

Teaching English as A Second Language: Factors Affecting Learning Speaking Skills

Dr. B. Madhavi Latha

M.A, Ph.D, CELTA.

Associate Professor of English

St. Ann's College of Engineering &Technology, Chirala,

A. P- 523187, India

PETTELA RAMESH

M.A, M.Phil, NELTS

Assistant Professor of English

St. Ann's College of Engineering &Technology, Chirala,

A. P- 523187, India

ABSTRACT:

*In today's globalized world, the language used most often is English. English has become the **lingua franca** for communication, business, education and opportunity in general. English occupies a place of prestige in our country. Even after decades of colonial rule, no indigenous language has come up to replace English, either as a medium of communication or as an official language.*

India is a multi-lingual country where people speak more than 350 languages and dialects. Indians are used to a particular pattern of pronunciation, intonation, stress and phonology of their mother tongue, when they start learning English language with its own set of patterns and rules, the confusion begins. This results in the problems in teaching and learning process of English language.

Moreover, lack of proper official data regarding how many people speak English, the proficiency levels of Indian teachers and learners leads to the difficulties in planning and implementing development in English language and its teaching and learning process. This paper makes an attempt in identifying the factors affecting learning speaking skills and outlines feasible solutions.

Key words: Language acquisition, communication process, four skills, speaking, central, complex, factors affecting.

Introduction:

In today's globalized world the language used most often is English. English has become the **Lingua Franca** for communication, business, education and opportunity in general. Economic and technological factors played their part in keeping English at the centre of communication.

According to Geetha Nagaraj: "English language learning was an effort directed at reaching as close an approximation of the native speaker model as possible"¹. English occupies a place of prestige in our country. Even after decades of colonial rule, no indigenous language has come up to replace English either as a medium of communication or as official language. The main incentives driving the momentum of learning English language in India are:

Education- Demand for English medium schools is on the rise, more learners have access to higher education, and vocational training programs are increasingly including English language classes in their curriculum.

Employment- People in India need to be proficient in English for employability and sustenance in their work places.

Social Mobility- People perceive English to be useful both for geographical mobility within the multi-lingual country for reaching the middle class.

India is a multi-lingual country where people speak more than 350 languages and dialects. Indians are used to a particular pattern of pronunciation, Intonation, stress and phonology of their mother tongue. When they start learning English language with its own set of patterns and rules, the confusion begins resulting in the problems in teaching and learning process of English language.

According to Jack C Richards and Willy A. Renandya; “A large percentage of the world’s language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking. The ability to speak a second or foreign language well is a very complex task if we understand the nature of what appears to be involved”². The number of people who can speak and write English as intelligibly and correctly as native speakers of the language do is receding day by day. The moment people hear something in English, they feel uneasy. They also find difficulty in listening and understanding English Language. As a result, teachers handling English classes face a lot of difficulties. Moreover, lack of proper official data regarding how many people speak English, the proficiency levels of Indian teachers and learners lead to the difficulties in planning and implementing development in English Language and its teaching process. Language has been divided into four main skills namely, Listening, Speaking, reading and writing. These four skills are further classified into two categories – Receptive skills and productive skills.

According to Mary Spratt, Alan Pulverness and Melanie Williams: “Speaking is a productive skill, like writing. It involves using speech to express meanings to other people”³. We learn a language, native or foreign, for communicative purposes. People speak to maintain existing social relationships and to make new ones. They also speak to pool and exchange information and also ease the performance of transactions. So, there is a growing need in the modern world for people to communicate effectively through the medium of speech. Speaking is used for many different purposes and each purpose involves different skills. Each of these different purposes for speaking implies knowledge of the rules that account for how spoken language reflects the context or situation in which the speech occurs.

Elaine Tarone rightly opines that: “It is one of the traditional ‘four skills’ involved in using a second language, and as such is usually viewed as the most complex and difficult skill to master”⁴. Speaking, like any language has to be learnt and practiced. People believe that speaking skills can be developed by giving a few topics to discuss or by making the learners talk on certain topics. Proper attention is not given to the factors that inhibit or facilitate speaking.

Kang Shumin says: “Learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules”⁵. And according to Geetha Nagaraj: “The objective in any language classroom is to get the learners to learn the target language and use it, which is done best when they are involved actively in the learning process”⁶. Learning to speak a language is very difficult task for second/foreign language learners because it requires the ability to use the language properly in social interactions. Kang Shumin opines that: “Learners must also acquire knowledge of how native speakers use the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange, in which many factors interact”⁷. Speaking activities can fail miserably due to some very real problems in ESL class. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the factors affecting oral communication, components underling speaking proficiency and specific skills or strategies in communication. Some of the learner centered factors affecting their speaking skills are discussed herewith.

Learner inhibition:

The most common problem encountered by the learner in the language acquisition process is learner inhibition. Speaking activities require a learner to have all eyes on him; Exposure to an audience can often give learners stage fright. They may also be worried about making mistakes, being criticized or losing face in front of the rest of the class. This results in their performance where either they make a lot of mistakes in spite of having a very good knowledge in the area or totally keeping silent.

Lack of motivation:

Lower motivation levels or lack of motivation is another reason for hindering the learners from active participation in speaking activities. It leads to reluctance in active participation in the speaking activities leading to poor practice or no practice at all.

Lack of subject matter:

Another common problem seen in the learners is that they think that they have nothing to say on a particular topic. In reality, they may be bored or feel that the topic is unrelated to anything they know. If this is the case, they will have no motivation to speak other than the fact that they should be participating in it actively.

Lack of proper vocabulary:

Next problem encountered with ESL learners is that they often have to search for an appropriate word. They don't find one to fit into the context/content. This is because of lack of exposure to a variety of vocabulary. This also leads to failing in communicating fluently in English Language, which again leads to losing confidence and lack of motivation to speak. As a result learners make an excessive overuse of fillers in their speech and conversation or give incomplete statements.

Lack of confidence:

A constant practice and patience are necessary to learn English Language. Learners believe that it is not possible to achieve fluency or master the language. This lack of confidence prevents them from learning the speaking skills.

Improper listening skills:

The central role of listening comprehension in the second/foreign language acquisition process is now largely accepted. Listening plays an extremely important role in the development of speaking abilities. Usually, one person speaks and the other responds through attending by means of the listening process. In fact, during interaction, every speaker plays a dual role- both as a listener and a speaker. If one cannot understand what is said, one is certainly unable to respond. So, speaking is closely interwoven with listening skills.

Poor non-verbal communication:

Oral communication involves a very powerful non-verbal communication system, which sometimes contradicts the messages provided through the verbal listening channel. Lack of knowledge of the nonverbal communication system of the target language usually results in the inability to pick up non verbal cues by the ESL learners, which often results in mis understanding.

Anxiety:

Speaking a Second/Foreign language in public, especially in front of native speakers often leads to anxiety. Sometimes, extreme anxiety results in the learners being tongue-tied or lost for words in an unexpected situation leading to discouragement and a general sense of failure in the learners. Unlike children, adults are very cautious about making errors in what ever they say. For them making errors would be a public display of ignorance which would be an obvious occasion of losing face. This is one of the major factors for the inability to speak in English.

Strong and quick learners domination in the class:

A large and mixed ability class is another factor affecting the language acquisition process. In these classes we have both strong and weak learners, where the strong and quick learners are often seen to be dominating and overtaking the slow and weak learners. The weak learners don't get opportunity in the presence of the strong ones, which results in the shrinking of the weak learners.

Family background:

The environment and family background plays a vital role in the learning process. In a country like India majority of the people are farmers with poor educational background. Learners coming from such background when asked to take part or do a speaking activity they fail to do it. Moreover, the poor income status of the family makes the parents engage their children in petty jobs instead of sending them to schools and colleges resulting in poor speaking skills.

Rural background:

Rural background of the learners where English is generally not used is another cause affecting the leaning process. Most of the learners coming from rural background are first generation learners of English Language. Their parents being farmers and uneducated, they lack guidance from their elders in this aspect. When learners of such background are asked to do a speaking activity, they end up in saying nothing. Even if they try to speak, they often tend to use their mother tongue, resulting in the failure of the learning process.

Excessive use of mother-tongue:

Learners generally tend to make an excessive use of their mother-tongue when it comes to the activities in productive skills namely- speaking and writing. When the learners are asked to perform a speaking activity, they immediately start thinking about the topic in their mother tongue, frame what they want to say in their mother-tongue and then translate it into English, which often results in mistakes, in addition to this learners often tend to make use of their mother-tongue which results in losing the motive of learning the language and lack of practice.

Lack of proper orientation:

Even though some learners have learnt the language at their school levels, they are unable to produce even a single sentence without grammatical error. The basic reason for this is , learning the subjects from the examination point of view. The learners, their parents as well as the teachers lay more stress on the group/core subjects and very less importance is given to English language. This attitude makes the learner ignore the language.

In order to convey meaning, the learners must have the knowledge of words and sentences. They must understand how words are segmented into various sounds, how sentences are stressed in particular ways. Grammatical competence enables speakers to use and understand the structure of English-language accurately and unhesitatingly, which contributes to their fluency. According to Mary Spratt, Alan Pulverness and Melanie Williams: “We can develop learners speaking skills by focusing regularly on particular aspects of speaking e.g.-fluency, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, body language”⁸.

Indian phonology

The phonological system of Indian languages and English differ in important aspects notably in the prominence given to distinctions between vowels and distinctions between consonants. While English has 22 vowel phonemes and diphthongs and 24 consonants, Hindi has only ten vowels phonemes but distinguishes over 30 consonants. The pronunciation of long and short vowels often creates confusion to learners. The consonant cluster is another cause of confusion for the learners. T .R. Kansakar opines that: “A non-native learner has problems in pronouncing certain vowel and consonant sounds of English accurately because these sounds do not occur in the mother tongue”⁹.

Mother-tongue pattern and its influence:

Indians are used to a particular set of pattern of pronunciation, Intonation, stress-pattern and phonology of their mother-tongue which has an obvious impact on acquiring a foreign language.

The changes in the patterns used in English and that of their mother-tongue often create confusion in the learners. They have to unlearn what they learnt in their mother-tongue and then acquire a second language. This influence of mother-tongue often becomes a major hurdle in the learning process.

These are a few problems encountered by the learners in the process of second/foreign language acquisition. These problems can be resolved to a greater extent by following a few remedies mentioned herein:

Certified/qualified and competent teachers:

Special attention must be paid to ensure that the Language Teachers have a very good command of English Language. They must be well qualified and certified. It is necessary to upgrade themselves and keep competent for which it is necessary to continue their research activities by participating in seminars/conferences and workshops. Presenting papers and publishing articles would enable them to keep abreast with the recent trends.

Building rapport:

Building rapport and good relation with the learners is essential to make the learning atmosphere friendly. The learning process becomes easy and effective in a friendly atmosphere which also strengthens the bond between the learner and teacher. This will make the learners feel free and express their views and enable to shed their shyness and inhibitions.

Building confidence:

The next important aspect is to build confidence in the learners. Once the teacher establishes a good rapport with the learners, it is important to build their confidence. This can be done by starting with simple and easy tasks. This will encourage the slow learners to participate in the activity and boost their morale. Gradually increasing the difficulty level will sharpen their knowledge thereby improving the learners. Minimizing teacher talk time and maximizing learner talk time will also encourage the learners. Instead of correcting the mistakes, the teacher can go for peer correction which would encourage them to come out of inhibition. The teacher should be a guide, mentor and facilitator.

Improved teaching facilities:

The teacher should ensure to get proper teaching aids and facilities which include- proper space, books and teaching aid. This would create a proper learning ambiance for the learner. When the learners get proper learning facilities and ambiance, their learning process will be effective and speedy.

Utilizing different methods of teaching:

It is essential that the teacher adopts different methods of teaching to suit the diverse needs of the learners. There are numerous methods of teaching language like- audio-lingual method, translation method, direct method etc. It is necessary to tailor the teaching method according to the diverse needs and styles of the learners. It must be a catchy and interesting method which would keep the learners involved and motivated so that they use in their real-life situations.

Desire to make the acquisition of a second/foreign language as effective and efficient as possible is the one common aim of the numerous theories and approaches of language teaching. One such approach of teaching English Language is *task-based approach*, wherein the learners have to actively engage in the process of acquiring the language in order to achieve a goal or complete a given task. Tasks can easily be related to learner's real-life language. They create contexts that facilitate second/foreign language acquisition and focus on form. Learners are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation in a task-based approach. This enables the teacher to see the progress in the learner's ability to communicate in English.

According to Mary Spratt, Alan Pulverness and Melanie Williams: "Tasks and less controlled practice activities give more opportunity than controlled activities for learners to practice, communicate, interaction and fluency" 10. One of the major benefits of this approach is that it is learner-centered. Unlike other traditional approaches, here the learner performs the task and takes an active part while the teacher happens to be a guide, mentor and

facilitator and correct the mistakes when needed, thereby remaining passive. This approach, when used in teaching speaking skills enables in minimizing teacher talk time and maximizing learner talk time, resulting in the progress in learners speaking skills.

As said by Sarah Philpot: “Learners learn better when they are engaged, relaxed and having fun” 11. The task-based approach makes the learners engaged, relaxed and as they get involved into the task/activity, they derive fun out of it. Thus the entire learning process becomes enjoyable and efficient.

These are a few problems and remedies of learning English language as a second/foreign language. There are many more factors pertaining to phonological, grammatical and other linguistic aspects which create a lot of problems in the process of language acquisition. Following a proper teaching strategy in the class would resolve many problems.

According to Jon Taylor: “Learning necessarily takes place through trial and error:: students need therefore, plenty of opportunity for such trial”12. Speaking is one of the central elements of communication. Effective instruction derived from the careful analysis of this area, efficient language input and speech –promotion activities, which will enable chances to speak English fluently and appropriately. Teaching English as a second/foreign language can be fun if it is done in the right way. According to Peter Watkins “Teachers need to provide a variety of speaking activities to reflect the variety of speaking activities learners will engage in real life”13.

CONCLUSION: To conclude-the process of acquiring the second /foreign language can be effective when both the learner and the teacher are involved in the process and derive fun out of it. This is the only way to keep the motivation and interest levels high. When this is achieved all the problems of teaching and learning get resolved and better results are attained.

REFERENCES:

1. Geetha Nagaraj: “*English in the world*”, **English Language Teaching: Approaches, Methods, Techniques**. Orient Longman private limited, 2008:1
2. “*Teaching Speaking*”, Jack C. Richards, Willy A. Renandya. Ed **Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of. current practice** CUP, 2002: 2.
3. “*Speaking*”, **The TKT Course**, CUP, 2005. Mary Spratt, Alan Pulverness and Melanie Williams: ed CUP, 2005: 34.
4. Elaine Tarone: “*Speaking in a Second Language*”- **Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning**, Lawrence Erlbaum Association, Inc, Published, Edited by Eli Hinkel ed. , 2005 . : 486.
5. Kang Shumin, “*Factors to consider: Developing Adult EFL Students’ Speaking Abilities*”, Jack C. Richards, Willy A. Renandya. Ed **Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of. current practice** CUP, 2002 : 204.
6. Geetha Nagaraj: “*English in the world*”, **English Language Teaching: Approaches, Methods, Techniques**. Orient Longman private limited, 2008: 105.
7. Kang Shumin, “*Factors to consider: Developing Adult EFL Students’ Speaking Abilities*”, Jack C. Richards, Willy A. Renandya. Ed **Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of. Current practice** CUP, 2002 : 204.
8. *Speaking*”, **The TKT Course**, Mary Spratt, Alan Pulverness and Melanie Williams ed. CUP, 2005: 35
9. T.R.Kansakar: “*Mother tongue influence on spoken English*”, **A Course in English Phonetics**, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 1998: 98.
10. *Speaking*”, **The TKT Course**, Mary Spratt, Alan Pulverness and Melanie Williams CUP, 2005 ed. : 35.
11. Sarah Philpot: **Building Blocks for English: Activities to develop study skills in young learners**, “*Introduction*”, Viva books private limited. 2007: 4.
12. Jon Taylor: *Introduction: The road to efficiency*., **The Minimax Teacher**, Viva books private limited, 2007: 7.
13. Peter Watkins: “*Developing Speaking Skills*”, **Learning to Teach English: A Practical Introduction for New Teachers**. Viva books private limited, 2007 80.