Freedom of Error and Peer Support in the ESL Classroom to Lessen Language Anxiety

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Abstract

If new entrants to the university have less competency in the English language, they find it challenging to follow degree programmes in the English medium. Students of the beginners' level classes at ELTU are reluctant to express themselves when they are not supported through the use of their first language (L1). Research indicates that English as a Second Language (ESL) students have an alarmingly high dropout rate in language acquisition in many countries (DelliCarpini, 2008). The reasons vary from personal dislike towards lessons to less competency which discourage them to continue learning ESL. This means that the lecturers must be able not only to teach the syllabus, but also to make the concepts and content comprehensible and interesting to ESL learners in their classrooms. The ESL lecturers should also help the ESL learners with low proficiency to reduce their language anxiety. In this opinion-based study, the research question is if university ESL courses are effective in reducing the language anxiety of ESL learners whose degree programmes are been conducted only in the English medium. In gathering data, 84 first year students of the Faculty of Commerce and Management representing the beginners' level classes in the English for Professional Purposes course were given questionnaires. Furthermore, unstructured individual and group interviews of students were conducted. The majority of students had identified improvement in the second language (L2) as a result of pedagogical approaches allowing language freedom and peer support practised in the classroom. Thus, this study is significant in encouraging the ESL teachers for low proficiency students not to be strict with the correct use of language aspects such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation for it is the language anxiety that slows down the language acquisition of these students.

Key words: *Efficacy, ELTU course, Less performers, L2 Requirements*

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(1) Introduction and Literature Review.

1.1. Language Anxiety Reasoning Low Proficiency.

If new entrants to the university have less competency in the English language, they find it challenging to follow degree programmes in the English medium. Students of the beginners' level classes at ELTU are reluctant to express themselves when they are not supported through the use of their first language (L1). This hesitancy can be seen even when questions are explained using short sentences and simple vocabulary in English. The reason may be fear to respond due to the feeling of having misunderstood the English language. Research indicates that English as a Second Language (ESL) students have an alarmingly high dropout rate in language acquisition in many countries (DelliCarpini, 2008). The reasons vary from personal dislike towards lessons to less competency. Less competency leading to language anxiety causes discontinuing ESL learning. This means that the lecturers must be able not only to teach the syllabus, but also to make the concepts and content comprehensible and interesting to ESL learners in their classrooms. The ESL lecturers should also help the ESL learners with low proficiency to reduce their language anxiety.

1.2 Peer Support within the Classroom as a Solution.

According to some research discussions, learning environment with variety of backgrounds, different philosophies of education and approaches to pedagogical practice can be effective in producing changes in beliefs and practices and increases the possibility of goals of student academic improvement will be met (Dellicarpini,2008). Moreover, this kind of background allows teachers to be leaders and reflective practitioners as their teaching can influence positively or negatively on ESL learners. Enlightened by this possibility within the classroom, the researcher being a Second Language (L2) teacher attempted to lessen the language anxiety seen in low proficiency classrooms by allowing more peer support during the lessons.

Another factor proved by a study is that students from racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse families and communities of lower socio-economic status tend to

perform less in language acquisition (Saravia-shore, 2008). In this regard, the researcher was encouraged to form diverse groups among students allowing them to communicate with each other in order to understand their psycho-social requirements. Formation of groups, through number counting or depending on some other factor, was maintained in the classrooms of which the students participated in the research. In the beginning of the year, students showed less interaction with each other. Continuous interaction during learning, which is one of the changes from other subject lectures, let the students feel comfortable to engage in activities in peer groups.

1.3 Service-Learning Helps Personal Development

Researcher's this experience of students interacting with peers during group activities in ESL classroom encouraged to find out the impact that team work can create in reducing language anxiety. A study referred had investigated characteristics of service-learning experiences on the cognitive, moral and ego-identity development of undergraduates (Batchelder and Root,1994).

Another study refers to language learning in a classroom as gradual changes in language use that are accomplished through participation in collaborative work (Hanna, 2013). Students may tend to use L2 institutional work and L1 as the language reserved for interaction. These studies throw light on the researcher's attempt of practising peer-support within the classroom as a step of service-learning towards colleagues. This practise is carried out while catering to lessen students' language anxiety through a communicative approach in teaching.

(2) Aim of the Study

In this opinion based study, the research question is if university ESL courses are effective in reducing the language anxiety of ESL learners with low proficiency whose degree programmes are been conducted only in the English medium. Students' perception of the effectiveness of the ESL course was sought in understanding their improvement or failure in language acquisition. This methodology is based on the assumption that the students would agree on their improvement of language acquisition if they liked the learning environment and pedagogical approaches applied in the classroom allowing them to lessen language anxiety. Their dislike towards the course would mean that the learning environment and

pedagogical approaches applied in the classroom did not create efficacy in decreasing the language anxiety which causes less performance.

(3) Methodology

3.1 First-Phase of Observation

The participants follow a one year course spending four hours each week at the ELTU. During the first two months of the first semester, the researcher observed a gradual improvement of students' interaction among themselves. Comparing these proficiency-level based classes to mixed-classes following the same number of hours held in 2014, the study was developed to know whether the same language proficiency of beginners' level students encourages them for more interaction with peers while getting rid of language anxiety. Thus, this observational phase guided to an opinion-based phase by the time of students' completion of the course.

3.2 Target Group

In gathering data, 84 first year students of the Faculty of Commerce and Management following the English for Professional Purposes course were given questionnaires. These students represent different departments of the Faculty of Commerce and Management. This faculty is the only faculty, first year students of which have to complete a one year course from the ELTU covering four hours a week. The course is carried out in proficiency-based classes and the students who participated in this study represent the beginners' level classes out of Advanced, Intermediate and Beginners. Students of all the classes of the course follow the same syllabus and the lecturers carry out the activities in a student-centred learning environment with more student group work than individual tasks.

3.3 Focus on Language Improvement

Group work targeted creating a learner friendly background in which they are encouraged to participate in activities. Students were allowed and even encouraged to make language errors in terms of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary when some students hesitated to express themselves. This encouragement was applied to make sure that language anxiety does not occur for students hesitate to present in a second language for the fear of making errors in that language. Students were also allowed to use the first language if needed, and the peers in the group had to support the speaker with expressions of English.

3.4 Questionnaires and Interviews of Feedback

Questions included the students' feedback towards the class formation, curriculum and teaching methods. Self-evaluation of students' L2 competency before starting the course and after completing the course was also sought. Furthermore, unstructured individual and group interviews of students were conducted. Student feedback also questioned whether the proficiency-based classroom system enabled them to get rid of language anxiety. Negative findings to this question were expected to prove that language anxiety cannot be simply extinguished by language freedom and peer support created in the classroom.

(4) Main Findings
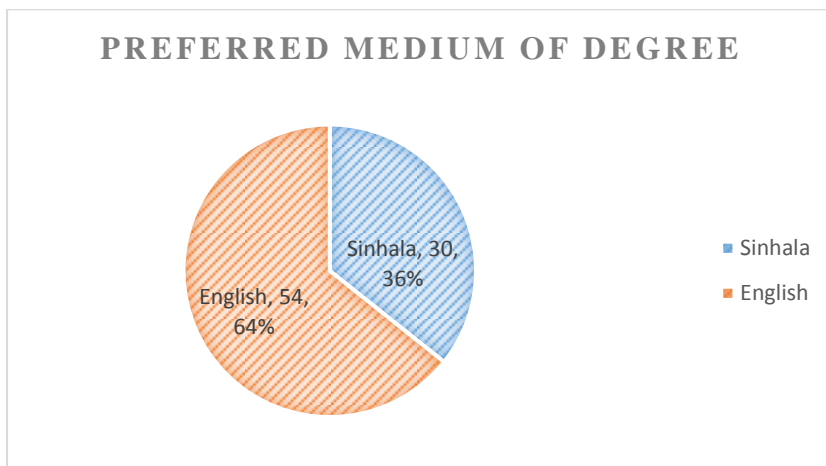
4.1 English Medium Preferred

Figure 01

Out of the 84 participants, 04 which is 4% mentioned that they carry out the degree in the English medium while 67 which is 80% mentioned that they carry out the degree with difficulty. 14 which is 16% were worried of getting low grades at exams and they mentioned the lack of English teachers at school as the reason for low proficiency in L2. Yet, as the figure 01 shows the majority had mentioned that they would choose the English medium for the degree if they were given to choose the medium. There were no students who wanted to follow it in the Tamil medium.
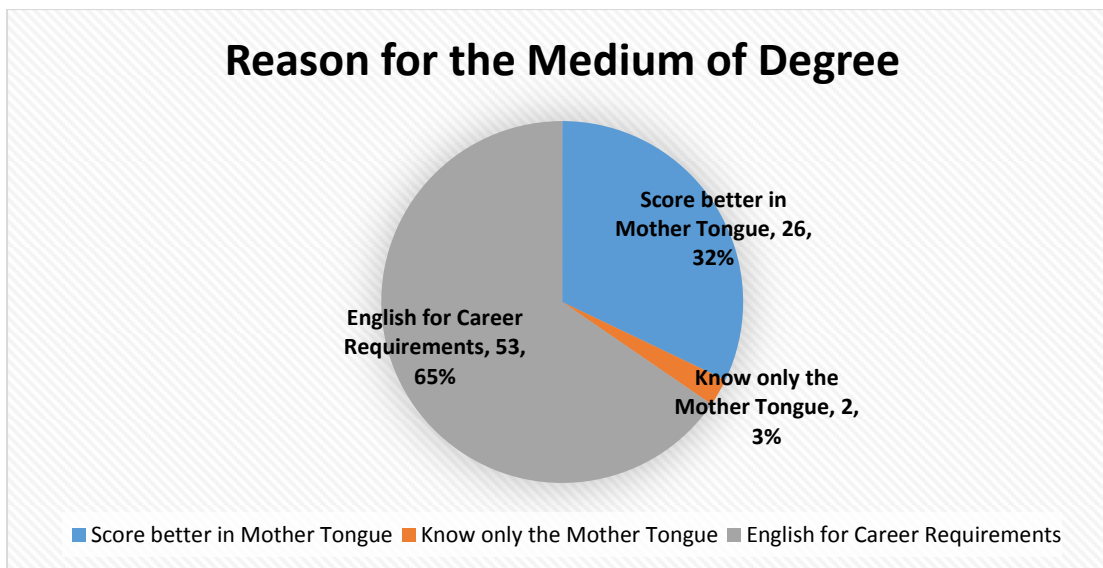
Figure 02

As the Figure 02 shows, students who wished choose the Sinhala medium had the reasons of scoring more and understanding only the L2. While the majority still preferred the English medium due to career requirements, some students had mentioned that they would also prefer the English medium if they understood English. These reasons highlighted the fact that the majority of the participants were interested in improving L2 which also suggests their attempt in taking part in activities carried out in the class.

4.2 Confidence in L2 after the Course

Self-evaluation of L2 competency before the course had given the remarks with 0% of participants as 'High', 65% as 'Average' and '35% as 'Low' which after the course remarked with 15% of participants as 'High', 75% as 'Average' and 10% as 'Low'. This evaluation of students showed an improvement in confidence in L2. This also suggested decrease in language anxiety which at earlier stages discouraged them to perform in L2. 52 students which is a 62% of participants had mentioned that they would still attend lectures regularly if attendance was not considered for their course, while 32 which is a 38% had mentioned that they would not attend lectures regularly if attendance was not considered.

In knowing the reasons behind their answers, 70% participants identified the course content as interesting and comprehensible while a 20% had mentioned the contrary. As an 85% of majority had accepted the course as relevant while a 5% had mentioned the contrary, a minority whose L2 needs were not met could be recognized.

4.3 Presentation Skills Lessening Language Anxiety

Being with same competency peers was liked by a majority which is 81 and the support through L1 in the class was liked by 79 participants. Knowing that the majority of students responded the class formation and pedagogical approaches in the classroom, next to know was the reasons behind their ranking of less language anxiety after the course.
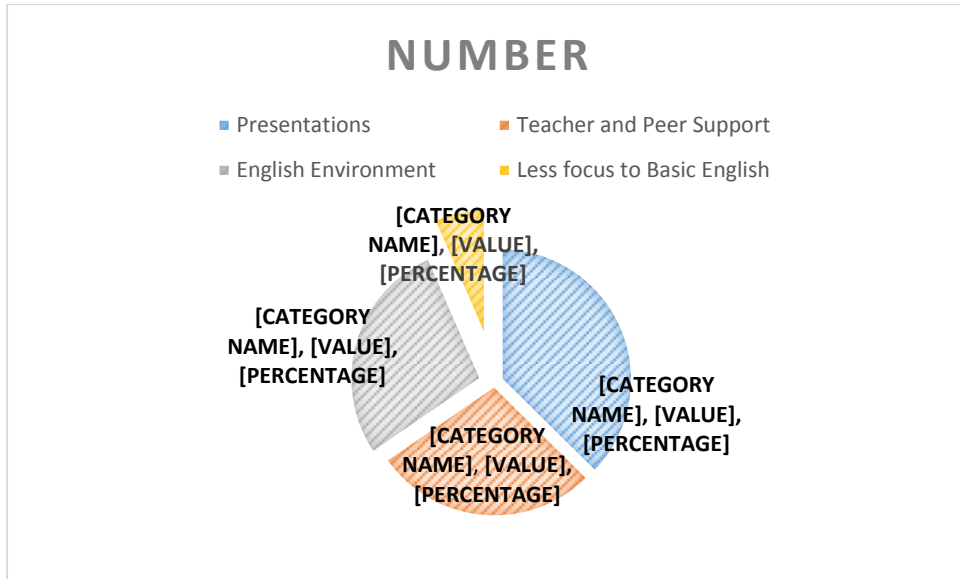

Figure 03

As the figure 03 shows, Presentation activities creating an English environment within the classroom improved through team work and the guidance of the teacher had helped to gradually decrease language anxiety in the students. Interesting activities like discussing videos, activities linking to cooperate sector knowledge, appreciation and feedback for participating in activities had encouraged the students to improve the competency in L2 while getting rid of the fear towards making errors in English. A few students had mentioned that less attention was paid to English grammar.

5. Recommendations

Among the student recommendations were more active tasks such as field trips and etiquette learning, less hours with more diversity including more grammar, relevant vocabulary and writing as well as more lenience with attendance. Interviews also proved that they consider the ESL course as a strong support to improve their L2 competency. This study recommends a maximum of two hours of lectures to be conducted at a stretch for only the students from four hours a day classes had insisted on need of less hours. Four hours covered

within two days with the same pedagogical approaches would help the students to get rid of language anxiety and be fluent in L2 while achieving higher grades at other exams and communicating with outer communities as well.

6. Conclusion.

The study found out that ELT classroom provides first year undergraduates a learner friendly environment amidst challenging subject content and learning method of their degree programme. The encouragement of interaction among teacher-students and student-student could be identified as a supporting factor to language acquisition. This interaction among students encouraged them to help peers, and decrease language anxiety. A majority which is 81 out of 84 participants liked the encouragement to participate created within the same proficiency classroom where freedom was given to use L1 when they found difficulty in communicating in L2. Thus, this study is significant in encouraging the ESL teachers for low proficiency students not to be strict with the correct use of language aspects such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation for it is the language anxiety that slows down the language acquisition of these students.

Key words: *Efficacy, ELTU course, Less performers, L2 Requirements*

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