Teaching Speaking Skills at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh: An Empirical Investigation

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the problems of teaching speaking in English at tertiary level in Bangladesh and tends to find out the solutions regarding this issue. Since English is a significant vehicle of communication in this era of globalization, the complications in learning and teaching these skills must be solved. Therefore, through questionnaire survey including teachers and students, those conditions have been investigated by some statistical tools and found that the problems lie mainly within the teaching methods and techniques. Moreover, significant statistical association has been tested between students' satisfaction of language competence in spoken English before instruction and the level of their improvement in speaking skills after instruction.

1. Introduction

If we want to make our students communicatively competent in English as a second language, it seems wise to assume that speaking skills will play a vital role in achieving this overall competence. It has now become a dire need for our learners to speak and interact in a multiplicity of situations through English. Even in many contexts, speaking skills are the basis on which a person's language competence is judged. But it is a matter of great concern that most of our tertiary learners can not speak English fluently even when they have learnt and have been taught the language for minimum 13 to 15 years of their life i.e. from nursery to Higher Secondary level. What are the reasons behind it? By analyzing the situation both from teachers' and students' point of view, it has been found that the difficulties lie primarily within the methods and techniques used for teaching spoken English.

2. Literature Review

Underlying Nature of Speaking Skills: Speaking is generally considered as one of the major productive skills. As suggested by McDonough and Shaw "As a skill which enables us to produce utterances, when genuinely communicatively, speaking is desire and purpose driven, in other words we genuinely want to communicate something to achieve a particular end". (McDonough and Shaw, 1993, p.152)

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Besides, depending on two main functions of language (i.e. interactional and transactional), Brown and Yule (1983) have made a useful distinction between transactional language and interactional language. Transactional language contains factual or propositional information and deals with the transfer of that information. Whereas, interactional language is used to establish and maintain social relationships. According to them, spoken language can be both interactional and transactional considering the facts that, interactional language is 'listener oriented' and transactional language is 'message oriented'.

In his functional analysis of speaking Bygate (1987) suggests that aural interaction can be characterized in terms of routines which are conventional (and therefore predictable) ways of presenting information which can either focus on information or interaction. Information routines contain frequently recurring types of information structures which can either be expository (e.g. narration, description, instruction, comparison) or evaluative (e.g. explanation, justification, prediction, decision). Interaction routines can be either service (e.g. job interview) or social (e.g.

a dinner party). This distinction between information and interaction routines mirrors the distinction between the transactinal and interactional (or interpersonal) functions of language. According to Bygate, a further feature of oral interaction is that the participants need constantly to negotiate meaning and generally manage the interaction in terms of who is to say what, to whom, when and about what. Therefore, his typifications give the impression that life proceeds through these sets of finite interactional routines. In fact, any interaction may contain elements of any or all of the elements identified by him.

Since speaking is a dynamic process and one which is difficult to separate from listening in many ways, Nunan (1989) has mentioned that successful oral communicators should develop 'conversational listening skill' as well. Moreover, Widdowson has mentioned the reciprocal exchange pattern of oral communication and considered that "What is said is dependent on an understanding of what else has been said in the interaction." (Widdowson, 1978, p. 58) Therefore, those who are learning oral communication skills should be exposed to these patterns and instructed to practice accordingly.

However, it is beneficial for the teachers to look at the underlying structural features of spoken language in order to ascertain what native speakers actually do when they participate in oral interaction. Brown and Yule (1983) have examined such various forms of language which are usually used by speakers of the language. These are:

- incomplete sentences, often simply sequence of phrases
- very little use of subordinate clauses

- very few use of passives
- active declarative forms are normally found
- not very specific logical connectors (moreover, however) and metalingual markers (that, when, while etc) exist to mark relationships between clauses
- topic comment structure is commonly used (as in 'the birds – did you let them out.').
- Replacing or refining expression (e.g. 'this man/ the poor fellow has lost his wife.')
- the use of generalized vocabulary (e.g. thing, nice stuff etc.).
- repetition of the same syntactic form
- the use of pauses and fillers ('erm', 'well', 'of course' and so on)

Communicative View of Language and Teaching Speaking Skills: While analyzing the nature of communicative language teaching, Richards and Rodgers have mentioned the following four characteristics of a communicative view of language:

"1. Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
2. The primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication.
3. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
4. The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse."(Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.161)

According to McDonough and Shaw, "This analysis shows how easily speaking skills can be accommodated within this particular view of language. When we ask our students to use actively the spoken language in the classrooms, we require them to take part in a process which not only involves knowledge of target forms and functions, but also a general knowledge of the interaction between the speaker and listener in order that meanings and negotiation of meanings are made clear." (McDonough and Shaw, 1993, p.154)

Furthermore, Nunan has summarized that a successful oral communication involves developing the following skills:

"● the ability to articulate phonological features of the languages comprehensibly;
● mastery of stress, rhythm, intonation patterns;
● an acceptable degree of fluency;
● transactional and interpersonal skills;
● skills in taking short and long speaking turns;

● skills in the management of interaction;
● skills in negotiating meaning;"
● conversational listening skills (successful conversations require good listeners as well as good speakers);
● skills in knowing about and negotiating purposes for conversations;
● using appropriate formulae and fillers." (Nunan, 1989, p. 32)

So, the act of speaking can be considered as the cumulative outcome of all these sub-skills.

Factors Influencing Adult EFL Learners' Oral Communication: Kang Shumin, an Associate Professor of English at Qufu Teachers University in China, has mentioned the following factors, which influence adult EFL learner's oral communication. The teachers at tertiary level should also keep these factors in mind while they are delivering instructions to the students. Because these factors also create constraints in adult ESL learning.

Age or Maturational Constraints: The 'interactive behavior' of EFL or ESL learners is highly influenced by age. Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1982) argue that, if acquirers begin to learn a second language early in childhood through natural exposure, they will be able to achieve higher level of proficiency than those beginning as adults. Oyama's study (1976) also shows that many adults remain far from achieving native-like proficiency in a second language because of "fossilization"- the permanent cessation of second language development. These also indicate that age plays an important role in affecting or limiting adult learners' ability to pronounce the target language fluently with native- like pronunciation (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). As a result, they may be able to utter words and sentences with perfect pronunciation but will face problems with prosodic features. And it may lead to misunderstandings and even to communication breakdown.

Aural Medium: Listening precedes speaking. If someone fails to understand what is said, he or she will not be able to respond correctly. So, speaking is intertwined with listening or the aural medium through which the rules of language are basically internalized. Shumin has observed that, the fleetingness of speech, together with the features of spoken English- loosely organized syntax, incomplete forms, false starts, and the use of fillers interfere with ESL learners' comprehension and thus affect the development of their speaking abilities as well.

Sociocultural Factors: The cultural factors with which a language is associated, can also affect second or foreign language learning. From pragmatic point of view, language is a form of social action because any kind of linguistic communication takes place in the context of structured interpersonal exchange. And this exchange pattern is being established in a social milieu and meaning is thus socially regulated (Dimitracopoulou, 1990). Therefore, to speak a language, the speaker must know how the language is used in a particular social context. It often becomes hard for non-native speakers to choose the forms appropriate to certain situations. Because speakers' own cultural norms may influence their use of the target language. Besides, oral communication involves both verbal and non verbal communication system. Due to lack of familiarity with the nonverbal communication system of the target language, ESL learners often do not understand how to pick up nonverbal cues. As a result, ignorance of the nonverbal message sometimes leads to misinterpretation.

Affective Factors: The affective side of learners also plays an important role in determining their success or failure in language learning. The affective factors related to second or foreign language learning include emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude and motivation. According to Brown (1994), L2 or foreign language learning is a complex task that is susceptible to human anxiety which is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, and apprehension. While discussing problems with speaking activities, Ur has also mentioned that

> "Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom: worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts." (Ur, 1991, p. 121)

In such situations learners' development in the speaking skills will become slow because of the interference of those affective factors.

Approaches to Teaching Speaking Skills: Teachers can take either bottom-up or top-down approach to teaching speaking skills. The bottom–up view suggests that learners move from mastery of the discrete elements of the language to a mastery of the larger components. It means, they begin with the smallest units of language i.e. meaningful individual sounds and move through the mastery of words and sentences to discourse (Nunan, 1989). Whereas, top-down approach suggests that learners start working from the larger elements and gradually goes to the smaller ones. In this case, learners begin with greater chunks of languages, which are embedded in meaningful social contexts and use their background knowledge of these contexts to grasp and to use the smaller

components of language (Nunan, 1989). These views are further contrasted by Hatch (1978) who has observed that, by following bottom-up approach one first learns how to use structures, then builds up a repertoire of structures and thus put those structures into use in discourse. Whereas, by following top-down approach, one learns how to do conversation at first and then learns how to interact verbally. Out of this interaction learners' knowledge of syntax develops gradually. While choosing the suitable approach, teachers should also remember the main characteristics of a successful speaking activity as has been pointed out by Ur (1991). He thinks that, while learners are practicing these activities in the class, they should talk a lot, their participation should be even, their motivation should be high and their utterances should have an acceptable level of language accuracy.

Communicative Competence and Speaking Effectiveness: Language proficiency is a multidimensional construct which includes various levels of abilities and domains of linguistic knowledge. According to Hymes (1971), to communicate effectively through any medium of language, learners should not only have the linguistic knowledge, but also have knowledge about the culturally acceptable ways of interacting with others in different social contexts. The learner who has such knowledge is considered to be communicatively competent by Hymes. Built on Hymes' theory, Canale and Swain (1980) have further proposed that, communicative competence includes grammatical competence i.e. purely structural knowledge about the language; discourse competence i.e. knowledge about intersentencial relationship; sociolinguistic competence i.e. knowledge about the rules and norms governing the appropriate timing and realization of speech acts; and strategic competence i.e. the ability to compensate for imperfect knowledge of linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse rules. Therefore, learners should have all these types of competence in order to become an effective communicator in spoken English.

3. Purpose of the Study

The present study intends to find out the problems existing in teaching speaking skills to tertiary students in Bangladesh on the basis of questionnaire surveys both from teachers' and students' point of view and has also figured out the directions to their solutions.

4. The Study Method

The Study Participants: For the questionnaire survey, two hundred students and thirty teachers were selected at random from ten private and two public universities in Bangladesh. The universities surveyed were Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University, Daffodil International University, Stamford University, State University, Northern

University, Darul Ihsan University, Northern University, Eastern University, University of Development Alternative (UODA), East West University and North South University. The data were collected in September 2007.

Survey Instrument: To collect primary data, two structured questionnaires were developed   following Likert scale with different satisfaction levels of some aspects as well as some other related variables through different statements ranging from strongly satisfied (1) to strongly dissatisfied (5). Primary data were collected from different universities where various levels of spoken English courses are offered at tertiary level.

A variety of measurement scales (nominal, interval and ratio) were included in a structured format to examine the relationships between selected variables. The questionnaire for teachers consisted of seven multiple choice questions and two open ended questions. Whereas, the questionnaire for students consisted of six multiple choice questions and also one open ended question. Both the questionnaires had some common and some different questions to compare and contrast the opinions of the two groups. The open-ended questions were used mainly to find out the suggestions from the students and teachers which had been included in the recommendation part. Data were analyzed by SPSS 12.0 (Statistical Package for Social Science) and common statistical tools like descriptive statistics, chi-square test and correlation were also used.

Analysis of Students' Information

Descriptive analysis of the considered variables shows the average response values along with their Standard Deviation in table-1.1. There exist vast disparity among the responses of problems faced in the class (Mean is 2.89 and Standard Deviation is 1.249).

Besides, high incongruity is found between the responses of satisfaction of language competence in spoken English before instruction (Mean is 2.77 and Standard Deviation is .990) and the level of improvement in speaking skills after instruction (Mean is 2.42 and Standard Deviation is .910).   Only the kind of activities that are being enjoyed most by the respondents are included in the frequency distribution. Among them, 'debating' seems to be the most enjoyable classroom activity to them (33.5%) and then comes 'listening comprehension activity' (24%). (See Annexure A, Table 2.1)

Table 1.1: Descriptive Statistics of the considered variables under study

Name of the Variables	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Background of the respondents	200	1.14	.343
Satisfaction of language competence in spoken English before instruction	200	2.77	.990
Level of improvement in speaking skills after instruction	200	2.42	.910
Practicing speaking skills outside the class	200	1.39	.489
Use of extra-textual material in English	200	1.39	.488
Most common problem faced in the class (lack of self motivation)	200	2.89	1.249
Valid N (list wise)	200		

It has been observed that only 14% of the respondents are from English medium background (27 out of 200). Therefore, most of the students at tertiary level are form Bengali medium who, are naturally weaker in English language than those coming from English medium. Regarding the language competence before instruction, 43% of them seem to be satisfied. Whereas 51% of them have agreed that, their speaking skills have improved following classroom instructions. Strongly dissatisfaction with language competence seems to be very insignificant before instruction (4.5%) and after instruction (3%). These mean despite the students' weaknesses in speaking skills, they are still somehow satisfied. (See Annexure A, Table 2.1)

Although 61% of the respondents have claimed that they practice speaking outside the class, 61.5% of them do not use any extra textual materials in English outside the class. Table-2.1 (Annexure A) shows the problems encountered by the respondents. Out of 200 students, 64 of them have said that they are 'lacking in self motivation' and it is the most commonly faced problem by the students. Further, many (53 out of 200) of them have emphasized on 'higher level of anxiety and lower level of self confidence' in spoken English classes as their second highest problem.

4.4. Association between the Satisfaction Level and Improvement Level

The hypothesis to be tested here is:

H_0: There is no significant association between satisfaction of language competence in spoken English before instruction and the level of improvement in speaking skills after instruction.

Table: 1.2 Association between satisfaction of language competence in spoken English before instruction and the level of improvement in speaking skills after instruction by Chi-square test.

		Level of improvement in speaking skills after instruction					Total
		Strongly Satisfactory	**satisfactory**	**Neutral**	**Dissatisfactory**	**Strongly Dissatis factory**	
Satisfaction of language competence before instruction	strongly satisfied	6	4	0	0	0	10
	satisfied	10	51	18	5	2	86
	neutral	0	31	20	0	1	52
	Dissatisfied	4	13	13	12	1	43
	strongly dissatisfied	2	3	1	1	2	9
Total		22	102	52	18	6	200

Chi-square is 78.14, Degrees of freedom is 16, Asymp significance is 0.000, Correlation coefficient is 0.318

H_1: There is some significant association between satisfaction of language competence in spoken English before instruction and the level of improvement in speaking skills after instruction.

Table-1.2 shows the observed and expected frequencies to obtain the overall chi- values of the considered variables. In both the cases the hypothesis are found to be rejected which means there exist strong evidence of association between satisfaction of language competence in spoken English before instruction and the level of improvement in speaking skills after instruction

4.5. Analysis of Teachers' Information

Again, the descriptive analysis of the considered variables in case of teachers shows the average response values along with their Standard Deviation in table-1.3. It is observed form the analysis that, teachers are not much satisfied with students' level of competence in spoken English before instruction. The average satisfaction score of student's language competence before instruction shows that dissatisfaction among the teachers is very high (Mean score is 3.30 and Standard Deviation is 1.11) and students' the level of fluency after instruction is not even satisfactory (Mean is 2.87 and Standard Deviation is 0.90).

Besides, 86.7% teachers have replied that they practice both group work and pair work in the spoken English class.

Table-3.1 (Annexure B) shows the frequency distribution of the problems faced in teaching speaking skills. 80% of the teachers have mentioned 'mixed ability classes' as the basic problem.

Table 1.3 Descriptive Statistics of the considered variables under study

Name of the Variables	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Satisfaction of student's language competence before instruction	30	3.30	1.119
Students' level of fluency in speaking after instruction	30	2.87	.900
Practice of group work and pair work	30	.87	.346
Listening comprehension activities	30	.60	.498
First target in teaching speaking skills	30	1.87	.346
Method of teaching	30	2.33	.884
Valid N (list wise)	0		

Whereas, the other problems are 'lack of suitable materials' (27.7%), 'large class' (33.3%), 'lack of students' motivation' (60%) and 'lack of in-service training' (6.7%). So, we can have a ranking of the problems from the reactions.

Besides, 30% of the teachers are neutral in their opinion on the student's language competence before instruction and 56% of them are neutral about the level of fluency after instruction. The teachers (86.7%) also hold that, fluency should be the first aim in teaching speaking skills rather than accuracy. Moreover, 73.3% teachers follow Communicative Language Teaching approach in the class. Whereas, Grammar Translation Method and Situational Language Teaching are also followed by 6.7% and 20% respectively.

5. Major Findings of the Study

1.　The study results from the questionnaire for students show that there is disparity between the responses of satisfaction of language competence in English before instruction and the level of improvement in speaking skills after instruction. It

means, speaking classes are somehow effective for the students even after having various problems (See table 1.1, column 3).

2.   Though most of the students' level of fluency in spoken English before instruction is dissatisfactory from the teachers' point of view (See table 2.2, column 3), the students are quite neutral about their competence level before the instruction. (See table 1.1, column 3). This shows that the students are not yet motivated enough to learn the skills seriously.

3.   Teachers are not even satisfied with their students' level of language competence after instructions (See table 2.2, column 3). Therefore, teachers do accept the shortcomings in teaching these skills and think that measures should be found out to make these classes much effective.

4.   From the analysis of the open ended question on the approach followed by the teachers in teaching speaking skills, most of the respondents stay with the top-down approach.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion: Speaking is one of the central mediums of communication. In ESL teaching at tertiary level in Bangladesh, it is an aspect that demands serious attention. In order to make the classroom instructions more effective, it is necessary for the teachers to carefully examine the underlying nature, factors, conditions and components of speaking skills. On the basis of the research evidence, it can be concluded that effective instruction together with sufficient language input and speech promotion activities, will gradually help learners to speak English fluently and accurately. By the mutual participation and co-operation of the teachers, learners and the concerned authorities, we will be able to overcome the referred problems and reach the goal of spoken fluency. In short, the following steps can be recommended in teaching speaking skills:

1.   The teachers have to bring constant variation in classroom activities and materials that they will be practicing and using in the speaking classes. It will help them to keep students' motivation level high and will also lessen students' anxiety level.

2.   Teachers have to give the students sufficient exposure to real life spoken language.

3.   The number of students in each class should be kept limited where teachers would be able to handle students' problems with precision.

4.   Most of the teachers think that students' narrow range of vocabulary and weaknesses in pronunciation are one of the main causes of their problems in learning spoken English. Therefore, emphasis should be given on teaching pronunciation and enriching vocabulary of the students.

5. Students have individual learning preferences according to their different needs and styles. As a result, every student cannot be satisfied by practicing similar activities in the class. To overcome this problem, teachers can conduct needs analysis at the very beginning of the course and thus may get a glimpse of their students' underlying preferences.

6. It is better, if a placement test can be taken before starting the language classes. It will help teachers to divide the students into groups according to their proficiency level.

7. Group work and pair work should be practiced in the classes to make the spoken English classes more interactive and interesting to students. This would other way round help the teachers to create conditions in which, students would like to participate.

8. Students should be instructed to practice these skills as much as they can even when they are outside the class.

9. To engage students' attention in speaking classes, the teachers can make the best use of multimedia resources. Teachers can even invite native speakers of English to motivate the students.

10. To increase the students' listening comprehension ability side by side with the speaking ability, teachers should pay special attention to using audio visual teaching aids.

11. To emphasize the communicative function of a language, students should be given fluency based activities rather than accuracy based ones. The activities should be less controlled by teachers and mistakes should be given less importance to build up students' self confidence. Teachers however, can take note of the mistakes and tell the students about them after completing the assigned speaking task. It will raise students' awareness of the mistakes which they have done while speaking the target language.

12. Moreover, it is a matter of great concern that, speaking skills in English is not stressed at school level in Bangladesh. Therefore, teaching of these skills should be introduced at the primary level in schools and measures have to be taken to arrange in-service and pre-service training of the teachers who are teaching at primary level.

7. References

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ANNEX-A

Table 2.1 Frequency Distribution of the considered variables (Students)

Satisfaction of language competence before instruction	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Satisfied	10	5.0
Satisfied	86	43.0
Neutral	52	26.0
Dissatisfied	43	21.5
Strongly Dissatisfied	9	4.5
Total	**200**	**100.0**

Improvement of speaking skills after instruction	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Satisfied	22	11.0
Satisfied	102	51.0
Neutral	52	26.0
Dissatisfied	18	9.0
Strongly Dissatisfied	6	3.0
Total	**200**	**100.0**

Back ground of the students	Frequency	Percentage
Bengali medium	173	86.5
English medium	27	13.5
Total	**200**	**100**

Practice of speaking skills outside the class	Frequency	Percentage
yes	122	61.0
no	78	39.0
Total	**200**	**100.0**

Most favorite activities in the spoken English class	Frequency	Percentage
Listening comprehension activities	48	22
Story telling	40	20
Role play	44	22
Using audio visual materials	23	11.5
Pattern practices & pronunciation practice	36	18
Debating	67	33.5
Grammar games	31	15.5

Use of extra-textual materials in English outside the class	Frequency	Percentage
No	123	61.5
Yes	77	38.5
Total	200	100.0

Problems faced in the class	Frequency	Percentage
Incomprehensible materials used	48	14.0
Higher level of anxiety	53	26.5
Lack of self motivation	64	32.0
Large class	24	12.0
Others	31	15.5
Total	200	100.0

Chi-Square Tests

Table 2.1.1 Chi-square test of the association between the satisfaction before and improvement after instruction.

	Value	Degrees of Freedom	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.941(a)	4	.094
Likelihood Ratio	9.427	4	.051
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.246	1	.264
N of Valid Cases	30		

8 cells (80.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .20.

ANNEX-B
Table 3.1 Frequency Distribution of the considered variables (Teachers)

Satisfaction of students' language competence before instruction	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Satisfied	1	3.3
Satisfied	7	23.3
Neutral	9	30.0
Dissatisfied	8	26.7
Strongly Dissatisfied	5	16.7
Total	30	100.0

Level of students' fluency after instruction	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Satisfied	1	3.3
Satisfied	7	23.3
Neutral	17	56.7
Dissatisfied	4	13.3
Strongly Dissatisfied	1	3.3
Total	**30**	**100.0**

Practice of pair work and group work	Frequency	Percentage
No	4	13.3
yes	26	86.7
Total	**30**	**100.0**

Method of Teaching	Frequency	Percentage
Grammar Translation Method	2	6.7
Communicative Language Teaching	22	73.3
Situational Language Teaching	6	20.0
Total	**30**	**100**

First aim in teaching speaking skills	Frequency	Percentage
Accuracy	4	13.3
Fluency	26	86.7
Total	**30**	**100.0**

Problems faced in the class	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of material	8	26.7
Large class	10	33.3
Lack of student's motivation	18	60
Lack of in-service training	2	6.7
Mixed ability class	24	80
Others	5	16