

**Lack of Confidence –
A Psychological Factor Affecting Spoken English of University
Level Adult Learners in Bangladesh**

Marium Jamila, M.A. in Applied Linguistics & ELT

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Abstract

English is taught as a foreign language in Bangladesh from primary level to higher level education where among all four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), speaking- a productive skill is often treated as the most convoluted part for the teachers to teach as well as for the learners to perform. There are some distinctive social and psychological factors that frequently set obstacles before the abilities of learners speaking English both in classrooms and outside the classrooms. So, this study focuses on a specific psychological factor namely ‘Lack of confidence’ which has been found as one of the greatest barriers that affects the oral performance of the university level adult learners mostly. The purpose of the study is to find out some possible solutions dealing with the causes and effects of the very topic with an aim to help students overcome their lack of confidence for ensuring better oral communication being the members of the global community.

Keywords: Importance of Spoken English, less confident learners in Bangladesh, causes and effects of lack of confidence, suggestions to overcome the barrier, teachers’ roles, students’ roles

Introduction

To most people, mastering the art of speaking is the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language (Nunan, 1991, p. 39). Whereas, ‘Spoken language production,

learning to talk in the foreign language is often considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of language learning for the teacher to help the students with' (Brown and Yule, 1983, p. 25).

While teaching English at the university level for years, frequently I have found learners less active in spoken classrooms unlike in the classrooms of other three skills (reading, writing and listening) where they are more likely to pass the class time in silent mode which, in real world, must be perfectly opposite. In our country, English is taught compulsorily as a foreign language from primary to higher level education and '... the importance of English communication proficiency has been recognized not only in academic sectors but also in job markets...In order to respond to the demand of communication proficiency prevailing in society, most of the universities in Bangladesh have initiated basic English communication courses besides major subjects' (Quadir, 2006, p. 51-52). But unfortunately, the condition of our learners is more or less similar to that of Hong Kong where 'Due to the weak foundation of English Language, inadequate training in primary schools and personalities, they are shy and unwilling to speak English in class even though they are forced by teachers' (Fan, 2001, p. 1).

Krashen (2002) finds that learners with high motivation, self-confidence and a good self-image, and with a low level of anxiety are well equipped for success in second language acquisition. On the other hand, learners with low motivation, little self-confidence and with a high level of anxiety hold high filters and ultimately, they become unsuccessful. So, to be good speakers overcoming the lack of confidence, learners should hold 'low affective filter' as it supports to receive more input confidently and at the same time 'Instead of expecting the teacher to make all decision, learners need to develop initiative and willingness to take on the part of responsibilities' (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986, p. 79). Here teachers' concerns should also be for the development of students' abilities to make sure successful oral communication e.g. while designing speaking activities the teacher should keep in mind that, 'it is also necessary to recognize the very different functions speaking performs in daily communication and the different purposes for which our students need speaking skills'(Richard, 2008, p.20).

Literature Review

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In foreign language teaching and learning, importance of Spoken English has its distinctive position (Ur, 1991; Nunan, 1991; Brown and Yule, 1983; Bygate, 1987). Ur (1991, p.120) argues that, ‘Of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important...as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing; and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak. But ‘One of the basic problems in foreign language teaching is to prepare learners to be able to use the language’ (Bygate, 1987, p. 3).

Numerous researches have reported that learners with high motivation and self-confidence are able to perform easily while; learners who lack confidence are usually not able to develop their speaking skill (Dörnyei, 2001; Krashen, 2002; Viswat and Jackson, 1993). Basically, when the learners suffer from lack of confidence, ‘They lack affective strategies such as being able to praise themselves for doing something well or having confidence in themselves’ (Viswat and Jackson 1993, p.17). Makiko Ebata (2008) finds that, ‘Lack of belief in one’s ability hinders him from achieving that task—pursuing a targeted language accomplishment...Moreover, it is widely believed that once students gain self-confidence, it progressively expands, in conjunction with experiencing success and satisfaction as well as good relationships.’ The fact is, ‘Self-esteem and self-confidence are like the foundations of a building: if they are not secure enough, even the best technology will be insufficient to build solid walls over them’ (Dörnyei, 2001, p.87).

Research Methodology

A. Subjects and Setting

For the study 83 students of 2nd semester (18-20 age groups) were randomly selected from a private university of Khulna Division who were enrolled in Listening and Speaking courses after their completion of Reading and Writing courses in 1st semester. The learners were from the departments of English, Law and Business Administration who were from both urban

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and rural areas of different parts of Bangladesh (mostly from Khulna Division) with mixed economic and social backgrounds. Most participants were from Bangla medium schools, where few of them took English medium schooling in their primary stage. All of them studied English as a compulsory subject in their last 12 years education.

B. Techniques of Collecting Data

Mainly two techniques of collecting data, namely, questionnaire and interview were carried out with a view to finding out the factors affecting the learners most in speaking English and also to get some suggestions both from the learners and the teachers in order to set effective spoken classrooms for more success. Before distributing the questionnaire, I mentioned the purpose of the study to the students and as I had a good understanding with the students so, they were in relaxed mood. At the beginning of collecting data I threw the question ‘Is speaking the most difficult one among all four skills?’ to all. Surprisingly all of them answered ‘yes’ and took the participation. The first part of the questionnaire was close-ended where the learners were asked to rank the listed social and psychological factors which worked as barriers in their oral production. The learners had their full freedom in the 2nd part where they were asked to mention any other factors that also hindered them as well as to write some of their suggestions to overcome the addressed difficulties. As I had courses with the students, I tried to take their interviews from time to time randomly, i.e., during class time discussions, personal counseling, etc. I took the interviews of some of my colleagues (teachers and researchers both senior and junior) who were also teaching the courses on all basic four skills. To enrich my understanding, sometimes, I observed the classes of my colleagues and the performances of my students sitting on the back bench.

I acknowledge the limitation, as the study was undertaken among the students of only one private university. The study needs to cover more students of different parts of Bangladesh both from public and private universities.

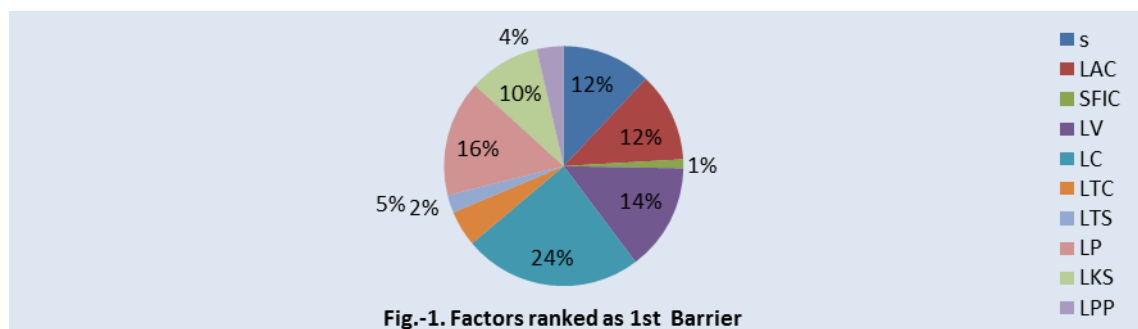
Results and Discussion

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Among 83 students, 20 ranked lack of confidence as 1st barrier, 15 students ranked it as 2nd, 11 ranked as 3rd barrier. Some students (3) ranked it as the last barrier (10th). Beside lack of confidence, lack of practice and lack of vocabulary were ranked as 2nd and 3rd most important factors affecting their skills. The chart below shows the percentage of the number of times the factors were ranked as 1st Barrier.



With all these factors, some more factors which were not listed in the chart were also mentioned by the learners like, unwillingness to develop the skill, lack of awareness, lack of skilled and friendly teachers, laziness etc. Though the students mentioned some other affective factors along with the listed factors of the questionnaire, ‘Lack of confidence’ becomes the focus of my study for the fact that it was ranked as the 1st barrier by highest number of participants. Important suggestions coming from both the teachers and the students, on the basis of the collected data, are listed below.

A. Students’ Suggestions

- 1) More compulsory classes and courses are necessary to make sure maximum participation.
- 2) Teachers should be friendlier to convince and compel learners in speaking activities.
- 3) Students need to study more English books, magazines, newspapers to widen the knowledge of the target language.
- 4) Group study can be a good attempt to improve English for which classmates should be supportive and caring to each other.

- 5) Enjoyable classes are considered necessary for motivating learners.
- 6) Initiatives to create awareness about the importance of English in the lives of learners should be taken from primary level education.
- 7) Formation of English language clubs can contribute widely in building up confidence keeping enough spaces for practice with different activities.

B. Teachers' Suggestions

- 1) Students should communicate in positive and self-assured ways without feeling hesitated.
- 2) Small class of 20-25 participants is required to ensure enough opportunities for practice.
- 3) Syllabus/curriculum of primary level to tertiary level should cover activities where students have the scopes for more oral exposures.
- 4) Changing the traditional mind set, learners have to take their teachers as friends and guides with whom learning difficulties can be shared easily.
- 5) Students can form their own study groups for practice outside the classroom, even after going home with the help of technology i.e. mobile phone, video-chatting etc.

Self-confidence vs. Lack of Confidence in Language Learning

Confidence factor, as an important aspect of the affective factors, is generally assumed to have a significant role in successful learning (Xiaolu, 2006, p.11). Self-confidence 'provides learners with the motivation and energy to become positive about their own learning. It also creates the drive in them to acquire the targeted language, enjoy the learning process, and experience real communication... Moreover, it is widely believed that once students gain self-confidence, it progressively expands, in conjunction with experiencing success and satisfaction as well as good relationships' (Ebata, 2008).

On the other hand, students who lack confidence '...are usually found to be extremely fearful and timid, reluctant to express their opinions and even unable to utter a complete meaningful sentence in class' (Ni, 2012, p. 1509). Less confident learners feel uncomfortable

when they are asked for speaking activities, they are not able to take oral tasks as challenges, and these are like threats to them. They lack faith in their own capabilities and are more concerned about being criticized or rejected by others.

A. Causes and Effects of Lack of Confidence

It is commonly understood that students' lack of confidence usually occurs when students realize that their conversation partners have not understood them or when they do not understand other speakers (Juhana, 2012, p. 102). Another important cause has been identified by Yoshitake (1991) in Viswat and Jackson (1993, p.16) in this way, '... the students are constantly told from childhood to sit quietly and listen to the teacher, and not to stand up and speak out unless called upon.' So, '...the issue of developing oral communication skills becomes problematic when learners suffer from a lack of self-confidence. Low confident learners feel uncomfortable, afraid and frustrated in the classroom. As a result, they tend to perform with less effectiveness and satisfaction, which is affecting their academic achievement in general' (Al-Hebaish, 2012, p. 63). And it is very common to see that 'The attempt to create a negotiating and students-centered learning atmosphere in English by teachers is usually unsuccessful. The achievement of effective communicative teaching becomes a daily headache to all English teachers. Inevitably, the lack of students' participation leads to the teacher-centered learning in English lesson' (Fan, 2001, p. 1). Consequently, the main purpose of the spoken classroom is crushed.

B. Recommendations to Overcome Lack of Confidence

Speaking with confidence is a must for learners in present world as 'Speaking is the skill that the students will be judged upon most in real-life situation. It is an important part of everyday interaction and most often the first impression of a person is based on his/her ability to speak fluently and comprehensibly' (Liao, 2009, p. 11). Here to attain the targeted success in a communicative classroom 'The roles of teachers and learners are, in many ways, complimentary' (Nunan, 1989, p.87).

1. Teachers' Roles

In a language classroom 'In the production of speech, however, each speaker needs to speak. He needs to speak individually and ideally he needs someone to listen to him and to respond to him' (Brown and Yule, 1983, p. 25). So, teachers should create a comfortable and flexible atmosphere using both theoretical and practical experience as it is very important to provide learners such environments where learners have the opportunities to use English at ease and which are supportive to develop self-esteem and self-confidence. 'Therefore, teachers should spare no efforts to create conditions that can be conducive to students' self-confidence' (Ni, 2012, p. 1509).

While designing the tasks for non-native speakers, teachers should take care of the course contents so that learners can use the language effectively in their real life situation. At the same time, 'Teachers have to accept that learners have a right to have their views incorporated into the selection of content and learning experience, and need to provide learners with the appropriate opportunities for them to make choices' (Nunan, 1989, p.94). These attempts will improve learners' confidence in choosing and applying proper strategies in communication. Teachers can use games because among learners, 'one possible way to reduce anxiety and increase confidence and motivation is to utilize drama in the ELL classroom' (Shand, 2008, P.14). Teachers can also exercise activities like role play, debate etc. forming pairs and groups in spoken classrooms considering the essential aspects such as learners' age, characteristics, learning styles, social and cultural contexts etc. as these types of activities encourage learners with positive motivation and also provide proper settings to speak.

That is to say, teachers should create negotiating classroom environments which can promote co-operative learning because '...students in co-operative environment have more positive attitudes towards learning and develop higher self-esteem and self confidence than in other classroom structures' (Dörnyei, 2001, p.100).

2. Students' Roles

Keeping all negative attitudes thousands miles apart, students will have to come forward with intrinsic motivation following the view 'Mistakes are okay because without mistakes there is no learning!' (Dörnyei, 2002, p. 93). If learners are really eager to learn, they need to '... develop a range of skills related not to language, but also to learning and learning-how-to-learn' (Nunan, 1989, p. 94). So, the desire of becoming successful speakers having seated quietly in the classroom is completely unfit because they have already been characterized metaphorically as players by Dubin and Olshtain (1986, p. 81) where 'As a player, one must participate actively. At the same time, one must concentrate by observing what others do. Players take part in all of the interactional configurations which are important in a communicative language course: as individuals, in pairs, in small groups, and in whole group displays.' To support the teachers, care should also be taken by students regarding some common issues, e.g., speaking actively is not something to make noise, having mutual respect for each other, etc.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be well said that, 'Lack of confidence' is really a headache for both the teachers and the learners, especially of University levels, in Bangladesh as it hampers the development of students speaking abilities as well as creates a difficult classroom situation for the teachers to take their students to the path of success. So, like other social and psychological factors this one should also be handled properly for the production of confident and high-quality English speakers. When students can be proficient enough in speaking English, they will automatically be highly motivated and convinced to face this competitive world with their aptitudes. Here, if concerned authorities, educationalists, administrators of each institution reflect on the fact while teachers play roles of facilitators and students take active participations with the support of suitable teaching and learning environments, the rate of success in students' oral communication skills will truly be increased.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Name (optional) and Department of the Participant:

Rank (1-10) the following factors which are against you to develop your English speaking skill:

Factors	Ranking No.
Shyness (S)	
Lack of academic courses till this level (LAC)	
Lack of vocabulary (LV)	
Lack of confidence (LC)	
Lack of training centers (LTC)	
Lack of technical support from institution (LTS)	
Lack of practice (LP)	
Lack of knowledge of structure (LKS)	
Lack of peers/friends to practice (LPP)	
Suffering from inferiority complex (SFIC)	

Appendix B: Open ended questions

(i) Do you face/feel any other obstacles which are not mentioned on the above table? Please mention.

(ii) Do you have any ideas or suggestions to remove the obstacles? Please write them.

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