

DIFFICULTIES FACED BY THE UNDERGRADUATES WHEN SPEAKING IN ENGLISH

Attanayake AMNR¹, Edirisinghe EMHJ²

¹ *Department of English Language Teaching, Wayamba University Of Sri Lanka, Kuliyaipitiya, Sri Lanka*

² *Department of English Language Teaching, Wayamba University Of Sri Lanka, Kuliyaipitiya, Sri Lanka*
nuwanrohith@yahoo.com

Abstract

Many English language learners frequently complain of their inability to communicate successfully and they face many difficulties when speaking in English. They also grumble that they can understand what is spoken but they cannot respond it. This study focuses on the difficulties faced by the undergraduates in oral communication in English. The study consisted of 40 first year students. The methodology employed was the analysis of data in pre and post-tests of speaking. Majority of the students had not followed any speaking lesson or had not had opportunities to speak in English in schools. The most frequent problems are the lack of sufficient vocabulary and confidence to speak because of their fear of making mistakes. The least problem was the difficulty in understanding questions. As an appropriate solution, one to one speaking sessions were introduced to build up their confidence to speak in English inside and outside the classroom effectively.

Keywords: Speaking ability, confidence, difficulties, oral communication

Introduction

Inability to communicate successfully in the target language in second language (L2) learning has been the complaint made by the learners of a L2. One among the many reasons to take into considerations might be the lack of confidence and anxiety about making errors as stated by Trent¹. Confidence helps learners to feel ready for life's experiences. When someone is confident, he or she is more likely to move forward with people and opportunities. Similarly, when people are lack of confidence that might be less likely to try new things or reach out to new people. If they fail at something at the first time, they might be less likely to try again. A lack of confidence can hold people back from reaching their success. Similarly, in second language learning, the self- confidence to use the target language plays a vital role in mastering the language. If the learners are lack of confidence to use the language, they will never try to move forward with the language.

Majority of the L2 learners do not have a good environment background to acquire and enhance English language from family, school, and friends especially when it comes to speaking skill. The only place for them to use the target language is the classroom. In this case the learners try to depend on their teachers because the teacher is the only available resource for them to communicate. These difficulties faced by them have made the students to remain in the low proficiency level in conversation. The main aim of L2 teaching and learning process is to enable the students to comprehend and produce the target language.

English has become the main language in business, and it has become almost essential for people to speak in English. English is the modern world language of media, education, technology, international

economic, tourism and scientific articles, and the internet that demands a sound knowledge of English especially of spoken English. While reading and listening are considered to be the two receptive skills in language learning and writing and speaking are the two productive skills necessary to be integrated in the development of effective communication. English has been the tool for education in the modern world and as a result, students are demanded to be able to improve the proficiency in English to continue their studies without barriers.

Of all the four macro English skills, speaking seems to be the most important skill required for communication. (Zaremba²). However, speaking for special communication usually occurs in contexts where speaking performance is conducted for an audience in differing circumstances. The principles of public speaking are also intertwined with the development of speaking for special communication. It is understood that any person without oral communication skills will suffer in this era of competition and may find it difficult to achieve a higher positions. Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information (Burns & Joyce³).

The purpose of this research is to find out the problems faced by the learners when speaking in English and to find remedial solutions that can be practiced to improve the speaking skills of ESL students in the university. Without having any academic speaking experience in English before, it is understood that it takes more time for ESL students to adapt to speaking practices in the classroom. Moreover, due to ESL students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, speaking tasks have become more demanding to be implemented successfully.

Research Methodology

Research Sample

Through random sampling procedure, 40 first year undergraduates (20 females & 20 males) studying at the Faculty of Applied Sciences of the Wayamba university were selected for the present study. The study was descriptive in nature. A questionnaire was developed by reviewing the existing literature and through discussions with the experts in the field. The data were collected personally, tabulated in the form of counting frequencies and then analyzed through percentages.

Objectives

1. To find out the difficulties faced by the L2 learners when speaking in English.
2. To find out whether one to one speaking practices are helpful for the L2 learners to build up their confidence in oral communication.

Research Questions

1. What are the difficulties faced by the undergraduates while speaking in English?
2. Are one to one speaking practices helpful for the students to build up the confidence in oral communication?

Results and Discussions

Table 1. Responses of students about their speaking ability in English

Question	Yes		No	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Shyness and fear in speaking	16 (40%)	21(52.5%)	2 (5%)	1 (2.5%)
Insufficient vocabulary to speak	16 (40%)	19 (47.5%)	2 (5%)	3 (7.5%)
Different exercises given for speaking ability	7 (17.5%)	5(12.5%)	12 (30%)	16 (40%)
Do not know how to speak correctly	13 (32.5%)	15 (37.5%)	5 (12.5%)	7 (17.5%)
I like English	15 (37.5%)	14 (35%)	6 (15%)	5 (12.5%)
Enough time for speaking ability	16 (40%)	18 (45%)	2 (5%)	4 (10%)
Students are the main cause for poor speaking	11 (27.5%)	7 (17.5%)	8 (20%)	14 (35%)
Teachers are main cause of for poor speaking	11 (27.5%)	13 (32.5%)	9 (22.5%)	7 (17.5%)
Regularly arranged activities	4 (10%)	1 (2.5%)	16 (40%)	19 (47.5%)
Speaking with class fellows and teachers	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)	17 (42.5%)	19 (47.5%)

As depicted in table-1, the students are shy and afraid of speaking in English because they think that their class fellows will laugh at them or they think that it is a disgrace when mistakes are done when they speak in English. Majority of students 37 (92.5%) said “YES” but 3 (7.5%) students said “NO” to the question. This can be ignored because vast majorities are of the view that they are humiliated by friends when they make mistakes. 35(87.5%) students claimed that they faced the problem of insufficient vocabulary to express their ideas to others while 5(12.5%) students disagree with the above idea and they were satisfied with their word power. However, this is a very few number.

28(70%) students replied negatively about the different exercises, tasks or opportunities given to them for improving their speaking ability. However, 12(30%) students expressed that they had the diverse kinds of opportunities to do different exercises to develop their speaking ability. Regarding the accuracy of expressing ideas, 28(70%) students agreed that they did not know how to speak correctly while 12(30%) knew how to express their ideas correctly. The remarkable point is that 29(72.5%) like to improve their English proficiency and 11 (27.5%) do not have positive attitudes to learn English. This is a considerable number.

In addition, 34(85%) students are of the view that sufficient time was not given to practice activities for the improvement of speaking ability whereas 6(15%) students claim that they had a number of opportunities in this connection. In further discussions with students, some of them claimed that they had the chances to practice speaking only after entering the university.

18(45%) students replied that they themselves are responsible for the poor speaking ability, while 22(55%) students responded “NO” regarding this. 24(60%) students said that the teachers were responsible for this main cause of poor speaking ability because they paid their attention to teach grammar and writing skill. This should be paid serious attention. However, 16 (40%) are of the view that different activities such as group discussions and debating competitions, etc. were regularly being arranged by the teachers in their classes. 5 (12.5%) students responded positively but a maximum number of students, 35(87.5%) responded negatively. Responding to the last question whether the students speak in the class in English with their teachers and fellow students, 4(10%) have said “yes”, while 36(90%) responded negatively in this regard.

Conclusion

Even though the students have already been learning English continuously for more than twelve years, it is understood that the majority of the students are shy and afraid to speak in English, thinking that their class fellows would laugh at them. The complaint made by many students is that enough time has not been given for the improvement of speaking ability in the classroom and their vocabulary level is insufficient to express their ideas to the others. In addition, different exercises or activities had not been given to them to improve the speaking ability. According to the collected data, some of students had the confidence to speak correctly.

However, it is worth expressing that both students and teachers are equally responsible for the poor speaking ability of the students. Different activities to provide opportunities to practice using the language such as group discussions, debates and competitions have not regularly been arranged in the classroom as expressed by a maximum number of the students.

English should be taught as a language as well as a subject. As the first step, the confidence to use the language should be improved. For such a purpose, ample of opportunities to speak in English should be supplied to the students in the classroom. Organizing one to one speaking sessions in the classroom is a good counteractive effort to build up confidence in the learners. In such activities, each student will get a chance to speak at least five to ten minutes a day individually with an instructor. Instructors can play the role of a facilitator. They avoid correcting the students at the beginning of speaking stages but help them in friendly manner in order to build up the confidence of the students. The students should be evaluated without students' knowledge and continuous proficiency tests can be conducted in order to examine the progress of the students. Students should be motivated, encouraged and appreciated during the activities for eradicating their shyness and fear to speak. Students should also be instructed to be positive in order to provide a friendly and conducive environment in the classroom. Linguistic skills such as vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciations may be emphasized by the instructors during the speaking sessions without pointing out the mistakes done by the students.

In addition, the students should be supplied with opportunities to develop the habit of listening and reading in the classroom and they must be guided for that. To assess the language competency of students at various levels, viva-voce can be included as a compulsory part of the examination system.

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