Challenges to Vernacular Learners (L1) in Acquisition of English Language (L2) at U.G. Level in Hyderabad Region

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Abstract

Majority of students in the Hyderabad region of India, are found to be in a perplexed state in an ESL Classroom at UG level. An attempt is made in this research paper to explore the extent of socio-cultural and vernaculars' influence on learners in acquisition of reasonable knowledge and skills in English, a Second language (L2) of the select region. It also identifies the inherent problems and challenges confronted by the students of vernacular medium background. In addition, it also suggests some practical measures to be adopted at the target level of teaching-learning scenario in a systematic and workable manner.

Keywords: Socio-cultural – Language acquisition-Vernacular influence

1. Introduction

In any region, social and cultural milieus are inter-reliant. Beyond this perception, Buttjes (55) refers to ethnographic language studies (Ochs & Schieffelin) and summarizes several reasons why "language and culture are from the start inseparably connected." A clear demarcation of these two is not possible as both are complementary to each other to a significant extent. The cultural lineage of an individual depicts the social background majorly and vice-versa. The past socio-educational environment plays a decisive role in determining the learning capabilities of a potential learner in the target language at UG level. It is a well known fact that a man is a product of his past when it comes to language learning. It is apparent that the learner is greatly influenced not only by his inherent qualities that are genetically transmitted through ages but also by the locale and culture he comes from.

According to Samovar, Porter, & Jain "Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication" (24).

On a general level, culture is referred as "the ways of a people" (Lado). Therefore, it is quite evident that in order to acquire and develop proficiency in L2, the learner should be exposed to the culture of the target language to make him visualize and improvise the context so that he might be in a position to understand and demonstrate it in real situations successfully. Valdes, as cited in Baker 2003, states: "every language lesson is about something and that something is cultural."

The present research paper, after considering the research conclusions of the select linguistic scholars, makes an attempt to delve into some of the cultural and vernacular influences on the learners of Hyderabad region and their impact on acquisition of English language skills (L2).

2. Brief History of Hyderabad Region

The select region for our research study- Hyderabad, the capital of Indian State of Andhra Pradesh, is located in the north-western part of Andhra Pradesh. The modern Hyderabad is spread over an area of 650 km^2 (250 sq mi), making it one of the largest metros in India. It is a historic place known for its unique heritage, culture, art and architecture. Hyderabad was ruled by the Mouryan Empire in the third century B.C followed by Sathavahanas, Andhra Ikshvaku and various Buddhist and Hindu Kingdoms. Hyderabad is located in the south-central region of the Indian Sub-continent and was also ruled by the Nizams from 1724 to 1948 with the help of British and French troops. The Nizams patronized Islamic art, Islamic architecture, traditions and culture. It is also a place for people who migrated from different parts of the country with multi-linguistic and multi-skilled pedigree. Thus, the region selected for our research study is undoubtedly the place for different religions, cultures and languages.

3. Objectives of the research study

➢ To identify the challenges faced by native speakers of the select region in learning English as second language (L2).

➢ To study and analyze the influencing factors of the L1 learners.

> ➢ To recommend workable solutions for the problems faced by ESL learners of L1 of the region.

4. Statement of the Problem

The learners with multilingual backgrounds have been facing a challenging situation at U.G. level in acquiring proficiency in the target language-English (L2) which is mandatory for academic as well as successful career.

The target group learners are not new to English language. They have almost fourteen years of learning experience in the language, starting from PP-1. In spite of being taught and learnt, the learners have felt a difficulty in acquiring required proficiency in speaking and writing in order to fulfill the academic, career and communicative objectives.

5. Aim of the Research Survey

The aim of the survey was to identify the various problems involved in acquisition of English language skills. It was also aimed at analyzing and interpreting the data collected from the potential learners in order to suggest feasible solutions for the complexities of the target language faced by L1 learners of the select region.

6. Research Design Method

An exploratory, objective, contextual research design, implementing the quantitative research method, was selected for the purpose of the study.

7. Data Collection Method

In this study, the researchers employed a questionnaire as survey technique to obtain data. The items in the questionnaire were designed meticulously in order to collect information, and to investigate perceptions of L2 learners at U.G. level in a demarcated geographical area. Items in questionnaire were close ended in format, which provided mostly quantitative information.

8. Description of Context

The geographical area identified for the study was Hyderabad region of Andhra Pradesh State, India. As the research, aimed at specific learners of English language, all participants were from the specified geographical area.

9. Data Analysis

For the purpose of survey, a structured questionnaire was administered to 60 students drawn from multi-lingual and multi- cultural backgrounds of the region. The questions were framed meticulously to identify the obstacles to acquisition of the language skills.

The ten parameters that selected for the purpose were:

- Studying in vernacular medium:
  61.6% felt that studying in a vernacular medium has become a major obstacle in acquiring communicative competence in English (L2). They opined that their mother tongue was influencing L2 in the process of acquisition. They also shared that they were unable to pronounce certain words of L2 under L1 influence.
- Gender influence on L2 learning:
  An attempt was made in this question to determine whether gender plays any role in acquisition process. 80% expressed that gender would not play any distinct role in L2 acquisition.
- Family educational background:
  Since the participants were drawn from various social and economical backgrounds, the researchersthought that it would be pertinent to find out whether educational background of the family would have any influence on the learners. For this question, 73.3% disagreed by marking   the   option 'No' and expressed that it could have some influence in the formative years of their learning but it would not be an issue in the course of learning at U.G. level.
- Influence of peers:
  This was asked to find out the extent of peer influence on L2 learning. While 46.7% marked the option 'to some extent', 26.6% chose the option 'Yes'. It is evident that friends play an important role in language acquisition.
- State of mind in L2 Classroom:
  60% of learners expressed that they feel uncomfortable and irritable during L2 learning. This could be attributed to lack of creating a context for learning language items.
- Bi-lingual method of teaching and learning:
  53.3% of learners expressed that using vernacular language L1 in the classroom, if required, would help

them learn L2 in an effective manner.

- English communication skills for a good career:
  This was asked to elicit the views of the participants on relationship between good career and English language. By marking the option 'a' (yes), 100% students opined that the language skills were essential for a good career and life.
- Learning English outside the classroom:
  About 66.6% students expressed that English language skills could be acquired outside the classroom at a faster pace than in classroom context.
- Learning English from other sources like television, movies, internet, magazines, etc.:
  About 80% of the learners expressed that learning English from different sources would be interesting and innovative.
- Application of L2 skills:
  66.6% students opine that application of L2 knowledge in a real life situation would help them learn the language quicker.

Fig. 1   2-D column representation of the survey results
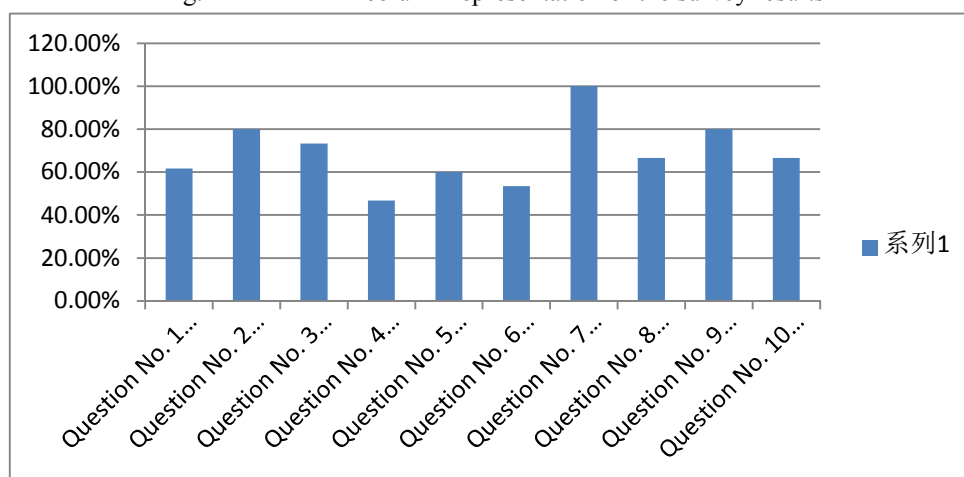
10. Observations based on survey

It is observed that most of the L1 learners were of the opinion that they could learn English better in informal settings than in formal classroom. During an informal interaction with the learners, they frankly admitted that majority of them were reluctant to use English outside the classroom in spite of knowing the fact that language cannot be learnt only in the Classroom. The reasons could be manifold- their low self-esteem, fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed by their peers etc. Some of them are under the false impression that they can speak English whenever the situation warrants. During the survey, it was also noticed that some of the students were feeling uncomfortable to reveal that they had come from vernacular medium background. Observations also revealed that while teaching in a class, it is difficult for the teacher to identify the vernacular medium students as majority of them conceal their regional language medium status. After a great amount of persuasion, students revealed their identity so that we could reach out to help them acquire the target language skills (L2). Accepting regional language medium status in front of their peers is considered very demeaning. They would rather sit through an entire class without understanding anything than seeking help from the teacher. They are of the opinion that once their regional language medium status is revealed, they would be isolated by their peers. The reason for being isolated from the rest of the group is because of their low self-esteem levels and lack of communication skills in the target language.

Therefore, it is obvious that regional language medium has a very strong negative influence on the learners of the target language (L2). Moreover, regional language medium students are being looked down and considered as a lot coming from low economic background, dull, and lacking social finesse by their peers. Unfortunately, regional language medium students are aware of the prejudices of their peers.Very few students, who are extroverts and good at language skills in their mother tongue, are able to overcome this pressure and strive hard to learn English language (L2) and communication skills.

11. Challenges faced by L1 learners

For the purpose of study and analysis the target learners are divided majorly into two categories – Learners from English medium education and learners from vernacular medium education.

11.1. English Medium School Education Learners (L1)

In an ESL classroom, majority of L1 students, who have studied in English medium since primary school, are presumed to have a good social and financial status. It is also found that they have reasonable exposure to contemporary lifestyle and culture. Obviously, L2 acquisition requires the knowledge of people, country, culture, religious and social practices of the target language region.) The students are overconfident and believe that they are good at English (L2), and find the ESL classroom difficult to sit through. In fact, they are ignorant of their limitations in knowledge and skills in the target language which eventually leads to failure in demonstrating their proficiency in L2.

Suggestions

The implementation of the following suggestions would help the L1 students of English Medium background improve their language proficiency in L2 at U.G level.

- Sensitizing them about their knowledge limitations of the L2 language.
- Motivating the self by realizing the fact that English is not just a language but a pre-requisite for employment and good living.
- Cultivating an aptitude for the language.
- Reading newspapers, magazines, fiction books etc.
- Learning and practicing language items such as grammar, syntax, vocabulary,   pronunciationetc, with an application orientation.
- Striving for fluency rather than accuracy in the initial stages of learning language.
- Understanding the fact that English is the language of library and computer.
- Exposing self to the target language culture, and different contexts of the language.
- Active participation in classroom activities.
- Communicating/interacting in the target language.
- Knowing about the culture of the English.

11.2 Vernacular Medium School Education Learners (L1)

On the other hand, learners from vernacular medium are doubly disadvantaged lot because they lack opportunities in acquiring knowledge and skills in L2 which is mandatory for academic performance and career growth. In spite of learning English as Second language for almost fourteen years (PP to plus two), considerable number of students are found failing in demonstrating reasonable language communication skills at UG level. The issue becomes extremely demanding when they need to study and write examinations of core subjects in their respective disciplines in English. Significant numbers of intelligent students drop out of technical courses, or become disheartened when they are unable to comprehend the lessons taught in English in the classroom. The pressure to possess level-headed knowledge and fluency in English language skills at UG level makes many students feel depressed and ostracized. These students feel anxious and nervous while trying to prove themselves academically credible to their parents and peers. Many brilliant students from vernacular medium schools are found lagging in academics, job interviews, seminars, presentation of projects and in other contexts of communication. In most of the situations, such as job interviews, academic projects, elocutions, debates etc, which require communicative competence, students with convent education background are stealing the march over the vernacular medium students. As a result, vernacular medium students are understood to have been depressed and felt marginalized by their own peer group members on various occasions.

In Hyderabad region, most of the learners of L2 come from families whose mother tongue is Telugu, Urdu, or Hindi etc. For these students, the syntactical pattern of vernacular language (L1) is a major hindrance in acquiring language skills in English (L2). Therefore, the ESL classrooms in Hyderabad typically reflect the tradition, culture, and languages- such as Urdu, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, etc., of the region. In this heterogeneous culture of a classroom, the teaching-learning is considered a challenge for both the learner and the teacher. To understand the intricacies involved in acquisition of L2 in the region, it is inevitable for us to examine the Standard syntactical patterns of Telugu, Hindi and English.

Syntactical Patterns:

Telugu   subject –object –verb (S O V)
Hindi   subject –object –verb (S O V)
English   subject-verb-object   (S V O)

For example:

Jane speaks Hindi. (Syntax: subject-verb- object)

When translated into Telugu, this sentence becomes

     Jane Hindi maataladuthundi. (Syntax: subject-object-verb)
      S   Obj   Verb

When translated into Hindi, this sentence becomes

Jane Hindi mein baath kar sakthi hai. (Syntax: subject-object-verb)

  S   Obj   Verb

A native speaker thus uses the given structures in his/her vernacular contexts. Whereas, when he speaks in English, he should change the syntax to subject-verb-object, which he finds it very difficult to cope with. So instead of saying 'Jane speaks Hindi', he might end up saying 'Jane Hindi speaks'. Most often they indulge in translating a native expression into foreign language following their innate structure (L1) rather than adopting the target language structure (L2).   Also, when they speak in English, they think in their native language and translate it into English word by word and sentence by sentence. Therefore, errors in speaking English occur due to mother tongue influence.

To understand more precisely, some syntactical patterns of questions in Telugu, Hindi and English are given below:

Telugu   subject –object –verb

Hindi   subject –object –verb

English   verb - subject-object

For example:

Telugu:

Nuvvu ninna college ki vellava?

Subject – adverb of time - object – verb   (syntactical pattern s-o-v)

Hindi:

Kya aap kal college gaye the?

Interrogative - Subject – adverb of time – object – verb (syntactical pattern s-o-v)

English:

Did you go to college yesterday?

Interrogative verb – subject – main verb- object – adverb of time (syntactical pattern- iv- s-o-adv of time)

In general, the factors that influence a vernacular language medium students' learning are identified as:

- Socio-culture upbringing
- Economic background
- Family education background
- The importance given for education in a family depends on mother's education
- Religion and caste
- Home atmosphere
- Parental upbringing - positive attitude of the family members help the students perform   better
- Society
- Age of the learner
- Academic background
- Gender of the student
- Peer acceptance in the class – students who do not hang out in a group in most cases   feel isolated and   end up as failures in academics.
- Socio, political and economical uncertainties.

Suggestions

In addition to the English medium education students, the implementation of the following   suggestions would help the L1 students of Vernacular Medium school education for improving their language acquisition and proficiency in L2.

- Realize the fact that for a good job and name, learning English is a must.
- Developing a flair for reading (not by force) would improve vocabulary, idiom, and grammatical knowledge of the L2.
- To be at home with the meaning and application of words, make some guesswork initially in order to find the different shades of meaning and context in which a   particular word may be used, by referring to good standard dictionary (English to English).
- Fluency in English can be attained through regular practice.
- Classroom knowledge of the language should be put into practice in order to be successful   in   real situations. This sort of practice would help overcome language   problems and make the learner confident.
- Grammar- Every language has its "dos and don'ts" in grammar. Studying grammar is an exhaustive part in learning a language. Studying and practicing grammar would   make the learner perfect in all four skills of language (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing)
- First listen attentively and then speak. Listening brings in you the power to assess an individual's worth.

In communication parlance, we call it "life building material."
- While you speak English, follow intonation and pauses carefully.
- At a learning stage don't crave for accuracy but strive for fluency.
- Once you feel confident and fluent in language usage, refer a dictionary for correct pronunciation.

The last thing is-"do not just know the meaning of words and usage, remember to learn and relearn correct pronunciation.

12. Conclusion

It is understood that there is an inherent relationship between language and culture, which motivates the teacher to follow the golden rule of language teaching "thou shall not teach language without also teaching the culture of the language". Therefore, while teaching L2, it is essential for the language teacher to understand the learner's innate linguistic competence, cultural background and emotional intellect. A text in context is the need of the hour which helps the learners feel at home while learning the target language skills. It is our opinion that teaching-learning practices of the select region –Hyderabad are to be redesigned keeping in mind the needs, knowledge levels of the target learner, and the requirements of prospective employer, so as to make the L2 learning a pleasure than a pain. In order to make the L2 easy and acceptable to the L1 learners the designers of syllabus and curriculum (L2) should also take into consideration the real aspects such as social, cultural, economical and educational background of the prospective learner.

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