An Insight into the Challenges in the Teaching and Learning of Spoken English in Indian Context

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Abstract

English is taught as a second language in India. Due to its ever growing needs in everywhere in the world, it is given due importance in Indian universities also. The recent anti-English campaign in some parts of India has hardly affected its status, and the importance has not lessened in any way. However, the learning and teaching of English in the Indian classrooms need improvement. Teachers of English in India need further training and tools to improve their sincere efforts. Hence this paper highlights the challenges encountered by the teachers and learners in the teaching/learning of spoken English and also suggests some remedial measures to overcome those problems.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** 14:6 June 2014
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Introduction

The most common problem with the ESL students in producing a spontaneous speech is that they are not adequately exposed to the English language. Speaking needs some kind of real exposure to an audience. These students are conscious of making mistakes and have a fear of attracting criticism from their audience. Naturally, they prefer to remain silent. As mentioned by Ur (1991), L2 learners feel that they are unable to think of what to say when they are asked to speak English. He further says that the ESL students feel "unnatural to speak to one another in a foreign language" (p. 121). Besides the affective variables, the structure of classroom discourse and certain phonetic features pose difficulty in developing the skills of oral communication of the learners.

Understanding the Classroom Discourse of Indian Universities

According to Ho (2007), many challenges prop out because the language learnt in an institution is totally different from what is used and spoken in the real world. She puts it succinctly in the following lines:

The second language is found to be based on literate and academic knowledge and preoccupied with the written word (Barnes, 1975; Widowson, 1978; Brynes, 1998) in the sense that emphasis is placed on the standard written code found in formal texts, even in oral communication. (p. 39)

It is also mentioned by the author that learning a language gets priority over using a language. Kramsch (1998, cited in Ho, 2007) claims that oral fluency has not been given much importance in "academic discourse" (Ho, 2007, p.40) and the skill learnt at academics requires one to achieve competence within the school setting. As a result, they are not competent enough to use the language divergently in the outside world. This incompetence in language causes the feeling of being tongue-tied and creates anxiety and frustration among the learners (Leaver, Ehrman & Shekhtman, 2005).

Classroom Talk

A class room talk as described by Ho (2007) is characterized by an exchange which is carried out in three parts between the teachers and the students. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975, cited in Ho, 2007) named this three-part exchange structure as I – R – F (initiation – response – feedback). If a teacher initiates the interaction, there has to be a participatory response from the student which in turn is evaluated by the teacher through a feedback move. But for many years, the initiation by teachers is in the form of a display question where teacher already knows the answer. Wells (1999, cited in Ho, 2007) while analyzing the I-R-F exchange finds that such talk moves around a very limited range of content and thus has a very little capability to promote talk in the target language. Unless a student is able to participate in the natural use of the target

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language, she/he cannot be a fluent speaker of that language. It is claimed by Ho (2007) that "the more well defined the structure of authority in the schools and classrooms the more students are discouraged from using the target language in an interactive and spontaneous manner" (p.21). Rogoff (cited in Ho, 2007) says that there should be a dialogic teacher-pupil relationship and the students must have an active role in negotiating the instructional process.

Another drawback with the ESL classroom talk in most of the Indian universities (mainly state universities) is that it is teacher-centered. As stated by Aslam (2008), a student hardly gets more than ten seconds to speak English in class out of the forty minutes period. The lack of exposure to English in classroom itself makes students incompetent in the language.

Classroom Settings, Teaching and Testing Methodologies

Teaching of second language as observed by Fazili (2007) has not been following appropriate methodology in Indian classrooms. The reasons which contributed towards this situation are listed below:

a)   There is a wide heterogeneity in the competence levels of the students in the classroom.

b)   Many Indian universities face the problem of large classroom where the number of students exceeds one-hundred sometimes. In this situation the teacher is unable to implement new teaching strategies in the classroom and fails to exercise his/her creativity.

Language learning/ teaching is considered to be a process that is purely mechanical and that ignores the cognitive aspects in most of the Indian classrooms. The teachers are kept at the bottom-most position in the curriculum framework. They are only responsible for transferring the materials advised by higher authorities to the students without analyzing their needs. The other problem lies with the poor examination system because it merely tests memory and luck of the students, instead of their competence and performance in the specific skills. This point is also supported by Ho (2007), who says that ESL learners learn the language to pass the tests. Hence, English is considered "just another subject" (Willis, 1981, p.41) that has to be mugged up to score well in exams. Willis (1981), too, agrees with Ho (2007) and says that "unfortunately the requirements of the exam dictate teaching priorities, and all, too often students leave schools unable to communicate orally in English" (p.41).

Therefore, non-native English teachers are compelled to rely mostly on the text books. They are unable to connect classroom teaching of L2 to the need for the same in the world outside the class. Completion of the syllabus becomes the sole aim of both the teachers and the students. Also, the monotony in the pattern of questions in the examination question papers over the years has compelled the teachers to stick to the age old teaching methods. These exams assess spoken English merely through dialogue and debate writing, writing minimal pairs for the given sounds and identifying consonants and vowels in the given words.

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Lack of Smart Classrooms

The agenda to introduce smart classrooms is still under process in many universities. In this era of technology advancement, most of the classrooms are devoid of modern technologies and teaching is dependent on blackboard and chalk. Even if some universities have got the smart classroom set-up, the in-service training for the teachers to get themselves acquainted with the smart classroom is still on hold.

Challenging Phonetic Features for ESL Learners

Apart from all these, certain phonetic features are problematic for the students learning English as a second language. These phonetic features make them unintelligible to their audience; consequently they prefer to remain silent. Shackle (1987) has discussed certain phonemes that have their equivalents in Indian languages, but there are some which cause problems in the articulation. Some of the phonetic problems are explained below:

• Consonants: Consonants like /p, b, g, m, n, j, h, s, f, v, t, d, z, k, l, ʃ, ŋ, r, tʃ, w, dʒ/ do not create much problem of intelligibility and articulation. However, sounds like /ʒ, θ, ð/ cause problem of articulation. Consonants like / θ, ð/ are replaced by aspirated dental /tʰ/ and unaspirated /d/ respectively, which may cause problem of intelligibility at the national as well as international levels. Distinction between /v/ and /w/ is also not very clear with many of the ESL language users but they hardly affect listeners' comprehension. However, substituting one consonant by another is the most problematic area which is discussed below:

1. /ʒ/ of *measure* is often replaced by / dʒ/ sound which confuses the listener.

Thus *measure* becomes *major*. Sometimes /ʒ/ is also replaced by /z/ and *measure* becomes /meːzə/.

2. Most of the speakers from Bihar, Bengal and Gujarat interchange the use of /s/ and /ʃ/sound. For example, the speaker intends to say "She's the one whom I saw at the sea shore" will say /siːz də wən ai sɔː æt də ʃiː ʃɔːr/. Thus the meaning comes out as *cease the one I saw at the sea shore*.

3. Sometimes /z/ is replaced by / dʒ/ by the speakers from Bihar and Bengal. For example /zest/ becomes / dʒest/.

4. /dʒ/ is used in place of /z/. For example *damage* becomes /dæmez/.

5. Most of the Indian speakers use aspirated /pʰ/ istead of /f/ sound. For example *fool* becomes /pʰuːl/. (Shackle, 1987; Shuja, 1995)

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•   Vowels also create much problem for the ESL learners, for instance there are certain vowel sounds that make Indian speech unintelligible and hence destroy their fluency. These are as follows:

1.   /e/ and /æ/ are often interchanged when they are used in English speech. For example: *bed* becomes /bæd/, *back* becomes /bek/ and *snacks* becomes /sneks/

2.   Shortening of the long vowels. Example *seat* becomes /sit/.

3.   Elongation of the short vowels. Example *Delhi* becomes /de:li/.

4.   The diphthongs /ei/ and /əu/ are articulated as the monophthongs /e:/ and /o:/, respectively. Example *cake* /keik/ as /ke:k/ and *boat* as /bəut/ as /bo:t/.

5.   /a:/ generally replaces the vowels /ɔ/ and /ɔ:/. Example: *ball* becomes /ba:l/.

The above mentioned problems are mostly found in the speakers of Uttar Pradesh. (Shackle, 1987; Shuja 1995)

•   Consonant clusters: English language permits certain consonant clusters at the beginning and at the end of a word. But different languages have different rules for the consonant clusters. For example, English allows initial consonant cluster /sk,sp, st, sn, sm/ which Urdu language does not permit. This feature causes the hindrance in the English speech of Urdu speakers and thus they face embarrassment when exposed to native speakers of English or those which have near native like pronunciation in English. Epenthesis is the most common phenomenon found in the speech of many ESL learners. Due to unavailability of certain English consonant clusters in their mother tongue, they mispronounce the word. Example: insertion of vowel in consonant clusters. *Class* is mispronounced as /kila:s/, and *bread* is /bi:red/.

•   Stress: It plays a vital role in conveying meaning. If a word is wrongly stressed, it may affect the listeners' comprehension and the intended meaning of the speaker may get destroyed:

Example: The sentence "The doctor advised me *operation* (/ɒpə-rei- ʃn/)." Here the syllable /rei/ gets the primary stress. If the stress is wrongly placed on the syllable /ɒpə/ the word becomes *oppression* (/ɒp-re:- ʃn/). Hence the wrong stress pattern can lead to miscommunication. ESL speakers have the tendency to put the stress in words or sentences improperly because of the interference from the mother tongue which may follow different stress patterns. Thus, they cut a sorry figure among their target language audience.

• Intonation: According to Shackle (1987),

>   The typical rising intonation of question in English is reserved for expressions of
>   surprise in most South Asian languages. Their characteristic interrogative pattern,

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in which the end of a question is marked by a rise-fall in the intonation, is quite unlike the English norm, and can easily cause misunderstanding (p. 232).

Thus, it can be said that correct intonation pattern should be executed in English speech so that the message gets conveyed successfully.

Remedial Measures

A sound knowledge of phonetics practiced with activities would be helpful to improve English speech. Leaver et al (2005) have suggested some remedies that would improve and relax the anxious speakers of English. They are:

• Simplification: Use of short phrases and sentences are to be encouraged.

• Islands: Learning to speak on topics which are frequently used may help ESL learners to use English confidently.

• Focus on the known: Making the language work with the limited knowledge of that language would motivate the students to speak efficiently.

Another thing to be taken care of is the teacher talk. It should maximize the use of referential questions in the classroom. Moreover spoken language should be assessed orally, not through written mode. The evaluation of candidate's performance should not only consist of summative assessment but also the formative and alternative ones. This measure will help the teachers to cover the syllabus patiently over the academic year. Also, teachers should be at the top most position during the designing of the syllabus because they are the one who are aware of the classroom situations.

The pronunciation problem of the students can be improved by making them to practice the sounds (International Phonetic Alphabet symbols) with the help of communicative activities. Some of the activities which can be used in the classroom are as follows:

Activities

Aim: The aim of this activity is to make the students pronounce words intelligibly.

Organization: The class is divided into groups of three: student A, student B and student C. The pronunciation of student A is better than student B in each group. Student C acts as an observer who keeps a check that the group talks in English and the game is played fairly. The teacher exchanges the student C of each group with the other ones in a way that each group has an observer of some other group. The observer is provided with game markers which are given to the group for each correct response. Therefore, if a group has less game marker in the first part of the activity, it tends to work harder to collect more game markers in part two of the game. At the

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end of the game (i.e. after the completion of part 1, part 2 and part 3), the game markers of each group are counted. Those who earn the maximum number of beads become the winner.

Preparation: Few List of words.

Activity 1

This activity will be carried out in three parts.

Part One

Procedure: Student A will read aloud the given list of words for student B. After listening carefully to A, student B will match each word on the left with the word on the right which has the same initial consonant (sound, not letter), and put the appropriate number in front of the word. An example is given. The words in the left-hand column below begin with 22 different consonants. The words in the right-hand columns begin with the same 22 consonants, but in a different order. The group that gets the maximum number of beads in minimum time wins the game.

List of words:

1	bag	tomato
2	cat	Czech
3	cent	yacht
4	check	loose
5	dude	There
6	fan	guess
7	gem	Dare
8	leap	Vote
9	meek	kneel
10	nail	Kite
11	zoom	Wild
12	pain	Holy
13	ptomaine	Pest

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14	room	Phone
15	shave	Jest
16	then	Zest
17	thick	Send
18	vest	Rhyme
19	weight	Main
20	whole	Thin
21	young	Boom
22	gas	Chef

Part Two

Procedure: Student A will read aloud the other list of words for student B. After listening carefully to A, student B will match each word on the left with the word on the right which has the same final consonant. An example is given. The words in the left-hand columns below end with 21 different consonants. The words in the right-hand columns have the same final consonants, but in a different order. The group that gets the maximum number of beads in minimum time wins the game in this part.

List of words:

1	Both	Love
2	Car	rogue
3	Clothe	dome
4	Dumb	grud
5	Fate	smooth
6	Globe	ridge
7	Graph	sane
8	Lace	beige

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9	Look	lung
10	Odd	gruff
11	phrase	eight
12	pole	Fade
13	rage	Toll
14	rich	Daze
15	rouge	Lock
16	rug	Loss
17	save	Hope
18	sign	Youth
19	soap	Care
20	tongue	Ash
21	wash	Witch

Part Three

Procedure: Student A will read aloud the third list of words for student B. After listening carefully to A, student B will match the final consonant of each word in the left-hand columns with the initial consonant of a word in the right-hand columns –if there is such a match. An example is given. The group that gets the maximum number of beads in minimum time wins the game in this part.

List of words:

1	beige	Pitch
2	breathe	Team
3	chip	Kill
4	coach	Bad
5	comb	dame

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6	cough	Goal
7	door	choke
8	face	Jell
9	lane	Fun
10	ledge	Think
11	lice	Safe
12	maid	Vain
13	meat	They
14	nave	Zone
15	nose	Mode
16	robe	Name
17	rogue	Lace
18	rung	Rake
19	rush	Yell
20	ruth	Wet
21	sail	Head
22		Shift

After completing the above three parts, student A and student B have to discuss the following questions:

• Two of the words in the left-hand columns have final consonants for which there is no match in initial position. What are the words?

• Three words in the right-hand columns have initial consonants for which there is no match in final position. What are they?   (Kreidler, 2004, p.30-1)

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Activity 2

Student A will read aloud the list of words for student B. After listening carefully to A, student B has to identify three consonants in each word. These words have three consonants separated by two vowels (CVCVC). The first has been done as an example.

•	Cherub	tʃ -r-b	Thistle	Ptomaine
•	Garage		Havoc	Possess
•	Philip		Jealous	Gingham
•	Receipt		Package	Righteous
•	Machine		Kenneth	Sheriff
•	Budget		Disease	Nothing

(Kreidler, 2004, p. 41)

Conclusion

This paper focussed on the issues related to teaching and learning of spoken English in Indian context. Besides talking about the problems of ESL classrooms and learners in India, this work has also presented some of the remedial measures to overcome the challenging issues of spoken English.

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