

## A study on the factors affecting ESL learners' English speaking skills

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### Abstract

With the globalization of the world and the widespread use of the English language, the English learners' oral communication competence, is becoming increasingly important. Therefore, college students are required to have high oral English proficiency. However, disappointingly, we find that undergraduate students' English speaking ability remains far less desirable and most of them still cannot communicate effectively and confidently. The great number of erroneous utterances that learners of English produce is an indication of how serious the problem is. There is a need to discover the reasons behind this worrying trend. Given the scarcity of research in Kolkata, in this area, it was felt that it would be timely to study this issue. The present study aims to investigate the speaking problems of a cross-section of undergraduate students majoring in Communicative English in Kolkata. It also explores the underlying factors that contribute to the existence of these difficulties. It seeks to establish students' self-perception of their own difficulties based on a questionnaire survey. The study identified the main learning difficulties in English speaking as perceived by the students. Based on the results of the survey, some recommendations have also been made.

**Keywords:** oral competence, linguistic factors, anxiety, role of teachers

### Introduction

Proficiency in English has been regarded as the principal determinant of upward and outward mobility. In today's world with easy access to travel, globalization of business and industry and the desire of non-native English speakers to communicate with English speaking peers, English learners of all ages and purposes value the ability to orally communicate in second or foreign language (Nunan, 1991) <sup>[1]</sup>.

English, as the world language, plays an important role in this age of communication. People speak to maintain existing social relationships and to make new ones. Oral competence is linked with career options, status and reward. English is the language of the aspirations of young Indians. A better spoken English skill enhances a youth's employability and opens higher paying job opportunities. Among the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking is the most important skill because Ur (1996) <sup>[2]</sup> believes that people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language. This means that using a language is more important than just knowing about it because "there is no point knowing a lot about a language if you don't use it." (Scrivener, 2005) <sup>[3]</sup>. Speaking is viewed as the most complex and difficult skill to master. According to Kang Shumin <sup>[4]</sup>, "learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules." It requires the ability to use the language properly in social interactions. The goal of English language teaching and learning is to encourage learners to use English for meaningful and effective communication, not only inside but also outside the classroom. Speaking activities can fail miserably due to some very real problems in the ESL classroom. In order to help students to overcome their problems in speaking, it is necessary to figure out the factors that affect their oral communication.

### Factors affecting speaking performance

There are a range of factors that inhibit the learners from

speaking English proficiently. These factors do not operate in isolation but are intertwined. What follows is a brief overview of only some among the numerous unexplored causes that lead to reluctant, limited or unwilling participation of students in speaking activities in the classroom.

### Linguistic factors

Linguistic factors include several features like pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. According to (Latha, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>, grammatical competence can help learners apply and perceive the structure of English language correctly that will lead them to their fluency. It has also been observed that learners find it difficult to transfer the correct grammar to their speaking. (Larsen-Freeman, 2001) <sup>[6]</sup>. Pronunciation also plays an important role in speaking. Mispronouncing a single sound or wrong use of stresses and intonations can cause misunderstandings. Exposure to a variety of vocabulary is essential for speaking. ESL learners often have to search for an appropriate word that fits into the context/content. As their receptive vocabulary is limited, they can hardly put the "receptive vocabulary knowledge into productive use". (Nation, 2001) <sup>[7]</sup>

### Affective factors

The affective factors related to speaking are anxiety, shyness, self-esteem, motivation, fear of making mistakes, lack of interest and many more. Anxiety is the affective factor that "most pervasively obstructs the learning process (Arnold & Brown, 1999) <sup>[8]</sup>. Worrying about being "wrong, stupid, or incomprehensible" (Brown, 2001) <sup>[9]</sup> completely ruins learners' speaking performance. Most of ESL learners are nervous in class (Liu, 2006) <sup>[10]</sup>, especially when they are asked to speak in class without any readiness. "Too much nervousness makes learners tongue-tied or lost for words" (Shumin, 2002) <sup>[11]</sup> which completely affects their achievement in foreign/second language classroom (Zhang & Jia, 2006) <sup>[12]</sup>. They are shy of the

attention that their speech attracts. They are also worried about being criticized or losing face in front of the rest of the class. The result is that they either make a lot of mistakes in spite of having a good knowledge of the topic or they totally keep silent. ESL learners should be motivated to speak bravely in order to improve their speaking competence because "motivation is probably the most important factor that educators can target in order to improve learning" (Olson, 1997) <sup>[13]</sup> and "the expenditure of effort to accomplish results" (DuBrin, 2008) <sup>[14]</sup>. Motivation is one of the factors that influence success or failure in learning a language, particularly a second language or foreign language (Gardner, 2006) <sup>[15]</sup>. In the same lines, Petty (1998) <sup>[16]</sup> argued that if students do not want to learn, their learning efficiency will be slow such that they may learn virtually nothing. Making mistakes is a natural process of learning a language but it causes potential threat to one's ego. These threats disappoint the learners to talk in English. Learners believe that it is not possible to achieve fluency or mastery of the language. This lack of confidence prevents them from learning the speaking skills. Eventually they lose interest and give up.

### **Listening ability**

Listening plays an important role in the development of speaking abilities. Actually, speaking is very closely related to listening. Doff (1998) <sup>[17]</sup> says that learners cannot improve their speaking ability unless they develop their listening skill. Learners should comprehend what is uttered to them in order to have a successful dialogue. Shumin (1997) <sup>[18]</sup> observed that when students talk, the other students respond through attending by means of the listening process. That is to say, speakers have to play the role of both listeners and speakers.

### **Topical knowledge**

Bachman and Palmer (1996) <sup>[19]</sup> believe that topical knowledge has a great effect on the speaking performance of the learners. The type of topic under discussion influences the ease of language use, to a great extent. One's lack of knowledge, interest, and preparation for a certain topic can greatly influence one's perceived competence.

Having enough knowledge about a certain topic and being familiar with the register enhance one's linguistic self-confidence, while lack of knowledge about a topic and its appropriate register result in one's avoiding communication (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels 1998) <sup>[20]</sup>.

### **Use of mother tongue**

When all the learners share the same mother tongue they tend to use it more than the target language. This results in code switching. Inadequate vocabulary repertoire and weak sentence building skills may be the reasons.

### **Classroom Environment**

Classroom environment plays a significant role in making a student take part in speaking activities. The atmosphere of the class, the size of the class, the arrangement of seats and many other class-related factors affect the motivation of the students. A conducive and co-operative environment proves to be supportive for learners. It has been observed that students are usually happier and more active in a small class. Teachers pay more attention to each pupil and learners get more involved in the speaking activities. On the other hand, mixed ability class is

another factor which hinders the language acquisition process. In these classes, the strong and quick learners are often seen to be dominating the weak learners.

### **Role of teachers**

The vital role the teacher plays in making learners willing or unwilling to speak cannot be ignored. If a teacher pays equal attention to all members of the class, encourages everybody to take part in classroom discussions and activities, and gives enough time to students to participate, he or she can considerably enhance the students' willingness to speak. The teachers should build an excellent rapport with their students. It is the duty of the teachers to make the learners aware that making mistakes is a learning process. Teachers should turn their fears into challenges and challenges into success by introducing many interesting and engaging activities in the classroom. Teaching and learning can be more meaningful if they integrate many elements in their approaches.

The above-mentioned factors in this paper have an important role to play in developing the oral competence of the learners. Thus, an attempt has been made in this study to focus on those factors that have prevented or affected the focal learners' motivation to speak English confidently and effectively.

### **Background of the study**

Kolkata is predominantly a Bengali speaking society. Consequently, English in Kolkata is often described as having an 'input-poor environment' because most communication outside the English classroom is in Bengali and English is little used in social interactions. In addition, due to the presence of a large population of Bengalis on campus, it is natural that the students communicate with each other in their shared language, that is, Bengali, outside the class. Such being the case, it is thus not surprising that English plays a negligible social role in the daily lives of the students in this study. English as a compulsory subject is being taught at primary, secondary and higher secondary schools in Kolkata. In spite of studying English for a long period of time, nearly 12 years, students are not able to speak English fluently in classrooms or in the real contexts. Despite all the money and time spent and efforts taken, students are not as successful in their oral communication as they are expected. Huge number of students in the classroom, insufficient English teaching periods and the syllabus that does not satisfy the learners' communicative needs are the main reasons for such a dismal situation. Additionally, because speaking is not tested in schools, it is less emphasized by both teachers and students. They give least attention to speaking in the classrooms because speaking is completely excluded from exams. Given the scarcity of research in this area, particularly in Kolkata, this study was undertaken to investigate the oral performance of learners in the classrooms at the tertiary level. To achieve this aim, the following research questions were designed.

### **Research questions**

1. What are the students' attitudes towards speaking English?
2. What are the most common difficulties encountered by them while speaking English?
3. What factors do they think are associated with these problems?
4. What are the possible remedies to improve the oral skills as perceived by the subjects of the study?

**Methodology**

**Participants**

The participants of this study are 70 undergraduate students, 18 to 23 years old, pursuing Communicative English (Major) in Kolkata, capital of the state of West Bengal, India. The reasons why these participants were selected for the study are as follows:

1. This course requires a high level of student participation and focuses on oral communication activities.
2. The participating students have been studying English for at least 12 years and are in the first, second and third year of university education. It is expected that students at this level have developed a satisfactory level of speaking skills.
3. The dominant first language of the participants is Bengali and they have studied English as the second language in their schools.

**Instrument for data collection**

A structured questionnaire was developed and administered on

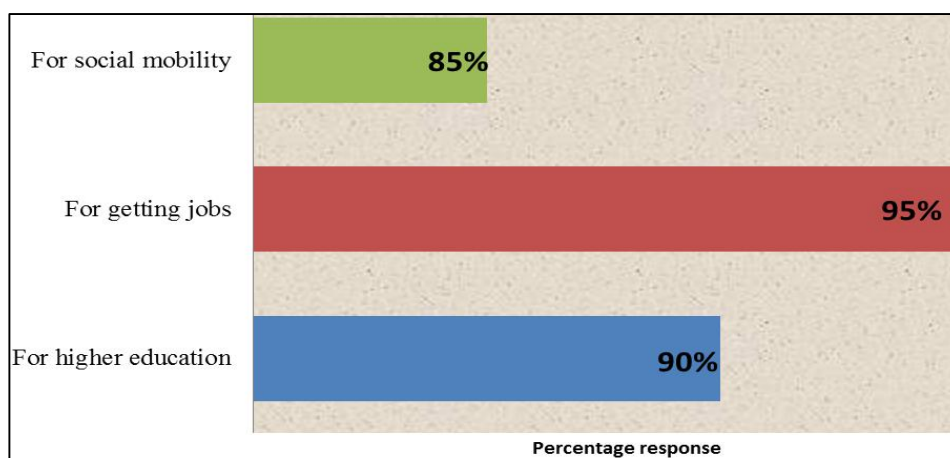
the participants for the collection of data for this study. The instructions of the questionnaire were easy to follow. The students were asked to introspect and reflect on their experience of learning English before they filled up the questionnaires.

**Data collection and procedure**

The quantitative data were organized according to the research objectives. Relevant themes were selected and coded, tallies were converted into percentages, and then spread sheets were used in plotting graphs showing variables according to the questionnaires.

**Findings and Discussion**

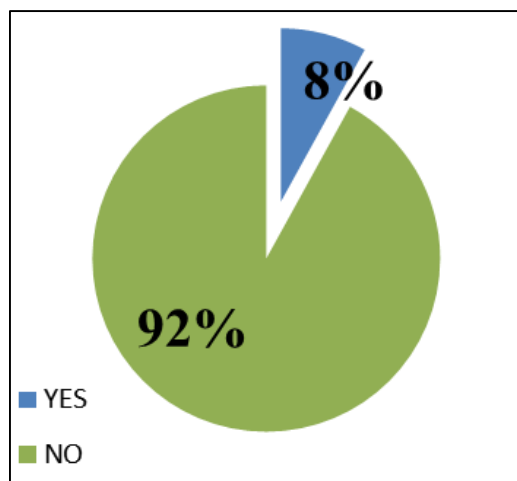
The findings of this survey are of interest and relevance to both learners and teachers of English language. The first research question of this study is regarding the attitude of the subjects towards speaking English.



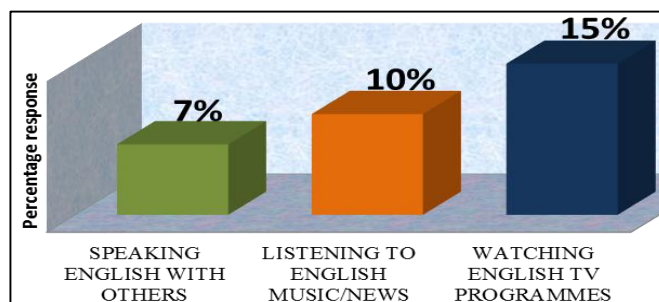
**Fig 1:** Importance of speaking English

Figure 1 shows that all the students unanimously agreed that speaking English is important for higher education, getting jobs and social mobility. They are aware of the advantages of being able to speak English well. These findings have been supported by Baker and Westrup (2003) [21], who said that learners who speak English very well can have a greater chance for better education, finding good jobs, and getting promotion.

Figure 2 reveals the fact that in school, the students did not have a regular opportunity to speak English in their classes. There were no speaking activities in the classes that could have given them some training in spoken English. The lack of a target language environment in classroom results in a lack of involvement in real-life situations. It has been observed that speaking fluency appears to develop with increased exposure to second language input. (Al-Sibai, 2004) [22].



**Fig 2:** Regular English speaking classes in school



**Fig 3:** Exposure to English language

Figure 3 shows the students' very limited exposure to English language. Almost all of them confirmed that they hardly use English to communicate with others. They have little contact with English in their daily life. The results show that very few

(10%) listen to English news or watch English shows (15%). It is a widely recognized fact that input is very essential for language acquisition. In order to participate in discussions the students need to understand every word that is spoken. Language is best learned when learners internalize what they have been exposed to. The results of a study

conducted by Bozorgian (2012) [23] also indicate a close correlation between listening skill and oral proficiency. He states that the higher the listening score, the better is the speaking score.

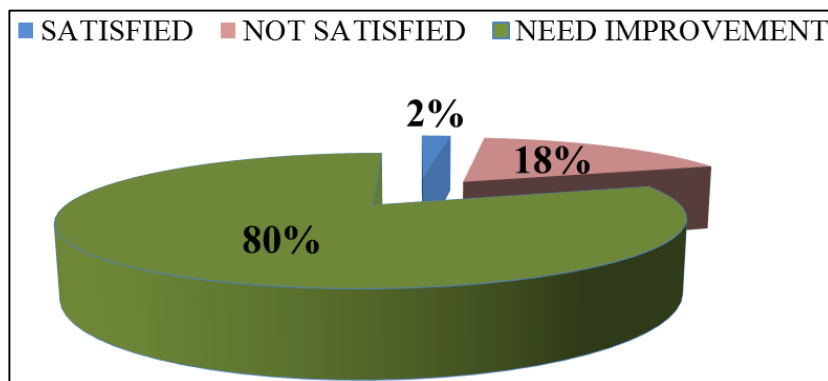


Fig 4: Self-evaluation of English speaking skill

The students’ self – evaluation of their English speaking level is presented in figure 4. Almost 80% students feel that their oral skills need improvement. They are apprehensive when communicating in English despite many years of studying English in school. They lack confidence to speak English as

they did not participate in discussions or voice their opinions in their classes before. Moreover, there is no active role of English outside the class. If students are to become fluent, confident speakers of English, then they need to practice using English as much as possible.

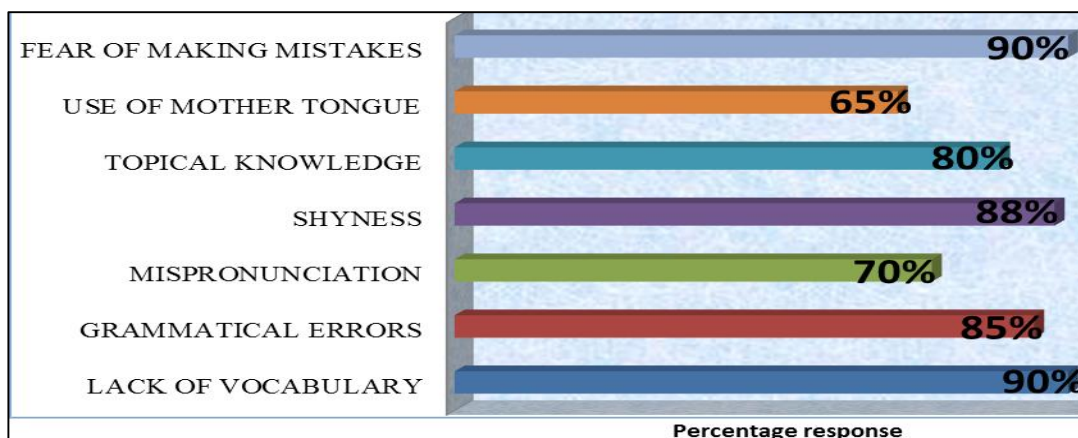


Fig 5: Speaking problems encountered by students

The second research question was about the problems the learners faced in their speaking classes. The students were asked to choose the speaking problems that they encountered from a list of problems in the questionnaire. According to the results of this survey, as presented in Figure 5, learners face a multitude of challenges in English speaking classrooms. Most of them identified several common areas of difficulty in speaking. They were most concerned with their low English language proficiency. Lack of vocabulary (90%) was identified as a big source of stress for the learners. Urrutia and Vega (2010) [24] demonstrated that learners’ oral performance was influenced by their lack of vocabulary. The present study also found that 85% students are scared that they would make noticeable grammatical errors. Surprisingly, a large number (70%) of the learners are worried about their pronunciation too. It is contrary to the view of Thornbury (2005) [25] that pronunciation is the lowest level of knowledge that learners

typically pay attention to. The phonological system of Indian languages and English differ in important aspects, like, the pronunciation of long and short vowels often create confusion among the learners. In order to speak English accurately, learners have to master all the phonological elements like stress, intonation and pitch. Al-Lawati (1995) [26] also investigated the speaking difficulties encountered by Omani students and found that the linguistic domain (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and discourse) constitutes the most serious area of difficulty. This is because the learners are yet to develop an adequate level in their basic abilities of the English language. Schools do not provide enough opportunities to students to learn and practice new and varied vocabulary. There is hardly any variety in the tasks designed for the teaching of grammar. Among the affective factors, shyness is an influencing factor which could affect students’ participation in class. The survey conducted in this study, revealed that majority of the subjects



(88%) believed that their shyness had affected their involvement in oral discussions. According to McCroskey (1992) <sup>[27]</sup>, shyness is a behavior that could be the result of any one or a combination of factors like social introversion, unfamiliarity with academic discourse, lacking confidence in subject matter and/or communication apprehension.

Fear of making mistakes in front of classmates and teachers is another cause that deterred the students from speaking in class. Most of the subjects (90%) cared about others' opinion. The common thread in all respondents in this study is the humiliation effect of others. The fear of peers laughing at them can have a serious impact on them. It may even prohibit them to initiate and communicate any more in the class, causing reticence. Topical knowledge is the speakers' knowledge of relevant information about the topic. The respondents' concern about the topic they are discussing and its primary role in making them participate in discussions was another finding of

the study. The topic of discussion plays a vital role in making 80% learners willing or unwilling to speak. To the focal learners, topic familiarity, topic interest, and topic preparation are very essential to make them speak. When the topics used and discussed in the class are of no interest to the students, they become more reluctant to speak. Having enough knowledge about a certain topic and being familiar with the register enhance one's linguistic self-confidence, while lack of knowledge about a topic and its appropriate register result in one's avoiding communication. (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels 1998) <sup>[20]</sup>.

This study also shows that 65% of learners tend to use their mother tongue in English speaking classes. This is because, they generally start thinking about the topic in their mother tongue, decide what they want to say in their mother tongue and then translate it into English, which often results in making mistakes.

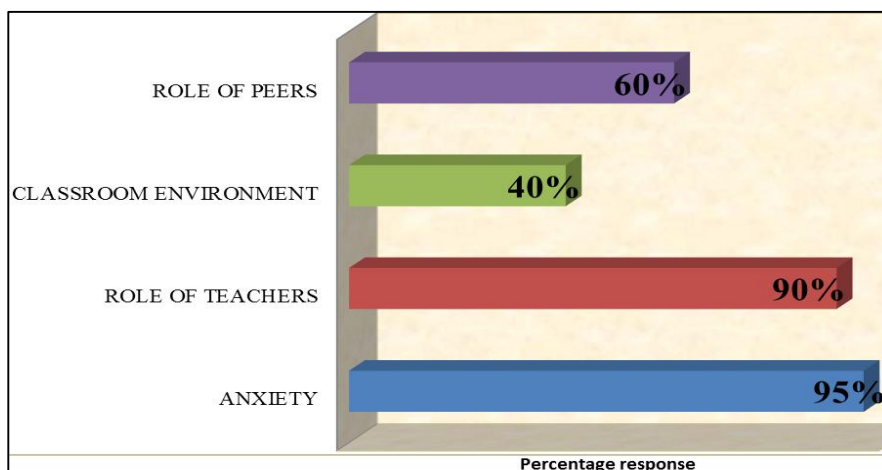


Fig 6: Factors affecting speaking performance

The next figure shows the results of the third research question of this study. When the students were asked to choose the factors affecting their speaking performance among the factors listed in the questionnaire, nearly all of them (95%) viewed anxiety as the most influential factor. Speaking in front of others is the most anxiety provoking language activity. Thus, the study reinforced the findings of the earlier studies by Park & Lee (2005) <sup>[28]</sup> who observed in their study that a large number of learners' anxiety level was negatively related to their oral performance. Even Tanveer (2007) <sup>[29]</sup> suggests in his study that the students' feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness may impede their language learning and performance abilities.

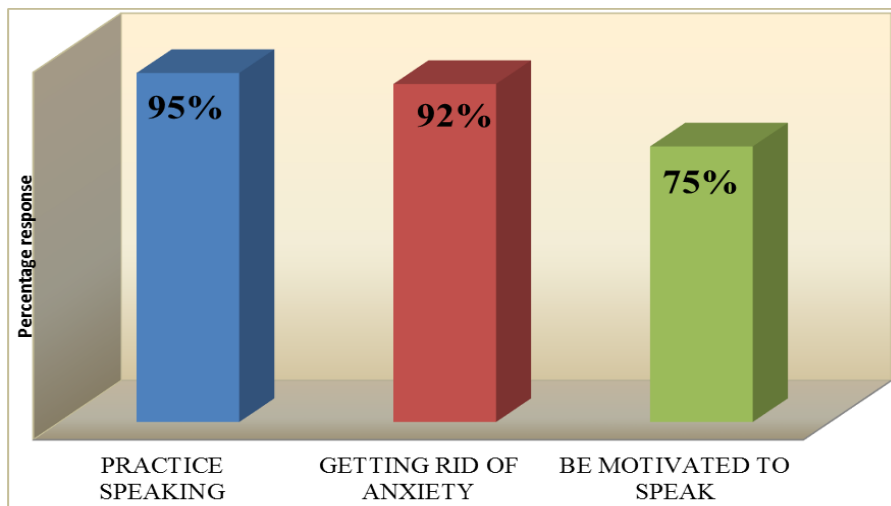
The role of teachers is the next important factor that affects the subjects' speaking performance in the class. A good 90% of the students feel that the positive traits of teachers and their methods of teaching are important motivating factors to stimulate their verbal engagements in the classroom. Every action of the teacher influences the students either directly or indirectly. It has been revealed in this study that many teachers speak Bengali in English speaking classes. Using L1 means sacrificing valuable opportunities for well-motivated English language use in the class. They indirectly and unconsciously convey the message to the students that it is nonessential to speak only English in the class. Allowing learners to use mother

tongue in the class results in meagre development of their English speaking skill. There are also cases of teachers who pronounce English words incorrectly and commit unpardonable grammatical errors while speaking with the students. Students generally take the wrong expressions for correct ones and this phenomenon goes a long way in affecting their speaking. Teachers need to know that their teaching style and competency have a great influence on the increase and decrease of their students' motivation to speak English. The teachers should act as role models and try to lessen the pressure and anxiety that learners feel, through their customized teaching strategies.

The desired goal of most students is to be as good as their peers. Sometimes this acts as a driving force for them but falling behind them can also create anxiety. This is the case with a reasonable number (60%) of students.

All the factors were considered highly impactful except for the classroom factor which was ranked rather low. Classroom environment poses little effect on students' performance. Nearly, 40% of the students observed that the atmosphere of the class, its size, number of students in the class and the arrangement of seats in the class did not have a significant role in their speaking performance.

The last research question was to find out the students' suggestions of overcoming their difficulties in speaking skills.



**Fig 7:** Students' suggestions for improvement

Figure 7 represents 95% of the students' views that it is very important to practice speaking English inside and outside the class. Many of them (92%) also lay emphasis on getting rid of their anxiety. Around 75% students feel, proper motivation arouses their interest to learn and encourages them to participate more in the class activities and oral practices. It is true that without will and desire to learn, it is difficult to achieve effective and fruitful learning.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

As mentioned earlier, this study was designed in part to contribute to the relatively small body of knowledge so far available on the English speaking problems of tertiary students majoring in Communicative English in Kolkata.

Conclusions drawn from the findings are that students' background in English influences their oral performance. It was apparent from this study that there was no speaking component in the school curriculum that could have given the students some training in speaking in English. Students also admitted that their preferred language of communication outside and within the class was their mother tongue and that obviated the necessity to master their oral skill in English. The students' listening habits were also very poor, there being no enthusiasm or intellectual curiosity on their part to watch English programmes or to listen to English news or music. They did nothing much to create the need to use English in authentic situations and improve their command of spoken English.

The key findings of the research showed a plethora of problems and factors that affect the performance of students in the English speaking class. The study shows that weak vocabulary, poor pronunciation, lack of topical knowledge, anxiety and shyness put students off from speaking. For almost all learners, the fear of being criticized, mocked or made fun of by the teacher or classmates inhibited all meaningful attempts to speak a language they knew was important for them. In order to foster learners' participation in class activities and thus lessen their degree of anxiety, teachers need to first identify the factors that may cause reticence and accordingly take measures to obliterate them to the extent possible.

In fact, considering the various linguistic (for example, grammatical, lexical and phonological problems) and assorted factors like inhibition, anxiety and motivation documented by

the students in this study lead the present investigator to agree with Fulcher's (2003)<sup>[30]</sup> argument that second language speaking is very complex. This is mainly because the sources of challenges for ESL learners when engaged in a speaking activity include not only demands of processing the task itself but also the demands of processing an imperfectly known language. Language researchers and practitioners will agree that the students' learning problem is further compounded by the lack of appropriately trained English language teachers at all levels. Zhengdong Gan<sup>[31]</sup> also observes that some secondary school English teachers in Asia often lack confidence in conducting communication activities in English because the teachers themselves feel that their own proficiency is not sufficient to engage in communication or deal with students' unanticipated needs. Cullen (1994)<sup>[32]</sup> thus rightly points out that poor command of spoken English among the teaching community is not just a concern for teachers or pre-service teachers but should also be a concern for those involved in planning pre-service teacher training programmes. Focus on improving the English language proficiency of the teachers could help in improving the situation as students may have very little to learn from their teachers if they themselves are not truly accomplished. Moreover, teachers need to be enlightened on the various teaching strategies that may reduce their use of mother tongue in their classes.

Yet the teachers cannot solve the students' problems instead of them. Of course, the way the teacher approaches teaching, the help of the peers, classroom organization matter a lot but the students themselves control the learning process and are responsible for their progress. It is up to them to make the best of all the opportunities to improve their oral skills.

Evidently, achieving proficiency in second language speaking in classroom conditions is not an easy task. Since there is no particular, definite factor that causes limited participation among the learners in the classroom, further exploration of the topic needs to be undertaken from diversified perspectives.

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