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A Critical Evaluation of the Reasons for L2 Learners' Low Proficiency in English

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Abstract:

The study attempts a critical evaluation of the reasons for Low Proficiency in the case of L2 learners in an Engineering college where the author is working. It also analyses certain classroom practices and limitations of the present day teaching methodology. The advantages of the new approaches to language teaching are vividly explained with special emphasis on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which has its focus on the learners' use of the language in day to day situations. The need for integrating fluency and accuracy is highlighted. It also throws light on the significance of error analysis. Ultimately the learners have to use the target language effectively at work place and hence the study reveals the importance of effective communication at workplace and the transactional values of the basic skills in the business world. Learners should go beyond the text book and the classroom. It is suggested that learners should find out self-directed learning activities beyond the text book and outside the classroom. It is hoped that this study will be beneficial to learners and English language teachers.

Keywords: Communication, Competence, Interaction, Proficiency, Skills

1. Introduction and the Background of the Study

The study is conducted in a premier engineering college where the author has been working for a few years. The ambience of an engineering college depends on its academic performance and placement. Proficiency in communication skills matters most during campus recruitment. Smooth communication in English language is expected of every employable graduate and most candidates fall short of the expectations of the corporate. Learners do not practise effective communication though the language skills they have acquired are adequate to meet the requirements. Technical universities have introduced a special syllabus **Technical English** which includes preparation of project proposals and project reports, apart from the usual grammatical items. This syllabus is designed to equip the students for placement interviews. But the research study reveals that the teaching methodology adopted is more or less the same as what they had in secondary schools. What is required is a shift of the focus from the grammatical components to the communication properties of the language. (Widowson and Allen, 1971) "Needs cannot be met by a course which simply provides the composition of sentences, but only by one which develops a knowledge of how sentences are used in the performance of different communicative acts". Language learning objectives and the needs of the learner should pave the way for developing effective skills. Therefore, the present study makes an attempt to explore the causes for low proficiency in the L2 learners and suggests various remedial measures to cope up with the requirement of the learners.

2. Methodology

Methodology adopted in this study depends on the author's long experience in the field of English language teaching. Questionnaire, classroom interaction, structured and semi-structured interviews are administered to more than a hundred students in the first year engineering classes.

3. Causes for Low Proficiency in L2 Learners

3.1. Lack of Exposure to English

Lack of exposure to English is the main handicap for the rural L2 learner. English is taught in schools not with the end to enable the learner to pick up the language, but just to satisfy the condition of teaching a second language. Learners are made to memorize and reproduce the answers. Ultimately most of them don't pick up the nuances of the target language. They cannot speak or write effectively. If the medium of instruction at school level happens to be English, the learners have chances to listen to the language even

in subject classes and they pick up English to a certain extent, and their proficiency level in the language is comparatively satisfactory. Speaking skills of Students from city schools will be good as communication in spoken English is insisted on. Most of the rural students from regional medium are denied these chances and they realize the need to communicate in English only when they join a bachelor's course.

3.2. *Class Room Situation in Professional Colleges*

Even after they join the professional course, the classroom situation in the first year classes is not suitable for picking up language skills. These students are not streamlined according to their proficiency in English, but are grouped together as per the engineering branch they have opted for. One class may consist of students who have come from different streams (CBSE, Matriculation and State Board) and some of them may have had instruction in the regional medium at school level. No teacher will be able to cater to the needs of this heterogeneous group, and some students remain totally neglected and they fail to cope up with others. They think mastering communication skills is beyond their reach. This group is generally branded as unemployable.

3.3. *Absence of Learner – Centered Approach*

Teachers are not able to concentrate on all learners when a class has a strange assortment of students with various capabilities. Unless the teacher is very innovative, he or she won't be successful in managing the class. If the class is divided into two or three groups and each group is allotted a different task as per its capability, the learners will profit. Outstanding students comfortable with communication can be given topics for discussion or presentation and the teacher can concentrate on the rural students with low proficiency. This also is not very successful. When real learning takes place, the class will be noisy and many institutions do not put up with the noisy environment in class room. Moreover, three different groups within a class room can be managed only by an experienced teacher.

3.4. *L1 Interference*

Most learners approach a new language against the background of their mother tongue. Trying to find identity with the mother tongue or L1 is always not possible. Framing questions and question tags, transforming affirmative statements into negative or vice versa may be an easy task in L1, whereas it is a bit intricate in English (L2). But once the learner understands the intricacies, it becomes child's play. But the strategies need to be introduced through play way techniques.

4. **Limitations of the Present Day Teaching Methodology**

4.1. *Grammatical Items Taught in Isolation*

Most of the grammatical structures are taught in total isolation drawn away from situational application. For example, the grammar item, 'change of voice' is introduced without applying its practical relevance for communicative expression. As a result, learners do not understand for what purpose the item is taught. This problem can be solved by introducing the teaching item against practical situation. Some technical constructions are more effective when they are put in the passive, rather than active. Students should realize, though drilling is given in changing sentences from active to passive, the grammatical item is to help them construct better sentences in technical writing. For e.g., "Modifications have been effected in the design of the plant". "Desalination plants have been set up" These sentences convey the full meaning when structured in the passive. Communicative functions of the language and the communicative need should be kept in mind both by the teacher and the learner.

4.2. *Teacher as Dictator*

The language teacher plays a crucial role in L2 learning. In the present context in rural India, language teacher is the only available resource for the L2 learners. L2 learners hail from rural background with all its disadvantages. He does not read anything other than the prescribed text book. All the four skills of language learning are inoperative in the class environment. Hence the teacher's role is vital. Generally the teacher assumes to be dictator of the class. The teacher's attitude should undergo a transformation. The L2 learner becomes a parasite in the hands of the teacher. He is unable to make use of his own potentialities. In other words the teacher does not allow him to grow independently. In the words of prof. Z.N.Patil, "The Teachers are the tormentors instead of becoming their mentors. They torture the students with two convenient tools in their hands, 'the text and the test'. The prescribed texts are uninteresting and irrelevant. Tests are designed as if their purpose is to expose the ignorance of the students rather than to reveal what they know". Therefore it is high time the teachers changed their attitude towards teaching and learning. Parker J. Palmer points out in his book, "The courage To Teach" that the excitement of teaching is at its best when the minds and the spirits of the teacher and those of the students are mutually engaged in learning. In the class room, the teacher should be passionate in making the learners interactive. Teaching methodology moves from teacher –centered approach to learner- centered and to interactive approach. Activities based on fluency and accuracy must be introduced. Teaching should be enjoyable and learning must be a fun. "Teaching and learning are interdependent, not separate functions. Teachers are primarily learners...., Learning is not consumption .It is facilitative leadership" (Lieberman and Miller, 1990).

4.3. Absence of Interaction

Class room interaction plays a crucial role in language learning. Learning takes place best in a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere. It is the responsibility of the teacher and the taught to create a conducive environment for teaching-learning process. If language is taught in a vacuum it will be dull and monotonous. Teaching items must not be introduced in isolation. Contextualized description of an item brings out effective results. There is an interaction between teacher and learner in the beginning of the class and gradually the interaction extends to a higher plane where all learners take active participation among themselves. The language teacher is only a passive spectator-a facilitator. "The more the interaction, the more the participation of the learners". Language learning takes place at every interaction

5. Importance of Communicative Language Teaching

To tide over the present crisis, we should resort to communicative approach. In the words of D.A. Wilkins "linguistic forms provide a means to an end and that end is communication. Great concern should be given to seeing what is learnt has communicative value, and what has communicative value is learnt". Only on the foundation of grammatical competence of the learner, the super structure can be built. The need of the learner is to have greater communicative ability in the target language. Communicative language teaching aims at developing fluency. In the words of Dr. K.Karunakaran (Language India vol. 113.8. 2013 August), "It is not accuracy or Fluency but accuracy and fluency. In fact they are mutually influential accuracy brings fluency and fluency brings further accuracy. Accuracy and fluency are not contradictory but rather like two pillars that support the spiral stairs towards communicative competency." Task based activities to develop accuracy and fluency may be given to the L2 learners. All class room activities may be fluency based and accuracy based which will develop the communication competency ultimately.

6. Significance of Error Analysis

Error analysis is an integral part of language learning. Knowledge of a language and the ability to use it is acquired gradually through trial and error method. Both teachers and learners should convert all events in the class rooms into language practices. For example, students coming late to class are a regular feature even in higher classes. The teacher permits the students on condition that they should explain the reason in front of all students. Small events lead to big results. The learner gets an opportunity to communicate and he gains confidence in this language learning situation. Modern communicative approach advocates tolerance of errors on the part of L2 learners.(George Yule 1996)p.194. Traditional teachers insist on practicing error free communication. Even negligible errors are pointed out and teachers spend hours on pointing out errors in the use of tenses, parts of speech etc. The more recent acceptance of so many errors in learners' language is based on a fundamental shift in perspective from the more traditional view of how second languages are acquired. The conclusion is that an error is not something which hinders a student's progress but a clue to active learning. In a class room situation the teacher gets angry when the learners use 'Childrens' or 'womens'. For the rural learner plural is formed by adding "s". These types of mistakes may be tolerated for the sake of removing the frustration of the learner. There are a number of similar occasions and we should take care not to make a fuss about it. 'It is a long time since we met'. This sentence is grammatically inaccurate. It can be corrected; 'It has been a long time...'.we should make allowance for such mistakes. Similar is the statement 'what you do in the evenings'.

7. Effective Communication at Work Place

Communication skills are becoming increasingly important in today's workplace. As team work becomes more and more critical in workplace, communication skill will assume even greater importance. The ability to communicate effectively both orally and in writing will become more significant as advanced technologies have an impact on the quick transfer of messages at the work place.

Communication is one of the important skills; leaders should have on their list of competencies. 'Language plays a crucial role in creating a harmonious atmosphere at the workplace.' 'A work place is a typical community of practices with its own repertoire of resources including linguistic and discourse resources. Joining a new workplace entails learning how to use language to negotiate new meanings with new colleagues. Person to person Interaction is dynamic and language is a crucial resource in managing social relations at work. Effective communication skills in the workplace will improve your ability to be a strong leader. The learners of today are going to be employed in different capacities. The employers or the industries look for excellent communication skills in their prospective employees. So it is the duty of the language teachers to make their learners excel in all channels of communication which include verbal, non-verbal, face to face, telephonic, video conferencing and also written communication. One should remember that all written communication is open to interpretation. Written communication should be professional, precise, and clear. It should be free from grammatical errors and all steps should be taken to reduce miscommunication and maintain professional credibility. An e-mail letter or a memo may not be the best way to communicate critical information. Effective communication at workplace accelerates productivity.

English language has become very essential in the MNCs and at international levels where people speak different languages. English is the only language which can be used as a common language for people from different nationalities. The Times of India from Bangalore reports that the police personnel working at the International Airport, Bangalore started learning English. Spoken English classes were arranged for the police force for fifty days. They realized the need to learn the basic English skills. 'We need to communicate in English as thousands of foreigners use the airport daily. The language lessons are helpful building bridges not just on the roads but even at home...' (21stOctober 2014, Bangalore Edition).They say they are reaching out to their kids too. Dinner

conversation at the household has a different flavor these days. They are able to interact with their kids at home. Need based learning works wonders at the receiving end.

8. Suggestions for Achieving Proficiency in Communication Skills

Communicative related activities must be explored outside the class room in the campus. Learners are exposed to the target language only in the class room. This situation has to be changed. The learner should find out self-directed learning activities outside the class room. For example, those who are playing in the field should exchange verbal communication only in English. During the lunch break they should converse only in the target language. In the dining hall, at the canteen learners indulge in conversational 'small talks'. Language is used profusely at their convenience. For example, 'have you finished lunch? A number of questions arise while chatting with neighbors. Language learning takes place spontaneously.

Club activities provide ample opportunities to develop communication skills. A member of the Toast masters club displays his smattering of the language while making a welcome speech. He gains confidence as he continues to take initiative in debates and discussions. An L2 learner should write minimum ten sentences in the target language every day. He should watch the English channels in the television. Reading the news paper goes a long way in improving the communication skills.

9. Remedial Measures

If the Engineering students at the entry level are streamlined according to the proficiency in English the four skills (LSRW) can be imparted effectively. The teacher should be given absolute freedom to frame need based tasks which can slowly and steadily develop their skills and help the learners overcome their inhibitions in communication. The present syllabus which is exam oriented with various grammatical items can be done away with and three different levels of communicative English syllabus can be framed. Students with excellent communication can be left themselves after the first two semesters without the supervisions of teachers. Club activities can groom them further. Students with low proficiency can be given intensive training in all the four skills throughout the four year tenure so that when they graduate they too will be capable of handling the language with reasonable efficiency.

A shift of focus from the traditional grammar teaching to communicative English should be initiated in a big way. Regular use of spoken English in campuses should be insisted. Teaching method should be learner centric and the teacher should move away from the traditional posture of the presiding deity of the class room.

10. Findings and Conclusions

The causes for low proficiency have been brought out through questionnaire analysis, learners' conversational analysis and unstructured interviews. The learners expressed their learning difficulties in achieving oral English fluency. They confessed that their exposure to English language was inadequate. Only a small percentage of students were interested in developing proficiency in the language. The majority of them did not have a clear-cut vision or goal as far as the need of learning English was concerned. Learners who attained considerable proficiency were of the opinion that they were not sufficiently motivated by their teachers.

The present study has discussed in detail the significance of effective communication at work place. The study has pointed out the teachers' crucial role in promoting effective interaction in the class room. The teachers should be committed and passionate about equipping the learners for the changing work place. The need of the hour is the overhauling the teaching methodology. The teaching of English should be in line with globalization and work place demands. The low level of English proficiency will undermine the other skills of the learners. After spending four years of learning in an engineering college the learners are required to attain the required level of language proficiency. Suggestions and remedial measures have been given to improve the proficiency. One should not wait for the prospective employer to give him re-skilling and re-training. To sum up, the present study is highly profitable and rewarding.

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