Difficulties in speaking English

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English language has the highest repute in global communication. Hence English communication skills are essential across the world. However, because of various reasons, speaking English could be a daunting task for many.

Second Language Acquisition

While trying to find out why adult learners of English experience difficulties, such as loss of words, frustration, anxiety, pronunciation problems etc., in speaking English, it is necessary to consider the aspects of speech and phonology in relation to second language learning, which involves speech production and also other areas of linguistics, which helps to explain the factors that cause difficulties in speaking English as second language.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is an important source of knowledge because it offers explanations for how one learns to speak a second language (SL), and more importantly, what type of factors influence the learning process.

Factors That Affect Speech Production

There are several factors that could contribute to difficulties in speech production, such as age, personality, social environment and instruction. Individual variation is a feature of SLA and should thus be taken into account when talking about second language phonology acquisition.

Moyer adapted Schumann's classification of different factors that affect language learning into five categories:

1. Neurological Factors: are related to lateralization, i.e. maturational constraints
2. Affective and Personality Factors: include motivation, ego permeability, tolerance for ambiguity, sensitivity to rejection and self-esteem, extroversion and introversion and culture shock
3. Cognitive and Aptitude Factors: include cognitive maturity and processes, strategies and styles, intelligence, interference from first language and field dependence and independence

Affective and Personality Factors and Cognitive and Aptitude Factors could be grouped together a Individual Variations

4. Instruction and Input Factors: are related to teacher and class dynamics and reaction to feedback, curriculum, intensity and duration of instruction, and saliency

5. Social Factors: are group or community level factors, such as status, assimilation and acculturation, preservation of ethnic and cultural identity, type of community, attitudes toward target language group and intended length of residence, and personal level factors, such as transition anxiety, social strategies and linguistic shock (Moyer)

Neurological Factors

Lateralization refers to the assignment of specific functions to either the right or the left hemisphere. As the brain becomes less flexible, language acquisition becomes more difficult (Lenneberg, 1967).

Flege, Yeni-Komshian, and Liu (1999) conducted a study with 240 Koreans of varying age groups. Their accents and the level of the learners' morphosyntax were rated through a grammaticality judgment test.

Thornburgh & Ryalls (1998) also conducted similar study with early and late Spanish and English bilinguals on English pronunciation.

Both the studies showed that age was the most important factor in the ability to produce native English sounds. It concludes, age / the time of the commencement of English learning, is a significant variable in pronunciation ability.

Individual Variation

There is a lot of individual variation in SL phonological acquisition (Ioup 2008: 51). Although it is said that children are better learners, some individual adults could outperform young learners, and some young learners may face unusual difficulty in learning the SL. A person's personality, motivation, attitude, and many other factors influence language learning. It also makes a difference if the learner has a strict self-critical attitude towards language learning or he / she is not open-minded toward other cultures and languages.

Instruction and Input

English has become an integral part of many people's everyday life through audio-visual mass media and popular culture. TV programs and news items also use authentic voices and subtitles instead of dubbing. Taavitsainen et al. noted that English terms are also frequent in the speech of professionals from many different fields, of this IT jargon is a well known example. English phrases have also started appearing in newspaper language.

English language is an essential part of education in many non English speaking countries, on every level from preschool to adult education.

However, English / second language instruction has been criticized for not providing the learners with oral language proficiency (Sajavaara 2005: 2).

Usually, learned language skills are literal and translation skills. Oral skills are learned only after coming into contact with people who spoke the language, after leaving school. In practice English / second language education meant memorizing, analyzing, categorizing, and being able to make conclusions.

Social Factors

Language learning is not only a process of learning a new knowledge; it is also a process of acquiring symbolic elements of a different ethno-linguistic community (Gardner, 1979: 193).

Social factors greatly influence speaking, accent and the attitude towards one's own accent. Those around the learner affect the way he sees himself as a user of the language. It includes those from the same language group and also those who speak the new language as first or second language (Moyer, 2004). Interaction is very important in SLA. But, if the learner does not feel comfortable with the people he could practice the language, interaction becomes difficult.

How to Overcome Difficulties in Speaking English

Practice and Grammar

A lot many educated Indians face difficulties in speaking English for lack of practice, even if they have studied English at school and college. While in class, students have limited time to practice English and outside, they don't have enough encouragement.

It is necessary to analyze the causes that make it difficult to communicate in English and find the solutions to overcome the difficulties.

Firstly, the environment for most people does not support speaking English frequently. Those around tend to think the person is flaunting when one speaks English for daily conversation. This kind of response hurts the person's self-esteem and the intent of improving speaking skills. To avoid being rejected by those around, the person would use the local language and quit practicing.

Secondly, there is an issue with grammar. One has to distinguish the tenses / reference of time, singular and plural forms. It is easy to get confused with English grammar which is essential to form sentences. If a person is weak in grammar, it becomes difficult to frame proper sentences that are right grammatically. When people realize their grammar is weak, they feel embarrassed in speaking English publicly.

Both are fundamental issues and have one solution, to encourage and practice speaking. In case of a classroom, the teacher should encourage, rather compel students to speak English only, whatever they want to say, and convince them that making errors is normal in learning. It will boost their confidence and encourage them to practice speaking. As for correction of errors, the teacher should give explanation after the student's speech is over.

If there is no teacher / classroom condition, a person can have an English conversation club comprising of colleagues, friends or family members and talk about anything in English in leisure. The club members can learn together and correct each other without feeling embarrassed. This way, speaking English will become a routine activity.

Learning in Leisure

Watching English movies and TV was suggested as a useful, proven tool to improve communicating skills, i.e., listening and speaking, of foreign students (in Celona's report). TV programs, ranging from cartoons to political programs / debates, help students improve their skills even if they have different levels of understanding.

Thinking in English

It is recommended that when a person is learning to speak English, he / she shouldn't think in his / her native language and then translate. It starts with learning to verbalize the abstract concepts into English.

Given that we first have the abstract concepts and images floating in our mind; then comes thinking process in the language we speak, and then we produce the actual speech, it adds more time to the whole process if we start translating; and the **resulting speech is often slow, hesitant, and it is easy to get stuck for words while translating** from the native language to English.

To achieve fluency, one must think in English. It could be difficult for one who is unfamiliar with English or even who is acquainted with English, after having used and thought in a native language for years. It could be quite a difficult transition. Nevertheless, this obstacle can be overcome by always trying to think in English when one speaks English until it becomes a habit. It is good idea to practice talking to self in English, as explaining whatever happened during the day. It gives the practice before one starts explaining things to others.

Vocabulary

It becomes difficult to say what one is thinking while speaking English for merely lack of vocabulary. One way of improving vocabulary is to read lists of words and their meaning and then memorizing them. Another is to learn 'relating' words; eg things relating to travel, like luggage, check-in desk, travel agency, flight attendant, boarding pass etc. If the word is not known for any of those things, it is worthwhile to look in a dictionary. Likewise, one could think of the kind of conversation he / she would have in an airport; e.g. asking for help if one couldn't find the gate or if one missed the flight or about going through immigration.

Thinking about conversations and writing them down helps a lot in learning useful words relating to each other and in mentally preparing for such situations. It will also be helpful in avoiding embarrassment in similar situations for lack of vocabulary.

Syntax and Sentence Structure

Native English speakers learn syntax and sentence formation through repetition before they learn the parts of speech and rules of grammar. Non English speaking students generally have no or little understanding of nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. in their native languages. But when in classroom, they notice that the adjective precedes the noun in a sentence through recognition of repeated sentence structures, and the concept is reinforced through classroom exercises, the students are able to utilize the structure when creating their own sentences as they continue learning the language.

It works the same way for adult learners; instead of classroom exercises, adult learners can incorporate leisure pursuits like watching English programs and listening to English speakers, as a daily activity.

Diction

If the speech content is great, it may appear great, but unless the audience is able to understand what one is saying, the message is lost. It is basic to learn to speak clearly by strengthening and stretching the muscles involved in speaking.

The most commonly used diction exercises are Tongue Twisters; there are countless, each stressing on either a letter or a letter combination.

It is best to start slowly, making sure the start and end of each word is crisp, and then repeating the phrase, getting faster while maintaining clarity.

Pronunciation

Words in English could be difficult to pronounce when speaking. It is important to consider not only the pronunciation of the individual words, but also the correlation between words in a sentence, and also the rhythm and intonation of the sentence.

Considering that imitating is the best way of learning, listening to native English pronunciations would be the best way of improving the learner's English pronunciation. The more practice, the closer it gets. It would be better to get an audio sample with transcript; the idea is, listening to a sentence while reading the transcript, and then, replaying the tape and repeating the sentence exactly as the person said. It is the fastest way of improving pronunciation.

Intonation

If a person speaks too quickly and with wrong intonation and rhythm, the listeners have trouble understanding what he / she says. Again it is best to learn by imitating; watching TV and listening to radio, observing people around when they talk, the way the pitch of their voice changes with body language and then repeating them in the same way.

Building Confidence

While speaking English, many people feel nervous and are scared of making mistakes because of lack of confidence. There are two things that could assist in improving confidence.

Firstly, one should stop worrying excessively about grammar. Even if there is a grammatical error, one should try best to communicate the point and mostly, it is conveyed. Often, grammar of spoken English is more flexible than written English.

Secondly, it is important to practice speaking English, in low pressure situations. One approach would be talking to self; it might feel ridiculous but it works. Another would be talking to teachers and English speaking friends; this way, if there are any mistakes, they would correct it. It is extremely important to practice in low pressure situations to build confidence for speaking English in a high pressure situation like teleconference, presentation or job interview.

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