Exploring the Perceptions of Undergraduate University Students about their English Speaking skills in Hazara Division

Adden Naseem¹, Sana Mehmood², Awais Ahmed Riaz Awan³, Alia Niazi⁴

¹ BS Student, Department of English, Abbottabad University of Science and Technology, Abbottabad,Pakistan
  Email: addennaseemooo@gmail.com
² Lecturer,Department of Education,university of Poonch, Rawalakot, AJK, Pakistan. Email: sana.mehmood@upr.edu.pk
³ Mphil Scholar,Department of Education,Hazara University, Mansehra,Pakistan. Email: awaisriazawan1@gmail.com
⁴ Mphil Scholar,Department of Education,Hazara University, Mansehra,Pakistan.Email: alianiazi00@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the perception of BS students about their English speaking skills. The study's objectives were, to measure English language speaking skills of BS students in Universities of Hazara Division Pakistan and to find out possible reasons of weak speaking skills of English language of BS students in Universities of Hazara Division Pakistan. The population of the study comprised of all enrolled BS students in English Department of two selected universities, Abbottabad University of Science and Tchnology and COMSATS Abbottabad , Pakistan. Data was collected from 50 undergraduate students of English Department of both universities by using systematic sampling technique through a questionnaire consisted of 40 items. For data analysis, percentage and frequency technique were used as statistical techniques. Results revealed that University students generally display confidence in speaking English, expressing ideas clearly, and utilizing vocabulary, but face challenges in maintaining conversations and understanding diverse accents. Pronunciation and grammar skills are considered strong, yet fear of speaking and limited exposure hinder progress. Addressing language balance in classes, enhancing motivation, promoting idiomatic usage, and improving comprehension strategies are key areas requiring focused intervention for students to excel in English language proficiency. It was recommended that Encourage exposure to native speaker audio materials. students listen to improve pronunciation, educators can recommend and provide access to authentic audio resources like podcasts, interviews, and recordings. This exposure can help students develop accurate pronunciation and intonation to improve there language skills.

Corresponding Author's Email: sana.mehmood@upr.edu.pk

INTRODUCTION

Language holds a profound significance in our lives as a fundamental tool for communication and expression (Smith, 2022). It serves as the primary means through which we convey thoughts, emotions, knowledge, and culture (Manivannan, 2006). A language is a systematic means of communication by the use of sounds or symbols (Krashen, 2002). Language is a code that we all use to express ourselves to others and communicate our viewpoints (Smith, 2022). It involves human speech and the communication of ideas through sounds, voice, and symbols articulated by speech organs (Manivannan, 2006).

A language attracts people because of wealth of literature and knowledge enshrined in it. English language is our window to the world. English language is one tool to establish our view point. We can make use of English to promote our worldview and spiritual heritage throughout the globe. It is the official language of air transport and shipping, the leading language of science, technology, computer and commerce and a major medium of education, publishing and international negotiation (Manivannan, 2006). Moreover, the use of English as an International language is growing with time because it is the only medium for communication in many countries. English is also used widely in the literature and media section to publish books, most of the writers write in the English language due to the vast majority of readers know only the English language and they can describe their ideas best in the English language.

The English language holds a central position in today's globalized world, acting as a bridge for communication and a key to unlocking vast reservoirs of knowledge and information (Smith, 2022). It serves as a common ground, facilitating exchanges between people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the prevalence of English in literature, media, and the digital realm amplifies its influence, making it an essential asset for individuals aiming to participate in the global discourse and remain competitive in the modern job market (Gardner, 2020).

Proficiency in English language skills, encompassing listening, speaking, reading, and writing, is fundamental for both academic and professional success in today's interconnected world (Matsuda, 2019). Effective communication in English is vital for academic pursuits, enabling comprehension of complex subject matter and fostering critical thinking (Gao & Smith, 2022). Additionally, strong English language skills are instrumental in career advancement, opening doors to a wide array of employment opportunities in multinational corporations, research institutions, and international organizations (Matsuda, 2019). Individuals equipped with proficient English language skills possess a competitive edge, as they can effectively engage with a global audience and navigate a world that is increasingly interconnected and reliant on effective cross-cultural communication (Gardner, 2020).

Objectives of the Study

The study was designed to achieve the following objectives:

i.   To measure English language speaking skills of undergraduate students in universities of Hazara Division Pakistan.

ii.   To find out possible reasons of weak speaking skills of English language of BS students in Universities of Hazara Division Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent studies, Gao and Smith (2022) emphasized the importance of understanding students' perceptions of their English speaking skills in the context of language learning and education. Gardner (2020) further highlighted the significance of investigating students' self-assessment and beliefs about their English speaking abilities, particularly in undergraduate programs such as Bachelor students (BS). These perceptions provide valuable insights into students' language learning experiences and educational needs.

To learn a language, humans are generally structured in such a way that they not only learn a language but also utter and distinguish speech sounds. A child's voice box is used from the beginning of his life. So, to express his feelings and ask for his needs, he makes an inarticulate sound, speaks tenderly, murmurs continuously, babbles, coos, and then makes

vowel and consonant sounds, but he never tries to write in his infancy (Krashen, 2002).

It has been recognized that effective English speaking skills are crucial for academic success, professional growth, and global communication (Matsuda, 2019). However, students' perceptions of their own speaking abilities may not always align with their actual proficiency. Factors such as self-confidence, language anxiety, exposure to English-speaking environments, and educational background can significantly influence how students perceive their English speaking skills.

Except for a few reputable educational institutions and the armed forces, the majority of institutions in our country teach English as a skill for communication or as a lingua franca using English literature. As a result, English is taught using traditional methods such as the Grammar Translation method, in which listening and speaking skills are completely ignored. Only grammatical rules of the English language are taught in the current scenario, and speaking and listening skills are not practiced in an environment conducive to listening and speaking a language. As a result of this practice, they understand the rules of the language but are unable to communicate in English (Ahmed, 2006).

In Pakistan, especially in the Hazara Division, traditional teaching methods that involve lectures and the use of the Grammar Translation method are still in use. The teacher writes or speaks as little as possible, leaving the students to function as passive participants in the class and passive listeners. They never get the chance to express themselves and develop their speaking and listening abilities (Riaz, 2003). The student is frequently silent while the teacher commands all of the attention. Because most teachers employ the Grammar Translation method, most students struggle to speak English fluently. Speaking and listening abilities are not given enough weight. Although they can help with speaking and listening comprehension, modern audio-visual aids like computers, the internet, television, radios, etc., are not frequently used (Khan, 2004).

The English language has four fundamental skills: speaking, writing, listening, and reading. A learner must be proficient in each of the four language skills in order to acquire the language. A weak one will make it difficult for the learner to use it effectively. Speaking and listening are completely disregarded when it comes to English language instruction in the public sector; only writing and reading skills are prioritized (Zahra, 2001). Learning English speaking and listening skills is essential for language learners because it is necessary for them to be trained in listening comprehension in order to understand native speakers.

However, speaking fluency is also essential for learners because it allows them to communicate both domestically and internationally. Speaking fluently in English allows learners to interact with native speakers and use the language as a lingua franca (Masons, 1981). Therefore, all four English language skills should be taught in order for government sector employees to use the language proficiently and competently.

Therefore, the focus of this research is to delve into the perceptions of BS students regarding their English speaking abilities, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of their beliefs, attitudes, and self-assessment. These findings can inform educators, curriculum designers, and language instructors in developing tailored language learning programs and support services that cater to the specific needs and challenges faced by BS students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Quantitative research is a systematic empirical approach used in the social sciences and various fields to gather numerical data, analyze patterns, and identify relationships or patterns through statistical analysis (Smith, 2017). It typically involves structured data collection methods, such as surveys, experiments, and observations, allowing for the measurement and quantification of variables and phenomena, ultimately aiming to generalize findings to a broader population (Bryman, 2016). So Quantitative research approach is applied to describe current condition, examine relations and study cause and impact phenomena. This research was descriptive and the approach of the survey type was used in order to collect data. Perceptions of students was examined through questionnaire.

Sample and sampling techniques

A sample refers to a subset of a larger group, known as the population, that is selected for study or analysis to represent the characteristics of that population (Trochim, 2006). It is essential in research to use a sample because it is often impractical or impossible to study an entire population due to time, cost, and logistical constraints.

The sampling technique used in this study is systematic sampling, a type of probability sampling in which every nth member of the population is chosen after an initial random start. In this case, 50 students were chosen at random from the entire population of English department students at Abbottabad University of Science and Technology and COMSATS Abbottabad. Systematic sampling is a method for selecting a representative sample while ensuring a fair representation of the population (Trochim, 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

The process of gathering information or facts from various sources in order to generate insights and support the research objectives is referred to as data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It entails the systematic collection of relevant data from participants or subjects using tools such as questionnaires or interviews.

A self-created questionnaire was used as the data collection tool in this study. The questionnaire was created specifically for the study and was given to the students who made up the sample. The questionnaires were personally distributed and collected from all participants by the researcher, ensuring direct involvement in the data collection process.

The interpretation and transformation of collected data to extract meaningful patterns, insights, and conclusions is known as data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The percentage and frequency technique, a statistical approach commonly used in applied linguistics, was used to analyze questionnaire responses in this study. This method aids in quantifying the distribution and frequency of responses to closed-ended questions, allowing for a more complete understanding of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result and Analysis of Student's Questionnaire

Student's questionnaire had 40 statements about the English language speaking skill with five points like scales. All the students were given the questionnaire with proper instruction. After collecting data, the data was drafted on Edythe page and with attention and care the percentage and mean frequency was attained. The data is presented in the tabulated form in Table 4.1 and 4.2, so it can be easily understood.

Table 4.1. *Perception of Students About English Speaking Skills*

	Statement		SDA	DA	UD	A	SA
1	I feel confident speaking English.	f	4	4	9	28	5
		%	8	8	18	56	10
2	I can express my ideas clearly in English.	f	2	4	15	21	8
		%	4	8	30	42	16
3	I use appropriate vocabulary while speaking in English.	f	2	8	13	25	2
		%	4	16	26	50	4
4	I can maintain a conversation in English without difficulty.	f	2	6	18	23	1
		%	4	12	36	46	2
5	I can understand and respond appropriately to different accents in English.	f	3	11	15	19	2
		%	6	22	30	38	4
6	I speak English fluently.	f	3	11	7	22	7
		%	6	22	14	44	14
7	I feel comfortable participating in group discussions in English.	f	4	5	8	26	7
		%	8	10	16	52	14
8	I can effectively use grammar and sentence structure in English.	f	2	5	8	24	11
		%	4	10	16	48	22
9	I can convey my thoughts and opinions effectively in English.	f	2	3	8	29	8
		%	4	6	16	58	16
10	I can deliver presentations confidently in English.	f	2	2	10	25	11
		%	4	4	20	50	22
11	I can engage in small talk and casual conversations in English.	f	2	4	9	24	11
		%	4	4	18	48	22
12	I can understand complex ideas and express them clearly in English.	f	2	4	9	33	2
		%	4	8	18	66	4
13	I can adapt my language style based on the audience and context in English.	f	3	5	10	28	4
		%	6	10	20	56	8
14	I can understand and respond to questions in English without hesitation.	f	4	5	11	26	4
		%	8	10	22	52	8

15	I can convey my emotions and feelings accurately in English.	f	2	4	14	20	10
		%	4	8	28	40	20
16	I can give and receive feedback in English without difficulty.	f	1	4	12	23	10
		%	2	8	24	46	20
17	I can explain concepts and ideas in English using examples and illustrations.	f	2	6	14	24	4
		%	4	12	28	48	8
18	I can negotiate and persuade effectively in English.	f	11	3	2	29	5
		%	22	6	4	58	10
19	I can understand and follow instructions given in English.	f	5	1	5	26	13
		%	10	2	10	52	26
20	I can handle challenging and stressful situations in English without losing fluency.	f	1	6	20	17	6
		%	2	12	40	34	12

Table 4.1 shows the students perceptions about their English language skills at university level. A significant majority of students (56%) expressed confidence in their English speaking abilities at the university level, showcasing a positive self-assessment. However, a notable portion (42%) acknowledged some uncertainty in expressing ideas clearly, suggesting potential communication apprehension. Additionally, half of the students (50%) affirmed using appropriate vocabulary, but 26% displayed hesitance, revealing a need for bolstered lexical confidence. Nearly half of the students (46%) felt they could maintain conversations with ease, yet a substantial 36% hesitated, implying potential challenges in sustaining dialogues. Moreover, 38% felt proficient in understanding and responding to various accents, while 30% remained uncertain, indicating potential difficulties in comprehending diverse speech patterns.

In terms of fluency, less than half of the students (44%) confirmed their ability to speak English fluently. Conversely, 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting a considerable segment struggling with fluency. A positive outlook was observed as 52% of students expressed comfort in participating in group discussions, demonstrating a favorable attitude towards collaborative English-speaking environments. A majority (48%) acknowledged effective usage of grammar and sentence structure, but 14% disagreed, highlighting room for improvement. Additionally, more than half of the students (58%) felt capable of effectively conveying their thoughts and opinions in English, although 6% disagreed, signaling challenges in clear expression.

When it comes to public speaking, 50% of the students agreed they could deliver presentations confidently. However, 26% were either undecided or disagreed, suggesting varying comfort levels with public speaking in English. Informal conversational settings posed a potential challenge, with 48% expressing their ability to engage in small talk, while 22% remained unsure. Understanding complex ideas and expressing them clearly was acknowledged by 66% of the students, yet 18% showed uncertainty, indicating potential difficulties in handling sophisticated language and concepts. Adaptability in language style

based on audience and context was embraced by a majority (56%), demonstrating a degree of communicative flexibility.

Majority of the students (52%) felt confident in understanding and promptly responding to questions in English, while 30% displayed hesitation or disagreement. Expressing emotions accurately was a concern for 40% of the students who remained undecided about this ability, highlighting potential challenges in conveying emotions through the language. Furthermore, 46% agreed they could give and receive feedback without difficulty, but 24% were undecided, indicating some reservation regarding feedback communication in English. Lastly, 52% felt confident in understanding and following instructions given in English, although 12% strongly disagreed, suggesting potential difficulties in this aspect. Additionally, a significant portion (40%) remained uncertain about their ability to handle challenging and stressful situations in English without losing fluency, implying potential struggles in high-pressure language scenarios.

Table 4.2. *Possible Reasons of Weak Speaking Skills of English Language*

	Statement		SDA	DA	UD	A	SA
1	I have sufficient vocabulary to express my thoughts and ideas in English.	f	2	7	11	25	5
		%	4	14	22	50	10
2	I find it difficult to pronounce English words correctly.	f	6	18	4	10	2
		%	12	36	8	20	4
3	I hesitate to speak in English due to fear of making mistakes.	f	5	12	13	17	3
		%	10	24	26	34	6
4	I have limited exposure to English-speaking environments.	f	0	6	13	23	7
		%	0	12	26	46	14
5	1. I have lack of opportunities to practice speaking English.	f	3	12	8	18	9
		%	6	24	16	36	18
6	I feel anxious or nervous when speaking in English.	f	3	16	14	13	4
		%	6	32	28	26	8
7	1. I struggle to understand native English speakers due to their speed and accent.	f	2	8	13	20	7
		%	4	16	26	40	14
8	1. I have difficulty organizing my thoughts in English.	f	2	17	14	14	3
		%	4	34	28	28	6
9	I have lack of the necessary grammar knowledge to speak fluently in English.	f	3	20	6	15	6
		%	6	40	12	30	12
10	I feel embarrassed or self-conscious when	f	7	12	7	19	4

	speaking in English.	%	14	24	14	38	8
11	I have a limited range of conversational topics in English.	f	3	15	11	16	5
		%	6	30	22	32	10
12	1. I feel that my English language classes focus more on reading and writing rather than speaking.	f	1	10	4	22	13
		%	2	20	8	44	26
13	1. I have lack of motivation to improve my speaking skills in English.	f	3	8	7	22	10
		%	6	16	14	44	20
14	1. I am not comfortable with using English idioms and expressions.	f	2	15	14	13	6
		%	4	30	28	26	12
15	I face difficulties in keeping up with the pace of English conversations.	f	3	10	16	18	3
		%	6	20	32	36	6
16	I am not aware of effective speaking strategies and techniques in English.	f	2	14	15	14	5
		%	4	28	30	28	10
17	I have limited access to English language resources (books, audio, video, etc.).	f	7	14	11	10	8
		%	14	28	22	20	16
18	1. I feel that my English language proficiency is not assessed adequately.	f	2	16	11	14	7
		%	4	32	22	28	14
19	I receive minimal feedback on my spoken English skills.	f	2	14	10	19	5
		%	4	28	20	38	10
20	I have less number of class mates who can speak in English.	f	0	8	4	28	10
		%	0	16	8	56	20

Table 4.2 shows the possible reasons of weak speaking skills of English language of BS students at Universities level. A considerable number of students (50%) expressed confidence in their vocabulary skills, indicating that they possess adequate vocabulary to convey their thoughts and ideas proficiently in English. Moreover, a significant majority (36%) demonstrated proficiency in pronunciation, suggesting that they do not encounter significant challenges in correctly articulating English words. However, a notable proportion (34%) expressed hesitancy in speaking English due to the fear of making mistakes, underscoring the impact of fear on their communicative confidence. Additionally, a substantial percentage (46%) of students reported limited exposure to English-speaking environments, pointing to the potential lack of real-life practice opportunities. Furthermore, There is a clear need for more speaking practice opportunities in the classroom as indicated by the significant number of students (36%) who expressed a lack of opportunities to practice speaking English.

It's interesting to note that a sizable percentage of students (32%) did not exhibit appreciable nervousness or anxiety when speaking in English, suggesting a degree of comfort with their spoken language abilities. Nonetheless, a sizable portion (40%) admitted that their accents and speed made it difficult to understand native English speakers, indicating the need for better listening comprehension techniques. Positively, a sizable percentage of students (34%) felt comfortable structuring their ideas in English, demonstrating confidence in their capacity to do so. Additionally, a significant number (40%) indicated confidence in their grammatical knowledge, suggesting a positive self-evaluation of their grammatical proficiency. On the other hand, a considerable percentage (38%) expressed embarrassment or self-consciousness when speaking in English, demonstrating the emotional factors that impact language expression.

A significant percentage of students (32%) indicated that they had limited conversational topics in English, suggesting that they might have difficulties participating in a variety of conversations. Additionally, a sizable portion of students (44%) felt that there was an unfair emphasis on language proficiency in their English language classes, highlighting the necessity for a more comprehensive strategy that includes speaking. Furthermore, a significant proportion of students (44%) indicated that they were not motivated to enhance their speaking abilities, suggesting the possibility of the need for programs to increase zeal and drive for language learning. Furthermore, a sizable portion of students (30%) expressed discomfort when utilizing English idioms and expressions, indicating a potential area for focused language enrichment initiatives. Finally, a significant percentage of students (36%) said they had trouble keeping up pace with the English language's conversations, underscoring the need for listening comprehension enhancement.

Regarding language learning strategies, a considerable proportion of students (30%) expressed ambiguity regarding their knowledge of efficacious speaking strategies and techniques in English, suggesting possible deficiencies in comprehension of beneficial language learning methodologies. Positively, a notable percentage of students (28%) disagreed that they have little access to resources for learning English, indicating that they believe language learning materials are adequately available. Moreover, a considerable proportion of students (32%) conveyed their contentment with the sufficiency of their evaluation of English language proficiency, suggesting a perceived congruence between their language skills and the methods of assessment. But a sizable portion (38%) claimed to have received little feedback on their spoken English proficiency, underscoring the significance of improved feedback mechanisms for speaking improvement. Lastly, a majority of students (56%) emphasized a scarcity of English-speaking classmates, pointing to the need for initiatives promoting a language-rich peer environment within their classes.

DISCUSSION

This study was aimed at examining students' proficiency in speaking English, with an emphasis on the validity and consistency of the data gathered via a questionnaire. The study evaluated a number of speaking skills-related factors, such as confidence levels, resource utilization, the influence of the first language, language facilities, and the function of audiovisual aids. A more thorough understanding of students' English language proficiency can be attained by contrasting these results with those of recent studies in the field.

Regarding confidence in speaking English, the study found that a majority of students feel confident in speaking English at the university level aligns with previous studies on language confidence and self-assessment. Research by Smith and Johnson (2018) found that university students tend to rate their language abilities positively, especially in familiar academic settings. However, it is important to note that overconfidence in self-assessment can

sometimes lead to discrepancies between perceived and actual language proficiency (Jones et al., 2019).

The presence of a significant portion of students who agree they can express ideas clearly in English is consistent with the results of a study by Garcia et al. (2020) on university-level language learners. Uncertainty about communication skills has also been observed in previous research, with Chen and Wang (2017) reporting that some students may doubt their ability to convey complex thoughts effectively in a second language.

The current findings highlighting a hesitation in lexical choices among a noteworthy percentage of students align with research by Brown and Lee (2019). They found that although learners might possess a broad vocabulary, they can experience difficulties in using words appropriately in context. This suggests a need for targeted vocabulary instruction and practice.

The challenge faced by a considerable portion of students in sustaining conversations in English is in line with the findings of a study by Kim and Park (2018). They reported that students often encounter obstacles in maintaining discourse due to limited fluency and topic-related vocabulary. Targeted speaking practice and exposure to various conversational situations could be beneficial.

The current results indicating uncertainty in comprehending diverse accents resonate with a study by Smith et al. (2019), which found that learners can struggle with accents not frequently encountered in their language learning environment. This suggests the importance of providing exposure to different accents in language classrooms.

The positive foundation in vocabulary and pronunciation skills among a substantial number of students aligns with research by Jenkins and Turner (2017), who observed that learners often make rapid progress in these areas during language learning programs.

The finding that a significant portion of students experience hesitation and fear when speaking in English is consistent with studies by Horwitz et al. (2018) and MacIntyre et al. (2019). Language anxiety can hinder speaking performance and motivation, highlighting the need for anxiety-reduction strategies and supportive language learning environments.

The current findings are in line with the research by Brown and Diaz (2016), which emphasized the importance of creating immersive language experiences and increasing speaking practice opportunities to enhance language proficiency.

The need to improve listening and comprehension skills, as indicated by a notable percentage of students struggling with understanding native speakers, aligns with the recommendations of Vandergrift and Goh (2017). Their research emphasized the significance of explicit listening skill development.

The positive perception of grammar knowledge and ability to organize thoughts among a considerable number of students is consistent with findings by Ellis and Shintani (2016), who reported that learners often demonstrate good grammatical control in structured tasks.

The perception of an imbalance in language instruction with a focus on reading and writing aligns with the findings of Xiao and Yang (2018), who called for more balanced language education that integrates speaking and communication skills.

The lack of motivation among many students to improve their speaking skills corresponds with research by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2019), who emphasized the role of motivation in language learning success and suggested strategies to enhance learner motivation. The current findings align with research by Salovey and Mayer (2017), who highlighted the importance

of idiomatic language and conversational competence in achieving effective communication in a second language.

The challenge in keeping up with the pace of English conversations, as indicated by a considerable number of students, resonates with studies by Graham and Macaro (2018), who emphasized the need for activities that develop listening skills in real-life conversational settings. The need for explicit instruction in effective speaking strategies aligns with research by Nation and Newton (2017), who emphasized the value of metacognitive awareness in language learning. The perception of a scarcity of English-speaking classmates corresponds with studies by Kubota and Fujimoto-Adamson (2017), who highlighted the role of the language learning environment in shaping learners' language development.

CONCLUSION

In this study, a significant portion of university students exhibit confidence in their ability to speak English, showcasing a positive outlook on their spoken language skills. Many of them also feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and ideas in English, highlighting a promising communication capacity. However, a considerable number remain unsure about their communication skills, suggesting a need for further support and guidance in this area. Additionally, while a significant portion of students feel at ease with vocabulary usage, some display hesitation in selecting appropriate words during their English conversations.

Furthermore, maintaining conversations in English presents a challenge for a considerable number of students, as indicated by their uncertainty in this aspect. Understanding different accents remains a concern for a notable percentage of students, underlining the need for improved listening and comprehension skills. Although some students struggle with fear and hesitation when speaking in English, highlighting the necessity for confidence-boosting interventions, they also recognize the importance of more exposure and practice in English-speaking environments. Additionally, a significant portion emphasizes the imbalance in language skill focus within English language classes, indicating the need for a more well-rounded approach to language instruction, fostering motivation and interest, enriching conversational abilities, and providing an environment conducive to peer interactions.

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