

## **FLUENCY AND ACCURACY IN SPOKEN ENGLISH - IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE IN A BILINGUAL CONTEXT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article is an attempt to address the need for developing the speaking skill among our EFL learners in schools. The need was borne out in a survey conducted among EFL in-service teachers. The survey also revealed certain classroom practices which are possible causes for low spoken English proficiency. The speaking skill is defined, high-lighting the importance of both fluency and accuracy in expressing communicative intent. In the light of the possible causes for low spoken proficiency, guidelines are provided on how to develop speaking skills.

### **Introduction**

In most Malaysian schools English is taught in an EFL context where English is not the language of the community. In fact, English Language teachers and students either share the same mother-tongue or are proficient in one common language, Bahasa Malaysia. In such a situation, to what extent can students see the relevance of English for communication? Most would take it as a subject to be studied and passed in an examination. Under such circumstances, to what extent has the expressed objective of the KBSR and KBSM English programme to enable students to communicate effectively in English, been achieved among our learners? This article attempts to address these questions and it also aims to provide guidelines on how to help learners to achieve fluency and accuracy in spoken English.

### **Spoken English - The Malaysian School Situation**

In July 1992, a survey on 'The Use of Spoken Language in KBSR and KBSM EFL' classes was conducted by the writer among 88 in-service English Language teachers in the University of Malaya. It was an attempt to answer the following questions:-

- a. What is the extent to which spoken English is used for communication in EFL classes?
- b. How well can our learners speak in English?

The teachers involved in the survey were mainly from primary and secondary schools. The levels taught ranged from Primary Year I to the tertiary level. The following findings are noteworthy at this point:-

1. 84.1% of the respondents agreed that their learners were not able to speak well in English. These included all the 16 respondents who taught in upper secondary classes and tertiary institutions. Their students had either completed the school English Language Programme or were almost at the end of it.
2. Of the four language skills, 50% named speaking as the skill their learners are weakest in while 43% named writing. Therefore, they are weakest in the productive skills.
3. It is significant to note the following two comparisons between the productive skills:
  - i. 57.5% named speaking as the skill their learners want more practice in while only 4.5% named writing.
  - ii. 50% named speaking as the skill their learners need more practice in while only 10.2% named writing. 5.7% named reading while the rest 34.1%, named a combination of skills of which speaking predominates). Though learners are weak in writing as well, it is speaking that featured significantly as the skill which needs most attention.
4. 73.3% named speaking as the skill learners get the least practice in at the individual level.

Such a situation is cause for concern as speech is primary to language. Hammerly (1991) notes that audio-oral skills are needed for 80-90% of all communication. Weissberg (1988:6), while recognising the role of input in second language acquisition states, "There is a growing recognition that students' oral output may also be instrumental in their acquisition." By oral output he means speaking in listener-speaker interactions. It may be concluded that as language is for communication, learning a language without experiencing the satisfaction of speaking it, puts a distance between the learner and the language and this can be a major barrier to developing general proficiency.

At this point it is pertinent to look into what the speaking skill involves and the significance of the terms fluency and accuracy in its description before identifying some of the causes of low spoken English proficiency among Malaysian learners in schools.

### **Fluency and Accuracy in Spoken Language**

According to Bygate (1987), speaking involves encoding communicative intent often in the 'here and now'. This is because of the time-constraint and reciprocity conditions inherent in listener-speaker situations. There is also the need to handle unpredictability of listener response. Hence, spoken language proficiency involves being able to produce fluently and accurately, autonomous utterances which are appropriate to the context of the speech situation.

Fluency may be defined as the ability to get across communicative intent without too much hesitation and too many pauses to cause barriers or a breakdown in communication (Crystal, 1977; Bryne, 1986; Nation, 1991). Accuracy refers to the use of correct forms where utterances do not contain errors affecting the phonological, syntactic, semantic or discourse features of a language (Bryne, 1988).

Therefore, even as teachers help learners to produce correct forms in English, it is also important that they help them to get across their communicative intent as effectively as possible in listener-speaker situations.

### **Identifying Causes for Low Spoken English Proficiency**

Oral communication through participation and interaction in listener-speaker situations is the cornerstone upon which spoken proficiency is built. This view is held by many researchers among them Savignon (1983), Canale (1983) and Ellis (1987). Oral communication in English is basically limited to the EFL class in our EFL context. The survey referred to above, identified the following practices in EFL classes which limit oral communication even further :-

#### 1. Widespread use of Bahasa Malaysia in Teacher Talk in EFL Classes

92% of the respondents use both English and Bahasa Malaysia to give instructions, teach language content as well as for informal interaction with students. 70% admitted to using Bahasa Malaysia and English in more than 50% of the 24 language functions listed under teacher talk. It may be said that the use of Bahasa Malaysia is rife in Malaysian EFL classes. With such a practice one wonders whether learners would attend to the aural-oral mode of English as Bahasa Malaysia can be resorted to.

#### 2. Use of Mother-tongue and Shared Language in Peer-interaction

Peer-interaction is almost entirely in the mother-tongue or the shared language except in 2 colleges and 5 schools, all in major urban centres.

#### 3. Motor-perceptive Nature of Speaking Activities

Some of the most common oral activities in EFL classes are:

- a. reading aloud of comprehension passages and model dialogues
- b. answering WH questions-the answers to these can be read off from the text
- c. giving answers to written language exercises
- d. reading aloud vocabulary lists
- e. drills - repetition of model sentences after teacher
- f. drills - as in repetition of model sentences displayed on the board, in textbooks, from substitution tables and using cues

These activities develop the motor - perceptive aspects of speech. Learners are helped to vocalize the sounds of English and to be familiar with the structures of English leading to linguistic competence.

The weakness of these activities, from the point of view of speaking, is that the learner is not required to formulate utterances based on processing of language for production in real time under reciprocity conditions. With emphasis on such activities one wonders if linguistic competence, important though it is from the accuracy aspect of speaking, will remain only as building blocks. They will not be put to the use for which they are made, which is to develop the speaking skill.

## **Towards Fluency and Accuracy in Spoken English Guidelines for Classroom Practice**

It is clear from the discussion so far, that maximizing opportunities for interaction is the key towards fluency. Accuracy comes through classroom input, instruction and monitoring of use.

Many would argue against the emphasis on use - after all it is an EFL context. However, it does not really matter that there is no immediate need outside the EFL class. According to Savignon (1983), what is important is that the opportunity to use the language in the course of learning it, creates interest and identification with the language, not to mention the confidence gained.

Strategies for maximizing opportunities for use:

### 1) Monolingualism in Teacher Talk

Teacher talk should be only in English in EFL classes. This practice should start at the beginning of the English Language programme and should subsequently be maintained for the students through the school programme. The 'une personne, une langue' (one person, one language) principle from which the suggestion draws its inspiration has claimed tremendous success in acquisition of a second language in early childhood (McLaughlin, 1974). The person supplying the input for the target language concerned, identifies himself totally with the language without using any other language with the child. Bahasa Malaysia or any other shared language may be used only at word level for clarification of the meaning of difficult vocabulary items.

Initially there may be many problems associated with this in the Malaysian context, especially the rather unnatural situation of a teacher and students who share the same mother-tongue speaking to each other in what appears (to the students) to be a "strange tongue". However, once established this will provide valuable and much needed quality input of English in real life use.

It may be argued that there is no linguistic resource to work with at the beginning of the English Language programme. This is where the teacher uses the 'here and now' orientation according to the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1984) to adjust input to make it comprehensible. (The 'here and now' orientation refers to using the context of the immediate environment which the learner can perceive at that point of time, to get meaning across.)

This practice of using only the target language in teacher talk among young learners at the beginning of a foreign language programme has been claimed to have been successfully adopted in the three situations below:

- a. Basingstoke, United Kingdom - Teaching Spanish to English speaking children in an English speaking environment (Berliner, New Straits Times 3rd April 1992)
- b. Victoria, Australia - Teaching German to English speaking children in an English speaking environment (Clyne, 1981).
- c. Japan - Teaching English to Japanese students in a Japanese speaking environment (Keiko, 1991).

There are important parallels in these situations similar to the beginning stages of EFL in the Malaysian primary school context and they are : -

- i. All are young beginners of the target language ranging from kindergarten to Grade 3. (According to Lenneberg (1967), language learning through inductive learning is most effective before puberty.)
- ii. All the learners share the same mother-tongue.
- iii. In each case English is taught in an EFL context.
- iv. Learners of the target language do not have an immediate need for the language except in the classroom to communicate with the teacher and in classroom simulated speech situations.

## 2) Encouraging Learner Output in Learner-Teacher Interaction

There is now widespread acceptance that the oral interactions in which second language (L2) learners participate, provide one of the main sources of data for L2 acquisition (Ellis, 1991). Ellis believes that 'teaching' can be profitably viewed as interaction that supplies learners with opportunities for learning. This applies especially to interactions with the EFL teacher.

Negotiation of meaning between teacher and learner increases comprehensible input which focuses on meaning. Learner production facilitates integration of new linguistic knowledge when the learner notices differences between his output and correct forms from the teacher's responses. This is especially so when the teacher monitors the learner's output through indirect correction. Such monitoring should form part of the conversational exchange focused on communicative intent of the learner.

## 3) Encouraging Peer-interaction Interaction (with a caution)

To what extent should effort be made to encourage spontaneous and unsupervised peer-interaction in English with our young beginning learners? Hammerly (1991), suggests caution. The application of SLACC/I (second language acquisition through classroom communication /interaction) to include unsupervised peer-interaction in beginning EFL contexts will expose learners to a large quantity of wrong forms. This will lead to a form of classroom pidgin. Fluency will be emphasized at the expense of accuracy. Within such a context how can opportunities for use in listener-situations be increased?

If there are learners in our EFL class who have acquired English either simultaneously with the first language or as a first language, they can be placed strategically in class. Such learners can then be models for maximizing comprehensible input through peer-interaction.

## 4) Encouraging Autonomy through Speaking Activities

The current emphasis on accuracy of linguistic forms through mechanistic mouthing of already encoded correct forms should be balanced against a greater emphasis on real use of these forms in communicative tasks. Willis and Willis (1987, 88) offer useful guidelines on how to provide a balance between activities focused on linguistic forms and those focused on language use to help learners achieve autonomy.

A good pedagogical principle to follow would be to remove the linguistic 'props' of already formulated structures as soon as possible. In the case of answering reading comprehension questions orally for example, information transfer activities can be done first. Interesting details of a passage on a camping holiday for example, can be represented in the form of a table under the headings:

- a. Date

- b. Places visited
- c. Activities
- d. Interesting Experiences
- e. Impressions

Referring only to the table, learners answer questions on the passage. In fact, a variety of speaking activities can be given using the essence of the text abstracted as in the above. For example, a situation could be simulated which requires learners to make an oral report on the camping trip. These points abstracted while providing the communicative intent, requires learners to encode in the 'here and now'.

Harmer (1983) refers to the communicative continuum of speaking activities while Littlewood (1981) refers to the increasing degree of communicativeness of speaking activities. Both suggest the importance of moving learners up the scale of communicativeness towards autonomy. All in, the focus of lessons should be on the use of language and the linguistic forms are but a means to this end.

### Summary

The survey suggests that in the Malaysian EFL context, the relevance of English for communication is not borne out both through the use of spoken language in EFL classes and through the speaking activities conducted.

Besides, the speaking skill of our learners leaves much to be desired. It would be interesting to look into the extent to which the former affects the latter among our learners in school.

### Conclusion

With the change from the structural syllabus of the KLSR and KLSM to the functional-notional syllabus of the KBSR and KBSM, the shift in emphasis has been from form to use and communicative language principles are subscribed to. One would think that classroom practice would reflect this change but it hasn't. What we see now (as noted in the results of the survey above) is the practice of structuralism imposed on the items of the syllabus organised according to "notions" and language "functions." Hence, linguistic competence continues to be emphasized but there is no corresponding effective link with the real use of the language patterns as defined by the functions itemised in the syllabus. So, even as structuralism provides the accuracy of language forms, language teaching eclectism should express itself by applying the principles of Communicative Language Teaching which work towards fluency. Such a balance is necessary to develop fluency and accuracy in spoken English.

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