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CAN WE BREAK THEIR SILENCE? EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF UNDERGRADUATES' RELUCTANCE IN SPEAKING IN ENGLISH IN AN ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This study objects to find out the causes which discourage undergraduates in speaking in English. Psychological, linguistic and cultural factors were considered as the key components in conducting the research. Based on the related literature it was hypothesized that there was a negative relationship between psychological, linguistic and cultural factors and speaking in English. For the study 50 students were randomly selected from 108 students who followed the credit course unit, 'Speech and Communication Skills' in the University of Ruhuna, Faculty of Science and they were given a questionnaire. As the discourse aspect of the study is also important 10 students and five language teachers who voluntarily participated were also interviewed. The data was qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed. It was quantitatively analyzed using SPSS. The results revealed that all the three components negatively influence students in speaking in English. Nevertheless, in the context, psychological factors appeared to exercise more negative influence on the students than the other two factors. Among psychological factors lack of confidence was the biggest issue faced by most of the students. Regarding linguistic factors, lack of vocabulary and dealing with university subculture peer influence appeared to disappoint the students more in speaking in English. As possible solutions to overcome these issues, the teachers have to be more creative, passionate and need to create a very friendly classroom atmosphere. Not only that but also the students too should stop underestimating their capacity when they speak in English. Even the university also needs to start setting a good background for language learners introducing new speech course units and sound language bodies.

Keywords: Undergraduates, psychological factors, linguistic, university subculture, passionate

Introduction

In Sri Lanka English language is valued as a high form of linguistic capital to secure profit or distinction in the society (Ranwala, 2015). Thus, Regardless of class, caste, ethnicity or other social demarcations, there is a rush to learn English and acculturate oneself into "English" ways of doing things. The undergraduates who wish to be the harbingers of development and innovation are believed to be well equipped with English. Nevertheless, insufficient knowledge of English is identified as a serious difficulty that hampered undergraduates accomplishing the best out of their university education (Perera, 2013). This language constraint; inadequate access to English is able to shut off the undergraduates from vital comparative self-assessment of their work with international developments and standards (Atapattu, 2013). Language learning is not subject learning, it is overlearning and obtaining mastery over certain special skills. In this regard, one should be able to handle all major four skills. Being able to write, read and listen most of the undergraduates find it difficult to speak. Ability to speak is the most essential skill since it is the basic for communication

(Aungwatanakun, 1994 as cited in Oradee, 2012). However, it is the most difficult skill to acquire because it necessitates command of speech production sub-skills like vocabulary retrieval, choice of grammatical patterns, and sociocultural competence (as cited in Al-Roud, 2016). It is the skill that is neglected in classrooms. Though it is not a part of the examinations it demands a lot of practice and attention (Bashir, Azeem & Dogar, 2011). It is one of the productive skills as it is the ability to interact orally with others by sharing with them one's views and feelings (Haidara, 2016). According to Clifford, in spite of its importance, speaking skill has been neglected in many schools and universities due to more stress on grammar and negative teacher-student proportions (1987, in Leong & Ahmadi, 2016). Hence, English language communication is the most shared issue faced by many students. Once they lack the needed communication skills they cannot be considered as 'industry ready' (Ahmad, 2016). This is not novel to the Sri Lankan university context in which most of the second language learners hardly communicate in English inside and outside the classrooms. Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate and answer the questions as what are the factors which discourage undergraduates in speaking in English and what makes language teachers incapable of encouraging the students in enhancing their communicative competence.

Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve three main objectives respectively;

1. To examine the relationship of psychological, linguistic and cultural factors with speaking in English.
2. To identify the other hidden causes which demotivate second language learners in speaking in English.
3. To come out with new strategies to encourage the language learners to enhance their speaking abilities.

Methodology

The participants of the study were the students of the Faculty of Science, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka who followed the credit course unit, 'Speech and Communication Skills' and the language teachers who worked for the same faculty. 50 students were randomly selected from 108 students and they were given a questionnaire which included 15 questions under three segments; consisting five questions under each category of psychological factors, linguistic factors and cultural factors. Accordingly, Likert five point scale was followed (strongly agree 5 points, agree 4 points, neutral 3 points, disagree 2 points, strongly disagree 1 point). Further 10 students and five language teachers were also interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and the interview questions were developed in line with the above mentioned three factors focusing on the related literature. The calculated data was qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed. To the quantitative analysis Statistic Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. Mean and correlation of the data set was considered to verify the significance of the data. In the present study the Cronbach's Alpha was used for calculating the reliability and it turned to be 84% asserting that there is a high internal consistency between the acquired data. Further it was hypothesized that

H1 There is a negative relationship between psychological factors and speak in English.

H2 There is a negative relationship between linguistic factors and speak in English.

H3 There is a negative relationship between cultural factors and speak in English.

Results and Discussions

Regarding the speaking ability of the sample population only an insignificant number of 8% was in the opinion that they have a good command in speaking in English. The majority of 50% was moderate and a large number of 30% was in the idea that their speaking ability was poor. Further the majority of 46% pointed that they sometimes speak in English whereas 34% reported that they speak in English rarely. 8% belongs to the hardly speaking category whereas just 12% (4% and 8% in total) was frequent speakers. The interviews revealed that the majority hardly speak in English inside the university and outside the university because there's no need. Even if they speak, that is only limited to the language classroom maximum two hours per week.

Factors which lead to undergraduates' reluctance in speaking in English were considered under the segments of psychological, linguistic and university culture. Thus it was evident that reluctance to speak in English has a social aspect, psychological aspect, linguistic aspect and a connection with instructor (Al-Roud, 2016). Mean and St. Deviation were measured in the analysis and the effect of mean value was categorized as lowest (1.00-1.49), low (1.50-2.49), moderate (2.50-3.49), high (3.50-4.49) and highest (4.50-5.00).

Table 3. Psychological Factors

Component	Mean	Standard deviation
Not afraid to make mistakes	2.02	1.186
Not shy	2.44	0.929
Not anxious	2.5	0.789
Confident	2	1.107
Motivated	3.16	0.738
Grand mean	2.424	0.62026

Regarding the psychological domain, the lowest mean of 2 was recorded under confidence. The grand mean is also recorded to be lower than 2.5 which is 2.424 with a deviation of just 0.62 indicating that psychological factors as a whole negatively influence students in speaking in English. The interviews revealed the students are scared to speak in English due to fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation of teachers and peers and as they afraid to lose face in front of the others. Their anxiety was situational. It was found that the students were in confusion that whether they could understand what others said and whether the others could understand what they said which was resulted in reducing their confidence. Thus, few students dominated the speaking atmosphere and the others have become passive learners. Despite their own weakness some students pointed that they did not feel like speaking as the lessons were a bit boring. They even revealed that their point of attending lecturers was just to keep up their attendance above 80% which was a prerequisite to sit for the examination. Hence, this is kind of Amotivation; a relative absence of motivation that is not caused by a lack of initial interest but rather by the individuals experiencing feelings of incompetence and helplessness with the activity (Soureshjani & Riahipur, 2012; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Table 4. Linguistic Factors

Component	Mean	Standard deviation
Fluent in English	2.86	1.178
Have enough practice	2.44	1.013
Can Pronounce well & no vocabulary issues	1.92	1.158
Can understand what teacher says	3.66	1.042
Can concentrate on language activities	3.92	0.877
Grand mean	2.96	0.78142

Concerning the language related factors of the students it is clear that the issue remains with pronunciation and vocabulary with the low mean value of 1.92 and practice with the mean value of 2.44. Dealing with the grand mean of 2.99 it was moderate with a deviation of 0.78 which was below 1.

The interviews revealed that the students keep quiet because they are scared of mispronouncing and they can remember few words. Actually some of them were in the belief that mispronouncing will make their friend mock at them and it will damage their identity inside the university. Thus, they listen than speak. The teachers complained that even the most enthusiastic speaking exercises become unproductive as the majority of the students keep quiet and force two or three usual speakers in their groups to speak. Further the majority of the students always try to write and read than spontaneously speaking. The students seem to use their mother tongue, Sinhala in discussions as it is easy and comfortable in expressing their ideas. This goes in line with what Leong & Ahmadi pointed (2017) highlighting Tuan & Mai (2015) that inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, low participation and mother tongue use are key issues in enhancing speaking skills. In Sri Lankan university context speaking is not tested. In following traditional teaching methods speaking is neglected giving more emphasis on writing and reading (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Richard & Rodgers, 2001). The issue seems to arise due to the non-English speaking academic atmosphere in pre-university rather than with the competence of the students (Farooqui, 2007; Chawdhury, 2001). Thus, it seems bit difficult to change the already practiced learning habits of the students.

Table 5. Cultural Factors- (university sub-culture)

Component	Mean	Standard deviation
Speak as much as I can; accepted norm	3.38	0.697
I speak as my peers also speak	1.9	0.814
Speak in English is not showing off	3.06	1.185
Not afraid to look foolish in front of the others	1.88	1.062
Speak in English in communicating with peers inside the university	1.66	0.519
Grand mean	2.376	0.43263

With the lowest mean value of 1.6 it is clear that students hardly communicate in English with their peers. A low mean value of 1.8 recorded for the fact that students are scared to speak in English because; if mistakes occur it will damage their identity. However, with a low mean value of 1.9 the students rejected that they are tempted to speak in English simply because their friend also speak in English. Considering the grand mean of 2.37 with a

standard deviation of 0.43 it was found that university subculture discourages undergraduates in speaking in English.

During the interviews it was found that there is no culture outside the classroom which foster speaking in English. As the majority of the students believe that their English knowledge is poor they do not like to join with English Speaking clubs inside the university as they are scared to sound silly in front of the others. Peer group is a valuable asset of the university subculture. Thus, the students highlighted that it is a disadvantage if they speak in English inside the university as such a practice will be marked as showing off the western accent and upper class. This is also pointed by Haidara, (2016) indicating that speaking in English outside the classroom can have the possibility to be labeled as ‘showing off’. It is peculiar. Further, during the interviews it was found that they have their own restricted language and jargon which is almost a fusion of English and Sinhala. Most of the English words are turned into Sinhala by changing a vowel or adding a vowel. Hence, cultural factors also seem to negatively influence the students in speaking in English.

The relationship between all the three factors and speaking in English were measured using the correlation and found that there was a negative relationship between all the factors and speaking in English. Therefore all the hypothesis have been proved.

Table 6. Correlation

	Speak in Eng.	Sig. (2-tailed)
Psychological factors	-.816	.000
Linguistic factors	-.731	.000
Cultural factors	-.450	.001

Analyzing the correlation it is obvious that all the r value significantly takes a minus value and sig. value is less than 0.05 indicating the negative relationship between speak in English and all the factors. Considering psychological factors r value is closer to one and it is -.816 which indicates that there is a strong negative relationship between psychological factors and speak in English. Next to that linguistic factors seem to discourage students whereas cultural factors also demotivate students though not much to a considerable extent.

Conclusions

The study proved that psychological, linguistic and cultural factors can discourage language learners in speaking in English. Among them psychological issues seem to be prominent. Among psychological factors lack of confidence, regarding linguistic factors poor vocabulary and pronunciation and considering cultural factors peers look more striking in demotivating students in speaking in English. To control the negative influence of such factors the language teachers can play a big role. They should create a non-threatening speaking atmosphere, have to use modern technology in teaching with innovative and interesting teaching materials. It is their duty to understand each and every student and their level of performance. Sound feed backs, passionate teaching methods and interesting activities will let students speak more. On the other hand teachers only cannot turn a silent student to speak because that eagerness and energy should come within the students themselves. They should stop underestimating themselves, need not to think about their mistakes all the time and should take each and every opportunity to speak and practice more. As a support for the students and the teachers the university itself can be a good mechanism in helping students to

speak more. The university can introduce new credit courses based on speaking, can implement new language clubs and societies in case of building up a culture inside the university where students feel no hesitation to speak in English. Thus, it is hopefully believe that this study will provide more avenues for language researchers to find out more solutions for such issues.

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