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TEACHING EFL SPEAKING AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL: A STUDY IN BANGLADESH CONTEXT

Md. Abu Yousuf
Chairman, Lodestar Education Foundation
Adjunct Faculty, Sonargaon University, Dhaka, Bangladesh
E-mail: yousufasia@gmail.com

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Abstract

The paper aims at investigating the prevailing methods, approaches and techniques in teaching EFL speaking skill in Bangladesh and tends to find out the reasons behind the poor oral performance of EFL learners. Participants consist of four non-native English teachers and 179 students from three public and two private universities in Dhaka. Data was collected through an attitude scale and interviews with the participants and then, obtained data was meticulously analyzed using SPSS Package. The findings specified the teacher-related, student-related, and educational system related quandaries encountered by non-native English teachers. Teacher-related constraints included teachers' low willingness to prepare and use communicative materials, lack of proper training in CLT approach and lack of motivation to teach speaking, lack of individual assessment and deficiency in strategic competence. Student-related constraints were mainly due to students' EFL speaking anxiety and insufficient proficiency, and educational-system related limitations consisting of large classes, grammar-based written examinations, teaching four skills together, absence of specific, customized and focused course on speaking skill. The findings of the study suggest that many of the difficulties encountered by both Bangladeshi students and English teachers over the last couple of years still persist to this day. The researcher suggests that the mentioned constraints could be overcome through the proper implementation of CLT approach and some other authentic techniques in an ideal classroom environment where speaking skill is the main focus.

Keywords: *Mandatory speaking course, imperativeness, barriers, efficacy of current approaches and methods*

1. Introduction

Speaking is a productive skill and it is a crucial skill of a language. In fact, meaningful human communication cannot be imagined without speaking. McDonough and Shaw (1993, p.152) thatspeaking is 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". Speaking is a vigorous process which involves listening.The importance of speaking as a primary and productive skill in ESL/EFL contexts has been phenomenal since it has been lingua franca for the academic interactions in recent days. But it is a matter of great concern that the majority of the students at the tertiary level in Bangladesh cannot speak English fluently even when they had studied English as a compulsory subject at their Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary level in our traditional mainstream Bengali curriculum.

Surprisingly, even after completing mandatory English course at the first year of undergraduate studies at the public and private universities, the level of oral proficiency is not developed at the expected level. What are the root causes behind the failure of being competent in

speaking? However, it has been observed and found that the several factors, i.e. absence of appropriate course and course materials, effective teaching methods, approaches and techniques, large classes, focus only on grammar-based examinations, lack of individual attention, lack of proper assessment and evaluation, teachers' unwillingness and the reluctance of the students hinder greatly in developing speaking skills.

Teaching speaking skills at the tertiary level is still peripheral and neglected in Bangladesh though it is considered to be the most crucial skill of a language. EFL learners in Bangladesh struggle to have the communicative competence in speaking even after studying English 13-15 years. The problems mainly lie with teaching methods, approaches, techniques used in teaching English and the lack of skilled English teachers and the absence of specific curriculum for speaking skills and reluctance of using English in EFL classrooms both by the teachers and learners.

In the past, the main focus in English as a second language or foreign language contexts used to be on grammar-translation method where deductive lessons on grammar are taught and communicative fluency in English speaking is totally ignored. Moreover, in the public assessment/examinations there is no system of evaluating students' oral skills and no individual attention is given. The importance of oral skills is not appraised in our evaluation system in Bangladesh. It is unfortunate to state that most of the students cannot speak English clearly in the class and cannot say things in front of the audience with confidence.

2. Objectives

The core objective of this study is to identify the students' quandaries in speaking and investigate why the majority of the learners cannot speak English fluently at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. It also explores the methods, approaches, and techniques used in teaching speaking skills and the obstacles in teaching process and suggest how to overcome those difficulties henceforth. The importance of correct and fluent speaking is also emphasized in this study.

3. Literature Review

Speaking is a primary and productive skill. It is generally acknowledged that English has become one of the most accepted mediums of communication. Good English-speaking skills have imperative demand in Bangladesh. In our country Bangla is the mother language of 95% people of the total population (Farooqui, 2007) and 86 % students of the tertiary level come from Bangla medium (Jahan & Jahan, 2006). Moreover, for the negative backwash effect speaking skills are generally excluded from the teaching objectives of the English language teachers and students do not get the opportunity to learn spoken English in the pre-university years (Farooqui, 2007; Majid, 2007).If students do not learn how to speak or do not get any opportunity to speak in the language classroom; they may soon get bored and lose interest in learning. On the other hand, if the right activities are taught in the right way, speaking in class can be a lot of fun, raising general learner motivation and making the English language classroom a fun and dynamic place to be.

Talley and Hui-ling (2014) observed that curriculum for teaching speaking skill should endeavor to expose learners to authentic, practical settings for speaking English and encourage active learner involvement in the lesson. Talley and Hui-Ling (2014) argue that English speaking curriculum should take cognizance of international and local cultures which should coexist mutually. In addition, Njgagi et al (2014) recommend that a curriculum should be designed in a manner that it recognizes the classroom activities of learners in order to enhance learning outcomes. Tuan and Mai (2015) pinpoint the factors that affect students' speaking performance such as motivation, confidence, anxiety, time, planning, amount of support, standard performance, listening ability and feedback during speaking activities. For students to have a successful conversation, they must have good listening skills in order to understand what is said to them. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches require that learners actively participate by sharing ideas, speaking freely, thus every speaker plays the role of listener and speaker (Tuan & Mai, 2015).

4. Methodology

The current study is a survey to identify the major problems of EFL speaking faced by the tertiary level students.

4.1. Sampling

The method adopted in this discussion is the observation method. Consequently, the researcher had to talk with the students of different universities in Dhaka city. The researcher tried to participate where many students talk to themselves in English in their university premises. The interviews, meetings, class observations, direct talks are conducted to complete the study with relevant information. Questionnaire served to 179 students and 27 non-native English teachers. The result of the observation has been discussed in the discussion and finding parts.

The respondents are randomly selected from five universities of which three public and two private universities among the undergraduate level students of various disciplines. The universities included were University of Dhaka, Jahangirnagar University, Jagannath University, Daffodil International University and Manarat International University. The process of sampling includes probability sampling technique, stratified and Random.

4.2. Instrumentation

The study is to be conducted among the tertiary level students of different public and private universities of Dhaka city under the keen observation of the researcher. The study uses the descriptive approach with utilization of qualitative methods such as direct interviews, observational studies, and questionnaires with existing information and case studies in the related field. The researcher uses observation method to collect data as stated earlier. The researcher also collected some previously published journal articles. A five-point Likert scale was used to identify the opinion of the participants. The ranking criteria were as follows:

Rate of opinion	Interpretation of the scale
5	Strongly agree
4	Agree
3	Neutral
2	Disagree
1	Strongly disagree

The participants gave detailed reasons for each problem and identified the problem ranking in their opinion. Most of the questions were open-ended. A set of questionnaires were prepared. The researcher has provided tips to the students and asked them to answer the questions which have been given to them.

4.3. Data collection

The data for the research study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected directly from the speakers of tertiary level students and from the teachers. The researcher enjoyed both participating and observing. It is to be considered that direct interviews always jeopardize the naturalness of the language use. This is why the researcher had to depend on the clandestine interviews and classroom observation. By using this method, the researcher goes through different literary articles, critical compositions, and websites to find out related study materials, in order to be acknowledged relevant information in the same field.

Several journal articles and books from different libraries are also collected to have specialized information on both the writers and compose the dissertation in a more credible way. These are the secondary sources of data. During the study, the researcher actively participated in the chitchat made by the group of people to observe the vitiation between Standard English and dialectally influenced English in terms of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation style, tone and intonation. Questionnaires are also proved to be supportive for the study.

4.4. Data analysis

The collected data are analyzed in the discussion and findings sections. The purpose is to describe the situation as observed by the researcher in harmony with the conceptual analyses of the researcher. Observation data are transcribed and written out in English for proper analysis. The major problems found from the observation are focused on the basis teaching methods, approaches and techniques and course curriculum. The major problems found in data collection are analyzed linguistically in a precise summarization. Data have been analyzed by the following process: preparing primary plan, checking questionnaire, editing, cleaning data and adjusting data. Finally, data were analyzed with the result of the study in the discussion parts.

5. Findings and Discussion

This chapter reports the results from the study and summarizes findings found from 179 answered questionnaires and the results of the 27 teachers interviewed. Jahan (2008) and Alam (2006) pointed out that "our tertiary level learners are not attaining the expected level of fluency in English." This research is an endeavor to find out the reasons why the tertiary level students are not competent in English speaking. The study mainly focuses on finding out whether the universities have courses in speaking skill, whether the courses are appropriately designed in terms of methodologies and materials, and the problems encountered both by the teachers while teaching and by the learners while learning speaking skill.

5.1. Availability of speaking course at the universities

Universities	Availability of speaking course	Other English courses
University of Dhaka (DU)	There is no speaking course in Business Faculty and Humanities. Only English Department offers courses on Listening and Speaking, Phonetics and Public Speaking.	There is a course on Foundation English for the Faculty of Humanities whereas there is a Business English for the Faculty of Business.
Jahangirnagar University (JU)	There is no speaking course in Business Faculty and Humanities. Only English Department offers courses on Listening and Speaking, Phonetics and Public Speaking.	There is a course on Foundation English for the Faculty of Humanities whereas there is a Business English for the Faculty of Business.
Jagannath University (JnU)	There is no speaking course in Business Faculty and Humanities. Only English Department offers courses on Listening and Speaking, Phonetics and Public Speaking.	There is a course on Foundation English for the Faculty of Humanities whereas there is a Business English for the Faculty of Business.
Daffodil International University (DIU)	There is no speaking course in Business Faculty and Humanities. Only English Department offers courses on Speaking skill, Listening and Speaking and Phonetics.	There is a Business English course for the Faculty of Business.
Manarat International University (MIU)	There is no specific speaking course in Business Faculty and Humanities. Only English Department offers courses on Composition and Communication and Phonetics	There is a Business English course for the Faculty of Business.

While taking teachers' interview, it has been found that none of the universities offer course on 'Speaking Skill' for their Business Faculty and Humanities except English Department.

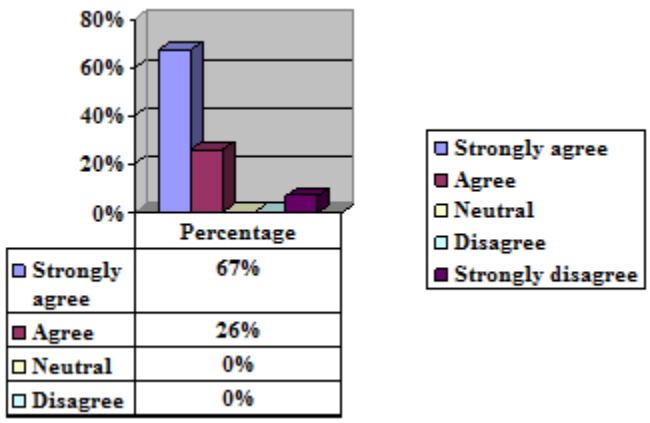
All three public universities have “Listening & Speaking Course” and “Public Speaking Course” for the students of English Departments. Though, it has been revealed while interviewing some students that the speaking classes are mostly lecture-based and theoretical aspects of listening and speaking skills are discussed in the class.

Moreover, the class is off-course as usual teacher-centered where students get less opportunity to interact through pair/group work. Furthermore, written examination is taken for oral performance evaluation. Although, there is an oral presentation at the end of each semester which somewhat helps students to be confident in public speaking.

In case of two private universities, the situation is almost same as there is no specific speaking course for other departments except English department. Even, the majority of the students of English departments are not fluent speakers mainly due to large class, lack of oral interaction, lack of student-centered classroom environment and above all less duration of class.

On the other hand, ‘Foundation English’ and ‘Business English’ are offered in all five universities in the Faculty of Business or Humanities where the main goal is to develop four skills of English language but in reality, only reading and writing skills are more or less developed and there is no activity for listening and speaking skills at all in the class. But, being a primary and productive skill, separate speaking course is required in EFL setting to develop speaking.

5.2. Perception of teachers and students about mandatory courses for EFL speaking



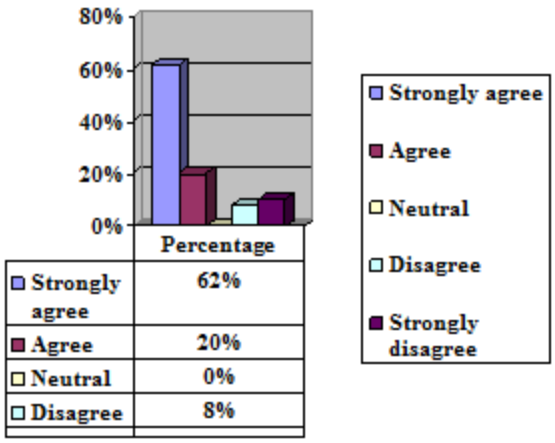
	Percentage
Strongly agree	67%
Agree	26%
Neutral	0%
Disagree	0%

Figure-1: Needs of mandatory speaking course: Teachers’ Perception

The bar-chart illustrates that 67% (18 out of 27) English teachers strongly agree on the statement that the English speaking course should be introduced and made mandatory not only for the students of English department but also for all students in other disciplines because they believe that English is no longer a mere language rather it has become ‘an influential tool’ and play vital role in higher education, business development, career opportunities, world-wide communications and so forth. And 26% English teachers echoed with this statement.

However, 7% English teachers strongly disagree with the statement. They mention that subject knowledge and technical skills are important. They did not put emphasis on the mandatory speaking courses at all.

For example, a student of accounting should achieve accounting proficiency and it can be done in mother-tongue. Another example is, a student in Bengali language may not be interested in learning to speak English.



	Percentage
Strongly agree	62%
Agree	20%
Neutral	0%
Disagree	8%

Figure-2: Needs of mandatory speaking course: Students' Perception

The bar-diagram shows that 62% (111 out of 179) students strongly agree on the statement that the English speaking course should be introduced and made mandatory for all irrespective of disciplines because they accept that English speaking ability is no longer optional rather essential in this globalized world. It is needed for higher education abroad, working in national and multi-national organizations and doing business world-wide and so on. And 20% students agree on the statement. However, 8% and 10% students disagree and strongly disagree respectively with this statement mentioning that mother-tongue is enough for acquiring higher education and developing expertise. Furthermore, learning to EFL speaking requires more practice which consumes much time which will ultimately create huge academic pressure. They further state that if English speaking becomes urgent, it could be learnt after academic education.

5.3. Barriers to teaching and learning EFL speaking: Viewpoints of teachers and students

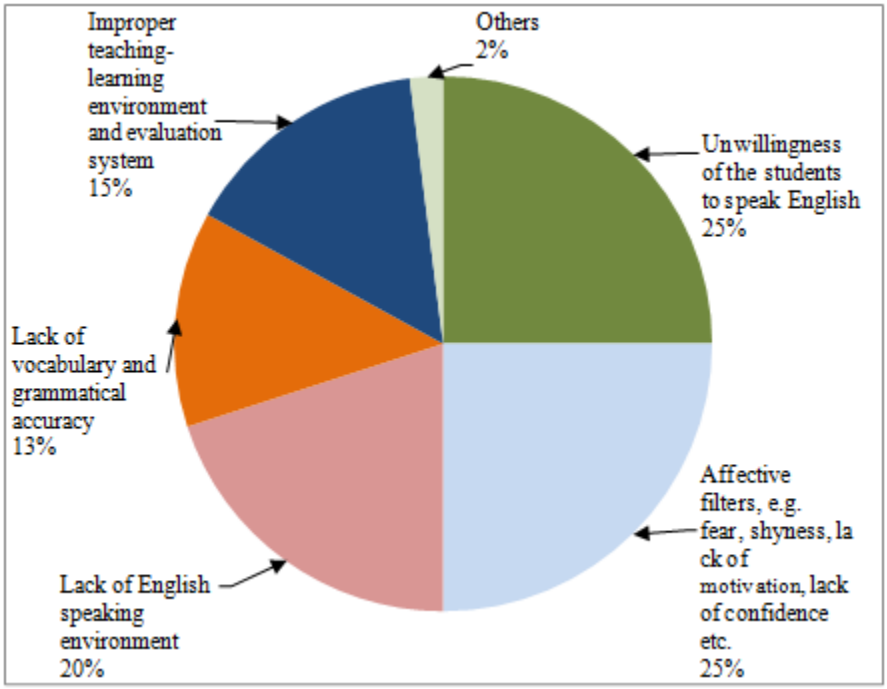


Figure-3: Teachers' viewpoints

The pie-diagram represents that the three major components have 70% shares of barriers to teaching speaking as viewed by the non-native English teachers include unwillingness of the students to speak English, affective filters, e.g. anxiety, fear, nervousness, lack of confidence, lack of motivation and so forth; and absence of English-speaking environment. On the other hand, 15% interruption causes due to improper classroom environment, e.g. large class, less duration, and inappropriate teaching materials, less or no activity-based class and the like. Some 13% hindrance occurs mainly because of poor vocabulary and grammatical knowledge of the students. They cannot even make some basic sentences correctly and after a long search, they find no words and just stumble repeatedly and cannot produce pragmatically correct sentences.

The following pie-diagram again depicts the students' viewpoints about the barriers to the teaching and learning EFL speaking that shows several key-points related to the study.

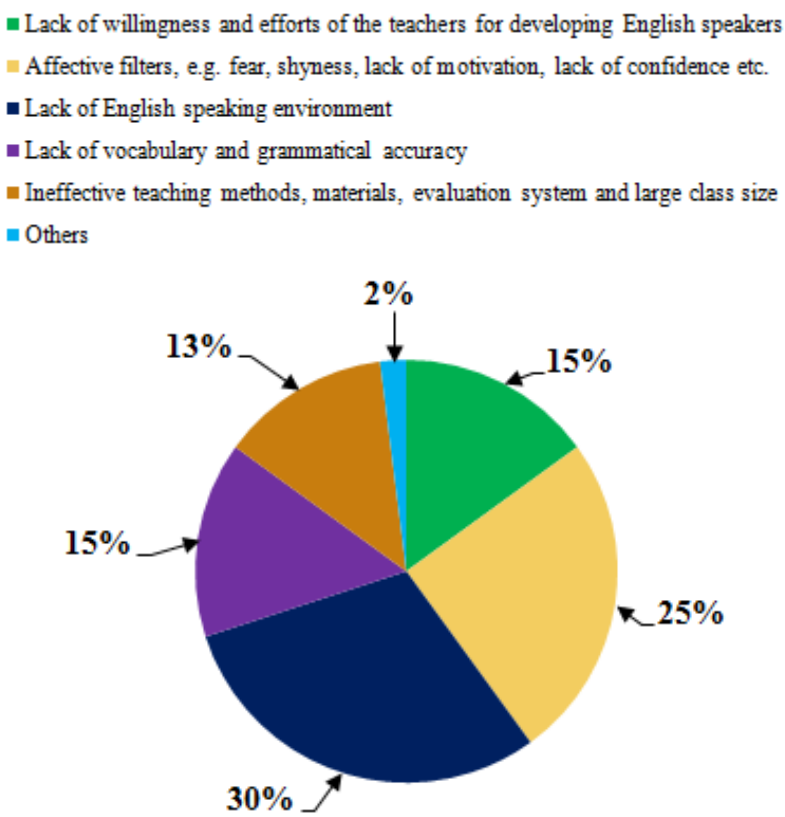


Figure-4: Students' viewpoints

The pie-chart denotes that lack of English-speaking environment and affective filters, e.g. shyness, fear, lack of self-confidence, lack of motivation and the alike; cause 30% and 25% barriers to learning EFL speaking respectively as opined by the students.

Other three major components represent 43% of barriers which include unwillingness of the teachers to take stress in making the students fluent speakers, ineffective methods, inappropriate teaching materials, unfavorable classroom environment, e.g. large class, less duration, and less or no activity-based class and poor knowledge of the students on vocabulary and grammar hinder the smooth learning process of EFL speaking.

5.4. Efficacy of the current methods: Opinions of teachers and students

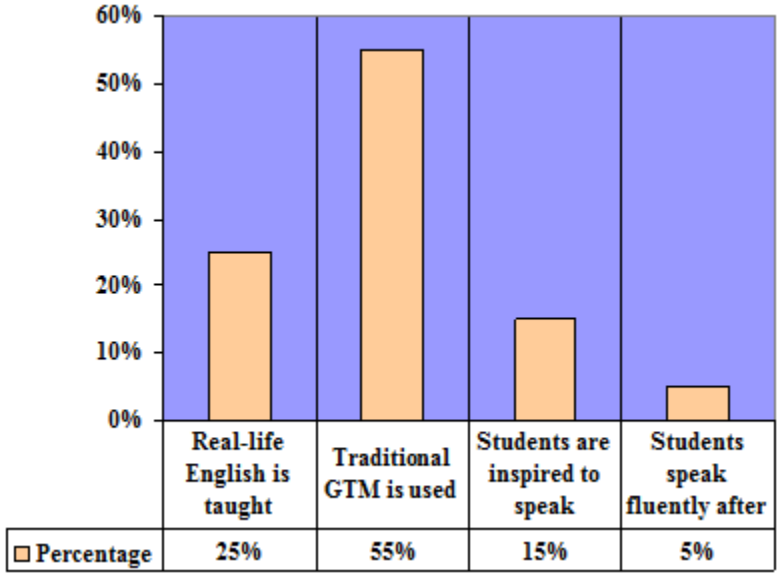


Figure-5: Teachers' opinions about efficacy of current methods

The simple bar-diagram clarifies that 55% (15 out of 27) teachers strongly agree on the statement that they use Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) while teaching English whereas only 25% teachers strive to incorporate Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLTA) by teaching real-life English in the classroom. However, it is found that around 15% teachers inspire students to speak up in the class which ultimately help flourish students' English speaking and leadership abilities as stated by the teachers. The English courses offered in the universities seem to be ineffective in terms of producing English speakers. Only 5% students become fluent speakers after doing the course(s) and the credit mostly goes to some teachers who inspire students being beyond academic syllabus as well as the efforts of the individual students to be fluent speakers.

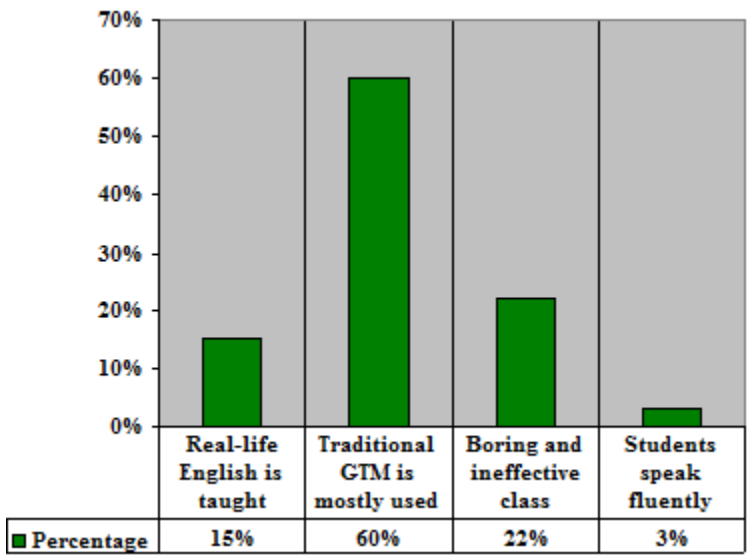


Figure-6: Students' opinions about efficacy of current methods

The bar-chart explains that 60% (107 out of 179) students strongly agree on the statement that the teachers use Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) while teaching English whereas only 15% teachers teach real-life English in the classroom. Moreover, 22% students agree on the issue that the classes are monotonous and found to be ineffective and only 3% students become fluent in speaking after completion of the course not because of the course curriculum but because of the students' individual efforts backed by some teachers' and elders' motivation and inspiration as fluency in English is badly needed for bright career.

6. Recommendations

Proficiency in EFL Speaking is much sought-after issue for the university graduates in Bangladesh to compete both in business and official jobs. In comparison with our neighboring country India, we are far lagging behind in EFL Speaking which hinders our smooth communication with the foreigners. In this era of communication, oral proficiency in English language is considered mandatory be it higher studies or career. Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations should be considered keeping the demand of EFL Speaking skill in mind:

Appropriately designed specific courses on speaking skill should be introduced, offered and run efficiently and mandatorily by all the universities of Bangladesh (both public and private) and ensure that the ultimate outcome is achieved, i.e. fluent English speakers are produced.

a. Evaluation system of speaking skill should be oral not written and numerous public speaking and presentation sessions to be incorporated and individual attention to be given in terms of EFL Speaking problem-solving and capacity building.
b. CLT approach to be used and the students to be engaged in classroom activities (i.e. pair work, group work, public speaking, presentation, conversation practice etc. through speaking promoting activities, e.g. interviews, discussions, role-play, simulations, brain-storming, story-telling and so on), which will ultimately help the students to practise real-life English and become fluent English speakers.
c. The classroom environment should be learner-centered rather than teacher-centered and collaborative language learning (CLL) to be ensured by pairing or grouping between weak and good students for effective learning outcome.
d. Learners' mistakes to be taken positively and they are to be motivated and inspired to learn through mistakes.
e. While preparing learning materials; real-life communication to be facilitated and learners' background knowledge should be kept in mind, and their known context to be chosen so that learning process becomes an interesting journey.
f. In EFL Speaking class 20:1 student-teacher ratio to be ensured for effective outcome and class duration to be increased from 45 minutes to two hours in order to give sufficient time to every student for pair/group practice, individual presentation and problem-solving session.
g. All the supports in relation to infrastructure and equipment to be provided by the authorities, e.g. multimedia and WiFi enabled classroom, language lab, self-access center, public speaking & debating club etc. to improve students' EFL speaking abilities.
h. Last but not the least, universities should make it compulsory that all the students must be proficient in English speaking before being graduated and there will be viva voce for oral performance evaluation at the final examination of undergraduate education. In this regard, Language Club to be formed at all departments and the participation should be made mandatory from first year to final year and accordingly continuous development of speaking skill can be planned.

7. Conclusion

EFL Speaking skill is neglected by the higher authorities in Bangladesh which is reflected in the syllabus of all classes from primary to university. There is no testing process when students have prospects to test their speaking ability and ability to use standard accent. Even, they

do not have any opportunity to practice speaking skills excluding English medium schools. So, there is discrimination between English and Bangla medium education in Bangladesh. An English medium student can fluently speak English as if he or she were a native speaker whereas a Bangla medium student sometimes cannot produce a single word with the correct pronunciation after passing a long twelve to fourteen years of educational life. Consequently, they fail to achieve good score in IELTS and TOEFL and thus cannot secure positions in the quality foreign universities in spite of having extensive subject knowledge. Therefore, this research study facilitates the teachers and the authorities to appreciate on language learning through prominence of teaching EFL Speaking English. The findings of the study recommend that all the universities should pay special attention to make the students proficient in EFL Speaking skill. If the recommendations are adopted by the concerned stakeholders, the teaching and learning of EFL Speaking skill will be effective than ever before.

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