is largely dependent on how well the person speaks in that language.

Importance of speaking skills in education

In order to empower ourselves, we need knowledge; and in order to gain knowledge, we need formal education. English is widely used as a medium of education or instruction in many countries. In Bangladesh as well, the medium of tertiary level education is English. The medium of instruction in the country's many public as well as private universities, is English. Books and materials followed are mostly written in English. Lectures are given in English as well. We all know that education is an interactive process, and in order to receive the knowledge, we need interaction. As the medium of instruction is English therefore, speaking skill is very important for the students. Suppose the students do not know how to use this language inside the classroom. In that case, it is easily understandable that they will not be comfortable or confident in using English outside the classroom in their day-to-day conversations. Hence, speaking skill is very important for learners to practice and master.

Commonly faced English-speaking problems.

Acquiring a skill is never easy as many difficulties and obstacles keep blocking the development of the skills and make it harder for the learners to grasp. Speaking problems are faced by learners all over the world. Studies conducted so far have pointed out several speaking problems the learners face. Speaking is an interactive skill that has problems and difficulties of many kinds. According to Thornbury (2005), the main problems learner-speakers face are in two areas - knowledge factors and skills factors. The knowledge factors refer to the speaker's linguistic knowledge that is used for oral production. The skill factors mean that the learners' knowledge is not sufficiently automated to ensure fluency. Therefore, English speakers should have linguistic knowledge. They should have functional knowledge about the purpose of speaking, whether as a transactional or interpersonal function. Secondly, the speakers need to have discourse competence which controls the capacity to connect and

organize individual utterances. Thirdly, learners need pragmatic competence that relates to a particular language and the contexts in which it is used, including the purpose for which language is used. Last of all, English speakers should speak grammatically correct English and have a wide range of vocabulary with good pronunciation.

In her study, Hadijah (2014) found out some reasons why students face problems in speaking English. The reasons were not limited to having little knowledge of the components of speaking skills, including vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and comprehension but also personal reasons such as lack of self-confidence, shyness to perform speaking, lack of speaking practice, time management, speaking material, and exposure problems. Therefore, it is clear that speaking has a vast domain of problems or difficulties that obstruct learners' successful learning of the skill.

Many studies have recommended the integration of Information and communication technology (ICT) into ELT practices (Chau, 2021; Nguyen, 2022; Pham, 2021). But this type of practice was not very common in the ELT scenario of the country before the pandemic of COVID-19. But this scenario is expected to change slowly due to the forced online educational practices caused by the pandemic.

Speaking problems in the Bangladeshi context

English is used as an official language and as a medium of instruction for tertiary-level education in both public and private universities in Bangladesh. Though English is taught as a compulsory subject from the primary level of education, the students have yet to reach the speaking fluency level inside and outside their classroom. In her study, Bhattacharjee (2008) stated that exposure to speaking situations is extremely limited in the classroom. Moreover, the students get very limited access to English outside the classroom. They spend most of their time with their family, friends, and the community where the Bangla language is used predominantly. In an EFL context like Bangladesh, the learners are not required to engage in English in practical situations outside the academic context. That is why they cannot practice oral communication in English. The learners consider it only as an academic subject rather than a means of communication.

Research objectives

The primary purpose of the research was to explore the problems while speaking English as undergraduate students. It was designed to find and analyze the nature of their speaking problem or the most commonly faced difficulties. A part of its purpose was to check if there was any significant difference between the two types of university students' speaking problems. On the basis of the data, the study aimed to present some recommendations for the concerned ELT practitioners to improve their fluency in English speaking.

Methodology

Pedagogical setting & participants

The aim of the research was to find out the speaking problems faced by the first-year English major students and conduct a comparative study between the public and private university students. For this reason, the research was conducted at two public and two private universities in Dhaka city. It included four university teachers and eighty-eight randomly chosen students. All the students were first-year English-major undergraduate students.

Table 1. Research Participants

Participants	Public	Private	Total
Number of universities	02	02	04
Student - survey participants	44	44	88
Focused Group Discussions (FGD) - students	05	05	10
Teachers	02	02	04

Research design

To elicit enough valid data, a mixed-method approach by Creswell (2014) was followed in the study to investigate the relevant issues. Both the quantitative and qualitative data were collected side by side.

Research instruments and data collection

This mixed-method study used both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools. The study used a survey questionnaire of seventeen items and the five-point Likert scale to collect the quantitative data. The speaking problem of the students was identified and measured by themselves. The self-reported data about the speaking problem was the primary tool to measure and analyze the phenomena.

The qualitative data was collected through interviews and focused group discussions. The researchers conducted focused group discussions among the students and took teachers' interviews in order to collect and analyze qualitative data.

Data analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed according to the five major questions of the questionnaire. Then the interviews were transcribed for coding. After that, the thematic analysis of the qualitative data was prepared. Finally, the two types of data were triangulated to present the overall findings and recommendations.

Research findings and discussion

Students' perspectives

English competence level and problems

It was found from the study that most of the English major first-year undergraduate students of both public and private universities, more or less, faced problems speaking English due to both linguistic and communicative competence.

Communicative competence in English

Q1. How well can you communicate in English?

Figure 1 shows that 6.8% of the private university student ratings and 11.4% of the public university student ratings of the communication capacity in English is "Excellent."
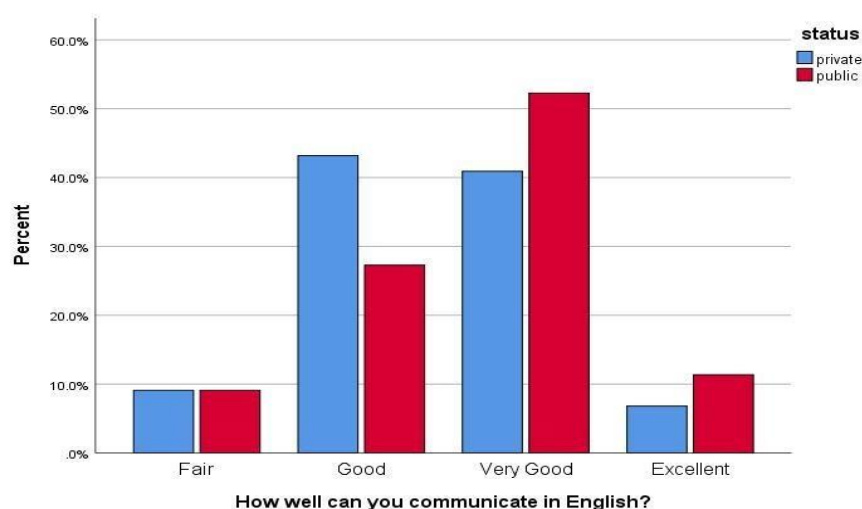

Figure 1: Communicative competence in English

No one rated their competence as "Poor ."After the overall calculation of the ratings given by the students, an average of 48% of ratings go to private university students, whereas 51% go to public university students.

Therefore, according to the students' own responses, we can state that public university students are slightly more competent than private university students in terms of English communication skills.

The problem of linking sentences

Q2. How often do you face problems linking sentences while you speak?

It seems that linking sentences while speaking is a common problem for most of the respondents. Only 2.3% of response is "never ."Regarding linking sentences, public university

students are again in an advantageous position. The ratio of easiness of this problem is Private 46: Public 53.
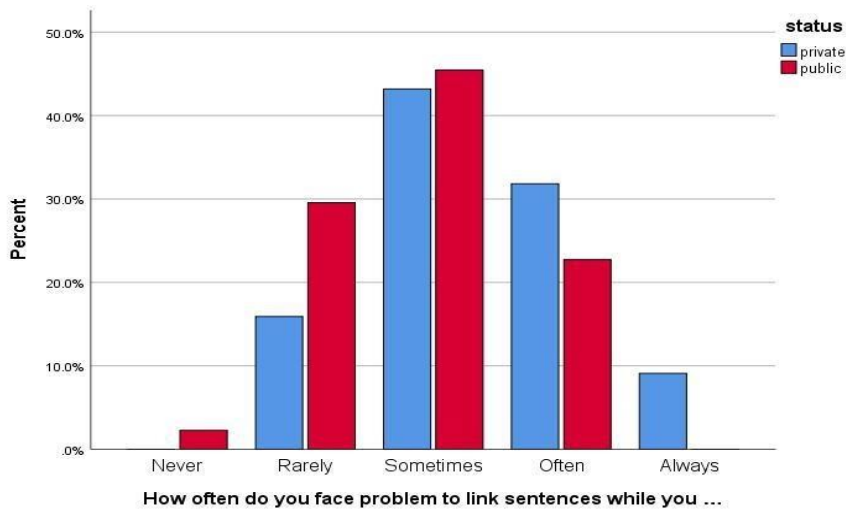

Figure 2: Problem of linking sentences

Fear of making grammatical mistakes

Q3. How much do you agree that "Thinking about making grammatical mistakes while speaking" is a hindrance to speaking English fluently?
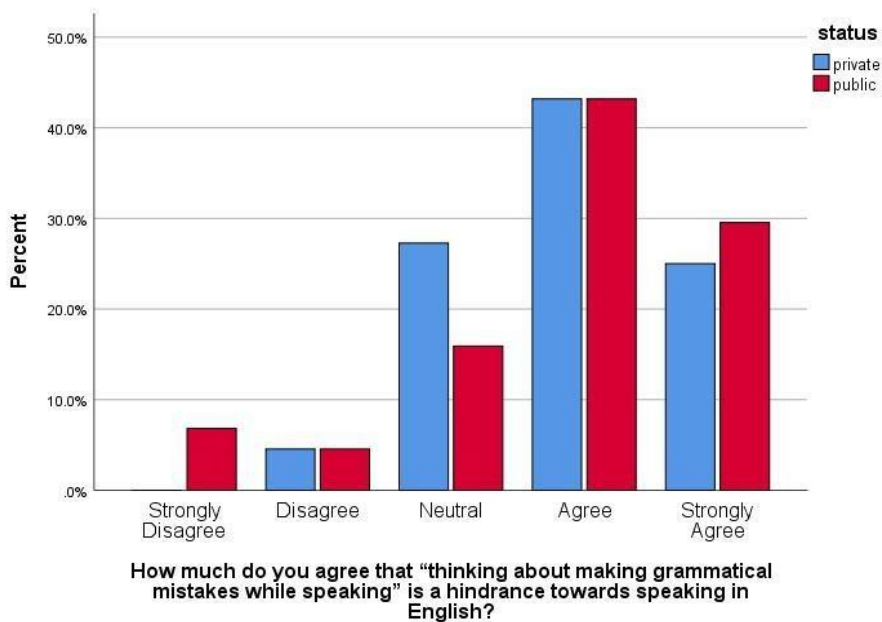

Figure 3: Fear of making grammatical mistakes

At least two-thirds of public and private university students have agreed with this statement that thinking about grammatical mistakes is a hindrance to speaking fluently. The ratio of ratings to this question is Public 50: Private 49.

Anxiety is as a problem while speaking.

Q4. To what extent do you think anxiety can cause any problem while speaking English?

The ratio of ratings of answers is Private 50: Public 50. It expresses that both parties have the same perception about anxiety as a problem with speaking English.

From figure 4, it is clear that most students find language anxiety as a problem always or often.
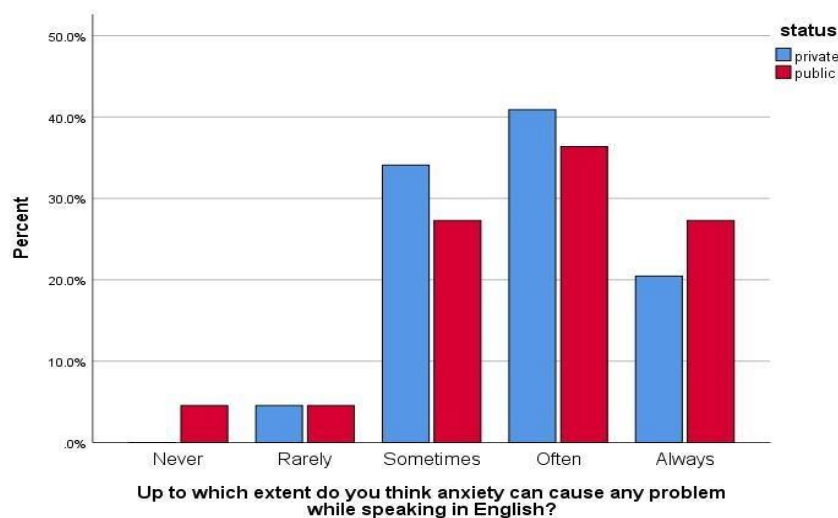

Figure 4: Anxiety as a problem while speaking

Role of the institution

Q5. Do you think your current institution plays any positive role in developing your speaking skill?
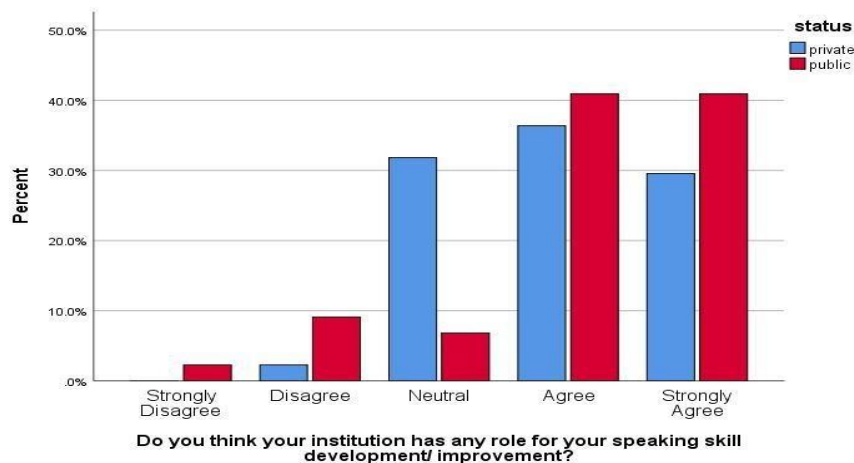

Figure 5: Role of the Institution

Here, the public university students expressed the opinion that institutions have a role to play regarding speaking skill development. The ratio of responses from private and public university students is 47: 52.

Absence of listening and speaking practices at the school level

Almost three-fourths of the students reported that they did not have enough scope of doing speaking-listening activities in the schools. Those skills were not tested as a part of the common examination systems at the school level. That is why the teachers did not emphasize developing the speaking skill.

Lack of motivation caused by lack of the scope to use English in real life

In the non-academic context in Bangladesh, the research participants did not need to use their discourse and strategic competence in English. The lack of scope to apply academically acquired linguistic competence in real-life demotivated them to increase their speaking skill.

Suggestions from the students

Few participants have addressed some more issues that are relevant to the problem of speaking. They have suggested a number of ways from their own experience to develop their English speaking.

> *New vocabularies or tough words are problems. For example, someone used the word "propensity" while talking to me, and I was embarrassed as I didn't know its meaning. It takes time to get on the momentum. I don't find appropriate words, and I also make grammatical mistakes.* (FGD, Public university student 2)

> *As English is our second language, we translate from Bangla to English. Therefore, it causes problems while speaking.* (FGD, Private university student 3)

> *Listening is the most important thing to me for the development of speaking skills.* (Interview, Public university student 4)

A number of students have proposed "mirror therapy" to relieve the fear of speaking.

> *We have to be confident. Everybody makes mistakes. It is not necessary to be super correct. Body language is also important. Practice with a partner or in front of a mirror is necessary. We have to have a desire to develop our speaking level, but we do not necessarily need to be like native speakers. We can also listen to podcasts and have foreign friends talk to them.* (FGD, Public university student 1)

Teachers' perspectives

The teachers from both public and private universities opined that first-year undergraduates face speaking English problems throughout the year. They mentioned several factors behind their impairment in speaking English. The study collected insights into the nature of the problems faced by the students. They defined the role of institutions and curriculum at large. Finally, the teachers of both public and private universities have given some, more or less similar, suggestions so that the first-year undergraduate English major students can overcome their English-speaking problems.

The teachers interviewed have pointed to several factors that are causing difficulties for the students. The interviewees have talked about several natures of students' speaking problems they have encountered. The problems of private and public university students have little difference. Most of the problems are very common to the learners of English as a Second or Foreign Language.

Bangla medium or poor schooling background

It is notable that all the teachers have mentioned that the students who are from Bangla medium backgrounds face more or less the same problems speaking English.

Social and economic constraints

One of the interviewees has mentioned that students of public universities do not get enough time to practice and develop their skills because of some financial issues.

Public speaking

Almost all the students felt uneasy speaking in front of a public audience. Most of the teachers have shared their experiences about this issue with the researchers.

Translate from Bangla

The function of the learner's first language is considered a major issue in second language learning. Here, in this research, it was found that students try to make sentences first in their native language, i.e., Bangla, and then try to translate them into English.

Affective filter

The teachers have suggested that the student's high level of affective filters hinders their language production.

Lack of vocabulary

All of the teachers interviewed have said that their students face problems mostly because of their lack of vocabulary.

Pronunciation and accent

Another reason the teachers have mentioned is that students face problems with the correct pronunciation of English. They also have trouble understanding the English accent.

Role of the curriculum

All the teachers have expressed the importance of a planned and consistent curriculum. They have shared different opinions regarding the status of the curriculum and what changes should be brought to it.

Teaching techniques

Both the teachers of public and private universities have agreed that teaching techniques of the curriculum have a major role in overcoming the students' speaking problems.

Syllabus design

Almost all the interviewees have put emphasis on a change in the syllabus. Some of them have said that more changes should be brought to the school and college levels.

Motivation

The teachers have remarked that motivation is an important factor that influences students' speaking skills. According to them, if students can feel the necessity to develop speaking skills, they will put more effort into it.

Role of the institution

All the interviewees have opined that the institution has immense importance in developing students' speaking skills. Most importantly, institutions can provide good teachers and mentors and ensure a friendly environment for developing speaking skills.

Role of the teacher

As the teacher can be a role model in front of the students in second language learning, interviewees have suggested that students may follow them and their experience of mastering the English language.

Environment

Interviewees have significantly emphasized the necessity of a good environment for learning English:

> *I advise students to go to the American center and British Council to get an English-speaking environment. I invite some foreigners to our university. Students can talk with them and this way they can improve their English very easily. (Teacher 2)*

Digital technology

A teacher remarked that current students, unlike the university students of the batches of a few years ago, are getting more facilities because of the availability of multimedia devices and contents:

> *The students are gradually improving because we did not have these opportunities like the internet, YouTube, etc., before.* (Teacher 3)

Private university students get more care about speaking fluency development

One of our interviewees has claimed a very significant issue that the private universities take more care about their speaking skills than public universities do. Moreover, the interviewee also remarked that nowadays, university students are becoming more interested in language skills and linguistics than literature, which badly affects their speaking performance.

> *Public university students are more concerned about their CGPA. They are unwilling to learn speaking though it is highly necessary for the job market. Even some English major students don't love reading books or watching movies. Even I also read and reread fairy tales books like Cinderella. I watch movies with my kids. I read out books for my kids. Nowadays, English major students are becoming more interested in linguistics than literature.* (Teacher 4)

Overall discussion and recommendations

The new major findings in comparison to the existing relevant literature can be highlighted through the following points:

The lack of speaking fluency of the undergraduate students is caused due to the absence of listening and speaking practices during the 12 years of academic studies from Class 1 to Class 12 at the primary, secondary, higher secondary (known as intimidating college in Bangladesh) levels at the schools. The Junior School Certificate (JSC), Secondary School Certificate (SSC), and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC.) English curricula focus on those two skills to a limited extent. On top of that, the existing major national public examinations, including the JSC, SSC, and HSC, which are held at the end of Class 8, Class 10, and Class 12, respectively, do not include the evaluation of listening and speaking skills. Surprisingly, the concerned national authorities named the English curricula as the Communicative English curriculum in 2010 and have been developing them since then, excluding those two skills in the rubrics. Hence, the students' foundation of English communicative competence is weak in the country, due to which they suffer at the undergraduate level.

The English language teachers have limited knowledge about how to apply the inductive approach in teaching. That is why the learners are too much concerned about grammatical mistakes, which has caused language anxiety.

Both public and private university students are weak in speaking fluency. But the private universities are found to take greater care to develop speaking fluency. The curricula and facilities of the private universities are better in this regard. The private universities have integrated the use of digital equipment and apps to implement E-learning more than the public universities, making English learning and teaching more effective there.

The following recommendations can be forwarded based on the findings of the study that may have an effective way to understand and overcome the challenges of English speaking skills faced by undergraduate students of English.

Grammar

The students should not only memorize grammar and its rules but also understand and be able to use it in practical life. While speaking, a lack of grammatical knowledge often causes problems, which was seen in this research based on the findings. Therefore, grammar and its competency should be dealt with seriousness.

Vocabulary

From the students' as well as teachers' point of view, it has been found that students' lack of vocabulary causes problems in their speaking. Therefore, students should give effort to building their vocabulary knowledge, and teachers should also take necessary measures so that they can ensure that students are learning vocabulary accordingly.

Anxiety

The students should reduce their anxiety and phobia about English speaking. They should take it naturally and overcome their shyness. Until and unless they defeat their psychological barrier, their speaking cannot be improved.

Motivation

The EFL learners should be more self-motivated. At the same time, the teachers also should motivate them in the class so that they take the initiative and willingly start giving efforts to overcome their speaking problems.

Institution

The institutions should also make necessary arrangements to help their students remove their speaking problems. From the research, it has been found that many students were benefited from the English club and practice sessions arranged by the institution. Therefore, the institution should put emphasis not only on their academic results but also on their English speaking competence.

Syllabus and curriculum

In order to overcome the speaking problem, the curricula and syllabuses should be updated timely, and the authorities should develop them in such a way that students can engage more and more through the lessons and tasks.

Outside the class activity

The speaking skills can be improved in various ways, including outside class activities. The teachers should encourage students to use English media on the internet. The students may use the outside resources provided by the British Council.

Conclusion

In this research, several issues came forward regarding the English major undergraduate students, which include the lack of practice, guidance, and self-motivation of the EFL learners to improve their speaking in their primary and secondary level education. It also explored their lack of practice and incompetence in grammar and vocabulary, the absence of the scope of a friendly environment to practice speaking. The overemphasis on grammar is common in the ELT scenario of the country at the school level, where the Grammar Translation (GT) method is followed despite the presence of communicative curricula. The poor ELT input with a minimum focus on the listening and speaking skills at the school level caused the EFL learners of the undergraduate level show poor performance in spoken English. The socio-economic background was also found to play a crucial role in this respect.

The delimitation of the study was that it was undertaken in four universities due to a lack of time and funding. But this research explored some experienced English teachers' opinions and feedback based on their long time teaching experience. Therefore it brought out some important factors that included the roles of higher educational institutions and the roles of English undergraduate syllabuses in this regard. It also sheds some light on the core areas of the undergraduate English curricula: literature, language skills, and linguistics. All these factors play important roles in influencing the English speaking performance of the EFL learners of the undergraduate level.

The problems which came to light throughout this research suggest that the nature of problems faced by the students are more or less the same in public and private institutions. The challenges are also similar in both types of institutions, yet the approach toward the problem is variable in some aspects. The teachers of these institutions also have almost similar points of view regarding the students speaking problems though their feedback towards the solution is versatile and different on some points.

The teachers and students should consider English more as a medium of communication than only an academic subject. The findings strongly demand more attention from the national education policymakers to develop ELT quality at secondary and higher secondary levels. The country needs an effective implementation of a stable and farsighted language-education policy and multidimensional short-term and long-term plans for the school level and the undergraduate level. Suppose the EFL learners gain the minimum fluency in speaking English at the school level. In that case, they can be nourished and polished further at the undergraduate level, which will enable them to communicate in the English language to survive in the competitive age of globalization.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this work.

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