

## Teacher Beliefs and Teaching Methods as Causal Factors in Student Reticence in English Language Laboratory

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### Abstract

Learner reticence is a real and much discussed problem in the ESL classroom; one interesting though rarely talked about phenomenon is the adoption of teaching practices and teacher beliefs that lead to silence and non-participation among learners. To a lesser extent it may be argued that the materials in use may also have their own contributory role to play in the (non)-learning process. This paper argues that teacher attitudes, beliefs, and practices militate against attempts by learners to acquire spoken English.

**Key words:** ESL classroom, reduction strategies, teacher attitudes and beliefs, spoken English

### Introduction

Aspiring Minds, one of the leading assessment companies “ that helps organizations, governments and institutions measure and identify talent”, conducted a survey based on which it arrived at certain shocking although not very unexpected conclusions about the quality of labour force emerging from engineering colleges and institutes in India.

Out of more than 6,00,000 engineers being pumped into the economy each year, only a handful (18.43%) are ready to be deployed as Software Engineers in the IT Services industry. And the number drops to as low as 3.21% for IT product roles.

(Aspiring Minds, <http://www.aspiringminds.com/research-articles/why-are-indian-engineers-unemployable?>)

A similar conclusion was reached by NASSCOM (National Association of Software Services Companies) about the sorry state of employability of engineers many of whom lacked soft skills and most importantly, ability to communicate fluently in English. In the words of Sangeeta Gupta, Senior Vice President, NASSCOM: "Our engineers are not unemployable, they just don't have industry-ready talent. In other words, they lack the skills required for the jobs that are available to them." These skills are “communication skills, confidence, presentation, problem-solving capabilities and generic abilities.”

The observations should come as no surprise to anyone who has taught in engineering colleges or has been part of the recruitment team/process. One of the key factors happens to be poor spoken English of the students who graduate with an engineering degree but with limited or no communication skills. The survey also established that recruiters were put off by the inability of the potential employees, i.e. newly minted graduates, to speak fluently and in grammatically correct English for even a limited period of time. They were also found to display poor soft skills, a weakness that employers find difficult to put up with at a time the markets demand such skills from the young workforce.

### **Changes in Engineering Curriculum**

Keeping in mind the needs of graduates and the market demands, engineering curriculum in several state universities and colleges affiliated to the state universities underwent a sea change, and one of the changes initiated was to revamp the English language curriculum and include English language lab component in addition to theory. This move also sought to establish the primacy of spoken language and accord it the respectability it had lacked until then.

Emphasis therefore was on teaching English for communication, with role plays, Just-A-Minute (JAM) and Group Discussions forming the staple of the syllabus.

The syllabus was designed with the express objective of preparing students to overcome diffidence, and shyness and take part in speaking activities which in turn would prepare them to face interviews. Ironically, there was no palpable evidence of improvement in either spoken English skills or interest in any of the recommended activities for practice in laboratory.

It is pertinent to record here that to make education inclusive and readily available to anyone keen to pursue any course of study, the erstwhile government of Andhra Pradesh introduced tuition fee waiver and scholarship schemes covering almost the entire gamut of the student population and this led to several thousand first generation and economically backward students joining engineering and medicine stream. The attendant result was a demand for engineering colleges and students who had had their education in regional medium schools were signing up for an engineering education. This made the task of taking English language teaching to the majority a real and challenging one for teachers who had expected their teaching assignment to be straightforward and easy.

### **The Study**

English Language Communication Skills laboratory forms the practical component of language teaching and the syllabus recommends a lot of communicative activities and assignments to enable students to enhance their communicative competence; spoken English therefore is accorded the same importance as other skills. In fact it was prioritised over other skills exposure to which was already there in some form. Besides, the lab component provided an ideal platform for those who were not exposed to the nuances of spoken language and whose

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 16:1 January 2016  
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circumstances did not permit much speaking in an L2. As far as the use of English by these first generation learners went, it was as good as foreign language, English being used sparingly or not at all.

To investigate the type of communication strategies used and the rationale for the frequent use or non-use of strategies, a study was conducted in three engineering colleges, two of which are affiliated to a state university in Telangana state and one is a national institute of technology. A total of 120 students took part in the study and the data collection involved asking students to speak for as long as they wanted to on a topic that was given to them and if they seemed reluctant, on a topic of their choice. The data were generated through observations, audio taping and interviews over a six month period. Despite the assurances of teachers that students had been motivated to participate in speaking activities and that they had had some practice, it was remarkable that only 10 speakers spoke for 5 minutes or more than 5 minutes; 80 of them spoke for a minute and longer than a minute but less than two minutes.

Number of students	80	20	10	5	5
Duration	1-2 minutes	3 minutes	4 minutes	5 minutes	6-8 minutes

It came to light that there was a neatly discernible pattern to strategy use among the students. Those students who spoke well used *achievement strategies* while those who did not speak or spoke very little used *reduction strategies*.

Faerch and Kasper (1984) arrived at a typology of communication strategies, based on the speech patterns observed among non-native speakers of a language. These are:

*Code Switching, Interlingual transfer, Inter/intralingual Transfer, Paraphrase, Word Coinage, Restructuring and Co-operative strategies, topic avoidance and message abandonment.*

Of the strategies listed above, the last two, namely, *topic avoidance* and *message abandonment* are of particular interest to this study since more than 70 % of the students resorted to them.

### **Message Abandonment**

In message abandonment, the speaker tries to start speaking something and when he finds he has reached the limits of English, decides to simply abandon the message and keep silent.

### **Topic Avoidance**

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In topic avoidance, the speaker chooses to avoid the topic altogether since his limited command of English will not allow him to speak for any length of time on it.

It was apparent from classroom observation that teacher beliefs and teaching methods had as much role to play in handicapping student enthusiasm and attempts to use target language as other equally relevant factors. The next section presents an analysis of what exactly went wrong on the teach(er/ing) front.

### **Teacher Attitudes, Beliefs, and Teaching Methods**

It was intuited that teacher attitudes and methods of teaching may have something to do with learner reticence and great reluctance to be part of lab activities. To throw more light on this, the researchers engaged in informal talk with students after data collection to find out why there was such unwillingness to take part in sessions organised in laboratory.

#### **Teacher Beliefs**

Teachers assume that because the students have joined engineering - a professional course that demands much from the learner- they also have what it takes to understand and respond well in an L2 when this is clearly not the case. It emerged from talk with students that teachers place too high an opinion or too low an opinion about student competence leading to mismatch between learner performance and teacher expectations. For instance, more than 40 % of students were from rural areas with an education that saw them taught in mother tongue. The remaining students though from semi urban and urban areas were rather uneasy with the language because they had had little or no practice using it outside classroom.

When organising speaking activities, teachers expected learners to use English from the word *go* and there was little patience for those students who were grappling with the language. Somehow it was thought the onus of speaking was on the student regardless of his/her competence in (using) it.

#### **Poor Opinion of Learners**

A great deal of condescension accompanied teacher reaction to student non-participation; students who were fairly fluent users of English were given greater opportunities to speak than those whose command of English was very low since it made easy a teacher's task of getting through with lab activities without much sweat. Low proficiency students were either ignored after being asked in the initial stages to speak or simply taken as entities whose presence needed to be tolerated.

To make students effective communicators, it is apparent that there needs to be effective assistance from the teacher, who must perforce "attend to both the cognitive and affective

dimensions of instruction, which can be achieved by building an academically motivating, caring and safe interactive atmosphere with students (Xie, 2010, p.11)

Teachers were unable to offer the much needed help to weak learners and the underperformers were written off as “unteachable”. The students who were at the receiving end intuited this but were unable to do anything about it, while teachers for their part justified their indifference by blaming circumstances.

Teachers held that it was a frustrating and thankless experience to hope for a miracle from low proficiency learners and threw the ball in the students’ court instead by arguing that having joined a course as tough as engineering it was the responsibility of students to aspire to learn and make for any lacunae on their own. If they were capable of learning advanced calculus, one teacher reasoned, they should very well cope with the demands on them to speak in the language lab. The fault that students had in them – poor communication skills- needed rectifying but the remedy needed to come from the place of disease, so went the argument! This not only dispirited the weak students but turned them away from the learning curve rapidly.

### **Inappropriate Grouping**

As mentioned earlier, students had varying levels of competence and felicity with English and there was no allowance made for this when they were asked to take part in Group Discussion or pair work; the students were grouped according to their roll numbers and often, very competent users were paired or put in the same group as very low proficiency learners and the more proficient students simply hijacked the session by speaking all through and letting weak students derive satisfaction from being part of the group. The weak students were only happy with the arrangement as they were given generous grades/marks for what they did not do, by virtue of the group being evaluated as a whole.

### **Teaching Materials**

It is interesting and amusing in equal parts that the communicative activities designed for role play had native speaker situations in mind. For example, some of the sample activities included “...asking for instructions at the post office, or ..... giving directions to a taxi driver in English;” ( Gupta, 2004, p.268) , simply ridiculous since very few taxi drivers boast enough knowledge of English to take instructions in the language and most of the communicative events outside classroom are conducted in a local language, including booking a room in a hotel or asking for and giving directions.

### **Ban on Code Switching**

For some inexplicable reason, in almost every school/college where English is taught and learnt as a second language, there exists what Phillipson(1992) termed “ Monolingual fallacy”, a belief that English is best taught through English and that if other languages are allowed into L2

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learning, standards of English will drop and fossilization will occur, leading to stunted or little language development. As has been rightly pointed out by Eldridge (1996):

Teachers and researchers in English as a second language have , on the whole, been concerned to minimize code switching in the classroom , taking it that the switching either indicates a failure to learn the target language or an unwillingness to do so (p.303)

In addition to the mistaken belief that mixing languages will retard and therefore harm language learning, there also prevails the feeling that the best way to learn any second or foreign language is through the language being learnt.

Studies have revealed that code switching is not only natural but inevitable in a second language classroom, a point that seems to have escaped the notice of these teachers. In a study conducted in a Turkish secondary school where English is taught as a second language, it emerged that “there appeared to be no relationship between level of achievement in the target language and use of code switching strategies. High-achieving students indulged in code-switching, just as regularly as other students” (Eldridge, 1996, p.304). Students in the Indian classrooms were handicapped in point of not being able to use language in a natural setting, there being a ban on the use of mother tongue even for limited use. Many who were highly reluctant to participate did participate when compelled since they did not have adequate vocabulary to express themselves and were desperately looking forward to using their mother tongue. The result was their speech was stilted, halting and impoverished in terms of vocabulary and usage.

## Conclusion

The one inevitable but highly valid conclusion that one reaches from observing a teacher fronted and guided lab session is that teachers’ teaching methods and beliefs impact student participation negatively. The findings clearly point to lacunae in certain teaching acts , teacher beliefs and approaches which work against teaching spoken English effectively. Instead of confining themselves to the so called tried and tested methods, which are an apology for effective teaching methods, teachers need to be proactive and enable students to have a greater say in how and using what materials speaking activities should be organised since that will:

foster a classroom culture that is more open to students’ desire to explore the language and topics that do not necessarily conform to the rigid bounds of the curriculum and the limited personal perspectives of the teachers( Xie, 2010, p.19)

This will surely render speaking in the language lab a pleasurable activity and lead to meaningful language learning with minimal compulsion to perform.

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