Honing English Speaking Skills in Engineering Students: An Empirical Study Based on Self-perception

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Abstract

Engineering students who come from remote rural areas and from a background of vernacular medium face difficulties in equipping language skills. There is a high competition in employability in Multi-national companies, where developing speaking skills in Engineering students is mandatory. Keeping in view this problem, a questionnaire was prepared which aims at identifying the main difficulties in speaking English faced by a selected sample of Engineering students in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. It seeks to establish students' self-perception of difficulties based on a questionnaire survey to provide autonomous learning ability in students. Through this survey three research problems were investigated: (1) Students' attitude towards speaking English (2) The common difficulties encountered by students while speaking English (3) Significant differences if any, according to the medium of instruction they received at school and intermediate level. A systematic analysis was carried out which suggests that active student learning should be incorporated, to improve speaking skills, encouragement is required, to curb passive reception of the learners. Students' perceptions and suggestions were also considered which suggested, students centered learning in friendly environment.

Keywords: English as a foreign Language, self-perception of speaking difficulties, curriculum design.

Introduction

English is the most problematic language for most students where learners need to master this skill to express themselves wherever they work. In addition to this, the significance of English as a second language in classroom is compulsory for speaking and for other productive

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skills such as writing, reading or listening. Nevertheless, in many professional colleges, speaking skill is often not assessed and students are graded on their performance in written examinations which the students are well aware of. Therefore neither the students nor the teachers take the speaking part seriously.

Literature Review

Despite the fact that speaking English is considered one of the most important skills, many students face difficulty in speaking this language. This can hinder their performance and fulfilling the basic requirements of successful communication during interviews. In India, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, especially in educational institutions in rural areas face difficulty in learning English, especially listening and speaking skills, as reflected in Andhra Pradesh (Yellapu, 2010). Rote learning is the method students generally adopted even for learning languages, what they anticipate will be tested.

In addition, some ascribe the lack of effective use of spoken English in classes where teachers themselves converse with students in Telugu. Thus the development of students' oral language and opportunities for students to practice and use oral language is not done. Yellapu comments on ELT in Andhra Pradesh state in southern India:

> The methodology of ELT in schools is bilingual or translation method. The teachers simply translate everything into their mother tongue and explain them on the name of bilingual or translation method. Though this method offers them sound knowledge in the content, it prevents them in acquiring communication abilities in English which has become the norm of the day. The teacher here plays more as a translator than a genuine English teacher. Hence, virtually, there is no much difference between a Telugu teacher and an English teacher. (Yellapu 2010)

Speaking is an effective interaction between the listener and speaker which help both the speaker and the listener, to code and decode the message appropriately. Such opportunities can be provided by creating a speaking environment in the classroom which encourages students to

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interact more and gives them the chance for constant practice in everyday life. Parents and teachers often complain that their children or their students are unable to speak confidently.

Internal filters such as lack of confidence, fear, and shyness are barriers on student output, making them reluctant to speak. Without self-confidence, no student will find the courage to speak freely in a classroom, let alone with strangers on the street if they have to give directions or any information and so on.

Research Objectives

This research is aimed at investigating the speaking difficulties faced by students who study English as a foreign language. It is a small-scale empirical study that can serve for research in the Visakhapatnam district. The application of such data is to improve the speaking skills in order to help the learners as perceived by them in the questionnaire. It also offers some relevant information about the nature of English speaking skills. It is hoped that after diagnosing the main English speaking difficulties faced by the learners, this can help the faculty to consider such difficulties in overcoming the lapses in planning new curricula and experimenting with revised syllabi and methods. This research seeks to provide answers to the following:

1. Students' attitudes towards speaking English.
2. Speaking difficulties faced by Engineering students as they perceive.
3. Significant differences if any based on the medium of instruction the students received.
4. Suggestions by the students to improve their learning process.

Students' perception of their problems needs to be empirically examined for enhancing English language acquisition. The students' perception can be used as input for redesigning syllabi and experimenting with new strategies for effective speaking. The present study provides difficulties students from Telugu medium background face while speaking in English and which can help the teachers to provide effective solutions to overcome the student's difficulty.

Methodology

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Spoken English refers to the needs of the students to acquire the required skills to become a professional after completion of engineering. The investigation considers three different topics which are components of speaking difficulty analysis: the attitudes towards speaking English, the students' needs, the difficulties they face while speaking English, and the language activities and skills required to speak in English.

Table 1: **The distribution of the study sample by gender and medium of instruction**

Gender		Medium of instruction	
Males	Females	English	Telugu
10	10	12	8

As to the specific features or key characteristics shared by students, all Engineering colleges adopt the same language. In other words, they mostly have the same course books, assessment style, language-labs, and so forth. The students irrespective of their gender share the same background characteristics except for some who come from rural areas and whose medium of instruction is in vernacular.

Questionnaires

The student survey as well as the questionnaires was done in English. The students' questionnaires consist of three sections. Section 1 collects demographic information, where students are asked to supply their personal information such as name, gender, age, qualification, medium of instruction and place of education till intermediate. Section 2 includes the difficulties encountered by these students in spoken English. This data is based on self-reporting by students on the type of speaking activities and skills they practice in the class.

Almost 20 students were randomly selected for piloting the questionnaire and the students were given the English version of the questionnaire. The researcher himself

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administered the pilot run to the piloting sample to gather information and the questionnaires were collected from them immediately.

Results

In what follows, the findings and the analysis are organized according to the research questions.

Students' Attitudes towards Speaking in English

Students were asked to choose from a self-reported two scales (1= yes; 2= No). The findings as in Table 2 are described to have a clear idea of the differences between students according to medium of instruction they received. The table provides students' perception according to their medium of instruction (Telugu or English). It was found there is a significant difference between students' attitudes towards the language according to their medium of instruction.

Table 2: Students' Attitudes towards Speaking in English

Statements	No. of students who responding 'Yes'	No. of students who responding 'No'
Face difficulty to speak English	14	6
Comfortable with English	11	9
Confident while speaking in English	12	8
Prefer speaking in English	5	15

A close look at Table 2 reveals that all the students have positive attitudes towards English language and they are very much interested in improving their English speaking skills. But the students from Vernacular medium reported that they face difficulty in speaking. According to the data the students belonging to Telugu medium background are more or less

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passive for they are not able to share their experiences and expressions in the classroom due to lack of confidence. Lack of comfort and shyness in using English is restricting them from being active participants and so very few students prefer speaking English among themselves.

Table 3: Skills the Students Need While Speaking in English

The table provides problems encountered while speaking English. It was found that students from rural areas and vernacular medium lack confidence and comfort in speaking English because they were not taught basic grammar such as articles, tenses, prepositions, sub-verb agreement and proper structures by their teachers which actually play a major role in influencing students' attitude towards the language.

Table 3: Skills the Students Need While Speaking in English

Skills	Respondents who said 'Yes'	Respondents who said 'No'
Difficulty in using articles	13	7
Difficulty in using tenses	11	9
Difficulty in using prepositions	12	8
Difficulty in using vocabulary	14	6
Difficulty in following sub-verb agreement	11	9
Difficulty in framing proper structures	16	4

The items of grammar such as articles, tenses, prepositions, sub-verb agreement and proper structures help in framing proper structures and thereby regular listening to news items, participation in speaking activities for instance group discussions, debates etc help in developing language efficiency in the speaker. It is observed that the students though belong to vernacular medium schools lack the basic knowledge of all the above said skills.

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Table 4*: Language Activities Required to Speak English

The present research also provides analysis of the application of the skills learnt to interact effectively and lack of these skills as shown in Table-4. hinder the students from applying the vocabulary, sub-verb agreement and so on while speaking such as giving personal information, comparing two things, describing pictures, describing people, animals and places, giving directions express agreements and disagreements in speaking activities such as debates, group discussion, J.A.M as shown in Table 5.

Table 4*: Language Activities Required to Speak English

	Respondents who said 'Yes'	Respondents who said 'No'
Use of previous knowledge while speaking	9	11
Give personal information	6	14
Comparison between two things.	8	12
Describe pictures	9	11
Describe people, animals and places.	8	12
Give directions.	9	11
Express agreements and disagreements	6	14
Participating in speaking activities such as debates, Group discussion, J.A.M	8	12

The analysis of Table 5 indicates that both genders with Telugu as their medium of instruction earlier before joining professional college agreed that they face difficulties while performing any speaking activities. Students feel that they do not get enough chances to practice

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speaking in English, and are in general more concerned about their weak proficiency in speaking. The students also expressed their anxiety that they are unable to voice their experiences and expressions in the classroom.

Speaking Difficulties According to Students' Perception

One of the most important intentions of the present research is to provide a systematic analysis of the skills needed while speaking in English and lack of skills as shown in Table 4 hinder the students from speaking English fluently.

Table 5: **Speaking Difficulty According to Students' Perception**

Problems encountered while speaking	Respondents who said 'Yes'	Respondents who said 'No'
Translating ideas from Telugu to English	12	8
Worry about committing mistakes	11	9

It was found that students face difficulty in translating their thoughts, ideas, and perceptions into English. The most common and noteworthy problem is students' lack of basic knowledge and acquaintance with articles, tenses, prepositions, sub-verb agreement has become a barrier in framing proper structures. These students record the information given in Telugu first and try to translate into English and while doing so they get confused with grammar. This makes the students commit lot of language errors when they are assigned with any speaking activity in the classroom.

Discussion

The findings of the present study support the study hypothesis that there are markedly significant differences between students in their perception of the speaking skill difficulty according to medium of instruction they receive. According to the limited sample of this study,

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students in vernacular media generally have the same attitude regarding speaking difficulties. This can be attributed to the fact that although the educational change is happening in different Engineering subjects, the English language shows no clear differences in the student perceptions (from vernacular medium) of their language difficulties. The findings also provide systematic analysis of the skills needed to improve speaking in English according to student perception and needs.

Skills to be Focused on as per Students' Suggestions and Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that students from Telugu medium mostly have poor speaking skills. Students should encourage themselves to adapt to the learning ability in Engineering Colleges. Since most of the students may represent a particular social or weaker socioeconomic background, they have different attitudes towards English, especially the speaking skill. Therefore the students have to shed their inhibition and shyness, and mingle with their peers from English medium so that it will enable them to acquire the language faster. The language teachers also should focus on such students and motivate them to use the language irrespective of language errors to creating an English speaking environment in campus.

Students suggested that skills such as student-centered teaching methodology, improvising speaking skills, and activity based teaching; English speaking environment in the campus can improvise speaking skill among students. They aspire for direct attention of the teachers and learning atmosphere where they feel they are valued.

This finding is helpful to direct attention of teachers and syllabus designers to the most importantly needed skills which the students need to master for any of those speaking sections as shown in Table-5. The language teaching community has to take initiatives to improvise the learning technique of such students. The learning process can thus be strengthened by designing a curriculum that can foster learning in all the students of all categories despite their medium of instruction.

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