

Peer Group Influence on Learning English as a Second Language; with Special Focus to the University of Ruhuna

Shavindra Chandradasa^{1*}, Dimuthu Jayawardena²

University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka.
shavindrachandradasa@yahoo.com¹

Abstract - In Sri Lanka the need and the acceptance of English is boundless. English is considered as a basic life skill than a second or a foreign language. However, due to lack of motivation, interest and commitment to learn English most of the university students remain at a disadvantage position. On the other hand peer group seems to be an indispensable component in their university life because peers set their comfort zone. Thus, the research was conducted with the aim of finding out the impact of the peer group on learning English as a Second Language. The study was descriptive and the mixed method comprised of both the qualitative and quantitative data was used in data analysis. Hence, the primary collect data was gathered through close ended questionnaires distributed among 61 of the second year students of the Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Sciences, University of Ruhuna. Additionally, observations and focused group interviews with the students and language teachers were also conducted. The secondary data collected through previous research was also applied in data analysis. The findings revealed that peers significantly influence language learners. The influence is noteworthy in attending classes, class room performance, prior preparation for lessons, changing attitudes in language learning, using language outside classrooms and inspiring others in learning English. In all most all the situations peers seem to shield students from being criticized as backward in using English and comfort them over language issues rather than encouraging them to learn English. This reliance is more reinforced because of institutional weakness and the weakness of the students regarding English knowledge. Thus, a more innovative teaching and learning environment should be created to encourage language learners to be independent. Moreover, peer group can itself use as a new approach in enhancing language skills of the students.

Key words: Comfort Zone, Learning English, Peer Group, Second Language, University Students

I. INTRODUCTION

A good knowledge in English is regarded as an essential requirement for the undergraduates to accomplish the best out of their university life. However, inadequate knowledge of English seems to make their academic journey a miserable

experience. Regarding some students this is a deeply rooted issue since they have struggled with language issues even from their school time period. It is also noteworthy that Sri Lankan government universities hardly carry good impressions on learning English as English is not just another language but, which carries socio-linguistic value. Thus, English is called 'sword' or 'Kaudwa' in their local slang. On the other hand peers and fitting in and being a part of their batch is what is most valuable which allows one to even behave in strange ways. Peers are their power and strength. Considering the present research setting it is apparent that most of the time the students avoid attending language classes as groups and try to depend on each other whenever the language matters. Subsequently, the English Language Teaching Unit is in a long term struggle to attract the students to accomplish the intended learning outcomes. Thus, the research questions to what extent peers influence on others in learning English as a second language with the objectives of finding out the impact of peer influence on learning English as a second language and identifying the specific reasons behind the dearth of enthusiasm in learning English to suggest new strategies to motivate students to be active language learners.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample population included sixty one of the entire batch of the second year of the Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Sciences and Technology of the University of Ruhuna. They were given questionnaires including twenty-five close-ended questions developed based on the five point Likert Scale range from St. Disagree to St. Agree. Out of sixty one, five questionnaires were rejected due to errors limiting the total number to fifty six. Based on simple calculations of MS Excel the percentage of the responses was considered to analyse data quantitatively. Besides, in-depth interviews were also carried out considering fifteen randomly selected students as the discourse aspect of the research is also important. Additionally, English teachers who worked for the faculty were also interviewed and the observations were also done during language class hours. To extract secondary data, publications of Local and international writers, (published and non-published) were also considered.

III. RESULTS

The majority of 76% pointed that they had average language proficiency and almost 100% pointed that peer group is an important part of their university life.

Attending Classes

Significantly the maximum number of 63% confirmed that they felt avoid attending language classes when their friends were absent. As 75% indicated they preferred the relaxing atmosphere created inside the class once they were with the companions. However, their aim of attending classes was not to spend time with companions but rather to spend a couple of hours profitably. Further, the majority of 63% preferred group activities. As the interviews revealed the students had a dependent mentality. As they view, unlike other subjects English is a challenge. English is 'sword, language of elites, language of oppression and language of the colonizers.' Accordingly, the majority of the students view English as a threat [1]. Thus, it was safer if they could face the challenge collectively that would eventually safeguard them from being individually spotted as backward. Who had good language command were regarded as assets. Peer group was the armor they used to cover up the language issues appear in learning English. Hence, it is constantly observed that they avoid classes and attend classes as a group.

Classroom Performance

Peer impact was also sever in classroom performance. 57% pointed that they were willing to accept friends' opinions if they felt that their friends were more capable in handling the language than them. As per 72% they concerned how their other companions judge them inside the class. As 71% pointed it was a great humiliation to conduct errors while learning in front of the others who were capable in using English. It is the fear of failure that makes many people feel nervous to respond in English language, because they concentrate more on others' feelings [2]. The majority of 65% was accepted the fact that they refused to actively perform in the classroom when their friends were not ready. Thus, they kept quite in the class until two or three students started speaking.

As per quantitative data this was kind of an inferiority complex created due to difficulties in handling the language. They had creative ideas but they did not know how to express them properly. Additionally, less enthusiastic language activates and the already established language learning culture; keep quiet, listen and take notes further reassure students to be inert learners. Hence, it was found that a series of pedagogic changes in terms of teachers, materials and syllabi were absent in the university context.

Prior Preparation

Peers significantly influence on prior preparation for the language classes. 64% revealed that they did not concern about prior preparation as no one hardly prepared. Even if they prepared 67% acknowledged that they did not reveal it if their friends didn't even look at that particular activity. 41% strongly supposed that they never conduct group discussions to get ready for the language activates. Moreover 61% accepted the idea that it was interesting to chat and spend time with peers doing extra activities than preparing for language lessons. It was their batch fit which is the most important element than polishing their language skills [3]. The teachers constantly complained that no one come prepared and they participated emptyhanded for classes. As per students that is their culture.

Attitudes towards English

Peers influence a great deal in shaping the attitudes of the students towards English. 52% was in the idea that there was nothing to be afraid if they couldn't understand what teachers taught because they knew almost every one suffered from the same difficulty. As the maximum of 66% proved it was not ashamed to achieve a low grade for English since all the students most probably ended up in the equal pathetic state. These are language related self-defeating thoughts [4]. Even in conducting assignments and tests the majority of 64% accepted the fact that the more relaxing approach was to follow friends and copy their projects to get rid from the task. In occasions in which language matters, as the majority of 69% approved they did not concern about their inability because they had a set of companions who consider language as difficult and something unattainable. As interviews revealed peers made others blind to see the reality that they must be worried about language inabilities. The teachers even complained that the students did not have big goals regarding English.

Out of classroom connections and language usage

More significantly 50% agreed that they kept no contact with language teachers as most of their friends did not keep contacts. They almost did not discuss their language difficulties with teachers. Even 59% accepted that they were scared to speak in English inside the university as their friends would be hostile towards them. "Peers matter in learning processes. Peers have an impact on performance not just during interaction but also before and afterwards." [5] Even, there were language associations inside the university the majority of 45% accepted they had no impression to join such when their friends simply refused. The maximum of 48% pointed that they didn't like to see that a few of the students

speak in English inside the university when the majority found fluency in English as a difficult accomplishment. Such behavior was just to show off the English accent. Qualitatively it was revealed that they were afraid to deal with English inside the university autonomously. Peer group is the relief for all the toughest language achievements. However, due to the peer dependency and the already generated backwardness, English Language Teaching Unit always finds it problematic to cultivate a language accustomed culture inside the university context.

Motivation to learn English

Peers acted as one of the major complications in diminishing inspiration in learning English. Significantly 55% accepted that they didn't feel it was urgent to learn English because their peers didn't feel so. As English is considered not an urgent requirement 59% pointed that they would misplace their peer bonds if they exhibit sudden desires to start learning English. As accepted by 80% of the sample they didn't have any uncertainties in any activity where English matters because their peer group acts as a shield to defend them. Either who can handle language will help them or they can be with the unskilled category. Lastly it was noteworthy to indicate that despite all the points each student precisely knew that English is crucial to academic accomplishment. The qualitative data proved further proved the fact that English as a non-credit course appears less significant. Their peer group which meant them to be the second home valid more just only next to their degree and Class accomplishment.

IV. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

It was evidenced that there was a strong impact of peer group on learning English as a second language. Primarily that was a negative influence. None of the students cannot negate the value of peer group because it is the answer for many of the obstacles the students face during their university life. Nevertheless, peer influence should not be another factor which demotivates language learners. It needs to be converted to an asset. As per the research findings, peer influence was the consolation and the shield the students use to hide themselves from language problems. Institutional weakness and weakness of the students had made them dependent on peers to a great deal. Hence, the truth should be identified that the remedies for language issues need to finalise in early stages of language learning to achieve a reasonable command

in English. It is a must to admit the students that language learning is not subject learning and it is overlearning. Peers are a good experimental ground for collaborative learning. Peer discussions, peer reviews etc. can provide valuable results in language learning. Consequently the university also needs to introduce innovative classroom activities, new technology and new teaching approaches where teachers, technology and peers can work together. Converting English into a credit course will help develop a new discourse for language learning among peers. New language courses such as speech and communication, English for academic writing, English for employment can be introduced to give more importance for English. Student-teacher interaction is also essential. The initial step of building such relationships can be planned by organizing a sound intensive English course prior the academic programme in which the peers can utilize to accomplish the maximum benefits of language learning.

References

1. Widyalankara, R. C. "Kaduwa and the Evolution of a Theory", Golden Jubilee Commemoration Volume of University of Kelaniya. Research and Publication Committee, Sri Lanka: University of Kelaniya, pp. 391, 2009.
2. Vemuri, B.R., Ram, R.V.M. & Kota, K.S. "Attitudinal Barrier for Learning English as Second Language: Problem Analysis", International Journal on English Language and Literature, Volume 1, Issue 1, pp.31, 2013. [retrieved from: www.iairs.org/PAPERS_V1-I1/PAGE%2030%20-%2035.pdf]
3. Chandradasa, V.D.S. "The Impact of University Subculture on Learning English as a Second Language; A Special Focus to the Undergraduates of University of Ruhuna, Faculty of Humanities, Unpublished thesis submitted for the M.A in Linguistics, Sri Lanka: University of Kelaniya, pp. 102, 2015.
4. Rathnayeka, P. "Clearing Impediments to the Use of English by the Undergraduates: A Case Study of the Faculty of Humanities Social Sciences of University of Ruhuna," Unpublished thesis submitted for the M.A in Linguistics, Sri Lanka: University of Kelaniya, pp.70, 2013.
5. Eisenkopf, G. "Peer Effects, Motivation, and Learning", pp.12, 2008 [retrieved from: <ftp://ftp.zew.de/pub/zew-docs/veranstaltungen/Papers/eisenkopf.pdf>]