

# **Why Can't Most Indian College Students Speak English Effectively? A Brief Diagnosis of Indian College Students' Spoken-English Skills**

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## **Abstract**

English is perceived as a global link language and plays a prominent role in knowledge dissemination in the areas of medicine, technology, business and higher education. Therefore, students require proficiency in English language, particularly L2 oral competency for academic as well as professional gains. However, recent surveys and studies conducted in India indicate that our college students have poor language skills. This paper reports the findings of a small study that corroborate this fact. The study was conducted to examine the oral English proficiency of students studying in different colleges at the University of Delhi. A structured interview of 45 Final Year college students was conducted telephonically and the recorded spoken samples were analysed quantitatively as well as qualitatively. The statistical analysis based on English language experts' evaluation revealed that the oral proficiency of around 50% students was average or below average. Moreover, a qualitative analysis further revealed that spoken samples of each of the three levels of oral competence (high-level, middle-level and low-level) displayed some distinct salient features which are discussed in detail. Students with average or low-level of oral competence exhibited lack of fluency and accuracy and their speech displayed noticeable grammatical and pronunciation errors. Some key recommendations include modifying materials and methodology by incorporating activities such as role-plays, simulations etc.; encouraging contemporary ways of communicating using technology and providing more opportunities to students to express themselves in a stress-free environment. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be of use in future research related to exploring university students' spoken skills in L2 in different contexts regionally, nationally and internationally.

**Keywords:** Link Language, L2 Oral Competency, Language Skills, Structured Interview.

## **Introduction**

Throughout India, there is an extraordinary belief, among almost all castes and

classes, in both rural and urban areas, in the transformative power of English. English is seen not just as a useful skill, but as a symbol of a better life, a pathway out of poverty and oppression. Aspiration of such magnitude is a heavy burden for any language, and for those who have responsibility for teaching it, to bear. The challenges of providing universal access to English are significant, and many are bound to feel frustrated at the speed of progress. But we cannot ignore the way that the English language has emerged as a powerful agent for change in India (Graddol 120).

In India, “English today is almost a compulsory second language” (Meganathan 83) given its status as an official language, a link language connecting people across regions as well as a “language that is seen as essential in availing best opportunities in education and employment” (Erling 9). “However, recent reports underscore the low employability rate of graduating Indian students due to the high demand for effective English language skills in the market (*India Skills Report* 38) and the poor spoken English skills of Indian graduates, particularly those coming from small towns and cities” (*National Employability Report* 7).

Therefore, English oral competence is an important skill that needs to be developed as an effective means of communication in our undergraduates. Out of the four language skills, though speaking appears to be relatively easy yet in reality, it is an extremely complex phenomenon. Bygate defines speaking as a “multilevel, hierarchical skill” in which “speakers adapt systemic knowledge of language to real world use, involving judgments of appropriacy at all levels, whether discourse, lexico-grammatical, or articulatory” (1-3). Similarly, Burns describes speaking as a “highly complex and dynamic skill” in which the speaker uses “cognitive, physical and socio-cultural” processes simultaneously for which the speaker’s “knowledge and skills have to be activated rapidly in real-time” (2). Thus, when we talk about communicative competence, it does not merely refer to competence in language use but also to “how language is used appropriately and how language is organized as discourse” (Harmer 14). Thus, teaching spoken language production, especially teaching learners to speak in a foreign/second language is a challenging task for teachers (Brown and Yule 25). In the Indian context, it seems even more an arduous task for college teachers since there is enormous heterogeneity in the socio-cultural and linguistic profile of their learners based on facts such as students’ home town, mother tongue, school background (English medium/ Hindi medium/ regional language medium,

private/ government-aided/ government); number of years of exposure to English; exposure to English outside the classroom etc. Moreover, challenges also arise due to reasons such as availability of limited class time along with classroom interaction “controlled by textbooks and examinations” which makes it “both difficult and unnecessary” for teachers “to pay attention to the essentials of everyday English (Tickoo 146). Though some work has been done at the level of schools to investigate the kind of problems children face in speaking English, very few empirical studies have been conducted at the level of colleges to investigate in detail the actual oral competence of students and to recommend ways in which their speaking skills could be enhanced. The present study aimed to fill this gap.

### **Research Questions**

The study investigated the following questions:

- I. Since students require effective speaking skills in their personal, academic and professional lives, what is their level of oral proficiency according to language experts?
- II. What kind of errors do students commit while speaking?
- III. How can students’ speaking skills in English be developed?

### **Research Methodology**

The researcher used the mixed methods procedure in the current study combining quantitative and qualitative approaches of data collection and analysis as “their combined use provides an expanded understanding of research problems” (Creswell 203). Within the mixed methods, a sequential design was employed wherein in the first phase, the researcher collected spoken samples of students and statistically analysed them with the help of language experts. In the subsequent phase, she carried out a content analysis of select samples based on the quantitative findings as the “rich data obtained from the participants’ experience can widen the scope of our understanding and can add data-driven depth to the analysis of a phenomenon” (Dornyei 40).

### **Context and Participants**

The participants of the research study were 45 Final Year students (23 girls and 22 boys, aged between 20-22 years) of B. Com (Honors) studying in different constituent colleges of the University of Delhi (DU), one of the largest universities

in India. The rationale for selecting commerce undergraduates as the population of this study was guided by the researcher-teacher's own background of being an English teacher at one of the DU colleges. Every year, a large number of students from different parts of the country come to Delhi to pursue undergraduate courses in different disciplines, particularly Commerce. Their profile in terms of their socio-cultural and economic contexts as well as their linguistic background is quite diverse. Although the population for the present study was huge, the researcher decided to select a small sample size of 75 students as collection and analysis of spoken samples is a time-consuming activity and an in-depth qualitative analysis would not have been possible with a larger sample size. However, only 45 students finally agreed to participate in the research.

### **Research Instrument**

Interview is a popular research tool in applied linguistics. According to Seliger and Shohamy, "the purpose of the interview is to obtain information by actually talking to the subject. Interviews are personalized and therefore permit a level of in-depth information-gathering, free response and flexibility that cannot be obtained by other procedures" (156). The researcher chose to conduct structured interviews of students in order to assess their natural spontaneous speech. An interview schedule was designed (Appendix) primarily consisting of general questions aimed at making students talk. Thus, the topics chosen were around their immediate plans after graduating, fond memories of their college life and problems in communicating in English etc. An additional question on the movie the students might have watched recently was kept handy for those who were reluctant to talk about the questions mentioned earlier. The researcher decided to hold a telephonic interview with students since, at the time of the research, the students had taken their final year exams and many outstation students had returned to their native place. Moreover, some students had been selected in the placement process and had begun working in companies as trainees. Thus, telephone appeared to be the best medium of communication; otherwise, it would have been difficult to arrange for a face-to-face interview given students' preoccupations.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The sample was selected by deploying a multistage probability sampling technique so that every unit of the population had an equal chance of inclusion in the sample and fairly represented the profile of students studying in different colleges

of DU which would, in turn, allow for making generalizations to the population. In the first stage, the researcher used the random number generator to shortlist nine DU colleges offering B. Com (H). Subsequently, a list of all the students enrolled in these colleges was procured and the random number generator was employed again to select 75 students (38 boys and 37 girls) for the research purpose. However, 16 boys and 14 girls declined to participate in the interview for reasons best known to them. Finally, 45 students (22 boys and 23 girls) comprised the sample of the study.

The researcher reached out to different college administrators and apprised them of the research study. She requested them to share the contact details of the students. All the 75 students were telephonically contacted by the researcher twice. Initially students were informed about the research objectives and assured confidentiality. They were requested to let the researcher know a convenient time when she could call them. This was followed by a reminder SMS message. Subsequently, the interviews were held with all the 45 students at their preferred time and on an average, an interview lasted for 8-10 minutes.

Most students warmed up easily for a conversation and felt happy to be contributing to the research, especially when their views were sought on the kind of problems they confronted while communicating orally in English and the kind of English course they desired in their curriculum. The entire data collection process took around 2 months. While a smart mobile phone made interviewing and recording simple, some hindrances such as bad network and background noise were experienced during the interviews.

### **Quantitative Analysis and Findings**

The recorded telephone interviews served as the corpus for an analysis of students' oral proficiency. The recorded audio samples were analysed by two English language experts (with long years of experience in teaching and evaluation at graduate and postgraduate levels) on a five-point evaluation scale adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) handbook to suit the Indian context. The students' oral competence was graded by the experts on a five-point scale with "5" as the grade awarded for "excellent" oral proficiency and "1" as the grade awarded to "poor" proficiency. The average grades of the experts were calculated and taken into consideration for all statistical interpretations. The table given below displays that there was a high positive

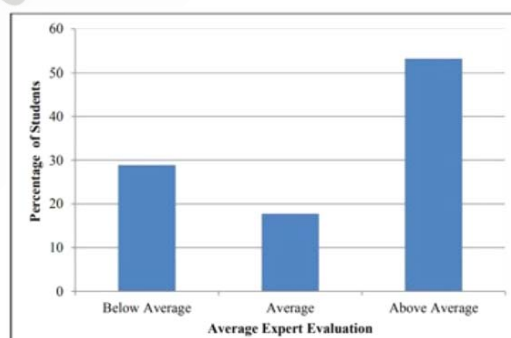
correlation with  $r = 0.823$  at 0.01 level between the scores given by expert 1 and expert 2 indicating that their ratings were congruent.

	Evaluation of Spoken skills by Expert 1	Evaluation of Spoken skills by Expert 2
Evaluation of Spoken skills by Expert 1	1	
Evaluation of Spoken skills by Expert 2	0.823	1
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 - Tailed)		

**Table: Correlation Matrix of Experts' Evaluation of Students' Oral English Competence**

Based on the average marks awarded by the two language experts, the students were classified into three categories namely: *Above Average* (students having scored more than 3), *Average* (students having scored 3) and *Below Average* (students having scored less than 3). The following figure graphically displays the average expert evaluation of the students' spoken competence.

It is quite evident from the figure above that as far as respondents' spoken English skills are concerned, the average experts' scores indicate that around half of the students (21/45 i.e., 47%) had *Average or Below Average* spoken skills. This indicates that some of these students with *Average* oral competence could maintain a flow of speech using basic vocabulary and grammatical structures although they displayed inaccuracies in using complex structures and spoke with a limited sense of stress and intonation. Moreover, other students evaluated as having *Below Average* oral proficiency could not speak effectively.



**(Figure: Average Expert Evaluation of Students' Oral Proficiency in English)**

Their speech was marked with long pauses, frequent repetition or self-correction, incoherence and demonstrations of errors related to basic grammar and vocabulary. However, the remaining half of the students (24/45 i.e., around 53%) could speak quite effectively. They exhibited an ability to use grammatical structures fairly well, demonstrated a wide range of vocabulary and spoke coherently although they showed minor flaws in stress, intonation and fluency. Since the experts found noticeable errors in the speech samples of several students, therefore it was imperative to examine the nature of these flaws through a detailed content analysis of their recorded interviews.

### **Qualitative Analysis and Findings**

Based on the average score of experts 1 and 2, the audio speech samples were divided by the researcher into three categories: students with a *high-level* of spoken English competence, students with an *average-level* of oral competence and students with a *low-level* of oral proficiency in English. Random samples of spoken English, each from these three levels of competence, were chosen and analyzed qualitatively by the researcher with the help of the experts. Salient characteristics of all the three levels have been identified and a detailed analysis of one sample from each category is discussed in detail below.

### **Salient Features of *High-level* samples of Spoken English**

Students with a high-level of spoken English competence displayed the following features: they could speak fluently and spontaneously with only occasional repetition or self-correction, merely pausing to choose the appropriate words to express their thoughts/feelings. They took little help from the interviewer and were able to develop an idea coherently using appropriate cohesive features. Moreover, they used a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical structures. They could use language flexibly to convey the precise meaning. Stress and intonation were used appropriately.

### **Analysis of a *High-level* of Spoken English Sample**

These students, rated by experts as displaying a high level of spoken English competence, produced speech that was coherent and had a natural flow. He spoke at length, took long turns and gave well-structured and comprehensive feedback to the questions asked. Consider his response when he was asked about the relevance of the Business Communication paper in their course:

So... very blatantly...very honestly... if I give an answer, then, a lot of my

papers...let's say I studied twenty-five papers, only three or four or maximum five come remotely useful in my life when I am working...and that is not just because I am doing coordinating operations for a start-up. It is also for anybody who is doing consulting for an XYZ company and that is because what we have been taught by our education system is not relevant. Coming down to the question of the business communication paper, it was not important for us in any way. It was insignificant also because it was a very generic course. Perhaps if they make it more specific or teach particular skills and make it more relevant to what is happening today it might become useful.

As it is evident from this transcribed excerpt, the respondent spoke fluently and presented his views in a logical manner. Also, he made appropriate use of linkers such as “because”, “so,” “perhaps” etc. in the above utterance. Moreover, there were no noticeable mistakes related to the use of articles and prepositions. The student displayed a consistent grammatical control of complex language and spoke coherently with fully appropriate cohesive features as we can see in the following utterance: “Teaching me how to make five different kinds of invoices, orders etc. is irrelevant because every company will have its own format. Instead, I should be taught how to make a business proposal which is far more useful than teaching obsolete, clerical things such as office orders.” There was clarity of thought as well as presentation and the student displayed no difficulty in flexibly and logically putting forth his ideas. The respondent had a fairly exhaustive vocabulary and used words such as “generic,” “obsolete,” “blatantly” etc. A close look at the above utterances will show how he was able to produce synonyms and antonyms easily: “relevant/irrelevant”, “significant/insignificant”, “obsolete/useful,” etc. Responding to the question on the desired modifications in the Business Communication paper, he suggested incorporating the role of social media in communication and said the following:

One thing is social media. Businesses are run on perceptions and today social media is playing an important role in creating perceptions as you have to be careful about what messages you are putting up...therefore you ought to know how to handle social media. If I go for an interview today, they (the interviewers) are going to look at my LinkedIn and not the CV that I am providing. (Kaushik 170-171)

The student spoke clearly, confidently at a moderate pace using appropriate stress, rhythm and intonation. His L1 accent had minimal effect on his pronunciation and the sounds of English were pronounced without errors.

Adequate use of chunking enabled the respondent to maintain a proper rhythm in connected speech. The student rarely repeated himself and showed no nervousness or hesitation while speaking. Momentary pauses in his speech were observed perhaps only to produce appropriate words to express his ideas. His speech could easily be comprehended by the interviewer.

### **Salient Features of *Middle-level* samples of Spoken English**

Students with an average spoken English competence maintained a flow of speech but used repetition or self-correction while speaking. They were able to express their personal opinions and could develop ideas on a topic but with limited flexibility. They had a limited vocabulary and were generally correct in their use of simple sentences, but more complex structures consisted of errors. Their use of cohesive devices was also restricted and inaccurate in some cases. They displayed some problems with word stress, chunking was more or less appropriate although it was not sustained throughout the utterance. The speech rate was generally appropriate. Students with an average level of English competence could be understood throughout although mispronunciation of individual words or sounds reduced clarity at times.

### **Analysis of a *Middle-level* of Spoken English Sample**

This respondent, rated by experts with an average spoken English competence, spoke fluently and confidently although inaccurately. At times she appeared to have understood that she had made a mistake and quickly corrected herself. For example, on being asked to narrate any memorable moment from her college days, she said, “that...my first memorable moment was when I go...when I went... to my college in first day” (Kaushik 173). Although she self-corrected her initial erroneous use of the tense yet she was unable to spot her incorrect use of the preposition “in” in place of “on” in this particular utterance although later in the interview (see the excerpt below) she correctly used the preposition “on” with “first day”. Thus, she displayed inconsistency in her use of prepositions. Neither was she able to notice that she forgot to use the article “the” before “first day.” Let us look at the excerpt below in detail:

Student: Ya...that (going to college) was so...mam...memorable moment because I was not from Delhi.

Interviewer: Hmm...okay

Student: So, everything new...so...I feel so happy while going to

college and making new friends and seeing people there because this atmosphere was not at my hometown.

Interviewer: Alright...

Student: On first day of college, I have no friends. People don't have friends on first day of college. But I have made up my mind that I will make friends because since Twelfth class, I am not so...*matlab*... ambivert also...I am kind of introvert...so...

Interviewer: Okay...so you were determined to make friends...ah...

Student: Ya...so I thought that how I will match them because people here are little hi-fi than the people come from other hometowns. (Kaushik 174)

Although this student managed to convey her meaning and also showed an awareness of the process of articulation (she mentions her personal example of having no friends on the first day in college and then makes a generalized statement that usually people do not have friends on the initial day), her utterances had several errors. The first glaring error was in the use of tenses since the student used the present tense several times to describe events that had happened in the past. She also omitted the use of the article "the" while uttering the phrase "on first day of college" and the use of the article "an" before the word "introvert." In her last utterance in the given excerpt, she forgot to add the relative pronoun "who" in the phrase "the people (*who*) come from hometowns." Thus, it is evident that the student was able to frame simple sentences with reasonable accuracy although there was little variety in the sentence structures used. One can also observe a breakdown of coherence in utterances such as:

Business...business communication subject is very useful because not only college, from day-to- day also whether we are going to company or anywhere that it is so useful because there we have read how to make citations and to make business letters. Before also we have a study about writing letters that was not related to business. So, I think it is useful for a commerce graduate. (Kaushik 174)

Wrong use of prepositions in phrases such as "from day-to-day" instead of "in day-to-day," no use of preposition in appropriate places such as "not only college" instead of "not only in college," incorrect use of verbs such as "make business letters" instead of "write business letters," erroneous use of the present continuous tense "we are going to" instead of simple present "we go to" etc. rendered the meaning of the utterance confusing and partially incomprehensible. The range

of vocabulary used by this student was also limited. She used “useful” three times in this utterance instead of using its synonyms such as “relevant”, “significant,” “important” etc. The pronunciation of this student displayed a strong influence of L1. Her stress was erroneous in several places. For instance, she pronounced “college” as /kT'le:’/, “memorable” as /'mYemore:bŒl/ etc. She also inappropriately put extra stress on certain words: “good” as /gu'dY/ and “that” as /dYe'Y/. The rhythm of English was not maintained making it difficult for the listener to understand the speech. There was a lot of code-mixing in several utterances with the student using Hindi words such as “*matlab,*” “*aisa,*” “*haan*” etc. to convey her thoughts. Although this student spoke at a moderate pace pausing noticeably at times to process her thoughts, the grammatical and lexical errors along with mispronunciations and inappropriate word stress made her speech unintelligible in places.

### **Salient Features of *Low-level* samples of Spoken English**

Students displaying a low-level of English competence usually gave monosyllabic answers or produced short utterances. Their responses either had limited relevance to the topic or lacked substance completely. They spoke only after a lot of prompting and their speech was characterized by noticeable pauses. Most utterances which comprised monosyllabic words strung together were brief and showed little evidence of control of structure. Low level speakers either frequently repeated themselves or self-corrected their utterances due to their limited range of grammar and vocabulary. The speech produced lacked coherence and did not display adequate and appropriate use of discourse markers and connectors. There were consistent lapses in stress and intonation. There was rarely any chunking as the speech was slow. In many cases, pronunciation was strongly influenced by L1 and the utterance became incomprehensible at several places.

### **Analysis of a *Low-level* of Spoken English Sample**

This student rated by experts as having a low-level of spoken English competence could not produce a fluent response. Most of his answers initially came in the form of monosyllabic utterances such as “ya mam” and “no-no.” After being prompted repeatedly, he could hesitatingly produce short but erroneous utterances. For example, on being asked what he was doing and what his immediate plans were, he replied, “I just complete my B. Com Honours this year.” On being probed further by the interviewer about what he was actually pursuing at the time of the interview, he said, “and ...further... my plan to ...go in MBA finance

field.” The respondent was often not able to understand the interviewer and kept repeating words from the questions. He finally managed a response only after constant prompting as it is evident from the transcribed excerpt given below:

Interviewer: Can you narrate any one memorable incident from your college life to me?

Student: Okay mam...just remind me, mam.

Interviewer: Ah...pardon...what do you mean?

Student: One second mam...me think...memorable moment?

Interviewer: Can you recall any special occasion or event from your college days that is close to your heart?

Student: So...my memorable moment was...that...when I have it in second year...

Interviewer: Good...so something special happened then?

Student: I got ...ninety-one in Maths subject... and my friends...my friends... were like...Oh my God...what you have done!

Interviewer: All right...hmmm...

Student: ...didn't expect from me...that was the moment. (Kaushik 176)

The student constantly code-switched to Hindi and had to be politely reminded by the researcher to speak in English. For instance, on being asked about what he missed about college days, he said “*Mam, kuchekdum se yaadnahi aa raha.*” Though at times the student managed to string a few sentences together in English yet the sentences did not display much variety and were characterized by repetition and grammatical errors. For example, when this student was asked about the relevance of the English Business Communication paper, his reply was: “Ma’am, I think business communication is the part where we have to communicate, so DU university colleges like our, we don’t get into the practical exams there about business communication so we should be in a practical thing in about...business communication.” (Kaushik 177). The influence of L1 on the construction of sentences was quite apparent. Look at this utterance while the student described the communication paper: “it’s about...some practical questions were there...and some theoretical conceptual questions were there.” His speech contained several other flaws such as wrong use of articles or unnecessary insertion of article as reflected in phrases such as “when I was in a first year,”

“now it’s a good” etc. There were several errors related to the use of tenses in his responses. For instance, he used the simple present “I just complete my B. Com Honours this year” instead of the simple past in this utterance. (Kaushik 177). There was also faulty subject-verb agreement in the responses. For instance, while describing the movie the respondent had enjoyed watching in the recent past, he said: “The scenes about Burj Khalifa was also good.” Several words were mispronounced due to inappropriate word stress such as “expect” mispronounced as /'Yekspekt/; “let” mispronounced as /'le:t/; “plan” mispronounced as /'pla:n/etc. Since the utterances were slow, inadequate chunking took place. Overall, this student’s speech was fragmented due to long pauses, repetitions and faulty grammar. Minimal information was conveyed due to limited vocabulary and use of simple sentence structures. Thus, communication broke down several times during the speech.

### **Recommendations**

Although one major limitation of the present study is that it presents an analysis of a small speech sample of students from the same discipline studying in one particular Indian university yet the findings significantly emphasize how a large number of Indian students lack English oral competence and the kinds of problems they exhibit while speaking. Therefore, there is a dire need for measures to be undertaken immediately in order to improve undergraduates’ speaking skills in English. A major shift required to accomplish this goal is for teachers to adopt a learner-centered methodology whereby learners may get more opportunities to voice their thoughts without the fear of being judged or reprimanded for making mistakes (Khan & Ali 3578). “Teachers need to adopt a structured and systematic approach aimed at helping students acquire fluency as well as accuracy” (Sabnani&Renandya 24).

Moreover, as discussed in the paper, students with average or below-average language skills commit lexical, grammatical and pronunciation-related errors that adversely impact their confidence and lower their not-so-bright chances of participating in classroom discussions due to the lecture mode adopted by most teachers. Thus, teachers must aim at developing students’ communicative competence by engaging them in interesting and interactive real world language activities by creating a friendly environment where the teacher’s role is primarily that of a facilitator. Some such activities include role-plays, simulations, group discussions etc. Research has established that encouraging cooperative learning tasks among students leads to an improvement in their intrinsic motivation to

learn L2 (Namaziandost, Ehsan et al 11). Also, in order to enhance the oral competence of students, language materials must expose the learners to language in authentic use for which teachers may base their activities on a number of authentic sources such as advertisements, songs, real-life dialogues, pictures etc. (Tomlinson 13). Also, materials must reflect the changing trends in communication that have arisen due to recent technological advances for which students may be engaged in activities that involve a hands-on-experience in using new channels of communication such as the digital media (Kathpalia and Ling 274). To conclude, special efforts must be made by teachers to facilitate and encourage natural communication in L2 among students so that they gradually acquire the skills required for effective oral communication.

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## Appendix

### Structured Telephone Interview Schedule for B. Com (H) Students

1. What are you doing currently and what are your future plans?
2. Considering that you spent three years in college, how was your overall experience?
3. Please share any one memorable incident from your college life.
4. Do you experience any problems communicating in English? If yes, what type of problems do you face?
5. Do you think B. Com (H) students should have a compulsory paper in English? Why/why not?
6. To what extent did you find the English and Business Communication papers useful in college? What makes you say so?
7. Tell me something about a movie that you have watched recently and liked a lot.