



English as a second language for health sciences undergraduates: Preferred activities and motivational factors

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Fluency in English is vital for non-native speakers in Allied Health Sciences. However, undergraduates in English-medium health programs often struggle with oral communication skills. To address this, faculty administrations have implemented various initiatives, though participation rates remain low. This study aimed to explore students' preferred activities and whether their motivation to improve English speaking skills was driven by intrinsic or extrinsic factors. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among first to final-year students in Pharmacy, Nursing, and Medical Laboratory Science (MLS) programs, who are native Sinhala or Tamil speakers. Data were collected through a validated online questionnaire, pilot tested for reliability. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators were analyzed using a paired sample t-test. Among 277 respondents (Pharmacy 33.2%, Nursing 45.8%, MLS 20.9%), intrinsic motivation was predominant ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI), with future job prospects, personal development, and confidence being key motivators. Common barriers included fear of mistakes, nervousness, and grammar difficulties. Students favored constructive feedback and supportive classroom environments. Preferred activities included presentations during lectures (60.8%) and participation in speaker clubs, with or without resource persons (55.7%). The study recommends more flexible, interactive opportunities like weekly speaker clubs, certification programs, and integrating both informal and professional topics into the curriculum. These findings offer practical strategies for improving language programs in similar educational contexts.

Keywords: Education, English Oral Competence, English programs, Motivation, Pharmacy, Second-Language Speaker

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INTRODUCTION

Fluency in spoken English is critically important for non-native English speakers across various fields of education and employment ([Alkhuzae et al., 2019](#); [Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021](#)). In contexts where English is the medium of instruction, fluency in the language significantly enhances students' academic performance ([AlMously et al., 2013](#); [Hayes & Farnill, 1993](#)). Numerous studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between English fluency and immediate post-graduation employment opportunities ([Sadeghi et al., 2013](#); [Salamonson et al., 2008](#)). Despite this, many students continue to face challenges in communicating effectively in English for several reasons ([Salamonson et al., 2008](#); [Wazeema & Kareema, 2017](#)). A lack of motivation ([Sorayyaei Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020](#)) and reluctance to practice speaking skills are among the primary obstacles.

Additionally, sedentary behaviour, inadequate soft skills and limited career prospects have been linked to poor language proficiency ([Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021](#)).

The Faculty of Allied Health Sciences at the University of Ruhuna comprises three Departments: Pharmacy, Nursing, and Medical Laboratory Science (MLS). It currently offers four-year undergraduate programs in Bachelor of Pharmacy, B.Sc. Nursing, and B.Sc. Medical Laboratory Science. All degree programs are delivered and assessed in the English medium. To graduate, students must complete an individual research project and produce a dissertation in English, with the proposal presentation and thesis defense are also conducted in English. However, student selection for these programs is based on their performance in the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Advanced Level examination in the science stream, which most students complete in their native languages, Sinhala or Tamil ([Weerakkody & Dharmadasa, 2015](#)). Only a small number of students take the examination in English ([Weerakkody & Dharmadasa, 2015](#)).

Due to limited exposure to English-speaking environments, many students exhibit a significant gap in language skills upon entering university ([Doskovskaya & Oparina, 2022](#)). The sudden transition to English as the medium of instruction is a major factor contributing to student underperformance in their university studies ([Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021](#)). This often leads to academic failures and, in some cases, extends time required to complete their degrees ([Aluwihare & De Silva, 2016](#); [Hill, 2009](#); [Weerakkody & Dharmadasa, 2015](#)). While all Pharmacy and health sciences degree programs in Sri Lanka include English courses, either for credit or non-credit offerings, the faculty administration has implemented several initiatives to further enhance students' English language proficiency. Unfortunately, these efforts are frequently undermined by low student attendance and passive engagement, with limits their effectiveness.

Several studies have highlighted these challenges among undergraduates enrolled in professional degree programs in Sri Lanka. For instance, [Seefa \(2017\)](#) analyzed the primary difficulties students face in learning English, though limited attention was given to identifying teaching methodologies preferred by students ([Weerasooriya, 2021](#)). [Vidanapathirana and Gamini \(2009\)](#), in their examination of issues faced by Sri Lankan students admitted to English-medium bachelor's programs, noted that enrolment is highly selective, with students from urban areas predominantly joining these programs. Furthermore, student performance was closely linked to their level of English proficiency ([Vidanapathirana & Gamini, 2009](#)). [Rameez \(2019\)](#) proposed that fostering positive student attitudes, motivation to practice, and self-confidence could help address the passive behavior often observed in language learning.

The socio-cultural environment significantly influences the development of English-speaking skill, as it affects learner motivation and engagement ([Chen, 2022](#)). As [Aysha Khan \(2024\)](#) notes, in contexts such as Pakistan, students are often motivated to learn and speak English due to its

association with social benefits, including improved academic performance and enhanced social standing among peers and teachers. However, while students may acknowledge the global importance of English for a deeper understanding of the world, they may inadvertently maintain connections to their native cultures, which can hinder fully integrative motivation for English acquisition ([Aysha Khan, 2024](#); [Saragih & Subekti, 2023](#)). These cultural dynamics suggest that the motivation to learn English is not solely grounded in academic aspirations; rather, it is intricately linked to broader socio-cultural influences, resulting in challenges that extend beyond the classroom ([Gearing, 2024](#)). Therefore, re-evaluating pedagogical approaches that emphasize the cultures of native English speakers may be necessary to create more inclusive learning environments that resonate with students' own socio-cultural contexts.

A motivated student is generally believed to learn more effectively and maintain long-lasting enthusiasm for their studies. Understanding the intrinsic and extrinsic factors of motivation is essential for designing appropriate strategies that encourage students' participation in engaging developmental activities ([Menggo, 2018](#)). However, there exists a research gap in identifying the motivational factors specific to health sciences undergraduates who are non-native English speakers and whose native languages are either Sinhala or Tamil, as well as their preferred activities for enhancing English-speaking proficiency. Given this, the present study aims to address the enhancement of learner motivation as a critical challenge.

METHODS

This study aims to identify the factors that motivate health sciences undergraduates who are native speakers of Sinhala and Tamil (Sri Lankans) and to determine their preferred activities for improving English-speaking proficiency.

At the University of Ruhuna in Sri Lanka, a cross-sectional survey was conducted among undergraduates enrolled in the Pharmacy, Nursing, and MLS programs. All learners from the first to the fourth years in these three Departments were considered for the investigation, while graduates and students who had completed the final year of academic work were excluded. Of the 466 undergraduates in the faculty (112 from Pharmacy, 251 from Nursing, and 103 from MLS), a convenient sample of 277 was included in this survey. The minimum sample size ($n=211$) was calculated using the formula outlined by [Krejcie et al. \(1996\)](#).

$$n = \frac{X^2 \times N \times P \times (1-P)}{(ME^2 \times (N-1)) + X^2 \times P \times (1-P)}$$

Notes: n = sample size; X^2 = Chi-square value for the specified confidence level (95%) with 1 degree of freedom; N = Population size (466); P = Population proportion (assumed to be 0.5); ME = Desired margin of error (5%).

Study Instrument

Data were collected using a self-administered online survey questionnaire, which was created in simple English via Google forms. The questionnaire was designed by the authors after reviewing relevant published literature ([Aggouni, 2015](#); [Bensoussan, 2015](#); [Gardner, 2005](#); [Ihsan, 2016](#); [Krishnan et al., 2013](#)) to investigate intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors in practicing English speaking skills, as well as to identify the activities students were willing to engage in to enhance their speaking proficiency. The questionnaire comprised three sections; Part I (demographic information of the participants); Part II (a 5-point Likert scale to assess the undergraduate’s level of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation); and Part III (questions on preferred English-speaking activities). The questionnaire was pilot tested for reliability using 10% (n=21) of the minimum sample size. Reliability for the sections on motivation, demotivation, and preferred activities was confirmed, with Cronbach’s Alpha values exceeding 0.7 for all sections. Data from the pilot test were excluded from the final analysis.

An online survey was selected over traditional paper-based questionnaires for several key reasons. First, it allowed students to complete the survey at their convenience, providing ample time for thoughtful and reflective responses, which is particularly important for health sciences students for whom English is an additional subject. These methods encourage more authentic responses, as students are not rushed between classes. Additionally, online distribution was expected to improve the response rate, as physical questionnaires are often not returned. The online format also facilitated rapid dissemination of the survey, minimized logistical challenges such as the distribution and collection of paper forms, and reduced the time required for data processing. Further, the online format offered greater anonymity and confidentiality ([Joinson, 1999](#)), which may encourage more honest responses. To enhance participation among less engaged or passive students, the survey was distributed via batch coordinators, with soft reminders sent every three days following the initial delivery. Clear instructions were provided at the outset, emphasizing the importance of student input in improving English-speaking programs at the faculty, thereby encouraging students to recognize the potential impact of their responses on faculty program design.

Data collection

The questionnaire was distributed via email to all the undergraduates in the three departments (n=466) through the batch coordinators to ensure comprehensive coverage. The questionnaire included a brief explanation of the study, along with an option for participants to provide informed consent. No personal information, such as email addresses or other identifying details, was collected; only the data requested in the questionnaire was recorded. One week after the questionnaire was distributed, 277 responses were received. Since the number of responses exceeded the minimum sample size requirement, all 277 were included in the data analysis. Any unanswered questions were treated as missing values during the analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20.0. A paired sample t-test was employed to examine the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators and demotivators. Descriptive statistics were used to report the results. Statistical significance was indicated by a p-value of ≤ 0.05 at a 95% confidence interval (CI). Additionally, participants' comments were thematically analyzed and categorized into three overarching themes: facilitators, barriers, and suggestions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, and administrative approval was obtained from the Heads of the three departments involved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 277 responses were collected, with 78.8% of respondents being female and 21.2% male). The distribution of responses across the three departments was as follows: 33.2% (n=92) from Pharmacy, 45.8% (n=127) from Nursing, and 20.9% (n=58) from MLS. The largest proportion of responses (40.8%, n=113) came from first-year undergraduates, followed by 31% (n=86) from the second-year students, 20.6% (n=57) from the third-year students, and 7.6% (n=21) from the fourth-year students. The majority of the respondents (94.2%, n= 261) had completed their schooling in the Sinhala medium. Only 3.2% (n=9) had been educated exclusively in the English medium, while 2.5% (n=7) had studied in the Tamil medium.

[Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#) below present the grades obtained by the respondents for English in the G.C.E. Advanced Level and G.C.E. Ordinary Level examinations, respectively.

TABLE 1 | G.C.E. Advanced Level English Results (n=277)

Grade	No. of students	Percentage
A	39	14.1%
B	47	17.0%
C	76	27.5%
S	94	34.1%
F	20	7.2%

TABLE 2 | G.C.E. Ordinary Level English results (n=277)

Grade	No. of students	Percentage
A	141	50.9%
B	67	24.2%
C	59	21.3%
S	9	3.2%
W	1	0.4%

Among the study participants, 236 (87.7%) indicated that speaking was the most challenging skill to improve. The difficulty of developing other language skills was reported as follows: writing (46.5%, n=125), listening (36.1%, n=97),

and reading (11.2%, n=30). A majority of students (83%, n=229) focused more on improving their speaking skills, followed by writing (55.1%, n=152), listening (42%, n=116), and reading (35.5%, n=98). Fewer than 4.8% (n=13) rated their speaking ability as "very good," while 22.8% (n=62) identified as "beginners," and the majority (72.4%, n=197) rated themselves as "intermediate."

[Figure 1](#) illustrates the factors motivating students to improve their English-speaking proficiency. More than three-quarters of the participants cited future job opportunities (86.3%), personal development (78.3%), and increased confidence (76.2%) as key motivators for becoming fluent in English.

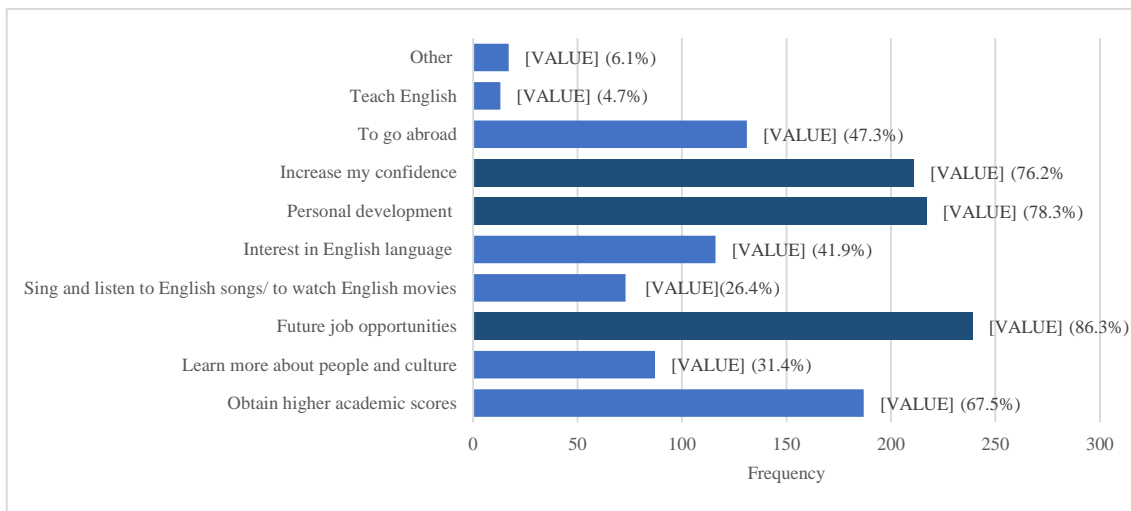


FIGURE 1 | Reasons for Improving English speaking

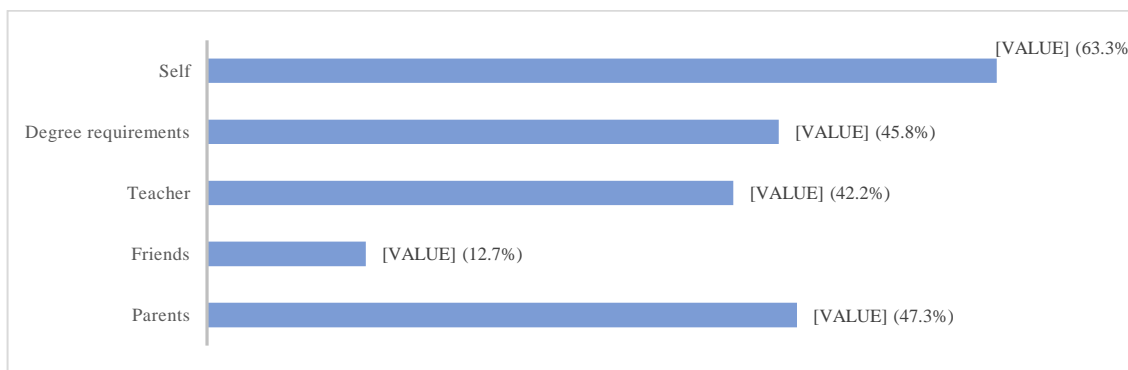


FIGURE 2 | Sources of motivation

[Figure 2](#) illustrates the sources of motivation influencing students to enhance their English-speaking proficiency. The majority of students (63.3%) reported being self-motivated, followed by parental encouragement (47.3%), degree requirements (45.8%), and positive influences from teachers (42.2%). In contrast, motivation from peers was relatively low, at 12.7%.

[Table 3](#) highlights that, despite students' motivation, several key structural and psychological barriers must be addressed to enhance English-speaking proficiency. A significant proportion of students (n=277) express a strong desire to become proficient English speakers and demonstrate high interest in developing effective communication skills (n=276). However, opportunities to practice speaking English remain limited, with many students reporting that they only occasionally speak English when given the chance (n=277). External motivation plays a crucial role for these students, as a substantial number prefer

encouragement from teachers (n=275) and structured opportunities (n=277), such as compulsory English-speaking courses (n=276) or regulations promoting the use of English (n=274).

Despite their motivation, students encounter several barriers to speaking English. Concerns about making mistakes (n=277), feeling of nervousness (n=274), and difficulties with grammar (n=275) are prominent challenges, along with issues related to pronunciation (n=272) and sentence formation (n=275). While teacher (n=274) and peer criticism (n=275) are less significant barriers, students still report that these factors moderately impact their willingness to speak in English. Additionally, time constraints (n=276), lack of opportunities (n=275), and financial limitations (n=273) further inhibit students' progress in mastering English-speaking skills.

The analysis of motivation levels among the participants reveals a significant difference between intrinsic and

extrinsic motivation. The mean score for intrinsic motivation is notably high at 4.16, indicating that students are primarily driven by internal factors such as personal satisfaction and the inherent enjoyment of learning. This level of intrinsic motivation is further supported by a relatively low standard deviation of 0.66, indicating that most students share similar motivational levels in this regard. In contrast, the mean score for extrinsic motivation is lower at 3.73, indicating that external factors -such as grades or recognition -play a less significant role in motivating students to improve their English-speaking skills.

TABLE 3 | Factors that Motivate/Demotivate Students in Speaking English (n=277)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
It is my goal to be a good English speaker	277	4.58	.793
I am very interested in learning effective English communication	276	4.51	.798
Every time I get a chance, I speak in English	277	3.41	.972
I prefer if the teacher motivates me to deliver speeches.	275	3.83	.987
I would like a compulsory English-speaking course.	276	3.68	1.151
I would like to have a regulation to speak only in English.	274	3.70	1.037
I like to receive marks/certificates when I deliver speeches.	275	3.75	1.031
I do not speak because I am worried about making mistakes.	277	3.39	1.316
I do not speak because I am nervous.	274	3.36	1.295
I am not fluent in English grammar.	275	3.37	1.050
I do not speak because of teachers' negative comments.	274	2.28	1.200
I do not speak because of other students' negative comments.	277	2.43	1.224
I do not speak because of negative peer pressure.	275	2.76	1.226
I cannot find words to make sentences.	275	3.05	1.197
I do not have a good accent/pronunciation.	272	3.05	1.072
I do not have time to spend learning English.	276	2.84	1.099
I do not have enough money.	273	3.10	1.181
I do not have an opportunity to talk in English.	275	2.80	1.046

Statistical analysis in [Table 3](#) shows that intrinsic motivation significantly impacts students' speaking skills (p

< 0.001, 95% CI), underscoring the importance of nurturing an internal desire to learn. Furthermore, a notable difference exists between intrinsic and extrinsic demotivation, with the mean score for intrinsic demotivation measured at 3.16, compared to a mean score of 2.56 for extrinsic demotivation. This finding suggests that students encounter greater internal challenges in their efforts to speak English than external barriers. Consequently, it highlights the necessity of addressing these intrinsic factors to enhance overall speaking proficiency.

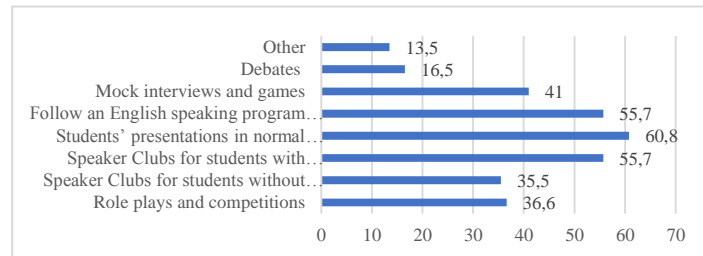


FIGURE 3 | Preferred Activities to Improve English Speaking Skills

[Figure 3](#) illustrates the activities students consider beneficial for enhancing their English-speaking proficiency. The most favored activity is student presentations during informal academic lectures, with 60.8% of participants indicating their support. This suggests that students value opportunities to engage in real-world discussions and presentations as a means to practice and refine their English skills. Following closely, 55.7% of participants favor the implementation of speaker clubs that include resource persons, reflecting a desire for structured guidance and mentorship in their learning process. An equal percentage (55.7%) also supports the establishment of speaker clubs without resource persons, highlighting the need for accessible platforms where students can practice speaking independently. Additionally, the survey underscores the potential value of structured programs, with 55.7% of students expressing interest in participating in an English-speaking program that culminates in certification. Furthermore, 41% of participants exhibited enthusiasm for engaging activities such as mock interviews and games, indicating a preference for interactive learning methods.

Less popular activities include debates (16.5%) and other unspecified methods (13.5%), suggesting that students may not view these as effective means for enhancing their English proficiency. Overall, the findings emphasize a strong inclination toward interactive and supportive learning environments, underscoring specific preferences that could guide the design of future English-speaking programs.

[Figure 4](#) illustrates students' preferred topics for English-speaking sessions, with lighthearted and professional themes ranking highest. Among these, humorous or cheerful topics are the most popular (72.5%), closely followed by stories or movies (71.7%) and professional needs (71.7%). Day-to-day needs also score highly at 68.8%. Other favored themes include recent news or events (55.8%) and science fiction (54.3%). While poetry, songs, and dramas attract interest from 47.8% of students, historical incidents or speeches were chosen by 37.3%. Only 10.5% of students opted for

"other" topics, indicating that the majority of key interest areas were well-represented in the provided categories.

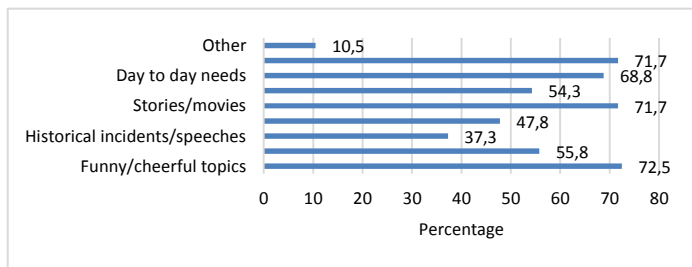


FIGURE 4 | Topics of Interest to Discuss in Speaking Practice Sessions

Table 4 outlines students' preferences and attitudes toward opportunities for improving their English-speaking skills, revealing a strong desire for supportive learning environments and resources. A dedicated club for English-speaking practice emerged as a favored option, reflecting students' interest in collaborative learning experiences. Additionally, students expressed a preference for participating in English-speaking practice sessions, highlighting their commitment to developing their communication skills.

The importance of constructive feedback from teachers was also evident, as students valued guidance that enables them to identify and correct their mistakes. The positive attributes of teachers—such as enthusiasm and support—significantly enhance the learning experience, fostering a welcoming classroom environment where students feel free to speak without fear of judgment. Overall, student feedback underscores the need for interactive, engaging, and constructive spaces to effectively foster English-speaking proficiency.

TABLE 4 | Preferred Learning Styles and Activities (n=277)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I prefer having a dedicated club for English-speaking practice	277	3.94	.907
I would like to participate in English-speaking practice sessions.	277	4.09	.890
I would appreciate opportunity to read English newspapers.	277	4.12	.919
I would appreciate the opportunity to read English novels.	277	4.18	.972
I would prefer if the teacher pointed out my mistakes and helped me improve.	277	4.43	.825
I value teachers' enthusiasm, helpfulness, and friendliness.	276	4.55	.796
I would like a pleasant classroom environment where everyone can speak freely without fear.	274	4.63	.760

Students' willingness to attend English-speaking practice sessions varied across the study population. The majority

(40%) expressed interest in attending weekly sessions, while 26.3% preferred attending twice a month. Monthly attendance was favored by 24.9%, reflecting a significant portion of students who are open to less frequent practice. A small percentage (6.7%) was willing to attend daily sessions, highlighting a highly motivated minority. Only 2.1% indicated they would never attend, indicating that the vast majority are interested in improving their English-speaking skills through regular practice.

Seventy-nine participants provided comments at the end of the questionnaire. Table 5 below lists the broader themes identified from the comments, categorized as facilitators, barriers, and suggestions to improve the English-speaking skills of Pharmacy and Health Sciences undergraduates who participated in the study.

TABLE 5 | Comments by Respondents

Comment	No of respondents
Facilitators	
Need to improve speaking skills	16
Need to talk with students in other countries to improve English-speaking skills	4
Barriers	
Speaking in English is a main problem for undergraduates	16
Having English exams create extra stress for students	8
Lack of self-confidence, fear, and anxiety	8
Academic workloads leave no time to practice English	3
Suggestions	
Do not make compulsory English courses	7
Having a club that can speak freely in English	5
Having English programs without disturbing academic program	5
Organizing English drama/practical sessions	5
Create a culture where everyone speaks English	5
Having student presentations during lectures	4
Provide interesting novels to the library	2
Having a compulsory English program	2
Having monthly speaking clubs	2
Conduct lectures, practical only in English	2
Having an external English diploma course on the weekend	1

This study examined the factors influencing motivation, demotivation, and preferred activities among Pharmacy and other health sciences undergraduates regarding the

improvement of English-speaking skills. The results revealed a significant difference ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI) between the internal and external motivation in learners striving to enhance their English-speaking competence. The majority of the students ($n = 277$, $SD = 0.66$) demonstrated high levels of intrinsic motivation. Similarly, intrinsic demotivation was found to be more pronounced than demotivation stemming from external factors. Furthermore, the findings indicated that students prefer free, relaxed learning experiences over compulsory, administrative, and examination-oriented English-speaking programs. Identifying the sources of inspiration and discouragement will facilitate the design of support programs tailored to students in similar contexts, where proficiency in a second language is highly valued in professional practice and career advancement. It is essential that learning and practice sessions are integral to enhancing self-motivation and the willingness to develop English speaking skills.

Social and Academic Importance of English Proficiency

It is widely recognized that proficiency in English as a second language elevates one's social status and esteem. The necessity of acquiring multiple languages to prepare for life and employment in the twenty-first century has been reflected among the participants in this study ([Sorayyaeei Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020](#)). The majority of respondents rated their current English-speaking abilities as "intermediate," yet all expressed a desire to improve their English-speaking skills. Students perceived English speaking as the most challenging yet exciting skill compared to reading, writing, and listening. This significant self-drive was attributed to various factors, including preparation for future job opportunities, personal development, enhancement of self-confidence, and the pursuit of higher academic scores.

A separate study conducted in Sri Lanka among science students learning in English indicated that most participants recognized the importance of language proficiency for effective lecture comprehension and classroom interaction ([Navaz, 2013](#)). In addition to intrinsic motivation, external factors such as degree requirements and encouragement from parents and teachers played a crucial role in motivating undergraduates to engage in English speaking. However, external sources of motivation were more pronounced among schoolchildren learning English as a foreign language. [Krishnan et al. \(2013\)](#) reported that the most significant motivational factor for these schoolchildren was parental encouragement, followed by social motivations.

Psychological Barriers in English Language Speaking

Speaking in a second language often triggers feeling of unease ([Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021](#)). Psychological factors such as anxiety, fear, and negative attitudes significantly impede the learning process ([Seefa, 2017](#)). Among the study population, self-driven demotivation was notably high and primarily attributed to apprehension. Most students expressed concerns about making mistakes while speaking, with nervousness, limited vocabulary, and inadequate grammar further contributing to their fear of speaking in public settings.

To enhance their confidence, measures such as activating passive vocabulary, engaging in practical sessions like micro-dialogs, memorizing scripts, and utilizing authentic audio materials could be beneficial ([Doskovskaya & Oparina, 2022](#)). The research findings indicate that language anxiety may persist beyond undergraduate life. A study conducted among Sri Lankan students studying overseas revealed that many participants perceived themselves as weak in oral communication skills ([Fazeena et al., 2012](#)). Furthermore, negative attitudes toward the target language can create a barrier between the learner and the language ([Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021](#)). This study identified negative attitudes, including a lack of interest in participating in practice sessions, among some respondents. Although this was not the majority view, the researchers argue that fostering a positive attitude towards English should begin early in the learning process. Therefore, addressing students' fears, anxiety, and negative attitudes toward English should be a primary focus in practice sessions ([Seefa, 2017](#)).

Cultural and institutional barriers significantly influence students' experiences in learning English. Cultural attitudes toward language use can affect students' willingness to engage in speaking activities. For instance, in some contexts, a strong emphasis on linguistic perfection may deter students from speaking due to the fear of making mistakes ([Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021](#)). This cultural mindset can hinder learners from practicing English in a supportive environment. Additionally, institutional barriers, such as inadequate resources, insufficient training for teachers, and lack of structured speaking opportunities, further complicate the learning landscape ([Weerasooriya, 2021](#)). Many students reported limited access to environments conducive to practicing English outside the classroom, reflecting broader systemic issues within educational institutions ([Seefa, 2017](#)). Addressing these barriers requires a concerted effort to foster an inclusive culture that values communication and to provide adequate institutional support that encourages student engagement in English-speaking activities.

Influence of Ragging and Peer Pressure on Language Learning

Local literature indicates that culturally embedded behaviors, such as ragging (bullying), shyness, and fear of speaking in public, contribute to passive behavior among students in classrooms ([Navaz, 2013](#)). However, this study revealed that the study population was not significantly affected by negative peer pressure or by negative comments from teachers. By the time this study commenced, ragging had been eliminated from the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences. Further, respondents expressed neutrality regarding the impact of adopting an English accent and time constraints as limiting factors in improving their English-speaking skills. Consequently, social pressure, traditional ideologies, and time limitations did not emerge as barriers to mastering English speaking among Health Sciences undergraduates.

External Challenges in Language Learning

Published research in Sri Lanka identifies inadequate opportunities to use English and practice outside the classroom as significant barriers to developing English communication skills ([Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021](#);

[Seefa, 2017](#); [Weerasooriya, 2021](#)). Furthermore, students face various external challenges, including a lack of resources, insufficient facilities, unqualified teachers, ineffective teaching methods, and poor-quality teaching materials ([Qian & Hu, 2022](#)). Economic constraints also contribute to these difficulties ([Seefa, 2017](#)). Additionally, the predominant use of the native language for an extended period relative to the target language has been recognized as a barrier to language acquisition ([Weerasooriya, 2021](#)). Nevertheless, the majority of participants in the present study did not agree that a lack of opportunities, financial resources, or materials hindered their ability to practice speaking English.

To enhance students' opportunities for engaging in English practice outside the classroom, faculty should consider facilitating conversation clubs, language exchange programs, and workshops led by qualified instructors ([Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021](#)). Furthermore, investing in resources such as updated materials and access to technology will contribute to creating a more effective learning environment ([Cao, 2022](#); [Chen, 2022](#); [Seefa, 2017](#); [Shaan, 2024](#)). Faculty involvement is essential, as trained educators can foster a more interactive and supportive classroom atmosphere that encourage students to practice speaking without fear of judgment. Moreover, providing regular feedback from instructors will help students build confidence and enhance their language skills over time.

Intrinsic Motivation and English-speaking Practice

Intrinsic motivation is a crucial factor influencing students' achievement and proficiency in speaking ([Ihsan, 2016](#)). A notable finding of this study is that most students are primarily intrinsically motivated, which presents an opportunity to design English practice sessions that align with their expectations. However, researchers argue that high motivation does not always correlate with language achievement ([Chen, 2022](#)). Due to the rigorous academic curricula of Health Sciences degrees, students express a preference for opportunities to engage in oral presentations in English during routine academic activities. Additionally, a significant number of students favor weekly speaker clubs featuring resource personnel, focusing on both professional and everyday needs. Topics such as humor, stories, films, current events, and scientific fiction are likely to increase student interest in attending speaking sessions. Many students also prefer certificate-driven English-speaking programs, mock interviews, and interactive games. Selecting appropriate approaches and teaching styles within a relaxed and upbeat classroom atmosphere may further foster interest in learning ([Mansor & Ishak Badarudin, 2011](#); [Soravyaei Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020](#)). The results of this investigation indicate that students appreciate it when teachers point out their mistakes. The majority also value opportunities to read English newspapers and novels, as well as the presence of friendly, helpful teachers and a welcoming classroom environment where everyone can speak freely.

Generalizability and Future Research Directions

While English has become the predominant medium of instruction in nearly all Health Sciences faculties in Sri Lanka, this study was limited to a convenience sample of

students from the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences at the University of Ruhuna. Consequently, there may be sampling bias, as characteristics of participating students may differ from those who did not take part in the study. Additionally, the online survey could face potential challenges related to non-response and self-selection bias. Although the university provides robust internet coverage for all students, there remains a slight possibility that it may not effectively reach those who are less comfortable with technology.

To enhance the generalizability of these findings, it is advisable to extend similar research to other Health Sciences faculties. Implementing a stratified random sampling method could further improve the representativeness of the sample. Future intervention research focusing on English-speaking practice sessions will be valuable for designing study programs that motivate and engage learners. Furthermore, additional studies are encouraged to explore the underlying causes of the apprehension reported by students regarding English speaking. Evidence-based approaches to managing these triggers will contribute significantly to increasing student participation in English-speaking practice sessions.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the factors that motivate health sciences undergraduates who are native speakers of Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lankans, as well as to determine their preferred activities for enhancing English-speaking proficiency. The results indicated that self-motivation serves as the primary driver for most students, with key motivators including future job opportunities, personal development, and increased confidence. Although barriers such as fear of making mistakes, nervousness, and difficulties with grammar were prevalent, students demonstrated a strong preference for constructive feedback from teachers and a supportive classroom environment. Based on these insights, faculty should consider the implementation of compulsory and authoritative English-speaking programs and develop strategies that align with students' intrinsic motivations and interests.

Practical recommendations include providing more flexible, interactive learning opportunities, such as weekly speaker clubs, presentations during academic sessions, and certification-driven programs. These findings also underscore the importance of incorporating lighthearted and professional topics, such as cheerful stories, movies, and professional needs, which received strong preference from the majority of students. By focusing on the creation of relaxed and supportive environments with targeted learning activities, educators can enhance student engagement and effectively address barriers to English-speaking proficiency. The insights derived from this research possess significant transferable value, offering actionable strategies for the enhancement of language programs in similar educational contexts..

The findings of this study hold broader relevance for educational contexts that share similar linguistic and cultural characteristics, particularly for health sciences students learning in English as non-native speakers. Strategies such as implementing flexible learning activities, establishing conversation clubs, and organizing workshops – alongside

fostering a supportive classroom environment that prioritizes constructive feedback - can significantly enhance student engagement and confidence.

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