

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING SPOKEN ENGLISH FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper addresses the need to give more importance to the development of the speaking skill in students, which is generally ignored at the undergraduate level. It is observed that an undergraduate in India, gets some opportunity to listen, read and write in English, but hardly any, to speak in English in the classroom. Whether this gap is due to the structure of the syllabus, the teaching methodology used or the activities and tasks the students are engaged in during the class hours require careful investigation. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that this trend, where the students do not get much opportunity to improve their proficiency in the speaking skill is gradually maturing into a malady. The symptoms are evident, when the average graduate attends job interviews or try to become self-employed in urban areas, where a minimum level of communicative ability in English is expected. Apparently, to make up for the deficiencies in the existing undergraduate English classroom, several Spoken English Institutes have mushroomed, who claim to provide quick remedies, with high fees, to the desperate job seeker.

Key Words: challenges, communication, English, language, learners, skills, undergraduate

Introduction

Speaking is the active use of language to express meaning, and for young learners, the spoken language is the medium through which a new language is encountered, understood, practiced, and learnt. Rather than oral skills being simply one aspect of learning language, the spoken form in the young learner's classroom acts as the prime source of language learning. However, speaking problems can be major challenges to effective foreign language learning and communication. English as foreign language (EFL) learners, no matter how much they know about the English language, still face many speaking difficulties. Many studies have indicated that oral language development has largely been neglected in

the classroom, and most of the time, oral language in the classroom is used more by teachers than by students. However, oral language, even as used by the teacher, hardly ever functions as a means for students to gain knowledge and explore ideas. To develop the knowledge to deal with oral communication problems in an EFL context, researchers first need to know the real nature of those problems and the circumstances in which 'problems' are constructed. **Review of Literature**

Martin Matějček 2013

The thesis deals with the topic of difficulties in teaching speaking skills to adult learners. In the background chapter, the characteristics of adult learners together with differences in teaching them in comparison to the young are explained as well as the theory necessary for further research. The most important part is dedicated to the role of adult learners' experiences and language learning expectations together with the difficulties they may meet while learning English. The theoretical part deals also with the communicative approach and especially with the teachers' and learners' roles in the process of teaching and learning the English language focusing on the differences between young and adult

Zhengdong Gan 2012

This paper reports the result of a study that aimed to identify the problems with oral English skills of ESL (English as a second language) students at a tertiary teacher training institution in Hong Kong. The study, by way of semi-structured interview, addresses the gap in our understanding of the difficulties ESL students encountered in their oral English development in the context of a Bachelor of Education (English Language) program. Insufficient opportunities to speak English in lectures and tutorials, lack of a focus on language improvement in the curriculum, and the input-poor environment for spoken communication in English outside class apparently contributed to a range of problems that closely related to the socio cultural, institutional and interpersonal contexts in which individual ESL students found themselves. The results of the study lead us to question the effectiveness of the knowledge- and pedagogy-based ESL teacher training curriculum. They also point to a need to incorporate a sufficiently intensive language improvement component in the current teacher preparation program.

Doan Linh Chi 2011

This study deals with Guidance for Learners' Improvement of Speaking Skills. Practice is considered an important part of language learning. Students are always encouraged to practice as much and as often as possible. However, some students do not know how to practice well and feel disappointed as practice does not always help them make much progress in their studies. Thus, as teachers, we should give them guidance on effective practice. This paper reports what and how guidance for practice should be provided for effective improvement of students' speaking skills. Encouraging preliminary results show that a set of appropriate activities to practice speaking and good management of group work can enhance students' speaking skills and increase their autonomy.

Magdalena Aleks and rzak 2011

The article deals with the problems of teaching and learning speaking, in particular those which are most relevant in the context of developing oral skills at the advanced level of foreign language

proficiency. The complex nature of spoken discourse must be taken into account and reflected at each stage of the learning process. Thus, the article examines the difficulties connected with choosing the appropriate framework and approach and discusses the typical patterns of interaction in the foreign language classroom. It also examines forms of control and evaluation and suggests some speaking activities which seem most suitable for advanced language learners in the light of the above theoretical considerations.

Dina A. Al-Jamal & Ghadeer A. Al-Jamal 2014

Since speaking well in English is crucial for English language literature undergraduates, the present study aimed at describing difficulties that may be encountered at an EFL setting. The sample was stratified random as drawn from six Jordanian public universities. Survey questionnaires as well as semi-structured interviews were reconstructed. 64 students were interviewed out of 566 students who responded to a survey questionnaire. The findings of the study exposed a perceived failure of EFL students' speaking skill in English was reported together with reasons that explain such perceived difficulty. The results of the study showed a 'low' speaking proficiency level among EFL undergraduates along with negligible instruction of the speaking skill at university courses' level. More highlighted difficulties by this study were as these of: communication in L1, large classes, and lack of time.

The use of English as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) in oral communication is, without a doubt, one of the most common but highly complex activities necessary to be considered when teaching the English language especially because we —live at a time where the ability to speak English fluently has become a must, especially who want to advance in certain fields of human endeavor (Al-Sibai, 2004, p.3). The focus of teaching speaking, of course, is to improve the oral production of the students. Therefore, language teaching activities in the classroom should aim at maximizing individual language use (Haozhang, 1997). In the past, oral communication instruction was neglected because of the misconception that oral communication competence develops naturally over time and that the cognitive skills involved in writing automatically transfer to analogous oral communication skills (Chaney, 1998). However, Ur (1996) considered speaking as the most important skill among four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) because people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language. This indicates that using a language is more important than just knowing about it because —there is no point knowing a lot about language if you can't use it (Scrivener, 2005, p.146). Oral Language Acquisition Oral language acquisition is a natural process for children. It occurs almost without effort. The ability to speak grows with age, but it does not mean that such growth will automatically lead to perfection.

General English courses for B.A/B.Sc./B.Com, students usually have sections on prose, poetry, drama, non-detailed texts and grammar. As in the English Major courses, the first four (i.e. prose, poetry, drama and non-detailed texts) are taught through lecture mode and tested through written examination, on the content of the prescribed textbooks. Grammar is restricted to the use of prepositions, passive and active

voices and direct and indirect speech - again in the written mode. The students are given exposure to general essay and precis writing. While reading and writing skill are minimally focussed on, the syllabuses do not give any importance to the listening and speaking skills. According to the CDC Report (1939: 17), the General English syllabuses, in general, do not take into account the learner's needs and interests.

The Special English course in most universities consists mainly of a list of literary texts (CDC Report, 1987:17) with the examination based on essays, short answers, definitions and seen and unseen passages for critical appreciation. In some universities (e.g. Andhra University, JNTUK), a communications skills component is included. Though the objectives include the development of "skills and abilities that may be necessary for their future academic and professional needs and interests" (CDC Report, 1989-91) there is no visible improvement in the communication skills of the students.

The Functional English course offered as an optional subject focuses specifically on the use of language for effective communication - written and oral. Among the twelve papers to be done in six semesters students are introduced to Phonetics (two papers) and Conversational English (three papers). Speaking skill has rightly been given a prominent place in the course, for it has been identified as the most important skill which fulfils the demands of the job market by potential employers and Functional English teachers (Kumar, 1997). In addition to these, there are also provisions for on-the-job training, project work and entrepreneurial development. Each paper focuses on a specific content area, having both theoretical and practical components. The functional English package thus, apparently attempts to bridge the gap created by the literature oriented English studies offered at the undergraduate level and the growing need for more function-oriented English courses.

The Functional English course being vocation-oriented, students are to be given training in the use of the English language for effective conversational, interpersonal and presentation skills. Irrespective of the syllabuses consulted, the FE students are expected to be able to speak English with a "high degree of confidence, accuracy and fluency in a wide range of life situations" (Prototype syllabus) by the end of the course. Practical training includes facing the camera and visits to the TV and radio stations to understand the various aspects of broadcasting. On-the-job training related to Spoken English is offered in announcing, news reading, giving commentary, teaching conversational skills and journalism.

A recent study (Singh, 1999) on the implementation of the Spoken English component of the Functional English course in five colleges in India shows that the teaching methodology offers scope for interaction among the students in the classroom. Students are given some opportunity to interact with each other and with the teacher during the class. As there are no compulsory prescribed textbooks, the teacher has the freedom to adapt teaching materials to suit the requirements of the students. Audio/radio programmes, reference materials, dictionary, newspaper clippings, maps, charts, diagrams, subject textbooks, teachers' notes and TV/ video programmes are the main teaching materials used. Ongoing internal assessment and final written and oral examination for the theoretical and practical component of

the speaking skill are also attempted in the colleges.

The teaching of Spoken English in the Functional English course has however been restricted to three aspects Phonetics, practice of English-in- situations and limited exposure to broadcasting, training students' phonetic through drill exercises for proper pronunciation of the consonants and vowels in English with intonation and accent. Teaching of Phonetics, which is offered as two papers of 100 marks each, emphasises on higher level of accuracy than fluency in speaking English. It is observed that the link up of Phonetics to vocation training has not been clearly established. The students are therefore unsure on how the exposure to the phonetics English can provide practical training for communication in the workplace.

The same problem emerges with the teaching of English in-situations also. Students are asked to write and read out the dialogues on topics recommended in the syllabus (eg at the post office, at the bank). Singh 1999 states the practice in conversational skills is limited to memorizing and reproducing these sample model dialogues, whenever particular topic is given. This indicates that the real communication skills are not developed through the task though the syllabus has provisions for fieldwork and visits to places which offer situations to practice conversational skills, it is yet to be effectively implemented in the colleges.

At present, the vocational aspect of the course has been compartmentalized to broadcasting training offered through three papers in the sixth semester. The 1999 study shows that the theoretical component is more focussed on, the practical training. Though there are various vocation training options in the syllabus, it is seen that the students' socio-economic background, motivation to join the course, interest in career options and the aptitude for training are not taken into account. Rather, all the students receive training in broadcasting, though only a small percentage may get employed in jobs related to it.

Another neglected area is entrepreneurial training especially for those students who have a flair for self-employment. The functional English syllabus content for entrepreneurial development again focuses more on "theoretical information" and "the issues related to starting one's own private enterprise (Revised RIE syllabus). While the exposure to these would create more awareness among the students and teachers of the course, further guidance needs to be given on the practical aspects of initiating an entrepreneurial venture, through minor project works and practical assignments.

These details on how Spoken English is taught through the vocational oriented Functional English course, can give us further insight into how the speaking skills can be taught to the undergraduate student, for employment purposes.

At the college level;

1. Need for more coordination among the teachers of English for integrated teaching of 'language' and

Literature.

2. Need for inter-departmental interaction between Arts, Science and Commerce departments in a college, to develop need based Spoken English courses, it will also enhance the quality of vocational training provided through the FE course.
3. Develop a common tasks and activities data bank within the English Department of a college that can be used by all teachers to develop the speaking skills in students.
4. Appointment of part-time lectures, local resource persons and experts for even distribution of workload in the English Department and for specialised teaching requirements.
5. Introduction of periodical review sessions between the University, the Principal of the college and the English teachers to assess how the English courses in general and the speaking skill in particular is being taught.
6. Encourage students' feedback on teacher performance, teaching methodology, teaching materials and examination system to improve the quality of Spoken English training offered to the undergraduates.

At the classroom level;

1. Role of the teacher to be of a facilitator who would encourage the students to do maximum-speaking with minimum communication stress.
2. Minimum correction of pronunciation and intonation, i.e. more, emphasis on fluency than accuracy is needed.
3. Training to be given on discourse management during long transactional turns and short interactional turns with genuine information gap between the speaker and the listener. In other words, more importance to be given on what the speaker means than what the word mean.
4. Speaking tasks should take into account the students reasons for learning spoken English, his/her culture identity and academic background.
5. Exposure of the students to authentic day-to-day conversations announcements, commentary, comparing news bulletin, radio/TV programmes for understand the art of speaking English and modifying as the conversation progresses.
6. Training needs to be given regarding how to modulate one's voice, for presentation of scripts, extempore speeches and conversation with others. A range of employment related language functions like greetings, making requests, enquiries, complaints, extending invitations, negotiating and persuading people etc. may be practiced. Special emphasis can also be given on the speaking skills and non-verbal gestures needed for business communications, appropriate and effective telephonic conversations and different types of interactions with clients and customers.
7. Testing should focus on the student's ability to communicate effectively in the spoken mode, with due credit given for accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, grammar and presentation. A continuous record of the student's performance in different occasions for different purposes can be useful to assess the student's overall development of the employment related speaking skills.

Conclusion

It was identified by the researchers that there are some students who are encountering several issues on

the skills Speaking and Listening when the research was undertaken. It was caused due to the dominance of their mother tongue Telugu language. Though, they had shown severe interest on English language and done many conversations on English language, they were unable to obtain the effective outcome in case of English language. Moreover, it is known that approximately 90% of the selected students had their schooling education in the medium of Telugu language. It clearly illustrates the influence of their mother tongue. At the same time there were no remarkable issues identified by the researchers in their English language writing skill and reading skill. Because, the selected students for the purpose of improving their English language, they use to provide importance to their target language, following private classes for enhancing the capacity of their English language, giving more importance to the grammatical part of English language, reading English books and writing articles in the medium of English. Therefore, issues were not detected in regards of these both Writing skill and Reading skill among the selected students.

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