

Identifying Barriers to Spoken English Proficiency: A Case Study of NUML Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the key challenges faced by students of the English Department at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Pakistan, in developing spoken English proficiency. Employing a quantitative research approach, data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 10 close-ended questions. A total of 20 students—12 males and 8 females from various semesters—participated in the study through random sampling. Statistical tools and graphical analysis were used to interpret the data. Findings reveal a range of persistent issues that hinder students' spoken English skills, including grammatical errors, pronunciation difficulties, shyness, anxiety, low confidence, and fear of making mistakes. Additional challenges such as limited functional vocabulary, lack of performance opportunities, and the complexity of language structures further impact their oral communication abilities. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted pedagogical interventions to address these barriers and enhance students' communicative competence in English.

Keywords: Spoken English, language anxiety, NUML students, communication barriers, English proficiency challenges

INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is taught and learned across the globe due to a range of influential factors. Historically, English gained global prominence through the legacy of the British Empire. Politically, the dominance of the United States as a global superpower has further reinforced the status of English. Moreover, the rise of science, technology, and the internet—including the widespread accessibility of the World Wide Web—has positioned English as a gateway to international communication and global participation.

Today, English is viewed not just as a subject, but as a passport to academic, professional, and personal opportunities. Learners around the world, especially those aiming to study at prestigious English-speaking universities (Maxom, 2009), see English as a vital skill to integrate into the global community.

Among the four essential language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—**speaking** is arguably the most immediate and practical. Speaking is as old as human existence itself, and remains a core means of expressing thoughts, emotions, and identity. Dale Carnegie (1997) emphasized that speech is a powerful tool of communication and a defining human quality. A person's speech not only reflects their ideas but also shapes how their personality is perceived by others. When someone struggles to communicate clearly, it may indicate inner anxiety or fear, leading to misjudgment by others.

Ur (1996) states that speaking is a critical skill in language acquisition—so much so that people often equate language mastery with speaking ability. In other words, those who can speak a language are considered fluent, even if they are less proficient in reading or writing it.

The concept of speaking has been defined in many ways. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, speaking refers to the act of expressing thoughts through the spoken word. It involves producing sounds that form meaningful and understandable sentences. Speaking is also a two-way process that includes listening, turn-taking, and conveying thoughts, opinions, or emotions. It requires both the construction and comprehension of meaning in real-time interaction.

For EFL learners, speaking is often the most challenging skill to master. Developing spoken fluency requires not just knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but also confidence, cultural awareness, and opportunities to practice in real contexts. When learners build effective communication skills, they become better equipped to use English functionally and meaningfully in their academic and social lives.

Problem Statement

As Harmer (2001) explains, English is not the first language of the majority of the global population. Rather, it functions as a **lingua franca**, a shared means of communication between speakers whose native languages are different. This makes learning English a complex task for many, particularly for those who begin learning it in adulthood.

Yule (1996) also emphasizes that acquiring a second language poses numerous challenges. Learners often start late in life, interact in English only occasionally, and continue to rely on their native language for day-to-day communication. In many cases, the unfamiliar sounds, and structures of English present an additional hurdle.

This study investigates the specific challenges faced by students in the English Department at NUML Hyderabad Campus when it comes to speaking English fluently and confidently.

Research Objective

- To explore the key issues faced by NUML students in developing spoken English proficiency.

Research Question

- What are the main challenges encountered by NUML students while speaking English?

Ethical Consideration

This research was conducted in strict accordance with ethical research standards. No harm was caused to participants at any stage of the study. Participants were treated with respect and dignity, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Data was analyzed impartially, and the results were presented fairly, without any bias based on ethnicity, religion, gender, or language.

Significance of the Study

Speaking is a powerful and practical skill that supports the development of other language competencies such as grammar, vocabulary, and writing. When students engage in spoken communication, they refine their ability to express thoughts, narrate stories, ask questions, and discuss ideas. More importantly, speaking has real-world implications: it enhances confidence, opens doors to academic and professional opportunities, and prepares students for diverse roles in society.

Baker and Westrup (2003) affirm that students who develop English-speaking proficiency enjoy greater prospects in education, employment, and personal development. As English continues to dominate the global job market, fluent speakers are better equipped to compete and succeed.

This study is particularly significant because it sheds light on the real challenges students face in acquiring spoken English skills. By identifying common barriers such as fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and pronunciation issues, this research offers practical insights for educators and learners alike. The findings can inform the design of more effective teaching strategies and boost learners' confidence and fluency, ultimately helping them express themselves more clearly and successfully in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Afshar and Asakereh (2016) conducted a study examining the speaking skill problems encountered by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors from both the students' and their instructors' perspectives. The study involved 238 Iranian undergraduate students—138 freshmen and 100 seniors—alongside 30 English instructors from four state universities: Zanzan University, Bu-Ali Sina University (Hamadan), Shahid Chamran University (Ahvaz), and Khoramabad University. Participants were selected through cluster random sampling. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, the researchers employed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated several key issues: an inefficient educational system, fear of making mistakes, and a notable lack of meaningful differences between the perceptions of students (freshmen and seniors) and their instructors regarding the challenges in speaking skills.

Al Hosni (2014) explored the speaking difficulties encountered by young EFL learners through observation and interviews. The results revealed that students primarily struggled with linguistic challenges, overreliance on their mother tongue, and inhibition. While teachers acknowledged the importance of speaking skills, the study highlighted that they often prioritized reading and writing to meet syllabus requirements, dedicating insufficient time to developing oral proficiency.

Mulyono, Ferawati, Sari, and Ningsih (2019) investigated factors contributing to speaking anxiety among EFL students using a qualitative approach. Seven international students studying at three different Indonesian universities were interviewed. The findings indicated that language barriers, negative self-perception, and intercultural communication apprehension were the primary contributors to speaking anxiety.

Oktavia (2013/2014) carried out a study to explore the problems faced by English department students during classroom speaking activities and the underlying causes. The results showed that common issues

included inhibition and the sense of having "nothing to say." These challenges were attributed to factors such as limited English proficiency, lack of practice, and ineffective teaching strategies that failed to engage students in meaningful speaking activities.

Al Nakhala (2016) conducted a study at Al Quds Open University in Gaza, Palestine, focusing on the difficulties encountered by English language students in speaking. Data were gathered through observation and interviews. The study found that fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence were among the major speaking barriers. The researcher recommended fostering a supportive and motivating learning environment to encourage students to speak more frequently and confidently in English.

Al-Jamal,A.D and Al-Jamal,A.G(2014) conducted a study about an investigation of the difficulties faced by EFL undergraduates in speaking skills. This study was conducted in mixed method. In this study the data were collected by two ways which were survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The result of this study showed that main difficulties faced by EFL undergraduates in speaking skills were large classes, communication in L1 and lack of time.

Al-Rabi (2008) stated and presented a solid reason that the textbooks do not contain some sort of oral activities, that may help practicing the learners, and this lack causes difficulty among learners. In this way he suggested that the course books must include some kind of oral exercises like songs, rhymes, or stories, that a learner perform orally. This conversational style makes students able to enjoy and learn, in order to make better speaking abilities.

Tanveer (2007) analyzed some important causes that were evolve in creating a restriction seeking and learning speaking ability, and how these factors effects on target language communication. The consequences of this analysis showed that the causes of these restricting factors were directly proportional in learning the language and their speaking performance. He stressed that the raise in anxiety slows down the speaking ability and performance of the learner.

Al-Lawati(1995) observed the hindrances faced by the Omani pupils, in producing verbal English and gave a point that the linguistic elements such as discourse, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary etc. are the main things that come in category of difficulties and obstacles in learning. According to him this is because of lack of opportunity in the curriculum for the purpose of learning and practicing the grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In this way the students could not learn some different or new type of grammatical skills or adding new vocabulary. He proposed that curriculum must be designated accordingly.

Boonkit (2010) examined and figure out some factors to enhance learners' speaking abilities and skills. He found that the appropriate use of activities would be fairly a good idea in order to lessen the anxiety level among learners. He found in his result and he suggested that student should be free in selecting the topic for his speech, in this way students will feel comfortable, and they will be confident while speaking on any type of topic.

Zhang (2009) arguably stated that for most of the English learners speaking is a very difficult area, and this is very complex phenomenon to be tackled. Therefore, many of the learners could not compete with speaking while communicating in English.

Ur (1996) believed that there are a number of factors that create difficulty in speaking; some of them are listed below:

1. Inhibition: This factor points out the idea of the students' personal approach to his speaking abilities, for instance, he gets nervous, feel hesitate, lack of confidence, fear of public speaking, or fear to be criticized on mistakes etc.
2. Nothing to say: Lack of motives in students' that could express them.
3. Low or uneven participation: In large classes many students could not get the chances to participate. In some case also the dominant students talk and get chance to perform while many other remain silent or speak little.
4. Mother tongue use: Mother tongue is easier and students who have the same mother tongue try to speak in mother tongue because in the one hand it is easy and on the other hand they feel less to be exposed.

Tuan and Mai (2015) who came up with study on Vietnamese EFL, the performance of the learners found that certain factors are highly affecting the students' performance such as topical knowledge, listening skills, motivation, positive feedback from teacher, confidence, and an appropriate time given to the students to perform well for speaking, hence enhancing their skills and abilities for speaking.

Existing literature highlights the complex and deeply personal nature of speaking in a foreign language, yet the issue remains underexplored in context-specific academic environments. Mahripah (2014) points out that societal expectations often equate fluency in speaking with academic success, placing undue pressure on students. While developing full command over a language is inherently challenging, Mahripah emphasizes the role of interpersonal skills in helping learners express their thoughts, emotions, and judgments. Similarly, Horwitz (2010) underscores the psychological complexities of learning a foreign language, particularly the speaking component, which often induces anxiety. He advocates for a deeper understanding of how individual-level dynamics such as self-perceived anxiety, physiological responses (e.g., heart rate), and idiodynamic self-assessments affect students during speaking tasks. Despite these valuable insights, there remains a significant research gap regarding how such psychological and interpersonal factors impact EFL learners in specific institutional settings, such as NUML Hyderabad. The need for localized studies that explore these challenges in depth especially from the students' perspectives remains urgent and underrepresented in current scholarship.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quantitative Approach

This research is conducted with the approach of quantitative methodology in order to investigate the issues of students' poor speaking skills at National University of Modern language Hyderabad campus. According to Fraenke, Wallen and Hyun (2016), in a examination method, where the researchers collect information starting from a group of students through questionnaire items. Some of the elements as depend on the gathering, collection and analysis of, explain, numerical data to describe, predict, or control phenomenon and variables of interest (Gay, Mills, and Airasian, 2009). It is empirical research so the whole data is in the form of numbers (Punch, 2009).

Sampling

The study is conducted on the selected population of National University of Modern Language Hyderabad, where the sampling procedure is followed by randomization from various semesters. The size of the sample is the certain amount, and which is 20 students only. Among the participants, there are 12 Male students and 8 Female students. These students are fall in the age from 18 to 23. The priority of the study is to keep personal information of participants confidential which comes under the consideration of ethics and personal privacy. The research has element of additional requirement that quantitative study

fundamentally attempts to clarify the problem using numbers and goes to generalize the study from a larger population.

Research Instrument

The study is conducted with authentic data collection with the consents of all participants. The instrument which is used to collect data in this study is questionnaire. This instrument is selected because of the nature of the study is quantities. The questionnaire is a research instrument containing of a sequence of questions for the purpose of collecting information from participants. The questionnaire contains 10 authentic and revised questions in order to collect the exact information according to the research, along with clear instruction that showed guidance in fulfilling the answers. The nature of questionnaire is based on closed-ended questions. Questionnaire validity and reliability, As, per requirement when the researcher designed any questionnaire, subsequently researcher makes it clear from supervisor. In order to make validity and reliability the questionnaire of this study is shared with supervisor, and after his checking and feedback this research questionnaire reached to its maximum authentic level. After his final approve of questionnaire that there is consistent and accuracy, then the further data collection was proceeded.

Data Collection Procedure

The data is collected from the primary source of data which is questionnaire. The time period of data collection was 4 days. The target of data collection as a setting area is National University of Modern Language. As the participants were from English department, therefore the data is collected from various semesters. The permission was taken from the class teacher and the questionnaires were distributed among the classes with clear instructions that their data would be secured and would be used only for research purpose. Finally, all the participants were satisfied with the ethical consideration of the study and provided the data that was required.

DATA ANALYSIS

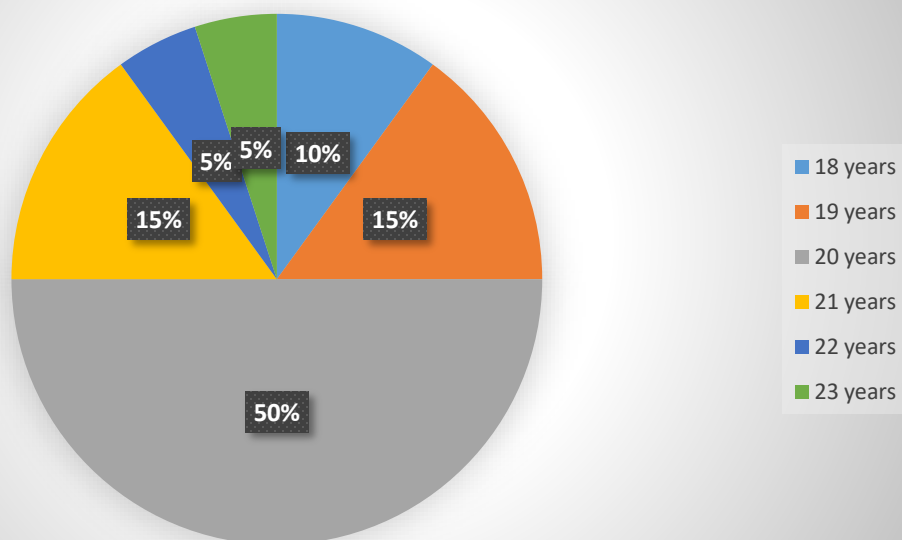
Background of participants:

Following table shows the background of the participants

Age	Sex	Mother tongue	Semester	Department
18-22 years	Male and female	Sindhi, Urdu, Saraiki, Baluchi and Japanese	2 nd to 5th	BS English

Age ratio of the participants

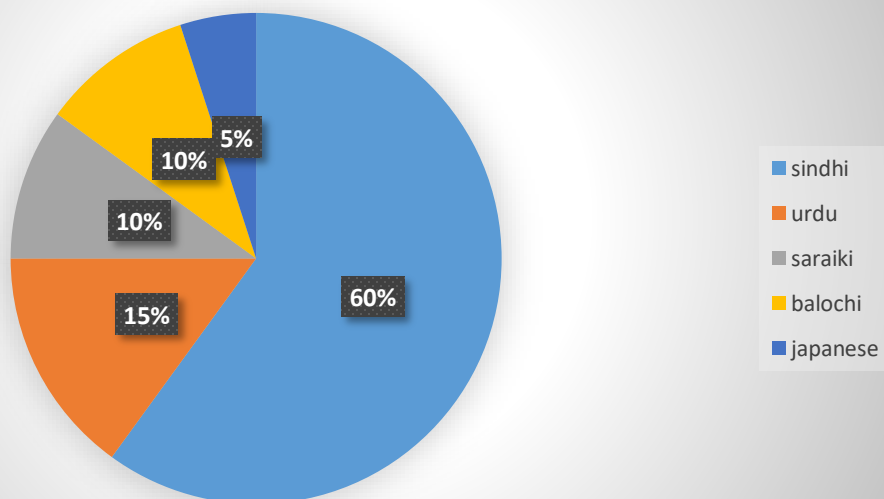
Age difference among participants.



The study has analyzed the data among the participants of various age, there are 10 percent of participants fall in the age line of 18 years and 15 percent participants are of 19 and 21 years, the medium age is 22 years and 23 years with percentage of 5. The majority of participants belong to the age line of 20 years that are 50 percent and minimum percentage of participants come beneath the age level of 22 and 23 years only with 5 percent.

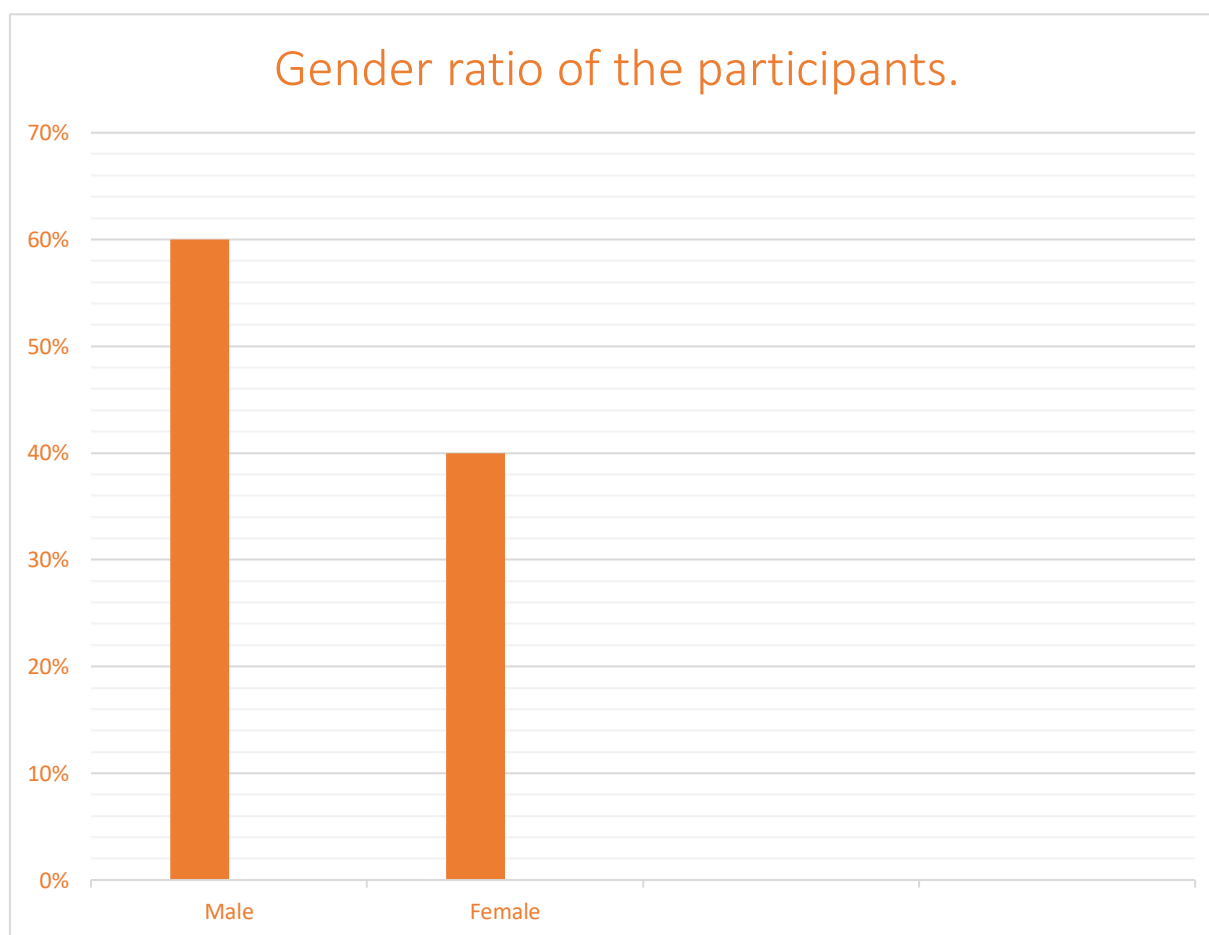
Mother tongue of the participants

Mother tongue of the participants



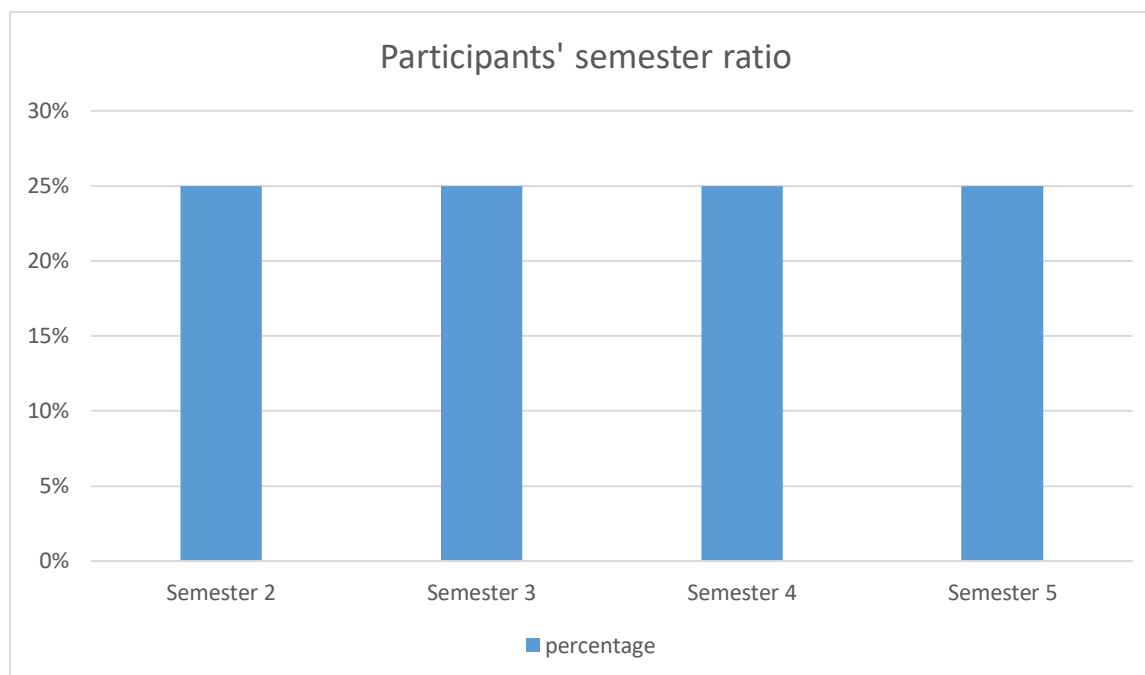
The study shows that the different number of participants has their different respective mother tongues. The ratio of the Sindhi speakers is highest up to 60%, while there is the ratio of 15%, 10%, 10% and 5 % of Urdu, Saraiki, Balochi and Japanese respectively. The above data shows that all of the participants speak different languages at their home rather than English language.

Gender of the participants.



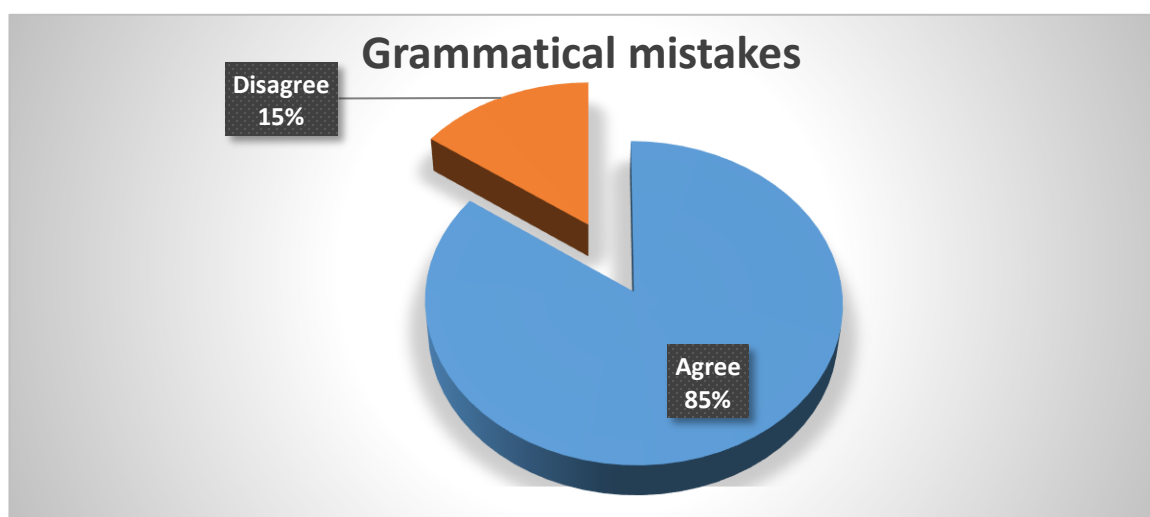
The overall data is collected from 20 participants. There are the greater percentage of male participants that is 60 percent. Male students are from various age and semesters with respective with distinguish mother tongue. Whereas female participants are in less ratio with 40 percent along with their different gender attributes of linguistic use and various background of Pakistani culture such as one female participant is Japanese.

Semester of the participants



The participants evolve in this study were from semester 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th. Five participants are taken from each semester. The ratio of all the participants with respect to their semester is 25%.

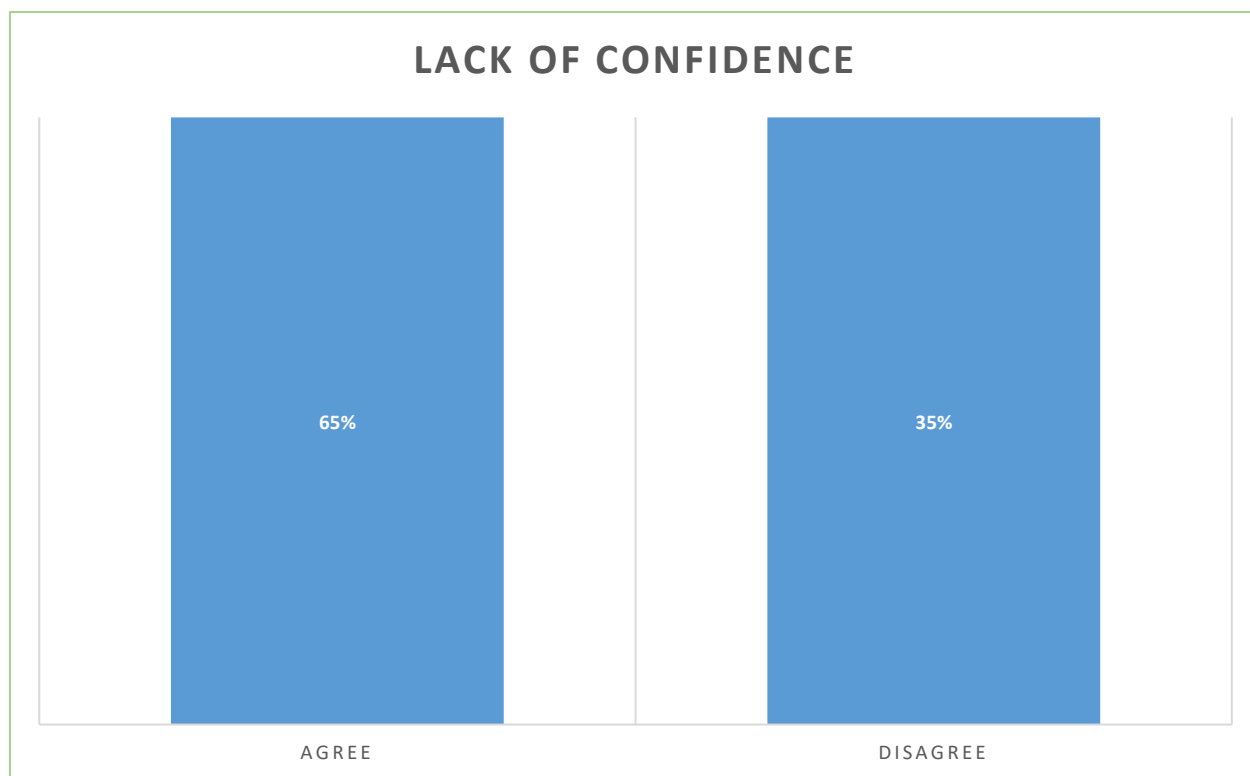
Q1: Do you make common grammatical mistakes while speaking the English language?



As above mention figure shows that 15 percent participants are not making any common grammatical mistakes, but majority of the participants agree on having grammatical mistakes while talking in English language. The percentage of participants that are making common mistakes is 85 percent. As the study

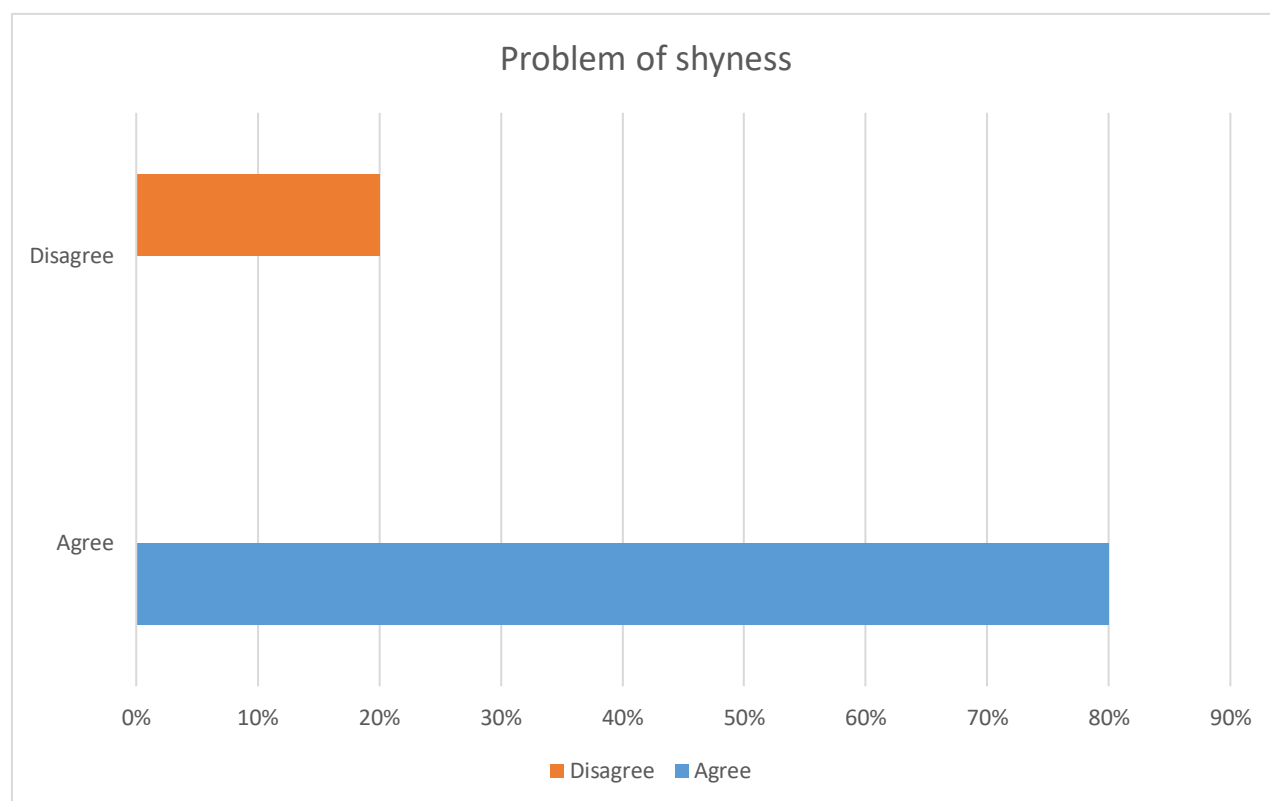
has observed that learning English as second language is difficult using the concept of grammar, somehow the students can use appropriate grammar in writing because in writing they are getting time to think but when it comes to speaking, they have less time to think about grammar and therefore they make common grammatical mistakes.

Q2: lack of confidence is one of the reasons by which the students cannot speak the English language; do you feel that there is lack of confidence in you?



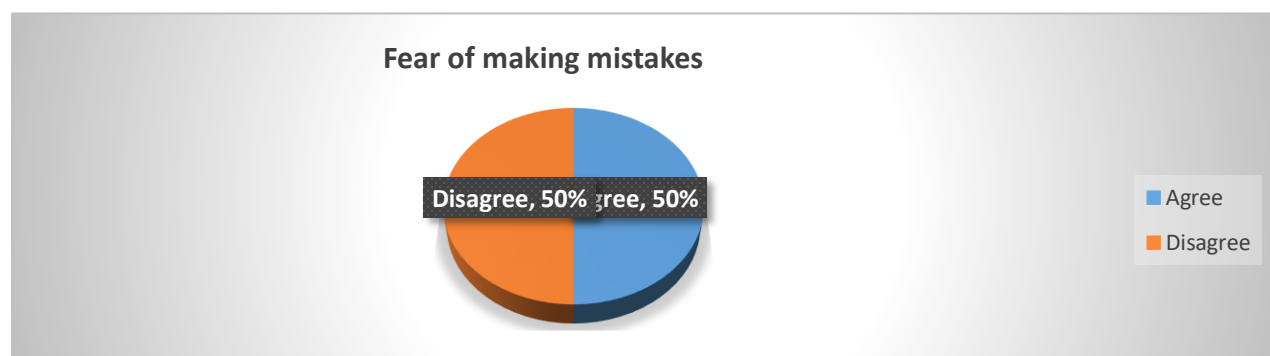
Confidence is the key element to have public speaking as well as conversation. The study shows that 35 percent of the participants are having good confidence to carry English language and convey their message boldly. Where majority shows that there is lack of confidence in them while standing in front people. They feel scarcity of confidence in delivering the message or idea in English language. The percentage of participants those feel lack of confidence is 65 percent. They nearly cannot express everything in English due to the resistance of boldness and dauntlessness that hinder them to be good expressers in English as their second language.

Q3: Shyness is also one of the factors by which the students cannot speak the English language. It is kinds of feeling which you feel while in speaking the English language in front of all.



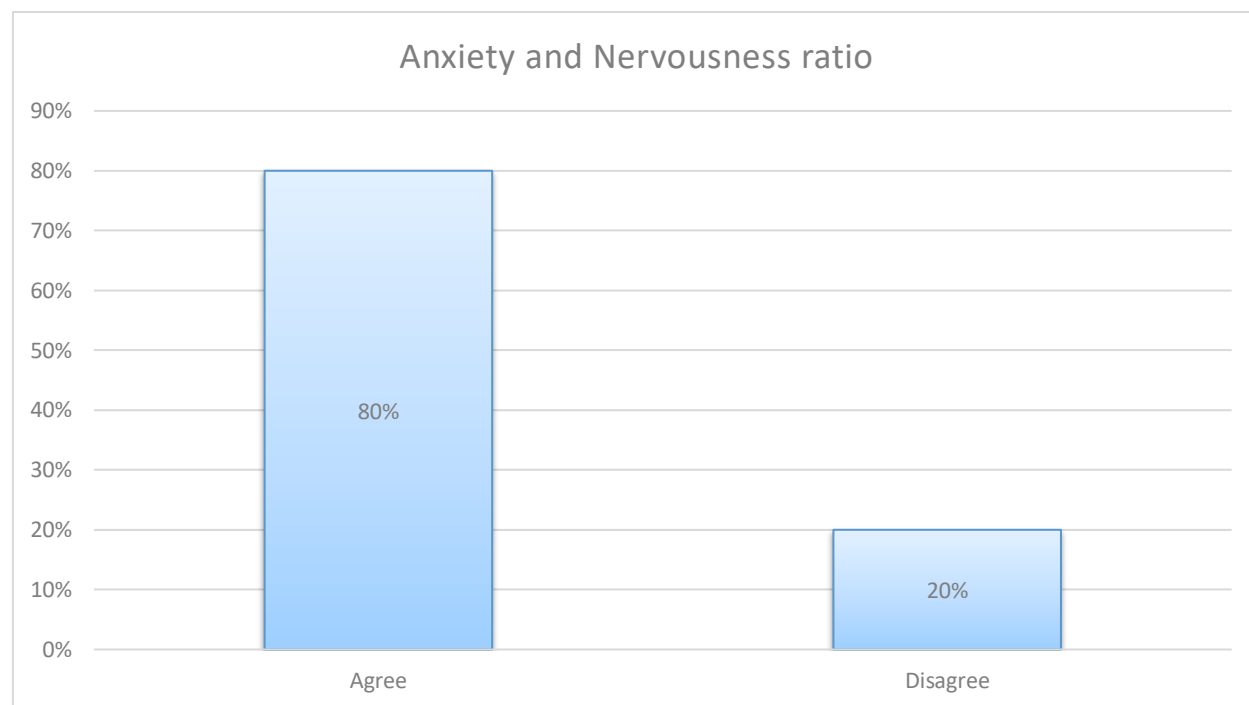
Shyness is the feeling of fear, awkwardness, or scarcity of comfort generally when a student is around the social interaction. The study shows that 80 percent of the participants feel shyness in English language while having social interaction. This is the characteristic of having low self-esteem regarding competence and performance of English language and in another terms, this can be referred as social phobia or social anxiety. And the 20 percent of participants are not facing such problem of shyness.

Q4: Do you feel ashamed of making mistakes in speaking the English language because of thinking that people will laugh on you?



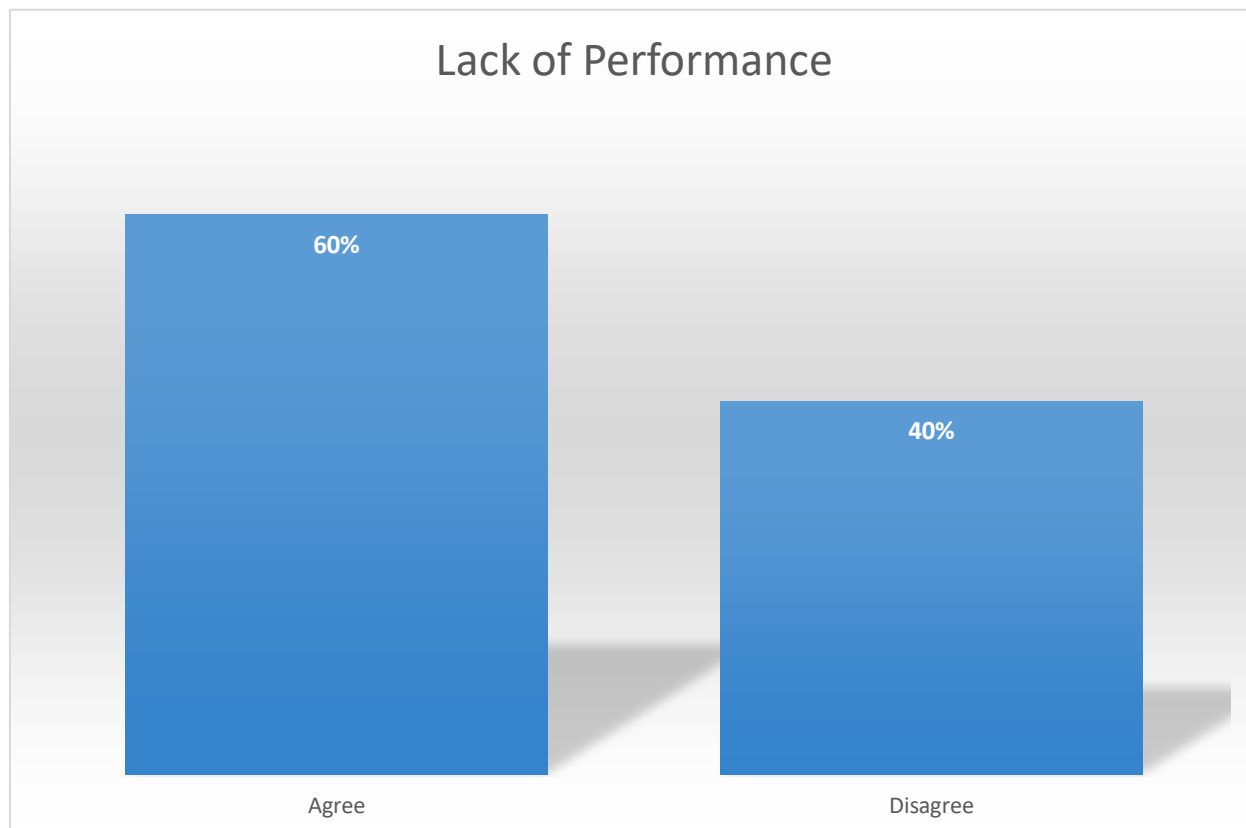
While learning anything one has to make mistakes in order to achieve required achievement, but as the study shows that 50 percent of the participants are feeling fear in making mistakes in front of the people while 50 percent are not going through this severe hesitation. The mistakes are necessary element to create the English language better and whereas this fear of making mistakes cause the hindrance in speaking the English language.

Q5: Do you feel anxiety and nervousness during speaking the English language?



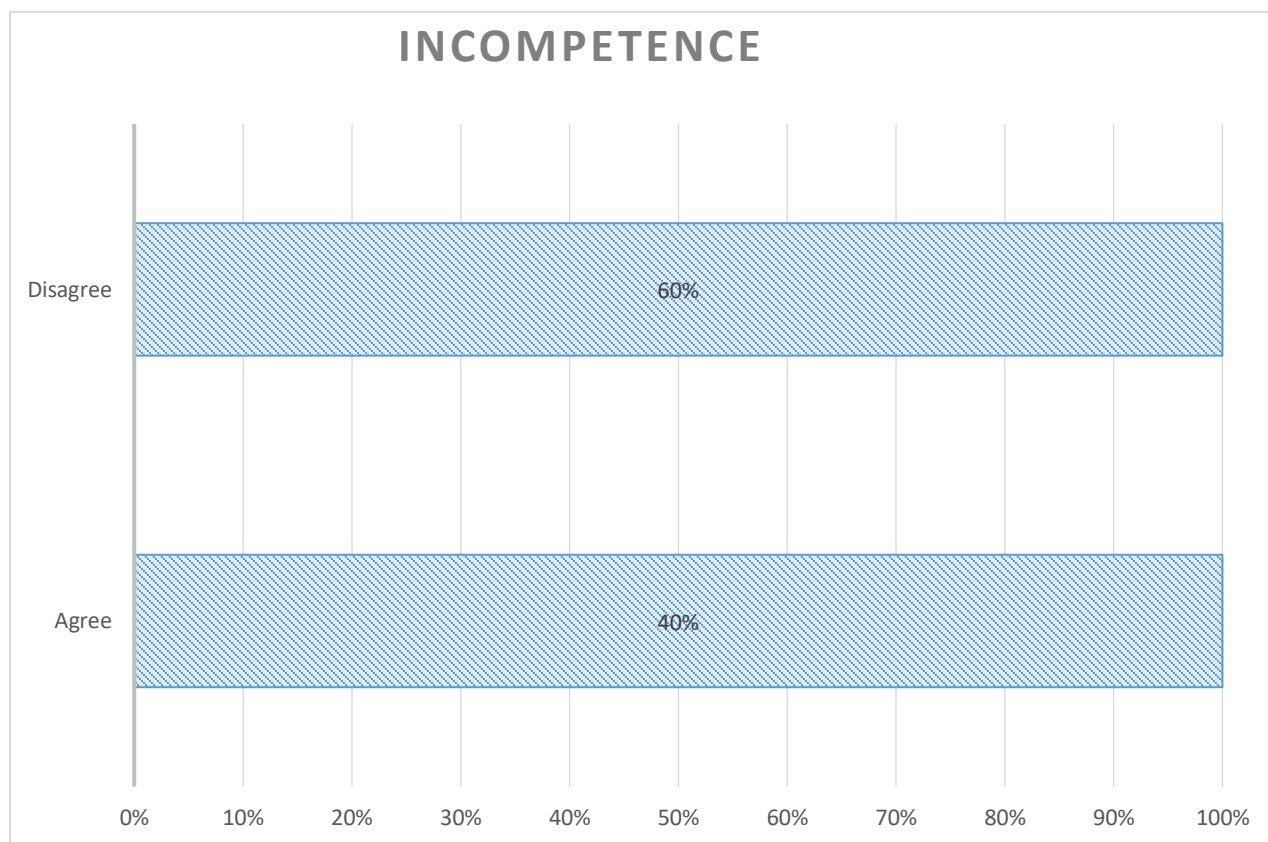
Anxiety and nervousness, while speaking English language, is a very serious issue among students. This problem is the biggest obstacle and a challenge that is faced by most of the students while speaking English language. As a consequence the level of anxiety among students increase and the nervousness cause them to get panic, thus they fail to utter the language without getting panic, therefore lack of clear expression is certain. The problem of anxiety sometimes leads to some psychological resistance like being disincentive and lack of personal interest to speak and they feel that they will never speak English perfectly. From above analysis, we have the idea that in the students of National University of modern languages Hyderabad campus, there is the great ratio of 80% of the students who agree on the idea that they feel anxiety and nervousness while speaking the English language. On the other hand, there is minimal ratio of 20% of the students who disagree and they do not have such problems of anxiety and nervousness.

Q6: Do you feel that you have so many ideas about any particular topic, but you are unable to give the best response and clear wording?



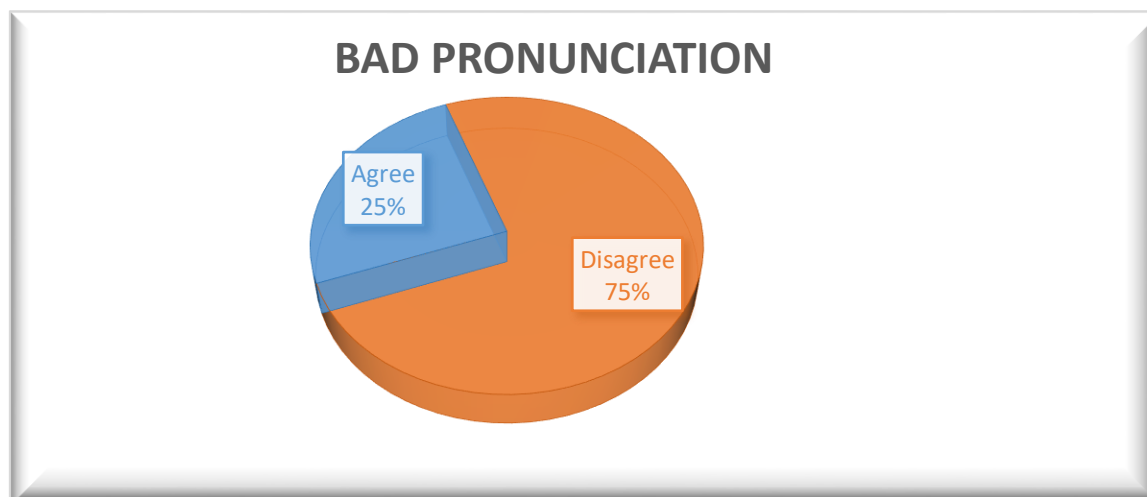
It is obvious that sometimes students do have a lot of ideas in their mind but they could not translate them into words that they speak, and feel very difficult to explain such complexity of ideas in their speech. Among the participants of this study, there is fair number of students who do have such problems of getting perplexed in that type of situation. 60% of them do believe that they come across to this problem which is the great ratio which shows that hindrances like this are very common. The 40 % of the students disagree to have such problems with them.

Q7: Have you ever feel that silence is better option in front of expert speakers of English language in the class?



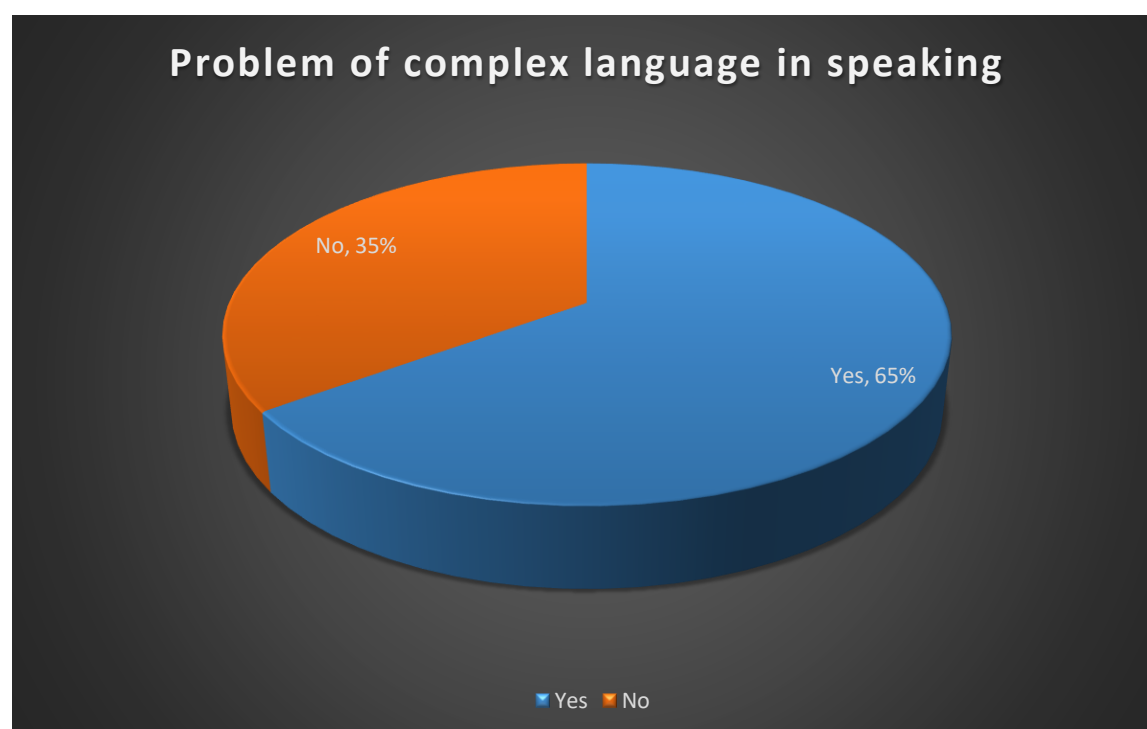
Competition among student causes feelings of inferiority to some students whose level is low, and the expert speakers and competitive students always try to fix their superior position, hence most of the students give preference to keep silence in front of the competitive students. The above data witnesses that 60% of the participants disagree with this point, while the 40% of the students do have this problem.

Q8: Is there any inferiority that your pronunciation is bad?



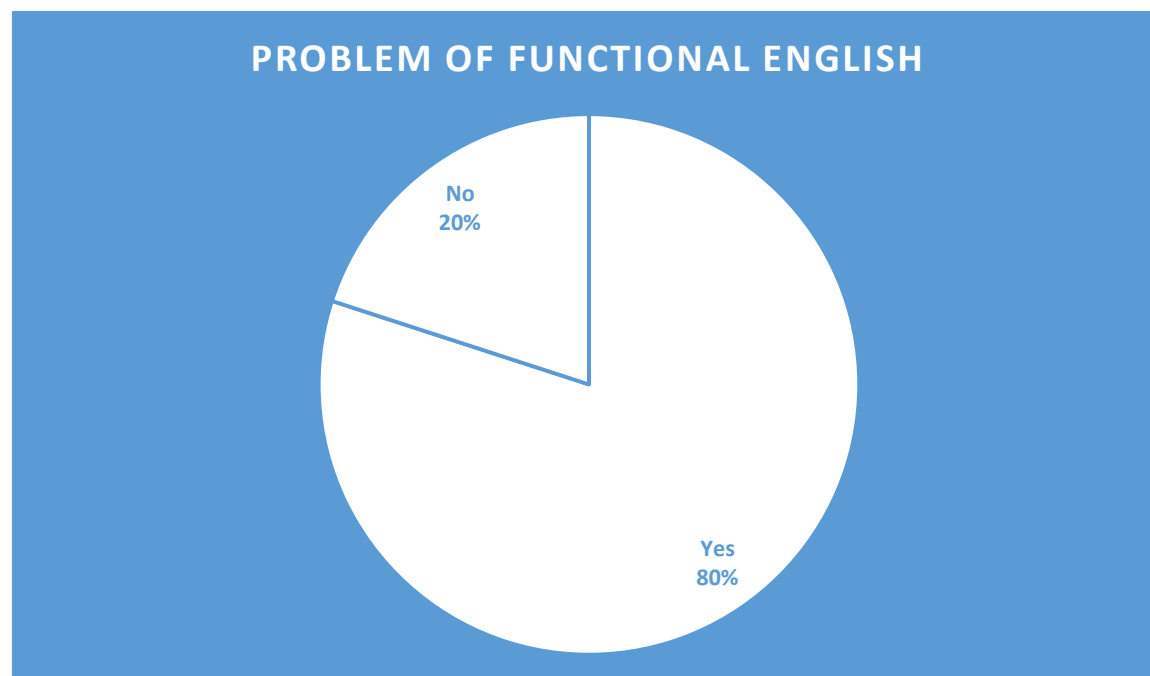
Bad Pronunciation is a issue that the students of third world countries mostly face. The native students whose mother tongue is different, and their phonological patterns are associated to their regional languages, therefore they make several phonological mistakes while speaking English language. But the above ratio says that there are 25% of the participants only who face this problem but 75% disagree, therefore they do not have issues like it while speaking English languages.

Q9: Do you try to use heavy vocabulary and complex sentence structure in speaking the English language, but you notice that the audience is not getting what you are saying. In this way you switch your method from complex vocabulary and sentences to simplify it.



Most often there comes a situation in which students speaking in English language try to explain something in complex sentence structures and using heavy vocabulary, meanwhile they realize that what they are saying is beyond the understanding of the audience so they redirect their speech style from complex to simple. This is a situational problem, and the above data shows that there are a huge number of students who agree that they do face these kinds of situational problems while speaking in English language, therefore the ratio of these participants is up to 65% while 35% participants deny that they do not have such like problems.

Q10: Can you explain every day activities clearly in speaking the English language?



In most of cases students who are active in their academic language but they face very difficult while speaking functional English and describing each and every activity of their daily life. In this study there is very less ratio of these types of students which is only 20%. Meanwhile the participants who are very confident to speak functional English is greater which is up to 80%, which is the maximum ratio of the students, who can speak English while expressing and explain the daily life activities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Findings and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that students at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Hyderabad Campus, face several critical challenges in developing spoken English proficiency. Among the most frequently reported issues are grammatical inaccuracies, shyness, anxiety and nervousness, difficulty with complex language, and a lack of confidence. These challenges significantly hinder students' ability to communicate effectively in English, both in academic and social settings.

One of the most prominent issues identified is grammatical errors during speech, indicating a gap between the students' theoretical knowledge and practical language use. Many participants struggled to construct grammatically accurate sentences, suggesting a need for more focused and communicative grammar instruction.

Shyness and performance anxiety were also reported as major barriers to effective speaking. A large number of students expressed discomfort when speaking in public or in front of peers, which not only

limits participation but also affects fluency and clarity. This aligns with broader research on language learning, which links emotional factors like anxiety and self-consciousness to reduced oral performance.

Additionally, the use of complex or unfamiliar language structures posed a significant hurdle. Many students expressed difficulty in articulating even routine, everyday ideas in English, often falling back on their native language due to a lack of functional vocabulary and speaking practice.

Perhaps most critically, the study identified a widespread lack of confidence among students. This lack of self-assurance—often rooted in fear of making mistakes—further compounds other speaking difficulties such as hesitations, mispronunciations, and limited expression.

In summary, the most pressing speaking issues observed among NUML Hyderabad students include:

- Frequent grammatical mistakes
- Shyness and social inhibition
- Anxiety and nervousness during speech
- Inability to use complex or functional language
- Lack of self-confidence
- Fear of making errors
- Weak pronunciation skills
- General incompetence in spontaneous speaking tasks

These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted speaking interventions, including confidence-building activities, interactive speaking tasks, peer collaboration, and context-based language use. The study highlights the importance of adopting more student-centered, supportive teaching methodologies to help learners overcome their psychological and linguistic barriers.

While this research provides valuable insight into the spoken English challenges of a specific group of learners, it is limited in scope due to the small sample size and institutional focus. Future research could expand this investigation across multiple campuses or regions to gain a broader understanding of speaking issues faced by EFL learners in Pakistan.

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