Imparting Second Language Communication Skills to Technical Students at the Tertiary Level

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Abstract

Having found that Engineering students struggle in striking a balance between knowledge (tacit) and use (Hymes, 1971)as far as conveying technical information in second language (L_2) is concerned, this paper will suggest situational speaking tasks to develop specific language and strategic competence in classroom environment. There is a gap between knowing and executing in language for expression. Language ability is judged based on sound language knowledge and strategic competence of the learner. Despite having enough knowledge, most of the learners fail to communicate effectively in second language. The paper reports a study in which 34 Engineering students, in two groups, were made to undergo language activities based on concrete needs analysis. Results revealed that there was a significant difference between the two groups with students in the experimental group outperforming those in the control group on both specific speaking and writing tasks.

Introduction

Conscious Grammar at Tertiary level is often considered a barrier for successful communication. Learning language (L1) differs from acquiring the language (L2). Ellis (1985)

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says "The term acquisition is used to refer to picking up a second language through exposure, whereas the term 'learning' is used to refer to the conscious study of second language" (p.6). Learners acquire the first language grammar through natural learning, which helps them to present their ideas without any grammatical hindrance. But they learn the second language along with its grammar consciously so they tend to speak applying the rules of language with grammatical restrictions. However, Krashen (1981) says, "Conscious learning may be used to alter the output of the acquired system sometimes before or after the utterance is produced" (p.2). Students at the tertiary level are only in the advantageous position as they have already learnt grammar for more than twelve years of study in their school though they lack fluency of expressing themselves. In this context, the present study focuses on recommending 'language acquisition' method for mastering L2 for GenY tertiary level learners based on a research done in this area.

Some may think that conscious learning helps to improve the linguistic competency. It is said that linguistic competency depends on communicative competency and vice versa. George Lukacs in his *Ideology of Modernism* suggested that abstract potentiality must be transformed into concrete potentiality for fruitful communication. Though conscious learning helps the learner to increase abstract potentiality, it often fails to contribute in appropriate situations. Krashen calls the conscious awareness of rules as Monitor; he says that it can only be a reference. The fundamental claim of Monitor Theory is that "conscious learning is available to the performer only as a Monitor" (p.3). Communication aims at conveying information but in the monitored situation the learner concentrates on rules and fails to convey the message at particular time. Conscious rules inhibit learners' spontaneous conversation, and thereby pave the way for psychological inhibitions.

According to Krashen (1981) psychological factors that inhibit acquisition are, "the lack of interest in the target language, speaker's self-consciousness, high anxiety, low aptitude, lack of self confidence, extreme consciousness of the rules" (pp.34-39). Extreme consciousness of the rules increases their anxiety and self-consciousness; high level of anxiety pulls learners from their self-confidence, distract from the task of attending to and remembering new items. Speaker's high self-consciousness directs them to concentrate on opinions of others, self-consciousness; decreases their aptitude, filters intake information. Attitudinal factors perform two functions viz., 'encourage intake and discourage intake'.

Dulay and Burt (1977) introduce the concept "socio affective filter" which insists that high filters will acquire less of the language directed at them. Attitude of high affective filters discourage the learners' intake whereas low affective filters encourage and motivate the learners' intake of second language. Overuse of rules discourages the intake motivational variable which increases the fear of difficulty that results in poor performance.

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Excessive consciousness of rules in the acquisition must be avoided where a feel for grammaticality alone is needed. Grammar must be felt by the learner. Krashen says, "The Monitor under user does not seem to use the conscious grammar at all. The under-user typically judges grammaticality "by feel", that is, he uses his subconsciously acquired system, rather than a conscious grammar" (p.16). Subconsciously acquired system can be created through natural language learning. Learning is more effective when it is active rather than a passive process. Communicative activities in suitable environment with the assistance of qualified teacher help them to transform the potentialities. Complete understanding cannot come from sound source alone because in connected speech one sound runs into next. For example, 'I like it' sounds like 'I lie kit' 'My name is Ann' sounds like 'My name Zan'.

Listening comprehension is needed as a first phase of development in the communication skill. It is a complex and active process in which the learner understands the vocabulary and structures, interpret stress and intonation. Listening activity increases the level of confidence to express their ideas in the target language. Opportunity is provided for the acquirers to express their feelings in task based language learning. David Nunan (2004) says "The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end" (p.4) .

Suitable tasks help the learners to face the reality where they concentrate on the message/information/concept. Users' attention is focused on meaning rather than grammatical form. It helps the learners to confront mental laziness and think through the barriers that lie between them and the stimulated implementation of their ideas. It provides the opportunity to see unexpected outcomes.

Situational Speaking Tasks

Situational speaking tasks (SST) help learners to see the differences between concept and reality. It can show the students themselves how much they know or don't know. Students have the chance to realize their potentialities while listening to others' performances. For example, they think to themselves, I could have said that! I know this stuff already! I said it better than him! I can do better than this! Their mental plans and their behavior are reflected in this particular activity and thereby their passive skills are revived. Group discussion table is an ideally co- operative environment. "It is necessary to construct groupings to achieve a co-operative rather than a competitive or an individualistic goal structure" (Harmer 2001, p.120.)

SST is potentially dynamic where learners share their ideas and information in a natural way. Each student has proportionally more chance to speak and to be involved in use of target language. It promotes a positive atmosphere/affective climate. Motivation can be often improved and self-expression could be explored. Research suggests that cohesive groups produce higher

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levels of academic achievement in conceptual learning, problem solving and meta- cognitive learning than individual, competitive learning formats. Patterns of feelings, disagreements, dominations, and the turn taking of the students reveal their attitude in the real situation. They can acquire the basic structures of language as simple present, simple past and simple future tenses through this kind of 'grammar feel' method.

Situation Topics Used

The following Situational topics were given to the leaners:

1. How do you enjoy the boring class?
2. Criticizing a movie in the coffee shop
3. Sharing experience of your love in infancy
4. Enhancing campus life with extracurricular and co-curricular activities
5. Best coffee in a restaurant
6. Roommate talking over the phone round about the clock and disturbing your sleep your response and a little argument.
7. Ring tone in the mobile and changing the caller tune-
8. The time u got caught…………………
9. Using laptops during the study hour –an interesting experience
10. Definition of family

Function of Tasks

Tasks assist learners to concentrate on conveying the message rather than the structure of the language. Refining takes place through self-learning. They can rectify their errors by self – correction. Action learning at the individual level focuses on the objective of learning. Constant practice of this task makes the learners to ignore their consciousness of rules and achieve a profitable development in their communication. Learners at tertiary level can face the reality and react to it boldly when they feel the grammar. The present research has proved that the learners make use of the 'past knowledge' of grammar while making utterances in second language. A ground of 60 students was identified and various tasks were administered to them to assess their ability to express themselves.

Evaluation and Findings

Evaluation has taken place after a period of three months of practice/teaching in the Laboratory based on the tasks. Listening skills were evaluated, where students were asked to recognize the correct words, and content of the record, and they were asked to answer the questions regarding the speech/dialogue they heard. SST tasks were conducted where aspects of production such as fluency, accuracy, complexity and their self-confidence were noted for

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speech evaluation. Accuracy was evaluated by noting the ability to avoid error in performance, possibly reflecting higher levels of control in the language. Their fluency was also taken into account because fluency concerns the learner's capacity to produce language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation.

The effectiveness was calculated through simple tests based on the activities given. Evaluation at the beginning of the laboratory tasks showed that nearly half of the students possessed excellent communicative skills. The following chart shows nearly 27% in listening, 23% of learners in speaking and 16% of learners in writing possessed the skills excellently well at the beginning of the course.

Table 1: Survey at the beginning of the course

Level	Pre Activity Assessment %		
	listening	speaking	writing
Excellent	27	23	16
Average	73	77	84

Figure 1 Survey at the beginning of the course
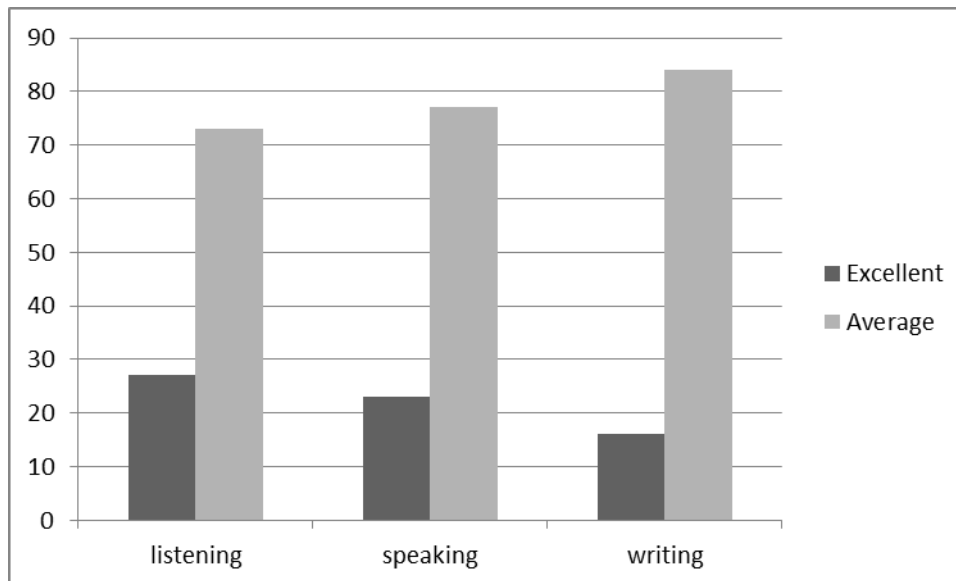
Again the evaluation has taken place after rigorous practice. It results in the following way. 79% of learners are excellent in listening, 83% of learners are excellent in speaking, and 87% of learners are excellent in writing skills. It is illustrated in the following table:

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Table 2 Final survey of learners' ability

	Post Activity Assessment %		
Level	listening	Speaking	Writing
Excellent	79	83	87
Average	21	17	13

Figure 2 Final survey of learners' ability
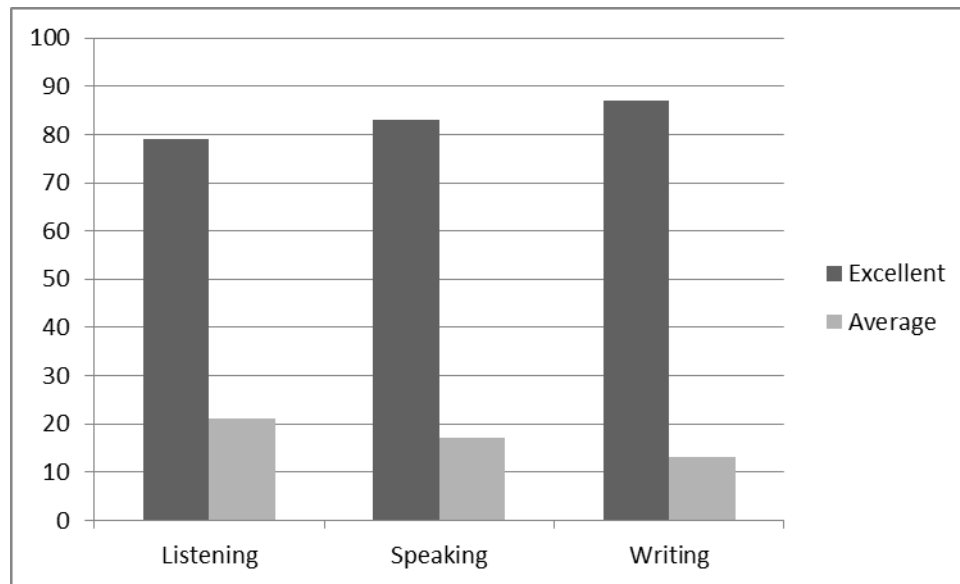
Secondary data was also collected through questionnaires to maintain the triangulation of research study. Questionnaire used in this study for data collection served for three purposes as

- To collect personal and background details for the profile included psychological questions also.
- To get feedback from the learners regarding their experience in practicing communication skills
- To get feedback to comprehend the improvement in second language communication skills.

As these were the written responses of the learners, it was believed that they would help the teacher-researcher to evaluate the communication skills of the learners from learners' perspective. A number of questions were included in the questionnaire to increase the level of explicitness. Likert scale (Likert 1932) was used in the questionnaire.

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Scales as Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree(D) and Strongly Disagree(SD) were provided with each statement in the questionnaire. Strongly Agree was assigned a weight of 5 points while strongly disagree weighted the score of 1 point. To capture a complete picture of learners' thinking ability, development in thought process and the improvement in L_2 communication skills learners were instructed to answer all the questions in the questionnaire. All the Learners were given the same questionnaire to maintain the uniformity, accuracy and standard of the data. Responses of pre and post questionnaire were assessed by using paired sample t-test with the help of SPSS(Statistical package for Social sciences) software.

Extracted results of responses are given below,

Table 3: Results of pre- and post questionnaire by using Paired sample T-test

S.No	Paired questions	Mean	Std. deviation	t	Sig.(2 tailed)
1.	Pre questionnaire with Post questionnaire	-1.515	1.218	10.103	.000

Variables were computed in two pairs as one as Pre- questionnaire data and the pair of it was Post questionnaire data. Mean and standard deviation of the variables were -1.515 and 1.218.The p value was less than 0.5, i.e., the tailed significant value p was 0.000,so it was assured that the results were significant. Therefore, it was found that there was a significant difference in the improvement of learners' strategies.

The 'grammar feel' methodology adopted to impart language skills was effective as shown above. It was also found that the students had no inhibition to express themselves. This paper concludes that suitable tasks and topics related to GEN Y learners can enhance the second language proficiency of the GEN Y learners.

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