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**Why Azerbaijani Learners are Less Proficient in Oral Communication after having 9 Years
of English Language Instruction: Central versus Non-Central Schools in Baku**

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Abstract

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The current research aims at investigating the existing obstacles that lead to having reduced oral production competence of the English language among Azerbaijani learners. The researcher sets a goal of exploring the reasons why school graders cannot master oral production of English despite having 9 years of language instructions. With that in mind, a comparative analysis has been held with 4 schools located in Baku, Azerbaijan – 2 central and 2 non-central educational settings. A mixed-method has been applied with 80 students – 40 from central and 40 from non-central schools, 12 English language teachers, and 3 education specialists to dig into the roots of the existing issue. To gather needed data, testing students' level of English-speaking skills, conducting surveys, holding interviews, and statistical analysis of findings have been adopted to get as much informative data as possible. Study findings revealed that factors of teacher quality, having grammar-focused lessons, lack of language environment, assessment tasks, and the student attitude towards mastering English language are the barriers in Azerbaijani students improving their communicative competencies of English. Moreover, all the mentioned factors, in fact, create the

gaps between the students studying at central schools and the ones who study at non-central educational settings. Because the listed components are lacking in non-central schools, students studying there get little to no chance to develop their spoken English. To eliminate the obstacles, the provision of professional development trainings for teachers, reconsidering the lesson plans and syllabi to make English classes more communication based, and the integration of speaking tests to assessment system should be brought to the attention of faculty members and specialists of education.

Key words: *communicative competence, barriers in speaking, teacher quality, language environment, assessment tasks, oral production*

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CHAPTER 1. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1 Introduction

In today's modern society, mastering oral production of English is considered to be one of the vital tools to reach a great deal of opportunities across different continents of the world. Here, having a sophisticated speaking skill is deemed to be an important ability for a student in learning a language (Rao, 2019). Since English has become an international and global language all over the world (Crystal, 2003), the national curriculum of Azerbaijani education has been integrated with the English language to deliver this subject to school graders starting from 1st/2nd grade to 11th (General Education Concept in Azerbaijan Republic, 2006). In the general education concept of the Azerbaijani Republic issued by The Ministry of Education, general objectives and expected outcomes for the foreign language (English) have been outlined as a set instruction (General Education Concept in Azerbaijan Republic, 2006). One of them is teaching students to establish a communication development of the spoken English based on speech patterns in other languages. However, an issue is raised on the matter of Azerbaijani learners not being proficient in speaking skill of the English language after graduating from public schools ("Azerbaijani teachers", 2013). They are not able to express themselves in English after having minimum 9 years of language instruction ("Azerbaijani teachers", 2013). The problem of leaving oral competence in a shade has been broadly investigated in Azerbaijan. It has been found out that when instructing not focusing on main principles of communicative approach is one of the existing issues (Mammadova, 2021). Conducting translation-oriented classes, holding lessons in the native language, insufficient teacher competence of spoken English are the major reasons among many that result in Azerbaijani students having reduced speaking skills (Mammadova, 2021).

This issue has been also proven by the statistics conducted by EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2021, p.8) which ranks Azerbaijan as the 86th country among 112 by the English skills. Here, Azerbaijan has been categorized in the “Low Proficiency” Band which indicates that the gaps are unusually narrow.

In our national curriculum, although minimum 3-4 hours are dedicated to learning this language, the vast majority of Azerbaijani students still have rudimentary knowledge of English (“Azerbaijani teachers”, 2013) despite the fact that English speaking skill is expected to be developed through the classes being held at public schools. However, this expected outcome seems to be not successfully achieved in the educational settings. Azerbaijani students’ communication competence of the English language seems to be kept as a neglected skill to be improved.

1.2 Significance of the study

Mastering spoken English, offers students quite many distinct advantages such as education and employment opportunities, interaction with diverse people, and fosters higher-order thinking skills (Rao, 2019). It is claimed that knowing English encourages innovations, improves the state of workplaces, social, educational, and economical state of the country (Rao, 2019). It broadens individual horizons, forms a modern workforce, and enhances a person’s network in a more qualified way.

Moreover, if we take analysis of an individual’s social and personal development, not being proficient in the English language prevents school graders from applying universities of English streams to continue their education (Putra, 2020). Because students are not proficient in oral communication of English, they are not able to get majored or expand their scopes in English (“Azerbaijan University”, 2017). Learners with the aim of mastering English get enrolled in a

foundation year to get General English Education to be fully prepared to major in English language at universities (Inguva et.al., 2019). Similarly, they get signed in either private or international schools for which they have to pay annual fee such as Azerbaijani British College - 15.400-16.500 AZN (Azerbaijan British College Database, n.d.). However, a group of socio-economically deprived students are not able to afford or access this privilege, especially, the ones who are studying in non-central public schools (Sharma, 2014). Compared to upper class students, opportunities are retained for underprivileged learners who are not getting the same standards of being educated in English (Sharma, 2020). Paying certain quantity of money is something that not everyone can afford (OECD, 2012), therefore, studying in English streams at Azerbaijani universities or abroad gets out of the list. Furthermore, having a good command of English (oral competence) has been one of the significant requirements at Azerbaijani workplaces (Mammadova, 2021). Therefore, being compelled to master spoken English will enable individuals to get into the job, more specifically, high-paid ones and expand their both professional and social developments.

1.3 Purpose of study

In response to Azerbaijani students' lacking speaking ability, the purpose of this mixed-method research study is to find out the major factors that hinder students' abilities to perform well when speaking English. This study aims to compare Azerbaijani students studying in central and non-central public schools to identify if any differences exist in students' level of oral communication of the English language. To shed light on the distinction of these 2 educational settings, it should be stated that based on geographic perspective, the sites have been decided. To be more specific, the ones located in the central area of Baku – Icheriseher are regarded as central schools, whereas, sites located in Neftchilar avenue have been considered as non-central

(peripheral) sites. Moreover, teaching practices and methodologies in the chosen educational settings will be investigated to see what major differences and gaps exist in guiding learners to develop their oral communication in English.

1.4 Hypotheses/Research Questions

Hypothesis 1: Students studying in central schools of Baku are better in English oral communication than the ones who study in non-central schools.

Hypothesis 2: Students studying in non-central schools of Baku are not equipped with the same opportunities (in regards to the quality of teachers and conduction of classes) as central school graders to master English speaking skill.

Hypothesis 3: Less emphasis is put on developing students' speaking skills in educational settings in which the language of instruction is Azerbaijani.

Research questions

1. What are the factors that hinder Azerbaijani school graders from mastering spoken English?
2. To what extent does learning English in central schools differ from non-central settings?
3. To what extent is speaking skill being focused on in English classes at schools?

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This part of the research presents literature sources – different theoretical foundations of English speaking, language learning, previous research studies conducted on this topic, and

highlights the gaps which exist in Azerbaijani literature related to the research problem. With the aim of identifying in which different methodologies can my research be investigated, various research conducted on the issue has been analyzed. In the theoretical foundation part, second language learning/acquisition theories and major debates are presented through critically analyzed concepts. In the empirical study part, however, various research methodologies and findings have been compared and contrasted to get more information about the problem that I am going to explore. Lastly, insufficient or missing pieces of information related to the research problem have been examined in the “Gaps” part. It includes the presentation of information that is lacking in the Azerbaijani context about the posed study. Literature review was conducted based on *Journal of Education and Teacher Training*, *International Journal of Social Sciences*, *Journal of English Language Literatures in English and Cultural Studies*, *Journal of International Research*, *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science*, *Journal of Physics Education*, and *Zambia Journal of Education*, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *Journal of Education for Information*, *International Journal of Educational Investigations*, *Journal of Qualitative Report*, *International Journal of Care Scholars*, *International Journal of Higher Education* stored in Google Doc platforms.

2.2 Review of Theoretical Foundations

To have a better understanding of how mastering spoken language works, first in the place, certain theories have been investigated to analyze different aspects influencing oral communication of people. The term “communicative competence” coined by Hymes (1972, p.283) refers to students having both knowledge of a language and the ability to use it effectively when speaking. He claims that for a person to have a communicative competence, both grammatical and sociolinguistic aspects of one language should be mastered. To have a successful oral production, a

relationship and interaction among grammar, structure, rules, and sociolinguistic aspects of a language should be fully processed (Hymes, 1972). Meanwhile, Widdowson (1972) notes that mastering an oral communication is not about knowing the linguistic aspects, but identifying the usage of them in communicative contexts. He explains that for the natural communicative use of language, a practical mastery and speaking activities should be implemented in classroom settings.

Moreover, there has been an increasing debate in the context of how students develop their oral communication of the foreign language (Mitchell et.al., 2013). Being best known for his contribution to the field of learning, Pavlov was the first one who believed that people learn a language through the behaviorism theory – reinforcements and guidance (Hambulo, 2013). This model is being increasingly used in the field of English language teaching to maximize student interest and engagement in the learning process (Rao, 2018). In today's educational settings, different aspects of behaviorism are integrated with language teaching instructions (Xuelian, 2018). Here, an educator divides the tasks into different chunks rather than making it a whole concept to be learned at once. After the task division, monitoring is held on learners to see how well the objectives are being achieved. Once we have a deep analysis of the theory, it can be easily noticed that it shapes both student learning and behavior in a way that mastering a language is guided through directions given by the teacher. Thinking in the same way, Hashim and Yunus (2018) emphasized the necessity of establishing school routines and settings to help students develop their skills in ESL learning. Meanwhile, a nativist theory (Kozhevnikova, 2019) emphasized that people are born with specific skills to learn/acquire a language thus there is no need to have formal instructions or guidance to teach students a foreign language.

Considering all these contradictory theories in second language learning, it can be noted that, the notion of language learning is a significantly complex concept to decide which claim works

best and which does not. However, it helped me in thinking about the formulation of data collection to examine what participants think about Azerbaijani students being exposed to the English language. Respondents of my research might be interviewed to examine how views are different between the ideas of schools having a role in helping learners master language through exposure and being able to learn a language individually regardless of teaching methods or strategies used in the classroom.

2.3 Review of Empirical Studies

In this part of the literature review, past empirical studies have been examined with the aim of analyzing different methodologies used to explore the problem I am researching. It enabled me to see how different techniques in doing research can lead to getting unexpected and surprising data at hand.

One of the Azerbaijani researchers – Dr. Tamilla Mammadova (2021) has conducted empirical research of case studies in Azerbaijan to investigate the reasons of lack of insufficient speaking skills. There are quite many noteworthy remarks to be made about the findings of her book entitled: “Exploring English Language Teaching in Post-Soviet era Countries_Perspectives from Azerbaijan” (Mammadova, 2021). First off, the statistical analysis showed that grammar is considered to be a core element of EFL teaching thus not much emphasis is put on the development of oral competence in educational settings. Another important key finding to be mentioned is about teacher quality. It is stated that: “As regards of development of speaking skills, many things depend on a teacher” (Mammadova, 2021, p. 70). Analysis revealed that when teachers themselves do not have sufficient English-speaking abilities, they tend to avoid conducting classes in the English language, thus majority of the sessions/discussions are held in Azerbaijani. Next point to be mentioned is about textbooks used in EFL teaching. It has been

stressed that activities included in the textbooks are not interactive, sufficient to develop students' oral communication skills. More specifically, majority of Azerbaijani educators use suggested textbooks, not additional materials. Since in textbooks not much focus is put on communication-oriented activities, teachers tend to exclude the session of practicing speaking skills in the classroom. Materials used in the EFL teaching is mainly targeted at learning grammar which leads to having mainly "multiple-choice" or "fill-in-the-gaps", "matching" tasks. Interestingly, Azerbaijani teachers commented on the research problem state that, in their views, having role-play, games, or pair-work activities are useless because they are not helpful in developing students' spoken English skills (Mammadova, 2021).

Lastly, it has been found out that because of slow improvement of speaking skills in EFL classes, Azerbaijani students are taking private classes or attending conversation (Mammadova, 2021). Statistical analysis of the study revealed that 70.7% of respondents get enrolled in private tutoring to have oral discussions in the English language.

Coskun (2016) conducted questionnaire-based research to find out why Turkish school graders can understand English but not able to express themselves when communicating. He explained that it is considered to be one of the common syndromes that learners experience at schools. Students in Turkey have low speaking proficiency although they constantly have English classes in educational settings. Statistics show that Turkey is ranked as the 70th country where the learners have low performance in the oral communication of English (EF EPI, 2021). The findings emerged from the research illustrated that, the main causes of the problem are having a lack of qualified teachers, holding grammar or theory-based classes, and neglecting the importance of spoken English. Here, even teachers do not consider themselves as certified professionals in teaching English to students. Their knowledge of the language seems to be not adequate for having

English classes at schools. Moreover, developing lesson plans based on teaching grammar only is another obstacle in improving students' communicative competence. Lessons are designed in a way that speaking activities are lacking, but more emphasis is put on teaching grammar only. Lastly, although the importance of having an improved oral communication skill is stated all the time, teachers and students seem to neglect the significance of it. Instead of having communication-based lessons, syllabi are improved based on learning the theories of the language.

Similarly, research conducted in Kazakhstan (Beisenbayeva, 2020) highlighted that, lessons are delivered in a more grammar-based and teacher-centered way. Here, students are not given enough chances to put the learned knowledge into practice, they are not given enough opportunities to improve their speaking skills. Additionally, it has been mentioned that, even the use of 1st language in English classes creates an obstacle for learners to foster their English proficiency level. Here, educators do not speak English, but in their mother tongue which encourages learners to interact with each other in their 1st language.

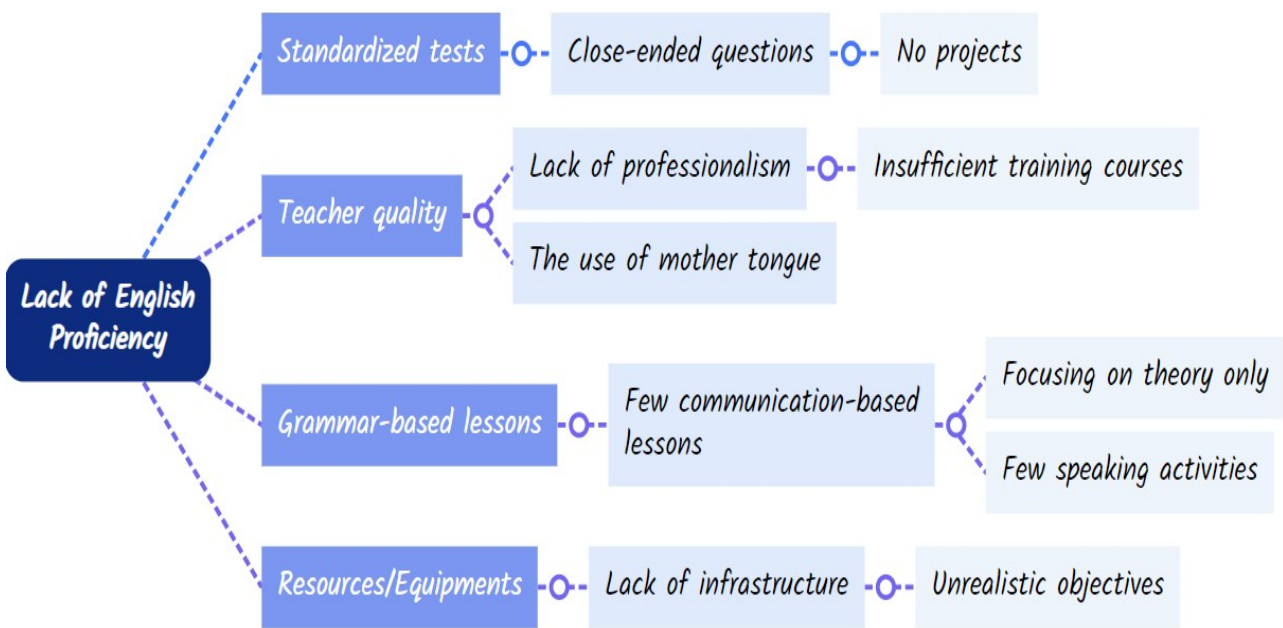
Another investigation held in Turkey by Solak and Bayar (2015) illustrated that poor planning of the lessons, an insufficient number of in-service training courses for teachers, lack of teacher professionalism, setting unrealistic lesson objectives, and assessment procedures result in having malfunctioning curriculum at schools. Students in Turkey cannot demonstrate high proficiency in English because assessment tests are focusing on measuring students' grammar knowledge only. This is why lessons are full of unrealistic objectives which do not aim to develop students' oral communication in English. It has been found out that because the tests are developed in closed-ended question types, learners do not focus on improving their speaking skills, but on another language point - grammar only.

An investigation held in Estonia (Ehala & Niglas, 2006) pointed out that learners studying in central areas demonstrate high performance in spoken English than the ones who study in urban/rural areas. As major causes, it is believed that family income, having more qualified teachers, equipment/resources, and the type of curriculum that is being used in central schools are the noticeable factors.

Lastly, after this issue has been explored in Georgia (Owens, 2020), the investigator has prepared specific budget and policy considerations to be followed to improve the state of communication competence of students. It has been mentioned that to support English learners, policymakers should revise the lesson plans to align them with the actual curriculum objectives. To be more specific, lessons should not be held based on grammar only, but more speaking activities should be conducted. Additionally, the assessment system should be changed as there is no specific focus on measuring students' speaking skills. More open-ended questions should be added to test spoken English as well. Lastly, a provision of qualified staff and peripheral equipment and resources to have equity in teaching English to all students should not be taken for granted.

Illustration below represents the major findings of the literature review (*Illustration 1*).

Illustration 1



2.4 Gaps in the Literature

This is the last part of the literature review which describes missing pieces of information of my research problem. One of the gaps to be considered is having a lack of data about the comparison of central versus non-central schoolers' oral proficiency in the Azerbaijani context. Furthermore, in another datum found about the research problem ("Azerbaijani teachers", 2013), educators posted their answers to find the cause and offer solutions to solve the issue of Azerbaijani students not demonstrating sufficient oral proficiency after graduation. However, information about actual reasons for the research problem, teachers' perceptions and their spoken abilities have not been discussed at all. On the other hand, one of the educators has suggested a solution for this problem stating that students should be grouped at schools based on their ability to know English ("Azerbaijani teachers", 2013). It bears a question in my mind that how can students starting 1st grade be grouped based on their ability? Which criteria to consider when forming these ability groups for 1st or 2nd graders? Another suggested solution was the integration of songs with

the English classes (“Azerbaijani teachers”, 2013). Is this the only problem why Azerbaijani students cannot speak English seems to be quite vague.

Summary

Searching for different sources to get as much data as possible gave me quite many insights on which aspects to take into consideration when identifying the research methodology and collecting data. Defining gaps, on the other hand, enabled me to think on ways to be applied when conducting my research to fill the gaps existing in the current literature of Azerbaijan. It has been revealed that there are quite many factors – lesson plans/objectives, teaching methodology, school atmosphere, inequity in learning resources, and teacher role play an important role in students’ English language learning. If any of them is followed in an undirect way, language learning can be resulted in a failure. Lastly, having a lack of research-related data in the Azerbaijani context, on the other hand, makes the process of identifying underlying assumptions of the reason why the problem still exists noticeably difficult.

Chapter 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Paradigm

To provide set directions and orientations of procedures of the research design, paradigms should be outlined to have a clear framework on how collected data should be addressed and comprehended (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). As Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) noted, there is a number of research paradigms to be used to understand the philosophical underpinnings of the research: positivism, interpretivism, constructivism, and pragmatism.

Since this study is based on exploring a specific context from participants’ perspectives, a deep interpretivist analysis will be held to analyze how the problem is manifested and occurred. In

pursuit of understanding, the underlying assumptions of my research problem, the value, and nature of qualitative data will be promoted through interpretivism (Chowdhury, 2014).

3.2 Research Design

Research design is a set framework which states the overall strategy to conduct, collect, and analyze data to reach the successful outcomes of investigations (Pawar, 2020). To provide a more complete and visualized data collection and analysis of inquiry, a mixed-method – the integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods will be implemented. Adopting mixed method will enable me to get multiple sources of data to address numerous perspectives to understand the phenomena (Doyle, et. al, 2009).

3.3 The Research Site

The data for this research will be conducted in 4 public schools – 2 central and 2 non-central school settings, Institute of Education, and Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan. Research sites for the study have been identified based on geographic perspective. To be more specific, the ones located in the central area of Baku – Icheriseher are regarded as central schools, whereas, sites located in Neftchilar avenue are considered as non-central (peripheral) ones. Furthermore, when deciding on these sites, mainly, access to school administration, the target population, documentations, and the possibility of holding speaking tests, surveys and interviews have been considered. Below, a more generalized picture of sampling method has been presented in detail.

3.4 Participants

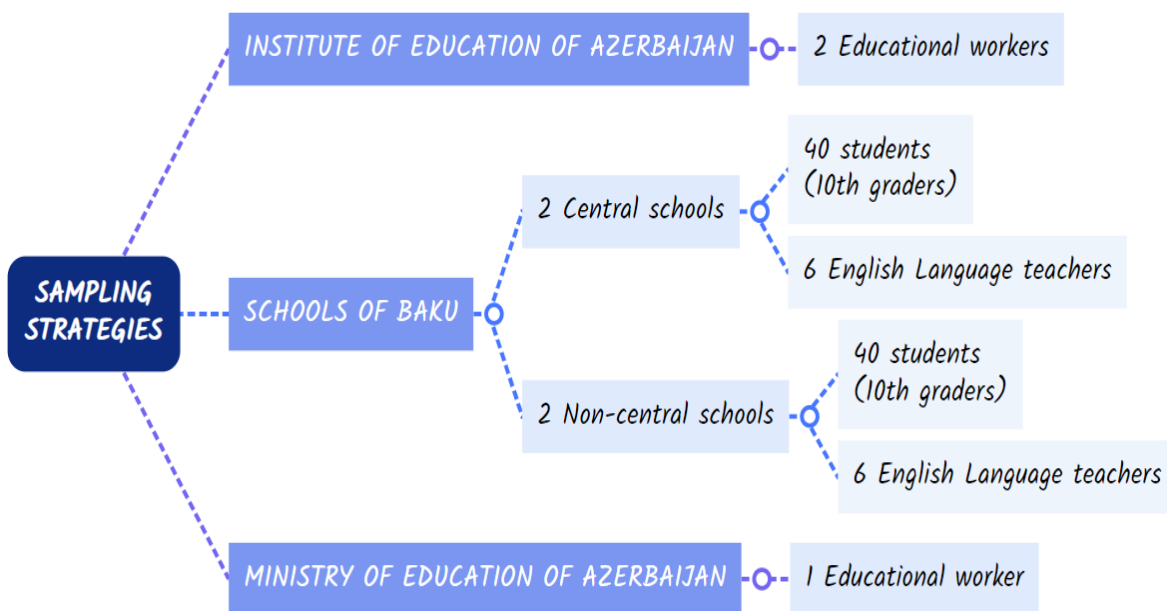
The respondents of this study will be 10th graders who are studying in central and non-central public schools of Baku city, Azerbaijan. The reason why specifically 10th graders have been chosen as focus participants is due to the eligibility to apply colleges and get into jobs after the

completion of 9 years of school courses (State Examination Center, 2022). Students finishing 9 years of instruction at school are eligible to apply to colleges to continue their education. This is why, from the overall approach, not 11th graders, but the ones who have completed 9 years of language instruction (10th graders) will be research participants. Overall, an investigation will be held in 2 central and 2 non-central Baku schools by having 20 randomly assigned 10th graders from each setting – overall 80 students. More characteristically, 2 educational settings located in the center of Baku (Icheriseher) and 2 to be found relatively far from the central avenue (Neftchilar) will be the main objectives. When choosing 80 respondents for the research, to avoid any kind of bias, an online tool (Research Randomizer) will be used for deciding on schoolers. First off, a list of all 10th graders names will be asked from the school administration then the names will be inserted on the online tool to assign participants for this research. Next group of contributors will be faculty members who are teaching English at the chosen schools of Baku. 3 teachers from all 4 settings (overall 12) will be another group of respondents of this research. They will be involved in this study to find out what they think about the problem that is being investigated. They will be asked to share their arguments on the factors that lead to students having lack of English-speaking skills. Another focus participant will be 1 educational specialist working at the Ministry of Education who is in charge of reviewing curriculum standards and education policies implemented for schools. All respondents will be asked to express certain claims on the reason why Azerbaijani students face problems when speaking English. Based on the statements, English language teaching policies and curriculum being implemented at schools will be examined deeper to identify possible gaps. Lastly, 2 educational workers of Institute of Education of Baku will be engaged in the process to get their ideas for the investigation of the problem.

3.5 Sampling strategies

In this study, to make the data collection process easy and accessible a convenience method will be used for sampling participants (*Illustration 2 below*). Being one of the most commonly used method, convenience sampling strategy offers a researcher to collect members from a conveniently available pool of participants (Etikan, 2016). Having said that, in this research, schools will be chosen based on having a direct contact with the administration. It will enable me to have readily available respondents which will lead to having an easy data collection process.

Illustration 2



3.6 Data Collection Process

In this study, data will be collected through testing students' English language speaking skills, surveys, and interviews from multiple sources to get as much information as I can for achieving enhanced results at the end. In the first place, 10th graders' knowledge of productive skill – speaking will be measured through a CEFR test adjusted to their levels. The reason why I have chosen CEFR test is because according to newly announced news by State Examination Center

(2022), foreign language curriculum of Azerbaijan will be changed and adjusted based on CEFR levels. More peculiarly, 9th and 11th graders' knowledge of foreign language (English in our context) will be measured based on the questions adjusted to the relevant levels of CEFR (State Examination Center, 2022). With that being said, 7 questions of CEFR test (*Appendix A*) will be asked with the aim of measuring students' oral language competences. The format of the test will be about evaluation of accuracy, fluency, and the level of understanding. Here, the score ranges from 0 to 56 with the levels of A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. The test will be conducted by the researcher herself in the English language via Blackboard platform (online). Test taker's level of understanding of the inquiry, accuracy, and fluency when answering questions will be measured based on 4-point scale (*Appendix A*). More distinctively, if a student understands what is being asked – “Yes”, if not “No” response will be marked for level of understanding. In return, the levels of accuracy and fluency will be evaluated based on 1-4-point scale for each question (*Table below*).

CEFR ORAL ASSESSMENT TEST

Name: _____

Level: _____

	Candidate can	Question	Response		Total score	Comments
		Understand	Accuracy	Fluency		
1	Introduce himself clearly Can you introduce yourself?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
2	Describe his family Can you tell me about your family?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
3	Describe his ambitions What are your future plans?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		

4	Narrate using past tenses Tell me about your last holiday?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
5	What do you think are the ideal conditions for studying?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
6	Hypothesize Have you always lived in Baku? How would you feel about living abroad permanently?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
7	Discuss global problem in details Can you tell me about the global problem? What is a possible solution to this problem?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		

Score:

0-12	Level A1	Elementary
13-24	Level A2	Pre-Intermediate
25-36	Level B1	Intermediate
37-46	Level B2	Upper-Intermediate
47-52	Level C1	Advanced
52-56	Level C2	Mastery

The table below illustrates level descriptors of CEFR (2001) to analyze competency level of students' English-speaking skills (University of Cambridge, 2009):

PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
INDEPENDENT USER	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
BASIC USER	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people

After the testing process, a paper survey (*Appendix B*) will be conducted with the focus group – 80 students to learn more about their attitudes and perspectives about fostering their speaking ability of the English language. 7 statements will be asked to analyze their perspectives on the posed problem. Survey questions have been designed in the English language with the translation provided in the Azerbaijani language (*Appendix B*). In the same vein, Langkos (2014) noted that the conduction of surveys is one way of drawing meaningful research conclusions through statistically analyzed findings.

The data collection procedures will be ended by holding interviews with the rest of the respondents. Langkos (2014) affirmed that, to gain insights in people's beliefs, perspectives, and understandings of the research study, an interview is one of the interactive ways of collecting data. For each group of participants, 5 questions (overall 10) have been prepared to explore multiple approaches to the posed research problem (*Appendix C & Appendix D*). Interviews will be held either in an online (Blackboard platform) or face-to-face format for the interviewees' conveniences. Whole interview processes will be recorded to be transcribed and coded to create a better context for study findings. To get various comprehensions of the set context, interviews will be conducted with 12 teachers of both central/non-central schools in the English language, 1 educational specialist of the Ministry of Education, and 2 educational workers of the Institute of Education of Azerbaijan in the Azerbaijani language. All collected data and statistical analysis will be examined through the Microsoft Excel program.

3.7 CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Being an internationally recognized standard CEFR is used to measure a language proficiency of students from A1 up to C2 level – six-point scale (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2021). In language testing, CEFR is used to measure different qualifications of language learning to see at what exact level has the language been mastered (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2021).

In the Azerbaijani context, in the same vein, it has been revealed that level descriptor criteria of CEFR 2001 have to be considered to improve the quality of English classes (Mammadova, 2021). To be more specific, since school curriculum programs of European countries are built on those descriptors (Mammadova, 2021), the assumed level of upper secondary schoolers is intermediate or upper-intermediate (B1/B2).

3.8 Trustworthiness

One of the quality criteria of qualitative method is considered to be trustworthiness which indicates to what extent findings of the research are truthful and can be confirmed by other researchers (Shenton, 2004). It is the level of confidence you put in the process of data, analysis, and overall method to run the investigation. Below four ways of assessing trustworthiness of qualitative data offered by (Shenton, 2004) will be discussed: credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability.

3.8.1 Credibility

Credibility of research is considered to be one of the dominant aspects to ensure trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). Respondents chosen for this research are accurately identified and described through convenient and random sampling method.

3.8.2 Triangulation

Using multiple sources of collecting data in qualitative research to have a comprehensive analysis of explored problem is referred as triangulation (Heale & Forbes, 2013). In this research, the convergence of information from numerous sources will be obtained by 10th public school graders, faculty members - school teachers, and educational specialists will be surveyed and interviewed to have an enhanced view of data.

3.8.3 Dependability

Regarded as a way of evaluating the quality and stability of data collection, analysis, and interpretation used to conceptualize the study, dependability is one of the factors of trustworthiness of qualitative data (Gunawan, 2015). By ensuring dependability, anyone outside of the research will be able to follow and evaluate the whole process at any time (Gunawan, 2015). An audit trail will be used to achieve the dependability of the findings drawn out of this investigation.

3.8.4 Audit Trail

To establish the conformability of the findings, an audit trail – a record of entire trails of chronological events, sources, and activities (Mckenna, 2004) from the start will be tracked to provide evidence on how recorded raw data has been analysed and synthesised.

3.8.5 Transferability

A strategy to measure to what extent research findings can be applied in other diverse contexts is named as transferability (Shenton, 2004). In this research study, transferability will be achieved through the application of thick and rich description of the respondents (Shenton, 2004).

3.8.6 Thick and rich description

This strategy enables transferability through providing detailed descriptions of the participants of the study, as well as research findings (Ponterotto, 2006). That being said, explicit information of the respondents and direct quotes will be provided through evocative language.

3.8.7 Ethical considerations of research

An ethical conduct of exploration is regarded as one of the most significant demands of trustworthiness of qualitative research (Mohd Arifin, 2018). It consists of values to be followed to ensure that a researcher has participants' consent, accessibility to relevant data only, and confidentiality are fully preserved (Mohd Arifin, 2018).

3.8.8 Ethical issue checklist

In this research study, ethical considerations will be achieved through having pre-determined checklists in a confidential way (Mohd Arifin, 2018). First, before starting the research work, a full consent of respondents will be obtained by giving detailed information about the selection process, the purpose, benefits of the study, and the possibility of discontinue their participation at any time of the investigation. Lastly, another ethical practice – anonymity (Wiles et al, 2008) will be preserved. Having said that, any specific detail which would reveal a respondent's identity will be excluded when presenting data.

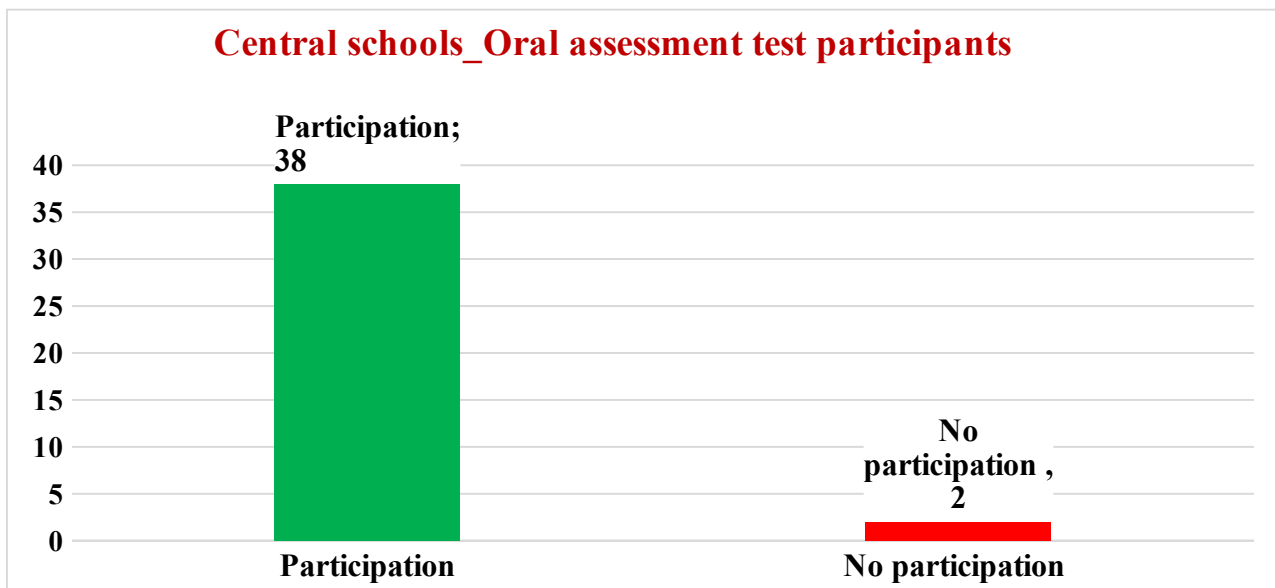
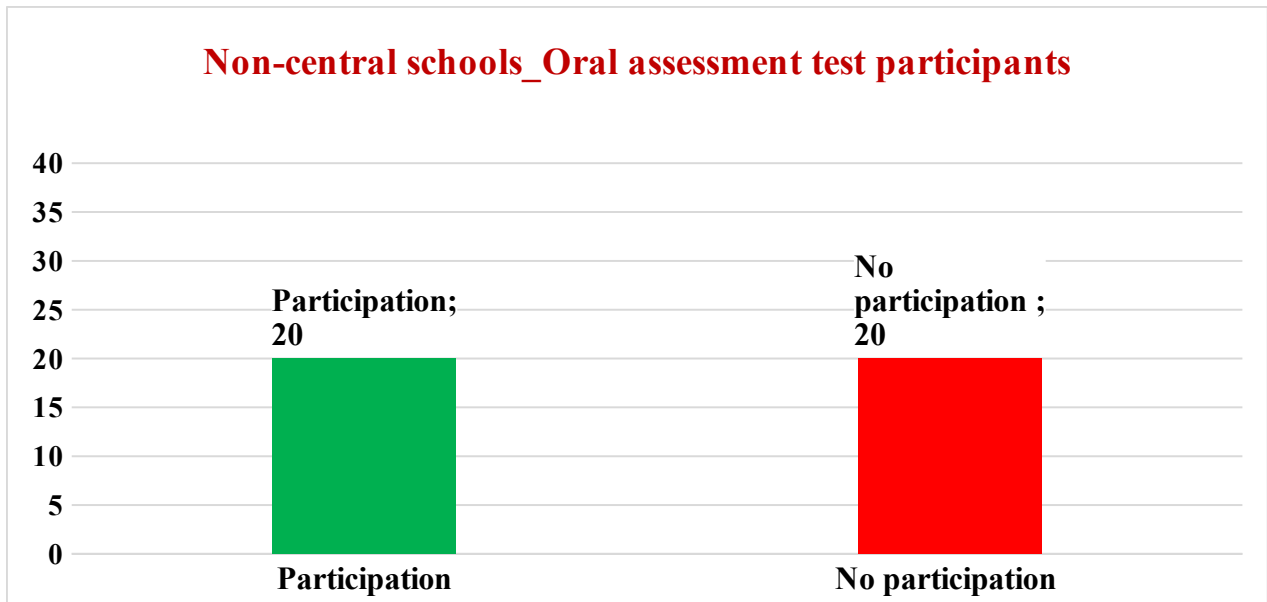
CHAPTER 5. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Oral Assessment Test Results (Statistical analysis)

Since this research is a comparative analysis of students' communication competencies between central and non-central schools, an oral assessment test (*Appendix A*) has been held in an

attempt of having a clear picture of their speaking levels. Out of 40 students studying at non-central schools, 20 respondents rejected to participate in the test whereas only 2 students of central schools stated that they do not want to get tested (*Set 1 graphs below*)

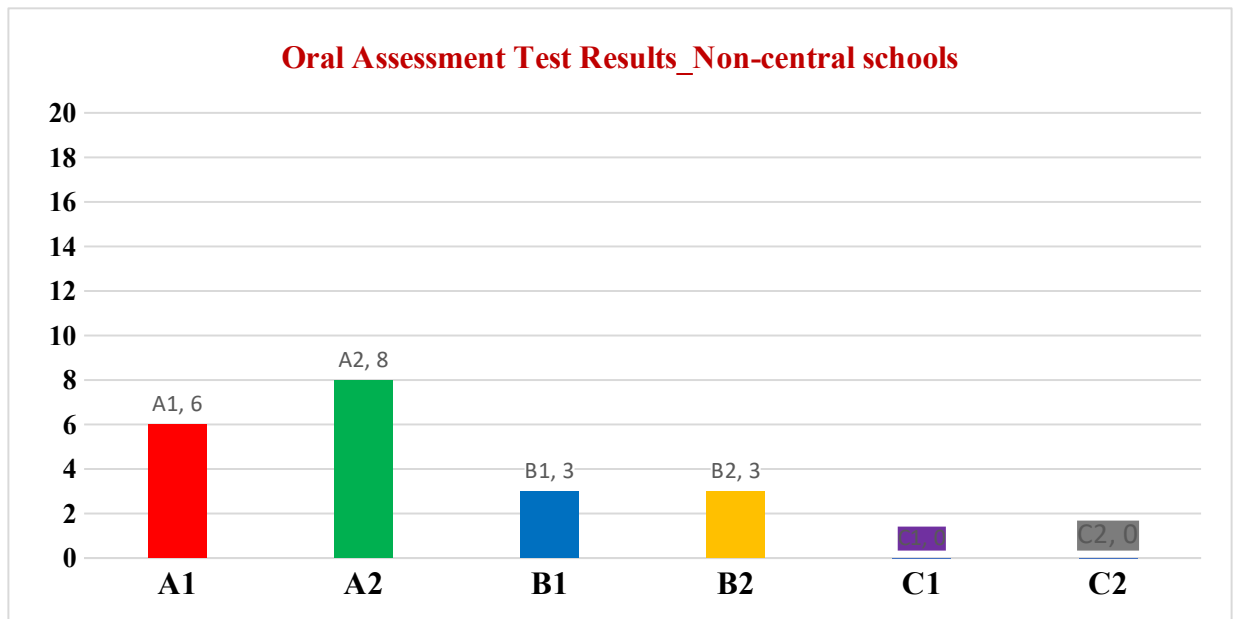
SET 1 Graphs

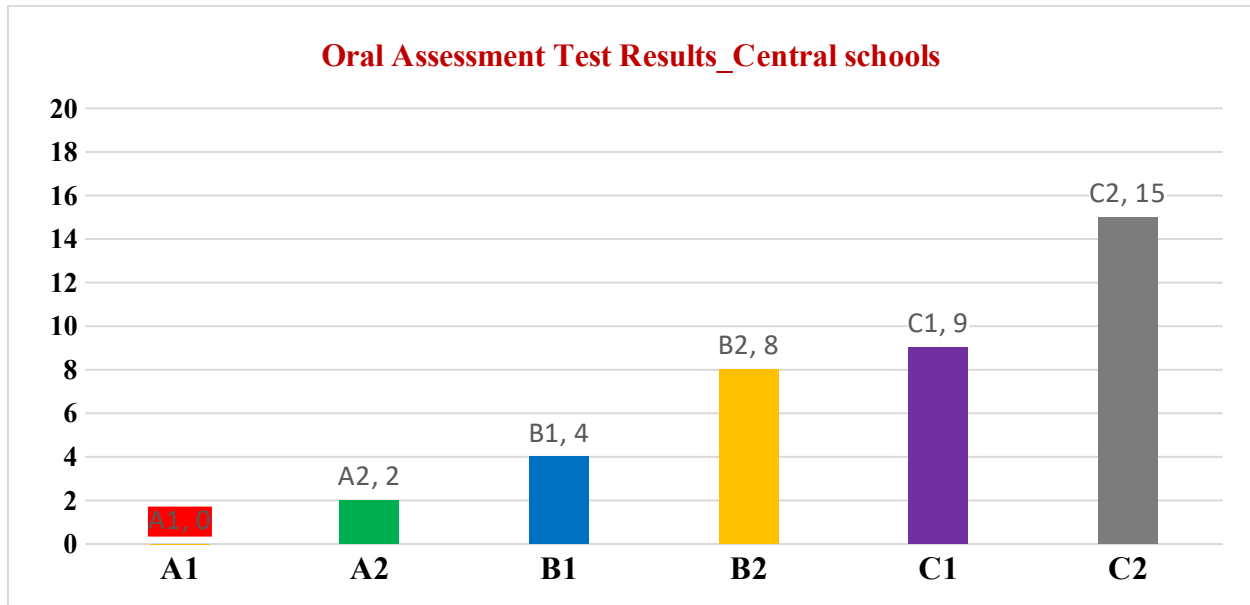


As it is shown in the graphs above, 50% of non-central, but only 5% of central-school respondents did not want to get involved in the speaking test and measure their levels of English-speaking ability. As a reason for not participating, a lack of insufficient oral production has been stressed.

Set 2 graphs below illustrate the comparative analysis of non-central and central school-participants' state of communication competences accordingly. Test results revealed that students of central schools, in fact, have a noticeably higher level of speaking skills of the English language than the ones studying in non-central settings (*Set 2 graphs below*).

SET 2 Graphs





As it can be easily outlined, not even one student of non-central schools has been qualified for C1 or C2 speaking level of the English language. Here, majority of the participants are at the level of A1 and A2. Meanwhile, out of the focus group of central schools, 24% participants of C1 and 40% of C2 levels have been indicated. Here, out of the tested respondents, not even 1 student is at the level of A1.

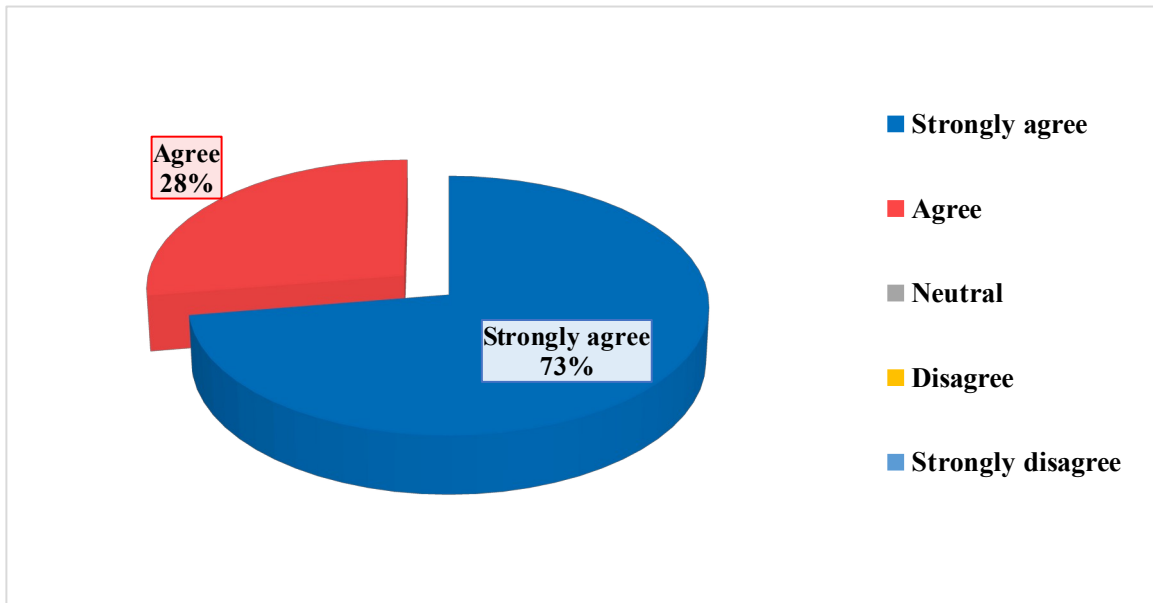
5.2 SURVEY RESULTS (STATISTICAL ANALYSIS)

In the second phase of data collection process, a paper survey consisting of 7 statements with multiple-choice variants has been conducted with 80 students – 40 non-central and 40 central school participants. All 10th graders (n=80) have attended and taken the survey (*Appendix B*). In the first question, respondents were asked to generally demonstrate their perspectives of the significance of English-speaking skill on their future studies (*Set 3 graphs below*)

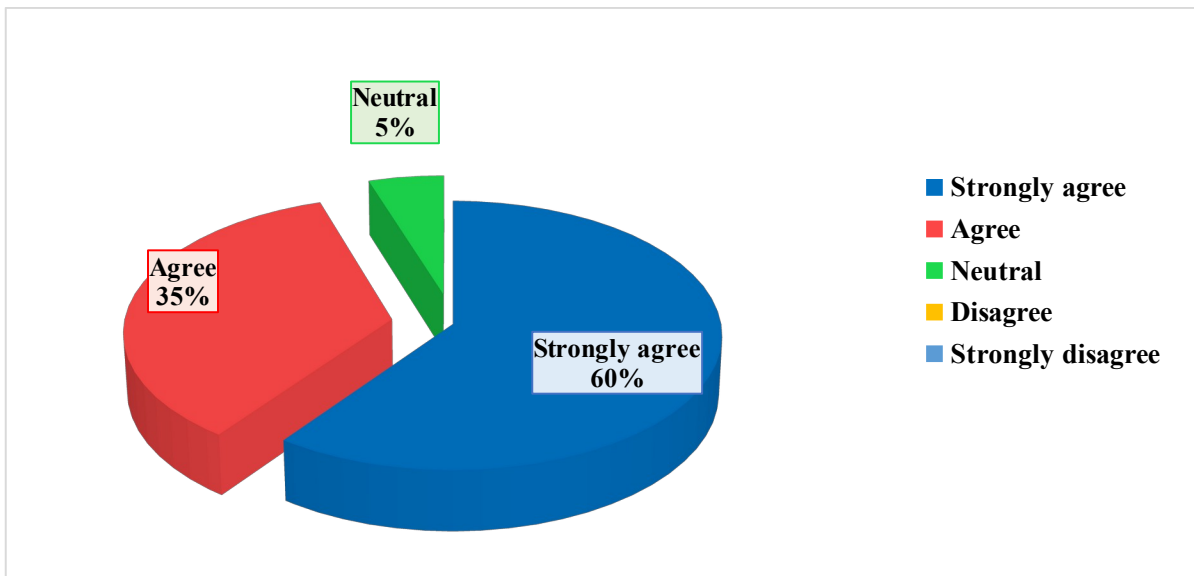
Statement 1: “Improving the spoken English is crucial for my future studies”.

SET 3 Graphs

Central school participants



Non-central school participants

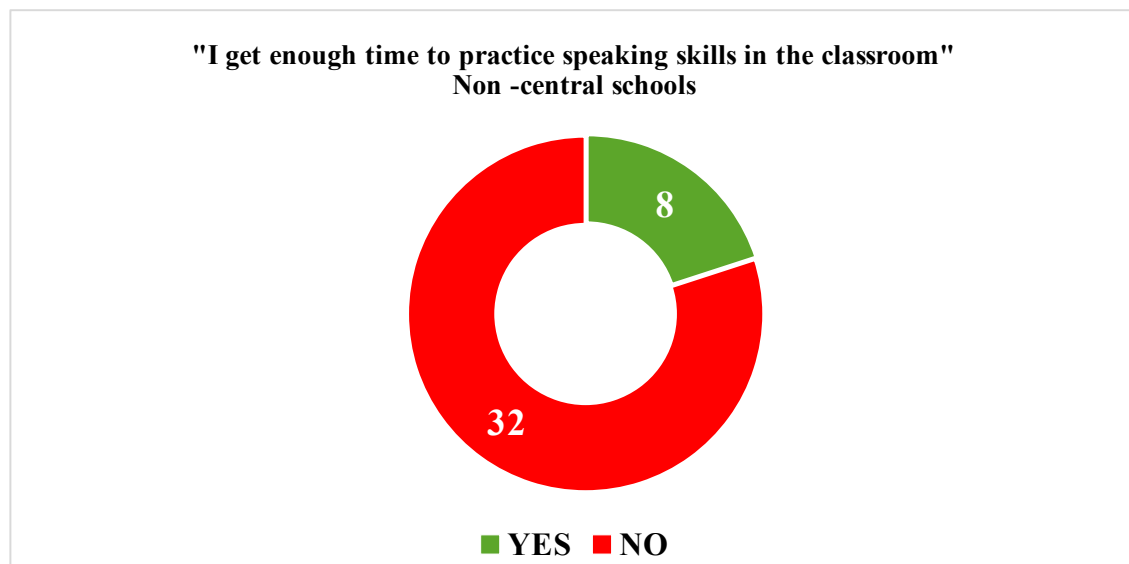
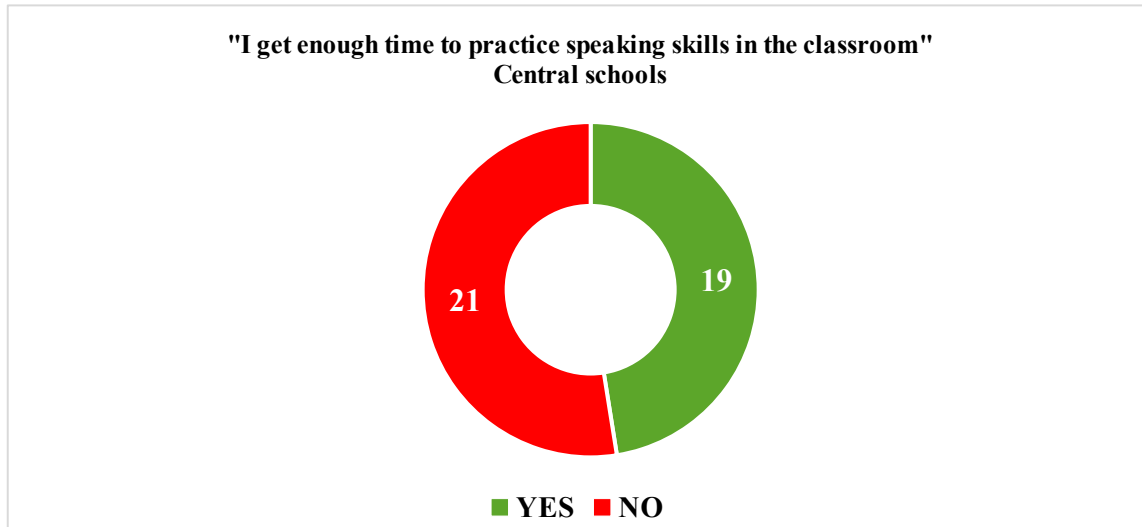


When having a deep look at Set 3 graphs above, we can easily note that even the attitude towards the necessity of having an improved communication competence is relatively different between 2 focus groups. 72% of those who surveyed from central schools strongly believe that it is significant more than the ones who are the participants of non-central settings (60%). Surprisingly, there is 5% of study population of non-central schools who are still neutral about it.

Statement 2: “**I get enough time to practice speaking skills in the classroom**”.

In the second statement of the paper survey, I aimed to investigate if students are given enough time to practice their oral communication skills in English (*Set 4 graphs below*).

SET 4 Graphs



Set 4 illustrations above clearly identify that in both settings, majority of the language learners believe that they are not given enough time to practice their speaking skills in the classroom setting. However, if we compare the number of respondents voting for “Yes”, it can be easily tracked that 47% of central school subjects claimed that they do have enough time for

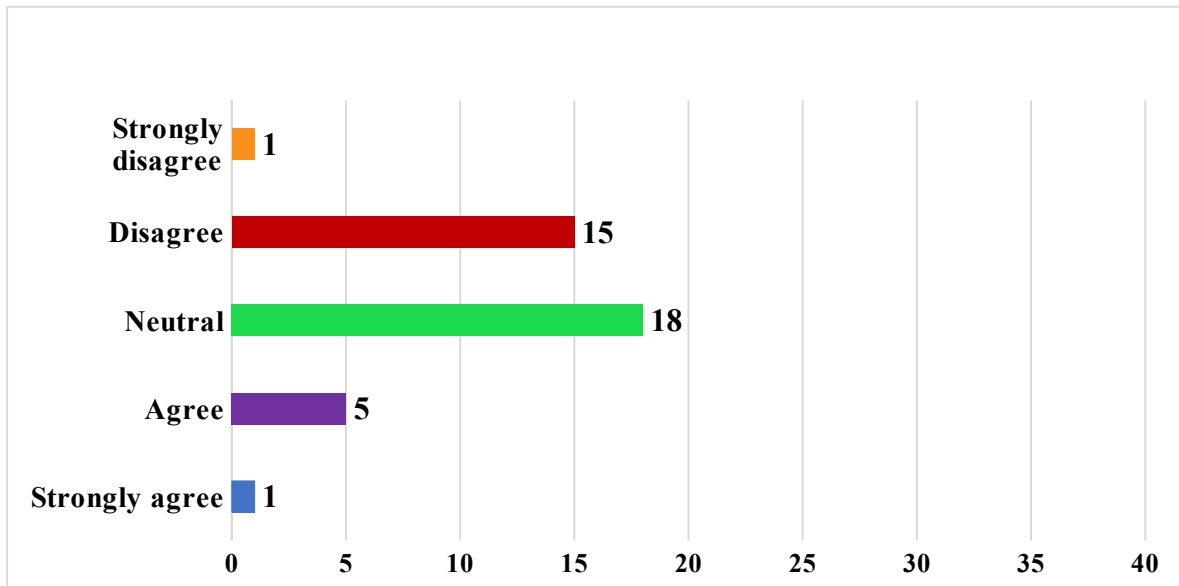
working on their communication competencies, whereas only 20% of non-central school graders agreed on the posed statement.

Statement 3: “The oral English achievements mainly rely on teachers”.

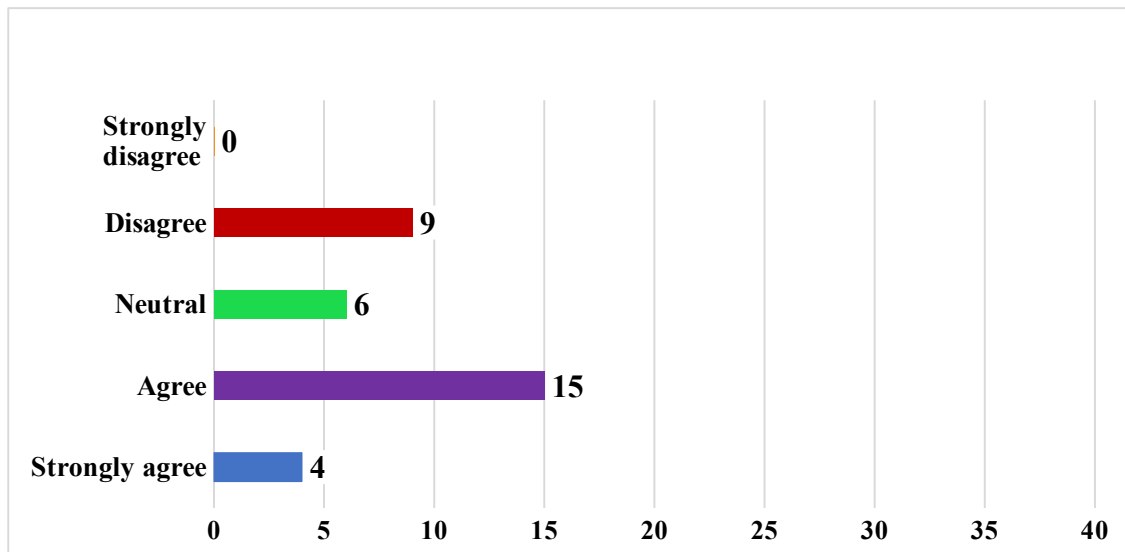
In the 3rd statement, students were asked to what extent they agree with the teacher being the main factor for improving their speaking skills and the findings are quite surprising (*Set 5 graphs below*).

SET 5 Graphs

Central school participants



Non-central school participants



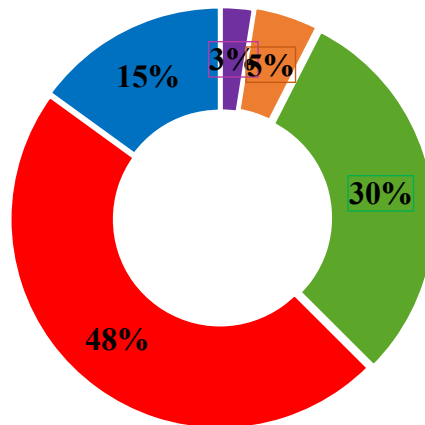
With the results of 3rd statement, I have realized that even the attitudes of learners of 2 settings are significantly different from each other. If we have a closer look, majority of the non-central school respondents (n=15) agreed on the teacher being the main factor in acquiring English-speaking skill, on the other hand, only 5 central-school participants agreed with the posed argument. Out of central schoolers, majority of them have either stayed neutral (n=18) or disagreed believing that an educator is not the crucial component of fostering oral skills in English.

Statement 4: “I cannot choose the proper words when expressing my ideas in English”.

Here, I wanted to check to what extent the school graders feel confident about their word choices when expressing themselves in English. Set 6 graphs below clearly portray that, students of central schools feel more confident on the matter than those studying at non-central schools. To be more specific, 48% of central-school reporters indicated their disagreements with the posed statement, whereas only 13% of non-central school graders claimed that they are not having problems when choosing proper words to express themselves. Here, 35% participants voted for “agree” to express their difficulties of word choice, meanwhile only 5% of central-school respondents reported that they are facing the same issue (*Set 6 graphs below*)

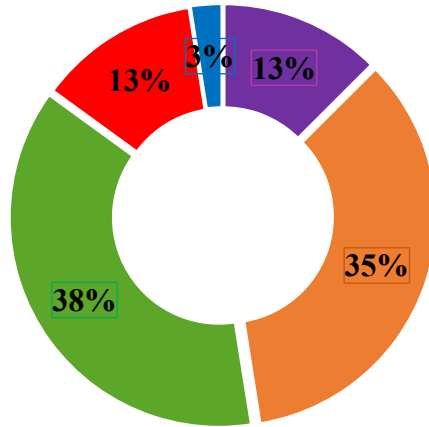
SET 6 Graphs

**"I cannot choose proper words when expressing my ideas in English"
Central schools**



Strongly agree **Agree** **Neutral** **Disagree** **Strongly disagree**

**"I cannot choose proper words when expressing my ideas in English"
Non -central schools**



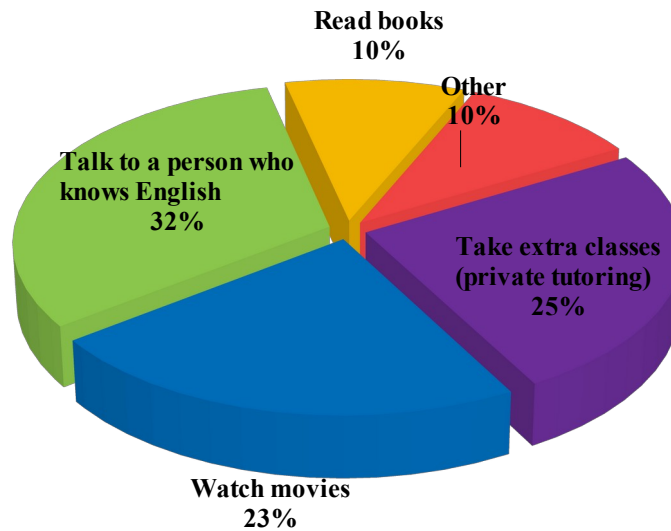
■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Statement 5: “For improving my oral communication skills of the English language, I _____”

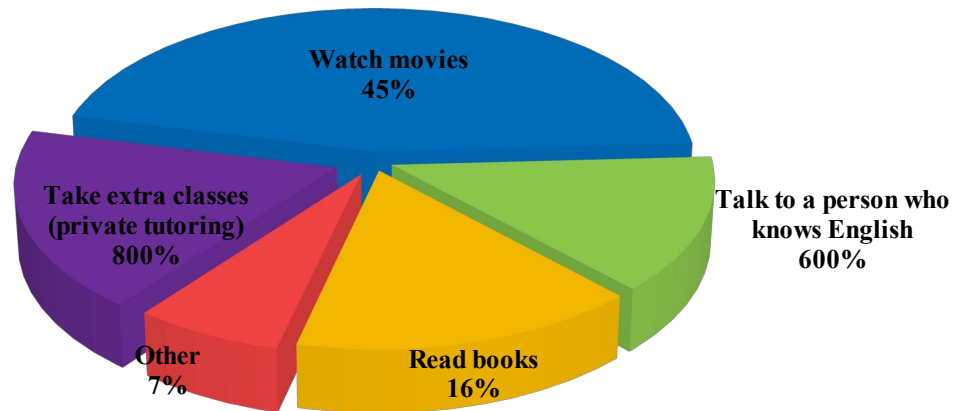
Another significant inquiry was to find more about the ways Azerbaijani 10th graders improve their expressive speech in English. This statement offered participants to choose more than one answer appropriate to the ways of improving their communication competencies (*Set 7 graphs below*).

SET 7 Graphs

Central schools: "For improving my oral communication skills of the English language, I _____".



Non-central schools: "For improving my oral communication skills of the English language, I _____".



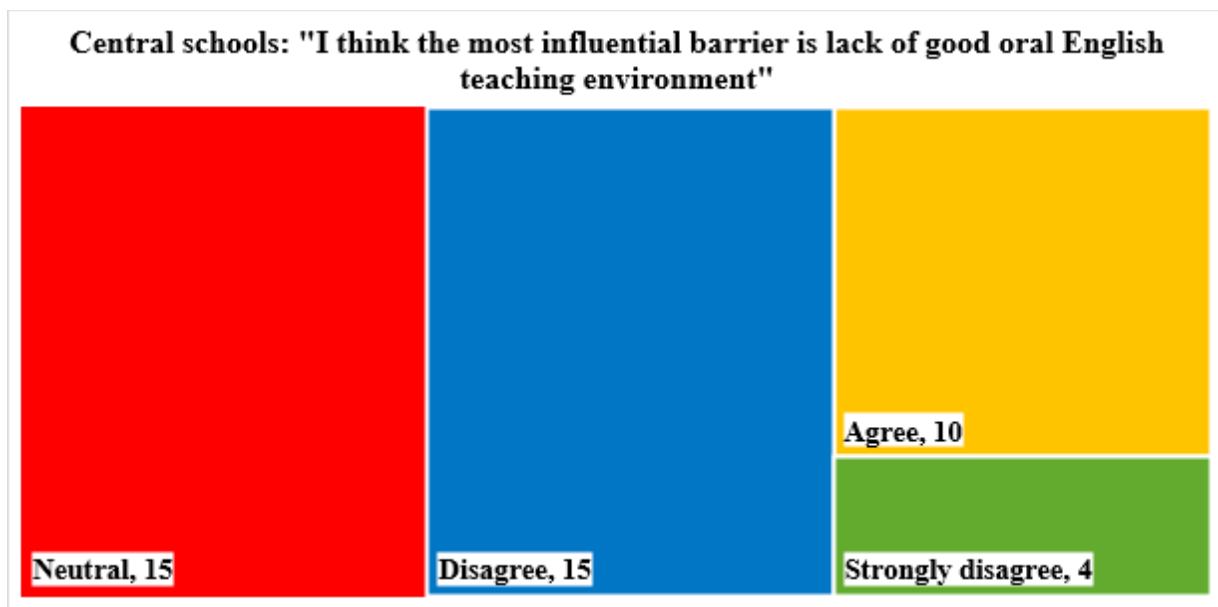
Findings revealed that there is a huge tendency for central school graders to talk to a person who knows English (32%), take private classes/courses (25%), and watching movies (23%) on fostering their speaking skills of English. On the other hand, for non-central school participants the most preferred way is watching movies (45%), having additional classes (only 18%), and reading

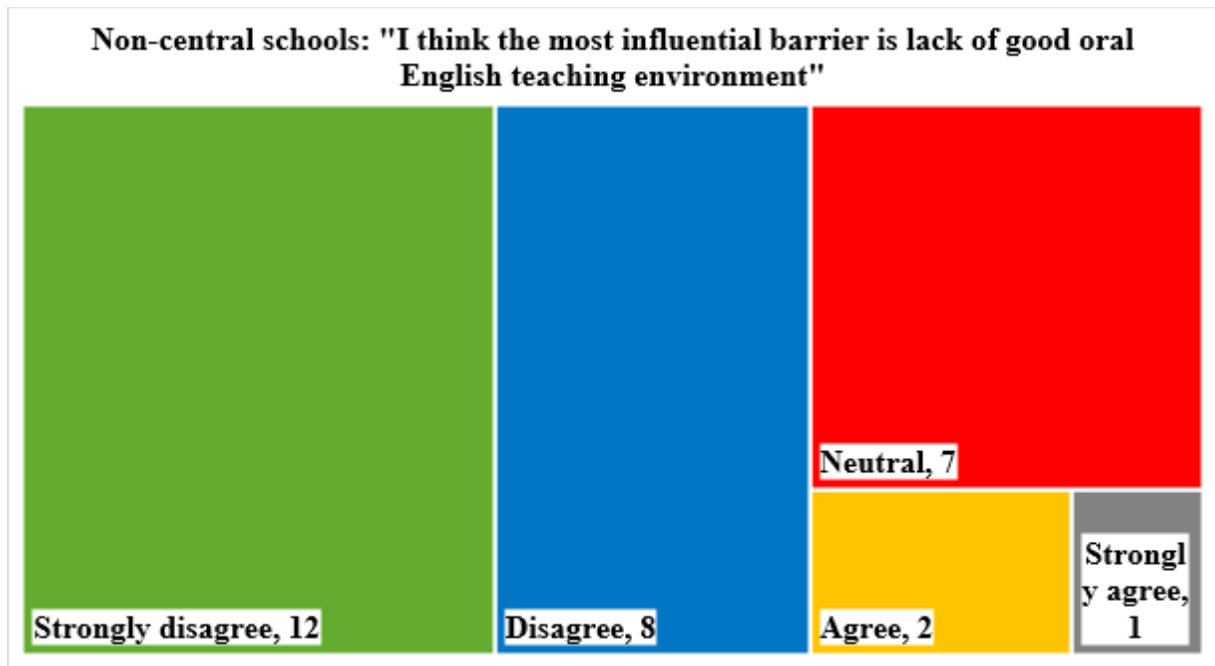
books (16%). Additionally, in the “*other*” section, 7% non-central 10th graders mentioned that they are listening to songs to improve their speaking skills, whereas 10% of central-school respondents clarified that they are going to conversation clubs, reading daily newspapers, learning English quotes, and playing games for the identified goal.

Statement 6: “I think the most influential barrier is lack of good oral English teaching environment”.

The purpose of this statement was to expose students’ attitudes towards having an effective oral English teaching environment at schools. Found data are quite surprising since majority of both central-school respondents (n=15 (disagree) & n=4 (strongly disagree)) and non-central school reporters (n=12 (strongly disagree), n=8 (disagree)) claimed that having a fruitful environment for improving an expressive speech in the English language is not an influential barrier at all (*Set 8 graphs below*).

SET 8 Graphs

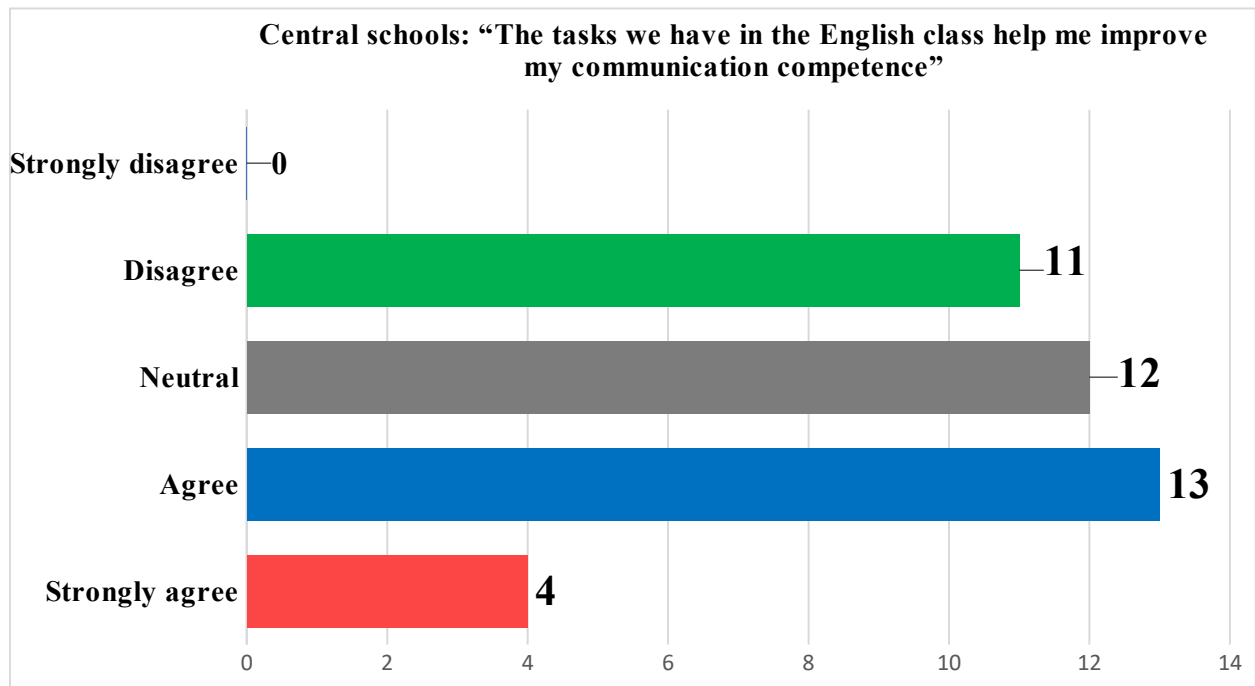


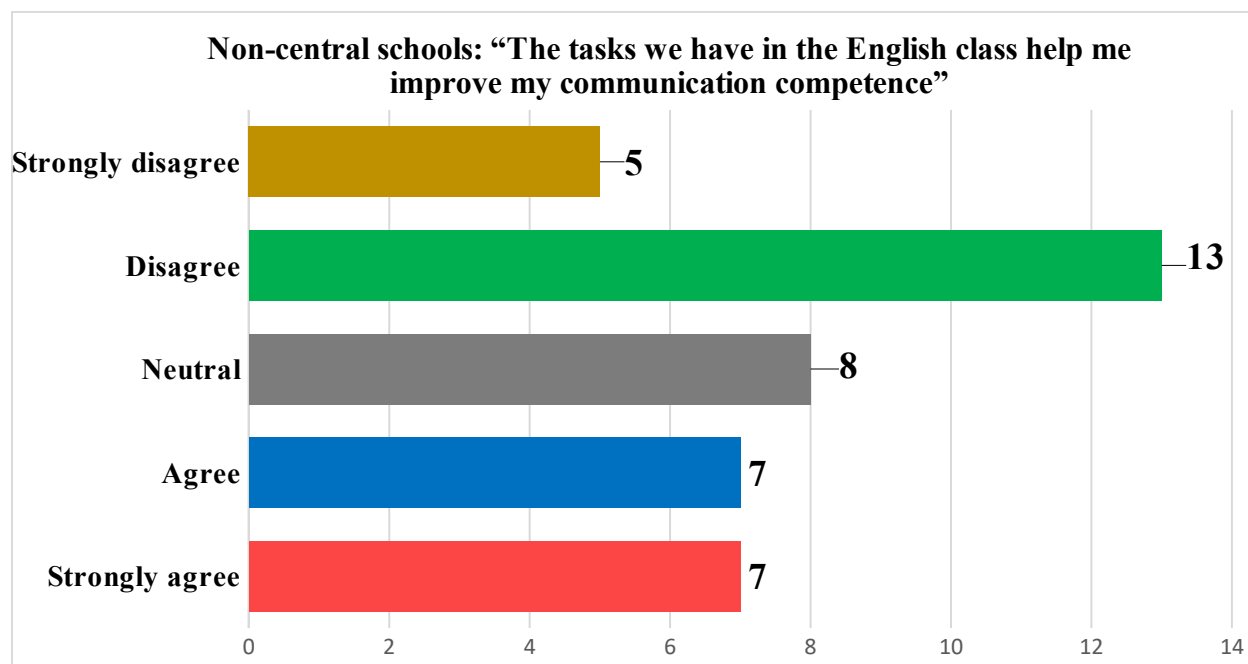


Statement 7: "The tasks we have in the English class help me improve my communication competence".

In the last inquiry of the paper survey, I was aiming to explore to what extent the tasks assigned in English classes are helpful for learners to boost their communication abilities. When analyzing Set 9 bar charts below, we can easily draw a conclusion that, the tasks being assigned in central schools are more helpful than the ones of non-central settings. Weighing up the evidence, we can state that 13 respondents of central schools agreed on the fact whereas 13 participants coming from non-central settings stated their disagreement on the tasks being effective for improving their speaking skills.

SET 9 Graphs





5.3 Analysis of Interview Data

After the completion of data collection process with the 10th graders, interviews were held with 3 teachers of each setting (4 settings, n=12) and 3 educational specialists of Ministry of Education (n=1) and Institute of Education of Azerbaijan (n=2) (*Table 1 below*). To reserve respondent confidentiality, real names will be kept anonymous, and the participants will be tagged by their job titles (*e.g. Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Educational specialist 1, Educational specialist 2*). Data collected from interviews have been transcribed and color coded by being categorized under 6 themes.

Table 1. Interviewee Information

<i>Table 1. Interviewee Information</i>			
<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Setting</i>	<i>Location</i>
1	Teacher 1	Non-central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
2	Teacher 2	Non-central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
3	Teacher 3	Non-central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
4	Teacher 4	Central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
5	Teacher 5	Central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
6	Teacher 6	Central school	Baku, Azerbaijan

7	Teacher 7	Non-central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
8	Teacher 8	Non-central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
9	Teacher 9	Non-central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
10	Teacher 10	Central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
11	Teacher 11	Central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
12	Teacher 12	Central school	Baku, Azerbaijan
13	Educational specialist 1	Ministry of Education	Baku, Azerbaijan
14	Educational specialist 2	Institute of Education	Baku, Azerbaijan
15	Educational specialist 3	Institute of Education	Baku, Azerbaijan

5.3.1 INTERVIEW DATA/THEMES

5.3.1.1 Theme 1. Speaking English in classes

As a first question of the interview, teacher participants have been asked if they speak English when having classes with their students. 4 teachers out of 6 central-school interviewees have mentioned that they in fact, speak English all the time and demands learners to not to speak in any other languages in the class. To explain the strategy even further, Teacher 4 and Teacher 12 state accordingly:

- *“Nobody speaks Azerbaijani in my class...Everyone has to speak English only...If they cannot, they have to use either mimics or gestures to explain what they want to say” (Teacher 4).*

- *“Of course, I speak English only...English classes must be held in English...I cannot imagine having an English class in any other languages” (Teacher 12).*

On the other hand, all non-central school participants alongside with the rest of 2 central-school respondents mentioned that they sometimes speak Azerbaijani when students do not fully understand them. They stated that to help students understand any taught material in an easy way, they sometimes refer to the native language by providing translations. Direct quotes below have been noted by Teacher 3 and Teacher 10 accordingly:

- *“We speak English in the classes... but sometimes we are using our native language with weaker students too...Because some students do not understand the English language, we use Azerbaijani language” (Teacher 3).*

- *“While 45 minutes, I try to speak English...but sometimes, if students do not understand the meanings of new words or translation is needed, I try to explain the words by translating them from Azerbaijani to English” (Teacher 10).*

5.3.1.2 Theme 2. Role of a Teacher in Developing Learners’ Speaking Skills

All interviewees have been asked to what extent they agree or disagree with teacher being the main factor in improving learners’ speaking skills. Except for Teacher 3, Teacher 6, Teacher 8, all interviewed respondents agreed that teacher quality is the main factor. They have explained that since students follow the teacher first, it is important to interest learners and motivate them to improve their oral skills of English. Here’s the direct quote shared by Teacher 4:

- *“At the top, there is the teacher because students follow him/her. Teacher should attract student attention towards learning and speaking English” (Teacher 4).*

Meanwhile Teacher 3, Teacher 6, and Teacher 8 clearly expressed that the teacher is not the main factor since learners should be self-motivated to boost their communication competencies. Teacher 3 explains the idea in the following way:

- *“I do not think teacher is the main factor here...Teacher shows the way only...some students simply do not want to study or learn which is a huge problem for us” (Teacher 3)*

When interviewing educational specialists on the same inquiry, however, an interesting set of data have been emerged. All 3 interviewed educational specialists clearly expressed that teacher quality is one of the key problematic obstacles in school graders having improved oral English skills. They all have mentioned that when having inspections at different schools, it has been clearly observed that some teachers do not speak English at all just because they themselves cannot speak English fluently. To have further analysis, it has been outlined that some of English teachers themselves do not have oral communication competencies, how will they teach students to speak English fluently? They are speaking Azerbaijani for the most of the time. Educational specialist 1 and Educational specialist 2 share:

- “We have serious problems to have English language teachers who can actually speak English fluently...currently we are having inspections and we have clearly observed teachers are speaking Azerbaijani when teaching students... If it is a foreign language class – English lesson, each and every single word has to be said in English... All language instructions have to be given in English” (Educational Specialist 1).

- “English lessons have to be held in English...Students are listening to the teacher, but he/she is not speaking English...Moreover, students are not speaking English with each other during the class” (Educational Specialist 2).

In the same vein, Educational Specialist 3 mentions that teacher quality is indeed a key factor since they have an important role in the delivery of curriculum standards:

-“Everything is carefully planned, but teacher is the one who delivers all the materials and curriculum standards to students at schools. Here, teacher has a huge responsibility...Because a teaching strategy is not applied in a successful way, many

problems are getting emerged on students' English-speaking skills (Educational Specialist 3)".

5.3.1.3 Theme 3. Grammar or Communication-focused lessons

Interview respondents have been asked several questions about the nature of English classes which has led to getting a quite interesting set of data about the process. It has been found out that, in fact, majority of the nature of classes are mainly grammar-focused, not communication-based. However, only a few participants mentioned that although it is not fully communication-based, they are still trying to have a pattern of speaking skills for about 50% of the classes. To justify the idea, Teacher 9 working at non-central school elaborated in this way:

- "Lessons are mainly grammar-focused...we can blame neither teachers nor students for that...Teachers are preparing students in a way that they can get good grades in the tests...so we have to focus on teaching grammar" (Teacher 9).

Teacher 2 mentioned that depending on a topic, lessons are designed based on both grammar and speaking-based sessions:

- "I think, both...50/50...it depends on which topic I am teaching...if I teach a grammar part, then the lesson will be grammar based, but sometimes we have interesting topics to discuss during the class to improve students' oral speech in English" (Teacher 2).

Educational specialists, on the other hand, firmly stated that a great number of English classes are not communication-focused, but theory based. Speaking seems to be a neglected skill to be improved in students. To weight the evidence, direct statements will be shared noted by Education specialists correspondingly:

- *“We are focusing on having teachers who know grammar better than the other skills...that is one of the main problems of ours...there is no clear language environment established for students to improve their speaking skills, because the main focus is on grammar” (Education specialist 1).*

- *“English classes are mainly about teaching grammar of the language and making students do the test for the most time...students are assigned to memorize vocabulary, grammar rules, or read the texts only” (Education specialist 2).*

- *“There is no language environment developed for students to improve their speaking skills in English classes...dialogues and debates should be there to help learners put their learned knowledge into practice” (Education specialist 3).*

5.3.1.4 Theme 4. Test-focused assessment tasks and materials

To find more about if the coursebooks/materials and assessment tasks are effective in developing students' communication competencies, interview participants were invited to share their insights about the matter. Majority of them mentioned that traditional coursebooks (*e.g. English 9 Student Book written by local specialists*) are not effective in having communication-based lessons whereas, the ones for 5th and 6th grades are overly beneficial for implementing the purpose of fostering speaking skills in students. It has also been stated that they are trying to find additional materials online available:

- *“Traditional books are not communication-based at all, mostly grammar-focused... There are lots of long texts to be read which seems boring for students...however, coursebooks are getting renewed each year and the newly published ones create great chances for teachers to have oral skill-based sessions with students” (Teacher 8)*

- *“Coursebooks are not satisfactory, to be honest...they keep changing all the time which affects the lesson process...we have to change the lesson plans and everything... traditional books are not effective, however, newly published ones are good in improving students’ oral communication” (Teacher 12).*

Furthermore, a great number of teachers explained the reason why majority of the lessons are grammar focused. They stated that students have to get prepared to pass the State exam with successful outcomes. Because there are no speaking tasks included in the test, teachers including great number of learners are not focusing on fostering their communication skills in English. A couple of interesting remarks have been made by Teacher 1 and Teacher 8 regarding the matter:

- *“Fluency and accuracy are important but students are getting prepared in a way that they pass the test held by the State Examination Center” (Teacher 1).*

- *“It is actually difficult to assess speaking and writing skills, this is why, teachers are not including such tests in their assessment forms...you have to think of proper criteria for grading oral assessment tasks which is not easy...but grammar can be easily graded” (Teacher 8).*

Education specialists have shared numerous striking insights which made me think about the posed problem even further. It has been explained that if a curriculum standard says that students’ oral speech will be fostered through having English classes, then the test should be integrated with oral assessment as well. Teachers are having grammar-focused lessons, mostly because there is no oral test in the state exam. To explain the idea even further,

Education specialist 1 highlighted that teachers do not include any speaking tests in formative or summative assessments which also leads to having problems:

- *“Having a specific and effective plan for assessment techniques is significantly crucial. Unfortunately, most of the time, teachers assess student knowledge just for sake of giving 2, 3, or 5 grades...They do not analyze the grades of summative assessment, for example...They never analyze to see what they have achieved throughout this academic year...it is a great pool of data for them, but teachers never make use of the grades to have effective outcomes...In my opinion, whatever our purpose is should be also included in the test...Analyses show that paper-pencil tasks are not sufficient for measuring students’ language competencies...there should be different types of evaluation for measuring knowledge of language learners” (Education specialist 1).*

- *“Teachers are not focusing on teaching speaking skills because they think that it is not included in the test anyway which leads to having a wrong attitude towards language classes....they plan their lessons around the center of grammar rules and forget about communication competences of learners...nowadays, a tendency is getting to grow for improving oral skills in the English skills, coursebooks are getting renewed, but the attitude and perspective of teachers are not changing...they still see having a language class as teaching grammar rules or making students memorize the vocabulary only...” (Educational specialist 2).*

5.3.1.5 Theme 5. Factors that make differences in the way central and non-central school graders develop oral English skills

In the next analysis part of the interview data, my main purpose was to investigate more about specialists' perspectives about the differences between 2 focus groups in the matter of communication competencies. It has been highlighted that the major differences exist in teacher quality, infrastructure, socio-economic background, and more opportunities presented to language learners to improve their speaking skills:

- *“We see the teacher factor here...first off, I would like to mention that being located in the center of the city already indicates that the situation is better and more prestigious... for example, teachers whose scores are higher on “Teacher Admission Tests” start their jobs in the central schools because of their prestige” (Education specialist 3).*

- *“Both students and teachers have more access to courses, trainings, or professional development sessions more than the ones who are studying and working at non-central schools...Additionally, we have a parent factor as well...central school graders tend to go to courses to improve their speaking skills so that they can either study abroad or in an educational setting where the language of instruction is in English...but only a few non-central schoolers go for it...” (Education specialist 2).*

5.3.1.6 Theme 6. Strategies for Developing Oral Language

In the last part of the interview, respondents have been asked to share specific strategies that they find quite effective for developing oral language of the students. Considering all of the mentioned themes above, the Education specialist working at the Ministry of Education (n=1)

and the specialists working at the Institute of Education of Azerbaijan (n=2) shared quite important strategies to be applied to make the situation keep developed further.

First off, all interviewees explained that teacher development/quality is the key factor. With that being said, the ones who are teaching English at schools must attend in different conferences, workshops, and professional development courses to improve their own oral speech of English. Moreover, a foreign language class must be held at that exact language. If a teacher speaks in students' native language or constantly refers to L1 (in our context, it is Azerbaijani), language learners' communication competencies are not going to get fostered. To further explain the detail, it has been outlined that it is important to create a language environment for learners. Each and every single task must be held in English – debates and different dialogues have to be assigned to be communicated in the English language:

- *“Teachers need to focus on their self-developments...it is important for them to get engaged in different professional development courses so that their oral communication competencies get fostered first, later on students” (Education specialist 1).*

- *“In my opinion, teachers should work on themselves first so that all classes are held in English. I think, school directors can plan something – organize or engage school teachers to different conferences or competitions and ask educators to speak English... in that case, teachers will be confronting themselves...they will realize that oral language skills are lacking and will start to be motivated to work on their speaking skills” (Education specialist 2).*

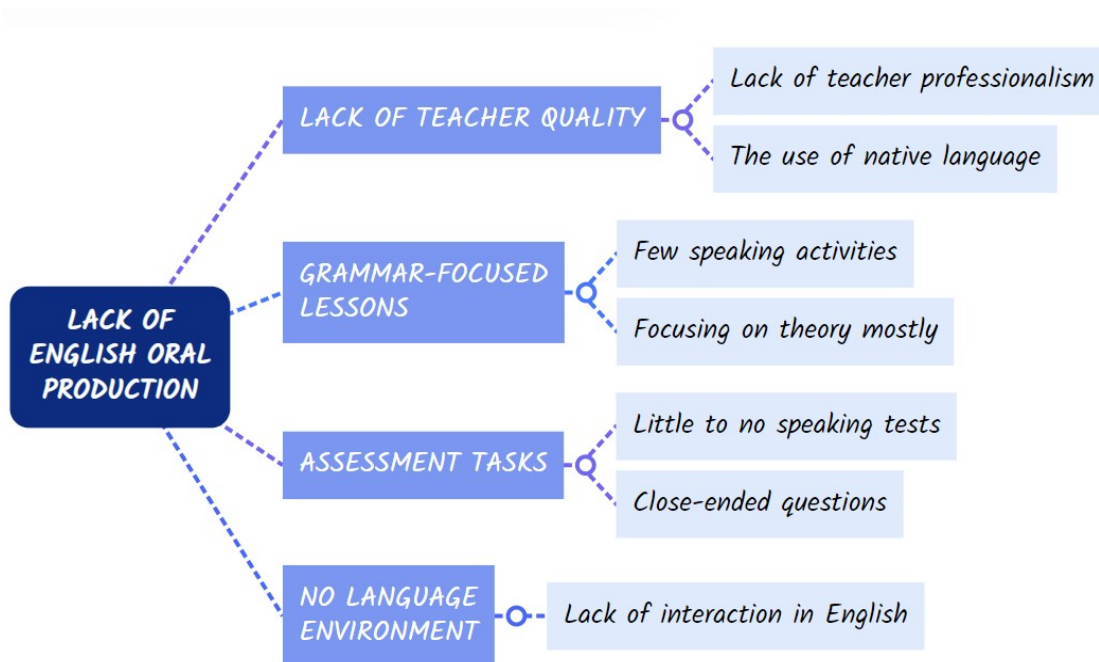
Lastly, it has been mentioned that students themselves also should be motivated to boost their speaking skills by getting involved in different international competitions. It has been

specified that another way of improving their communication competencies can be creating a chance for them to interact with foreign students and have a discussion about different topics. In the end, a strategy has been added about assessment tasks. It has been outlined that teachers should not assess students' knowledge just for the sake of giving grades. It is vital for educators to integrate speaking tests to assessment formats for motivating learners to have enhanced oral English skills. Education specialist 3 notes:

- *“A number of speaking tests must be increased as an assessment format...I understand it might be difficult to hold oral assessment tests for all students who give state exam, however, we can have such tests for specific faculty admissions...if a faculty needs to have an individual with a fluent communication competency of English, it is significant to have a test for him/her in that case...” (Education Specialist 3).*

The major findings have been highlighted in the illustration below (*Illustration 3*).

Illustration 3



CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

Evidence discussed above demonstrated that the problem of Azerbaijani students not having proficient oral English skills is still the ongoing issue. Since the focus group of this research is mainly 10th graders (n=80), it has been explored the reason why they cannot speak fluently in English despite of having 9 years of language instruction. As it is a comparative analysis of central (n=40) and non-central schoolers (n=40) of Baku, conducting oral assessment tests, surveys, and interviews as data collection instruments helped me a lot to dig the issue deeper and find the actual barriers to be addressed. *It has been found out that there are several points that exist in central schools, but lack in non-central settings which make the gap of proficiency in spoken English more noticeable.*

In the first place, speaking tests highlighted that there is, in fact, a huge difference on students' English communicative competencies between 2 focus groups. As statistics provided above (*Set 1 graphs above*), out of 40 non-central schoolers, 20 students rejected to get tested, meanwhile, only 2 respondents of central schools did not accept the invitation to participate in the speaking test. The ones who refused to be in this part of the study, stated that their oral English skills are not sufficient enough to be evaluated. With that being said, they did not even want to give it a try. Statistics for the ones who got tested, however, emerged another interesting set of data to be discussed. The result of oral assessment test revealed that non-central school participants have been placed in the A2 as a highest level (n=8), whereas for the central school graders the highest is C2 (n=15). This evidence gives me a way to state that the English-speaking level of the ones who study at central schools of Baku is significantly higher than the ones who study at non-central settings.

Secondly, survey statistics demonstrated that unlike central school graders, majority of non-central school respondents do not have enough time/chance to improve their speaking skills unlike the ones who study at central settings. Additionally, when participants were asked if they are experiencing problems with a word choice when speaking, striking result showed that it is the non-central respondents who are having this issue more than the ones studying at central settings. Moreover, it has been revealed that the teacher quality, tasks, materials, and language environment existing in central schools seem to be more effective and helpful in improving language learners' oral production than the other ones. These tools seem to be more beneficial in terms of providing learners with a chance to improve their spoken English more in central schools than the non-central settings.

Lastly, 25% of central schoolers mentioned that they are taking private/additional courses to improve their speaking skills, meanwhile only 18% of non-school respondents stated that they are taking the same action.

To learn more about the existing barrier that causes the problem to be the case, data collected by conduction of interviews helped a lot and gave quite many insights on the matter. Having the same resemblance with the ideas of Coskun (2016), results of my interviews also showed that, in fact, lack of teacher quality/professionalism is one of the commonly experienced problems for successful oral production. Participants highlighting the significance of teacher role in the improvement of students' speaking skills, noted that some of the English educators are not qualified in having a fluent speech in English. This is why, they keep constantly referring to the native language of students and holding classes not in English. Because teachers are not speaking in English during the sessions, the chances of giving learners an opportunity to boost their oral production gets out of hand. Non-central school interviewees

mentioned that they refer to students' native language when a student does not fully understand or needs a translation. Meanwhile, teachers working at central schools stated that in their classes, no one is allowed to speak in any languages other than the English. All interviewed education specialists also confirmed that during inspections and monitoring it has been revealed that, even teachers cannot express themselves in English, let alone their students. They are holding sessions in Azerbaijani which leads to having no interaction in English.

Another lacking point is having grammar-based lessons and assessment tasks. English classes are being held in a way that language learners are memorizing the grammar rules and vocabulary only. Majority of the tasks they do simply go around testing the theory of the English language. Consequently, the improvement of speaking skills seems to be the neglected skill for the majority of the teachers. In the curriculum standard, speaking is set as a skill to be imposed on learners throughout the academic years, however, a great number of educators do not bring oral production of English to the center of student attention. This idea has an alike point with Beisenbayeva (2020) in Kazakhstan context. As mentioned in the literature, teachers plan their lessons in a way that learners comprehend the theory/grammar only, but not work on their communicative competences.

Interestingly, when being inquired about not having any communicative-based lessons, majority of the non-central-teacher respondents justified it by claiming that students are getting prepared to the state exam which has no speaking test. So, they bring the argument of state exam not including any speaking test, but the focus of holding language classes should not be teaching students theory only. With that in mind, they design the assessment tasks mainly in a format of closed-ended and grammar-based just in a way that language learners pass the state exam with higher scores. This point aligns with the findings of Solak and Bayar (2015) in which

it is shown that one of the barriers is designing assessment tasks in a theory-based format, rather than oral production-centered.

With all the stated factors above, the points are being summarized under the state of having a lack of language environment in English classes (Widdowson, 1972). Speaking activities are not present in the majority of settings. Only central-school interviewees claimed that since fluency and accuracy are important, several discussions and conversations during the sessions are held to help learners improve their speaking skills of the English language. Because a proper environment is not established for students, they speak English neither with their teachers nor with one another in the classes. They do not get enough opportunities to put learned knowledge into practice by doing authentic tasks. As education specialist working at the Ministry of Education also mentioned, learners are not given enough chances to produce a speech by applying the theory and using sets of vocabulary they are being taught in the English classes.

Lastly, since one of the research questions has been aimed to address the reason for having different levels of English-speaking knowledge in learners, education specialists brought significantly important barriers to be considered. First off, it has been stated that central schools have more qualified teachers than the non-central settings. It is because the ones who get higher scores in the Teacher Admission Test, tend to get hired by central schools mostly. Moreover, it has also been claimed that there are lack of opportunities exist for the ones who work at non-central educational settings. Because majority of the workshops, professional development platforms, and courses are located in the center of Baku, teachers do not have a comfortable access to them unlike the ones who work at central schools. Secondly, there is also a noticeable difference between the access of students to different courses or other opportunities based on

the socio-economic background. A great number of students attend in central schools with the aim of studying abroad or a place where the language of instruction is English. With that in mind, they attend in different conversation clubs or go to courses to have a fluent speech of English which is a case for only a few non-central school graders. Accordingly, the ones studying at central schools have more chances to get involved in international competitions or platforms where they can get exposed to the language environment than the ones studying at non-central educational settings.

CONCLUSION

Findings of this research highlighted that there are numerous obstacles in the way Azerbaijani students improve their productive skills of the English language. The remarkable result to emerge from the data is that there are gaps to be considered to help students have an enhanced communicative competence. Lack of teacher professionalism, having grammar-based lessons, not including assessment tasks to measure language learners' levels of speaking, and lack of a language environment lead to framing students' vision of learning a language. Azerbaijani schoolers' perspective of knowing a language is limited to passing the test only which results in having grade-centered learners at schools. Since a comparative analysis has been conducted between non-central and central school settings, the study has validated that teacher-student attitudes toward learning English, teacher quality, socio-economic background, and the designs of English classes make the gaps between the 2 focus groups seem more noticeable. In central school settings, students' vision of learning a language has not been framed in passing the state exam, but to get accepted to prestigious universities and have more employment opportunities. Additionally, it has been stressed that the access factor to different

courses, trainings, international competitions, or platforms of people studying and working in central areas are more attainable than the non-central settings.

CHAPTER 7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In this part of research, written policy recommendations will be listed to take specific courses of action to solve the issues emerged from the study:

1. Provision of professional development for English teachers

One of the most powerful factors that influences the way Azerbaijani schoolers acquire the oral production of English is the teacher factor. It has been revealed that majority of teachers are conducting lessons in the Azerbaijani language because of having an insufficient fluency of speaking. This component is mainly the case for non-central school teachers, meanwhile in the settings located in central area of Baku teachers speak English for the most of the time. Study findings validate the usefulness of providing professional developments, workshops, trainings, or international competitions for English teachers. Additionally, universities producing English language teachers should create more chances for them to improve their communicative competences in a way that they hold English sessions not in the Azerbaijani language.

2. Addition of speaking tasks to formative and summative assessments

The way formative and summative assessments are held at Azerbaijani schools seem to make language learners tongue-tied. Because oral skill is not measured in assessment tests, neither teachers nor students have motivation to work on the development of speaking skills. It has been stressed that people are studying what is being asked in the test. With that being said, teachers should consider the methods of testing students' level of speaking skill and add them to

their lesson plans and syllabuses. More speaking tasks should be assigned for learners as a part of formative and summative assessments throughout the academic year.

3. Having communication-based lessons and tasks

Faculty members should reconsider the lesson plans and syllabuses of English classes and have them more communication-based rather than grammar-focused. Study results provide an evidence for the obstacle of not having a language environment and students being taught theory of the language only. To avoid the issue, more discussions and debates have to be held to increase the level of interaction among learners to put all the grammar rules and vocabulary into practice. Additionally, learners should be assigned to complete authentic tasks – where they can actually apply the oral English skills in different scenarios and situations.

4. Making courses and professional development trainings accessible for all teachers

One of the noteworthy data emphasizes that a factor of not having the same access to courses and qualified teachers mainly create noticeable gaps between central and non-central educational settings. Teachers working in non-central settings should have the same access to attend in professional development trainings, workshops, and international conferences. There should be more trainings organized in/around the non-center areas of Baku. Moreover, interview findings revealed that teachers getting high scores from Teacher Admission Test prefer to get employed by central schools which creates a gap of having qualified educators in non-central settings. With that being said, teachers should be incentivized to work in non-central schools with the provision of extra funding.

5. Integration of speaking tests with admission procedures

Because state exam does not include any test concerning oral production of English, neither students nor teachers are encouraged to work on it. Teachers are focusing on teaching theory and students are memorizing the grammar and vocabulary of the language only. As an external motivation, the integration of oral assessment tests with the admission criteria should be considered by education specialists. This case is specifically about the universities producing English language teachers. Teachers-to-be's communicative competencies of English should be tested before assigning teaching positions for them at schools.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – CEFR ORAL ASSESSMENT TEST

Name: _____

Level: _____

	Candidate can	Question		Response		Comments
		Understand	Accuracy	Fluency	Total score	
1	Introduce himself clearly Can you introduce yourself?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
2	Describe his family Can you tell me about your family?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
3	Describe his ambitions What are your future plans?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
4	Narrate using past tenses Tell me about your last holiday?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
5	What do you think are the ideal conditions for studying?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
6	Hypothesize Have you always lived in Baku? How would you feel	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		

	about living abroad permanently?					
7	Discuss global problem in details Can you tell me about the global problem? What is a possible solution to this problem?	Yes/No	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		

Score:

0-12	Level A1	Elementary
13-24	Level A2	Pre-Intermediate
25-36	Level B1	Intermediate
37-46	Level B2	Upper-Intermediate
47-52	Level C1	Advanced
52-56	Level C2	Mastery

APPENDIX B – SURVEY

10th Graders_SURVEY

The following questions are about your oral English learning, choose what you think is the proper answer (Aşağıdakı suallar İngilis dili danışığının öyrənilməsinə aiddir. Sizə uyğun olan variantı seçin)

1. Improving the spoken English is crucial for my future studies.

(İngilis dili danışığının inkişafı gələcək təhsilim (dərslərim) üçün vacibdir)

- a. Strongly agree (Tamamilə razıyam)
- b. Agree (Razıyam)
- c. Neutral (Neytral)
- d. Disagree (Narazıyam)
- e. Strongly Disagree (Tamamilə narazıyam)

2. I get enough time to practice speaking skills in the classroom.

(Sınıfda İngilis dili danışiq bacarığımı inkişaf etdirməyə kifayət qədər vaxtım olur)

- a. Yes (Bəli)
- b. No (Xeyr)

3. The oral English achievements mainly rely on teachers.

(İngilis dili danışiq bacarıqlarının inkişafı adətən müəllimlərdən asılı olur)

- a. Strongly agree (Tamamilə razıyam)
- b. Agree (Razıyam)
- c. Neutral (Neytral)
- d. Disagree (Narazıyam)
- e. Strongly Disagree (Tamamilə narazıyam)

4. I cannot choose the proper words when expressing my ideas in English.

(İngilis dilində özümü ifadə etməkdə düzgün söz seçimi edə bilmirəm)

- a. Strongly agree (Tamamilə razıyam)
- b. Agree (Razıyam)
- c. Neutral (Neytral)
- d. Disagree (Narazıyam)
- e. Strongly Disagree (Tamamilə narazıyam)

5. For improving my oral communication skills of the English language, I _____.

(İngilis dili danışiq bacarıqlarımı inkişaf etdirmək üçün Mən _____)

- a. Take extra classes (private tutoring) (Əlavə İngilis dili dərsləri götürürəm (Əlavə hazırlıq, kurs/məktəb))
- b. Watch movies (Filmlərə baxıram)
- c. Talk to a person who knows English (İngilis dilində bilən şəxslərlə danışırım)
- d. Read books (Kitab oxuyuram)

Other (Digər): _____

6. I think the most influential barrier is lack of good oral English teaching environment

(Düşünürəm ki, İngilis dili danışiq bacarıqlarının zəif olması ən çox öyrətmə mühitindən asılıdır)

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree (Tamamilə narazıyam)

Strongly agree (Tamamilə razıyam)

7. The tasks we have in the English class help me improve my communication competence.

(Dərslərdə etdiyimiz tapşırıqlar İngilis dili bacarıqlarımı inkişaf etdirməkdə mənə kömək olur)

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree (Tamamilə narazıyam)

Strongly agree (Tamamilə razıyam)

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE TEACHERS

1. In the class, do you speak English when teaching students?

2. It is believed that: “Improving speaking skill is considered to be a neglected skill in public schools”. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

3. Are the lesson plans/syllabus communication-based? Or mainly grammar-focused?

4. Do you believe that oral achievement of a student mainly depends on a teacher quality?

Not on the design of the resources/lesson plans/assessment tasks?

5. Do you find course books and assessment tasks effective in teaching students to improve their communication competences?

APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE EDUCATION SPECIALISTS

1. We are investigating the reasons why Azerbaijani students cannot master spoken English after having 9 years of language instructions. In your perspective, what might be the obstacles?

2. In our national curriculum, a speaking ability is one of the skills to be fostered in students. Do you think our curriculum provides enough chances for students to improve their oral communication in the English language?

3. Do you believe that oral achievement of a student mainly depends on a teacher quality? Not on the design of the resources/lesson plans/assessment tasks?

4. Do you think learners studying in non-central schools have the same access to improve their English skills as the ones who study in central schools?

5. Which strategies would you suggest for making the situation better?