BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM
OF TEACHER TRAINEES -
Awareness of Innate Communicative Abilities*

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Lim Soh Lan and Maya Khemlani-David
Centre for Language & Communication Studies
University of Malaya

ABSTRACT

Teacher trainers in Malaysia very often have to work with pre-service ESL teacher trainees who are not proficient in English. They consequently face a real problem making role models out of them. This paper explores the possibility of improving the accuracy of the spoken English of such trainees (with special emphasis on grammatical accuracy) through building the self-esteem of teacher trainees. This is done by helping them to build on the communicative abilities they already possess through a consciousness-raising process.

Introduction

In Malaysia, it is becoming increasingly difficult to get proficient speakers of English to be trained as ESL teachers. Consequently, teacher trainers have to work with many preservice trainees who are not proficient in spoken English.

In an effort to equip Malaysian secondary schools with competent ESL teachers, students selected from among SPM equivalent to GCE "O" level first graders who scored distinctions in English, undergo a pre-ESL programme. One such programme is run by the University of Malaya and it immerses the students in various aspects of English, including a paper called Linguistic Competence, which equips them with knowledge of grammar. These students subsequently join the Bachelor of Education TESL programme, which provides the professional training necessary for ESL teachers. On entry to the course, students take a placement test which groups them according to their proficiency levels.

This paper draws much from the experience, observation and research into the weakest of the three groups in the 1991-92 batch. This group is made up entirely of those who had joined the 1989-90 pre-ESL group of that academic year.

In tests of the spoken skills, both in oral interaction and presentation tests these students scored lowest in grammar compared to content, flow and pronunciation. Basically, they are able to get across their communicative intent but this is interwoven with poor grammar and convoluted complex structures - unacceptable for ESL teachers as they are supposed to be role models of the language.

Strevens (1985) is unchallenged when he says:-

"The teacher of a language is the learner's MODEL especially as far as the SPOKEN language is concerned, and if the teacher's command of the language is inadequate the learner's achievement will be impaired .... It is a source of great discouragement for a learner to have a teacher whose command of the language is inadequate, who makes obvious errors in the classroom, who is uncertain about meanings and grammatical patterns." (our emphasis)

Strevens is therefore, of the view that the skills component of a teacher training course must ensure that the teacher's command of English is at least adequate for classroom purpose. This he says "... ought to be a make-or-break requirement since the teacher without an adequate command of the language is probably wasting his own time and that of the pupils and he may be losing their general enthusiasm as learners into the bargain."

It is clear and will become clearer later that this group of trainees, which is representative of many pre-ESL trainees, has to work on improving the spoken language especially where accuracy is concerned.

In an effort to identify some of the underlying causes of this problem a questionnaire was administered to this group (Lim, 1992). It was found that only 11.65% of class time was allocated to spoken skills in primary and secondary schools attended by the respondents. The speaking skill was reported as given the least emphasis in these schools in 90% of the cases. Furthermore, outside the language classroom most of the respondents reported that they did not have the opportunity to speak English. In fact, many of the ESL teachers switched to the mother-tongue when interacting with them, even in the English classes.

The above study also shows that most of the exercises to develop the spoken skill were drills, model dialogues, reading speaking aloud (passages), answering reading comprehension questions and giving answers orally to exercises in worksheets and textbooks. Such spoken activities are mainly motor-perceptive and mechanistic. While giving practice in pronunciation, stress, rhythm and syntax, they do not give the students the chance to handle autonomy and unpredictability - two important aspects of real life use of spoken language (creative use).

When faced with real life use of English in classroom situations, trainees do not have such "props" to resort to, e.g. the written form of what has to be said or the recollection of the teacher's model sentences. Therefore, he finds it difficult to draw upon the code of English in an autonomous fashion i.e. to say what he wants to say in his own words. He literally has to think about what to say. The time constraint, inevitable in speech situations makes it difficult for a trainee who has been immersed in drills and other motor-perceptive speech activities to speak spontaneously and accurately.

In addition, the trainee is often told of his numerous errors, especially grammatical which marks his spontaneous and autonomous oral production. It is therefore, inevitable that the self-esteem of such teacher trainees vis-à-vis spoken skills and teacher talk is low.

Suggested Solution

From the scenario depicted, it is imperative that the confidence and self-esteem of teacher-trainees be boosted.

The aim is to make the teacher trainees aware through a consciousness-raising instructional phase of the innate i.e. already available, communicative resources and strategies available to them. (see definition in Theoretical Framework).

To start off with, teachers must be made aware that they already have the grammatical base (from Pre-ESL and B.Ed TESL lessons) to make choices. Trainees must also be made aware that such choices are necessary for what is expected in their performance as models of L2, especially where accuracy of syntax is concerned, is of utmost importance.

Teacher trainees could capitalize on such innate resources and in the short run camouflage their limited language proficiency. Ultimately, teacher trainees must be given the confidence and self-assurance that they can overcome their own linguistic handicaps through the use of communicative strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The proposed solution suggests making trainees aware of the grammatical resources and communicative strategies which they can capitalize on. This consciousness-raising will be transmitted through a number of lessons to make trainees aware of the language they use. Donmall (1985) says, "Language awareness is a person's sensitivity and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life."

This covers three broad parameters - the cognitive, affective and social. Cognitively, it may be interpreted as raising the trainee's awareness of the patterns of language which he needs in the classroom i.e. domain-specific language. Affectively, language awareness also motivates the trainee to be personally involved in the process of overcoming his linguistic handicaps. Socially, he can play a more effective role as a model of the language and function effectively as an ESL teacher in his community.

Wright (1991) asserts that teacher trainees should be given the opportunity to handle data of oral language and especially that of their own speech production to describe, analyse, reflect upon, evaluate and ultimately to see for themselves the alternatives and strategies to apply. In this way, they would be able to develop domain-specific usable skills - in this case grammatical accuracy and communicative effectiveness in classroom use of spoken English.

This, Wright believes, involves guiding the trainees' attention towards particular aspects of language in relation to his specific problem areas thereby increasing the degree of explicitness and hence his awareness of the language problems.

Looking at language generated by the teacher in the classroom or simulated classroom situations is especially relevant in this context. The teacher is encouraged to use metalanguage to talk about his

classroom language and consequently, knowledge of L2 is further reinforced as he reflects and talks about language in an illuminating way both with the teacher educator and his peers.

The teacher thus, is not only a user of the target language but also an analyst of his own oral production. The insights gained are then put into practice. Such insights will enhance his competence. The practice sessions, which are focused on his linguistic handicaps and on means of overcoming such linguistic handicaps will in turn, help him to build up his performance.

The ability for the trainee to use metalanguage and grammatical terminology to talk about language is in itself a confidence-booster. Inductive methodology will raise the learner from conscious exploration of language to unconscious and natural use of language.

Trainees are encouraged, through examination of data, to be aware of times where he had made use of communicative strategies (CS) to overcome his linguistic handicaps - not at the expense of accuracy, though. At this point it may be relevant to explain what CS means.

Communicative strategies are attempts made by inventive language learners to circumvent their linguistic difficulties or inadequacies. This is when their limited knowledge of the target language makes it difficult for them to say what they mean.

A communicative strategy has been defined as follows: -

"...a systematic attempt by the learner to express and decode meanings in the target language in situations where the appropriate systematic target language used have not been formed."

Tarone (1981)

Communicative strategies therefore, serve to compensate for inadequacies in the target language.

Research on communicative strategies has generally focused on the language learners. Khemlani-David (1992) investigated the possibility of consciousness-raising of communicative strategies as a tool to improve language proficiency of L2 learners.

As this study focuses on the teacher trainee, many of the basic principles of consciousness-raising of communicative strategies can be applied. The strategies that teacher trainees will benefit most from are strategies to overcome both grammatical and lexical difficulties. Teacher trainees not only face problems with target language syntax and structures but also with limited vocabulary in the target language.

We will therefore, focus on CSs which resolve both the aforementioned difficulties that teacher trainees face. The focus of this study then, is not merely CS as a means of communicating intent but equally important is the need to be accurate. We will therefore, look at achievement strategies, both formal reduction and functional strategies, which are means by which the language user can make use of, not only to communicate intent but to communicate it accurately.

Faerch and Kasper (1983) explain:-

"In order to avoid producing non-fluent or incorrect utterances by using insufficiently automised or hypothetical rules/items learners may decide to communicate by means of

a reduced system focusing on stable rules and items which have become reasonably well-automised."

They give two reasons for using formal reduction strategies. These are to avoid making errors and to increase fluency. They are of the view that elimination of certain formal elements of the target language does not interfere with the transmission of meaning. In fact, it may facilitate communication, making it more efficient eg. the use of the simple present tense instead of other tense forms where meaning is not affected.

At the lexical level, L2 users can make use of a wide range of functional strategies to get meaning across. Such strategies include interalia circumlocution, simplification, paraphrase and even lexical translation.

Knowledge of the wide gamut of resources they can fall back on should give the teacher trainee confidence. However, we feel teacher trainees should not resort to too much use of some communicative strategies like language shift, appeal for assistance, change of topic, code switching, word coinage and foreignizing. This is because alert learners will be able to conclude that the teacher himself lacks the knowledge. We believe that once the trainees are made aware of the linguistic resources they have and have enough practice to draw upon them as needed there will be ripple effects. They will then be able to monitor their output and manipulate and adjust their teacher talk so that comprehensible input is made available to their learners.

The Exploratory Study

A. Design

Based on the aforementioned premise, four one hour sessions were devised aiming at making the teacher trainee (TT) aware of the ample resources, she has at her disposal, to overcome linguistic deficiencies. The sessions were conducted weekly and stretched over a month. After each session the TT was told to consciously make use of the strategies both in the classroom and in her spoken discourse with peers outside the classroom.

A reading comprehension lesson was conducted by the trainee. This was audio-taped and a transcript helped to determine the number and type of errors made.

This was in turn followed by the consciousness-raising phase which stretched over a month. The teacher-trainee was made aware of the kinds of errors she made. More importantly, the subject was also made aware of the range of available communicative strategies, especially at the level of syntax. To help tide her over at a difficult time. Such strategies could help her to reduce the number of syntactical errors made.

Subsequently, seven weeks later, the teacher-trainee conducted another reading comprehension lesson on the same passage. Transcripts were again made of the lesson. Both the number and kind of errors made were then analysed.

It was hypothesized that the consciousness-raising phase would result in greater awareness of the range of resources the subject had available in domain specific language-teacher talk. Consequently, this would enhance self-esteem and result in less errors.

An interview with the teacher trainee was conducted to ascertain how she felt about the input provided in the consciousness-raising phase of the research design. Was she more aware of language? Did she feel more confident when she taught the lesson the second time round as compared with the first time?

B. The Subject

The lady subject had obtained a Grade 1 and an A for English in the school leaving certificate. Incidentally, the academic and linguistic profile of the subject is highly representative of her peers, discussed earlier. The subject was selected because she appeared to be the least confident of the group in terms of her spoken language.

C. Limitations of the study

Only one subject was chosen. The small sample is deemed appropriate as this is meant to be an exploratory study. The kinds of errors made by the subject are representative of those made by the other teacher trainees in this group.

Furthermore, the consciousness-raising phase of the research was limited to four hours. A more intensive and prolonged awareness-phase is necessary, if a substantial difference to confidence is to be realized.

D. Analysis of Data and Discussion

Numerous grammatical errors (141) were noted in the first transcript. Errors may be categorized under:-

- prepositions
- plurality
- subject-verb agreement
- articles
- tenses
- passive constructions
- infinitive
- pronouns
- word order.

Basically, the transcript indicated a high degree of complex and convoluted sentences with subordination. The result was unwieldy and inefficient performance. Note the following example:

"O.K. eh starvation while means ar you are ... death caused by eh lack of er food supplies er too low to buy adequate supplies food so er you know that nowadays er many countries are faces the problem such as Africa er right?"

In Session 1 the TT listened to her own reading comprehension lesson and reported she was not aware of the kind and number of errors she made.

The researcher then asked the TT to listen to a native speaker discourse. She reported that she was made aware of the much simpler structures and shorter transactional turns of NS. This gave her the confidence that it was perfectly all right to use simple sentences, which she was in possession of. Incidentally, the TT also reported that she was unconsciously trying to superimpose on her spoken language, the norms of the written language.

The subject was given examples of spoken language and reminded to be aware of the difference between the spoken and written modes. She was advised to use simple sentences and structures and was relieved to learn that she need not use complex structures.

In analysing her transcript the TT was made aware of how she could replace her complex structures with simpler forms.

In session 2 the researcher made the TT aware that she had a number of communicative resources at her disposal. She could make use of either achievement or avoidance-oriented strategies.

Achievement strategies are where the speaker wants to get her message across. Circumlocutions, for instance, were a solution open to them when faced with a vocabulary problem. Avoidance strategies included use of the active rather than passive structures.

Again, using her transcript the TT was made aware of the number and range of strategies she had already automatically used. She had made use of rephrasing, repetition and abandonment of structures.

In Session III formal reduction strategies were advocated. Use of the simple present and simple past were encouraged whenever possible. It was noted in the first transcript that there appeared to be a number of difficulties over verb forms and mistakes arising from regular use of the passive. The trainee was shown where the active voice could have been more effectively used in place of the passive.

In session IV the TT was made aware of the resource of formulaic speech or expressions for instance "Have you finished/completed/done...?"

The TT was also shown how to give definitions. For instance, in explaining lexical items the TI' got into linguistic deep waters. She tended to use structures like, "I like to explain what the means of conquer"; Also in eliciting information she used difficult structures which resulted in grammatical errors e.g. "Do you know what the meaning of...?"

She was taught the formulaic expression for teacher talk vis-à-vis asking for meaning of words and giving definitions. She was told to use the expression "Do you know what means?"

At times, however she did use simpler correct structures. This was pointed out to the TT so as to give her the confidence that she had the knowledge and the structures to use this speech act correctly. Sometimes though, she tended to go off track.

In the consciousness-raising sessions the TT understood the grammatical mistakes made and was well-versed in the meta language used.

In all four sessions the TT was shown the typescript to determine when she had made use of both formal reduction and functional strategies.

The tapescript of the second lesson, i.e. after the consciousness-raising phase showed a marked reduction in the number of grammatical mistakes made. The errors fell by 50% i.e. from 141 to 69.

However, the type of errors remained basically the same except that there was a reduction in the number of errors connected with the use of the passive. There were no errors in the use of the passive as compared to 15 in the first transcript. This was mainly because of an avoidance strategy used and the use of formulaic expressions where the passive could not be avoided in teacher talk. For example, "Have you finished the passage?"

The number of complex constructions fell by 2%. The first transcript shows that 38.46% of the utterances were complex structures while the second one showed 36.5%. Although the complex structures dropped by only 2% the complex structures in the second transcript were less convoluted and unwieldy. The complex structures used in the second transcript were more purposeful and obligatory and also achieved communicative intent more effectively.

The focus on complex structures, use or non-use of the passive form etc in the consciousness raising phase of the experiment appears to have achieved the desired results. The overall effect is the reduction of errors and also the growth in confidence as manifested by the non-existence of nervous and apologetic giggles found in the first transcript as compared to the second where none of it appeared.

Recommendations and Importance of the Study

It is vital that teacher trainees appear confident to their students. At the same time as role models it is also important that they are good role models or it might be the case of the blind leading the blind.

Any kind of exercise or strategy which can in the short term help them to minimise errors and build their self-esteem will hold them in good stead in the long run.

The knowledge that they have within themselves (a reservoir of strategies to overcome linguistic handicaps) will help not only the teacher but also the learners in the long run for they too will be listening to fairly respectable levels of English.

It is therefore, recommended that the English Proficiency component of the B.Ed. TESL programme include the following:

i. an error analysis of teacher talk
ii. an awareness phase where TT reflect on the CSs they have made use of and
iii. an awareness of the entire gamut of CSs available to them to achieve accuracy and effectiveness in teacher talk.

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