

Identifying listening and speaking difficulties: Bangladesh higher education students' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The importance of communication skills, particularly listening and speaking, is undeniable in today's world. However, studies have reported various difficulties with these skills in the context of higher education in Bangladesh, especially in the arts faculty. The underlying causes and challenges, particularly in higher education settings, remain under-researched. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the listening and speaking needs of higher education students in an arts faculty department. A case study approach was employed, utilizing open-ended items, in-depth interviews, diagnostic tests, and document analysis. The findings revealed that students face challenges in areas such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency, with nervousness, lack of confidence, and hesitation acting as significant barriers to skill development. Furthermore, there was a clear imbalance between students' needs and the content of course syllabi and examination systems. The study suggests enhancing Hutchinson and Waters's (1987) learning needs approach to better align with national development policies in countries where English is a second or foreign language. These findings highlight the need for curriculum reforms and more targeted instructional strategies that address students' real-world listening and speaking needs, ultimately fostering more effective communication skills in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Bangladesh; learning needs; listening skill; needs analysis; speaking skill

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INTRODUCTION

Listening and speaking in English are prerequisites of IR 4.0, as English continues to be the global lingua franca for business, science, and technology. It is also the dominant and influential language for international communication and innovation (Dewey, 2007). In essence, strong English listening and speaking skills empower individuals to participate actively in the global technological and innovation ecosystem, thereby contributing to the strengthening of IR 4.0.

Hence, it is easy to understand why listening and speaking skills are immensely important for higher education, as evidenced by numerous studies (See Ngwoke et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2019; Seraj et al., 2021; Yokubov, 2022). In addition, a growing body of research (for example, Xu & Qiu,

2022; Tsang & Lee, 2023) confirms the significance of these two skills in second or foreign language teaching learning, as they are interconnected to each other (Mahanty & Mishra, 2023). This integrated nature of skills is advocated by Brown and Lee (2015) who explain that "Listening frequently implies speaking, and in academic contexts possibly note-taking; speaking virtually always implies a listener" (p. 315).

Nevertheless, there is a growing concern from different parts of the world, indicating students' struggles with these two skills. For instance, in Malaysia (Badrasawi et al., 2020; Nor et al., 2019), the Philippines (Sumalinog, 2018), Indonesia (Ratnasari, 2020; Sofyan & Mushriah, 2019; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020), Vietnam (Vu, 2021), Turkey (Ozcelik et al., 2019), Iran

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(Namaziandost, 2019), Bangladesh (Seraj et al., 2021), Iraq (Idham et al., 2022), Taiwan (Chou, 2023), and Nigeria (Ngwoke et al., 2022). Some of these challenges and difficulties are related to students' total comprehension, problems of interpretation, lack of vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, hesitation, anxiety while listening and speaking, and lack of fluency. Similarly, in the context of this study, a large number of studies from Bangladesh indicate similar challenges and difficulties faced by students from various disciplines and universities (see Ahmed, 2021; Aktar, 2020; Akter, 2019; Akteruzzaman & Sattar, 2020; Alam et al., 2022; Seraj et al., 2021).

There are many reasons why students are still facing problems with listening and speaking skills, even though English is widely taught as a second, third, or even as a foreign language in many contexts. The struggles could be due to, among others, (i) exclusion of listening and speaking from the syllabus (Mridha & Muniruzzaman, 2020) and teaching (Kabir, 2023); (ii) prominence of rote learning (Amin & Greenwood, 2018); (iii) unequal emphasis on skills (Riya & Kabir, 2019); (iv) problematic course design (Wali, 2018); and (v) inadequate curriculum in meeting communicative needs (Ahsan et al., 2021).

Most of the needs analysis research on speaking and listening (see Aysu & Ozcan, 2021; Dai, 2023; Ismail & Nawir, 2023; Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2021; Primo et al., 2010; Song & Zhou, 2022) used one or two research instruments for collecting data. In contrast, the present study employed four different types of instruments: open-response items, in-depth interviews, diagnostic tests, and document analysis to thoroughly examine the needs of the students. Specifically, the investigation of documents, including course syllabi and exam questions conducted in this study, makes it unique, as Caulley (1983) claims that "document analysis is superior for finding out retrospective information about a program and may be the only way that certain information may be obtainable" (p. 19). The use of document analysis assisted the researchers in identifying disproportionate course syllabi and exam patterns that are not aligned with students' needs in terms of listening and speaking.

Therefore, this study is carried out to identify the difficulties that are experienced by the students in Bangladeshi Higher Education Institution (BHEI) in terms of listening and speaking. Findings from this study would enable teachers and educational planners to develop appropriate teaching and assessment methods of listening and speaking that are relevant for 21st century learning in preparing for the IR 4.0.

The context of listening and speaking in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has one of the largest English-learning populations in the world, with 160 million people living in a densely populated area of 147,000 km² (Rahman et al., 2019). Bangla is the national and official language of the country, and it is the mother tongue of the majority of the population (Hunter & Zaman, 2022; Islam & Hashim, 2019; Rahman et al., 2019). In the fields "of education, administration, judiciary, trade, and foreign communication, English plays significant roles" (Amin & Greenwood, 2022, p. 1). However, over the last four decades, different governments have introduced inconsistent educational policies, which have complicated the teaching and learning of the English language in the country (Kabir, 2023; Rahman & Pandian, 2019). These issues mainly arise from the adoption of a top-down approach where important decision-making processes are done by higher authorities, changes in curriculum, and modifications that totally disregard ground realities (Kabir, 2023) and local resources (Hamid, 2020). There is also a lack of proper communication between policymakers, teachers, students, educational institutions, and teacher educators, who are responsible for implementing policy. This lack of communication is vital for reducing the "gaps between policy aspirations and local classroom conditions" (Amin & Greenwood, 2018, p. 11), which relates to the disconnection between educational reforms and actual classroom limitations.

Students continue to struggle with listening and speaking even after the implementation of CLT in Bangladesh in the 90s (Hossain, 2022). As contemporary ELT research has documented, Bangladeshi classrooms are mostly influenced by the powerful examination system (Farooqi, 2021), and it is evident that insufficient focus is given to all four skills in public examinations. Furthermore, exam questions focus only on reading and writing components, while listening and speaking skills are completely absent (Mridha & Muniruzzaman, 2020), with no provision for "testing the listening and speaking skills in public examinations" (Rahman, 2019, p. 58).

On the basis of the above discussions, the present study intends to identify and examine the problems that students experience in the teaching and learning of listening and speaking in their tertiary education, as well as determine their learning needs, specifically in improving their listening and speaking skills.

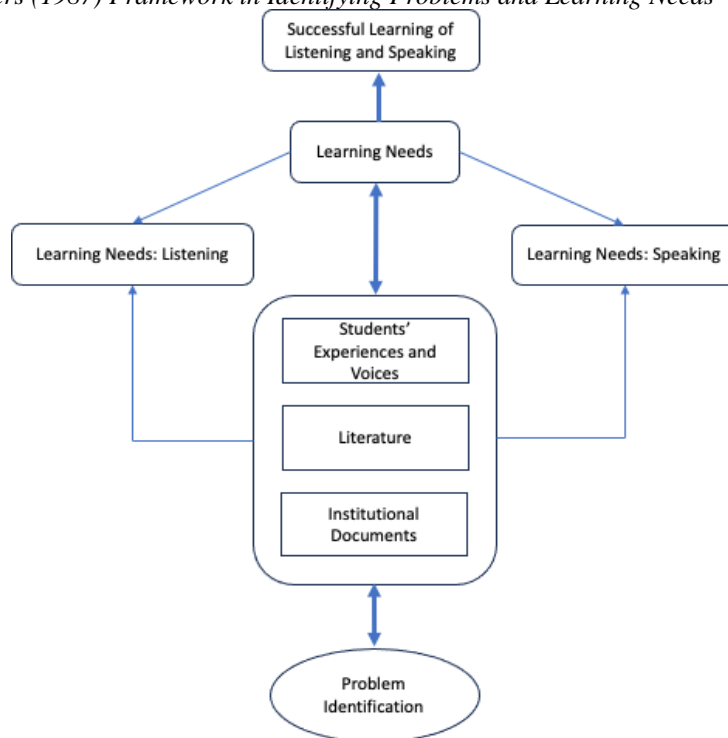
Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) framework has been used by numerous studies (Jitpanich, 2022; Rachmawati et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023) for its workable, detailed, feasible, and perceivable nature (Fadel & Rajab, 2017). Such an approach will be an effective one, especially in countries like

Bangladesh, for identifying, isolating, and analyzing the problems of listening and speaking. This is because the country's curriculum and policies are based on a top-down approach without considering the ground realities (Kabir, 2023). Furthermore, Bangladeshi learners' proficiency level in listening and speaking skills is well documented as being

below the required standard (Seraj et al., 2020). In these conditions, Hutchinson and Waters' (1986) model will be effective because, through the lens of learning needs from this model, the problems of listening and speaking skills can be easily identified, and effective measures can be taken to help the students.

Figure 1

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) Framework in Identifying Problems and Learning Needs



METHOD

In exploring and examining the problems that students faced in listening and speaking, a mixed-method research design was used. Different qualitative and quantitative instruments were designed and implemented to answer the research question.

Participant Recruitment

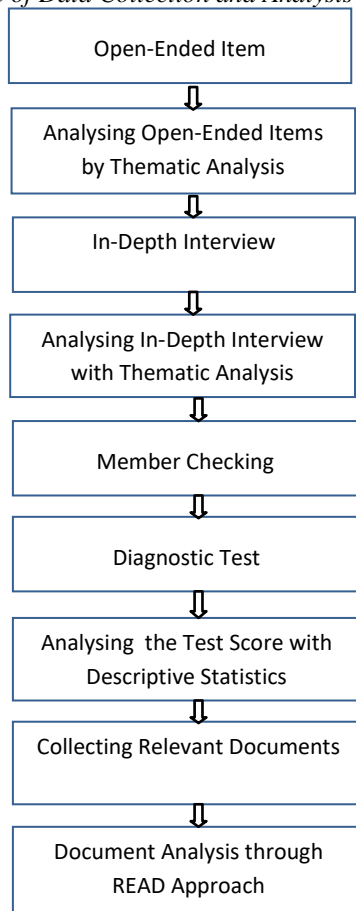
All the participants (n=32) of the present research were studying in the first-year undergraduate program at a public university in Bangladesh. They were majoring in an arts faculty department and were selected from their cohort of 50 students using the convenience sampling technique. We approached all 50 students but only 32 agreed to participate. All 32 students, with an average age of 18, had studied English as a compulsory subject for 13 years, starting from the school level up to the university admission test (Bhuia et al., 2016). In this study, they would be identified as S1, S2, S3, S4, and so on.

Instruments, Data Collection and Data Analysis

Four types of instruments were used to collect data in the present research - open-ended items, in-depth

interviews, diagnostic tests, and document analysis. All the Instruments were validated by four experts. Different types of instruments were used to ensure triangulation, which is a procedure for ensuring validity and identifying "convergence among multiple and different sources of information" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126), and "comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means" (Patton, 2002, p. 599). The researchers also used member checking as a crucial tool to validate qualitative data by presenting the data's transcripts, accounts, and interpretations to the students for verification (Robson & McCartan, 2016). While collecting data, the present research spent a considerable amount of time in the research setting to interact with the participants for a longer period of time to facilitate prolonged engagement with the aim of getting "as close as possible to participants' understanding of a phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 246). During this time the identified sample or the participants of the research were connected to the researcher through WhatsApp group for easier communication and interaction. The flow of using different data collection instruments, and data analysis were presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Sequence of Data Collection and Analysis



Open-Ended Item (OEI)

To assess the challenges and problems students are facing in listening and speaking, all 32 participants responded to an open-ended item on a piece of A4 paper. We employed OEI “to find out, in an unstructured manner” (Brown, 2009, p. 200), what the students’ problems and difficulties in terms of listening and speaking skills were. Specifically, the item was “What are the problems of listening and speaking you experienced during your academic studies?” The responses to the open-ended items were collected, organized, and thoroughly analyzed using the thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). For data analysis and presentation purposes, open-ended item participants are addressed as OEI1, OEI2, and so forth.

In-Depth Interview

This study used in-depth interviews as the primary mode of data collection in capturing rich and thorough information about the problems students faced in listening and speaking in academic studies. Six (6) students out of the thirty-two volunteered for the interviews, which lasted for 10 to 15 minutes for each student. The interview protocol was used and the questions were developed based on the themes derived from OEI, the research objective, and the research question of the present study. The

researcher explained the purpose of the interview to the participants and obtained permission from the participants to record the interview using a voice recorder.

Recordings of interviews were transcribed and read a number of times to be familiar with the data and to generate codes. Codes were checked and rechecked to derive themes related to the research objective and research question of the present study. The themes were reviewed, defined, and named according to the techniques suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The named themes and transcribed interviews were sent to the participants for member checking, which is a process of returning “transcripts, accounts, and interpretations” (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 172). They checked the themes transcribed interviews carefully and agreed with the derived themes. For data analysis and presentation purposes, in-depth interview respondents were addressed as S1, S2, and so forth.

Diagnostic Test

A diagnostic test (was carried out to assess the learners’ current level of listening and speaking proficiency. The test was necessary to measure the learners’ “ability, knowledge or performance” (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 3) in listening and speaking. Prior to designing the test, the research analyzed the test patterns conducted in Bangladeshi higher education with the aim of matching the proficiency level of the learners with the diagnostic test items appropriately. Also, the syllabus of the English for Academic Purposes course, which is mandatory for all freshmen, was reviewed for its contents so that the selected diagnostic test items were aligned with the participants’ proficiency level. Listening and speaking tests documented in the literature (Baskaran et al., 2021; Becker, 2016; Gul & Aziz, 2015; He et al., 2022; Phoodokmai, 2011; Tavakoli et al., 2023) were also reviewed and the same selection criteria were applied in finalizing the test items.

In the listening part of the test, the research adopted Becker’s (2016) strategy of using an audio file that focused on academic situations, since the current context also involved English for academic purposes. Hence, the research conducted the listening part of the diagnostic test using the audio file from The British Council Learn English website. At the onset of the test, students were briefed on: (i) the purpose of the test, (ii) the process of how they had to answer the questions, and, (iii) the time allocated for answering each item in the test. The listening test audio file was played twice in the classroom before the students were asked to complete two tasks that included (i) true-false items for 10 minutes and (ii) closed-ended items (short answer) for 15 minutes. As for the speaking component, there were two items: (i) Speaking

individually - speaking for two minutes to introduce themselves (adapted from Tavakoli et al., 2023), and (ii) Speaking in groups - students choose one topic out of four and speak about it in a group (4 students in each group, 5 minutes for each). The listening and speaking test scores that students obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics i.e. mean, median, mode, frequency, and percentage.

Document Analysis

We examined documents that functioned as a product (Prior, 2003), which with thorough analysis, provided information pertaining to teaching and learning listening and speaking, especially the relevant syllabus and exam questions. The researchers, with the assistance from faculty members, collected the syllabus of two English courses i.e. 'Professional English' (PE) and 'Communicative English' (CE) as well as past-year exam questions from the respective department (actual name of the department was not used for ethical reasons). The documents were analyzed through the READ approach (Dalglish et al., 2020) which stands for, (i) readying the materials, (ii) extracting data, (iii) analysis and, (iv) distilling findings. The documents were read thoroughly a number of times to familiarize with their contents. After familiarizing, data were extracted, and organized according to the research objective and research question, and findings were identified as a sample of document analysis.

FINDINGS

Data collected from open-ended items, in-depth interviews, diagnostic tests, and document analysis were analyzed and triangulated. It shows different types of problems that students experience in relation to teaching and learning of listening and speaking skills.

Listening Difficulty

There were five main challenges when it concerned listening: (i) pronunciation (S1, S2, S3, S4, OEI2, OEI5, OEI6, OEI9), (ii) fast speech (S3, S4 and S6, OEI9), (iii) grammar (S1, S2, OEI11, OEI12, OEI13), (iv) vocabulary (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, OEI11, OEI3, OEI17) and, (v) nervousness and lack of confidence (S1, S3, S5, S6, OEI6, OEI9, OEI11, OEI13).

Data from open-ended items and in-depth interviews indicate that following fast speech and pronunciation are challenges for the students. The fast speech of the speaker is a problem in listening because, as S4 states, 'When the speaking is fast, it becomes difficult to understand.' S6 affirms that "In listening, if it is so fast, then it is a problem." Similarly, OEI9 asserts, "When the speaker is fast, it is difficult for me to follow." S2 and S3 agree, claiming that understanding pronunciation is

difficult for them when the speaker speaks fast. This can be overcome if the speaking is at a normal speed (S4).

Most of the students are not confident in grammar, which also affects the development of other skills. S2 states that grammatical structures are quite difficult to understand while listening, especially elements like 'patterns of sentence construction' (S1, OEI11) and 'modals' (S2, OEI12). OEI13 states that "tense and preposition are difficult for me."

In addition, a lack of vocabulary creates a lot of challenges in listening as described by these students:

Lots of unfamiliar words in listening text (S1)

Listening is difficult for not understanding the words of the speaker (S2)

I don't know word meanings for that reason I cannot understand listening text (OEI11)

Vocabulary is a problem to me (OEI17)

S4 identifies "synonyms and antonyms" as difficult aspects of vocabulary when it concerns listening and speaking. Similarly OEI3 mentions that "synonyms and antonyms are challenging" to her. S5 also points out that he "cannot understand all the words while listening" and therefore, feels "nervous". These excerpts reflect students' difficulties dealing with vocabulary while listening. The diagnostic test further confirms the students' struggle with listening skills, whereby they only manage to obtain an average score of 4.75, with only 6 (18.8%) students receiving a score of 6 (out of 10). Most of the students (46.9%, $f=15$) are of intermediate level in terms of listening, attaining 5 out of 10 marks (see Table 1).

Table 1

Listening Test Score (Frequency and Percentage)

Marks (out of 10)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
3	3	9.4
4	8	25.0
5	15	46.9
6	6	18.8
Total	32	100.0

A number of students (S1, S3, S5, S6, OEI6, OEI9, OEI11, and OEI13) report that nervousness and lack of confidence are real challenges for them in listening activities. For instance, S1 reports that he feels nervous before listening to an English audio or English lecture, while S3 expresses that he lacks "confidence in listening and speaking." Similarly, OEI6 points out, "For being nervous, I can not concentrate on English classes." S5 becomes nervous while listening, which also makes S6 less confident and "affects listening performance." OEI13 agrees and claims that, for a lack of confidence, he "fails to perform well in listening and speaking."

The document analysis shows that the above problems and difficulties faced by students are not adequately addressed in the syllabus and examination questions. For instance, in the analysis of the 'Professional English' course syllabus (a mandatory course that intends to develop undergraduates' communicative competence), the emphasis throughout is placed mostly on grammatical items. While the syllabus adequately covers 'academic writing,' 'reading with sub-skills and strategies,' and 'phonetics and phonology,' it does not focus on the development of listening sub-skills. In the 'Communicative English' syllabus, which is a mandatory course that aims to support undergraduates in learning and applying linguistic knowledge, there is a concentrated focus on structure, grammar, and vocabulary. Unfortunately, there is none on the development of listening sub-skills.

In the analysis of exam questions for 'Communicative English,' we discover that only writing tasks such as question-answer, word meaning, sentence making, translation, writing letters, applications, essays, and dialogues are tested. None of the listening sub-skills are tested in the examination for 'Communicative English.' The challenges mentioned by students in the interview are clearly not addressed by the course syllabus, as reflected in the exam questions. The scrutinization of the documents indicates a significant discrepancy between the exam questions, course contents, and the challenges students face.

Speaking Difficulty

There were five main problems or challenges identified by students in speaking. They are: (i) pronunciation (S2, S3, S4, OEI6, OEI7, OEI8), (ii) vocabulary (S2, S3, S4, S6, OEI1, OEI2, OEI4, OEI5), (iii) fluency (S1, S2, S3, OEI9, OEI10, OEI11, OEI12, OEI13), (iv) grammar (S3, S4, S5, S6, OEI15, OEI17, OEI19), (v) nervousness (S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, OEI1, OEI15, OEI18, OEI20).

In speaking a number of participants face problems in pronunciation. For instance, S3 asserts that "my pronunciation is not good." OEI6 agrees with S6 and claims that "I face problems in speaking because I am not confident with my pronunciation." Similarly, S4, OEI7, and OEI8 point out that pronunciation is a problem for which they can not speak properly. OEI8 claims that for developing pronunciation, they do not get any "proper training or feedback."

When the participants are asked questions in English during the viva voce exam, many of them struggle. For example, S1 elaborates "During viva voce exam teachers ask questions in English, in that case maybe the question is easy but as it is asked in English I can not understand it." Similarly, OEI6 asserts that "as I have problems in English speaking,

during viva voce exam I face a lot of problems." S2 agrees and explains,

Most difficult is speaking obviously because I can listen properly, I can write properly, I can read properly but I can't speak properly. It seems like a big problem to speak English fluently. So I think it's speaking, which is the most difficult skill.

Students find it quite difficult to speak in an academic setting as they are not well-versed with "syntax" (S5, OEI15) and "preposition and organization of sentences" (S3, OEI17), and are not able to use "verbs" correctly (S4). These grammar-related deficiencies seriously affect them; for example, S6's "performance in listening and speaking skills," especially in terms of "sentence making" and the organization of "one sentence after another." OEI19 points out that, "I feel confused while using prepositions in speaking."

Speaking is challenging because most of the participants have issues with vocabulary (S2, S3, S6, OEI1, OEI2, OEI4, OEI5). S3, for example, relies on English-Bangla translation to understand the meaning of "unknown words" and would have problems when he doesn't "know the full word meaning in Bangla," which is the main reason why it is "quite difficult" for him. When the meaning of words is not understood or they have a limited vocabulary, they tend to become "nervous" (S6). Similarly, OEI2 states that "shortage of vocabulary makes me nervous." S2 elaborates, "English has a huge vocabulary. I face a shortage of vocabulary when I speak in front of the class," which is a sign of "lacking confidence" (S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, OEI1, OEI15, OEI18, OEI20).

They also tend to be nervous when they "don't know the proper (i.e., right or accurate) words" to use while speaking (S6). OEI20 agrees with S6 and asserts, "Vocabulary lacking makes my speaking faulty and slow. I feel nervous to speak because I don't know the meanings of a lot of words." This is further aggravated by the fact that the students were given "no feedback" (S3) and no "proper materials" (S4, OEI18) for improving vocabulary problems. All the above co-relate with the results of their diagnostic test on speaking, whereby the students obtain an average score of 6.68, which is below the median.

Table 2
Speaking Test Score (Frequency and Percentage)

Marks (Total 10)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
3.00	1	3.1
4.00	11	34.4
5.00	16	50.0
6.00	4	12.5
Total	32	100.0

The full marks for the speaking component are 10, but only 4 students (12.5%) obtained 6 marks, which is the highest mark achieved by any of the students. Half of the respondents (f = 16; 50%) are

at the intermediate level (5 marks), while 11 (34.4%) of them obtained 4 marks, which is below the intermediate level.

Most of the students clearly express that they have problems with speaking fluently (S1, S2, S3, OEI9, OEI10, OEI11, OEI12, OEI13). For instance, S2 is “not at all fluent in speaking” and so is S3, who narrates, “fluency is needed, but without grammatical knowledge and other speaking problems, there is no fluency in my speaking.” OEI10 agrees and asserts that “I have a number of problems in my speaking. Fluency is one of them.” Many of the students associate speaking skills and nervousness (S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, OEI15, OEI20). These excerpts below demonstrate the link between nervousness and speaking.

While speaking in the class, feel nervous as there are a lot of people listening (S2)

It feels bad that I will not be able to arrange them, then become nervous (S3)

As I have a number of problems in speaking such as grammar and pronunciation, so feel nervous (S4)

I think if I make mistakes what teachers will think of me. So feel nervous while speaking. (OEI15)

I know that my speaking is not good enough. My teachers and friends might make fun of me if I speak like this. It makes me nervous. (OEI20)

As found for the listening component, the document analysis of PE and CE also reveals the lack of attention given to speaking components such as pronunciation (S2, S3, S4, OEI16, OEI17, OEI18), vocabulary (S2, S3, S4, S6, OEI1, OEI2, OEI14, OEI15), fluency (S1, S2, S3, OEI9, OEI10, OEI11, OEI12, OEI13), and grammar (S3, S4, S5, S6, OEI15, OEI17, OEI19). The element of speaking confidently, which leads to nervousness, is also tellingly missing in the PE and CE syllabuses (S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, OEI11, OEI15, OEI18, OEI20).

DISCUSSION

The present study recorded university students' own voices expressing challenges in listening and speaking. Participants claimed that they have grammatical problems in these areas. Students' grammatical difficulties in both listening and speaking skills indicate insufficient needs-focused course content and proper teaching methodology. Most of the participants have problems with sentence grammar, which refers to the mastery of grammatical items and syntactic structures used to produce “grammatically well-formed sentences in English” (Richards, 2015, p. 262). Numerous studies (Fitriani, 2019; Kanwal et al., 2022; Lengkoan et al., 2022; Nor et al., 2019) have documented students' grammatical errors in their

listening and speaking abilities, indicating that grammar is a barrier for students in these areas. Ajaj (2022) contends that students' grammatical issues are a result of outdated curricula and teaching methods. However, Schenck (2021) asserts that the difficulty of grammar aspects varies depending on the learner's L1. Grammatical errors create complications due to the differences between the “grammatical constructions of the mother-tongue languages and those of the English language” (Matiso, 2023, p. 308). Nevertheless, prompt introduction of corrective feedback (Schenck, 2021) can be effective in overcoming grammatical difficulties.

Findings from the document analysis reveal the inclusion of irrelevant grammatical items such as word formation, transformation, parts of speech, register, phrase, clause, sentence structure, and ‘WH’ questions. These do not address the students' needs for listening and speaking, which are sentence making, modals, prepositions, verbs, and syntax. These indicate flawed teaching practices that overlook students' needs and include irrelevant items as teaching content, which are of no use to the students. Though there are many grammatical constructs and distinctions in a language, not all of them are always helpful to second language learners (Richards, 2015). Therefore, needs analysis is warranted in establishing the “current condition of learning in a particular learning context” (Yunita et al., 2018, p. 85).

Data revealed that pronunciation is a problem for many participants in both listening and speaking skills, which is consistent with previous studies (see Fitriani & Zulkarnain, 2019; Huyen, 2023; Kanwal et al., 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Students' problems in pronunciation are due to the fact that the majority of the students come from Bengali medium educational backgrounds, where pronunciation teaching does not receive sufficient focus. Moreover, students do not get sufficient pronunciation practice opportunities in pre-university education. However, research (Richards, 2015; Syafitri et al., 2023) suggests that pronunciation difficulty is due to the complex sound system of English, which poses various problems for second or foreign language learners. These include different sounds that are absent in the mother tongue (Luthfianda et al., 2024), rules of stress patterns and intonations (Syafitri et al., 2023), consonants, and long and short vowels (Syafiq & Hafiz, 2023). Moreover, a sound could be phonemically present in learners' mother tongue and in the English language but pronounced in different ways (Luthfianda et al., 2024). All these complexities contribute to the delay in learning pronunciation.

Findings from open-ended items, in-depth interviews, and document analysis indicate that insufficient teaching effort and teaching materials

are the main reasons for students' problems with pronunciation. This implies that serious attention must be given to teaching that focuses on phonological and phonetic elements in authentic communication settings, so that students are effectively guided on accurate pronunciation that prevents "communication breakdowns" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 114). Moreover, the use of creative and effective teaching approaches, aided by meaningful teaching materials, would address the complex sound system of English, including its intonation, stress patterns, and specific articulatory features (Richards, 2015; Syafiq & Hafiz, 2023; Syafitri et al., 2023; Wardhaugh, 1970). Such an effort would assist students in familiarizing themselves with different varieties of English (Jackson, 2004; Stakanova, 2014).

Additionally, data illustrate that students did not receive any proper feedback on their pronunciation in the classroom. This indicates a lack of pedagogical training among teachers, that leads to a failure to help students address pronunciation problems. Literature suggests that lack of feedback is one of the main causes of students' inability to learn pronunciation effectively (Baker & Burri, 2016; Yulia, 2019). Through proper feedback students can learn which language item they "need to work on and which feature they have made progress" (Muhsins, 2016, p. 26), as well as produce correct target sounds and address incorrect substitution of sounds (Richards, 2015). All these indicate that proper feedback is one of the most important contributing factors to a learner's pronunciation development (Baker & Burri, 2016).

Students in this study encounter vocabulary-related problems that hinder their listening and speaking skills, as previous studies have also discovered (see Kanwal et al., 2022; Nor et al., 2019; Nushi & Orouji, 2020). Students' vocabulary problems indicate an insufficient focus on needs-focused approaches in the curriculum and course content. This implies that an important aspect, such as vocabulary, is neglected in teaching and testing. However, from the points of view of Bergström et al. (2022), one of the reasons for vocabulary challenges is the sheer number of words that need to be learned. This challenge, however, can only be addressed effectively if high vocabulary targets are set and pursued (Schmitt, 2008).

Students in this study, however, come across many unfamiliar words in a very short period, making them constantly pause to gauge the meaning of those words. These hesitations make the students miss the next part of listening (Hardiyanto et al., 2021). Additionally, students appear to translate English words into Bangla to understand them, which further delays their ability to decipher entire sentences (Alroe & Reinders, 2015). To address these challenges, learners should actively engage with words to enhance vocabulary learning

(Schmitt, 2008; Stroud, 2014). This could be attained by planning enjoyable and challenging gamification tasks to effectively engage learners in word learning (Zainal, 2023). Such tasks can help learners use learned words more frequently (Lui & Lam, 2012; Panmei & Waluyo, 2023). Similarly, image-to-text recognition (Shadiev et al., 2020) can be another fruitful way of engaging learners. For instance, learners can take pictures of specific objects and label them using an image-to-text recognition approach (Shadiev et al., 2020), empowering them to take ownership of their learning based on their needs and interests.

Anxiety, lack of confidence, and hesitation are some of the barriers that students endure while listening and speaking. They feel nervous before listening to English lectures or content, as well as speaking in English in front of other students and teachers. These issues arise from the fact that the majority of students come from middle-class economic backgrounds and completed their pre-university education in Bengali-medium educational institutes, where they received almost no training in listening and speaking skills. Literature indicates different factors that contribute to students' anxiety, lack of confidence, and hesitation. For instance, a lack of content can make students feel unprepared and unable to engage effectively in listening and speaking tasks (Nurhalisa et al., 2023). Additionally, grammar mistakes, mispronounced words, and limited vocabulary exacerbate their anxiety, making them hesitant to communicate in English (Habiburrahim et al., 2020). The demotivating nature of the classroom, including rigid teaching methods and lack of encouragement, further discourages students from active participation (Zhang et al., 2020). Moreover, the limited use and practice of English for daily communication leaves students with insufficient exposure, hindering their confidence and fluency (Susilowati, 2019).

These negative vibes could be reduced by engaging students in a more relaxed classroom condition (Yasmin et al., 2024) and forging interaction via discussions and group work (Filipe, 2023).

On reflecting upon this research, we concur with Hamid and Erling's (2016) observation, based on a myriad of literature (such as Bianco, 2014; Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2000, 2001) that "the complexity of English language policies in developing societies which are shaped by global and local forces" (p. 26) needs to be "contextualized within wider development issues" (p. 39). This means that students' learning needs should also be examined by, and connected to, the lenses of national agendas and development policies. Identifying learning needs, without considering national aims and societal aspirations, would be deficient and, more significantly, detrimental to the nation's development and progress. This is

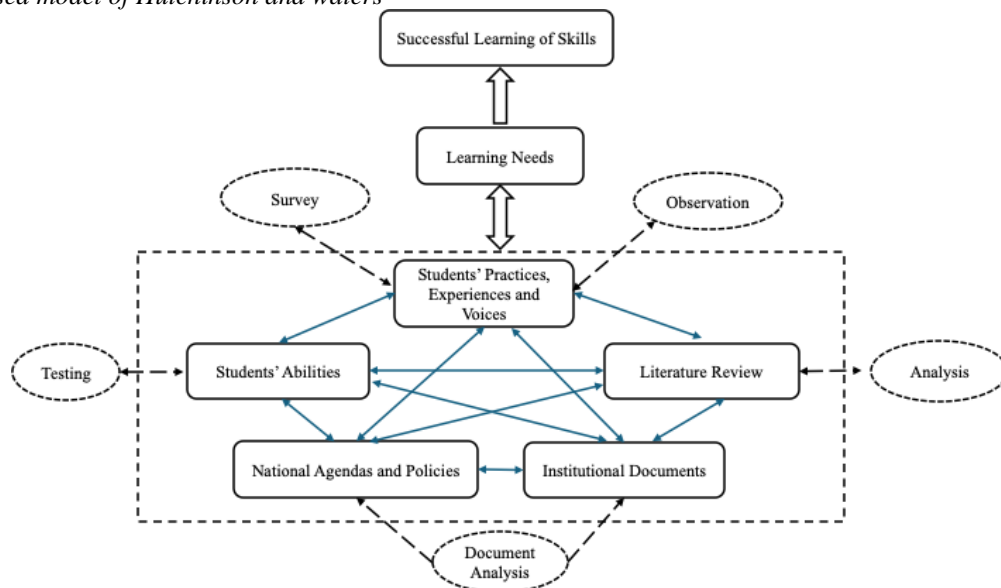
especially true when English is considered an important tool for a 'global informational economy' that integrates "countries and regions into the global market" (Warschauer, 2000, p. 529). Moreover, language policy is crucial for understanding how "authoritative institutions such as governments and education systems construct the future possibilities for languages within their jurisdictions and attempt to shape emerging linguistic ecologies" (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019, p. 3). This is particularly evident in countries where English is deemed a second, third, or foreign language, such as Bangladesh (Hamid & Erling, 2016), China (Gil, 2016), Vietnam (Bui & Nguyen, 2016), Hong Kong (Jeon, 2016), Japan (Glasgow & Paller, 2016), and Malaysia (Rahman & Singh, 2021).

From the above arguments, the existing Hutchinson and Waters (1987) framework, as enacted, is lacking in the context of developing and third-world countries where English is, or is developing as, an essential part of the countries' socio-cultural and economic systems. In reflection, and in tandem with our experiences of planning and carrying out this research, we believe that the Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) model should be refined and improved, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 depicts a constructive, comprehensive, and dynamic needs analysis that contemplates and considers five interconnected variables and elements (students' practices, experiences, and voices; students' abilities; national agenda and policies; institutional documents; and relevant literature review) that would inform students' learning needs. We postulate that these variables intersect with each other on different levels and varying degrees, and in amalgamation, they would provide a very comprehensive understanding of the students' needs that benefits them, as well as the institution and the nation. For example, students' practices and experiences of language use positively affect their abilities (D'warte, 2014); students' abilities could be ascertained by a systematic literature review (Mihret & Joshi, 2024; Suseno, 2023); and institutional documents could be a rich source of learning for students (Vieira, 2017). Their needs are ascertained using different but meaningful instruments that include surveys, testing, document analysis, literature analysis, and observation. The more instruments used, the better our understanding of students' needs becomes (Nugraha, 2002).

Figure 3

Improvised model of Hutchinson and waters



CONCLUSION

The study attempts to examine problems experienced by the higher education students in two important communication skills i.e. listening and speaking. Data demonstrate that students face considerable challenges in listening and speaking that include grammar, vocabulary, coping with fast speech, fluency, nervousness, and lack of confidence. Findings indicate that the problems students face in these two skills are direct consequences of: (i) the overemphasis of grammar

in course syllabus and not on communication and related sub-skills; (ii) teaching of irrelevant contents and; (iii) an examination system that overlooks listening and speaking skills.

Findings indicate that teachers may have seriously lacked pedagogical knowledge or failed to incorporate practices, which help students overcome their listening and speaking problems. This has to be determined and addressed accordingly, as the lack of pedagogical knowledge and practice directly influences teaching-learning quality. Professional

development programs that are based on scientific needs analysis should be organized, assessed, and further improved to enrich teachers' knowledge and skills (Kheswa et al., 2014) in helping students develop listening and speaking proficiency.

Hence, we suggest that future needs analysis studies adopt the quadruple research instrument approach used in this study. Such a holistic approach provides valuable insights into previously unexplored problems related to students' communication skills and the causes of these problems. It would enlighten researchers, teaching professionals, curriculum designers, and stakeholders to understand the intricacies and complexities of these problems and thus construct proper measures for revising curricula and methodologies.

Future research can be conducted by following the comprehensive needs analysis framework used in the present study, tailored to assess the listening and speaking learning needs of students in other educational contexts for developing proficiency in different language skills. Since the present study investigated first-year undergraduates, future research can focus on different academic levels, as well as other required academic skills.

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