When students can appreciate their teacher as someone who is passionately committed to a field of study and to upholding high standards within it, it is much easier for them to take their work seriously. Getting them to learn then becomes a matter of inspiration by example rather than by enforcement and obedience.

Christopher Day
CHAPTER FOUR

LEVEL OF ORAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH AMONG
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

4.1 Area of Study and Selection of Informants

The present study documents the English speaking performance of the postgraduate students in Coimbatore. The scholar is primarily concerned with those students who have had their entire education in schools and colleges where the medium of instruction had been English. In spite of approximately fifteen years of education in English medium institutions, it is very unfortunate and disturbing that most of the students fail to communicate in English what they really want to, not because they lack ideas, thoughts and feelings, but because they are unaware of when and how these communicative tasks and acts are performed. Their English speaking proficiency level was quite limited, which is astonishing when considering the fact that the students' length of study in English medium schools was around fifteen years. Most students found it very difficult even to articulate their needs and preferences.

This study has attempted to investigate the factors that contribute to the current level of proficiency both within the classroom environment and out of classroom in the wider social context,
and the scholar has recommended a variety of strategies for the instructors to overcome this problem.

The informants were selected randomly with approximately two hundred postgraduate students from various colleges in and around Coimbatore. The students were in the age group of 21 to 23 years and had completed 15 to 16 years of education. The students hailed from both rural and urban backgrounds. Since the primary concern of the scholar is to identify the problems that students from English medium background face while communicating in English, the scholar based her assessment mostly on students from English medium backgrounds. Out of the 200 informants, approximately 75% were those who had had their entire education in English, while the rest of the informants were those who studied in Tamil medium.

The variables selected for the present studies were: (1) On the basis of the geographical division of the area of study, the variables considered were: (a) Rural (b) Urban. (2) Medium of instruction: (a) Tamil (b) English (3) Parental education of the informants: (a) Up to Higher Secondary (b) Graduation (c) Above Graduation and (c) Professionals.
4.2 Data for the Study

The priority aim of the scholar in pursuing this study is to assess the 'practical' communicative ability of the postgraduate students in Coimbatore. The major data collecting technique implemented was the participant observation method and the emphasis was in collecting the casual speech of the informants so as to investigate the communicative competency of the students.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information about the informant's personal and family background, his learning environment, the level of proficiency in English at the school level and college level, and attitudes towards English. Apart from the two hundred questionnaires, a few questionnaires were distributed to students in higher secondary schools from both urban and rural areas to identify their proficiency and also to probe into the teaching methods adopted by the teachers in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, two hundred questionnaires were distributed to the postgraduate students from both the rural and urban colleges to assess their speaking proficiency in English and more importantly, to gauge the reasons for their lack of competency in English.
4.3 Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated and tested based on the data collected.

(i) The findings reiterated the scholar's view that there is no significant difference in the speaking ability of the postgraduate students irrespective of the medium of instruction in schools and colleges.

(ii) Parental education, economic position and the area of domicile do not have a direct correlation to English language acquisition.

(iii) Instructional practices, the curriculum, and the examination system have a great role to play in language acquisition and communicative competence of a learner.

4.4 Oral Assessment

When we learn a language, there are four skills that we need for complete communication. When we learn our native language, we usually learn to listen first, then to speak, then to read, and finally to write. These are called the four "language skills": Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. The four basic skills are related to each other by two parameters:

- the mode of communication: oral or written
The four language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening are highly interconnected and, therefore, cannot be taught independently. Listening and reading both rely on input from an outside source and require knowledge of the language, background knowledge, and comprehension skills. The productive skills of writing and speaking are more complex as they necessitate taking knowledge of a language a step further to actually produce new language.

The scholar acknowledges that all four skills are needed to successfully assimilate into an environment where the target language is used: one cannot simply listen without responding. The foreign language classroom should mirror (as closely as possible) an authentic environment where the language is used. Therefore, these four skills should be integrated into the
curriculum. But speaking is at the heart of second language learning. Foreign language proficiency is measured by the ability to communicate in the language. This ability is demonstrated in the understanding of authentic aural materials and in the ability to generate spoken language for real-life purposes. Undoubtedly, speaking is the most important skill yet it appears particularly vulnerable to attrition. Despite its importance, speaking was until recently largely ignored in schools and universities, primarily for logistical and programmatic reasons, such as emphasis on grammar and culture and unfavorable teacher-student ratios. Speaking was also absent from testing because of the difficulty in evaluating it objectively and the time it takes to conduct speaking tests.

Even though many students have mastered basic listening and speaking skills, some students are much more effective in their oral communication than others. And those who are more effective communicators experience more success in school and in other areas of their lives. The skills that can make the difference between minimal and effective communication can be taught, practiced, and improved.
The scholar took into consideration the six criteria for oral assessment provided by Canary and Cody (2000). The criteria include adaptability, conversational involvement, conversational management, empathy, effectiveness, and appropriateness. The scholar records in detail all the six criteria.

A. Adaptability (flexibility)
The ability to change behaviors and goals to meet the needs of interaction comprised of six factors.

1. Social experience - participation in various social interactions.
2. Social composure - refers to keeping calm through accurate perceptions.
3. Social confirmation - refers to acknowledgment of partner’s goals.
4. Appropriate disclosure - being sensitive to amount and type of information.
5. Articulation-ability to express ideas through language.
6. Wit - ability to use humor in adapting to social situations; ease tensions.

B. Conversational Involvement

i. Behavioral and cognitive activity

ii. Cognitive involvement demonstrated through
interactive behaviors.

iii. Assessed according to three factors

1. Responsiveness - knowing what to say, know roles, interact.
2. Perceptiveness - be aware of how others perceive you
3. Attentiveness - listen, don’t be pre-occupied

C. Conversational Management

a. How communicators regulate their interactions
b. Adaptation and control of social situations

c. Who controls the interaction ebb and flow and how smoothly the interaction proceeds.

d. How topics proceed and change

D. Empathy.

a. The ability to demonstrate understanding and share emotional reaction to the situation.

b. Need not lead to “helping” the other person

c. Cognitive understanding

d. Parallel emotions

E. Effectiveness

a. achieving the objectives of the conversation

b. achieving personal goals

c. A fundamental criterion for determining competence
F. Appropriateness

a. Upholding the expectations for a given situation

b. A fundamental criterion for determining competence.

4.4.1. Components of an effective speaking activity

The scholar took into account that an effective speaking activity should include the following four aspects.

(a) The assessor should ensure that as much as possible, of the period of time allotted to the activity, maximum time is in fact occupied by learner talk. The assessor should be more of an observer and facilitate learner talk.

(b) Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants: all get a chance to speak, and contributions are evenly distributed.

(c) The topics for discussion should be interesting to the students, only then the students will be highly motivated to speak. They will be eager to say something new about the topic and they would want to contribute to achieving a task objective.

(d) The assessor could ensure that the language is of an acceptable level. Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to
The scholar was very particular that any assessment method which the scholar administered should adhere to the measurement principles of reliability, validity, and fairness. The instrument must be accurate and consistent, it must represent the abilities the scholar wished to measure, and it must operate in the same way with a wide range of students. With a view to knowing the students' proficiency and to understand their needs for English, the scholar devised a questionnaire for the postgraduate students in some colleges in and around Coimbatore. In addition, personal interviews and informal discussions were also conducted.

4.4.2. Implementation of speaking activities

The scholar used the observational approach; wherein the student's behavior was observed and assessed unobtrusively. The scholar also tried the structured approach, wherein the students were asked to perform one or more specific oral communication tasks. Their performance on the task was then evaluated. The task was administered in a one-on-one setting -- with the scholar (test administrator) and one student -- and also in a class setting. In either setting, students were made to feel that they were communicating meaningful content to a real audience. Tasks
focused on topics that all students could easily talk about and in some cases the students were allowed even to talk on a topic of their choice.

The communicative assessments that were administered sought to judge the extent to which the students simulate real life communicative situations. The emphasis was on appropriateness rather than on ability to form grammatically correct sentences. While assessing the students the scholar focused more on understanding the communicative intent of the speaker rather than on picking out specific details.

4.4.3. Test Type One

In Test Type One, students were randomly paired and tasks were designed to give ample opportunity to interact with each other. The scholar acted as the interlocutor and assessor. The two learners introduced themselves to the interlocutor and to each other. The scholar also interacted with each candidate by asking further questions based around topics such as family, school life, travel and future plans. Thus, this opening phase of the test, was not only designed as a 'warm-up' to put the learners at ease, but the assessment focused upon interactional short turns of speech.
Activity 4.1 Example of interactional short turns of Speech

4.4.4. Test Type Two

In Test Type Two, students were given a simple situation and were asked to interact based on the task given. It was a guided speaking task with an 'information gap', and was designed to elicit a longer turn of speech. The task was highly structured as
the scholar took into consideration the language ability of the learners participating in the assessment. There was an element of role-playing also, as the partners were given in advance information about what his/her role was, what specific functions he/she needed to carry out, etc., while the existence of an information gap gave the task a degree of process authenticity. Moreover, initially, there was reluctance on the part of learners to assume the part of another person. Hence, this information-gap provided the learners some information and to some extent they could overcome their initial inhibitions. This type of assessment attempted only to enhance the communicative value of the assessment.

**Student A**

You are planning to buy a cell phone. You don't want to spend more than 5000 rupees, but you think that a cell phone that costs less than 5000 rupees is probably not of good quality. You definitely want a cell phone with a camera, and one with an FM built in. You have investigated two models of cell phone and your friend has investigated three models. Get the information from him/her and share your information. You should start the conversation and make the final decision, but you must get his/her opinion, too.
**Student B**

Your friend is planning to buy a cell phone, and you have investigated three types of cell phone. You think it is best to get a slim and light weight handset. Share your information with your friend, and find out about the two cell phones that your friend investigated. Let him/her begin the conversation and make the final decision, but don't hesitate to express your opinion.

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**Activity 4.2: Example of an Information Gap**

**4.4.5. Test Type Three**

A role play task would be similar to the above information gap activity, except that it would not involve an information gap. The following is an example of a role play activity administered to the students. The scholar designed this role play with the intention to test communicative language, the learners would be assessed on his/her ability to carry out the functions (apologizing, requesting, asking for information, responding to a suggestion, etc.) required by the role.
**Student A**

You missed an important test yesterday. Go to the respective teacher and apologize for having missed the test. Request the teacher for a re-test.

**Student B**

You are a teacher. A student who missed your test yesterday comes to your office. Accept her/his apology, but emphasize the importance of writing the test. Tell him you will consider his request for a re-test and warn him against such absenteeism in the future.

**Activity 4.3: Example of a Role-Play**

4.4.6. Test Type Four

In Test Type Four, the scholar adapted an idea from Brown & Yule (1983: 123-126). The scholar administered a 'spot the difference' activity involving two pictures, where the learners in groups of three or four had to discuss the similarities and differences. Participants were asked to find the differences and the number of differences was prespecified so that the participants had a goal towards which to work. These pictures were used to elicit locatives and plurals and as with most spot
the difference tasks, questions. It was essentially a descriptive task, and though the test was designed to meet the communicative requirements of the test, there was the added element of problem-solving. As the three learners negotiated the solution to the problem, it was necessary for them to alternate between transactional, long and short turns of speech. The students were required to discuss in English the entire process of unraveling the similarities and dissimilarities. Hence, this kind of activity opened up immense opportunities to interact in English and it was possible to assess the students based on a comprehensive parameter and also to assess them holistically. The author has reproduced a sample of 'spot the difference' picture on the next page, wherein the students were required to elicit certain grammatical structures and vocabulary appropriate for the task.
Activity 4.4: Example of 'Spot the Difference' (Ref. Internet)
4.4.7. Test Type Five

In Test Type Five, a group oral test was conducted wherein students were divided in groups of five or six, and were asked to have interactions on a range of topics. The students were engaged in free discussion tasks based on given topics. Pictures of famous personalities were also distributed to the students and each group was required to find out whose picture the other group had by asking questions for instance, the name of the person, profession of the person in the picture etc. The students also gave some clues to help the other group to guess the person in the picture. Finally, the students were asked to describe the pictures given to them. Apart from these pictures, students were given pictures wherein they had to discuss and analyze the picture and answer the questions that was asked based on the pictures. The scholar used pictures in her assessment because pictures are not just an aspect of method but through their representation of places, objects and people they are an essential part of the overall experiences of the students. As put forth by Andrew Wright in his book, *Pictures for Language Learning*, pictures contribute to:

- interest and motivation
- a sense of context of the language
- a specific reference point or stimulus.
Playing football near substations

**Question:** If the ball goes over the fence, what should the boy do?

**Discussion:** Why is this not a good place to play? What would you advise the boy to do? Why are substations located near to schools, houses and places where children might play?

**Activity:** Imagine your friend has been playing a ball game in the school playground and he has kicked the ball over the fence into the substation. Give instructions on what he should do to get the ball back safely.

**Warning signs**

**Question:** What is the sign telling us?

**Discussion:** Why do people put up signs? Why should we read warning signs? How can you tell this is a warning sign?

**Activity:** Design your own warning sign telling people not to play with electricity. Speak for two minutes on the design you have created to warn people not play with electricity.

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*Activity 4.5.1 Questions for discussion based on the pictures (Ref. Internet)*
4.4.8. Test Type Six

Another instrument was the IELTS format of interview (a speaking test) in which the students were asked to answer general and personal questions about their homes and families, jobs, studies, interests, and a range of similar topic areas in about five minutes. Interview questions were not strictly preplanned; rather, the scholar tried to ask related questions according to the students' answer to the former question. In this way, students could provide information that is more credible with ease. The students were also given topics to speak for two three minutes, with a preparation time of one minute.

Thus, the interview consisted of a meaning-focused oral interview where each student was given a range of topics to choose from. Once the presentations were over, the scholar was free to ask the candidates any type of impromptu questions - personal or content-based - related to the topics selected. The students were assessed on fluency to find out their levels of continuity and also coherence wherein the students' ability to link ideas and language together so that speech was coherent and connected. The students' grammatical range, their vocabulary and accuracy were assessed to gauge the students' vocabulary range
and the accuracy with which meanings and attitudes can be expressed.

**Describe a movie which made a strong impression on you.**

You should say:

- which movie it was - the name
- what the movie was about
- who the main stars were and explain why you enjoyed the movie.

**Describe your favorite teacher.**

You should say:

- who was this teacher
- what this teacher taught
- how long you had this teacher and explain why you liked this teacher.

**Describe someone you admire very much**

You should say:

- who this person is
- what this person does
- how long you have known about this person and explain why you admire this person so much.
Describe a country you would like to visit:

You should say:

➢ which country it is
➢ when you would like to go there
➢ who you would like to go with and explain why you would like to visit this place.

Activity 4.6 Example of speech topics

Although Hughes (1989: 105) recommends a duration time of 30 minutes, arguing that 'it is unlikely that much reliable information can be obtained in less than about 15 minutes', a longer test was not possible due to time constraints and also the large size of the class. The scholar found it difficult to administer a longer oral assessment as assessment could only take place during regular timetabled classes.

4.5 Current Level of Proficiency among Postgraduate Students

Proficiency goals can direct the design and development of quality learning activities. Foreign language proficiency is measured by the ability to communicate in the language. This ability is demonstrated in the understanding of authentic aural and written materials and in the ability to generate spoken and written language for real-life purposes.
During the scholar's interaction, the students reiterated the scholar's belief that of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking is undoubtedly the most important activity: People who know a language are referred to as "speakers" of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing; and many, if not most, foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak. However, the scholar found that it was not easy to design and administer speaking activities in the classroom that would develop the learner's ability to express themselves through speech. There were some problems caused by learners as they participated in speaking activities. It is extremely important that language teachers should design an effective speaking activity to meet the needs of solving learners' problems.

4.5.1. Aim of the activities

The scholar's intention was to gauge the students' basic abilities to understand and convey information, ideas, etc. and to investigate their attitude toward communication through dealing with everyday topics. The scholar decided that all categories of assessment should focus more on success in conveying a message and communication rather than language accuracy. The scholar followed two approaches in order to design effective
communicative tasks concerning the selection and adaptation of materials, looking in particular at the issues of attracting learners' participation and at ensuring their ability to express themselves in oral English with basic fluency and accuracy. The scholar acknowledges the fact that there is no standard scale to rate the speaking of the students despite the fact that achieving practical communication ability is the goal of English language teaching. The outcome of the assessment suggests that the criteria used for assessing the speaking skills of the postgraduate students could be a proper indicator of the students' speaking achievement with high reliability.

4.5.2. Pair work

The pair work was attempted as such arrangement not only 'makes them more willing to speak', but also 'makes the communication as fluent and as successful as possible' (Underhill 1987: 30). Hence the paired format usually encourages a more natural interaction. The students were free to choose their partners. In spite of the flexibility of the activity students were extremely inhibited and self conscious even to introduce themselves to each other. They required constant encouragement to continue their interaction. The conversation was predominantly monosyllabic interrupted frequently with laughs.
The scholar found that most of the students from Tamil medium background did not go beyond exchanging their names. When the scholar asked simple questions about their parents' occupation and their hometown, they just mumbled words which were barely audible. The students from English medium background were also reluctant to initiate conversation but tried to communicate with simple structures which had basic grammatical errors, especially errors in subject-verb agreement. They communicated adequately in most contexts but were rather passive with responding and commenting.

4.5.3. Role play

In the role-play activity, the students played their roles carefully and were very concerned about the relations with others and others' opinions about themselves. The students from Tamil medium background gave simple responses and that too only when required, but they were unable to maintain or develop the roles they were playing. Their interaction was too passive and lacked coherence. Similarly, the students from English medium background found it difficult to sustain their roles after a few exchanges and there were long pauses as well. They frequently displayed some attempts – verbal and non-verbal – to ask for repetition or paraphrasing. The scholar had to provide them the
necessary help to keep the conversation going. They tried to develop the interaction but not effective enough to contribute to develop the interaction. During the interaction the students sometimes reverted to L1 when thinking aloud and when asking for clarification.

4.5.4. Picture based activities

In both types of picture based activities, speech was slow and hesitant, and disconnected. Speech was also halting and fragmentary and communication was impeded. The students were unable to respond without hesitations and pauses which demanded unreasonable patience from the listener. The students struggled to implement coping strategies to tackle unknown vocabulary and structures. In one of the activities related to giving warnings telling people not to play with electricity, students lacked basic vocabulary and structures to effectively fulfill this task.

4.5.5. Common errors

The scholar records some of the common errors that students made while speaking in all areas of assessment.

• non-use of the third person present tense–s (“She look very nice”)

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• interchangeable use of the relative pronouns who and which
  ("a book who," "a person which")
• omission of the definite and indefinite articles where they are
  obligatory and insertion where they do not occur in
  native speaker English. ("she is good teacher," "I like to visit
  the Australia.")
• use of an all-purpose question tag such as isn't it? or no?
  instead of shouldn't they? ("They should arrive soon, isn't
  it?"
• increasing of redundancy by adding prepositions ("We have
to study about . . ." and "can we discuss about . . .?"), or by
increasing explicitness ("black colour" vs. "black" and "How
long time?" vs., "How long?")
• heavy reliance on certain verbs of high semantic generality,
such as do, have, make, put, take
• pluralisation of nouns which are considered uncountable in
native speaker English ("informations," "staffs," "advices"
"equipments")
• use of that-clauses instead of infinitive constructions ("I
want that we discuss about my hometown").

The performance of the students in the task where they were
given topics to speak for two to three minutes was far from
satisfactory. Most of the students spoke with long pauses and breakdowns in coherence. The students were unable to speak for even two minutes and a lot of prompting by way of gestures by the scholar was required to encourage the students to fulfill the task. They were unable to develop the topic beyond a few seconds. The choice of words was frequently inaccurate and the vocabulary range was not adequate to deal with the topics. Lack of vocabulary occasionally impeded communication.

4.5.6. Performance descriptors

The scholar provides the Performance Descriptors which is based on IELTS speaking band descriptors. The scholar used the descriptors given on the following page to assess the proficiency of the students.
The scholar has depicted in the graphs the achievement levels of post graduate students by taking into consideration the above mentioned guidelines for assessment. In Graph A, it is clear that approximately fifty five percent of students from Tamil medium background failed to meet the minimal requirements of the task as very little communication was possible. On the other hand, students from English medium background performed a little better with almost sixty percent of the students in the scale of 3-4, where speech was slow because of frequent search for language but it did not impede communication. An interesting observation was made by the scholar, that is, the difference in
the performance between the students from both Tamil medium and English medium at 7-8 level is negligible.

Graph B, illustrates the performance of students at the level of grammatical range, vocabulary and accuracy. It is evident that students from English medium backgrounds seemed to have better knowledge of grammar and produced basic sentence forms with reasonable accuracy, whereas, students from Tamil medium backgrounds were at the lowest level as they were not successful in producing basic sentence forms. Errors were very frequent and this led to misunderstanding. It is again proved that students, irrespective of their medium of instruction, could not raise their performance to a higher level.
Students' ability to use a range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety is highlighted in Graph C. The scholar was struck by the fact that the level of performance by both sets of students is at the lowest with almost eighty percent of students from Tamil medium backgrounds remained at 1-2 level. Students from English medium backgrounds were quite close with sixty percent of the students at 1-2 level. Even at the medium level, it was observed that there was only a difference of seventeen percent. Students from both backgrounds spoke very frequently with mispronunciations with predominantly L1 influence in their pronunciation. Students' performance at the higher level was
minimal, with only five percent of the English medium students rising to level 5-6.

Interactive communication and comprehensibility of the students is portrayed in Graph D. The scholar was comforted in the fact that at least here the students from English medium backgrounds fared much better than their counterparts. Almost sixty two percent from English medium backgrounds were able to initiate discussion and maintained their interaction without too much of prompting from the scholar/interlocutor. On the contrary, students from Tamil medium background gave only simple responses and were unable to maintain or develop the interaction. Though the English medium students performed better in this
Scale of Performance assessment, approximately sixty two percent of them stabilized at the middle level, while only three percent of the students made it to the highest level.

Overall Performance

Percentage of Students

Scale of Performance

• English
• Tamil
The bar graph given in the previous page illustrates explicitly the overall performance of the students based on all the descriptors discussed at length in the previous pages. The results of the analysis mirror the scholar's view that the competence in communicating in English by the students from English medium background is far from satisfactory and they were often dependent on L1 to achieve successful communication.

4.5.7. An analysis of the students' oral performance

Results showed that the performance of the students in linguistic components was better than their performance in communicative aspects. Fluency is one of the key factors in assessing the oral language proficiency. Most of the students in the present study were hesitant and their oral performances were discontinuous. Another scale on the descriptors was comprehensibility and interactive communication in which the students from English medium background showed a better performance than in the other scales. In most cases they understood the question or/and the gist but still were not able enough to manage the discussion.

Although the performance of the English medium students in vocabulary and grammar scales was better, there were other problems such as lack of complete accuracy. As for acceptable
and intelligible accent, both English and Tamil medium students showed a weak performance in this scale which is indicative of the learners' ignorance of this part of language.

The findings throw light on the fact that English medium students do not differ greatly from their counterparts in their speaking ability. It is unfortunate that in spite of several years of English medium instruction, students' performance in English was only at the low level. (3-4). The overall performance graph, very explicitly reveals the fact that only less than ten percent of the English medium students was proficient in English, and was wholly effective at communicating both actively and receptively in everyday contexts. The finding of this study reiterates the scholar's contention that hardly ten percent of the English medium students were equipped with appropriate, sufficient range of vocabulary and could speak the language using a wide range of structures.

In English proficiency testing, oral performance appears to be one of the most difficult skills to assess since there are many external and internal factors that influence a rater's impression toward how well someone can speak a foreign language. In other words, the reliability of scoring has always been doubted as the oral proficiency test inevitably involves raters' personal/
subjective views instead of their objective points of view. The present study documents the performance of postgraduate students using a rating scale similar to the IELTS speaking assessment. The scholar is aware that this may not be considered by some as a standard rating scale to assess the performance of postgraduate students but the scholar finds that in the absence of any reliable methods of assessment the approach taken by the scholar in this study is probably the most reliable and holistic way of assessing the students and it could serve as a good working model.

4.6 A Brief Insight into the Causes of the Learners' Problems.

From the learner's perspective, speaking is the most complex and difficult task among the language skills since it involves knowledge about the language and the skills involved in using it. During her interaction with the students, the scholar noticed that within the four language skills, speaking ability was the one that the students thought they should improve the most (97%). This meant that many students thought their oral skill was deficient. The scholar also found that the learners had high anxiety in English learning since most of them lacked speaking practice in the target language both inside and outside of the classroom. This limited real-life practice and experience appeared to have eroded
their confidence and weakened their willingness to speak. Moreover, they experienced a sense of panic when pressured into doing an English oral test. The scholar quotes some of the students' responses when the students were questioned on the reasons for their inability to speak in English.

*I always feel nervous when speaking English.*
*I feel bad in my mind because I wonder why I can't speak English very well.*
*I don't know grammar, grammar is difficult, so I can't speak English.*
*My English not good enough; I can't talk very well.*
*I want to talk English perfectly; I can't make mistakes in front of others.*
*I don't speak English well, everyone will laugh.*

These statements indicate an important problem that the majority of students face in learning and particularly speaking English. Many learners expressed their inability and sometimes even acknowledged their failure in learning to speak English. These learners might be good at learning other skills but, when it comes to learning to speak in English, they claimed to have a 'mental block' against it. The students frequently told the scholar that they do not like group discussion in the class. When asked why
they felt so reluctant to speak in the discussion, the common answer was because they felt that they had nothing to talk about. They felt very nervous when they were talking something to the group mainly because they were very afraid of making mistakes and losing face. That means their anxiety (Kitano, 2001; Sprinthall, Sprinthall & Oja, 1994) did not come from the outside competition, but their self-perception and the fear of negative evaluation.

4.6.1. Techniques employed by students in their interaction

Hence, the scholar found that the students adopted various tactics and manipulation of cultural intricacies which was predominant in their conversation. The most common technique adopted by the students was avoiding speaking on the topic given or being passive when questioned. Mostly students from rural background and from Tamil medium background would refrain from responding completely. Students from urban areas and to large extent students from higher socio-economic status were at least confident enough to approach the topic, but even they failed to fulfill the task.

The students resorted to avoidance as a means of covering up their lack of certain structures. It is just a strategy that the
students employed as 'escape routes' (Ickenroth, 1957) to compensate for their inability to use certain structures. Most of the times the students tend to literally translate structures from the first language. Sometimes they requested the scholar to let them use the first language, *e.g.*: 'I can't tell in English, I say in Tamil, ok?' but when the scholar insisted that they try in English, they kept quiet unable to continue due to lack of awareness of appropriate structures. For instance, a simple question like: 'Why did you choose this degree?' The answer was: 'I choose this degree ..... mmm...... I like it so much.' It is very surprising that they were not able to go beyond that because they were postgraduate students and had studied the course for 3-4 years. The scholar understood that they knew the reason for choosing a particular degree, because they responded to the same question in Tamil very effectively, but could not do so in English. In general, students replied mostly in two or three words.

Students adopted the above mentioned strategies to conceal their weakness in communicating in English. The scholar wishes to record some of the reasons for their performance which was below expectations. Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to
an audience. Learners often feel shy to speak in English in the classroom. They are worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts. Even if they are not inhibited, you often hear learners complain that they cannot think of anything to say: they have no motive to express themselves beyond the guilty feeling that they should be speaking. Moreover, in class where all, or a number of, the learners share the same mother tongue, they may tend to use it: because it is easier, because it feels unnatural to speak to one another in a foreign language, and because they feel less 'exposed' if they are speaking their mother tongue.

4.6.2 Teaching of English is not skill based in present classroom teaching
The scholar is in agreement with many experts in ELT that teaching of English at present at all levels is either limited to structure or grammar or translation method. At the primary and secondary school levels, structures and vocabulary are taught through a structural syllabus and grammar translation method. This method of teaching is being carried out, because teachers believe that this would help the learners construct correct English sentences with the help of the structures learnt over the years. At the higher secondary level these structures are revised and more exposure to English is provided with the help of
literary texts. The scholar's present study, vouchsafes an established truth that, students at the higher secondary level and college level score very high marks in English, for instance, as high as 195/200. But such students are highly deficient in the use of the language, in normal communication whether in spoken or written form. The students may be well-versed in grammar rules but they do not really know how to use them. Grammar should not be taught in isolation, and grammar should be taught by use and not by rules. In India, teaching of English is more or less content-based and not skill based.

The four skills of the language - Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing have been generally neglected. Teachers are required to teach only based on the prescribed text and students are given stock answers and they memorize the answers and reproduce them in examinations. Marks and degrees are awarded without any reference to the skills and abilities of the learners. At present, India has a very strict exam system which is in essence knowledge - rather than skill-based. Students' language competence is then assessed using written exam papers where neither listening nor speaking skills are tested. This has had a substantial impact on teaching practices since, overall, teachers find themselves teaching to a test rather than helping their
learners to develop their basic language skills. The consequence of this is that, although many students manage to excel in their examinations, most of them do not succeed in using the language to communicate effectively.

4.6.3 Lack of adequate exposure to English language

An important reason for the poor performance is the lack of adequate exposure to English language. Previous studies have shown that exposure to the second language is one of the environmental factors that can enhance language proficiency. It is a fact that learners' proficiency in the second language increases as they experience richer language environments. It is only through exposure an individual becomes involved in a socialization process, thereby acquiring the knowledge, values, and social skills required in learning a second language. The socialization process includes interaction with an English speaker or other English learners. This result in the learner's opportunity to master a new array of social norms, attitudes, and mannerisms enable the learner to become an effective speaker of the second language.

It is common knowledge that exposure to a second language occurs whenever individuals engage in conversations in the second language with family members, friends, classmates, and
colleagues; whenever they read books, magazines, and newspapers written in that language; whenever they come across information being disseminated in different multimedia sources; or even when they are mere passive listeners in any activity or place in which the second language is being spoken. Moreover, exposure to the second language can also influence a learner's motivation to learn that second language. Taking this into consideration, the scholar requested some of the students, both from rural and urban backgrounds to fill the questionnaire which served as a checklist to find out their exposure to English language. The items for the English exposure questionnaire reflect different situations where English is spoken in the home (e.g., speaking and conversing in English at home), friends (e.g., conversing in the English language with friends), school (e.g., teachers and classmates speaking in English, activities in school conducted in English), and media (e.g., watching English television shows, listening to English music, reading English books). The checklist was administered to the students and they were required to shade the bubble that corresponds to their answer.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. My parents talk in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. English is spoken at home.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I converse in English among my family.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I engage in activities where English is used.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My friends speak in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I attend social gatherings where English is spoken.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I talk with my friends in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. My teachers speak in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The activities in my school are conducted in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. My classmates speak in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. My school encourages students to speak in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The medium of instruction used in the classroom is English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I chat online in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I send text messages in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I receive text messages in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I browse web pages that are written in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I listen to songs in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I watch movies in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I watch TV shows in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I read magazines written in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I read newspapers written in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. I read books written in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. The information I read around is in English.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Checklist to Gauge the Exposure to English Language*
The results of the questionnaire revealed that the exposure to the language in both rural and urban areas were almost equal. This is probably due to the reason that even though the mass media, English newspapers and magazines are freely available even in rural areas but the use of these resources is limited. One area of exposure where the scholar noticed that students from urban areas had a slighter edge is the exposure in school. More teachers in urban schools communicated in English and comparatively more activities were carried out in English in urban schools. But the scholar wishes to record that whatever differences that might be noticed in the level of exposure in rural and urban schools, the difference is only minimal.
The scholar advocates the use of communicative method of teaching as the most effective way to teach a language in the classroom. The ‘models’ of language teaching processes which are being widely discussed these days call for tremendous changes in teachers’ attitudes both towards what is taught and how it is to be taught. The current shift is towards natural language use and away from the conscious and analytic study of forms and structures. Consequently, this requires a new definition of the role of the language teacher, a teacher who is concerned with creating an environment which provides appropriate and ‘comprehensible input’ – an environment in which the learner can engage in ‘real’ communicative interaction. The scholar received very positive response from the students about the communicative assessments carried out by the scholar. Majority of the students considered the communicative tasks designed especially for them to be successful and they liked the communicative tasks because they were encouraged to participate and given more chance to communicate in English. The atmosphere in the classes was active and the students were motivated to use English to express themselves.
Speaking seems intuitively the most important of all the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) since people who know a language are referred to as a 'speaker' of that language. In other words, a learner's end product of language learning is to be capable of speaking the target language fluently. However, speaking skill is a crucial part of the language learning process, and it is also the one skill, which has often been neglected in the classroom. English language teaching in educational institutions in India is still unable to meet the requirements of the political and economic growth of the country as many students after the completion of their respective courses found it hard to communicate in English effectively after spending a long time studying the language. Traditional teaching approaches, dated language material, the use of memorization and rote learning as a basic learning technique, the use of translation as both a teaching and learning technique, the perceived role of the teacher, and the rigorousness of teaching and learning to written exams, among other things, might have hampered the effectiveness of both the teaching and learning of English in the classroom. (Liu, 1995).

In the next chapter, the scholar will focus on the shift from the 'correct' way of selecting, grading, sequencing and presenting
the language as content, and way from prescribed teaching methods and techniques towards providing activities and processes which lead to natural communicative interaction in the classroom. The teacher is seen as a facilitator, an advisor and a counselor who is more concerned with providing an environment that will make available for learners opportunities for language learning. (Edelhoff 1985: 128) Many of the procedures and activities which from part of the communicative approach to language teaching should be handled properly, and they require a great deal of sophistication and awareness on the part of the teacher. How effective the lesson is depends not merely on the materials used, but also very much on the teachers' use of these materials in the classroom. However rigorous the advance planning about what to teach in the classroom might be, it is the teacher who directly shapes what happens in the classroom. Designers of the curriculum and materials do decide on the shape of the teaching-learning activities but the effectiveness of any method in a particular situation is a function of the actual performance of the individual teacher.
Conclusion

The researcher has attempted to investigate the factors that contribute to the current level of proficiency both within the classroom environment and out of classroom in the wider social context, and the scholar has recommended a variety of strategies for the instructors to overcome this problem. While working on the present study the parental education, economic position, the area of domicile and the medium of instruction of the students were taken into account. The researcher wishes to reiterate that despite its importance speaking was until recently largely ignored in schools and universities, primarily for logistical and programmatic reasons, such as emphasis on grammar and culture and unfavorable teacher-student ratios. Speaking was also absent from testing because of the difficulty in evaluating it objectively and the time it takes to conduct speaking tests. The scholar used the observational approach; wherein the student's behavior was observed and assessed unobtrusively. The scholar also tried the structured approach, wherein the students were asked to perform one or more specific oral communication tasks. Their performance on the task was then evaluated. However, the scholar found that it was not easy to design and administer speaking activities in the classroom that would develop the learner's ability to express themselves through speech. It is
extremely important that language teachers should design an effective speaking activity to meet the needs of solving learners' problems. The findings throw light on the fact that English medium students do not differ greatly from their counterparts in their speaking ability. It is unfortunate that in spite of several years of English medium instruction, students' performance in English was only at the low level.

One important reason for the current situation is even students from English medium schools have learnt English only as a subject and not as a language.

The scholar is in agreement with many experts in ELT that teaching of English at present at all levels is either limited to structure or grammar or translation method.

In the following chapter the scholar discusses at length the instructional practices to enhance the speaking skills of our students. As we all know language is the most important communicative tool of mankind, and English is an important tool for today's international communication. The objective of all English teachers should be, to develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels, and at the same time they will be able to
enhance their ability to study independently and improve their cultural quality so as to meet the needs of India's social development and international exchanges. Therefore, cultivating our students' ability to use English in communication should be the major goal of English teaching in schools and colleges.