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**Can Hurdles be Overcome by Learners of
ESL in Learning to Speak English?**

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Abstract

Even though proficiency in ESL includes all the four major skills, invariably, the skill of writing predominates the Indian ESL curriculum. The reason may be, perhaps, traced to the ESL education scenario which existed in the pre independence era, when the British government needed the Indian employees mostly in the domain of clerical jobs. (Chaudhary, S.C., 2002). But in the present context, Indians need considerable proficiency in all the four major skills in general, and the speaking skill in particular, to communicate with the rest of the world effectively. Against this backdrop, this article attempts to explore some of the factors behind the problems faced by the ESL learners at the tertiary level in India.

Recognizing the Consequences of Poor Skills in English

'Poor language skills flatten out career curve'. 'Lack of oral skills proves dearer in the job market', 'Poor Communicators lose out in placement drives by software giants', 'Varsities will focus on Spoken English.' These are examples of some of the screaming headlines in Indian press these days.

These claims have been supported by some recent studies carried out by researchers in the field of English Language Teaching. A doctoral research carried out recently among the students in 26 engineering colleges spread across the Indian state of Tamil Nadu points out that more than 50% of the respondents had felt that their cognitive process had been affected by the language factor. Further, it adds that their lack of confidence to communicate in English, in spite of their good score in the semester examinations really hinders their aspirations.

New Directions in Anna University and Other Universities in Tamilnadu

Such concerns expressed in the media and the revelations highlighted by the second language research findings have made the higher authorities of a premier technical university sit up and take stock of the situation. As a result, of late, the students of all the III year engineering courses affiliated to Anna University, Tamil Nadu across the state have been prescribed a newly introduced course in English aimed at developing their communicative skills.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 9 September 2009

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Following Anna University a few other universities have already started re-designing their curriculum. Spoken English is now a compulsory component of the Part II General English syllabus for the bachelor's degree in Manonmaniam Sundaranar University located in South Tamilnadu.

Evaluating Student Preparedness

One of the important steps in all these is to assess the students' preparedness to deal with the newly introduced task in their ESL curriculum. For, they may not have had any real experience with oral communication skills in English hitherto, even though they did go through a phase of the so-called "Spoken English" in their +2 (intermediate) course, which required them to mark the stress and the pause in a given passage. This was done by most of them by placing an (') or a (/) anywhere in the given text according to their own perceptions.

Assessing the Level of Performance in Eleventh and Twelfth Grades

Hence, an investigation into the students' ability to speak English was felt necessary and was carried out among a selected group of students who had completed their +2 course under the stream of Tamil Nadu State Board of Higher Secondary Education and who have joined various degree courses at A.P.C. Mahalaxmi College, Tuticorin, affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tamilnadu.

For this study, a random sample of 181 students admitted into the different undergraduate disciplines such as History, Tamil Literature, English Literature, Chemistry and Zoology was chosen. This study group was administered a preliminary test to assess their speaking skill.

The Instrument

The instrument used to test the students' oral proficiency in English was to "say" a few sentences on any one of the topics familiar to them in their daily life, namely, 'family', 'mother', 'coffee', 'apple', 'rose', 'temple', and so on . In this test, a majority of the students, that is, 83% of them, failed to utter even a single sentence. Many of them uttered just a few words without any relevance or coherence. Some of them just stammered without even being aware of the meaning of words such as 'temple', 'hero' and so on. In fact, only a few of them could produce a couple of sentences using the given words. This they achieved by repeating the same structure several times.

Examples: 1. Coffee-

Coffee is very tasty.
Coffee is very useful.

2. Family-

Family is very good.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 9 September 2009

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Family is very important.

Preparation before the Second Test

Later, after a gap of three months, another test was conducted. Students were encouraged and imparted some motivation to learn ESL. Some training in the fundamental aspects of functional English was given for a period of twenty hours spanning over a period of six weeks. During the practice sessions the teaching was done using mainly the target language, and the learners were thus made to speak English compulsorily.

Performance in the Second Test

In this test, students were asked to a dialogue each in pairs, on a few given situations in daily life such as a meeting between friends at the market, two passengers at a railway station, a patient and a doctor, and the like. The performance of the samples in this test showed a remarkably encouraging trend. While almost all the students were able to produce at least a few strings of words to communicate their ideas, some of them expressed themselves quite fluently and coherently. A few of the pairs even produced very good dialogues. In their speech, many of them used more or less the approximately relevant content words to drive home their point. They missed out mainly on the use of connectives, subject–verb agreement, tenses and syntactic order in their utterances. On the whole, everyone talked with greater confidence. Indeed, this whole experiment was done in a fairly learner-friendly, stress-free, low-anxiety informal classroom environment.

A Correlation Analysis

A correlation analysis was done between the students' performance and their background variables before the commencement of the experimental teaching. It revealed very significant correlation between the learners' performance and factors concerned with their formal and informal exposure to the target language and their learning environment. These included the learners' background variables such as,

1. The medium of instruction at all the three levels of schooling viz., primary, secondary and higher secondary, which happened to be Tamil in a majority of the cases.
2. The teacher who taught English at the primary and secondary levels, who happened to be a teacher of other subjects as well.
3. The language used by the teacher to teach English in the class, which again happened to be Tamil in most of the cases.

4. The language used by the teacher of English for class management, which happened to be Tamil in most of the cases.
5. The failure of the teacher of English to induce and encourage student-talk in the class.
6. The learning strategy adopted to learn the English lessons including grammar and vocabulary, which happened to be rote- learning or memorizing by a majority of the students, without understanding and recognizing structural points such as word order in a sentence.
7. Lack of opportunity to develop in the learners an earnest goal and interest in taking self-initiative and be autonomous in the learning process. Students do not show individual fervor for the learning of items and using them in context.
8. The schooling background of the parents of the students. Most of the parents were only primary school graduates, with no exposure to English during their schooling. In addition most of the fathers were unskilled labourers or from other lower socio-economic status, with not much means to either acquire or enable their children to acquire English.

Results of a Comparative Analysis of the Performance: What Do We Learn?

When a comparative analysis of the performance of the students in the two tests was done, it revealed a considerable improvement in the second test, despite the study group's informal exposure and learning environment remaining unchanged.

This seems to prove that ESL learners can perform much better when they are placed in a better learning environment and given sufficient motivation and exposure to learn the target language in the classroom situation.

Performance in English by the Subjects Teachers and English Literature Teachers

Incidentally, an interesting finding emerged out of this study. It was the remarkable progress in performance registered by the samples drawn from the faculty of English Literature. Indeed, they outdid the samples drawn from the other disciplines who were exposed to the use of the regional language most of the time in their classrooms. As Swain (1985) asserts, exposure and opportunities for production are indispensable factors in the process of acquisition of a language. Obviously, these factors must have helped the samples from the discipline of English Literature to perform better than their counterparts from the other disciplines. This finding further confirms that with greater exposure to the target language and with better learning environment in the classroom students will acquire better language skills.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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We Certainly Can Overcome Negative Factors!

Thus, it can be safely concluded that, the impact of most of the negative factors of the ESL learners' background on their acquisition of the target language can be overcome effectively by a better learning environment and adequate exposure to the use of the target language in the ESL classroom. This must, of course, be combined with sufficient motivation given to the learners by the teachers of ESL. Whenever there is a lack of motivation among the students, it may be compensated by induced motivation. Perhaps, in the Indian context, it can be done by making the students adequately aware of the need for proficiency in English to enable themselves to be upwardly mobile in the changing world.

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