

Learning English in Small Towns: Problems & Solutions

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Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to investigate the different reasons and enlist various levels of difficulties of Learning English in small towns in India. Unique sound system and disparity between letters and sounds give rise to faulty listening of pronunciations and ultimately mispronounced language. This paper also identifies the factors such as diverse rules of phonetics including stress patterns, tone and different dialects that affect English language learning. In addition to this, it also tries to unearth difficulties rose due to abstruse grammar rules, vast vocabulary, mother tongue influence, lack of linguistic exposure, lack of trained teachers, indifferent government attitude, socio-cultural and socio-economical background of the learners, lack of facility, students' strength, faulty teaching methodologies etc. At last, it also provides some workable solutions.

Aims and objectives

1. To investigate the different reasons and enlist various levels of difficulties of Learning English in small towns like Nanded.
2. To provide the workable solutions to identified problems.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

The scope of study is restricted to author's interaction, observation and academic experience with the learners studying in Kids' Kingdom Public School, Nanded. In addition to this, the present paper also includes the conclusions drawn on the basis of students' performances in various LSRW tasks conducted in school in the A.Y.2016-17 and the responses collected through a questionnaire offered to 30 students studying in 9th standard.

In addition to primary sources, research papers published on the same topic were also referred.

Methodology

A random sample of 30 (from the available strength of 140 in 9th class) students studying in Kids' Kingdom Public School, Nanded was selected. The sample included 15 male and 15 female respondents.

Instrument

A questionnaire was the main research instrument employed in this research. Use of questionnaire is assumed to be one of the most common methods of data collection in a language research. The tailor-made questionnaire has been designed by the researcher. The questionnaire, first, asked the respondents to provide background information about their gender, nationality, and age. Second, they were asked to identify the most challenging areas in learning English language by rating each one on a 1 to 5 Likert-Scale (1 indicates being „Very easy“ and 5 „Very difficult“). Various topics were listed with examples, in case the respondents were not familiar with the technical names. Lastly, they were asked to check one choice that describes their use of grammar in writing and speaking such as Always, Usually, Sometimes, Little, or Never.

Procedures

The questionnaire was distributed in the classes and immediately after that the teacher explained the purpose of the questionnaire, and then left the class to have the students complete the questionnaire and to avoid answering any questions that may affect the participants' responses. The questionnaires were then collected, coded, and analyzed by the researcher.

Findings

Information was collected through a questionnaire offered to 30 students studying in 9th standard in Kid's Kingdom Public School, Nanded. The participants were asked to rate the various language topics that they have been studying on a 1 to 5 Likert-scale. This was done to fix the most common language problems faced by the students and to provide recommendations/solutions.

The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For the purpose of this study, the analysis focused on the topics identified as „Difficult“ and „Very difficult“. The questionnaire revealed the findings displayed in Table 1 and Figure 1.

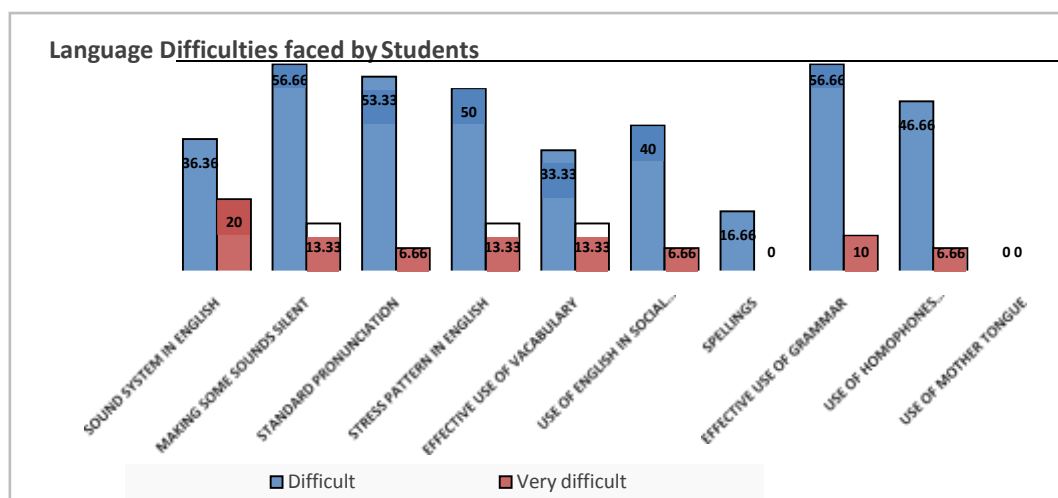
Table 1

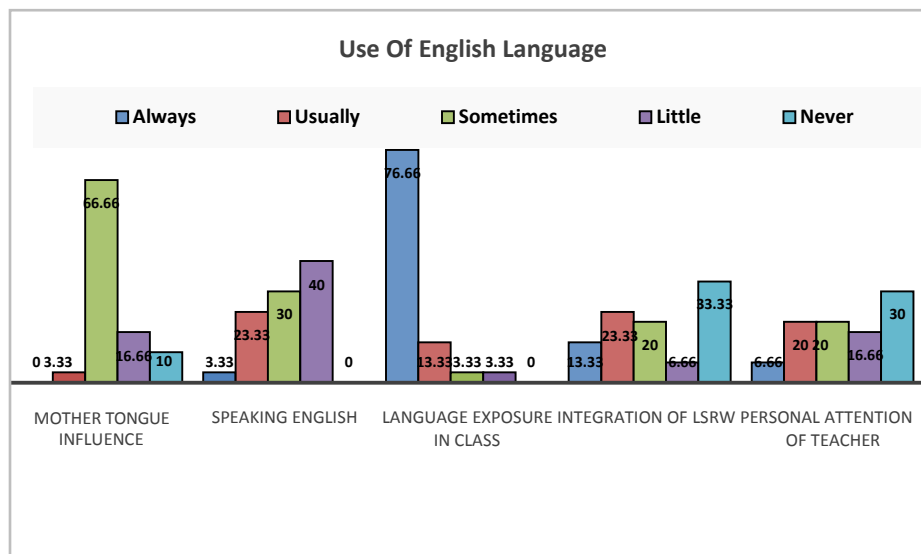
Overall Percentages of the Different Topics Rated as 'Difficult' or 'Very Difficult'

Topic	Difficult		Very difficult	
	NO	%	NO	%
Sound system in English	11	36.36	6	20
Making some sounds silent	17	56.66	4	13.33
Standard Pronunciation	16	53.33	2	6.66
Stress pattern in English	15	50	4	13.33
Effective use of vocabulary	10	33.33	4	13.33
Use of English in social interactions	12	40	2	6.66
Use of mother tongue	0	0	0	0
Spellings	5	16.66	0	0
Effective use of grammar	17	56.66	3	10
Use of homophones (carat, caret, carrot karat)	14	46.66	2	6.66

Figure 1. The most difficult language topics identified by the respondents

It can be seen from Figure 1 that more or less all topics were rated „Difficult“.





In the above table the first question (I face the problem of mother tongue influence while speaking English.) option „sometimes“ is rated high therefore it can be concluded that most of the learners face the problem of mother tongue influence though sometimes. In the same way, the second question (I speak English in day-to- day interactions.) option „little“ is rated high and which reveals little linguistic exposures of the learners whereas in the third question (I get an opportunity to speak in English through speaking tasks conducted in the class.) „always“ option is rated high which tells limited speaking exposure. The fourth question (In teaching of English I find proper integration of the four skills (LSRW) of language learning.) gets high score in option „never“ which gives an idea about the lack of proper integration of LSRW skills. High rating to „never“ in the last question (I get personal attention of the teacher in the class.) is indicative of overcrowded classrooms.

Besides, it has also been noticed that students are facing problems with respect to sound system in English. The very first problem in learning English begins with its sound system. English has 26 alphabets, these 26 letters produce 44 sounds and there is no one to one correspondence between letters and sounds. And this disparity is enough to leave learners bemused. One letter produces more than one sound for example letter „O“ produces three different sounds- / ∂ u“/, / ν “ /and / ∂ “/ as in „go“, „proverb“ and „about“. In Indian schools the difference between letters and sounds is hardly explained. Therefore, letters are misunderstood as sounds and the problem gets aggravated. Students at early stages of learning listen to wrong pronunciation of words and

continuous to live with problem of language learning. This misunderstanding gives rise to another problem of pronunciation.

In English, for example, pronunciation of plural and present tense suffixes „s“ & „es“ is totally depend on the phoneme before it. There are three different plural sounds produced for „s“ & „es“ they are /s/, /z/, and /Iz/. If the last phoneme is voiceless, use /s/: Week is /wi:k/. The /k/ is voiceless and so the plural/genitive is /s/. Week's = /wi:ks/, cats-/kæts/ If the last phoneme is voiced, use /z/: Story is /stɔ:ri/. The /i/ is voiced and so the plural/genitive is /z/. Story's = /stɔ:riz/ , names -/neimz/. If the last phoneme is an alveolar fricative - /s/ or /z/ - then use /Iz/: House is /haus/. The /s/ is an alveolar fricative - /s/ and so the plural/genitive is /Iz/. Houses = /hausIz /, places= /pleisiz/. (Deshpande & Dharmasi, 1999).

Another problem that troubles non-native learners is of Intonation. The rises and falls in tone that make the „tune“ of an utterance, is an important aspect of pronunciation of English, often making a difference to meaning or implication (Chen, 1983). Stress, for example, is most commonly indicated not by increased volume but by a slight rise in intonation. Intonation patterns in English sentences primarily indicate the degree of certainty of an utterance, i.e. whether is a statement, questions, or suggestion. Most questions in rising intonation, however, Wh- questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how) end with falling intonation. It is important for students to learn these patterns not only in order to communicate meaning, but also in order to avoid unwittingly sounding rude or indecisive. Grammar is one of the most difficult aspects of a foreign language to master. It is defined as “the rules that govern how a language“s sentences are formed” (Thornbury, 2000, p. 1). English grammar has been traditionally viewed as “a system of syntax that decides the order and patterns in which words are arranged in sentences” (Close, 1982, p. 13).

Furthermore, there are number of problems which are faced by Non-native speakers of English, however, some of the representative problems are listed below:

making some sounds silent, standard pronunciation, stress pattern in English, effective use of vocabulary, use of English in social interactions, spellings, effective use of grammar and use of homophones etc.

Solutions

Competency Building of Teachers

Linguistic competency of the teachers dealing with pre- primary as well as higher secondary classes must be developed through outcome based trainings irrespective of their subjects. As other subjects' teachers also use English as a medium of instruction, their language also must be as per the standards. This creates standard listening exposure to the learners and this in turn, enhances their language abilities.

The teachers should be trained in all the nuances of English Language ranging from sound system to all the concepts of phonetics so that they can deal with the subject as per the requirement.

Proper linguistic exposure to the students

Students must be introduced to standard pronunciations right from the beginning of their formal education. This can be done with the help of trained professional and with the help of various language software, interactive and innovative games and standard videos on various topics.

Limited students' strength (batch size of 20)

Limited students' strength facilitates scope for individual attention, enough linguistic exposure, effective conduct of various activities, and effective feedback from the audience (students) and the teachers in turn; enrich understanding of the topic under discussion and language skills.

Activity Based Learning (ABL)

ABL asks for active involvement of the learners which improves understanding and interest of the students. Teacher should design need based activities for various topics prescribed in the syllabus for e.g. converting a lesson into a skit or one act play and asking them to perform it in the class. To improve the vocabulary of the students one can conduct **Vocabulary building activity**. In this activity students are asked to learn and record one new word in a separate notebook with its spelling, pronunciation, contextual meaning and its use in their own sentences. Every week one period should be dedicated to take review of the progress of the students. While doing so, every student should be asked to share any two outstanding words from his/her list as per the pre decided pattern in front of the class. To motivate the students, special marks should be given to this ongoing activity.

Apart from this, a linguistic exposure can be given through effectual conduct of various activities like skits, dramas, extempore, listen to my story, group discussions, speeches, description of pictures or objects etc. After an effective conduct of these activities a factual feedback should be given to each student. To facilitate an effective feedback, performances should be video recorded and played for the students.

GAMES

Games which are task based and have a purpose beyond the production of speech, serve as excellent communicative activities. The aim of all language games is for students to use the language; however during game play learners also use the target language to play, persuade and negotiate their way to desired results. This process involves productive and receptive skills simultaneously. Games offer students a fun filled and relaxing learning atmosphere. After learning and practicing new vocabulary, students have the opportunity to use language in a non-stressful way. While playing games, the learner's attention is on the message, not on the language. Rather than paying attention to the correctness of linguistic forms, most participants will do all they can to win. This eases the fear of negative evaluation, the concern of being negatively judged in public which is one of the main factors inhibiting language learners from using the target language in front of other people. In a game oriented context, anxiety is reduced and speech fluency is generated thus communicative competence is achieved. Some of the games are mentioned below:

A Word Game:

Students should sit in a circle. The group may consist of 5 to 6 students. One student writes a word with a minimum of 5 letters. The next student should write word with the last letter of the previous word within 5 to 6 seconds. This would enable them know their vocabulary.

A sentence game

Students should sit in a circle. The group may consist of 5 to 6 students. One student writes a sentence with a minimum of three words including subject, verb and object. The next student should write another sentence with the last word of the previous sentence within 10 to 15 seconds. This would enable them know their sentence framing capability.

Guessing the object with the help of clues

Divide the class into the groups having 5 to 6 students in each group. Call one member from each group and give them a card having one word with obvious clues. Ask them to explain the word to their group without using obvious clues or any non-verbal clues.

Creation of strong foundation in grammar

Concepts in grammar should be taught thoroughly right from parts of speech to the clauses. Students should be made aware of inter- linking of various grammar concepts. To cross check their understanding, a lot of practice should be taken through various speaking and writing tasks. As it is rightly said by Confucius, “I hear and I forget. I see and I believe. I do and I understand.

Integration of LSRW Skills

While dealing with any poem or a lesson teacher should integrate four skills (LSRW) of Language learning. This LSRW sequence must strictly be followed. First, let the students listen to the poem or the lesson, then ask them to answer questions based on their listening, next give them a comprehension passage based on the same lesson to read and write answers to the questions asked.

2. Conclusion

Thus, in the present paper, an effort is made to probe reasons behind difficulties of learning English in small towns and it has been found that the difficulty begins with understanding of English sound system. English has 26 alphabets, these 26 letters produce 44 sounds and there is no one to one correspondence between letters and sounds. In addition to this, this paper also underscores the factors such as diverse rules of phonetics including stress patterns, tone and different dialects that affect language learning. Besides, it also tries to unearth difficulties rose due to abstruse grammar rules, vast vocabulary, mother tongue influence, lack of linguistic exposure, lack of trained teachers, socio-cultural and socio-economical background of the learners, lack of facility, students’ strength, faulty teaching methodologies etc.

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