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Grammar phobia as a hindrance to the fluency in oral communication of Bangladeshi tertiary level students: A study

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ABSTRACT

Oral communication has a highly significant role to stay in touch with the current global circumstances, but a low level of speaking fluency is seemingly a major drawback for Bangladeshi tertiary-level students to achieve global standards of speaking. Taking the core issue into account, this study aims to explore grammar phobia as an obstacle to the learners' way of gaining fluency in oral communication. To substantiate the hypothesis a fact-finding survey for the study has been conducted on the learners of the tertiary level of a particular region in Bangladesh. The findings of the study show grammar phobia of the learners as a major threat to fluency as they get less exposure to free expression and communication when it comes to mutual interaction in the classes. In a typical Bangladeshi approach to language learning, the learners are supposed to put extra emphasis on grammatical accuracy for communicative competence, but most of them admitted that they fumble in free fair communication for fear of grammatical issues. In addition, It would be further evident from the study that teachers' limitations and lack of expertise contribute to the overall failure of tertiary-level learners in their performances in oral communication.

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1. Introduction

As English is one of the prevalent languages in learning and teaching both formal and informal education, it is like a dream comes true to achieve English as a second or foreign language for many people in this universe (Desfitranita, 2017). At present English language has extensive prospects for people in Bangladesh depending on previous legacy as well as based on the needs of students, researchers, traders, and non-resident Bangladeshis who are often constrained to speak perfect English

(Hasnaine, 2020). Besides, there are four processes to be familiar with; listening, speaking, reading, and writing to obtain perfect accuracy in English but it is a matter of regret that our education system where English is concerned stresses only reading and writing (Naik, 2018). But there are also another two skills to be skilled including speaking and listening. From them, oral communication or speaking takes the governance position among the four skills of communication (Sultana & Jamin, 2021). But, there are no marks set for listening and speaking exams so the learners do not have any feeling of interest in listening and speaking skills and this curriculum is designed by the authority of NCTB (Bosu, 2020). Besides, learners of Bangladesh study English from the primary to the tertiary level of education as a compulsory subject of them, and grammar is considered the root of learning and using a language (Basak, 2014). To define grammar, Basak (2014) writes as Islam (1997) opines that grammar is a set of rules of an exact language. Therefore, it is momentous to master the rules to achieve grammatical accuracy. But obtaining grammatical rules is not supportive to improve students' speaking skills even if it has an impact on their speaking capability during communication.

In Bangladesh, Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is used to teach the English language (Rahmotullah, 2020). Though CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) was introduced to higher secondary levels in 2001 (Siddiqua, 2016). Nevertheless, grammar is considered mainstream in learning English. Most English learners believe that the study of grammar is the key to English speaking, and they simply cannot think of learning English without studying the grammatical rules. Thus, they give their attention to acquiring complete knowledge of grammar and permit their student to be careful about grammatical mistakes while they speak and write. Some scholars discourage teachers to underline grammatical mistakes because it generates fear among students. However, according to Fierstein, actual communication gets impeded owing to the fear of being judged, and maximum learners scare to be judged (Sultana & Jamin, 2021). Actually, Fear is associated with correction, and negative evaluation; and learners are also influenced by the fear of being laughed at by other students or being criticized by the teacher; as a result, learners commonly get frustrated to participate in a speaking activity. It is one of the reasons that hinder a learner from being fluent in speaking. Sultana and Jamin (2021) mentioned the term "inevitable anxiety" in their article and this term is considered a hinder to improving oral skills in the English language. It means when a person is anxious to speak English with others, his brain cannot process language properly. Because fear can be experienced by everyone to some extent that alerts us to the present threats to be actual or imagined, and this fear is known to us as anxiety. Rádlová et al. (2020) say that it may also contribute to some feelings of aversion, according to a result of a study investigating people, who feared or did not fear snakes; those who experienced this fear stated high feelings of phobia as well as scare. Similarly, students who have already been taught the importance of obtaining grammar for their fluency in speaking are always in tremendous fear of making mistakes. Therefore, they do not improve their speaking skill because they communicate less lest they may mistake grammatically.

Hypothesizes of the research are as noted below:
- Grammar-based learning of English is an obstacle to obtaining fluency.
- Grammar-based learning activities create fear among students.

The objectives of the research are as follows:

• Finding the obstacle to being fluent in speaking.

• Exploring the fear of grammatical accuracy to be spontaneous in oral communication.

2. Literature review

According to Idrus and Salleh (2007), Oral communication helps one to enhance emotional intelligence. But it is very sorrowful that the GTM method has been governing the English Language Teaching (ELT) class in Bangladesh for several years (Abedin, 2012) which is used to focus only on improving the grammatical items of Bangladeshi tertiary learners' and it is according to the English 2nd paper of tertiary level. As teachers follow this method, they ignore the CLT approach. Though CLT was introduced in 2001, still the focus is very much on the traditional English teaching method GTM. For example, most of the items of the English 2nd paper of the HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) level English program are related to the GTM method. English 2nd paper of the national curriculum syllabus is based on the grammatical syllabus so the learners are fully discouraged to develop oral communication in English (Rahman, 2018). Besides, studies found that the grammatical sequences which were followed in classes did not match learners' inner developmental acquisition sequences; thus, despite all labors, students would not obtain the explicitly taught forms until they are mentally prepared (Pienemann, 1984). In this regard, speaking English causes fear in the learner's mind and it works as a filter (Sultana & Jamin, 2021). This filter is known as 'The Affective Filter'. This Affective Filter can be weaker or stronger. Stronger or high affective filters work as a barrier to the normal flow of comprehensibility of language and the weaker filters are the opposite (Stevick, 1976). For this reason, the brain cannot have admittance to acquiring knowledge with a high affective filter. **The Affective Filter** hypothesis represents Krashen's view that several 'affective variables' play a facilitative and non-causal role in second language acquisition, and these variables include motivation, self-confidence, anxiety fear, etc. Krashen states that students with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-perception, and a low level of anxiety or fear are better prepared for success in second language acquisition but the low motivation, low self-confidence, high level of anxiety or fear, introversion, and embarrassment can raise the affective filter to form a 'mental block' which averts comprehensible input from being used for acquisition (Schütz, 1998). A mental block is a psychological obstacle or limiting mindset that prevents one from completing important tasks and achieving success. As a result LAD (Language Acquisition Device) as propounded by Noam Chomsky in the 1960s doesn't work properly and the ability of language performance decreases. According to Tanveer (2008), learners' feelings of stress and fear prevent their learning and performance abilities of the language. To inquire into the matter, we may see the result of the Dhaka University admission test where 22,000 failed and only two learners happened to pass the eligibility criteria for admission among 40,565 examinees (Hasnaine, 2020). Sultana & Jamin (2021) also present the reality of that situation, they opine as, after completing university education, Bangladeshi learners can hardly speak English or prove their skill in oral communication. Similarly, Bosu (2020) says if the students are asked to speak for five minutes only in the English language on any favorable topic, they feel scared about their poor oral efficiency in communication to be exposed publicly. According to international standards, the

English language proficiency level of Bangladeshi pupils is very low as this country's people have been placed at 71st position on English Proficiency Index (EPI) among 100 non-English speaking countries and they have obtained 48.11 points in the 9th edition against 48.72 in the 8th edition (Hasnaine, 2020).

In addition, several factors including fear, fatigue, inattention, etc. affect one's speaking skills (Mridha & Muniruzzaman, 2020). Polishchuk (2017) also opines that some psychological aspects, such as misperception, stress, fear filtering, distrust, worries, and individuals' state of mind affect the learning of University learners in their English communication. In this regard, scholars suggest English learners follow communicative English and give more importance to the communicative approach. To solve this psychological issue, they take the help of communication strategies (Sultana & Jamin, 2021). So, communication-based studies can be a way to lessen psychological factors.

Having mentioned all these points of view of different researchers, the researchers of this paper mutually believe that there is a strong element in the form of the fear of grammatical accuracy antagonistic to the fluency and spontaneity in oral communication.

3. Method

Methodologies advocate how inquiries should proceed to specify the problems, how to frame a problem to be explored, how to develop proper data-fed generation, and how to sort the logical association between the problem, analysis, conclusions, and implications (Jackson et al., 2007).

According to the statement, the researchers have discussed the mixed method in the section on research design. Then they documented the details of the participants, tools, and data collection procedure.

3.1 Research design

The researchers prefer to follow the descriptive research design. Descriptive research designs cover the answers to the questions of who, what, when, where, and how related to a specific research problem (Anastas, 1999). Besides, the researchers have used both quantitative and qualitative methods known as the mixed method.

Mixed methods may be defined as a kind of research that is to collect and analyze data, complete the findings, and draws hypotheses using both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in single research by the investigator (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007).

Quantitative research is quantifying and analyzing variables to get results and it encompasses the utilization and analysis of numerical data using definite statistical techniques to answer questions such as who, how much or many, what, where, when, and how (Apuke, 2017).

In conducting qualitative research, interviewing is a set of procedures to generate data from individuals and groups using structured, semi-structured, or unstructured questioning setups (Jackson et al., 2007).

To achieve the goal, the researchers prepared questionnaires including learners' consent and teachers' opinion. There, they offer close-ended questions for the learners and open-ended questions

for the teachers. Finally, they collected this information following a systematic and methodical approach.

3.2   Participants

One hundred and fifty-one students from five prominent colleges in Bogura responded to the questionnaires. Besides, they also interviewed five teachers from five highly esteemed colleges in the Bogura district.

3.3   Data collection procedure

Data collection is the process to make sense of "how the information is collected" (Wright et. al., 2016). To complete this process, firstly, they elected five prominent colleges in the Bogura district of Bangladesh and went there to collect the requirements. They started their investigation on the 30th of June and finished it on the 3rd of July. In those institutions, they faced some complexities, but they managed to get permission from the authorities. They selected one hundred and fifty students from five colleges as participants and five highly qualified teachers to be interviewed as per the methodical design. They follow probability sampling, such as systematic sampling to choose the population for the study. The respondents nicely answered all the questions, and the teachers shared their views and commented on the issue. Finally, they collected the essential information for the inquiry.

4.   Results and discussion

4.1.   Results

This section of the study presents the findings of the study. Relevant information is accumulated and shown graphically. The researchers use a column, and pie charts to organize this information. Then a brief discussion on the analysis of the findings is noted as presented in Figure 1.
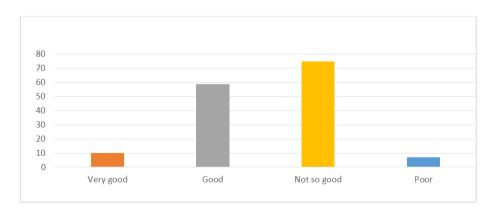

Figure 1 - Learners' fluency level in speaking

The Figure 1 shows students' fluency levels in the English language. Approximately 6.6% of learners are very good, while 39% of students are good, whereas around 49% of participants are not so good, and about 4% are poor to speak fluently.

Later, some questions have been asked to get the opinion of the students which help the researchers to find their exact linguistic status. The rates of their consent are shown in the Figure 2.
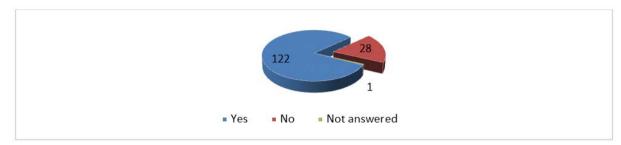

Figure 2 - Students' preference for speaking in English

Nearly 80% of participants were positive in their answers, about 18% of learners were negative, and 1% said nothing. Meanwhile, Figure 3 depicts the proportion of learners' fluency in speaking English.
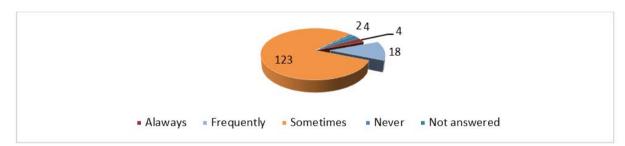

Figure 3 - Learners' frequency in speaking English

Around 2% of students speak in English, almost 81% of them sometimes speak English, 12% are used to talking in English frequently, 1% of them ever talked in English, and around 2% were reluctant to answer.

Figure 4 - Learners' opinion on English as a vital skill at the college level

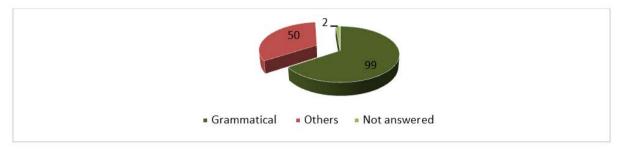In addition, from Figure 4, it is clear that almost 93% of them commented yes, and around 6% commented no.

Figure 5 - The factors of fear in speaking in English

Figure 5 illustrates the factors of students' fear in speaking in English. Almost 66% of students blamed the grammatical issue, whereas 33% chose other things, and 1% remained silent on the issue.

Figure 6 - Fear of making errors while speaking English

Furthermore, about 65% of learners agreed that they feared, whereas 33% disagreed, and around 1% said nothing. Figure 6 shows the proportion of students' fear of making errors in speaking English.

Figure 7 - Excessive concern about making grammatical errors while speaking English

In answering the question of the excessive concern about making grammatical errors in speaking English, almost 70% of students said yes, while 28% were negative, and about 2% were unresponsive to the issue *(see Figure 7)*.
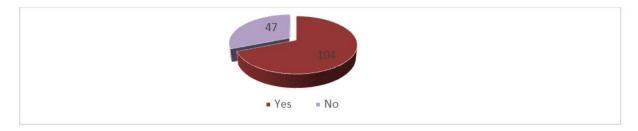
Figure 8 - Respondents' opinion about the lack of sufficient grammar rules increasing speaking difficulty

In Figure 8, the respondents' opinion about the lack of sufficient grammar rules increasing speaking difficulties is depicted. Almost 69% of students were positive, and around 31% were negative in their responses.

Figure 9 - Fear of negative comments from others as an obstacle to being fluent at the time of speaking English

Figure 9 presents students' fear of negative comments from others as an obstacle to being fluent at the time of speaking English. Nearly 68% of learners answered positively, whereas around 31% were negative, and 1% of them remained silent.
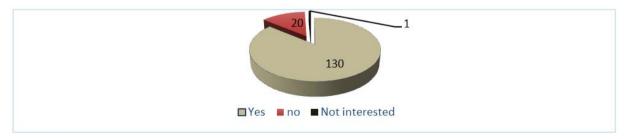

Figure 10 - Fear of failing and making grammatical mistakes
as the two most common barriers to speaking English fairly

Meanwhile, Figure 10 illustrates students' fear of failing and making grammatical mistakes as the two most common barriers to speaking English fairly. About 86% of participants said yes, and around 13% were negative in their answers, while 1% remained reluctant.
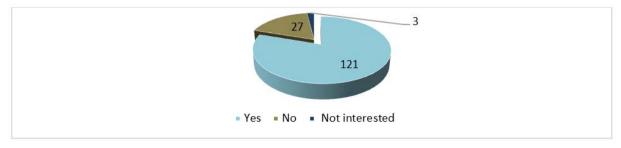
Figure 11 - Reducing the pressure of obtaining grammatical accuracy
as a solution to reducing the fear of speaking

In addition, Figure 11 presents reducing the pressure of obtaining grammatical accuracy as a solution to reducing the fear of speaking. Nearly 80% of learners agreed on that issue, but about 17% disagreed, and around 2% were reluctant to reply.
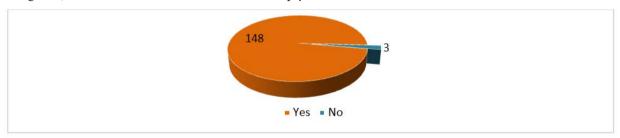

Figure 12 - Obtaining learner's speaking perfection through practice

Obtaining learner's speaking perfection through practice is showed in Figure 12. Almost 98% of students gave a positive view, while 2% gave negative comments.
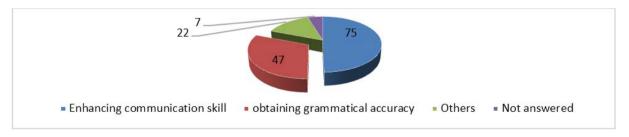

Figure 13 - First step to reducing fear of speaking

Nearly 50% of learners agreed that enhancing communication skills is their first step to reducing their fear, but around 31% opined that obtaining grammatical accuracy is the way to decrease the fear of speaking, and about 14% chose other things, whereas 5% said nothing *(see Figure 13)*.
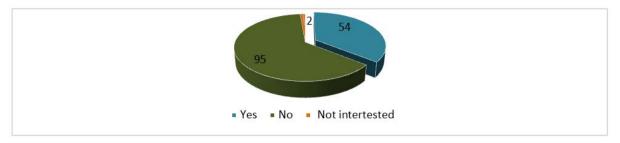
Figure 14 - Learning of learner's English grammar only to meet the requirements of the examination

Figure 14 shows the proportion of learning of learner's English grammar only to meet the requirements of the examination. Almost 36% of the participants consented as yes, while 63% said no, and 1% were silent to answer.
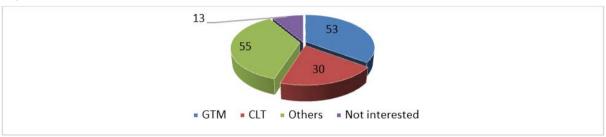

Figure 15 - Preferable method of the teachers to run the class

Finally, nearly 35% of the students said that their teachers follow the GTM method while around 36% chose other methods to be followed by their teachers and about 20% gave their opinion on the CLT method which is followed by their teachers and 9% remained silent to answer *(see Figure 15)*.

Our native language is Bangla, whereas English is our non-native language. As English is not our natural language, it is natural to have some complexities to gain fluency in this language. Only by following the systematic process, we may develop our skills in this language. The researchers tried to specify the problems to be solved. For this reason, they have surveyed to find the specified causes so that the learners can be fluent in this language in an organized way.

4.2.   Discussion

According to Figure 1, a few learners are very good on the fluency scale, however, most of them are not so good. This finding reflects the real status of the student's fluency level at the tertiary level. Then other figures from the study illuminate the whole image of the language learning process, and the researchers accumulated this information from the learners and the teachers.

Almost all students prefer to speak English, however, they are hesitant to communicate in it sometimes because they fear making mistakes. Most learners said that grammatical issue is responsible for their failure in oral performance. Therefore, a large group of them opined that enhancing communication skills can be a solution to overcome this problem.

The present status of the study also shows that learners have limited scope to give a speaking test in the exam while they always go through exam activities on reading and writing. As a result, most of them face some difficulties, which are as below –

- They afraid being judged.
- They afraid making errors.
- Become a failure in oral communication.
- Excessive pressure of making grammatically correct sentences.
- Fewer communication activities make them discomfort while speaking.
- Exam-oriented conception makes them reluctant to tell as much as they can.
- The absence of a communication-friendly environment decreases their fluency level.
- They don't have much knowledge about the process of developing skills in oral communication.

Besides, the teachers shared their opinion on the fact. Most of them follow the GTM method, while a few teachers follow the CLT method occasionally. For this reason, they always give importance to grammar, as their view is to take into account that grammar accuracy is unavoidable for the student's language development. They also think that without sound grammar one cannot grow their skills in this language. As they follow the GTM method, they don't teach the students according to the CLT method or arrange communication-based programs to enhance or inspire them. But they have admitted that the students often fear learning the English language for fear of grammatical accuracy. One of the teachers commented that fear of grammatical accuracy is a reality in language learning.

5.   Conclusion

Fear is a psychological thing that hinders the natural process of learning. In oral communication, learners' ease helps them to speak fluently. In the case of having fear in mind, one cannot feel comfortable orally. As a result, they lag in obtaining proficiency in speaking and fail to gain the desired level of oral fluency. Therefore, the above study hypothesizes the negative impact of the overwhelming fear of grammar accuracy in oral production and suggests obtaining speaking skills or developing speaking fluency through the communicative process. The core finding of this research is the common confession of the students and the teachers that the fear of grammatical accuracy is a barrier to speaking incessantly. Thus, as observed by the researchers of this article, the more a learner becomes grammar phobic the more he or she loses the natural rhythmic ability to speak. Finally, they have detected the effect of grammar phobia as a real cause of concern for oral communication activities.

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