



## From Classrooms to Conversations: Examining the Gap in English Language Speaking Skills among Sri Lankan English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners

R.M.J.U. Rathnayaka<sup>1</sup>, M.A.N.N. Fernando<sup>2</sup>, L.V. George<sup>3</sup>, D.M.M.S. Dissanayake<sup>\*4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> *Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Sri Lanka*

Email address of the corresponding author - \*sucheru.d@sliit.lk

---

### Abstract

The persistent struggle of Sri Lankan learners relating to spoken English proficiency despite extensive formal instruction continues to be a dominant issue in English language teaching and learning in the local context. Thus, with the objective of finding out the underlying factors that contribute to the low competency in English language speaking skills of secondary level learners, this study was conducted based on the research question 'what are the reasons that hinder the improvement in English language speaking of Sri Lankan ESL learners?'. Data collection included a mixed-method approach: a detailed questionnaire was distributed, and interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online (via Zoom) with six educators and twenty-four students across the Western and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. The participants included eighteen Sinhala and twelve Tamil speakers. The questionnaires were subjected to quantitative analysis using cross-tabulation and descriptive statistics. Additionally, for the interviews conducted, content analysis was employed. Furthermore, the Cross-Validation approach was used to support the findings. The analyses reveal several critical barriers to improving spoken proficiency: inadequate educational resources, antiquated pedagogical practices, limited immersion in the language, and challenges with pronunciation leading to an inhibition towards speaking English. Teachers mainly highlighted a predominance of conventional, grammar-centric teaching methods and the reluctance to utilize available technological

tools due to concerns about misuse and damage. The student participants reported that their reluctance to practice speaking is due to fear of making errors and being negatively judged, compounded by an excessive focus on examination success. Both teachers and students were of the view that examination papers prioritise receptive skills over productive ones, thereby reinforcing a cycle of rote learning and exam-oriented instruction. This study advocates for a reformation in national examinations to include assessments of productive skills, speaking and listening, to better reflect comprehensive language competence. Additionally, it is suggested that cultivating a genuine passion for English within students, despite existing constraints, could significantly enhance their language acquisition and learning. Educators are encouraged to adopt more innovative and supportive teaching strategies that emphasize practical language use and student engagement.

**Keywords:** Assessment reform; Pedagogical practices; Psychological barriers; Spoken English language proficiency