

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

COUNSELLING AS A STRATEGY TO IDENTIFY PROBLEMS OF THE ESL LEARNERS AND MOTIVATE THEM TO PARTICIPATE IN THE BASIC SPEAKING SKILLS TRAINING AT THE ENTRY LEVEL OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Effective oral communication in English language has become mandatory for academic success at the level of higher education. Students, when they are in the job market, are assessed, evaluated and graded only by their speaking skills. Developing speaking skills is invariably one of the challenges and responsibilities of teachers of English at higher educational institutions. Hence, it is the need of the hour for teachers of English to find out innovative strategies to motivate the students to enhance their speaking skills in English. Counselling is taken as a significant strategy by the researcher to identify the problems and to solve them through motivation of the students to participate in speaking skills development programmes. Having identified the challenges faced by the students during their participation in the speaking skill tasks, the researcher has used counselling as an experimental strategy to explore its significance in making the students participate in the speaking skill training programme. The participants were fifty first year under graduate students, who were below an intermediate level in proficiency in basic English speaking skills. The students took up a pre test on self-introduction orally before counselling and a post test after counselling. The results indicated a significant difference in their speaking ability.

Key Words: Counselling, Motivation, Strategy, Speaking skills.

INTRODUCTION

Basic oral communicative skills are very important in today's highly competitive world. Oral communication is an important skill and essential for success at different levels of life, and for one's career development. Unfortunately in English language classroom, speaking skills have been completely ignored, and emphasis is given on only writing skills for the chief purpose of making the students get through the written examinations. Speaking is a demanding task that involves extremely cognitive processes.

In today's higher education classrooms, heterogeneous environment is a common

phenomenon. In such class rooms, only a very few students are able to speak and respond in English. The students are even not participatory in the oral exercises in English. Hence, when students are required to speak, they are unable to exhibit or express even personal information about themselves in English, and they become frustrated and show reluctance to participate in oral communication in English. The main reasons for their frustration and reluctance to take part in speaking activities include lack of motivation, lack of teachers' understanding of the learner's level of speaking before the speaking skill training programme, and lack of opportunity for the teachers

to use diagnostic tools to find out the entry level problems of the students in speaking skills. Moreover, students rarely speak even in their own vernacular language in public performances like seminar presentations in the class, oral competitions, acting in English plays, etc. So, the students in the class feel very strange, nervous and anxious to participate in speaking activities in English. When students are asked to communicate in English, they feel afraid to speak, and many of them express a common response that they have nothing to say.

In a heterogeneous environment, training the students in speaking skills is not an easy task because speaking is the result of composing ideas, and is developed in the mind of the learners. It also involves a number of sub-skills: pronunciation, accent, stress, pause, intonation, tone and delivering with appropriate body language. It is a complex process neither easy nor spontaneous for many second language speakers.

There are various factors that affect the teaching of speaking skills effectively. Class room management, syllabus completion, time constraint and less effective teaching methods are a few of the factors. As a result, students who can speak well in English, lack the opportunities to enhance their speaking skill, and the average and below average students struggle to speak a few sentences in English on their own. When these students get enrolled in higher education, with some expectations to develop knowledge on the subject they choose, they are expected to speak fluently in different situations such as seminars, oral presentations in the class, and conversation with teachers, peers and administrators. Such requirements reveal the significance of teaching basic speaking skills in English. Thus, it is very important for the teachers of English to try to use various innovative strategies to teach their students speaking skills with utmost care. The present study focuses on using counselling as a strategy and its impact on students to motivate them to participate in speaking activities in order to make them enhance their speaking skills in English.

Definition of Counselling: There are a number of definitions available for the term 'Counselling'.

Scholars of psychology from various parts of the world have defined counselling in different ways.

Counselling refers to "professional guidance of the individual by the use of standard psychological methods such as collecting case history data using various techniques of personal interview and testing interests and aptitudes" quoted in Britto. Donald A. Biggs(2000) says in psychology, counselling refer to a 'scientifically respectable' way of dispensing personal, social and educational information or advice.

The investigation, on the impact of Counselling was done on fifty first year undergraduate students at St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli. The aims and objectives of this initial evaluation were to:

- Investigate the researcher's experience in counselling and his perception of its impact.
- Compare the psychological fear of participating in the speaking activities in the heterogeneous class before and after the use of the strategy of counselling.
- Compare the teacher-learner rapport to enhance the speaking skills of the student before and after counselling.
- Compare students' confidence and their involvement in speaking tasks before and after the use of the method of counselling.

The Study: The present study addresses the use of counselling as a strategy in developing speaking skills of fifty first year undergraduate students. The objective of the study is to determine whether the counselling as a strategy has any significant impact on the first year undergraduate students' speaking skills in English. The study seeks to answer the following question: Does 'counselling' as a strategy significantly enhance the speaking ability of the first year undergraduate students?

The Design of the Study: The design of the study was experimental which involved only an experimental group. The experimental group's data before and after the 'counselling' was analysed and compared to evaluate the impact of using counselling as a strategy in enhancing the basic speaking abilities of first year undergraduate students in English language.

The Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were fifty first year undergraduate students from St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli, whose ability to speak in English was below that of the students at intermediate level. They belonged to the age group of 18-20 years. The students were from rural and semi-rural background. They participated in the basic speaking tasks of self-introduction, but were reluctant to perform it confidently without fear.

Need of Counselling Skills for the Language

Teachers: As remarked by M. John Britto, 'in ELT, the teachers are required to be good counsellors in order to succeed in the mission of making the students learn English. Even though they are not specialized in Psychology or counselling, they should have basic skills of counselling in order to make the target students proficient in communication skills in English'(p.48-49). Oxford Advance learner's Dictionary defines Counselling as "professional advice about a problem"(p.347). It also implies that counselor refers to "a person who has been trained to advise people with problems, especially personal problem". Counselling at the beginning of the English language training programme is (1) to discover the difficulties of the learners, and (2) to make the learners disclose whatever notions, perceptions, experiences, expectations and interests are there in the mind of the learners before the start of the English language training course. (3) to plan the course with care, so that the meaningful interventions are assumed by the language trainers to achieve the outcome from the target learners.

Procedure: At first, the students were asked to participate in the proficiency test on oral self-introduction in English. Arthur Hughes mentions, "Proficiency tests are designed to measure people's ability in a language, regardless of any training they may have had in that language"(p.11). The counselling was done after the first self-introduction by the students in the classroom. In counselling, the students were asked to disclose their problems like psychological difficulties, problems concerning the classroom ambiance, course materials, and methods of teaching, problems with the teachers, duration of the course, class hours, socio cultural problems and problems related to peer-learners in the class. In the

counselling process, the language trainer was able to identify the problems and needs from the student or the learner's point of view individually. Moreover, the learner was aware that all his or her personal problems related to English language learning were known to the trainer. The trainer was able to easily motivate, guide and facilitate the learners in the counselling session by suggesting some solutions to enhance their speaking skill in front of their class mates.

A few learners were unable to disclose their problems and difficulties to the language trainer in the counselling, for them, the trainer converted the counselling into an informal interview. In the interview, the trainer asked questions and made the learners involve in the interview to identify problems and obstacles related to English language learning. Thus, counselling was conducted in a comfortable manner to the learner so that the learners were able to express their language-related problems without any hesitation.

In the summing up counselling session, the students expressed their willingness and wish that they would actively take part in the speaking activities in the future whenever they get opportunities.

Thus, a rapport was built between the learner and the English language trainer. The questions asked in the informal interview are listed below:

The following were some of the questions raised during the time of counselling:

- Can you speak in English?
- Have you tried to speak in English in the class with your classmates?
- Can you tell me the reasons for not using English language to speak with your friends, teachers, parents, classmates or with general public?
- Do you have fear in speaking English in front of your friends or teachers?
- Do you feel shy to commit mistakes while speaking in English with your friends or teachers?
- Are you really interested in learning English language?

- What are the ways in which you want to learn English?
- How was your classroom ambiance to learn English language?
- What English communication skills were focused on in your school?
- Do you really want to speak in English?
- Have you used English in your communication? If no, why?
- If you get an opportunity to speak in English, will you communicate? If no, why?
- If you get rid of your fear, would you communicate?
- If you get rid of your shyness, would you communicate?
- If your classmates are encouraging, will you communicate in English?
- If you are given feedback on your performance, will you change/try to correct yourself and develop English language skills?
- Will you participate in the language activities voluntarily?
- Will you try again and again till you succeed in developing your language skills?
- Will you continuously try to acquire English language skills even when your classmates and friends criticize you negatively?

Data collection: The primary data collected was based on oral performance before counselling is tabulated below in table-1.

TABLE 1: STUDENTS' BASIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKING SKILLS BEFORE COUNSELLING

| S.No | Particulars related to speaking (Self-introduction) | No. Of Students (n=500) | Percentage (%) |
|------|---|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1. | Students introduced themselves only in English | 2 | 4 |
| 2 | Students introduced themselves using Tamil and English language (Bilingually) | 12 | 24 |
| 3. | Students who introduced only in Tamil | 22 | 44 |
| 4 | Students who did not come forward to introduce themselves | 14 | 28 |

SOURCE: PRIMARY DATA

Table-1 Illustrates that 4% of the students only introduced themselves completely in English. 24% of the students introduced using Tamil and English language (Bilingually). 44% of the students

introduced only in Tamil, and 28% of the students did not come forward to introduce themselves.

INFERENCE: It is clearly inferred that 96% of the students found it difficult to introduce themselves only in English.

TABLE-2: STUDENTS' BASIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKING SKILLS AFTER COUNSELLING

| S.No | Particulars related to speaking (Self-introduction) | No. Of Students (n=500) | Percentage (%) |
|------|---|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Students introduced themselves only in English | 8 | 16 |
| 2 | Students introduced themselves using Tamil and English language (Bilingually) | 26 | 52 |
| 3 | Students who introduced only in Tamil | 13 | 26 |
| 4 | Students who did not come forward to introduce themselves | 3 | 6 |

SOURCE: PRIMARY DATA: Table-2 Illustrates that 16% of the students only introduced themselves completely in English. 52% of the students introduced using Tamil and English language (Bilingually). 26% of the students introduced only in

Tamil and 6% of the students did not come forward to introduce themselves.

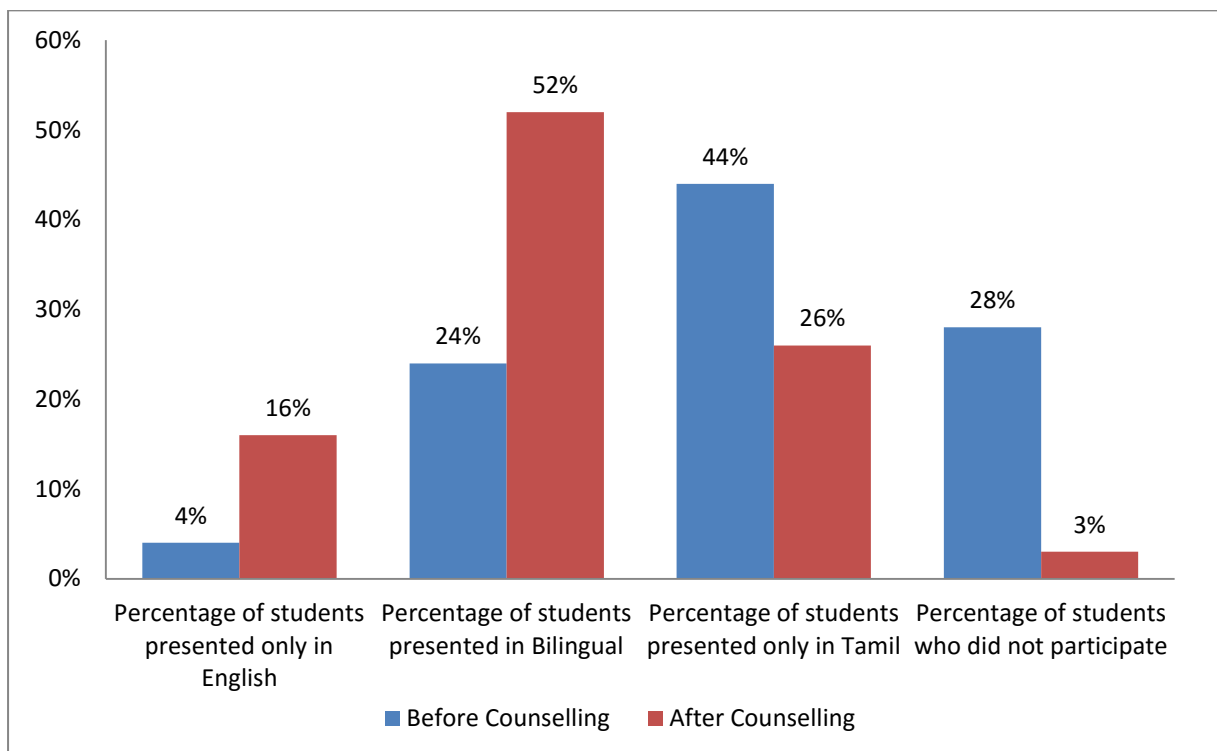
INFERENCE: It is clearly inferred that 84% of the students found it difficult to introduce themselves only in English. 16% of the students were able to introduce orally only using English. The table shows

a considerable progress in the speaking skills of the learners after counselling.

DATA ANALYSIS: This study was an attempt to determine the effect of counselling as a strategy to enhance speaking skills of the students at the first year undergraduate level. This part presents the results of data analysis. For this purpose, inferential statistics was used to analyse the data. The data

collected from the students' performance before and after counselling was analysed. Both the data were compared to measure the efficacy of counselling on enhancing basic oral self-introduction of the students. The comparative chart below shows the percentage of improvement of the students' in their oral self-introduction task before and after counselling. (See fig.1)

FIG-1: COMPARISON OF THE ORAL SELF-INTRODUCTION TASK BEFORE AND AFTER COUNSELLING



CONCLUSION

Counselling as a motivating, guiding and suggesting strategy is not based on any method of enhancing English speaking skills and is not exam-oriented. It gives special attention to speaking needs of the students and to eliminate their psychological fear. The focus was on enabling the a few key elements of speaking: words and sentences presented without fear which develop their speaking abilities. Counselling offers the students to build their confidence and motivation which would go a long way in enhancing their speaking skills.

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