Acquisition of Phonological Skills through Situational Learning Aided by Acquired Knowledge Competency

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Acquired Knowledge Competency and Phonological Skills Acquisition

Acquired Knowledge Competency (AKC) in a target language such as English is very important for communication through that language with people across the globe. Within AKC, internalized phonological skills acquired from real life communication situations enables learners to communicate competently with people across the globe, who come from diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic and professional backgrounds.

Learners of a second or foreign language need to speak the target language in a manner that is intelligible to their target audience for successful business transaction. However, often we notice that the second or foreign language learners find it difficult to understand the native speakers' use of the second or foreign language learners' target language, or reveal great difficulty to speak and communicate well when they are exposed to the native speakers. The problem arises not due to the lack of knowledge in and about the target language but because there are many differences between the phonological systems of the source and target languages, among other reasons.

Our Proposal

We propose a hypothesis in this paper that this problem can be solved by the application of the principles of situational method in the target language speaking environment.

Second or foreign language learners acquire them from the second or foreign language speaking environments they are exposed to. Phonological features always dominate and interfere with the mastery process when second or foreign language speakers communicate with the native speakers or with any person or persons from any part of the world.

As the learners get used to one system of speaking (their first language) for many years, they find it very difficult to change over to the phonological features of their target language. Often they are even unable to recognize the phonological features of their target language. They tend to substitute their first language features for the phonological features of their target language. Switching over to the phonological features of the target language is made easier when learners are exposed to the target language speaking environment. Thus, we need to create target language situations in our classrooms.

Remember that this is only one of the many important factors. For example, our teachers need to demonstrate an ability and willingness to switch over to the target phonological features.

Acquisition of Phonological Skills

Second or foreign language learners need to be given an exposure to a real communication situation of the target language speakers in order to enable the learners to acquire the correct phonological components of the target language. This is possible by giving adequate aural exposure to the target phonological system through direct access to target language speakers. Online chatting or video conferencing will help in this. Language labs also play a crucial role. Language learning software that focuses on the phonological system of the target language is very helpful. Watching news through the TV channels and Radio programs originating from the nation/s of the target language is another step in the right direction. Movies in the target language offer total immersion.

However, it is imperative on the part of the learner to practice responding instantly in order to improve aural skills simultaneously. As the saying reveals, speech is like a baby; it is easy to conceive but difficult to deliver.

The learner will encounter various difficulties of speech only when he or she speaks. Hence the learner has to spend considerable effort to improve accuracy and clarity mastering the essential phonological skills. Therefore, learners need an exposure to native-like situations to listen and acquire the phonological skills in the target language.

The situational method of acquisition of phonological skills is a lively and pleasurable experience compared to the struggle to learn the phonetics of the target language and consciously applying it in speech. Situational learning will also create a long-term effect on learners.

Method

Our study is based on the hypothesis that second or foreign language learners acquire phonological competency to converse with the target language speakers when they are exposed to the target language environment by using the situational learning method. Thahira talks about its advantages: "Procedures move from controlled to free practice of structures. Procedures move from oral use of sentence patterns to their automatic use in speech, reading and writing." Target language environment creates compulsion to speak and modify the language output in consonance with the target language. Acquired theoretical knowledge from ESL classes can be used for comprehensive phonological skills development.

Participants

Data was collected from thirty students from final year classes of undergraduate engineering disciplines of an engineering college affiliated to Anna University, Chennai, India. These subjects were earlier not selected for employment by the multi-national corporations in the campus interviews because they lacked adequate phonological competence English. These subjects have studied English for more than a decade through heterogeneous ESL classes.

The students were divided into two categories based on the input they received in the target language.

Category 1

This category of students studied target language in ESL classes and acquired phonological input from ESL teachers. Their medium of instruction for other subjects was English. They had good knowledge of the subjects they have taken up for study in the college but did not have a good mastery of the phonology of the English language.

Category 2

These students also studied English in ESL classes. They studied the other subjects in their first language. Their approach towards the target language is knowledge oriented in grammar aspect and structural aspect without any emphasis on any of the four language skills. They relied more on memory than on actual performance of the language through fluent speaking..

The subjects of the first category had considerable receptive input of the language by means of listening and reading. They had a compulsion to master the productive skill of writing only and not speaking. In the classroom also they were often non-communicative. They wrote their examinations in English. They watched English movies but didn't have enough chances to practice speaking.

To the second category of students, speaking in English was itself a tough task. Due to inadequate target language input, they never gained any confidence to speak English and have lost their confidence to speak correctly. They looked for words while speaking and depended on translation method for expressing ideas. They framed sentences in first language and searched for words and parallel structures.

The Data

The students were asked to take language tests on listening skills and speaking skills. The audio used for the listening task was based on the target language phonological system. The task for speaking skill examined fluency, clarity and intelligibility of their utterances, influence of mother tongue, control on rate of speech, and ability to adjust to differences in accent.

Findings and Inferences

The first category of students scored between 39% and 70% of marks. In this category, majority of them scored better marks in listening than speaking. Almost all of them have had practice in listening skill. But their listening was in the second language speaking environment, not in the target language environment. They spend more time in listening in classroom situations and while watching television programmes. Even though they listen to English in classrooms, they rarely get an opportunity to speak in the target language. But the electronic media give them exposure to target language phonological system. They do not seem to prefer such exposures, and are used to it out of necessity.

They find the system (mother tongue and second language environment) they were accustomed to as more friendly. One third of these students attempted online chatting with target language speakers but could not cope up with the rate of speech of the target language speakers. Hence their communication was somewhat very restricted in scope and fluency. As they were willing to engage themselves in conversations with the target language native speakers, they will develop better confidence if they get continuous exposure to the target language speaking situation.

Students of the second category scored only between 13% and 30% of the marks. These students had little chance to acquire phonological competence in the target language, English. They were not privileged to receive any adequate input in terms of grammar or vocabulary. They found it very difficult to understand the sound system of target language speaker. They were ignorant of word stress, intonation, and correct pronunciation. For example; they stressed the last letter 'r' in the words like *butter*, *matter*, etc. The final sounds in the words like *warden* and *garden* were pronounced not as consonant clusters as 'dn', but as a separate syllable as 'daan'. They relied on memory to pass their English exams. These subjects suffered due to misguided and wrong language learning methods applied.

Acquisition of Phonological Skills

Acquisition of phonological skills from the target language situations in contrast to learning English using structures, etc., in ESL classes has the following advantages: It facilitates the learners

- To acquire phonological competency without much mental strain and physical effort.
- To identify the wrong intonation patterns in second language speakers' environment and correct these by themselves.
- To speak with due concern for phonological elements for accuracy and clarity.
- To correct on their own the mistakes they commit while practicing the language as there is responsibility to put the message across successfully.
- To involve completely in listening so that knowledge acquisition becomes easy and fast.

References

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