



EXPOSURE AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY (SPECIAL REFERENCE TO UNDERGRADUATES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA, SRI LANKA)

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ABSTRACT

It is always stressed that for the mastery of a second language, particularly to develop communicative competence in it, necessary exposure should be provided to learners since exposure to the language positively correlates with language proficiency. Exposure supplies necessary input for stress-free learning in a realistic manner. This paper attempts to prove this notion and suggests how such input could be effectively invested for better results. The data required for the study are obtained through the distribution of questionnaire and an informal discussion with subjects who are undergraduates of the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

Key Words

Communicative Competence, Exposure, ESL (English as a Second Language), Instrumental Motivation

INTRODUCTION

The issue that some students perform well in a subject while others though with similar background, academic preparation and experience encounter more difficulties in learning it, baffles most teachers. In the case of the subject being language instruction whether in a native or a second language, a series of factors are involved. One set of factors contributing to the success in language classroom are the attitudes and motivation of both students and teachers. Even though these factors are not only ones that account for differences in classroom processes and student outcomes, it is undeniable that they influence the environment for instruction, teachers' individual roles and students' efforts significantly.

According to McKay and Hornberger (1996), there are clear indications that the relationship between a person's prior linguistic and academic experience, the social context of instruction, and the result of formal language instruction has complex and reciprocal correlation with each other. Positive attitudes about language and language learning may be as much the result of success as the cause. However, it should be borne in mind that students with positive general attitudes are not linked with effective strategies that enable them to take advantage of instructional opportunities presented to them. In addition, there are still other factors such as the attitudes and examples of the peers, teachers and parents with respect to language study and social and institutional language policies as reflected in, for example, required courses of language study, both first and second, in schools

which affect students. The language study depends also on the social status of the language. The report of McKay and Hornberger (1996, p.19) rightly fits into this context. "Learners of English as a second language are in a rather different situation: their level of comprehension of the standard or any dialect is influenced by amount of exposure to the language. As learners increase in second language proficiency, typically but not always after ever – longer periods of residence in an environment in which the second language is widely used, they become more knowledgeable about and sensitive to dialectal and contextual variation in language."

It's an obvious fact that a child acquires its first language without any formal instruction or guidance solely because of exposure to the language. Acquisition of a language is a gradual process performed through observation and mimicking and thus it requires a natural environment in which the learner is to be exposed to various day-to-day experiences. As far as ESL students in Government schools and the university in Jaffna are concerned, they severely lack exposure to English as Tamil, their mother tongue is used for all forms of communication in all domains, i.e. education, entertainment, sports, religion, shopping etc. Hence their English language proficiency is quite dissatisfactory.

In the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce of the University of Jaffna, the medium of instruction is Tamil-English bilingual in the first year and English in the following years whereas in the Faculty of Arts Tamil, the students' mother tongue is the medium of instruction during the entire course. In compliance with the notion, greater the exposure higher the language proficiency, students in the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce achieve ESL proficiency to a relatively higher level compared to students in the Faculty of Arts. Therefore student samples from both faculties are selected for purpose of comparison to prove the hypothesis "Exposure positively correlates with language proficiency"

The objective of this study is to establish that adequate exposure is an essential factor to be

proficient in the second language and suggest ways and means to provide needed exposure to learners in the ESL classroom.

The Sample and Procedure of Data Collection

In this investigation, 300 undergraduates including 100 students from the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce and 200 students from the Faculty of Arts of the University of Jaffna were selected as a representative sample for the study. The formal investigation was carried out by distributing questionnaires. The informal investigation included observation and discussion with students.

The questionnaire was developed in three sections.(See Appendix - A) Section – A involves 10 questions relating to the respondents' exposure to English and their motivation for and attitude to the use of English at home. Section – B consists of 4 questions mainly relating to the respondents' attitude and exposure to English in the University. The four questions in Section – C are intended to gather data relating to the respondents' use of English and their attitude to the use of English outside their family and the University.

The data analysis focused on the factors that hinder undergraduates from independently producing language in its written and spoken form. Several problems which the undergrads encounter in communication have been identified.

Data Analysis

Positive Correlation between Exposure and Language Proficiency

The data elicited from the undergraduates through the distribution of questionnaires establish the positive correlation between the undergraduates' exposure to English and their English language proficiency.

The students' responses to items 3(a) and 3(b) in section B of the questionnaire reflect their proficiency levels of English when they entered the university. In response to item 3(a) (When you

entered the university, were you able to express yourself in English?) 61 students answered in the affirmative, 229 students answered in the negative and 10 students did not respond.

In response to item 3(b) (To what extent, were you able to express yourself in English?), out of the 61 students 7 students were able to speak fluently, 42 moderately and 12 fairly well.

The researcher’s discussion with the students revealed that the aforesaid 61 students are from families with a considerable extent of English exposure and sound economic status.

Learners generally do not have sufficient access to the target language outside of the classroom and practice what they have learnt in the classroom. Learners usually step into the real world using their mother tongue soon after they leave the classroom. In classrooms, although teachers now have gradually adopted approaches that focus on meaning and language use, due to the linier mode of face – to – face interaction, the learning outcome is still not efficient enough. Teachers now urgently need a solution to increase exposure and use of the target knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom.

Factors of learners’ different personalities, learning and response pace, motivation and language proficiency can all lead to individual inequality to speak up in class or in groups. For example, learners who are shy, slow or afraid of making errors may choose to speak less in the classroom or group discussions. Insufficient access to the target language both inside and outside of the classroom certainly is an obstacle to foster learners’ language proficiency.

Sometimes learners’ previous language knowledge may help communication to some extent but they have to learn how to use this effectively in real life situation. As long as they make progress in communication, adjustment becomes easier. Language learning means learning to communicate i.e. learning to use language appropriately for the communication of meaning in social contexts.

The students’ responses to item 2 in section B (What grade have you obtained for General English in the G.C.E (A/L) examination?) reveal their attainment levels. The details of their performance in this examination clearly indicate their dissatisfactory English language knowledge by the time they enter the university. It should also be observed that General English course book is specially designed to develop students’ communicative ability whereas they are found to be far behind in this ability when they admitted to the university.

Grade	Number of Students
A	Nil
B	Nil
C	3
S	9
F	288

Table 1 : Students’ attainment levels in General English in the G.C.E (A/L) examination.

The table represents the very high percentage of failures in English which indicates the huge decline of students’ language proficiency.

The following comments are worth mentioning here. “ Even after 8 to 9 years of study which includes primary and secondary level of education, when they come to tertiary level they are not proficient enough in English to follow their higher studies in English.” (Sunthareswaran, 2004:151)

Sunthareswaran (2004:174) made his observation regarding the students’ lack of keenness in learning the subject General English. “ Some students do not bother to prepare themselves for this subject at the examination and the number of students obtaining pass has not been very encouraging over the years.”

In the researcher’s discussion with the students regarding the high percentage of failures in English, the students came out with various reasons including the lack of General English classes in schools, irregular conducting of classes and what is taught in the class not always corresponding to the questions in the General English paper in the G.C.E (A/L) examination.

The researcher's discussion with teachers of English in schools revealed that no instruction or expert guidance with regard to the use of General English course material in the class is provided. Civil disturbances and the prevailing transport difficulties are additional constraints that prevent teachers from attending seminars or conferences for teachers of English in other parts of the island. Also specialists who can serve as resource persons to deal with the subject of new trends in ESL teaching are not available in Jaffna.

Extent of the students' use of English

The choice of methodology in the language class depends on the extent of the use of the language of the students in everyday life or outside the classroom. In a monolingual language situation like in Jaffna, students have very limited scope to use English in everyday life. However, owing to the influence of globalization, some students have access to internet, satellite television, mobile phone etc. which provide them knowledge in information communication technology. These students have an opportunity to use English on occasion. This opportunity is not available to all the people across towns and villages. Differences between the urban and rural surroundings and the economically advantaged and the economically disadvantaged people can be observed always.

Vignaraja (2005) commented that though the vernaculars were developed languages, they grew insignificant before the presence of English and they couldn't be the source of modern learning. Though English is declared as a link language its role in domains such as education and law is high. "This could be better evidenced in the University of Jaffna where English dominates in the areas of education and law and plays the minimal role or rather a negligible role as a link language. This may be due to the fact that the region where the Institute is established is predominantly monolingual." (Vignaraja, 2005:2-3)

Nowadays there is a growing tendency of abandoning the 'focus on form' teaching approach such as Grammar Translation and Audiolingualism as

more language teachers have observed the failure of form focusing approach in developing learners' communicative ability in real life situations and shifted to adopt the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The CLT approach highlights learners' communicative competence which is defined as learners' ability to efficiently express what they mean in the target language and successfully achieve communication in real life situations. (Hymes, 1972 as cited in Chen, 2005). In order to do so learners are expected not only to acquire the linguistic but pragmatic knowledge of the target language (Hedgecock, 2002). It is suggested that competence, both linguistic and pragmatic, is the knowledge developed and acquired through exposure and use (Kasper, 1997). It has been admitted that without sufficient exposure which is essential for learners to notice and acquire the language input and chances to use the knowledge, communicative competence can't be promoted (Chen, 2005)

Extent of Students' use of English in the Classroom in the University.

In response to item 1(a) in section B (Which language do you use when you interact with your lecturer in the English class in the university?), almost all the students ticked the option, 'English and Tamil'.

WANG (2006,p.51) said, "In class where all or a number of the learners share the same mother tongue, they may tend to use it; because it is easier, because it feels unnatural to speak to one another in a foreign language and because they feel less 'exposed' if they are speaking their mother tongue." Many research findings show that students are verbally more comfortable in the bilingual instruction class. Cummins (2004) claimed that when students continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages they gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both, and they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize reality. Bilingual students develop more flexibility in their thinking as

a result of processing information through two different languages (Cummins,2004).

Suseendiraraja (1997:11 as cited in Sunthareswaran,2004:164) stated, “We must note that a good section of students have begun to feel that they could study in Tamil, work, earn and prosper in life comfortably. Today the pattern of life in our society is such that only a very few learn English for intellectual satisfaction.”

While English can be reserved for certain functions like lecturing, the students’ mother tongue can be used for other functions including explaining grammar to students particularly when the grammatical concepts in the target language do not occur in students’ first language, explaining tasks to the students, explaining a particular methodology used in class, explaining aims of a lesson, checking students’ comprehension etc.

Extent of the students’ use of English in real situations

When considering the responses of students to item 5 (Are your parents fluent speakers of English?) and item 7 (Do they communicate with you in English?) in section A of the questionnaire collectively, 64 students answered in the affirmative and 236 students answered in the negative. Thus these 64 students can be assumed to have some exposure to English at home. The following chart represents the students’ exposure to English in their household.

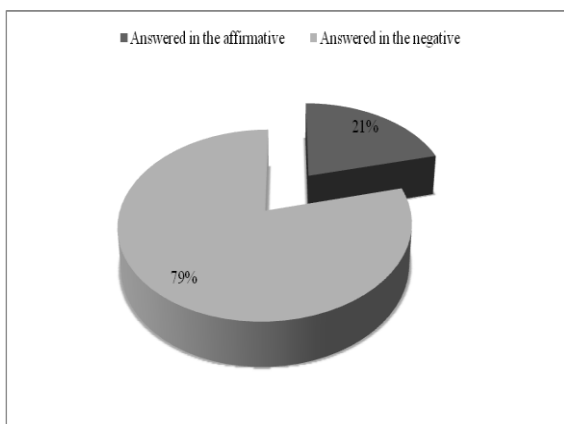


Figure 1. Students’ Exposure to English

Further, the discussion with students together with the data elicited from the questionnaire revealed that the students of the Faculty of Man.Studies and Commerce who have greater exposure to English as the medium of instruction in their faculty is English use English for real communication to a higher extent than the students of the Faculty of Arts.

Based on the above collective data and the other scholars’ views, the researcher sums up that as far as classroom teaching is concerned, bilingual instruction is beneficial in the English language class as students are found to be more comfortable and at ease in following the class. Further, certain teaching items necessarily and inevitably require the use of students’ mother tongue for explanation. Use of mother tongue creates a tension free environment that induces students to interact with the teacher and the other students independently. Nevertheless, an adequate exposure to English outside the classroom is recognized as a strong factor that influences the students’ use of English in real life situations.

The informal discussion with students reveals that the students of the Faculty of the Man. Studies and Com. who have greater exposure to English as the medium of instruction in their faculty is English use English for real communication to a higher extent than the students of the Faculty of Arts.

Although difference in the ability of individual adults to learn a second language exists, if enough time and enough opportunity are provided to any adult of reasonable abilities, he can learn to communicate in any language. But the degree of eventual fluency achieved will differ considerably from individual to individual, unlike the situation with child language acquisition. (Where every child achieves perfect fluency given enough exposure). Motivation is another important factor in language learning and societies that praise or experience the value of multilingualism will increase the motivation level of learners and thus increase the success of second language learning in general.

Among various methods, the most important tools for adult language learners are determination and

consistency as well as exposure to the proper language forms.

Although at first glance, children may appear to pick up L2 faster, this is not due to superior ability over adults to acquire languages, but more exposure. Also cognitive development grows with age as well, so that older children are in fact more intelligent and efficient learners than younger children. So if there were equal exposure to the language, given the greater mental abilities of older children and adults, they would acquire language faster than younger children.

Informal discussion with students shows that students from the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce perform better than the Arts faculty students in ESL semester examinations.

FINDINGS

Since the majority of the students in the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce in the University of Jaffna are from urban areas, they have considerable extent of exposure to English at home and in the society while majority of the students in the Faculty of Arts are from rural areas and their exposure to English is very much limited. Data reveals that students in the Faculty of Man.Studies and Commerce having greater extent of exposure use English more and perform better in ESL examinations than the students in the Faculty of Arts.

CONCLUSION

There is always a positive correlation between exposure and language proficiency. But in most ESL classes in Jaffna, students' experience within the classroom is different from their experience outside the classroom. Thus in order to let students have exposure to English, real life situations should be simulated in the classroom. Further the classes should be learner centered and sufficient interaction among students be promoted. The teacher is expected to function as a facilitator and most importantly there should be greater focus on meaning than on form. Students need to be

encouraged to use their knowledge about the language to function in the language.

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Appendix – A

Questionnaire for the undergraduates in the University of Jaffna

Name :-

Batch :-

Course :-

Underline the best response which represents you.

Section A

01 (a). Do you speak in English to your family members in your daily interaction with them?

(i) Yes. (ii) No

(b) If yes, how often?

- (i) Always.
- (ii) Sometimes.
- (iii) Occasionally.

02 (a). Do you write to them in English?

(i)Yes. (ii) No

(b). If yes, how often?

- (i) Always.
- (ii) Sometimes.
- (iii) Occasionally

03.What is your motive to communicate with them in English

- (i)You want to improve your English.
- (ii)You like to talk in English
- (iii)You are free to talk to your family in any language.
- (iv)Your family encourages you to use English.

04. What is the reaction of your family when you use English?

- (i)They are very attentive and receptive.
- (ii)They reply in English.
- (iii)Both (i) and (ii) above.
- (iv)They ignore you.

05. Are your parents fluent speakers of English?

(i)Yes. (ii) No

06. Can they write in English?

(i)Yes (ii)No

07 (a). Do they communicate with you in English?

(i) Yes. (ii) No

(b) If yes, how often?

- (i) Always.
- (ii) Sometimes.
- (iii) Occasionally

08. What is your reaction when they use English?

- (i)You are attentive and receptive.
- (ii) You also keenly interact with them in English.
- (iii)Both (i) and (ii) above.
- (iv)You ignore them.

09 (a). Do you read in English?

(i)Yes (ii) No.

(b). If yes, what type of English materials do you read?

- (i) News papers. (ii) Novels, Short Stories, Poems, Plays etc.
- (iii) Text books. (iv) Local and International magazines.

10 (a). Do you listen to or watch English programmes on radio/ television?

(i) Yes (ii) No

(b) Name the programmes you listen to or watch?

- (i) BBC World Service (ii) CNN
- (iii)SLBC English Service (iv)Rupavahini

Section B

01(a).Which language do you use when you interact with your lecturers in the English class in the University?

(i)English (ii) Tamil (iii) English & Tamil

(b)Are you allowed by your lecturer to use Tamil in the English class?

(i)Yes (ii) No

(c) Are you happy in following the English class in the English medium?

(i)Yes (ii) No

(d)Do you have any difficulties in following the class in the English medium?

(i)Yes (ii) No

- (e) If yes, what are the difficulties?
 (i) Understanding the meaning of sentences.
 (ii) Understanding the meaning of words.
 (iii) Expressing ideas on your own.
 (iv) All the above or some of the above.

- (ii) You are not able either to understand or speak English.
 (iii) You have often difficulty with vocabulary.
 (iv) You think it is wrong to use English.

02. What grade have you obtained for General English in the G.C.E (A/L) examination?

- (i) A (ii) B (iii) C (iv) S (v) F

03(a). When you entered the University, were you able to express yourself in English?

- (i) Yes (ii) No

(b) To what extent, were you able to express yourself in English?

- (i) Fluently (ii) Moderately (iii) Fairly well

04(a). In what medium do you follow lectures of your main subjects?

- (i) English (ii) Tamil

(b) If it is English, do you believe that it helps to improve your English knowledge?

- (i) Yes (ii) No

(c) If yes, how does it help you?

- (i) Your vocabulary (word power) has been improved.
 (ii) Your speaking ability has been improved.
 (iii) All the above.

Section C

01 (a). Do you have opportunities to communicate in English outside home and the University?

- (i) Yes (ii) No

(b) If yes, where?

(i) Clubs. (ii) Playground (iii) Community Centers. (iv) Places of Entertainment

02. Do you visit public libraries to read in English?

- (i) Yes (ii) No

03 (a). Do you talk to your friends in English?

- (i) Yes (ii) No

(b) If yes, what are the topics you discuss?

- (i) Sports/Games (ii) Politics (iii) Art and Literature.
 (iv) Any other topics of your own interest.

04 (a). When others discuss anything in English with you, what is your reaction?

- (i) You keenly participate in the discussion.
 (ii) You are not keen in participating in the discussion.

(b) If you are not keen, what is the reason?

- (i) You are able to understand English but not able to express in English.