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Acquisition of Effective Speaking Skill for the Second Language Learners of English: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract:

Speaking English intelligibly and flawlessly has been a major concern for the professionals in this competitive era. Engineering graduates fail to get a job because of lack of fluency in English. Professional colleges like Engineering institutes take several initiations like providing PPT classes, spoken English classes, soft skill training etc to their students to make them speak in English. In most of the cases it has been found that though the engineering graduates have good percentage of marks in their concerned subjects, they fail to grab a job because of lack of fluency in English. This paper will look into various aspects of the said issue like the cause behind the failure of acquisition of speaking skill for professional like Engineering graduates and the remedial measures to overcome the same.

Keywords: Intelligibly, PPT(Pre placement training), Spoken English, Fluency, Soft skill training

Introduction-The potential for employment of students graduating from professional colleges is enormous, but one major handicap which many of them face is poor communicative ability in English. It is liberalization and globalization helped in developing our contacts in international level where professionals need to communicate with foreigners inside India as well as abroad in English. The professionals must communicate in English which would be understood by one and all. Professionals must acquire the speaking skill in English therefore that will help in facilitating an easier entry into the corporate world.

Out of the four skills of English language, Speaking is the most important one. Without proper acquisition of speaking skill the existence of the human being in the earth is rarely possible. Learners need the speaking skill to establish and maintain relationships, to negotiate, to influence

people. Speaking is the skill by which learners are assessed when the first impression is formed (Hedge 261).

To speak English effectively the learner needs to acquire the following as outlined by Harmer-

1. Lexis and grammar
2. Negotiation language
3. Connected speech
4. Expressive Devices

Brown in dealing with spoken interaction, lists the features of spoken language which can make speaking and consequently understanding the spoken word, especially for beginners, an intricate task. These are mentioned characteristics (270):

1. Reduced forms
2. Stress, rhythm, and intonation
3. Clustering
4. Redundancy
5. Performance variables
6. Colloquial language
7. Interaction

Speaking does not take place in a vacuum. In most cases people do not speak on their own or to themselves. Speaking is a reciprocal activity. For an interaction to be meaningful, a speaker needs a partner, an interlocutor. Taking part in an interaction, e.g. having a conversation, requires certain skills and certain language to be available at the learner's disposal.

Models of speech production, like many others in cognitive psychology, resemble flow charts. They represent speaking in terms of a series of stages through which a speaker needs to proceed when assembling an utterance. Their point of departure is an idea in the mind, and the end-product is a disturbance in the air caused by the operation of the speaker's articulators (Tongue, teeth, lips etc).

Levelt (1989, 1999) makes clear that any model of speech production, whether in 11 or in 12, needs to incorporate a number of stages. Field (2004: 284) identifies them as:

a) a conceptual stage, where the proposition that is to be expressed first enters the mind of the speaker

b) a syntactic stage, where the speaker chooses an appropriate frame into which words are to be inserted, and marks parts of it for plural, verb agreement etc.

c) a lexical stage, where a meaning-driven search of the speaker's lexicon or vocabulary store takes place, supported by cues as to the form of the word (e.g. its first syllable)

d) a phonological stage, where the abstract information assembled so far is converted into a speech-like form

e) a phonetic stage, where features such as assimilation are introduced, which reduce articulatory effort; and where the target utterance is converted into a set of instructions to the articulators

f) an articulatory stage, in which the message is uttered.

It is important to note that the first three of these stages are abstract and not in verbal form. It is only at stage (d) that linguistic forms become involved. A model of speaking also needs to allow for:

a forward planning mechanism at discourse level, which (for example) marks out in advance which syllable is to carry sentence stress

a buffer, in which an articulatory plan for the current utterance can be held while the utterance is actually being produced

a monitoring mechanism, which enables a speaker to check an utterance for accuracy, clarity and appropriacy immediately before it is uttered and almost immediately afterwards.

Issues and Challenges for the Second Language Learners in Acquiring Speaking Skill-

Taking Engineering education into account, Engineering graduates in Orissa follow the curriculum of Communicative/Business communication English in first and second semester of their engineering courses. They go through the syllabus, write the end semester examination for theory and practice the requisite assignment in the said laboratory classes. In addition to this, when these students go up to their next semester, management provides pre-placement training classes, Business English certificate courses, Soft skill development classes to enhance their English proficiency and to make them industry ready.

Unfortunately, the above-cited efforts as well as courses go fruitless when these Engineering graduates fail to communicate properly in different spheres of society. It has been observed that most of these professionals fail to-

1. Open and close a conversation.
2. Take turn in a discussion
3. React properly

4. Ask questions
5. Offering suggestions
6. Introduce self and others
7. Offering apology
8. Giving directions
9. Responding to telephone calls
10. Negotiation of meaning

The Reason Behind the Failure of These Professionals in Performing in the Above Cited Situations-

0. The factors that are likely to cause reluctance are failure with the learners could be cultural, linguistic, and affective factors (Burns and Joyce 134). Examples of linguistic factors limiting speaking may be, according to Burns and Joyce, difficulties in the phonetics and phonology of the target language, poor knowledge of grammatical patterns or low awareness cultural background and social conventions that are necessary for processing meaning in the target language. A low motivation level, timidity or anxiety in class, negative social experiences, and culture shock are ranked among possible affective factors(134).

1. Large size class rooms where theory is taking an edge over practice.
2. Teacher centric classroom instruction where students talk time is less or nil.
3. Time constraint to complete the syllabus ,therefore less stress is being given for acquisition of speaking skill.
4. There is no end semester examination to test the Speaking skill of the students therefore students neglect to practice the speaking skill.
5. Lack of appropriate knowledge of teachers to teach English pronunciation.
6. Lack of motivation of the Vernacular medium students leads to non acquisition of the Speaking skill.
7. Lack of appropriate environment and appropriate resource to acquire the skill.

In addition to this lack of practice really aggravate the problem of non acquisition of speaking skill.

In this connection, the remarks of Bright&McGregor(1978)seem pertinent:

Skills can be achieved only through practice, which is something we cannot do for our pupils. They got to do it for themselves, which means that the good teacher of language, even more than the teacher of other subjects, should spend a great deal of time, listening, reading and not talking. Of course, he/she will have to talk quite a lot, but this pupils have got to talk and read and write very much more, under his guidance, if they are to make progress(p4).

8.A performance deficit in a test of L2 speaking might arise from:

.Linguistic sources: gaps in the mental lexicon, imprecise or incomplete representations in the syllbary, inability to encode a syntactic pattern into a form of words.

.Knowledge sources: cultural gaps in world knowledge or pragmatic knowledge

.Failures of comprehension or recall which leaves gap in the discourse representation.

9. Learners problems with speaking could arise because of mother tongue interference, inhibition, no ideas to share and problems of participation in large size class rooms.

Remedial Measures to Improve the Speaking Skill of the Second Language Learners or Professionals of English-

1.Back ground knowledge of the students have to be analysed and befitting methodology of teaching style has to be adopted to acquire the Speaking skill.

2.Students should be given with task and assignment so as to improve their speaking skill.

3.Students should be encouraged to participate in debate ,group discussions,role plays, group presentations as well as individual presentations to improve their speaking skill.

4.Teacher talk time has to be reduced in the class and students talk time has to be more .

5.The large size class room strength should be down sized into various groups and assignments and task should administred to these students to improve their speaking skill.

6.Teachers should motivate the students to speak in the target language in and out side the class room so as to facilitate to the learners to acquire the speaking skill easily.

7.Formative assessment of speaking test has to be designed by the teacher and students must take part in the test to know their level of proficiency by the assessment of the test.

8.End semester speaking test has to be designed by the Institute or the University under which professionals continue their education ,so as to improve the interest of the learners in acquiring the the Speaking skill in English.

9.Business English Certificate (BEC) Speaking test pattern has to be adopted by the professionals to improve the Speaking skill of their students. At the same time professionals should be encouraged to participate in BEC Exam to know their proficiency in Speaking skill.

10. Littlewood's methodology of teaching speaking should be adopted by the teacher so as to improve the speaking skill of the professionals. Littlewood argues for four different kinds of activities that are requisite for learning to speak. Within his primary division there are two major categories, i.e. pre-communicative and communicative activities. Pre-communicative activities are defined as follows.

“The teacher isolates specific elements of knowledge or skill which compose communicative ability, and provides the learners with opportunities to practice them separately..... The aim is to provide learners with a fluent command of the linguistic system, without actually requiring them to use this system for communicative purposes”. (Little wood 1994 85.)

11. Extensive reading should be practiced by the students to acquire more vocabulary which in turn will help them to express better in communicative contexts.

12. Fluency-oriented task as suggested by Littlewood, Harmer and Ur should be practiced by the students to enhance their Speaking skill in English. Littlewood's “Functional communicative activities” and “ Social interaction activities”, Harmer's “Practice activities” and “Communicative activities” and Ur's interaction activities like brain storming ,organizing and compounding activities should be practiced by the students under the guidance of teachers to enhance their Speaking skill.

13. Employ pair-work and group-work, select the topic and task carefully, adjust the level of language difficulty, Make learners speak the target language, Establish good relationship (Tsui 164). These are the advises given by Ur for the teacher to execute the task in the class room.

(Adapted from Ur 121-122).

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