

## Developing speaking skills of adult learners in private universities in Bangladesh: problems and solutions

Sabrin Farooqui  
PhD candidate  
The University of Sydney

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*The globalisation of English and a growing demand for good English-speaking skills in the job market in particular have been placing a greater emphasis on the teaching of English speaking skills in Bangladesh. The private universities emphasise developing English skills. It seems that students of public and private universities have the same level of proficiency when they start but, at the end of four years of study, the students of private universities have acquired a higher level of proficiency in English. With observation, document analysis and a series of interviews with teachers who are teaching English language in these private universities, this study investigates how these private universities are helping the students to develop English language skills. It explores teachers' perceptions of the problems students encounter while speaking English and the factors that help these learners to develop their speaking skills.*

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### Introduction

In Bangladesh, English language teaching and learning has followed the traditional grammar translation method in all levels of general education since it emerged as an independent country in 1971.

In language classrooms, the focus was on grammatical rules, memorisation of vocabulary, translation of texts and doing written exercises. Classes were taught in the native language 'Bangla' (also known as Bengali), with little active use of English language. Since the English courses did not seem to improve the skill levels of the students, as expected, reform started to take place in education from early 1990s. The globalisation of English and a growing demand for competent English language users in the job markets has placed a greater emphasis on English language teaching in Bangladesh. To raise people's overall level of competency in English language, the Bangladesh government made changes in its education policy. The English Language Teaching Improvement Project introduced communicative textbooks up to the higher secondary level. The project aims to facilitate the teaching and learning of English with a methodology that will encourage students to acquire communicative competence in English through regular practice of these skills in the classroom. The enactment of the Private University Act in 1992 marked another major breakthrough in the higher education system in Bangladesh. The law was approved with the expectation that these universities would open their doors to the education appropriate for the time. These universities emphasise developing English language skills.

This study focused on how these private universities are helping students to develop these skills. It explored teachers' perceptions of the problems students encounter while speaking English and the factors that help these learners to develop their speaking skills. The work presented in this paper constitutes a part of a larger research project that had two objectives. One was to gain teachers' perspectives

on the problems students have while speaking in English, the reasons behind their perspectives and the factors that work for effective learning. The second objective was to obtain students' perspectives on their problems while speaking in English and their understanding of the ways that help them to develop this skill. This paper focuses on the first objective of the project. The achievement of both objectives will help to provide a more thorough picture of teaching of spoken English in these private universities. The purpose of this study is not to generalise the results to all other private universities of Bangladesh but to obtain a deeper understanding of the situation in five private universities there.

This paper begins with an introduction to the English language teaching policy in Bangladesh. Then it reports on a study conducted in five different private universities of Bangladesh where issues of teaching spoken English were raised through a series of interviews with five teachers who are teaching English language in these universities. It ends with some recommendations for change in the educational policy of Bangladesh.

### **English language teaching in Bangladesh**

English is a foreign language in Bangladesh and the country depends on it for various internal trades and conducting business with the outside world. Bangla is the native language of 95% of the total population of this country. People use this language in their everyday activities. However, English is in much demand in job markets. In business, industry and government, workers are increasingly expected to develop proficiency in English. Students take English language courses from year 1 to 12 in schools. These courses are mandatory for all students. After passing the Higher Secondary Certificate exam which is held after completion of twelve years of study, students move to tertiary education. There are two categories of universities in Bangladesh – public and private. Public universities

are established by the government. The private university act passed in 1992. The first private university (North-South University) started its first academic session in the capital city Dhaka in 1993, and since then, 52 private universities have been established in different parts of the country. The growing demand for higher study, and delayed study caused by 'highly politicized student activism on campus' (Chowdhury 1997:8), contributed to the phenomenal growth of these universities. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, the total number of students in the private universities is 44,604. The University Grant Commission monitors these private universities to ensure that the standards of teaching and physical facilities are satisfactory. These universities have offered an opportunity to thousands of students unable to avail themselves of opportunities for a good education in public universities.

Establishment of private universities is one of the most important reforms in the history of education in Bangladesh. These universities have responded to the demand for higher studies by providing education in fields of Business Administration, Business Finance, Computer Science, Environmental Science and Telecommunications since there is a high demand in service sectors for students who have skills and knowledge in these areas. Some private universities provide an honours degree in English literature. Chowdhury (1997) states that these private universities are believed to improve the standards of higher education in Bangladesh to an international level by making collaborative arrangements with universities in the United States and other developed countries. English is the medium of instruction in these universities and general English courses are compulsory for all students. These universities put special emphasis on English, remembering that jobs will go to those who have achieved fluency in spoken and written English (Alam 2005).

## Literature review

The literature on teaching spoken English to adult learners in Bangladesh is very scarce. Many studies highlight the principal problems of teaching English in countries like Bangladesh, China, Japan and Korea where English is taught as a foreign language (in an EFL context) and where the grammar translation method is the prevalent teaching approach (see Anderson 1993, Chowdhury 2001, Li 1998, Liu 1998). In these countries, learning English language means learning grammar, reading and translation. Students do not like to become engaged in conversation or play communication games. They refuse to speak English to each other. There is a long tradition of unconditional obedience to authority in these countries. They expect teachers to be authority figures and the teaching method to conform to the traditional teacher-centred approach. Teachers find it difficult to teach these students with a new approach. Li (1998) states that

[a]fter so many years of schooling in traditional settings, students rely on the teachers to give them information directly, making it very difficult to get the students to participate in class activities (p.691).

In Bangladesh, as Chowdhury (2001) mentions, students are not exposed to skill development courses in pre-university years. So if they are faced with communicative approaches to language teaching in university, they find themselves in a new world. He also mentions that in universities, first year students have a modest grasp of structure and usage due to heavy grammar input from pre-university schooling but have great difficulty in expressing themselves. Teachers find it difficult to get the students to participate in class activities. He also states that the problem lies with the overall cultural orientation to the academic atmosphere rather than with the competence of the students.

Some studies outline strategies that can be used by teachers in EFL contexts to help adult learners develop their speaking skills.

Shumin (2002) suggests that adult learners should develop short, interactional exchanges in which they are required to make short utterances. It will make them able to become more engaged in small talk in the target language. Jones (cited in McCarthy & O’Keeffe 2004) proposes the technique of the ‘split story’ which involves telling students a story, but stopping at a crucial point and inviting students to provide their own imaginative ending. Pair work and group work also increase the amount of speaking involved in the activity (Brown 2001, Green 1989, Nation 1989). Nation (1989) points out that “[o]ne of the most useful procedures is the movement from individual to pair to group to whole class activity” (p.26). Adult learners should be allowed to collaborate during the learning experience; it enhances the learning situation (Green 1989). According to Hinkel (2006), contextualised uses of specific grammar structures and vocabulary help to connect the subject-matter and language learning activities. Debates and problem-solving tasks can promote increased grammatical and lexical complexity in the language of learners. They prepare learners for real life communication in an EFL environment.

Researchers also place importance on learning environment which affects how much initiative students will take to speak in a foreign language. Green (1989) pointed out that non-English speaking adults are already timid about using the English language. The teacher must help to build the self-confidence of the students by being encouraging. Learning environments can have a facilitating effect on oral production (Payne & Whitney 2002).

## Methodology

This study focused on two aspects of private universities – the conditions that affect how the teaching-learning process is conducted and the concepts that English language teachers have of effective teaching. The data collection started in December 2005 and finished in June 2006. Since the researcher has experience of teaching in two private universities, she is quite familiar with the settings.

The interviews were conducted with five teachers, aged between 28 and 32; three were women and two were men. A profile of the participants is provided in Appendix A. Participants were selected through the researcher's personal contacts. 'Typical case sampling' which is a type of purposive sampling has been selected as a sampling strategy (Wiersma & Jurs 2005). The participants were neither beginners nor highly experienced teachers. To be selected for the sample, they had to be an English language teacher in a private university and had to have experience of teaching for some years. All of the informants received their masters degrees from the Department of English of Dhaka University. The teaching experience of the five teachers ranged from two to six years. They have been given pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. These names are used when their views are noted below.

In this study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation and document analysis. The interviews followed a semi-structured format because the study started with a fairly clear focus. It helped to address more specific issues. Each question was followed by probes designed to obtain more detailed responses. The interviews lasted between 30–40 minutes and were conducted in participants' homes and offices. The purpose of the interview was explained to the participants and the confidentiality of the personal information was assured. While most questions focused on the strategies that teachers use to teach English in their universities, there were a number of questions that asked students' level of expertise, university policies and course structures which were thought to be important for this research to find out the reasons behind using various strategies by the teachers (the interview questions are in Appendix B). The interviews were conducted in 'Bangla' and were transcribed and later translated. Interview transcripts were sent to the informants for verification and feedback to increase the credibility of the research.

A total of six classroom observations offered evidence about strategies that the teachers actually use to develop the speaking skills of

their students. The field notes that were taken while conducting observations in the classrooms were descriptive. The description of the situation and the events were jotted down as they occurred. The notes were written as narratives but were summarised immediately after each observation. Documents such as course outlines and examination questions were also studied.

During data analysis, the interview transcripts were read by the researcher to understand the topic and the themes. Trends, categories and classifications were developed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba 1985) and they have accurately captured the information in the data. The information has proved to be useful in understanding and illustrating the issues under study.

## Findings

Recurrent themes and salient comments regarding the teaching of speaking skills of English language were identified and subsumed under three main categories, namely, policies of the private universities, teachers' perceptions of students' problems in speaking and the reasons for the problems, and the strategies that teachers use to overcome these problems.

### Policies of the private universities

English language courses are compulsory for all students of the private universities. These courses are called 'Foundation courses'. Students attend some courses at the beginning and some at the advanced level of their studies. In one university, there is a separate course for teaching speaking. Classes take place twice a week. There are around 15–25 students in a language class and classes usually run for 90 minutes. These courses emphasise the teaching of all four skills – writing, reading, speaking and listening. Teachers do not have to follow any fixed textbook to teach English in these universities. In two of these five universities, the course outline is given at the beginning

but as Farhin, one of the participants, said: “The syllabus is fixed but the teachers have freedom to choose the teaching material”. Students have examinations on speaking. In some cases, students are given marks on class-performance which is basically on speaking activity.

English is used as the medium of instruction in these universities. As Farhin stated: “Lectures have to be in English. Teachers have to talk in English to students inside and outside the class”. It is compulsory for the students to speak in English in classes, especially in English language classes. Two participants, Shamim and Saif, had experience of teaching in two other private universities. They said that the policies are similar there. One participant noted that the university authority emphasises speaking skills to such an extent that students are supposed to come to the teacher and talk for some time in English if they receive a poor grade in their speaking test. If any student misses four classes, s/he is not allowed to sit for the final examination.

Unlike the public universities of Bangladesh, the private universities provide students with opportunities to use a language laboratory where they can practise listening and speaking activities. Various competitions are arranged there. In some universities, there are even ‘self access centres’, as Saif mentioned from his previous experience of teaching in another private university. Thus it can be seen that English is the medium of instruction in these private universities and all students have to take mandatory English courses during their candidature. Students also have tests on speaking and they can also practise the language outside the class through language clubs and self-access centres provided by these universities.

### **Teachers’ perceptions of students’ problems in speaking and the reasons for the problems**

Different problems were identified by the participants regarding students’ skills in spoken English. Three out of five participants said

that the students usually have a small English vocabulary. They do better in reading and writing skills but do very poorly in speaking. They feel shy and do not want to speak in front of the class. One participant mentioned a very important factor that inhibits students from practising speaking in the EFL context. Since people are monolingual in Bangladesh, students do not need to use English outside the class. Mayeesha talked about one of her students who had said: “Outside the classroom, whom will we practise with? With our friends? They will laugh. It’s not possible to practise speaking English with family members either.”

The majority of the students have come to tertiary level after passing the Senior Secondary Certificate and the Higher Secondary Certificate where their textbooks for English have been written following the communicative language teaching method. The books focus on all four skills of English language, but only reading and writing are tested in their final examination. When the participants were asked if they thought that the students have ever practised speaking in English in their schools, all of them agreed with Mayeesha who responded boldly:

Never ever. I asked my students about it and they said that they never did speaking or listening activities in their schools. This is completely new for them that they have to speak in English in class.

Most of the participants blamed the educational system for the students’ lack of courage to speak in front of others in class. As Farhin stated: “Our educational system should be blamed for it. Students do not have many chances to interact in English in schools. In many schools, teachers take English classes using Bangla.” She added: “Another problem with our educational system is that the students are not given the opportunity to think. They cannot write or speak about anything on a new topic where they have to think before writing or speaking”. In schools, students focus entirely on rote memorisation up to the higher secondary level of education.

Creativity is not encouraged. The participants considered that it is the education system of Bangladesh which has made the students unable to think for themselves and to deal with an unfamiliar situation. Thus, most of the participants blame this educational system for making the students timid about using the English language.

### **Strategies used by the English language teachers**

Since the students do not have sufficient proficiency in English, teachers find it hard to do any oral communicative activity with them. Teachers provide students with easy topics to help them getting started with speaking. As Namira, Saif and Shamim mentioned, they start working with the students giving them very simple topics like 'Introduce yourself to other students' or 'world cup football' or 'world cup cricket', subjects with which they are familiar. Sometimes students are asked to talk about a movie they have watched recently. Students often play games in groups, for example, the whole class is divided into groups and students are given stories with no ending and are asked to provide the ending. Sometimes they are given some material—a knife, a rope. They are asked how they will escape with the help of these things. These activities create interest among the students. Since students have a problem in initiating speaking, the teachers try to help them speak up in class. They do not teach grammar separately and emphasise fluency rather than accuracy. The teachers try to enable the students to communicate effectively by placing importance on the socio-cultural features of communication and oral production. They teach effective communication strategies, conversational routines (for example, small talk), conversational formulae (for example, forms of address) and speech acts such as requests, compliments, clarification and questions.

To try to help students overcome their shyness, teachers of these universities make it mandatory for all students to speak in English. As is mentioned in the objective of a course outline at one of the courses

of English language, the course aims to improve students' speaking ability. The course also aims to considerably reduce learners' overall shyness, nervousness and inhibition in speaking. Since there are small numbers of students in a class, teachers can manage to speak with everyone in the class. They ask questions of all the students, asking them to speak up in their class. All the participants agreed that students improve later with practice.

What I see at the beginning is that they cannot talk in English, but after some time, they start talking with few words. I feel that the development takes place after having much interaction in class. (Shamim)

In classes where students of mixed levels sit together, the more fluent students dominate the class. As a solution to this, Farhin mentioned: "I do not talk much to those students who are with advanced level of English. I rather use them as facilitators. They are to talk to weak students and help them".

In four of the five universities, students have speaking tests which encourage them to practise in spoken English. Namira said that the university where she teaches does not have any policy of taking a speaking test but she takes the test personally so the students feel motivated to learn it.

In these private universities, students can also practise language in language clubs. Debates and various games are arranged in these clubs. They therefore have opportunities to practise English outside class. Sometimes, students are shown movies, as Farhin said, using multimedia and are asked to talk about them later.

Thus the data show that to help students overcome their shyness and hesitation in speaking English, teachers allow students to talk about themselves, encourage dialogue and discussion through asking questions and use the technique of 'split story' (Jones, cited in McCarthy & O'Keeffe 2004). They create a congenial atmosphere in class and friendly relations with the students.

## Discussion

Though English has been taught as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary levels in Bangladesh, it has not had the desired impact on learners in terms of basic competence in the language. The data reveal that the private universities are using different strategies to develop students' English speaking skills. They make students speak in class by making it compulsory for all of them. All students have to take compulsory English courses and they have tests on all four skills which work as motivation for the students to develop the skills since it is proven that, if something is tested, it is important (Shohamy 1993, Wall & Alderson 1993). Students can also practise the language outside the class through language clubs and self-access centres provide by these universities.

Students come to tertiary level in Bangladesh with the educational background where "classroom activity is characterised by the teacher delivering the syllabus which students ingest, leaving little room for genuine enquiry, questioning or criticism" (Thornton 2006:190). This study illustrates that most of the teacher participants blame the educational system for making the students timid about using the English language. In such a situation, teachers allow the students to talk about themselves to promote conversation. They encourage dialogue and discussion through asking questions, which helps students minimise their shyness and hesitation in speaking English. They develop a congenial atmosphere in class and friendly relations with students. The teachers' comments remind us of Brown (2001) who said:

One of the major obstacles learners have to overcome in learning to speak is the anxiety generated over the risks of blurting things out that are wrong, stupid or incomprehensible ... Our job as teachers is to provide the kind of warm, embracing climate that encourages students to speak, however halting or broken their attempts may be. (p.269)

The triangulation of the data collection method contributed towards cross-validation of this qualitative research, and the detailed account of data analysis and examination helped to enhance external reliability. The in-depth interviews were a useful method for this research since they helped to generate insights (Neuman 2006), while interview transcripts sent to informants for verification and feedback enhanced the credibility of the research (Fade 2003, Mays & Pope 2000). Moreover, the researcher's prolonged engagement with the community assisted in making the information obtained from the participants more accurate and credible.

The research, however, is not without its limitations. The participants do not represent a wide spectrum of varied experiences. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in Bangla. The translated version therefore might have affected the findings of the study.

## Conclusion

The initiatives taken by these private universities have so far been successful in helping students to develop their speaking skills. With fluency in English, they stand a better chance of securing a good job. But only 30% of all students in the country can afford to study in private universities. What about the rest who are studying in public universities? Although it is a very small-scale study, this research has helped to raise very important issues related to the development of English speaking skills of adult language learners in Bangladesh. This study shows that the key strategy adopted by these private universities to develop speaking skills is making it compulsory for the students to speak. The Ministry of Education of Bangladesh should recruit trained teachers and take the initiative of testing speaking skills in both the Senior Secondary Certificate and the Higher Secondary Certificate examinations so that the learners are forced to practise speaking in English in their schools. Potentially, it could raise the overall English speaking competency level of students and make it more of a level playing field.

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## About this author

**Sabrin Farooqui** is a lecturer in the Department of English at Eastern University in Bangladesh. She is currently doing a PhD in Education in University of Sydney, Australia. She has taught English language in Bangladesh and Australia. Her interests include curriculum design, teaching strategy and teacher education.

## Address for correspondence

106 / 37 Morley Avenue, Rosebery, Sydney, NSW, Australia 2018  
 Tel: (612) 96902602 (home) (612) 90365300 (office)  
 Email: s.farooqui@edfac.usyd.edu.au



**Appendix A: Profile of the participants**

Name	Age	Gender	Academic Qualification	Teaching experience in EFL	Teaching experience in private universities
Mayeesha	Below 30	F	MA, Department of English, University of Dhaka	4 years	2 years
Shamim	30–35	M	MA, Department of English, University of Dhaka	5 years	3 years
Namira	Below 30	F	MA, Department of English, University of Dhaka	4 years	2 years
Saif	Below 30	M	MA, Department of English, University of Dhaka	6 years	3 years
Farhin	30–35	F	MA, Department of English, University of Dhaka	6 years	5 years

**Appendix B: Interview questions**

- How long have you been teaching English language?
- How long have you been teaching in this private university?
- What is the policy of this university regarding the teaching of English language?
- How many courses on English language are there?
- How often do the classes take place?
- How many students are there in every class?
- How do you teach speaking skill?
- How do the students respond?
- What are their levels of English language?
- What problems do students face when they are asked to speak in English?
- What do you do with passive students in class?
- What do you think inhibits speaking skill?
- Does the university provide students with any facility to learn English language (for example, language club, self-access centre etc.)?
- Do students have any speaking test?
- Have you found any improvement in their speaking skill?

**Evaluating the trainability of enrollees of the Leventis Foundation (Nigeria) Agricultural Schools' programs**

~~Modupe M. Osokoya  
Institute of Education,  
University of Ibadan, Nigeria~~

and

~~Adewale Adekunle  
International Institute of Tropical Agriculture  
Ibadan, Nigeria~~

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~~The Leventis Foundation (Nigeria) Agricultural Schools (LFNAS) are schools established to train youths to develop their state and their nation in the area of food production. This study sought to assess the trainability of enrollees in the three operating LFNAS. Five research questions were posed. The CIPP evaluation model was adopted. The population and sample for the study consisted of a total of 247 enrollees. Questionnaires, structured interviews and observational techniques were used to gather information, while using simple descriptive statistics to analyse the data. Many of the enrollees were found to be within the required age range.~~