



WHY DO THE L2 STUDENTS STRUGGLE TO SPEAK ENGLISH PROPERLY?

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Abstract:

The descriptive survey research aims at exploring why the students struggle to speak English properly without mistakes even after years of learning English at schools and completing their graduation studies, from students' perspective. The study is conducted on 182 B.Ed. students taken from two colleges of education in India. The investigator used a self-constructed and validated Questionnaire for the study. 11 questions were asked and the results were analysed. The findings of the study reveal that majority of the students were not able to speak in English without mistakes [Research Question (RQ) 1] and their level of fluency in English was average (RQ 2). Most of the students were interested in improving their spoken skill in English (RQ 3) for getting an employment in schools (RQ 4). Students should be taught how to speak in English at the secondary level (RQ 5); they were weak in spoken English because their teachers did not teach and train well in speaking (RQ 6); and their teachers did not take special interest (RQ 7). Inability to construct sentences correctly (RQ 8) was their major problem that prevented them from speaking in English. They were not blaming their parents (RQ 9) for their poor spoken English skill and they prefer to go to a spoken English coaching centre for improving their spoken English (RQ 10) and they were confident of teaching their subject in English if they were appointed as a teacher in schools (RQ 11), in spite of this limitation.

Key Words: L2 students, Spoken English Proficiency

Background:

English is spoken at a useful level by some 1.75 billion people worldwide – that's one in every four. By 2020, we forecast that two billion people will be using it – or learning to use it (The British Council, 2103). Next to the United States (268 Million), India remains the world's second-largest English-speaking country (125 Million). It ranks the 34th country with a moderate proficiency level in English according to the English Proficiency Index (EPI) of 2019 (<https://www.igspekenenglishonline.com>). It ranks the 5th country with a high level of proficiency among the Asian countries, next to Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia and Hong kong, China (<https://www.humanresourcesonline.net>). Thus the fact is obvious. Though India is the second biggest English speaking country in the world the EPI stands far below in the order of ranking. This revelation calls for exploring the English proficiency of Indian users at different levels because "speaking is one of the most important skills to be developed and enhanced as means of effective communication" (Morozova, 2013). This article aims at finding out why the students struggle to speak English properly, from the perspectives of the L2 learners.

Review of Related Studies:

Learning to speak English demands much the active participation and co-operation of the learners, and an increase in their motivation to speak English and enhanced self-confidence through doing so (Ahlquist, 2019). Student-centric activity based learning techniques directly impacts learning to speak. Storytelling strategy could improve students' speaking skill as it improved their comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Sharma, 2018). Though language can be learnt at any age, early starters have a marginal advantage in terms of oral fluency and exposure outside the school has a greater impact on oral fluency (De Wolf, 2017). Communicative tasks aimed at improving speaking skill may not achieve the goal set as the students may not necessarily actively interact with each other in pair work and so the students could be given freedom to choose their favourite working partners, rather than assigning them to a fixed pair by the teachers (Chen, 2017). Second language learners around the globe encounter problems and difficulties in speaking that stands as barriers to master speaking skill. Fear of mistake, shyness, anxiety and lack of confidence were identified as the problems of the students in speaking English (Al Nakhalah, 2016). Speaking English is a reachable goal. The structure and step-by-step process of the interactive English syllabus effectively engaged many students and encouraged more of them to make an effort because conversing in English that showed a gradual progress in speaking (Talandis & Stout, 2015).

Methodology:

This study is descriptive in nature. 182 students, heterogeneous in nature, studying Bachelor of Education, within the age group of 21 and 23, from two colleges of education in Tirunelveli district of Tamil

Nadu State were the sample chosen for this survey research, adopting purposive sampling technique. The tool prepared and validated by the investigator was used for the study. Content validity was established by three English Language Teaching (ELT) experts. The draft tool was modified and improved based on the experts' opinion and the questions raised to clarify certain concepts in the items of the tool, and the final tool was once again given to the ELT experts. After getting their approval, the questionnaire was given to the sample and they were explained the purpose of the study. The final tool consisted of 11 questions, out of which 3 were Yes/No questions; 1 was a 5-point rating scale with options very good, good, average, poor and very poor; and the remaining 7 questions had 5 options out of which the respondents were asked to choose any one of their choice, considering the appropriateness. An appeal was made to be honest in answering, after going through every item in the tool, without any haste. The investigator himself collected the data from the sample of students. All the distributed 182 questionnaires were got back from the students and they were selected and tabulated for data analysis, as all the items in the tool were answered, without omitting any of the item. Percentage analysis was done to find out the results of the study.

Research Questions and Results:

1. Can you speak fluently in English without mistakes?

Category	Yes	No
N	32	150
Percentage	17.58	82.42

2. How would you rate the level of your fluency in speaking English?

Category	Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
N	31	47	67	25	12
Percentage	17.03	25.83	36.82	13.73	6.59

3. Are you interested in improving your spoken English still?

Category	Yes	No
N	126	56
Percentage	69.23	30.76

4. Why do you want to improve your fluency in Speaking English? (Choose the best one, considering your need)

Category	To be employed as a teacher soon	To gain knowledge	To get more marks in the examinations	To speak with officials and friends	To improve your self-image and personality
N	77	25	31	27	22
Percentage	42.31	13.73	17.03	14.84	12.09

5. At which level of education Spoken English should have been taught properly?

Category	At Pre-primary Level	At Primary level	At Secondary level	At Higher Secondary level	At College (UG & PG)
N	20	51	72	27	12
Percentage	10.99%	28.02	39.56	14.84	6.59

6. What could be the reason for you to be weak in Spoken English skill?(Choose only one, considering how it affected you)

Category	Because my teachers did not teach and train well in speaking	Because I studied in a Tamil-medium school	Because I did not take sincere effort to learn & speak English	Because I did not use the given opportunities well	Because I am coming from a rural background
N	29	30	66	25	32
Percentage	15.94	16.48	36.27	13.73	17.58

7. If you were to blame your teachers for your poor English, why would it be? (Choose any one option only).

Category	Because my teachers were incompetent	Because my Teachers were not qualified	Because my teachers did not take special interest	Because my teachers had no time to teach spoken English	I will not blame my parents at all
N	26	14	39	61	42
%	14.29	7.69	21.43	33.51	23.08

8. What prevents you from speaking in English?

Category	I am weak in grammar	I don't know enough vocabulary for speaking	I don't know how to construct sentences correctly	I do not have a companion to speak in English	I am afraid of speaking English
N	21	34	57	30	40
%	11.54	18.69	31.31	16.48	21.98

9. If you were to blame your parents for your poor English, why would it be?

Category	Because my parents did not admit mein an English medium school	Because they did not give education in a good school	Because they were economically poor	Because they did not have that much awareness	I will not blame my parents at all
N	23	21	52	27	59
%	12.64	11.54	28.57	14.83	32.42

10. What would you like to do personally for improving spoken English fluency now? (Choose the best any only option)

Category	I would like to go to a Spoken English coaching Centre and learn	I would like to go a good English teacher privately and learn	I would like to join an on-line course and learn speaking	I would like to use free online study materials and learn	I would like to be employed in a school and learn speaking gradually
N	42	53	37	29	21
%	23.08	29.12	20.33	15.94	11.53

11. Are you confident of teaching your subject in English if you are appointed as a teacher in a school upon completion of the B.Ed. course?

Category	Yes	No
N	115	67
Percentage	63.19	36.81

Discussion of the Results:

The results of data analysis show that majority of the students were not able to speak in English without mistakes (Research Question 1) and the level of fluency in English was average (Research Question 2). This response from the students, who were studying B.Ed. degree and who would become the teachers in schools immediately after the completion of this professional course within a shorter duration, is unwelcoming and unexpected. Because they are not mere students studying in schools, rather prospective teachers, and the possibility of improving their English to speak without mistakes in a formal learning school or college atmosphere has almost come to an end. As they have a greater responsibility of teaching students, it is recommended that they ought to learn and master speaking without mistakes in English. At the same time, it is promising that majority of the students were interested in improving their spoken English (Research Question 3). Majority of them were for improving their oral fluency to be employed as a teacher soon (Research Question 4), followed by the other reasons. This realization that they need to have good English for getting a job would be a motivating force. If efforts are taken with sincerity and dedication, it will benefit much themselves and their student community.

The expressed opinion by majority of the students that spoken English have to be taught properly at secondary school level (Research Question 5) when compared to pre-primary, primary, higher secondary and higher education levels, draws the attention to the fact that the secondary school teachers (those who are teaching from the standards 6th to 10th) have a greater role to be played. Further the stated majority of the opinion that they are weak in spoken English because the teachers did not teach and train well in speaking by the students (Research Question 6) calls for reflection with a sense of moral responsibility and professional obligatory duties by the teaching fraternity. If it is found to be true, it is recommended that the teachers should have to pay more attention and efforts on improving the spoken English, not merely completing the syllabus and drilling them for getting pass mark in the examinations. To the hypothetical question that if you were to blame the teachers for your poor standard of English why it would be, majority of were of the opinion that their teachers did not take special interest (Research question 7) and it is by and large found to be true in the prevailing school context, as in general teachers are satisfied with doing the assigned regular works. So it is recommended that teachers take extra effort to help them come out of the struggle to speak in English without mistakes.

Constructing sentences to convey precisely the message with proper grammatical structure is not so easy, and it requires continuous speech practice. The expressed inability by majority of the students to construct sentences correctly (Research Question 8) prevented them from speaking English, when compared to fear of speaking in English, lack of vocabulary, lack of companionship to speak in English, and lack of grammatical knowledge was enlightening. It exactly states their specific difficulty defect and what need to be done to remedy the situation.

The responsibility of the parents to provide good education for their children is much regarded everywhere and at all times. Majority of the B.Ed. students at this grown-up stage were satisfied and expressed their feeling that they would not blame their parents at all (Research Question 9) for their poor spoken English skill. Blaming others or regretting over the past won't help in solving the problem. What needs to be done to overcome the problem is a positive outlook with an idea of what to do next. To the question raised, what would

you like to do personally for improving spoken English fluency, majority of the respondents expressed their desire to go to a spoken English coaching centre and learn spoken English (Research Question 10), followed by the other self-initiation efforts.

Conclusion:

Learning to teach is a skill and it can be mastered by experience. To the question whether they are confident of teaching their subject in English if they are appointed as a teacher in a school upon completion of the B.Ed. course, majority of the student positively answered and said 'yes' (Research Question 11). It shows that the amount of self-confidence that they have on themselves that they can pick-up spoken English gradually after joining in a school is worth appreciated. Yet, the answer given by the same students 'No' to the question whether they are capable of speaking in English without mistakes (Research Question 1) is embarrassing. Good communicative skill is a basic and an expected competence from any teacher by the school management, the parents and the students, and the B.Ed. students realizing this need should do their best to improve their spoken English. This will overall be beneficial to themselves, their children and the society.

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