An Investigation of Pedagogical Factors Influencing the Speaking Skills of ESL Learners at the Tertiary Level in the District of Thanjavur

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Abstract

Acquiring a second language is a continuous process in which the L2 learner undergoes a lot of mental stress through unlearning and re-learning. Of the four language skills, speaking is nevertheless considered to be a challenging one. Students in a country like India, where English is the primary language of education, find it difficult to speak in English in ESL classrooms because of the lack of communicative competence. Despite the contrary arguments about the relationship between teacher input and language learning, it is observable that pedagogical variables influence language and its process of learning. The principle of the interrelationship between language learning and pedagogical input in the classroom environment is indispensable.

This paper deals with the pedagogical factors that influence L2 speaking in a classroom environment of government college students in Thanjavur. The purpose of this paper is to find out some of the pedagogical factors that affect the oral competence of a few ESL students, studying BSc. Physics in Rajah Serfoji Government Arts College, Thanjavur. Results show the participant's understanding of L2 is influenced by their exposure to language in a classroom environment starting from their school days. The paper also analyzed and evaluated the pedagogical environment of the learners who participated in the study. It also covers the use of strategies, techniques, methods (i.e. cooperative learning, teamwork, pair work, oral drills, role plays) by the teacher in his/her classroom.

Keywords: SLA, TBLT, Pedagogical factor, Communicative competence.

Introduction

Pedagogical factors are the factors or aspects or variables that influence a learner in his or her academic set up / background. This extends to a variety of sub-variables or aspects that either contribute or affect the learner to a reasonable extent. This covers a long list of aspects such as

classroom environment, teacher's role, type of task used by the teachers, method of teaching, motivation given to students by teachers, strategies or techniques used by the teachers, and so on.

The teacher plays a vital role in a classroom environment in influencing the learning abilities of the second language learners. This leads to changes in the motivation levels which helps to a great extent in SLA. Gardner & Masgoret (2004) suggest that motivational intensity, classroom anxiety, and evaluation of the learning situation does not exist in isolation and that the learning situation includes evaluation of the teacher and the course as part of the integrative motive.

Dornyei (2007) mentions several influential concepts to create a motivating classroom environment: "group cohesiveness and interpersonal relations, group norms and student roles, the teacher's leadership styles, and the process of facilitation, as well as the main phases of a proactive, motivational teaching practice within a process-oriented framework".

Lantolf (2002) says, "the human mind is always and everywhere mediated primarily by linguistically based communication". As a mediated process, SLA is seen as developing when learners engage in classroom interactions, often with more capable team members. Though there are instances where learning happens outside the classroom environment, the major learning processes happen inside the classroom and precisely between the teacher and the students and among the students or between learners and more capable learners. Teachers must often question the learners to check that they had understood the meaning of keywords or concepts. Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (2002) suggest that "Providing examples of words, their meanings and demonstrating how they might be used when beginning to learn a language may be more important than attention to the grammatical components and spelling of vocabulary".

Several studies highlight the importance of learning inside the classroom as against learning outside the classroom. Various views/perspectives have been presented on the said issue. This is often done in task-based studies. These studies concentrate on the type of input or activity concerning the level of learner and the learning environment about psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and communicative competence-based tasks.

Tasks can involve any or all four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In carrying out a task the learners' principal focus is on exchanging and understanding meanings, rather than on the practice of form or prespecified forms or patterns. There is some kind of purpose or goal set for the task, so that learners know what they are expected to achieve by the end of the task, for example, to write a list of differences, to complete a route map or a picture, to report a solution to a problem, or to express the most interesting/memorable personal anecdote. The outcome of the completed task can be shared in some way with others.

TBLT initially emphasized fluency in communication at the expense of other aspects of language like accuracy and complexity (Krashen and Terrell's (1983) Natural Approach, and Prabhu's (1987) arguments against an explicit focus on grammar). J. Willis (1996) views a classroom task as 'a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome.' He also suggests that language use in tasks is likely to reflect language use in the outside world.

Significance of the study

ESL studies that focus on pedagogical factors have been carried out so far in various areas using many methodologies. This study is significant because this type of research involving a movie-based task concerning communicative competence has never been done among the government college students in the District of Thanjavur.

Students' profile

A group of fifteen students from second-year Physics of Rajah Serfoji College, Thanjavur was chosen for the study. The students chosen were from a rural background. They have basic knowledge of English and can communicate to a certain extent. They are from different family backgrounds whose exposure varies accordingly. The students could understand L2 and express their views and opinions to some extent but most of them could not fluently speak in L2.

The research question

How do pedagogical factors affect the speaking skills of ESL learners in a government college?

Methodology

Fifteen students were chosen at random and intimated about the purpose of the study. The students who volunteered (15 students) were extrinsically motivated to undergo the study. They were given tasks to analyze the pedagogical factors that affect their speaking skills. The students were divided into two groups based on a baseline test. Both the groups were initially given a text-based task i.e., they were asked to read the story of the "Gladiator" in text format and asked to summarize the story in their own words. The task turned out to be a challenging one for both groups. At the next level, both the experimental group and the control group were asked to watch the movie "Gladiator" with subtitles and were asked to narrate the story as they have understood in their own words.

A movie like Gladiator was chosen because students of this age might be more interested in action-based movies with a historical significance. Moreover, videos help to a great extent in SLA as Lonergan (1984) pointed out that video can present "complete communicative situations. At their best, video presentations will be intrinsically interesting to language learners. The learner will want to watch, even if comprehension is limited."

As the study focuses on communicative competence concerning the individual caliber of the students inside the classroom environment, it gives more weightage to communicative competence rather than fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Descriptive statistics have been used to analyze the data.

Three participants who volunteered could not attend the video classroom as they had some other academic engagement.

Results:

Table 1: Control group

S.No	Roll No	Fluency (5marks)	Accuracy (5marks)	Complexity (5marks)	Communicative competence (10marks)	Total (25 marks)
1	17PE1207	3	3	3	6	15
2	17PE1209	4	4	3	5	16
3	17PE1225	3	4	3	5	15
4	17PE1227	4	4	3	4	15
5	17PE1239	4	3	4	4	15
6	17PE1240	3	4	4	5	16

Table 2: Experimental group

S.No	Roll No	Fluency (5marks)	Accuracy (5marks)	Complexity (5marks)	Communicative competence (10marks)	Total (25 marks)
1	17PE1203	5	4	4	8	21
2	17PE1205	4	4	4	8	20
3	17PE1213	5	5	5	7	22
4	17PE1217	5	4	4	7	20
5	17PE1230	4	5	5	7	21
6	17PE1245	4	4	4	8	20

Discussion

Students who scored less found it too difficult to comprehend the movie and hence couldn't narrate it effectively. This was mainly due to the lack of communicative competence. It was obvious that they were rarely shown any sort of English movies or any form of video in their classroom environment right from their school days. This category of students has never been exposed to innovative classroom techniques or strategies. On analysis, it was clear that these samples are first-generation graduates who have had a lesser chance of interacting with others in English inside or outside the classroom. These students' medium of instruction in school was in their first language; even if they studied in English medium schools they were not taught in English. They were taught only in their regional language. Classroom instructions by their teachers, students' interactions with teachers, clarifications based on a learning item, etc… were done only in the regional language. This has been the major reason for their failure to understand the movie even in the video format. Their exposure to language was too limited that they could not complete their sentences in a meaningful manner when asked to narrate the movie in their own words.

Pedagogical factors found to be influential:

The following are the pedagogical factors incurred from the study:

    (a) Teachers communicate in the regional language.
    (b) Interactions among students in the regional language.
    (c) Teacher's motivation to students in SLA to an insignificant level.
    (d) Lack of Innovative teaching methods.
    (e) Classroom practices with less focus on learner-centered tasks/activities
    (f) Underdeveloped ambiance for learning

The set of samples whose communicative competence was better were from very good schools that had a good classroom environment. They have had a good chance of interacting in English with teachers, friends, and peers. Moreover, they were encouraged to read English newspapers at the library and also to watch English news bulletins and sometimes even encouraged to watch movies. This has helped these students to a great extent not only in comprehending the movie but also to narrate it in their language. Their exposure to the English language in a pedagogical environment is higher compared to the other set of samples.

Limitations

Such small-scale experiments can be performed only when the sample size is small. The results may not be precise when bigger sample size is involved. It may not produce the desired effect if there is no proper language lab set up.

Conclusion

It has been evident from the study that students from a better pedagogical environment with good exposure to L2, can understand and articulate in a second language considerably to a reasonable extent than those with limited or nil classroom exposure in terms of SLA. Moreover, the audio-visual presentation also aids their comprehension of language to a considerable amount. The study can be extended to a case study involving a greater number of samples and suitable tasks i.e., could be designed with a few changes in the criteria type and video input**.** This study also implies that a reasonable number of innovative as well as interesting tasks need to be given weightage not only to be practiced while learning inside the classroom but also to be incorporated into the syllabus to strengthen and enable a better learning environment.

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