

Speaking in English Is an Attitude, Not a Mental Pressure: A Study on Speaking Skill at the Undergraduate Level in Private Universities in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Speaking is one of the most essential skills for human communication, as it directly reflects a speaker's thoughts, attitudes, and confidence. For undergraduate students in Bangladesh, particularly in private universities, developing proficiency in English speaking is often considered both an academic necessity and a professional requirement in a globalized world. Despite the adoption of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach and curriculum reforms, a significant number of students continue to perceive English speaking as a source of pressure rather than a natural, confident practice. This research explores the speaking styles, challenges, and attitudes of undergraduate students across selected private universities in Bangladesh. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaire-based surveys with interviews and classroom observations. Findings suggest that while some students demonstrate commendable fluency, many experience anxiety, lack of vocabulary, and limited opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom. The research argues that speaking in English should be fostered as an **attitude**—a mindset of confidence and willingness—rather than a burden or examination-driven activity. The paper concludes that targeted institutional support, frequent speaking opportunities, and a shift in student perception can transform English speaking into an empowering skill for future employability and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: speaking skill, private universities, undergraduate students, English as a foreign language, oral communication, attitude, communicative competence, Bangladesh

Introduction

English is widely regarded as the global lingua franca, serving as the dominant medium of communication in international business, higher education, and professional networking (Crystal, 2012). In Bangladesh, English holds a dual status: it is both a second language in educational contexts and a foreign language for daily use. With the increasing influence of globalization, proficiency in spoken English has become a prerequisite for students who aspire to excel in both national and international contexts. For undergraduates in private universities, English is not only a subject of academic study but also a gateway to employability, cultural capital, and global mobility.

Despite these opportunities, the reality presents a paradox. Students spend more than a decade studying English as a compulsory subject, yet many still fail to acquire fluency in speaking. The emphasis within classrooms often remains on grammar, reading comprehension, and examination performance, leaving speaking skills underdeveloped. Consequently, a large proportion of students view speaking in English not as an enjoyable or natural process but as a source of psychological pressure. This issue becomes particularly pressing in undergraduate programs at private universities, where students are expected to actively participate in presentations, seminars, group discussions, and job interviews.

The central argument of this research is that speaking in English is an attitude rather than a mental pressure. If students approach speaking as a mindset of confidence, openness, and willingness to communicate, their performance improves significantly. Conversely, when speaking is framed as a high-stakes task tied to grades, exams, or judgment from peers, students experience anxiety and avoidance. This study therefore investigates the current state of speaking skills among private university undergraduates in Bangladesh, the barriers they face, and the attitudinal shifts required to empower them as effective communicators.

Although English speaking competence is recognized as vital for academic and professional success, undergraduate students in private universities in Bangladesh struggle with fluency due to anxiety, inadequate practice opportunities, and curriculum gaps; reframing speaking as an attitude-driven

skill rather than a pressure-driven obligation can significantly enhance communicative competence and confidence.

Rationale of the Study

The motivation for this research arises from several interconnected realities:

1. **Global Demand for English Fluency:** In professional sectors such as information technology, business process outsourcing, media, and academia, English speaking skills are indispensable (Graddol, 2006). Bangladeshi graduates often lose opportunities to peers from countries where English education is more practice-oriented.
2. **Gaps in the Current Curriculum:** Although the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has been introduced since the 1990s, most classrooms remain exam-focused, emphasizing grammar and writing over authentic communication (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008).
3. **Psychological Pressure and Avoidance:** Students frequently report anxiety, shyness, and lack of confidence when asked to speak English, especially in front of peers (Horwitz, 2010). The tendency to avoid speaking further perpetuates their weakness.
4. **Socioeconomic and Institutional Inequality:** While some private universities offer interactive speaking courses with modern facilities, others provide minimal support, resulting in unequal exposure and opportunities.

Given these realities, this study is not merely academic but also socio-pedagogical, aiming to identify practical strategies to shift students' perception of English speaking from a burden to a sustainable, positive attitude.

Literature Review

Research on speaking skills in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts highlights both the cognitive and social dimensions of language learning.

Speaking is not only about linguistic competence but also about interactional skills, confidence, and motivation (Bygate, 1987).

Speaking as a Core Skill

Bygate (1987) argues that speaking has often been undervalued compared to reading and writing in traditional curricula, despite its importance in real-life communication. Brown and Yule (1983) distinguish between interactional functions of speaking, which serve to build social relationships, and transactional functions, which focus on conveying information. In Bangladesh, students are often trained for transactional functions (e.g., classroom responses, examinations) but not for interactional ones, which are essential for workplace communication.

The South and East Asian Context

Several studies in Asian EFL contexts reveal similar challenges. Li (1998) notes that in China, grammar-translation remains dominant, limiting speaking fluency. In Japan and Korea, learners excel in reading and writing but struggle with oral communication due to cultural traditions of silence and fear of error (Anderson, 1993; Soto, 2004). Comparable trends are observed in Bangladesh, where obedience to authority and teacher-centered approaches restrict interactive learning (Chowdhury, 2001).

Bangladeshi Context

In Bangladesh, English has a long historical presence since colonial times, yet fluency remains a challenge. Hamid and Erling (2016) note that while students across socioeconomic backgrounds recognize the importance of English, their actual communicative competence is low. Rahman (2015) highlights that students' positive attitudes towards English are often not matched by classroom practices, which remain heavily exam-oriented. Moreover, studies suggest that undergraduate students rarely practice speaking because it does not carry marks in many courses (Majid, 2017).

Psychological Barriers

Horwitz (2010) identifies foreign language anxiety as a major factor in speaking performance. Shyness, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of vocabulary hinder fluency. In Bangladesh, such anxiety is intensified by social

stigma against “wrong English,” leading students to remain silent rather than attempt to speak.

Curriculum and Institutional Gaps

Hanumantharao (2001) emphasizes how short class durations, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of teaching aids in India hinder speaking practice. Similar conditions exist in many Bangladeshi universities, where classes prioritize content delivery over interactive exercises. Consequently, students graduate with limited speaking ability despite years of formal instruction.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the current level of English speaking proficiency among undergraduate students in private universities in Bangladesh.
2. To explore the psychological and attitudinal barriers (e.g., anxiety, shyness, lack of motivation) that affect speaking fluency.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of the existing curriculum and institutional practices in promoting communicative competence.
4. To propose strategies that can reframe English speaking as a positive attitude rather than a source of pressure.
5. To contribute to policy and pedagogical recommendations for enhancing English speaking skills in Bangladesh’s higher education sector.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives:

1. **Communicative Competence (Hymes, 1972):** Suggests that language learning should extend beyond grammatical accuracy to include pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence.
2. **Willingness to Communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998):** Posits that learners’ readiness to speak is influenced by confidence, motivation, and perceived opportunities.

3. **Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982):** Emphasizes that anxiety and negative emotions act as barriers to language acquisition, while low-stress environments enhance learning.

These frameworks collectively inform the argument that speaking in English should be approached as an attitudinal practice supported by confidence-building, interactional opportunities, and institutional encouragement.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to examine the challenges and attitudes related to English speaking skills among undergraduate students in private universities in Bangladesh. Speaking, unlike other language skills such as reading or writing, requires active interaction, confidence, and practice. The complexity of these processes cannot be adequately captured through a single research method. For this reason, a combination of surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis was employed.

The study specifically aimed to uncover classroom-related challenges that hinder students' ability to communicate fluently in English. The methods were chosen to triangulate the findings, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of both institutional practices and individual student experiences.

The guiding research questions included:

1. What challenges do undergraduate students face in developing English speaking skills at private universities in Bangladesh?
2. How do teachers and institutional policies shape the opportunities for speaking practice?
3. What are the perceptions of students regarding peer reactions, anxiety, and institutional support in practicing English speaking?
4. What interactive strategies, if any, are being used to promote oral communication, and how effective are they perceived to be?

Data Collection Methods

Student Survey

A structured questionnaire was distributed among undergraduate students across selected private universities in Dhaka city. The survey gathered demographic information, students' frequency of English usage inside and outside the classroom, and their perceptions of challenges in speaking fluently. Items were rated on Likert scales and supplemented by open-ended responses.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were organized with small groups of students (6–8 participants per group) to capture collective attitudes, shared challenges, and peer dynamics related to speaking English. These discussions revealed how peer encouragement or mockery affected students' willingness to speak.

Classroom Observations

A series of classroom observations were conducted in language courses across four private universities. Classes typically ranged from 15 to 25 students and lasted around 90 minutes. Field notes were recorded in narrative style, focusing on teacher-student interaction, classroom management, seating arrangements, and students' active participation.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with both students and teachers. Students were asked about their personal experiences, confidence levels, and opportunities to practice speaking. Teachers were asked about their perceptions of student difficulties, institutional expectations, and strategies employed to encourage speaking.

Document Analysis

Institutional documents such as course outlines, syllabi, and examination papers were reviewed to determine the curricular emphasis on speaking skills. This analysis provided evidence of how speaking was formally incorporated—or neglected—within assessment frameworks.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and recurring themes across survey data, interviews, and field notes. Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) **constant comparative method**, data were coded, categorized, and refined until salient themes emerged. The triangulation of survey results, classroom observations, and interview transcripts ensured validity and reliability.

Quantitative survey responses were summarized using descriptive statistics to illustrate trends in student practices and attitudes. For example, percentages were calculated to show how frequently students reported speaking English in the classroom. Qualitative narratives were then used to contextualize and explain these numbers.

Research Findings

From the data collected, three broad categories of findings emerged:

1. **Institutional policies and curricular design**
2. **Teachers' perceptions of student difficulties**
3. **Students' experiences, peer interactions, and psychological barriers**

Policies of Private Universities

English language courses are compulsory in all private universities surveyed. Students are typically required to take two to three courses during their undergraduate studies: one at the beginning (foundation level) and another at an advanced level.

One noteworthy finding is that while some universities have courses explicitly dedicated to speaking, others integrate speaking alongside reading, writing, and listening. Teachers often enjoy freedom in selecting teaching materials, as syllabi outline general objectives but do not prescribe textbooks. This flexibility allows for creativity but also leads to inconsistency in practice.

Classroom observations confirmed that speaking tasks were often marginalized. In some cases, students were graded on oral participation; in others, speaking was not assessed at all. As one participant remarked:

“The syllabus is fixed, but the teacher has freedom to choose the material. Sometimes we get marks for class performance, but it is not very strict.”

The absence of consistent institutional emphasis means that speaking remains optional rather than central to the learning process.

Teachers’ Perceptions of Student Problems

Interviews with teachers revealed recurring concerns:

- i. **Limited Vocabulary:** Students often lack the lexical range to express themselves in English.
- ii. **Shyness and Anxiety:** Many avoid speaking for fear of embarrassment or negative evaluation.
- iii. **Lack of Exposure:** Since Bangladesh is a largely monolingual society, opportunities to use English outside the classroom are minimal.

One teacher summarized the dilemma:

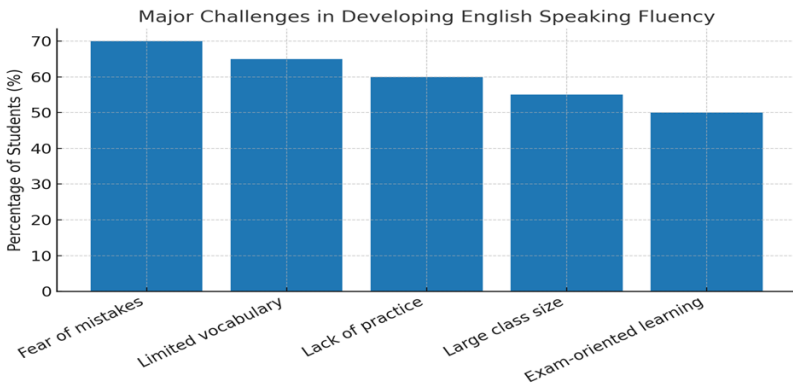
“They do better in reading and writing. But when it comes to speaking, they become silent. Outside the classroom, who will they practice with? If they speak English with friends, they fear being laughed at.”

The lack of authentic speaking environments means that whatever fluency students achieve is often restricted to classroom tasks.

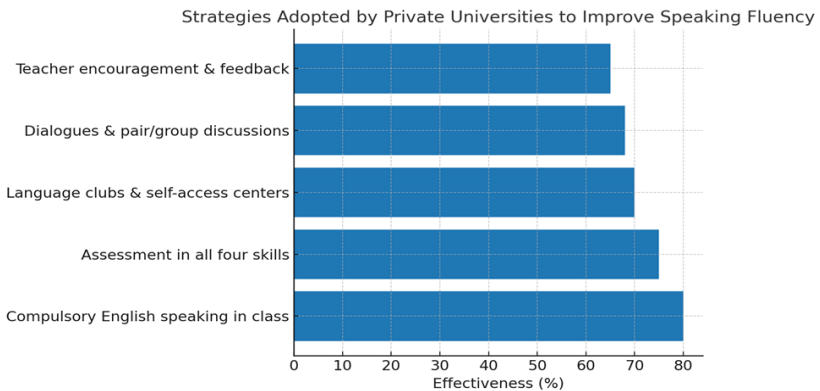
Students’ Experiences and Peer Pressure

Survey findings revealed the following distribution regarding English usage in class:

- Constantly: **5%**
- Almost all the time: **11%**
- Sometimes: **17%**
- On a small scale: **22%**
- Never: **45%**



This data suggests that nearly half of the students **never use English in classroom discussions**, and fewer than 20% use it consistently.



Peer reactions emerged as a critical barrier. About **73% of students** reported avoiding English because their peers might laugh at mistakes. Only a minority (26%) said peers encouraged them to practice. One student explained:

“I once made a mistake in class, and everyone laughed. After that, I never tried again.”

This reflects a culture where error correction by peers is often punitive rather than supportive, leading to silence and avoidance.

Institutional Support and Language Clubs

Although some universities maintain language clubs where students practice speaking in an informal environment, participation is inconsistent. Around

80% of surveyed students agreed that such clubs could help them, but 18% felt they would create additional pressure.

Observation revealed that where clubs or interactive sessions were held, students engaged more freely in English conversations. However, the irregularity of such programs limited their long-term impact.

Another structural issue was classroom seating arrangements. Traditional rows discouraged interaction, while circular or cluster seating in a few observed classes encouraged peer discussion and eye contact.

Interaction Skills

Interaction in the classroom is central to speaking development. Yet, observations indicated that teacher talk dominated class time, leaving limited opportunities for students. Research confirms that speaking practice requires maximizing student talk time (Harmer, 2015).

Group work and pair work were occasionally used, but problems arose:

- i. Some students dominated while others remained silent.
- ii. Instructions for group activities were often unclear.
- iii. Topics chosen (e.g., politics, environment) sometimes failed to interest students, who would have preferred lighter themes (e.g., sports, fashion).

Harmer identifies three main benefits of speaking activities:

1. **Rehearsal** – preparing students for real-life communication.
2. **Feedback** – giving learners immediate responses to their performance.
3. **Engagement** – making lessons motivating and interactive.

Despite these potential benefits, classroom culture in Bangladesh still leans toward teacher-centered delivery. As Johnson (1995) emphasizes, communicative competence requires not just linguistic knowledge but also active classroom participation.

Interviews and Observations

During structured observations, students were given tasks such as presentations and discussions. In one case, students were asked: “*Do you like language learning? Why or why not?*” Initially, participation was hesitant. Some students managed to speak briefly, but most avoided eye contact.

Follow-up interviews revealed that students felt nervous because such speaking activities were new to them. As one explained:

“We never did speaking or listening activities in school. This is completely new.”

Observations further highlighted that when teachers modeled enthusiasm and encouraged informal small talk, students became more confident. For example, one nervous student improved within minutes once she realized mistakes were tolerated and effort was appreciated.

Teachers also reflected that students’ reluctance often stems from lack of conversation strategies. Many do not know how to react in dialogue (e.g., using short responses such as “Really?” or “I agree”). Explicit training in conversational cues could make speaking tasks less intimidating.

Overall, the research reveals that speaking difficulties are not merely linguistic but attitudinal and environmental, requiring systemic changes in pedagogy, policy, and classroom culture.

6. Results and Discussion

The initiatives taken by private universities in Bangladesh have so far been successful in helping students develop communication skills, particularly in English. With fluency in English, students stand a better chance of securing employment. However, only about 30% of all students in the country can afford to study in private universities. This raises an important question: what about the rest, who are enrolled in public universities?

Although this is a small-scale study, it raises significant issues related to the development of English-speaking fluency among adult learners in Bangladesh. Findings indicate that the key strategy adopted by private universities to improve fluency is making English speaking compulsory in classrooms. In this context, the Ministry of Education of Bangladesh could

play a vital role by introducing standardized speaking assessments at the tertiary level. Such a move would encourage students to practice spoken English more actively, thereby raising the overall English-speaking competency of university students and ensuring a more level playing field in the job market.

6.2 Results of the Survey

Survey results reveal several key insights:

- **Perceptions of difficulty:** A majority of students reported that English is a difficult subject, which discourages them from practicing it. Their limited vocabulary also adds to this sense of difficulty.
- **Fear of mistakes:** Many students avoid speaking in English due to fear of making errors, which creates hesitation and lack of confidence.
- **Lack of practice in classrooms:** Students often do not practice speaking English during class. Some mentioned that they did not feel the need to practice in the classroom since speaking skills are not graded. This perception reduces their motivation to develop fluency.
- **Assessment gap:** Since speaking does not contribute to marks, students tend to neglect it, focusing instead on written tasks. A shift in student mentality is necessary so that they realize the importance of speaking for real-life communication and professional activities.

6.3 Findings

The classroom observations further highlight several issues:

- **A 90-minute class with about 45 students** proved insufficient for individual participation. Teachers could not allocate equal time to every student.
- Despite adequate preparation time, many students could not complete their performance.

- During teacher-led conversations, only a few students (around 5 out of 45) responded, mostly with brief "yes/no" answers.
- Students struggled to construct full sentences, often misusing punctuation and demonstrating poor pronunciation.
- Nervousness and hesitation were evident; some students failed to respond at all.
- Feedback was usually given collectively on common mistakes rather than tailored individually.

Discussion

Although English has been taught as a compulsory subject at the primary and secondary levels in Bangladesh, the outcomes have been unsatisfactory in terms of learners' communicative competence. The data indicate that private universities are adopting innovative strategies, such as making English speaking compulsory in classes. Students are required to take compulsory English courses, and assessments cover all four language skills. This testing system motivates students to develop speaking skills, supporting the argument of Shohamy (1993) and Wall & Anderson (1993) that assessment drives learning.

Additionally, students have opportunities to practice English outside classrooms through language clubs and self-access centers provided by some universities. However, challenges persist. Students enter tertiary education with a background of teacher-centered learning, where classroom activities primarily involve rote memorization of syllabi (Thornton, 2006). This traditional system leaves little space for inquiry, questioning, or critical thinking.

Teachers participating in the study acknowledged that the education system itself often discourages students from using English actively. To address this, teachers encouraged self-expression by allowing students to talk about personal experiences, engage in dialogue, and participate in discussions. Such approaches reduced students' shyness and hesitation, creating a congenial and friendly classroom environment.

Brown (2001) emphasized that one of the major obstacles in learning to speak is anxiety—the fear of making mistakes or appearing foolish. A supportive

classroom climate, where attempts are appreciated even if incomplete or incorrect, is essential for building learners' confidence (p. 296).

Language researchers have also proposed models of speaking practice. For example:

- **Rivers and Temperley** proposed a model illustrating the processes involved in learning to communicate.
- **Levett's Model** (1989) breaks speech production into four cognitive stages.
- **Penny Ur (1981)** suggested a variety of oral activities, such as communication games, though with limited group practice.

These frameworks highlight that structured practice, motivation through assessment, and supportive teaching methods are central to improving English-speaking fluency among Bangladeshi students.

6.5 Recommendations, Limitations, and Conclusion

The findings of this study reaffirm that speaking competence is a complex skill that must be consciously and continuously developed. Classroom practice plays a central role, especially when activities are designed to foster interaction and authentic communication among learners (Bygate, 1987; Brown, 2001).

Recommendations

1. Early and Continuous Exposure

The use of English should be emphasized from the primary level of education so that learners become familiar with the language early on. Early exposure can reduce fear, increase confidence, and make communication in English more natural (Hamid & Erling, 2016).

2. Real-Life Practice Opportunities

Beyond classroom instruction, students should be given opportunities to practice English in real-life situations. Examples include participating in extracurricular events, engaging in

community activities, or interacting with native/advanced speakers (Ur, 1981). These experiences help students understand the practical use of English beyond examinations.

3. **Integration of Technology**

Incorporating digital tools, apps, and interactive platforms can motivate learners by making practice engaging and accessible. Many students perceive technology as innovative and enjoyable, which encourages consistent practice (Harmer, 1995).

4. **Supportive Pedagogical Approaches**

Teachers should focus not only on correcting errors but also on creating a safe and supportive environment where students feel comfortable experimenting with language. Encouragement, pair-work, role-play, and discussion-based tasks can help reduce anxiety and build confidence (Brown, 2001; Hadziosmanovic, 2012).

5. **Comprehensive Assessment**

Oral performance should be assessed beyond grammar and vocabulary, taking into account communication purposes, coherence, fluency, pronunciation, and interactive skills (Johnson, 1995; Kumaravadivelu, 2009). Such holistic evaluation criteria ensure that students are rewarded for meaningful communication, not just mechanical accuracy.

Limitations

This study was limited in scope, focusing only on a small sample of students at private universities. Time constraints and the size of classes also restricted individual speaking practice. Therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all tertiary institutions in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the study highlights the critical role of institutional policies, classroom practices, and supportive environments in improving English-speaking skills. Private universities, by making spoken English

compulsory and integrating co-curricular opportunities, have set a useful model that could be replicated in public universities.

Future research could:

- i. Investigate longitudinal improvements in speaking skills with sustained exposure.
- ii. Compare different teaching methodologies (e.g., communicative vs. grammar-based) in public vs. private universities.
- iii. Explore the role of technology and self-access centers in promoting independent speaking practice.

Ultimately, the improvement of speaking competence requires collaboration between policymakers, educators, and students to create a level playing field for all learners in Bangladesh (Hamid & Erling, 2016; Chowdhury, 2001).

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