

Major Linguistic Barriers of Oral Communication in English as Perceived by the Tertiary level ESL Students

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Abstract

Effective oral communication skills help students to improve their own academic performance, increase their employment options, enhance their subsequent professional competence, and improve their own personal effectiveness. Unfortunately, while communicating orally in English, the learners usually encounter varied linguistic problems that evidently hamper their communication. The goal of the present study is to find out the major linguistic barriers of oral communication in English faced by the ESL students at the tertiary level. It also tends to find out some effective and necessary solutions of the problems, so that, both the teachers and the students can be benefited in their objectives. The data for the present study were obtained through some audio texts and oral presentations. The findings of the study show that unfamiliarity with the sound system of English, inadequate range of vocabulary, inability to form certain grammatical constructions like WH-questions, passive sentences, reported speeches, etc, and failure to use different word classes according to the demand of the sentence are the main barriers of oral communication. The study also recommends that the items which pose serious problems in oral communication should be given more emphasis and sufficient treatment in the syllabus and also should be taught in such a way these are used in real life situations.

Keywords: linguistic barriers, oral communication, ESL students.

Introduction

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Oral communication means spoken communication, so it would include not only face-to-face communication but also communication through any mechanical or electrical device like telephone. Listening to someone speak on film could also be considered oral communication, but it is less personal since the person is not speaking directly to the listener. Oral communication is, however, very important right from the beginning of life; the mother must speak to her baby in order for the baby to develop normally, especially in language. When one speaks with another person, much of the content of the communication is in the sound of the voice, conveying whether the intention is to joke or be serious, to be kind or cruel. These shades of intention may be missing from or ambiguous in an email or text message. Emoticons are hardly sufficient to impart the subtleties of feeling. When a lover whispers to his beloved, a mother coos to her infant, two friends giggle together, a teacher praises a student, an operator gives first-aid instructions over the phone, a criminal threatens a victim, or a spiritual teacher transmits a secret instruction--all these are interactions that have a unique effect because of the use of oral communication. Effective oral communication skills help students to improve their own academic performance, increase their employment options, enhance their subsequent professional competence, and improve their own personal effectiveness.

But, unfortunately, while communicating orally in English, the learners usually encounter varied linguistic problems that evidently handicap and hamper their communication and eventually negatively affect their general proficiency. Hence, understanding their problems in communication as well as finding out the best solutions is important in order to help learners in oral language development. There is value in studying the kinds of problems that students encounter during oral communication and the strategic steps they might take to resolve these problems. The understanding so achieved can contribute to the more effective teaching and learning of oral skills in the language classroom.

Literature Review

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The word **communication** is derived from the Latin terms ‘*cum munis*’ [to make common] and ‘*communicare*’ [to share]. Hence, communication is defined as the exchange of information, thoughts, ideas, feeling and the like. Because of its complexity, scholars and experts cast various definitions of communication. Ang (2004), for example, posits that communication is “the transmission of messages via verbal and non-verbal cues.” Comeaux (1996) asserts that “communication is a transaction in which the participants are mutually engaged in the process of creating meaning.” Communication is, basically, a meaningful exchange that involves not only the spoken and written word, but also body language, personal mannerisms and style, the physical environment – anything that adds meaning to a message (Hybels & Weaver, 1998). This process takes place through the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages (Brooks & Heath, 1993).

Oral Communication is, however, the process of Communication which is sent by the sender through the words of mouth. It takes the form of speech & listening. Such Communication takes place across the table through discussions, telephones & in meeting & conference. Oral Communication carries a variety of social & work related news & trends to be rather accurate & faster than most formal Communication. Actually, oral communication includes face to face conversation, conversation over telephone, radio broadcasts, interviews, group discussion, meeting, conference & seminars over the public address system, speeches etc.

Since oral communication is a two way process between the speaker and the receiver involving the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of understanding (listening), so in order to find out the factors that affect the learners’ oral communication, we must take into account the learners’ listening and speaking skills.

Familiarity with the English sound system and ability to articulate English sounds prepare the students for listening to English utterances with understanding. And listening that should precede speaking paves the way for them to develop oral fluency and accuracy. Listening is often said to be a passive skill while speaking is described as an active one. This is not wholly true; for

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listening is also an active skill as it is concerned with decoding a message and understanding it; moreover, the listener has to show that he has or has not understood the message from his response. However, the students are usually hampered in their ability to listen for meaning by certain weaknesses. In general these weaknesses are -

- ✓ Inability to understand pronunciation other than the personal or regional pronunciation.
- ✓ Inability to understand certain words/phrases of a text due to inadequate range of vocabulary.
- ✓ Inability to understand fast speech.
- ✓ Inability to maintain attention because of uninteresting/long text.

As pointed out earlier that practice in listening should precede practice in speaking. At the phonological level this is particularly helpful; the learners should be able to recognize a sound before they attain an ability to produce it. But listening does not lead naturally on to speaking and oral fluency in communication unless listening is followed by practice at the grammatical and lexical levels too. So, listening-attention should be sharpened with particular emphasis on grammatical and lexical items. In general, particular attention should be paid to the following drawbacks generally noticed in the students' speaking -

- ✓ Failure to discriminate between long and short vowels or diphthongs.
- ✓ Failure to aspirate initial /p/, /t/, /k/ of stressed syllables.
- ✓ Failure to pronounce the sounds that are not available in the first language.
- ✓ Failure to put stress on appropriate syllable.
- ✓ Failure to convey message clearly due to inadequate range of vocabulary.
- ✓ Failure to form certain grammatical constructions like WH-questions, passive sentences, reported speeches, etc.
- ✓ Failure to use different word classes according to the demand of the sentence; especially prepositions.

- ✓ Failure to maintain subject-verb agreement and use some other grammatical categories properly.

Statement of Problem

Listening and speaking, two of the four skills of English language, have been considered as a crucial problem for the tertiary level ESL students. Hence, being a teacher of English, I have been observing that the tertiary level ESL students confront lots of difficulties in oral communication, especially in pronunciation including sounds, stress, intonation, etc. They also often find English word formation and sentence construction quite problematic. Moreover, the learners suffer problems in learning vocabulary items and to convey meanings through and/or receive meanings of words, phrases, clauses, sentences/utterances and so forth. Such problems obviously seriously hamper the learners' oral communication. Therefore, it seems reasonable to take account of and identify what major linguistic barriers the students encounter in oral communication and what measures can be taken to overcome those barriers.

Research Rationale

The goal of the present study is to find out the major linguistic barriers of oral communication in English faced by the ESL students at the tertiary level. It also tends to find out some effective and necessary solutions of the problems, so that, both the teachers and the students can be benefited in their objectives and product out-comes regarding oral communication skills development consecutively.

Research Methodology

Participants

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The participants of the investigation were the tertiary level ESL students selected from a few well-known universities of Bangladesh. A total of 230 students were selected. Among them 73 were from the Dhaka University (DU), 68 from the Ahsanullah University of Science & Technology (AUST), 52 from the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), 20 from the Jahangirnagar University (JU), and 17 from the Khulna University (KU). They were basically selected through the purposive sampling method on the basis of convenience and availability.

Data collection

The data for the present study were obtained through some audio texts with a post listening activity sheet (Appendix-1) and oral presentations. First, the participants were given an audio text to listen to. Then, they were asked whether or not they had understood the text fully, and if not, what were the reasons. They were also given a list of all possible factors that prevented them from understanding the text and they were to mark only those factors that caused the listening problem. On the other hand, to identify the linguistic barriers of speaking, participants' oral presentations were carried out. Each participant was given a topic to speak on for about five minutes. They had to start speaking immediately after getting the topic without any preparation. While observing the presentations, the researcher marked the factors using a chart (Appendix-2) that were hampering the participants' oral proficiency. Through these activities, however, the major linguistic barriers of oral communications as perceived by the participants were pointed out. Prior to the actual stage of data collection, current literature on factors affecting in oral communication were critically reviewed and a pilot survey was conducted in order to get necessary feedback for the final survey and also to sharpen the tools to be used.

Data presentation and analysis

For listening

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The participants were given an audio text to listen to and a list of all possible barriers to mark only those that caused the listening problem. The results have been shown in the table-1.

Table-1: Barriers of Listening

Barriers of Listening	No. of Respondents having difficulty	Percentage (%)
Pronunciation of the speaker	164	71.30
Unknown words	104	45.22
Fast speech	71	30.86
Lack of attention	43	18.70

Source: Survey

From the data analysis of the participants' listening, it was found that around 71% of the participants could not understand the text fully because of their inability to understand the pronunciation of the speaker. Approximately 45% participants had some difficulties to understand the text properly due to their inability to get the meanings of certain words used in the text. Only near about 30% of the participants marked that the speech was fast while about 19% could not maintain attention as the text was uninteresting to them.

For Speaking

Each of the participants was given a topic to speak on for about five minutes without any preparation. From their presentations, several factors were identified and marked that were responsible for causing speaking problem. The results are shown in the table-2.

Table-2: Barriers of Speaking

Barriers of Speaking	No. of Respondents having difficulty	Percentage (%)
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Different types of vowels	178	77.39
Aspiration of /p, t, k/	230	100
Unavailability of particular consonants	153	66.52
Misapplication of stress	230	100
Inadequate range of vocabulary	230	100
Forming certain grammatical constructions like WH-questions, passive sentences, reported speeches, etc.	123	53.48
Using different word classes	161	70
Maintaining subject-verb agreement	65	28.26

Source: Survey

From the data analysis of the participants' oral presentations, it was noticed that around 77% of the participants were failed to discriminate between long and short vowels or diphthongs. None of them aspirated initial /p, t, k/ of stressed syllables nor placed stress on appropriate syllables at all. Approximately 66% participants failed to pronounce the sounds that are not available in their first language, e. g. /ʒ, f, v/. On the other hand, all the participants failed to express themselves properly due to their inadequate range of vocabulary and near about 53% participants faced problems in forming grammatically correct sentences, especially WH-questions, passive sentences, reported speeches, etc. About 70% of the participants had difficulties in using appropriate prepositions, while only around 28% participants failed to maintain subject-verb agreement.

Discussion

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Based on the findings of the data analysis, the following suggestions can be drawn- To begin with, the study has shown that inability to discriminate between long and short vowels or diphthongs, failure to pronounce the sounds not available in the first language and misapplication of stress are the main barriers of oral communication for the tertiary level ESL students. And this gives the idea that learning the sound system of English is the most needed thing in the respondents' academic studies.

Secondly, the study has revealed that inadequate range of vocabulary is another major problem of oral communication that not only prevents the learners from understanding a message but also conveying a message properly. Therefore, special care should be given in teaching vocabulary in such a way that the students can use them for effective oral communication in real life situations.

Thirdly, the study has shown that the construction of WH-questions, passive sentences and reported speeches also poses great difficulty in oral communication, particularly in speaking. Moreover, the tertiary level ESL students face difficulty with the uses of different word classes, especially prepositions. Sometimes, they suffer problem with subject-verb agreement. To be brief, the students confront problems with almost all the major grammatical categories of the English language. So, it is specially recommended that the items which pose serious problems in oral communication should be given more emphasis and sufficient treatment in the syllabus and also should be taught in such a way these are used in real life situations.

Conclusion

Communication is said to be the most important skill for human survival because one needs it to maintain contact with the world. It is a part and parcel of everyone's life. All individuals need to communicate to share their thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and information

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with others. However, the degree of its effectiveness depends upon one's communication skills. The better are one's communication skills, the better a person understands him/her. Hence, looking at the oral communication skills, we see, there are lots of problems that prevent the tertiary level ESL students from mastering the needed oral communication skills. The present study attempted to explore those problems and also highlighted some strategies for coping with oral communication problems employed by the learners. The implications of the findings of the present study may not be exhaustive but to some extent, will benefit the ESL students as well as the teachers, I believe.

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Appendix-1

Post Listening Activity Sheet

Q. 1. Did you understand the text fully?

- Yes / No

Q. 2. If not, mark the factor(s) that prevented you from understanding the text properly-

- Pronunciation of the speaker.
- Unknown words.
- Fast speech.
- Lack of attention.

Appendix-2

	Student No.
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Barriers of Speaking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Different types of vowels										
Aspiration of /p, t, k/										
Unavailability of particular consonants										
Misapplication of stress										
Inadequate range of vocabulary										
Formation of WH-questions, passive sentences, reported speeches, etc.										
Using different word classes										
Maintaining subject-verb agreement										

(NB- Students with difficulties in speaking are tick marked against the barriers they faced during presentations.)

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