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Target Language: Proficiency & Intelligibility

Nagen Bhusan Patnaik, M.A., PGCTE, M.B.A., Ph.D. Scholar

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Abstract

Target language or Second language (L2) learning reflects the complexity of learning a language which is the other tongue rather than the mother tongue. This paper focuses on the prospects and benefits of the skill-based learning of Second language. Adult L2 learners have two means for internalizing a target language. The first is acquisition, a subconscious and intuitive process, similar to that used by a child to pick up L1. The second is conscious learning, in which a learner attends to form and is aware of his/her own learning process. The conscious learning processes and the subconscious acquisition processes are mutually exclusive. Thus, the scholar asserts that speech would emerge after the acquirer had been exposed to enough comprehensible input. In the present competitive world, where the use of English is widespread, we have to learn and teach L2 in order to cope up with the existing system as it is beneficial for a learner, based on his/her own needs.

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At the outset, I would like to focus on my personal experience to justify how the interference of the Mother Tongue leads to less intelligibility of the Second Language. I had been to KSR College of Science and Arts, Erode, to attend the contact programme of PGCTE, CIEFL, where I encountered caustic comments from the guide regarding my articulation of some of the consonantal phonemes. While articulating /s/ and /sh /, the guide found the interference of my mother tongue Oriya. As a result I had been given a tongue twister “She sells sea shells on the sea shore” to practice. It took the whole night to practice this tongue twister. And finally I succeeded in articulating these two sounds exactly. Similarly the interference of our mother tongue is rampant in our spoken English which snatches away the charm of the language. Further, it also creates difficulties in intelligibility which leads to communication failure. Therefore, in order to attain success in the process of communication, the speaker has to achieve proficiency in speaking English properly.

R. Krishnaveni (2010) points out

“Language is the most important tool of communication. Linguistic problems of understanding arise even when people speak the same language. Tone, facial expressions and voice play an important role in one’s speech and the process of communication. Words with relative meanings, jargon, technical terms, connotative and denotative meanings of words also make it difficult for people to understand the communication they are exposed to.”

(www.languageinindia.com 10:5)

In our country, we can find many factors that are responsible for affecting the teaching-learning process of the target language. For instance, the medium of instruction in many schools in different states is the regional language but not English, which leads to very less exposure of English. The students in India can be categorized into two groups: groups of students who adopt their regional language/s as medium of instruction from the primary level and the other groups of students who adopt English for the same. Hence, the problem of teaching English as a second language to the Indian students starts from the pre-school stage. Furthermore, the environment and family background play a vital role in learning processes. In India, poorer family background, with inadequate literacy and education of the family members, leads to poor or low standards in education. The parents are not able to provide support in learning activities of their children at home and they cannot afford to send their children to well-equipped schools. The children are engaged in different jobs to earn money to meet the daily needs of the family. This is the prime hurdle affecting teaching learning process. Secondly, the infrastructure, viz. school buildings, class rooms, labs, etc., are not adequate to facilitate the conducive ambience for learning. (MJAL, vol: 1:1 February 2009 1:1 Teaching English as a second in India –a review Murali.M.)

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LSRW: The Skills

Employing all four linguistic skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing - while working through a lesson will help us reprocess language during the lesson. Learning rules are not sufficient, but practicing the language is even more important. All these aspects add variety to learning a lesson and facilitate the learner to practice the language. It has been found that learners can knock off a grammar sheet without mistakes. But, when asked, "Could you describe your father?" they have problems in answering this sort of question. This happens due to the emphasis given in many school systems to learning grammar and not on how to enhance Oral or Spoken communication.

Listening - the Primary Skill

Listening is the absorption of the meanings of words and sentences by the brain. It leads to the understanding of facts and ideas. This primary skill is rarely taught in schools because the educators assume that it can be achieved automatically. But effective listening is a skill. Like any other skills, competence in listening is achieved through learning and practice. A good listener is not just a silent receptacle, passively receiving the thoughts and feelings of others.

To be an effective listener, we must respond with verbal and nonverbal cues which let the speaker know that we are listening and understanding. One can follow the following steps to fine-tune the listening skill and to become an effective listener.

- Face the speaker and maintain eye contact.
- Be attentive.
- Keep an open mind.
- Listen to the words and try to picture what the speaker is saying.
- Don't interrupt.
- Ask questions only to ensure understanding of something that has been said.
- Pay attention to what isn't said -- to feelings, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and other nonverbal cues. (www.learningthroughlistening.org)

Listening is certainly a precious gift. It enables a new born baby to speak L1 without even learning alphabet.

Speaking

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The importance placed on Oral Communication skills by employers has been well recognized. Knowledge and technical know-how are clearly important, but these must be presented with an excellent standard of communication skills, particularly oral. Furthermore, oral communication and presentation skills are considered one of the best “Career enhancers” and to be the single biggest factor in determining a student’s career success and failure.

In the Oral Communication Competency Report published by University of Virginia, oral communication is defined as “the effective interpretation, composition, and presentation of information, ideas, and values to a specific audience.” Individual and business relations can be developed and maintained with the help of this skill. (<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/oral-communication-skills.html>)

But it is a regrettable fact that in our country, particularly in rural schools, speaking skill is given least importance. Though we know the importance and benefits of spoken communication, yet we are unable to justify and prove its importance. For instance, during our schooling we get very less opportunity and suitable platform for speaking. Because the classes are totally teacher-centered, where teachers are only teaching and the students are playing the role of mute spectators. As a consequence, when we go for higher studies to colleges and universities, the fear factor still prevails while speaking, which becomes an obstacle in career progress. Consequently, this fear factor snatches away the opportunity of enhancing the skill. This is one of the prime reasons for poor placement in technical colleges.

Furthermore, the mother tongue influence (MTI) in learning and speaking the second language, causes less intelligibility of L2. The problem of speaking can easily be found while learning and practising sounds of English. For instance, the consonantal phonemes /f/ and /v/ are labio-dental in RP (Received Pronunciation). But Oriya speakers of English make them bilabial by closing both the lips. In Oriya we have the terms like *FALA* (fruit), *FALTU* (useless), *BHATA* (rice), *BHAI* (brother), etc., which are bilabial. As a result, the bilabial and labio-dental sounds overlap in our spoken English. By articulating the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols, we can make our spoken English acceptable and intelligible.

In India where English is spoken as a second language, English has developed a variety of accents. For example, the speech of an Oriya speaker of English will differ markedly from that of a Bengali or Tamil or Telugu speaker. Even the accents differ in different parts of the state of Orissa. For instance, the speakers of Cuttack (Orissa) area articulate the words fat /fæt/, cat /kæt/ as /fjɑ:t/ and /kjɑ:t/. The speakers of English in Berhampur (Orissa) articulate the words poor /pʊə/, and /pɜ:sn/ as /pu:r/ and /persɒn/. This makes their spoken English less intelligible.

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Steps to Improve Speaking

Improving English speaking skills will help us communicate more easily and effectively.

- Practice where you can, when you can. Any practice is good – whether you speak to someone who is a native English speaker or not.
- It's important to build your confidence. So far as intelligibility is concerned, it is wise to use simple and correct English sentence structure. As more intelligibility of the listeners increases the confidence level of the speaker.
- Try to experiment with the English you know. Use words and phrases you know in new situations. Doing things or playing with words is really a good exercise of getting feedback.
- Try to respond to what people say to you. One should respond to what others say in a natural way to build rapport.
- Don't speak too fast: It's very important to use a natural rhythm when speaking English. Because speaking too fast may lead to less intelligibility.
- Try to relax when you speak: As we know that the mouth does most of the pronunciation work. When we speak English at normal speed, we'll discover that many of the pronunciation skills, such as linking between words, will happen automatically.

Reading

Reading skills enable readers to turn orthographic writing into meaning and achieve the goals of independent comprehension and fluency. These are specific skills which enable a reader to read the written form as meaningful language and to mentally interact with the message. Reading aloud helps twist the tongue properly which leads to proper articulation of different words. It is a means of discovering information to expand one's knowledge and understanding of the subject of any kind. That is why it is said "Reading is to mind what exercise is to the body". In fact, reading strengthens the mind. (Alex, K. 2009 Soft Skills: Know Yourself & Know the World. S. Chand, New Delhi.) In the modern age of information, reading truly is a fundamental survival skill. Here are certain tips to improve reading skill:

- Know the purpose of reading: Are you reading for entertainment or to learn something.
- Decide why you're reading before you start and you'll greatly improve your comprehension and enjoyment.

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- Be choosy: Select the chapters and articles that are important. Ignore the rest.
- Scan before you read: Look at the table of contents, index, topic headers, captions, etc. These will help determine if, a) you have a real interest in this reading, and b) what information you're likely to get from it.
- Optimize your reading environment: Reading will be faster and more comprehensible in a comfortable atmosphere.
- Once you start, don't stop: Read each item straight through. If you finish and have questions, go back and re-read the pertinent sections. If you don't have questions, you got what you needed and are ready to move on.
- Be Consistent: One has to focus on the purpose of reading the material. You can be on the track by following along with your hand. This simple technique helps you focus and increase your concentration and consistency.

Writing

Writing is considered the toughest skill. We need to do a lot of homework to fine-tune our writing skill. Good writing skills are essential for a career in Public Relations. A solid foundation in writing basics is good, but to succeed as a professional, it takes practice and commitment. If you are giving your writing to anyone else to look at, accurate grammar will show that you are professional and competent, as well as making your writing look clean, neat, and generally easy to follow. Constructive criticism may be the best way to highlight flaws in your work. Because your audience is exposed to an increasing number of writings each day, your standard of writing must be livelier, easier to read, more concise, and more interesting than ever before. To compete for attention, writing must be purposeful, audience-centered, and concise. The goal of effective writing is to express your ideas rather than to impress your audience.

Tips to Improve Writing

- Plan ahead. The first priority in writing is planning. Take the time to think about your writing task before you even start to write. What is the purpose of your writing? Is it a fictional story, a journalistic interview for a newspaper, and what not?
- Identify your audience. Will your readers be children or adults? Is English their first language, or not? Are they reading for pleasure, or is this a technical article? Both the topic you choose and its audience will determine your writing approach. It is wise to use Standard English when you are writing formal, instructional, or technical pieces.

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- Proper spelling. Nothing makes a piece of writing less professional than an article that is full of spelling errors, and that means your audience may not take your work seriously. Keep a good dictionary on your desk, or use an online dictionary if that appeals to you.
- Use proper grammar. Good grammar can help make your writing better by making it clear and easily comprehensible.
- Review your writing. Last but not the least, proofread your work for spelling and grammar errors, and correct any that you find. Once the mechanics of grammar and spelling are taken care of, read it out loud to yourself. Do a final check to ensure proper and effective writing.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude that deliberate effort is required to learn the target language. Otherwise it would be an impossible task to achieve proficiency and competence. It is a fact that we are frequently exposed to L1 throughout our life time. On the contrary, we are less exposed to L2. That's why deliberate and intensive learning is required for more exposure of L2 and to make the other tongue we use more intelligible. We may not be able to achieve one-hundred percent proficiency in the second language like that of the native speakers; but we can try to speak like them.

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