

An Analysis of Speaking Competence of Undergraduate Students of Eight Degree Colleges of Punjabi University, Patiala

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Abstract

This paper attempts to ascertain the existing level of speaking competence in English of the entry level students of eight degree colleges affiliated with Punjabi University, Patiala. For this purpose, a speaking test consisting of six different tasks was administered to 240 students (30 from each college). The responses of the students were subjected to both quantitative as well as qualitative assessment. The scores attained through quantitative analysis were tabulated. In addition to the tabulation, the responses were also analyzed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the students while speaking English. The whole exercise was undertaken with an objective of gaining feedback regarding the level of competence of these students so that relevant practice material could be designed. Besides discussing the results of the performance of the students, certain other theoretical concepts related to speaking have been discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Qualitative assessment, Quantitative analysis, Feedback

1. Speaking and Communication

Speaking is paramount in developing communicative competence in a language whether first, second or foreign. It is the most commonly used means of interaction between human beings. In the context of language learning also, it is considered to be the most important among the four skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) because of its dominant role in the process of communication. The ability to speak a language effectively is crucial for development in social, economic, political and cultural spheres. Lack of this ability can push one towards the margins of a competitive and globalized social environment.

This observation is relevant in the context of English also which, presently, is the most widely used second language across the globe.

2. Defining Speaking

Speaking is articulation of sounds in such a way that uttered sounds correspond to a particular unit of language called word. It is a sequential chain of many such utterances which constitute sentences with variations and modalities regarding grammatical construction, vocabulary and phonetic features. Communication takes place when two or more people having knowledge of such variations and modalities engage in exchanges of words or sentences. In common parlance, it is assumed that speaking is a simple act which develops spontaneously in response to one's ability to hear and keeps increasing as one starts learning a language formally. This is particularly relevant in the context of the first language. In case of any other language, however, learning is not as simple. From the linguistic point of view, things are much more complex irrespective of the language.. A lot many theoretical inputs have been provided by various scholars to explain speaking. Brown defines it as "an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing of information" (13). In consonance with Brown, Bygate also puts forward a definition of speaking highlighting the "interactional skills which involve making decision about communication" (23). Martin Bygate and Jeremy Harmer are two prominent scholars who have made significant contributions towards explaining speaking as a skill. They propagate that skill in the use of a language along with its knowledge are the two prime factors responsible for achieving communicative goal through it. They emphasize on the concept of speaking as a skill containing several components which according to them 'must be taken into account when language teaching activity is undertaken'. These components can also be referred to as sub-skills which, at an initial level, include knowledge and the ability to produce phonemes, morphemes, words and phrasal units; and at an advanced level, include discourse functions, fluency, cohesion, body language and strategic options. Mastery over these skills, according to Bygate, equips a speaker for "making decisions rapidly, implementing them smoothly and adjusting our conversation as unexpected problems appear in our path" (3). Kang Shumin corroborates this approach of understanding speaking as a multi-featured skill as they say, "effective oral communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions that involve not only verbal communication, but

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also paralinguistic speech such as pitch, stress and intonation" (204). Besides these sub skills, another important aspect of developing speaking as a skill is 'cultural awareness' as appropriateness of speech is culturally determined to a large extent. Emphasizing the importance of this aspect, Brown and Yule opine, "a great number of cultural assumptions which would be normally presupposed, and not made explicit by native speakers, may need to be drawn explicitly to the attention of the speaker of other cultures" (40).

3. Speaking and Other Skills

All the four skills of language learning are interdependent on one hand, but also possess certain features which are unique to each of them on the other hand. These characters of interdependence and uniqueness of the skills make it important to understand the mutual relationships which exist amongst them. Observing the process of language learning closely, one can clearly understand the role which speech plays in the development of other skills. Along with 'listening', which, undoubtedly, is the foundation of all language learning, speaking is the basis of developing the other two skills, i.e. reading and writing (except in special cases where children, born with a hearing disability resulting in an inability to speak, get specially trained to read and write). Elaborating the influence which listening and speaking can have on the other skills, Yalcinkaya, Muluk and Sahin state, "It is the sound which gives meaning to the letter or graphic image. The process of decoding the graphic images of letters into sound and subsequent recognition into their meaning is more efficient when auditory processing skills are well developed"(1137-1138).

Continuing the discussion on the relationships among skills, the comparison of speaking to writing is imperative as both of these are similar in nature, yet different in essence. Commenting on the manner in which even writing is dependent upon speech, Yalcinkaya, Muluk and Sahin again observe, "Writing is a process in which sounds are translated into graphic form. If the sounds of a language are poorly integrated, it is likely to be a disturbance in their graphic reproduction." (1138). In addition to the aspect of production, there are other similarities and dissimilarities between the two productive activities. A writer and a speaker, both create meaningful structures to convey their ideas, though there are subtle differences in the nature of the produces they create. Written language is permanent in the sense that the writer can go back to it whenever he wants to, but speaking,

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in contrast, is ephemeral as it cannot be revisited. Another major difference between the two is that speaking is informal in comparison to writing which means that writing can be preplanned whereas speaking (except when delivering a pre scheduled speech) is spontaneous. Comparing the linguistic depth involved in the two skills, it can be observed that writing demands adherence to accurate syntactic structures, whereas minor alterations in the structures (not amounting to inaccuracy) can be made while speaking in order to enhance its communicative effect. Communication through writing is unequivocally clear given the graphic nature of the symbols, i.e. alphabets which have clear cut visual boundaries. These symbols cannot be mistaken for anything else. On the other hand, while speaking, one is dealing with symbols in the form of sounds, the pronunciation of which may be significantly influenced by factors such as nativity, race and culture. These subtle differences make the comprehension of second language a challenging experience for the listeners who may find it difficult to grasp the pronunciation of the natives. Finally, it may be stated that the relations among spoken and written texts are complex in the light of a variety of situational, functional and processing considerations.

As discussed earlier, ability to speak effectively influences the proficiency level which one attains regarding writing and reading. A positive correlation exists between speaking and reading, similar to the one between speaking and writing. As speaking provides the basis for reading, exposure to reading, in its turn, enhances the knowledge regarding structures, vocabulary and style of the speaker-turned-reader. There is a continuous unconscious acquisition of knowledge of these aspects while reading. Therefore, it can be said that all the four skills are intricately and inseparably related to each other.

4. Speaking and Methods of Language Learning

Various methods and approaches of TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) have accorded different places of significance to speaking in the hierarchy of the four skills. Much before speaking was recognized as a skill, the traditional approaches and methods of ELT such as Grammar-Translation Method, the Bilingual Method, the Structural Approach etc. emphasized on instilling literary, grammatical and semantic knowledge in the learner. The concept of pragmatic application in the form of communication as visualized today was missing altogether from all these approaches and methods. With the growing need

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for communication in English, there developed a few methods and approaches such as The Direct Method, The Reformative Method and The Audio-Lingual Approach which focused on developing the ability to communicate orally in English. The Direct Method emphasizing on repetition or mimicry of a limited set of constructions became popular for a short time towards the beginning of the twentieth century. After its decline, it reemerged in the form of Audio-Lingual Method around the Second World War. This method recommended habit formation drills with a focus on pronunciation by using audio-video aids, mimicry and memorization. It completely rejected the emphasis on grammatical accuracy as promoted by several previous approaches and methods. The Reformative Method was based on the premise that speech rather than the written word is the main form of language. This method promoted an alternative to grammar-oriented teaching by laying stress on phonetics. Towards 1960s, as a result of widespread dissatisfaction with the prevalent methods of ELT, the concept of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) started gaining prominence. Marking a departure from traditional approaches, it focused on 'communicative competence' rather than the 'grammatical or linguistic competence' as the primary goal in a language class room. This approach emphasized on fluency in comparison to accuracy for the sake of meaningful engagement in language use. It focused on development of speaking and listening skills along with writing for specific communicative purposes and on authentic reading texts. According to this approach, the learners are supposed to use language productively and receptively without rehearsed context. In support of the premises of this approach, Harmer states that 'language is communication' and expresses confidence that with the teaching of language through communicative tasks, "the language learning will take care of itself" (57). Since the last decade of the previous century, an assortment of methods and techniques as per the need of the audience and situation is being recommended all over the globe wherever English is being taught as a second language. Kumaravedivelu explains it as, "a rare congruence of refreshingly new ideas that can fundamentally restructure second/foreign language teaching education...one emphasizes the need to go beyond the limitations of the concept of method with a call to find an alternative way of designing effective teaching strategies" (537). Though development of speaking skill has occupied the attention of the scholars and teachers of English as a second language, 'Task-based Instruction' as recommended in the communicative approach for developing the four skills is being adopted along with a revival of traditional methods of translation, repetition, emphasis on grammatical accuracy etc.

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Considering fluency and accuracy as complementary principles in relation to communicative techniques, the times since 1990s can be termed as the Post-Method Era or Post-Communicative Approach to teaching of English as a second language.

5. The Study Conducted

Speaking, as discussed in detail above, is the most popular of the four skills of English language learning. This is also true in the case of Indians as the second language learners of English. However, when it comes to proficiency level exhibited by Indians in this particular skill, its immense popularity does not seem to have had much impact. A number of empirical as well as qualitative studies have been conducted all over the country to assess the level of competence of speakers. An assessment of a similar nature was done by the researcher on the entry level undergraduate learners from eight degree colleges affiliated with Punjabi University, Patiala in Punjab state; the results of which verify the above mentioned observations regarding their existing proficiency level. A total of 240 learners (30 from each college) were selected through a random sampling procedure for the study. Majority of these learners (234) had passed their senior secondary from two school boards, i.e. Punjab School Education Board (PSEB) and Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE). 6 learners had passed out from other boards. Following is the list of colleges:

1. Akal Degree College, Mastuana Sahib
2. Govt. College, Gobindgarh
3. Govt. College, Mohali
4. Govt. College Ropar
5. Multani Mal Modi College, Patiala
6. Public College, Samana
7. S.D. KanyaMahaVidyalaya, Mansa
8. University Constituent College, Ghanaur

8. The Test Administered

A speaking test comprising of six tasks was administered to these learners. In Task-1, the learners were asked to mimic a set of twelve words (Simple, Compound and Complex).

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This simple task carried 6 marks (0.5 for each word). In Task-2, they were asked to repeat a set of ten sentences in English. These sentences were also simple, compound and complex in nature and carried 5 marks (0.5 for each sentence). These two imitative tasks were designed with an objective to assess the ability of the learners to retain and reproduce. In addition to their ability to mimic; these tasks were expected to provide inputs regarding their pronunciation. Understanding the meaning of the words or sentences or the intent of the speaker was not considered. Task-3, carrying 5 marks (0.5 for each question), consisted of ten short questions to which the learners were supposed to reply in a single sentence. Its objective was to assess the ability of the learners to respond to questions which induced controlled response. Task 4 comprised five short sentences in Punjabi/Hindi which the learners were asked to translate in English without writing them. This intensive task was designed for gaining input regarding the grammatical competence and vocabulary possessed by the test takers. Task-5 was 'responsive' in nature and comprised eight questions to which the learners were supposed to reply in two to three sentences. Carrying 16 marks (2 marks for each question), this task was designed with an aim to elicit limited analytical response in addition to knowing about the ability of the learners to comprehend questions. The last task carrying 8 marks (4 marks per question) consisted of two questions which the learners were asked to answer at length. This task had an objective of assessing the conversational skills and the ability of the respondents to engage in logical, extensive speaking. The first question in the task was a close-to-real-life topic in which the respondents were given an opportunity to narrate about a party which they had enjoyed a lot. The second question in the task was an extensive one aiming at assessing the ability of the respondent to engage in lengthy and complex analytical speaking.

8.1. Rationale behind the Tasks

These tasks were designed with the objective of providing detailed inputs regarding the existing level of competence in speaking of the target learners. Most of these tasks were based on everyday concerns likely to interest the test-takers, otherwise a majority of them get scared off when asked to speak even a simple sentence in English.

8.2 Assessment Criteria

Assessing speaking in second language is an extremely challenging task as more than

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one aspect needs to be considered at the same time. Though the level of proficiency can be directly observed, the reliability and validity of such observations can be subject to discussion. In the context of the present study, as stated above, an effort was made to assess the existing level of speaking competence in English of the target learners by administering a comprehensive speaking test to them. Based on their performance in six different tasks contained in the test, the respondents were accorded points and on the basis of the points scored by a respondent, he/she was placed in one of the five stages (1 to 5) indicating five different levels of competence. The respondents were to be awarded a total of 45 points. Task 1 was for 6 points, Tasks-2, 3 and 4 carried 5points each. Task 5 carried 16 points and Task 6 was for 8 points. The five stages corresponding to certain levels of percentages and points are shown in Table 1.

The scores obtained by the learners from the different boards have been tabulated as under:

Table 1: Scores obtained by respondents from various school boards in the speaking test

Stage	Percentage Level	Points
Stage-1	< 35%	0-16
Stage-2	36%-55%	17-25
Stage-3	56%-75%	26-34
Stage-4	76%-90%	35-40
Stage-5	>90%	41-45

The bar chart shown in Fig. 1 highlights the difference in the performance level of the learners from different school boards.

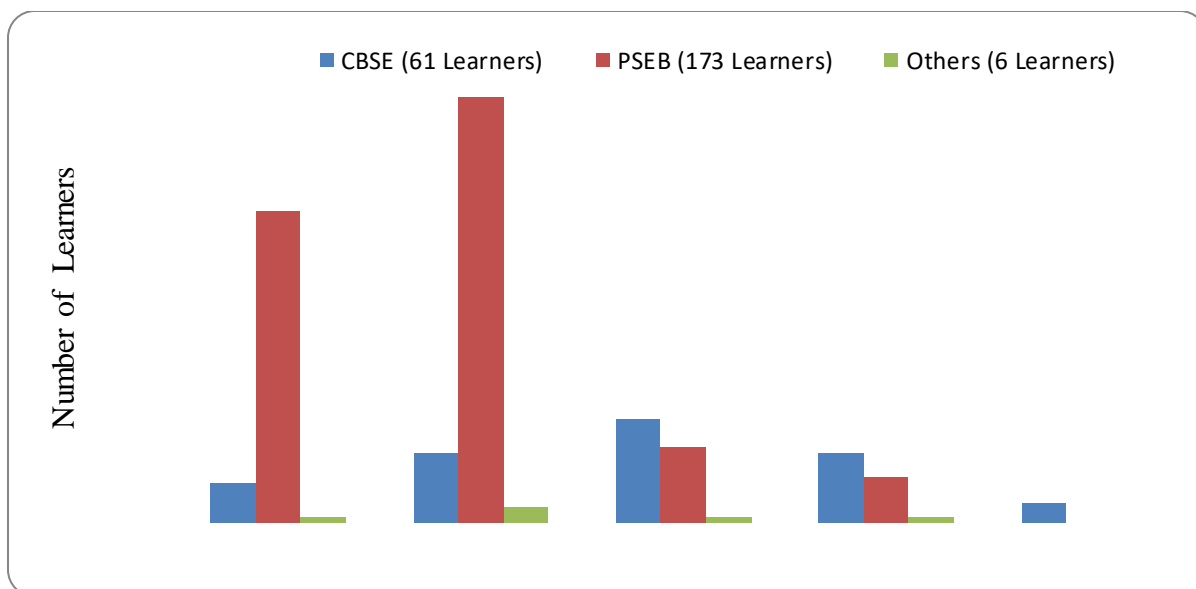


Fig 1: Comparative performance levels of the learners from different school boards.

As discussed in detail in the beginning of this section, the tasks were varied in nature and aimed at providing comprehensive inputs regarding the performance of the respondents in various aspects of speaking. This exercise was supposed to lead the researcher to a diagnostic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the respondents regarding the aspects of speaking in which they need training and practice. This would further help in construction of relevant remedial and practice material.

The scores obtained by the learners from the three different boards have been tabulated as under:

Scores	Stage-1	Stage-2	Stage-3	Stage-4	Stage-5
Boards	0-16 (72 learners)	17-25 (103 learners)	26-34 (37 learners)	35-40 (24 learners)	41-45 (4 learners)
CBSE (61 learners)	8	14	21	14	4
PSEB	63	86	15	9	Nil

(173 learners)					
OTHERS (6 learners)	1	3	1	1	Nil

For this specific purpose, the researcher designed a rubric which included seven criteria indicating seven key aspects of speaking. The responses were accorded weightage against each of them. It is pertinent to clarify here that an effort has been made by the researcher to equate the stages in which the respondents were placed (on the basis of the points which they scored) to their level of control over several features of speech mentioned as criteria in the rubric.

The rubric and the scale on the basis of which the responses were categorized is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The rubric and the scale on the basis of which the responses were categorized.

Criteria→ Score ↓	Grammatical Accuracy	Vocabulary	Fluency	Pronunciation	Prosodic Features	Retention	Body Lang.
Beginner Stage -1 0-16 Points	Shows hardly any control over grammatical constructions, can hardly translate effectively	Does not possess sufficient vocabulary to communicate, uses words from the mother tongue	no fluency at all, extremely broken speech	Extremely faulty pronunciation with strong influence of mother-tongue	Appears to have no knowledge of any of these features	Can retain and reproduce individual words but not sentences	Exhibited extreme discomfort while speaking, no eye contact, extremely nervous

Low Intermedi ateStage- 2 17-25 points	Can only construct simple and short sentences with occasional accuracy, can translate only simple sentences at times	Possesses very limited vocabular y, frequently uses words from the mother tongue	No fluency in wake of limited sentence construc tion and vocabul ary	Strong influence of mother tongue on limited vocabular y	Shows no knowledg e of these features	Can retain and reprodu ce individ ual words and simple sentenc es	Uncomfort able while speaking, no eye hand, nervous hand movements
Intermedi ateStage- 3 26-34 points	Can construct simple sentences accurately , can translate simple sentences as well	Possesses limited vocabular y, but uses it appropriat ely	Can fluently speak short sentence s, not the longer ones	Pronounce s reasonably correctly with influence of mother tongue at times	Makes efforts toSpeak with correct stress, uses short forms	Can retain and reprodu ce individ ual words and sentenc es without asking for repetiti on	Makes effort to be confident, makes eye contact, but nervous while interacting or logical speaking
High intermedi	Can construct	Possesses sufficient	Exhibits good	Has nearly perfect	Has good control	Exhibit s	Confident with the

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ate Stage-4 35-40 points	accurate sentences and translates accurately with a rare error in constructi on or translation	Vocabular y to communic ate effectively , does not use mother tongue at all	fluency with rare obstructi on	pronunciat ion except for a few sounds which indicate the mother tongue influence	over these features with occasional indecisive ness	perfect capacit y to retain	body language and eye contact with a rare under confident gesture.
Advance d Stage - 5 41-45 Points	Can construct variety of sentences accurately , translates conveying the spirit	Possesses sufficient Vocabular y to communic ate effectively , does not use mother tongue at all	Exhibits good fluency with rareobstr uction	Has nearly perfect pronunciat ion	Has good control over these features with occasional indecisive ness	Exhibit s perfect capacit y to retain	Confident with the body language, eye contact and hand movements

9. Discussion of the Results

On the basis of performance of the learners in various speaking tasks, it can be noticed that only four learners from the CBSE out of a total of 240 (both the boards) were able to reach stage 5 named 'Advanced' which indicates the highest levels of proficiency against the various criteria. These learners exhibited almost perfect control over all aspects of speaking included in the rubric. Their ability to remember what they listened was near perfect; they could accurately reproduce the 'words' in task 1 and 'sentences' in Task 2. They did not make any error regarding accuracy and their pronunciation was nearly flawless. They appeared to have sufficient vocabulary to communicate their ideas effectively, though while

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translating from Punjabi into English, three of them did use the verb 'falling' instead of 'felling'. The only aspect which appeared to have scope for improvement was prosodic features which can be attributed to anxiety of being tested or perhaps lack of formal training. The body language of this small group was generally positive; they exhibited confidence as they made eye contact while speaking, controlled their facial expressions and hand movements well. It is pertinent to mention here that the assessment against some of the criteria included in the rubric would have the subjective element, leaving scope for discussions and even disagreement regarding the score assigned to the learners against tasks that aimed at assessing their ability to interact and respond to intensive tasks.

24 learners were able to attain the score (35-40) which placed them in Stage-4 named 'High Intermediate'. Out of these 24, 14 were from the CBSE, 9 from the PSEB, and 1 was from ICSE (other board). These students, like the ones in Stage-5, attained near perfect scores in the first four tasks. Their ability to retain as put to test in Tasks 1 and 2 was almost perfect with instances of an occasional fumble when it came to reproducing long sentences at number 8 and 10. Their pronunciation was marked by occasional errors when it came to pronouncing words such as 'banana', 'endeavour', 'students', 'patient' etc. It could be observed that the pronunciation of certain phonemes was influenced by the mother tongue, e.g. they could not control pronunciation of the phoneme /ɪ/ which sounded as spoken with more stress than required in words such as 'working', 'corner', 'early' and 'hard' etc. They did not use the phoneme /j/ in the word 'student' in which they also used the vowel /æ/ in place of the schwa /ə/. While speaking the word 'patient', these learners used the pure vowel /e/ in place of the diphthong /ei/ and also the vowel /æ/ in place of /ə/. In Task-4, while translating, almost all of these learners used 'falling' in place of 'felling'. This group exhibited an above average control over vocabulary and its appropriate use. They did have the semantic resources to convey their ideas, and syntactic knowledge to construct accurate short sentences while responding to Tasks 5 and 6. These learners were able to speak quite fluently with occasional fumble. Their body language also was generally positive. These learners, however, faltered when it came to assessing the use of suprasegmental features like stress and intonation which indicates anxiety of being tested and lack of formal knowledge of these features. This was particularly noticeable when they responded to tasks requiring them to interact with the researcher and also demanded background knowledge of the topic. At times, they spoke at a

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level tone without pauses or appropriate rise and fall in tone. Several learners found it a little difficult to respond satisfactorily to questions included in Tasks-5 and 6, being at some loss while explaining the reasons behind the choices they would make with regard to their favourite film star, their choice between watching a film or a live cricket match, why do they like one particular season, and why do they prefer one type of food over the other. They could comfortably talk about their families, about their household responsibilities, and even about their choice to live in a city or a village. In the subsequent questions, however, they hesitated a bit in explaining the reasons. They could logically talk about the necessity to follow traffic rules. In Task-6 also, they enjoyed talking about the party, but were at a loss when the issue of environment was taken up in the last question. This particular question exhibited their limited background knowledge as well.

A total of 37 learners (21 from CBSE, 15 from PSEB and 1 from Haryana Board of School Education) obtained scores which put them in Stage 3 named 'Intermediate' indicating 26 to 34 points out of a total of 45. This set of respondents was good at repetition of simple individual words, but occasionally missed one or two compound or complex words.

Similarly, when it came to repeating sentences, they appeared to be in perfect control of simple sentences but faltered occasionally while reproducing the compound and complex sentences which were relatively longer, e.g. sentences between 8 and 10. Their pronunciation was also not flawless as they committed errors in articulation of words such as 'banana', 'grammar', 'consolidate', 'corner', 'mechanic', 'watch', 'student' and 'endeavour'. Like their counterparts in Stage 4, these respondents made errors in articulation of the consonant /t/ which was produced prominently in each of the words mentioned above. This group also faltered in pronunciation of phoneme /j/ in the word 'student' in which they replaced the schwa /ə/ with the stronger vowel /æ/. They pronounced the rounded vowel /ɒ/ in 'watch' as /ɑ:/ which indicates discernible influence of the mother tongue. It is pertinent to mention here that these respondents were given full score whenever they were able to repeat the word or the sentence completely. They did not lose score due to faulty pronunciation. The above observations regarding pronunciation or fluency are only additional in nature. Their responses to questions in Task 3 were nearly perfectly controlled. They also successfully translated two or three sentences from Punjabi into English, but in sentences 2 and 3, they used 'falling'

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instead of 'felling' and 'giving the test' instead of 'taking the test' respectively. Both these errors can be understood in terms of their limited semantic resources. This group was found to be fluent in speech when the sentences were small and constructions were simple. Though they appeared to possess knowledge to respond to questions under Tasks 5 and 6, they could only make short sentences without perfect use of vocabulary. Their ability to reason was found to be hampered in absence of necessary semantic resources in the target language and their inability to construct variety of sentences. They returned to the use of the mother tongue in order to explain their logic, but when asked by the researcher to use English only, they appeared confused. This group appeared confident but anxious which affected their body language to some extent. These respondents, like those in Stage 4, showed little control over prosodic features. However, this group showed a lot of promise and scope for improvement with a little training and practice.

103 learners (14 from CBSE, 86 from PSEB, and 3 from other boards such as the 'Open' school board of Punjab and UP Board of School Education) were placed in Stage-2 named 'Low Intermediate'. These learners were only able to repeat simple individual words in Task 1, though fumbled a little while pronouncing compound and complex words such as 'eye-contact', 'consolidate', 'endeavour' and 'facilitate'. In Task 2, these respondents could manage to reproduce the simple sentences, but again fumbled and made errors while repeating sentences 6 to 10. They tended to forget these sentences almost half-way. In addition to committing the same errors as the respondents placed in Stages 3 and 4 with regard to pronunciation, this group made several more errors. Their pronunciation of words such as 'hockey', 'want', 'lazy', 'woman' and 'good' etc. as /hɑ:kɪ/, /vɑ:nt/, /ledʒi/, /wʊmən/ and /gʊd/ (with unusual stress on /d/) exhibited influence of the mother tongue to the extent of being faulty. They could confidently and correctly answer questions in Task 3, but exhibited very limited translation skills in Task 4. Similar to their counterparts in Stage 3, they used the verbs 'falling' and 'giving the exam' in place of 'felling' and 'taking the exam' respectively. Most of these respondents could not translate sentence 5. In case of Tasks 5 and 6, these learners exhibited very limited ability to respond with reason, sufficient background knowledge and vocabulary. This group exhibited extremely poor control over prosodic features. They were hardly able to interact with the researcher or talk about 'environment'. Their responses to questions in these two tasks indicated complete lack of fluency, absolutely

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no knowledge of aspects such as stress and intonation, very limited vocabulary and an ability to construct only short sentences. This group also appeared to possess limited vocabulary and grammatical competence. Their speech was marked by frequent obstructions as a consequence of all these factors and was not fluent at all. They appeared to be extremely conscious of their limitations which resulted in nervousness. All this made them under confident and affected their body language. They avoided any eye contact; talked with their heads down; and kept twisting the fingers of their hands.

72 learners (8 from CBSE, 63 from PSEB and 1 from Haryana Board of School Education) were placed in Stage-1 named 'Beginner' after obtaining a score of less than 16. This group exhibited an ability to repeat either simple words or relatively common compound words such as 'motor-cycle' and 'bride-groom'. Many of them articulated 'eye-connect' or could only manage to speak 'eye' in place of 'eye-contact' and 'new-pound' or 'new-fond' in place of 'new-found. They could hardly reproduce any of the complex words correctly, e.g. saying only 'proxy' in place of 'proximity' and 'facility' in place of 'facilitate'. They found it extremely difficult to repeat long sentences contained in Task 2, fumbling in almost every sentence from 1 to 5 and partially or completely missing out on the rest. This indicates that their ability to listen correctly and retaining is extremely limited. With regard to pronunciation, this group was observed as committing almost all the errors which their counterparts in Stage 2 had committed. In addition, these respondents pronounced simple words such as 'is' and 'was' in an incorrect manner, articulating /dʒ/ in place of /z/ in both the words; and /ɑ:/ place of /ɒ/ in 'was'. They responded to questions contained in Task 3 with interest as these were the only questions which they could respond with confidence of possessing adequate vocabulary. This group could only translate one or two sentences correctly from Punjabi/Hindi into English. In fact, majority of them did not even try to translate sentence 5. At times, they tried to use the expressions of Punjabi/Hindi while translating, e.g. 'maali'. They also used the word 'labour' instead of 'labourer' besides wrongly replacing the verbs 'felling' and 'taking the exam'. These examples exhibit their extremely limited semantic resources and an inability to put the limited ones to appropriate use. They also appeared to be at a loss when it came to their background knowledge and logical, critical thinking required to indulge in analytical and argumentative responses to questions in Tasks 5 and 6. They could respond to these tasks with extreme difficulty in

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broken sentences replete with words from the vernacular, grammatical errors and that too only after a lot of goading by the researcher. They had absolutely no control over prosodic features and fluency. Their body language conveyed they were scared or completely disinterested.

To sum up the discussion regarding the existing competence level of the target learners, it can be stated that more than 72% learners have been placed in Stages 1 and 2, 15% in Stage 3, and 10% and a fraction, i.e., 1.66% in Stages 4 and 5 respectively. It may be interpreted differently, leading to the observation that about two-thirds of the entry level learners have failed to make any meaningful communication in English. They lack knowledge as well as training in all the key aspects of speaking which were used as criteria in the rubric. Except for the 11% learners placed in Stages 4 and 5 who exhibited near perfect control over almost all the components of the criteria, all the remaining can be observed as requiring training and practice in all the aspects. The scores which the learners in the first three stages have been able to obtain are largely a result of their correct responses to 'Imitative Tasks' and 'Directed Response Tasks'. They have not performed well in Tasks 5 and 6, 'Extensive' and 'Interactive' in nature. It means that these learners do not possess the competence to engage in lengthy conversation. All these observations can serve as a platform for building practice material so that the deficient aspects can be strengthened.

Probing the reasons behind such performance, more than one factor can be quoted as responsible. Regarding the level of competence exhibited by the learners from the state-run board, it can be clearly observed that the policy makers have been caught on the wrong foot with regard to the choice of appropriate materials and methodologies for teaching English as a second language in the state. Along with the corresponding 'input' skill of listening, speaking fails to find much favour with the curriculum designers of the board. On the other hand, in the English courses offered by the CBSE, it does find a place along with 'listening'. These boards have included a component ASL (Assessment of Speaking and Learning) in their courses. Along with ASL, speaking gets a boost through the use of English as medium of instruction for other subjects also. Moreover, the learners are greatly benefited by the overall environment of these schools where the learners are encouraged to use English as the medium of communication. In comparison, the students from the state-run board neither get

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instruction for other subjects in English, nor do they get any opportunity to communicate in English with teachers or peers. The situation worsens for them since after their schooling; the universities also completely ignore the development of this skill in the curriculum.

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