Promotion of speaking skills in language classes: a strategy tried out in the Department of Library and Information Science, University of Kelaniya, and tested at the Institute of Human Resource Advancement (IHRA), of University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The objective of this presentation is to state briefly a solution the investigator identified through a research for a complicated pedagogical issue evident in English L2 classes in Sri Lanka. Students' reluctance to take part in oral activities done in these classes is an impediment that obstructs above speech activities. Language teachers in general define this as a result of students' low grammar proficiency. Some attribute the problem, to students' indifference towards English speech. Yet, the above research identified lack of confidence on the part of students to speak English through fear of errors and vindictive peer reaction as most threatening drawbacks that hinder speech, scoring the highest mean values: 2-62025316 and 2.6, respectively. Grammar related difficulties turned out to be less relevant. Apart from questionnaire No 1, on the basis of which the above facts were gathered, two other questionnaires were administered. The most important information solicited from questionnaire No 2 administered to respondents domiciled abroad was, examining whether English Language errors were ridiculed in those territories. None of the countries was afflicted with that issue, according to data. Third questionnaire given to 18 second language teachers inquired whether error phobia and vindictive peer reaction impeded work in their classes. examined, except English experienced error phobia and vindictive peer reaction from the point of view of the teachers consulted. As was evident from above data fear of English errors was a phenomenon specific to Sri Lanka

As such instead of seeking solutions to that issue from foreign counties where the issue was non-existent, finding a remedy for it locally was felt to be a prudent step. Initial steps necessary in that connection were: proving the hollowness of error phobia related to English and also convincing the students that error occurrence is an inevitable phase during language mastery; not necessarily in respect of second languages but with regard to first languages as well. Major task out of these two being the first one, above research focused more attention on that aspect and in view of that this presentation predominantly discusses data related to that task.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics, Language errors, Peer reaction, Spoken English, Stigma, Syntax

Introduction

All four segments of a Second Language are difficult for mastery. Yet in respect of English, the component that poses the most number of impediments is speech due primarily to a psychological factor. Technical issues emerging often as a result of language discrepancies mislead the learner further, making speech more arduous. A Sinhala learner can inquire about both actions and states using a single syntactic form. Therefore, he can ask: "Does the bus stop here?" to inquire about an action. He tends to use the same pattern: "Does the bus full?" to check a state related to the bus. This is responsible for the relatively simple grammar format; namely in flexional ending pattern Sinhala learners use to formulate interrogatives. There are numerous other linguistic drawbacks that disorient Sinhala learners mastering English. The limited time available for one to respond to an oral question too makes speech still difficult. This however is not a major problem to L1 learners mastering English and other learners trying to acquire languages other than English for they tend to use whatever language they have at their

disposal to put across their message. Second language learners of English remain silent if they cannot speak perfect English because of the stigma attached to erroneous English. People proficient in English are considered as an educated, wealthy, intelligent and socially powerful set of beings in Sri Lanka. Yet to claim this status one's English should be perfectly accurate. Proficiency levels below this norm are treated as erroneous English and positive qualities associated with English proficiency are denied to those who use substandard English that abounds with errors, reducing them to virtual nonentities in society. Speech being the language skill where the learner is most susceptible to make errors, L2 learners of English refrain from speaking English to avoid the stigma attached to errors in Sri Lanka.

Problem Statement

Speaking ability is specifically important to library science undergraduates. To make course related oral presentations in English they need speech. First-hand information related to the discipline – a vital segment woven into the library science degree syllabus - has to be gleaned from both state and private institutions. To deal with the latter, English is a must. On completion of the degree, these students have to seek a career in the open job market that adopts varying recruitment procedures. Though the state aspires to enroll candidates having academic excellence, the private sector which attaches relatively less importance to this aspect prefers candidates fluent in English. Although it is possible to gain writing ability through sheer perseverance, that is not a feasible strategy for speech acquisition. Hence taking part in oral activities is an indispensable language function necessary for library science students. The fear of English errors is a severe drawback, which

jeopardizes that task.

Objectives

The above facts prove that the fear of English errors, which is an outcome of the uncalled-for reverence Sri Lankans attach to English as the main cause of the research problem. The aim of this investigation, therefore, was to prove that the exalted position English occupies in Sri Lanka is a result of a series of events – both natural and engineered – related to Colonial era.

Materials and Methods

The issue at hand being one predominantly psychological in character, data needed for the study had to be gathered indirectly. The research tools used as such were, mainly: questionnaires, structured interviews, classroom observations, focus group discussions.

Research site

IHRA, Classes at the University of Colombo

Population: 592 students

Sample size: 114 students

Results and Discussion

Data collected from questionnaire one, two and three were examined thoroughly as they were related to the issue at hand directly. The first one was administered to students, requesting them to select the most burdensome causes that impeded speech. Though conventional teachers argued poor grammar knowledge as the main cause of the issue, it turned out to be a less important concern. The lack of confidence to speak

English and vindictive peer group reaction emerged as the most threatening impediments scoring the highest mean values, namely 2.62025316 and 2.6, respectively.

Table 1-Mean values applicable to the items examined

Question	No of Respondents	Total Marks	Mean	St. Dev.	Rank (According to Means)
1. Unable to frame questions necessary for communication (Q1)	70	174	2.48571429	1.05211158	4
2. Difficult to select the appropriate grammar patterns Needed for speech (Q2)	85	220	2.58823529	1.1711645	3
3. Can't recall grammar vocabulary quickly to maintain the speed needed for speech (Q3)	103	244	2.36893204	1.05195418	5
4. Pronunciation not satisfactory (Q4)	57	133	2.33333333	1.01451455	6
5. Don't have confidence to speak (Q5)	79	207	2.62025316	1.0943329	1

6. Fear that others will misinterpret efforts to speak English as a sign of exhibitionism (Q6)	70	182	2.6	1.26942057	2

Questionnaire No. 2 given to respondents domiciled in 50 foreign countries revealed English language as being a linguistic apparatus that occupied varying levels of importance in their territories.

Most crucial data solicited through it was checking whether English errors were ridiculed in their countries. There was not a single country, which experienced that phenomenon. Questionnaire No. 3 administered to 18 Second Language teachers in Sri Lanka proved that it was only in English L2 class that students avoided speech through fear. Vindictive peer group reaction too was totally absent in other L2 classes. As could be seen from the above data, the fear of English errors was the main cause that prevented students from taking part in oral work done in class. As dispelling this fear was thought to be a prerequisite needed to encourage speech, the investigator examined the circumstances that helped elevate English to its esteemed position.

The British government's reluctance to impart English education to all and sundry in the country, conventional elites' desire to have the monopoly of English education to themselves, vital social changes that took place during colonial era turned out to be the hindrances that discourage speech in English L2 classes. (Details of these developments are annexed to this paper).

The constant exposure of students to the above facts helped soften their ingrained fear of English errors to a certain extent. However, they needed more incentives to commence speech. The investigator presented specially drawn ambiguous illustrations to enable students to interpret those diversely. In view of the ambiguity, none of the interpretations produced was incongruent with the pictures. Students were also encouraged to focus more attention to meaning applicable to the visuals without struggling to maintain grammar accuracy. Although the technique did not bring about a startling change in the L2 class, it instilled some confidence in students to speak English.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The perusal of L2 related research alone was found to be inadequate. The examination of L1 learning tactics, particularly those related to "conducive emotional climate" inherent to L1 acquisition helped the investigator to plan strategies to overcome the error phobia and promote speech. Therefore, the discovery of more innovative strategies is a goal worth achieving in this regard.

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