

# **Factors Influencing English Speaking Performances of Bangladeshi Private University Engineering Students**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to address the influencing factors of speaking skills of tertiary-level learners in engineering studies. The data were collected from sixty students and nine teachers teaching at a number of Bangladeshi private universities – International Islamic University Chittagong, Southern University Bangladesh, and Chittagong Independent University. The researchers followed mixed methods to analyze and generate data. The students were chosen from the freshers of Engineering faculties of the mentioned universities who were involved in different speaking activities such as storytelling, performing presentations, debate, problem-solving, situational conversation, question answering and extempore speech. This research, the topic of which is apparently controversial, explores the learners' English-speaking competence as well as the influencing factors such as fluency, pronunciation, grammatical range and accuracy, and lexical resources. The major findings of the study include certain challenges in speaking skills such as Anglophobia, lack of an English-speaking environment, syntactic and morphological limitations, lack of lexical resources, and intonation issues in pronunciation. This paper will

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understandably contribute to the syllabus design and material development of teaching speaking skills to tertiary-level students of Engineering studies in particular.

### **Keywords**

English speaking, engineering students, influencing factors, speaking competence, tertiary level

### **Introduction**

Speaking is a useful skill and an important part in learning a language. According to McDonough and Shaw (1993), speaking is a competence that allows us to make utterances. When we are truly communicative, speaking should be meaningful, functional, and purposive since humans speak for certain aims and purposes. While English is considered as the lingua franca of the world in recent years, the significance of speaking English has been a key factor in ESL/EFL situations. It is quite concerning that the speaking proficiency of the majority of the tertiary students (of Engineering fields) in Bangladesh is below average, despite their having studied English as a compulsory subject in the country's mainstream Bengali curriculum from the Primary level to the Higher Secondary level. Surprisingly, even after finishing the required English courses during undergraduate studies, the level of the oral ability of the students is not adequate.

In existing Engineering subjects, students learn speaking skills in the language learning process by using methods like Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Eclectic and various other techniques in English language classes. Teachers in English language classrooms encourage students to participate in group discussions, extempore speech, turn-taking, adjacent pair, side sequence, topic change, topic conflict, or other activities

that encourage them to be habituated to speaking in real-life situations. Speaking is highly sought by engineering students since their occupational discourses need to be remarkably convincing and efficient communicants (Brown, 2010). Since the English language is generally utilized as a means of academic and professional communication, mainly in the ‘digital world,’ more priority is given to educating learners in mastering English language speaking skills (Boonkit, 2010). Due to the increased need for improved speaking abilities, Bailey (2005) and Goh (2007) propose approaches to focus on speaking skills through syllabus adjustments, task development, and identifying appropriate pedagogy. Students enrolled in undergraduate courses come, nowadays, from a variety of cultural, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds. Their language abilities also vary depending on whether the learners received their formative education in English or Bengali medium. Furthermore, according to a recent survey by Aspiring Minds (2019), many engineering students fail terribly in terms of communication in English, despite their adequate expertise in English as an academic subject. As a result, there is a need to improve students' oral English skills so that they may perform effectively in both academic and professional environments.

## **Literature Review**

Engineering students frequently complain that they fail to meet industry needs and expectations because they lack language, expression, and style abilities (Erling & Walton, 2007). It is unanimously agreed that attaining proper speaking proficiency requires command of four sub-skills including fluency, lexical resource, grammar, and pronunciation.

### *Fluency*

In Bangladesh, English is widely used as a medium of communication and the usage of English speaking is gradually increasing due to globalization. In our country, 86 percent of tertiary students

come from Bengali medium schools (Jahan & Jahan, 2008). Furthermore, speaking abilities are often eliminated from English language teachers' teaching objectives, and students do not have the opportunity to study spoken English in the pre-university years (Farooqui, 2007; Majid, 2007). Students may lose interest in studying English if they do not learn to speak or practice speaking communication in the language classroom and in real-life contexts. Speaking in the class, on the other hand, can be a source of interest if the proper activities are taught in the right way, increasing overall student motivation and making the English language classroom a joyful and dynamic place. Tuan and Mai (2015) identify the aspects that influence students' speaking performance, such as motivation, confidence, anxiety, time, planning, the amount of help provided, standard performance, listening capacity, and feedback during speaking activities. Furthermore, Mamun (2016) attributes acceptable speaking difficulties to two fundamental causes: one resulting from differences between the mother tongue and the target language, and the other from the teaching process, which is made up of the syllabus, the teacher, the teaching method, material, equipment, and testing. Most EFL and ESL students consider mastery of speaking abilities to be essential (Richards, 2008; Florez, 1999). Richards (2006, p. 19) advocates for "natural language usage" to describe speaking as "when an orator participates in useful contact and sustains understandable as well as continuing communication despite limits in his or her communicative ability to increase emotional intelligence." Zaremba (2006), Celce-Murcia (2001), and Kayi (2006) all emphasize the importance of verbal communication. The complexities of speaking are tied to a set of talents that may be measured by "the capacity to fill time with discussion... the capacity to speak in clear, reasoned, and semantically complex phrases... the ability to say suitable things in a variety of circumstances"; the ability to "be innovative and imaginative in language usage"(Richards, 1990, p. 75).

### *Pronunciation*

Pronunciation is considered one of the major sub-skills of speaking proficiency. L1 influence on pronunciation is a common phenomenon when it comes to speaking English as a second language. And in this regard, Bangladeshi students are no exception. According to Hayati (2008), Standard pronunciation is, without doubt, one of the most important and unavoidable aspects of teaching English in particular, and any other language in general. Regardless, pronunciation is rarely given enough focus in English teaching and learning at any level in Bangladesh (Maniruzzaman, 2008). As a result, pupils have limited opportunity to practice English pronunciation in the classroom and hence struggle with it. As pronunciation is hardly assessed in the existing examination system, students are reluctant to improve their pronunciation skills.

Maniruzzaman (2008), has questioned the capacity to teach pronunciation on the grounds that it has little, if any, influence on students' pronunciation abilities. According to him, the classroom teacher has little control over correct pronunciation in an EFL situation. He also expresses his notion saying that learning a native-like pronunciation is unachievable and even dialect may have an impact on pronunciation in Bangladesh. Pennington (1989), on the other hand, did not take such beliefs into account, claiming that formal pronunciation instruction can make a difference. To improve proficiency in pronunciation, Engineering departments at both public and private institutions in Bangladesh provide courses on spoken English with a focus on pronunciation in English language teaching pedagogy.

### *Syntactic accuracy*

Generally speaking, learning and teaching English in EFL context often involves a lot of challenges, mainly at the beginning of learning, where learners of English language make linguistic errors at various levels: phonological, syntactic, and semantic (Rimbar, 2017). Al-Busaidi and Al-

Saqqaf (2015) observe that the students' errors mostly affect their intelligibility in writing and speaking. EFL students mainly commit grammatical errors both in their productive skills namely writing and speaking. Grammatical errors in using syntactic and phonological have been divided into various kinds. These errors account for the highest number of errors which are classified into eight different types. These types are listed in order based on their frequency as follows: (1) tense and form (2) plurality (3) subject-verb agreement (4) prepositions (5) parts of speech (6) word order (7) articles and (8) adjective form.

As a consequence, eight types of errors extracted in the speaking of the learners of the technical subjects are the following: errors in word usage, articles, preposition, conjunction, tense, errors in word order active-passive structure, and subject-verb agreement. Among these, the highest frequency of errors is in word usage, and subject-verb agreement is the lowest frequent common error. The factors of these general errors are highly related to the L1 transfer. The findings of the study have implications for the English-speaking of the students especially in the realm of science and engineering.

### *Lexical recourses*

In English language education, while identifying the primary reasons for improving speaking skills, both instructors and learners acknowledge that lack of vocabulary is one of the most common hurdles to learners' fluency development. As a result, it is necessary to create an appeal to emphasize vocabulary acquisition tactics that may play a significant role in this situation. Therefore, learners become aware that vocabulary learning plays a critical part in this process (Bailey, 2006). Similarly, learners must demonstrate good command of the following: pragmatic awareness of the word (the capability of using language in social contexts while keeping cultural constraints in mind), grammatical aspect, and competence in interconnecting the words to make a

conversation meaningful and purposive. Learners have difficulty striking a balance in this regard, which adds to the complexity of their vocabulary and cognition (Bulté, Housen, Pierrard, & Van Daele, 2008). They emphasize oral discourse qualities such as the use of formulaic phrases, hesitation tactics, repetition and rephrasing (Hughes, 2002); the use of contractions, reductions, or elisions; and the use of suitable pronunciation, idioms, stress, rhythm, or intonation (Brown, 1994).

While the above literature illustrates several factors regarding speaking barriers, the current study seeks to explore the most relevant challenges of speaking ability of tertiary level engineering students in Chattogram, Bangladesh. And in order to do so, this paper asks the following questions:

1. What difficulties in terms of oral communication in English do the students of engineering faculties of private universities in Chattogram face?
2. In what ways the existing challenges regarding English speaking proficiency can be overcome?

## **Research Method**

This paper deals with the influencing factors of speaking of the tertiary level learners of three private universities located in Chattogram, Bangladesh. This paper follows quantitative and qualitative methods. The study also focuses on the fluency, pronunciation, syntactic accuracy, and lexical resources of technical students' speaking. The study uses sixty students' speaking tests which have been recorded by the examiners in the second semester to identify the nature of errors committed in their speaking. In order to identify the possible reasons for errors along with necessary remedial measures, the authors have conducted face-to-face interviews with nine English instructors who have taught English-speaking courses to the students of engineering faculties. The names of the participants, for example, teachers and students have been kept unnamed in contemplation of

research norms. The selected first and second-semester students of the Bachelor program in the Engineering Departments from Southern University Bangladesh, International Islamic University Chittagong, and Chittagong Independent University.

To analyze the speaking proficiency of tertiary-level engineering students effectively, 60 students of the first and second semesters of mentioned universities were selected. Actually, their English speaking examination is the process of checking their ability to present their academic topics in English verbally with required fluency, correct accent, and proper syntactic accuracy and lexical exactitude. Moreover, the speaking skill of the students is measured with a regular grade scale in their results. It is noted that these students completed their English speaking courses in their 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> semester. In addition, the students got the idea about the correct use of accent, vocabulary, grammatical structures, situational conversation, extempore speech, academic presentation, and question-answer session. Moreover, besides speaking content, the students also learn basic grammatical usages and their implications in the real life context. These courses are designed for the students of Engineering where they can learn the techniques of speaking, use of phrases and idioms.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Sixty samples of speaking have been collected randomly from first and second semester students of the engineering departments of Southern University Bangladesh, International Islamic University Chittagong, and Chittagong Independent University. After monitoring the speaking, the researchers observe that their speaking is not free from grammatical and lexical errors. The prime concern of this paper is to bring out the efficiency of the students in their effective communication in real life situations. However, speaking skill is practiced in the classes and assessed in the

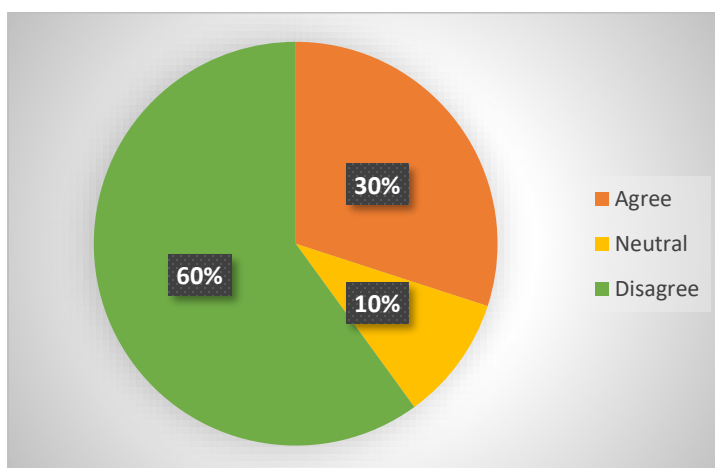
examination at the undergraduate level to boost learners' speaking competence and performance. Moreover, in order to facilitate students, textbooks in line with speaking skills are included in the English syllabus. It is generally found that after completing Spoken English courses, learners' pronunciation level hardly reaches the optimum level. Despite having enough lessons and practice in the class, only a few students can speak accurately and use varieties of grammatical structures while speaking in English. It is mentionable that among many students, only a small number can use words precisely in communication either in the classroom or in real life situations.

The ELT practitioners who are teaching English language skills for many years in engineering faculties at the tertiary level have provided their insightful opinions regarding the challenges and effectiveness of speaking skills. Some of the major opinions are feeling shyness, nervousness or hesitation, Anglo phobia, lack of confidence, poor background in English preferably English speaking, and lack of teachers' rapport.

Questionnaire data collected from target students and the insights from teachers' interviews are presented and analyzed below:

*Quantitative survey: Students' perceptions.*

Statement 1: Students can make effective communication in real life situations.

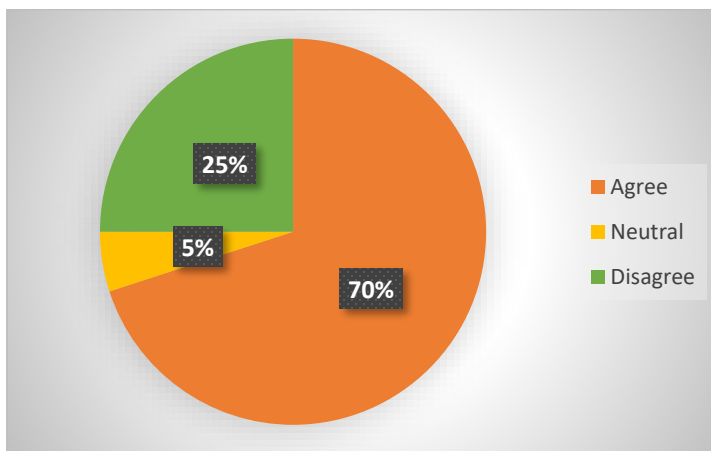


**Figure 1.** Students Can Make Effective Communication in Real Life Situations

**Source:** The author

Figure 1 shows that among the participants, 60% of them opine that they cannot communicate effectively mainly in their real-life situations both inside the classroom and outside the classroom which they consider as a prerequisite for their degree and also to get a good job. On the other hand, 30% believe that after completing the Spoken English courses, they can communicate in daily life situations where necessary, though they may not be expert users. However, 10% of participants remain neutral to give their opinion on the above statement.

Statement 2: Speaking Skill is assessed in the examination at the undergraduate level.



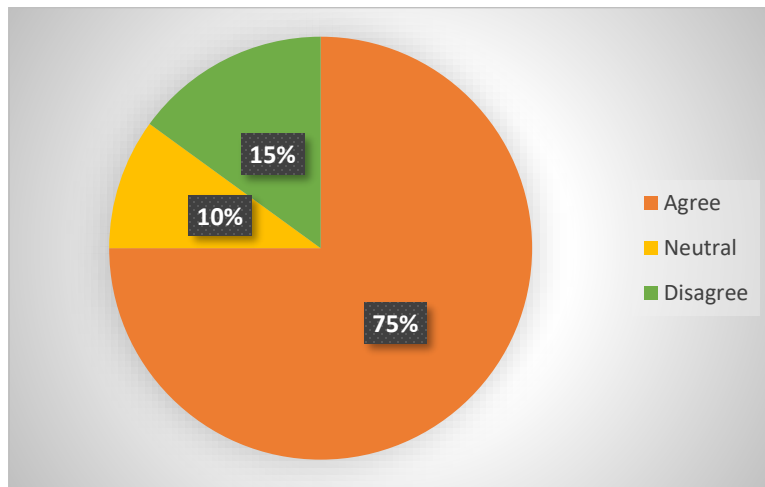
**Figure 2.** Speaking Skill is Assessed in the Examination at Undergraduate Level

**Source:** The author

In Figure 2, 70% of the participants have agreed that speaking skill is assessed in the examination at the tertiary level as one of the requirements of their syllabus. Engineering students not only practice and learn in class but also manifest in the exam as feedback. On the other hand, 25% of the participants have given opposite opinions. They think that speaking skill is not rightly tested

in the exam as it is needed. 5% of the participants remain neutral to give their opinions regarding the issue.

Statement 3: Appropriate Textbooks in line with speaking skills are included in the English syllabus.

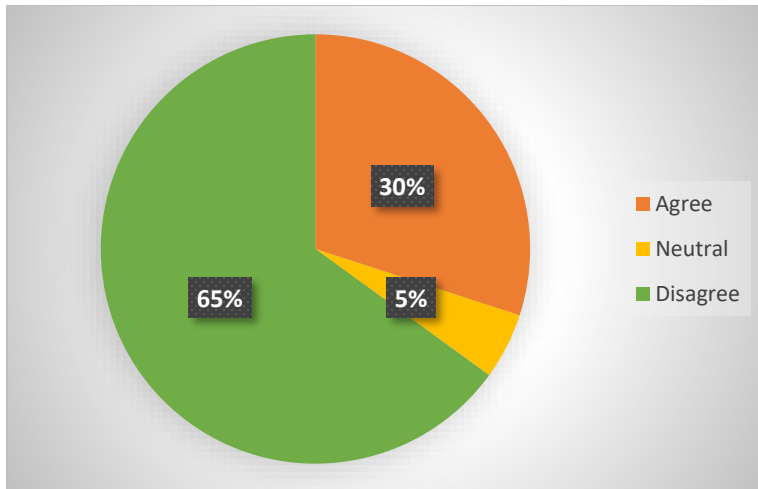


**Figure 3.** Appropriate Text Books in Line with Speaking Skills are Included in the English Syllabus

**Source:** The author

The data presented in Figure 3 shows that 75% of the participants have given their opinion with the statement that their assigned textbooks are appropriate for their regular class activities. On the other hand, 15% disagreed with the statement provided. They feel the necessity that the existing textbooks need to be modified and updated to keep pace with their academic topics. But 10% of the participants remained neutral in their opinions.

Statement 4: After completing the Spoken English courses, learners' pronunciation skill reaches the optimum level.

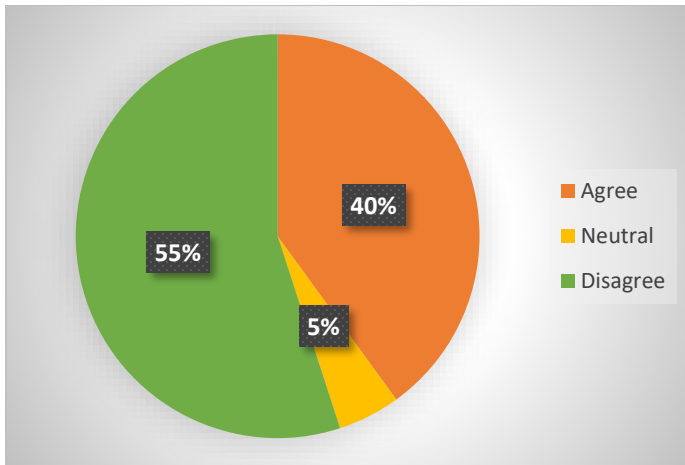


**Figure 4.** After Completing the Spoken English Courses, Learners' Pronunciation Skill Reaches the Optimum Level

**Source:** The author

According to the data shown in Figure 4, 65% of the participants have expressed that their pronunciation skills fail to reach their expected level as they hardly find a suitable environment or partner to practice their accurate English pronunciation. As a consequence, they are not confident enough to speak in English neither for academic nor for professional purposes. In contrast, 30% disagree that they are satisfied with their speaking skill and they can converse with accurate pronunciation. The number of participants who have remained neutral is 11%.

Statement 5: Students can use varieties of syntactic structures in speaking English.

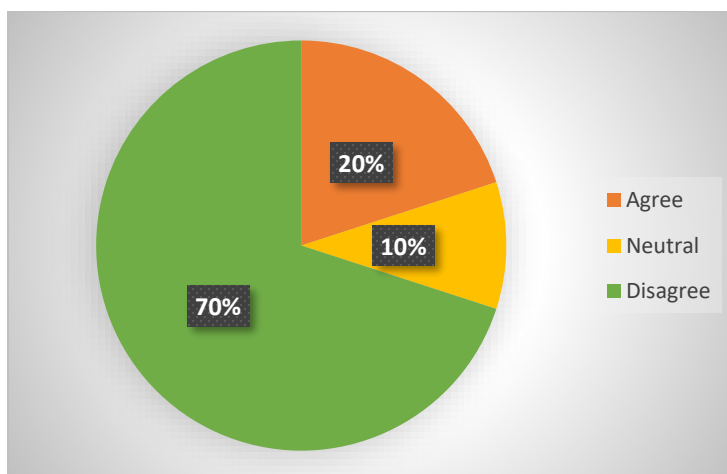


**Figure 5.** Students Can Use Varieties of Syntactic Structures in Speaking English.

**Source:** The author

Figure 5 shows that 55% of participants cannot utilize several kinds of syntactic structures spontaneously while speaking in real life context. In addition, they always try to translate their thinking from their mother tongue to English in which they are not concerned about grammatical range and accuracy. On the other hand, 40% of participants can use effectively grammatical structures according to the situation needed. 5% of participants remain neutral to provide any information regarding the mentioned question.

Statement 6: Students can utilize and generate lexical resources in communication.



**Figure 6.** Students can Utilize and Generate Lexical Resources in Communication.

**Source:** The author

The data presented in Figure 6 present that 70% of participants cannot generate an award range of vocabulary. Students of engineering faculties are not generally capable of using appropriate diction in communication though they are even taught Baron technical words to enrich lexical resources in the classroom. As they frequently use L1 in daily communication, they cannot use the relevant vocabulary in English speaking outside the classroom where it is required for. In contrast, 20% of the participants agreed that they can utilize lexical resources in their daily communication besides speaking in the classroom. The last 10% of the participants have remained neutral in their opinions.

**Table 1.** Teachers' Data Analysis

The interviewees	Data Themes
T1	Feeling shy, nervous, or hesitated, Anglophobia
	Lack of confidence
T2	Individuality (Bangla is enough)
	Scarcity of Technical devices to practice English speaking
T3	Lack of enough English practices in formal and informal situations
	Lack of English-friendly environment
T4	Poor background in English preferably English speaking
	Sense of reluctance or lack of interest in learning English speaking

T5	Inappropriateness to adjust with assessment
	Poor stock of words, phrases, and idioms
T6	Weakness in using grammatical rules and structures
	Weakness in word formation and sentence formation
T7	Lack of teacher-student rapport
T8	Intonation issues -lack of meaningful chunking
T9	Insufficient credit hours of English language courses.
	Large class size.

**Source:** The author

The English teachers who have been teaching English to engineering faculties at International Islamic University Chittagong, Southern University Bangladesh, and Chittagong Independent University for many years have pointed out some major factors in the English speaking of the students. The teachers are coded as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, and T9 in Table 1 to keep their names undisclosed as research norms.

According to T1, the key elements which shrink students' efficiency in speaking are mainly shyness, uneasiness or reluctance, and fear. The bulk of T1 pupils lack confidence in their ability to communicate their speaking abilities. T2 agrees with T1 and states that lack of confidence is the primary cause of errors in English speaking. T2 also states that students in engineering professions have a strong preference for their mother tongue (Bengali), which is regarded as an impediment to speaking English. Another important factor to consider is the lack of materials or teaching aids. Another English instructor, T3, believes that students of technical subjects prioritize Engineering skills and knowledge over English learning. The students are mostly concerned with gaining Engineering knowledge so that they can obtain a job. As a result, they believe that lack of practice in formal and informal situations is an

important cause of poor speaking skills. T4 has also said that a lack of English proficiency is an important factor in this profession. Generally, pupils at the elementary level do not receive an adequate environment in English speaking. Learners are often reluctant to engage in English discourse in regular activities. T5, on the other hand, argues that pupils are unable to adjust to the assessment process of speaking owing to the inadequacy of the evaluation system and that they are unable to utilize acceptable vocabulary in appropriate situations. T6 believes that pupils are unable to apply grammatical structure to the circumstances in the speaking sector. T7 is likewise worried about the teachers' and students' relationships. Students are apprehensive about approaching their professors. Therefore, active interactions between teachers and students are not taking place in the classroom. T8 believes that students in Engineering sectors commonly struggle with pronunciation, particularly with intonation and meaningful chunking. T9, on the other hand, believes that learners in the technical sector only receive Basic English courses during their first or second semester of graduate school, which is insufficient to teach English effectively. T9 also says that English class sizes in Bangladesh are exceptionally large. As a result, language teachers are unable to give learners critical feedback on linguistic progress. Furthermore, in a semester system, the time of the course is inadequate for teachers to finish the material in depth. T8, another instructor, reminds out that the English language class is just fifty minutes long, which is far too short.

#### *Reasons for committing the errors*

The researchers have chosen nine English language practitioners who are teaching English at the Engineering field for more than five years to address significant reasons responsible for the errors in speaking. Based on the face-to-face interview with the practitioners, the researchers point out the following facts which play a vital role in their poor performance in speaking that have been perceived by them:

a. Students do not have the required command of English grammar due to insufficient input at primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels. Their insufficient syntactic competence lowers their confidence in fluency in English.

b. English practitioners at the tertiary level are not concerned enough about effective teaching methods and techniques in the classroom rather they focus on completing syllabus contents. Moreover, they are keenly interested in preparing students for examinations instead of true learning and teaching.

c. Many educational institutions cannot provide teaching aids like audio-visual classrooms, microphones, uninterrupted electricity, and trained teachers due to economic constraints. Similarly, English practitioners are not well paid in Bangladesh which eventually negatively impacts teaching performances.

d. Students are very much keen to speak their mother language and do not give sincere attempts in Speaking English which bars their spontaneity in fluency and pronunciation.

e. Students in the engineering sector always show their negligence in the learning English language because of their course curriculum in which students are not encouraged to give focus on learning correct English.

f. As English is a second language in Bangladesh, students in engineering fields nurture some kind of Anglophobia which ultimately impedes their communication skills in English.

g. In Bangladesh, still some universities use the combination of Bengali and English as a medium of instruction. Teachers are obsessed with L1, so often language instructors deliver English lectures in Bengali which is a great drawback because students do not get a pure English-speaking environment in classrooms.

h. Majority of the English teachers in Bangladesh are GTM oriented. Therefore, they do not

try sincerely to come out from the traditional method.

i. Most of the English teachers give their unanimous opinion that the practical implementation of curriculum and syllabus is a major challenge as the majority of the teachers and students fail to keep pace with new changes in curriculum and syllabus.

## **Recommendations**

After a thorough analysis of the data generated by both teachers and students through the questionnaire and interviews, this research recommends the following:

- Confidence among learners must be improved through adequate practices of the usage of language in the English class. English practitioners should ensure a congenial environment in the class where students get motivation and appreciation to engage themselves in classroom activities spontaneously.
- In the formal environment, the influence of L1 and dialect should strictly be prohibited in English language pedagogy. There must have a penalty for using L1 and local dialects in mainly English language classes. In addition, students should avoid ethnocentric ego so that they feel comfortable in learning and practicing English speaking.
- In order to enhance language proficiency, technical devices such as audio, video, projector, microphone, and uninterrupted electricity in language teaching must be ensured. Digital classrooms and mentioned opportunities should be available for English learners so that they can utilize technologies for the betterment of their English skills.
- Practices of English speaking both inside and outside the classroom must be habituated among students and this is how they may be fluent and extrovert in L2. Learners should

be motivated to practice speaking language in real-life situations. They should have a good command of the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic applications of the English language.

- To improve overall development in English, students may be given a six months semester primarily focusing to know how to develop four skills namely listening, reading, writing, and speaking before starting undergraduate study so that they can easily adopt the syllabus.
- Students may be provided with incentives and encouragement to create interest in learning and development of their speaking skills. Competitions and workshops may be organized and consequently, prizes can be provided to the winners to motivate and boost their skills in English. This is how students will be extroverted and confident enough to engage in discussion in classroom activities more and more.
- English language lab may be founded for English learners to practice to enhance their aptitude and proficiency in English usage.
- English language class size must be confined to 20-30 students so that teachers can give due feedback to each and every student in terms of their syntactic and lexical errors. When the class size is large, interaction between teachers and students is hardly possible.

## **Conclusion**

The current study can have immense importance to boost the English-speaking potential of students in engineering academics. In addition, this research may contribute to playing an effective role in learners' learning process to improve speaking proficiency with a special focus on fluency, pronunciation, syntactic accuracy, and lexical resources. This paper will certainly prompt both teachers and learners to adopt active roles in the process of

communicative activities. Though teachers are still grappling with some challenges to the implementation of effective teaching and learning in the engineering sectors, they should strive to apply fruitful teaching pedagogy to improve the speaking efficiency of the learners. Moreover, this study may provide new insights to English language teachers in improving their teaching pedagogy. Finally, this research is expected to open a new avenue for researchers, educationists, and policymakers in designing syllabi and curricula for English learners of tertiary level in general, and engineering students in particular.

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