
Measuring Oral Communication Skills at Undergraduate Level: A Case Study

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The present study is a case study which does not claim to find a solution once and for all to the vexed question of poor oral communication skills in second language learners. It attempts to identify these factors and tries to focus on major issues responsible for learners' weakness in spoken fluency. It tries to give some recommendations for improving the second language learners' spoken fluency. It also aims to identify the pattern of communication strategies used by second language learners. It tries to examine the obtained data on the second language learners' use of communication strategies. It focuses on neglected skills of speaking fluently in English as second language learners. The present paper tries to focus on the use of communication strategies which can improve the oral communication skills of second language learners. Though it is a fact that there is a lot of research in this area, the use of communication strategies is still limited in communication. The second language learners are not well-versed with the implementation of communication strategies in oral communication. We cannot deny that the teachers concentrate mainly on developing writing skills which are tested in examination. While developing speaking skills or oral proficiency is given least importance in the classroom situations. This study will provide a model for developing oral communication skills with the use of communication strategies. It will help to measure oral communication skills with the help of fluency and accuracy after making use of communication strategies. Hence the present study is significant in the area of research on second language learning.

Key Words: fluency, accuracy, oral communication skills, communication strategies, second language learning, proficiency

Introduction

Oral communication is the vital component of the language arts curriculum. Speech enables the students to make connections between what they know and what they are learning. Speaking skill is the basis for efficient learning of language. At the same time, speaking is the most crucial part of the language learning process. Learning of a language depends completely on its understanding and comprehension. So for effective and successful communication, the learners have to develop their oral

communication skills. When the ability of speaking is developed, he learns how to speak, what to speak and where to speak. This leads to the development in the fluency as well as the effectiveness in speaking.

The demand of English speaking skill in our students is increasing day by day. Accordingly, it is necessary to develop oral communication skills and to identify which factors can affect their fluency and accuracy. To develop fluency and accuracy in a second language is a developmental process which requires a lot of exercise and time. If

the learners use more communication strategies, their oral communication skill can be developed.

The present study is a case study which does not claim to find a solution once and for all to the vexed question of poor oral communication skills in second language learners. They have learnt English language for long years at school and higher education, but still unable to communicate effectively in real life situations. This study only makes recommendations which one hopes, will aid teachers and learners in developing communicative competence.

Aim and Rationale of the Study

It is expected the learners would be spontaneous and confident in their interaction in the target language after receiving several years of education in the second language. There might be a number of factors which could be responsible for poor communication skills among second language learners.

The present study attempts to identify these factors and tries to focus on major issues responsible for learners' weakness in spoken fluency. It tries to give some recommendations for improving the second language learners' spoken fluency. It also aims to identify the pattern of communication strategies used by second language learners. It tries to examine the obtained data on the second language learners' use of communication strategies. It focuses on neglected skills of speaking fluently in English as second language learners.

Significance of the study

It has been observed that English language teaching and learning is carried out purely from examination point of view. The learners are tested on their ability to give written responses which are given by the teachers. There is very little emphasis given for developing speaking skills. The learners find it difficult to continue speaking in English even for a short conversation. In such condition, the learners switch over to their mother tongue when they cannot express themselves in English.

The present paper tries to focus on the use of communication strategies which can improve the oral communication skills of second language learners. Though it is a fact that there is a lot of research in this area, the use of communication strategies is still limited in communication. The second language learners are not well-versed with the implementation of communication strategies in oral communication. We cannot deny that the teachers concentrate mainly on developing writing skills which are tested in examination. While developing speaking skills or oral proficiency is given least importance in the classroom situations. This study will provide a model for developing oral communication skills with the use of communication strategies. It will help to measure oral communication skills with the help of fluency and accuracy after making use of communication strategies. Hence the present study is significant in the area of research on second language learning.

However, the definition of fluency given by C.J. Fillmore (1979) is -

- “The ability to fill time with talk i.e. to talk without significant pauses for an extended period of time.
- The ability to talk in coherent reasoned and semantically dense sentences showing a mastery of the semantic and syntactic resources of the language.
- The ability to have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts.
- The ability to be creative and imaginative in language use.”

While accuracy is explained by Brumfit (1984) such as-

- “Fluent language does not necessarily mean in accurate language and it does not imply that fluent language is devoid of accuracy.
- Excess focus on accuracy can hamper learning thus making learners lose confidence and motivation through teachers over correction.
- In an activity if a learner is not learning something naturally as he/she would do in L1, it is an accuracy activity.
- The quality of the language is irrelevant. Activity that focuses on language alone is accuracy activity and activity that focuses on the use of the target language is fluency activity.
- In a fluency activity, monitoring should take place but with the same intention of a native speaker.”
- The most curious part of fluency is that it has different meanings for different users. Nizgorodcew (2007: 33) states, “When one describes an L2 learners’ performance as fluent it means that he /she is proficient in native like L2 use. On the other hand, in the L2 teaching jargon, fluency

practice means oral communication practice, when interlocutors are focused on conveying meanings rather than on formal correctness.”

Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary to current English (2005- 7thed) defined fluency as –“the quality of being able to speak or write a language, especially a foreign language, easily and well.”

According to Brumfit (1979:11), “opportunities can be provided by fluency work, in which students are expected to concentrate on the communication task, on the use of language and not on formal accuracy.”

In the same way the definition of communication strategy is given by Littlewood (1981) as “the learners’ way of coping with the situation is what we call his communication strategy.”

As the present study focuses on the development of oral communication skills with the use of communication strategies, the following research method is followed to get the results.

Research Methodology:

A questionnaire and an informal interview schedule for the second language learners and teachers in Solapur University at the undergraduate level is designed to collect the information about communication strategies used by the learners. In the same manner an audio-recording of second language learners is scheduled to measure fluency and accuracy in communicative situations. The sample population of this study comprised 500 hundred undergraduate level learners and 100 English teachers of

Solapur University in the state of Maharashtra.

The questionnaires used to collect information from learners and teachers have been adapted from (Shamiry, R.2000. *Yemini Learners Oral Communicative Competence in English: A Study at the Tertiary Level*. Hyderabad: EFLU). Some questions are modified and some are taken as it is. The pictures used to collect information for audio-recording of the learners' have been taken from the internet. A profile of learner is filled up by each learner to collect background information for qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data is analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Some statistical tests are also done to test the hypotheses like -

- 1) Communication strategies are used by ESL learners to overcome their problems of oral communication skills in English.
- 2) Oral communication skills can be measured in terms of fluency and accuracy.
- 3) There is a positive correlation between fluency and accuracy of the ESL learners.
- 4) Fluency and accuracy cannot be affected by faculty or sex of the ESL learners.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis is divided in two parts. In the first part there is the analysis of questionnaires to identify communication strategies used by the ESL learners to

overcome their problems of oral communication skills in English and in the second part there is the analysis of audio recordings of the ESL learners to measure oral communication skills in terms of fluency and accuracy.

Analysis of Questionnaires

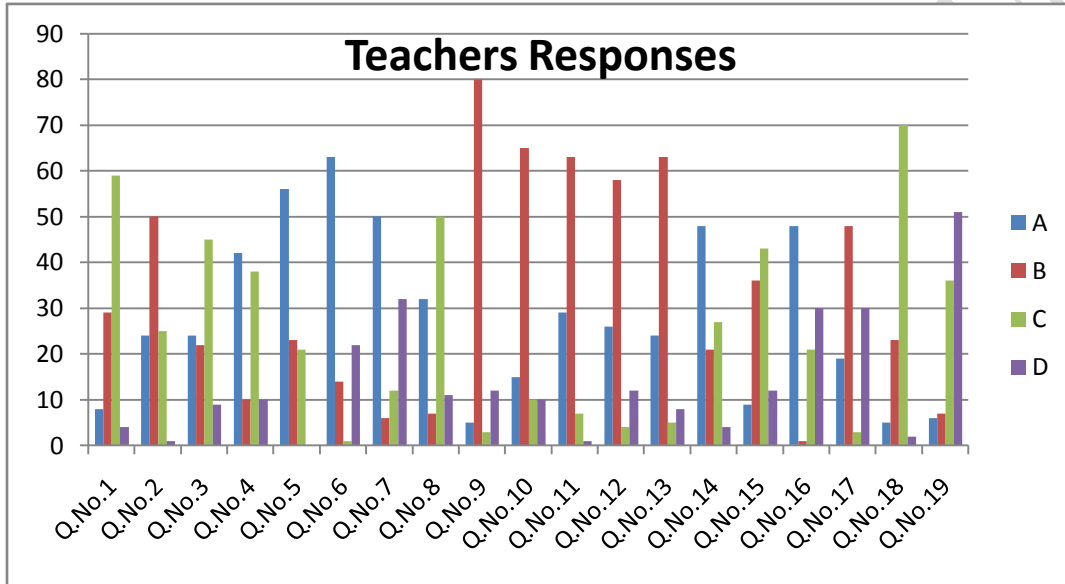
The collected data in the form of questionnaires of the ESL learners and teachers is analyzed to get the information about the problems in oral communication skills and use of communication strategies by the ESL learners. The responses of the learners and teachers to the questionnaires indicate that the second language learners use various communication strategies to overcome their problems of oral communication in English language. From the responses of the learners and teachers to questionnaires, we can list out the communication strategies used by the learners as follows:

- * Make a note of words or sentences and ask their teachers later if they do not understand what the teacher is saying.
- * Make use of their mother tongue when they do not find the right word in English.
- * Seek help from their listeners or teachers when they find difficulties in their speech.
- * Think in their mother tongue and then translate it into English, when they plan their speech in English.
- * Correct other students' speech silently when they make a mistake.
- * Hesitate and avoid speaking with proficient speakers of English.

- * Memorize vocabulary to develop their fluency in English.
- * Listen to their teachers’ pronunciation to improve their pronunciation.
- * Speak silently or aloud with themselves in English.

From the analysis of questionnaires of the learners and teachers we can conclude that the ESL learners use different kinds of communication strategies which can be useful for developing their oral communication skills in second language i.e. English.

Table 1: Use of Communication Strategies by Learners



Analysis of Audio-recordings

The collected data in the form of audio-recordings of the ESL learners is analyzed to get the information about fluency and

Parameters of fluency

- * Words pronounced by the learner per minute
- * Pauses used by the learner per minute
- * Fillers used by the learner per minute
- * Repetitions used by the learner per minute

Parameters of accuracy

- * Accurate sentence structures used by the learner
- * Accurate vocabulary used by the learner
- * Accurate tenses used by the learner

accuracy of the second language learners. The scores are given for fluency and accuracy of each learner according to the following parameters.

- * Accurate cohesive devices used by the learner
- * The scores of fluency and accuracy are calculated by following procedure:
- * Each parameter of fluency and accuracy is observed and calculated.
- * Scores are given to each parameter of fluency and accuracy.
- * The sum of scores of fluency and accuracy is calculated.
- * Score sheet of fluency and accuracy is prepared for 500 learners.
- * Coding is given to the score sheet of fluency and accuracy.

GROUPS	SCORE OF FLUENCY	SCORE OF ACCURACY	TOTAL
MALE -FEMALE	M 4501	3611	8112
	F 4305	3464	7769
ARTS-COMMERCE	A 4268	3385	7653
	C 4546	3680	8226
RURAL-URBAN	R 3304	2455	5759
	U 5349	4643	9992

From the score sheet, we can say that the fluency and accuracy are important components of oral communication skills. The scores of fluency and accuracy indicate the following results-

- * Scores of fluency is greater than accuracy.
- * Female scores of fluency and accuracy are greater than male scores.
- * Commerce faculty learners' scores of fluency and accuracy are greater than Arts faculty learners score.
- * Urban learners' scores of fluency and accuracy are greater than the scores of rural learners score.

Qualitative Analysis

The collected data in the form of informal interviews of ESL learners and teachers is analyzed to get the information about fluency and accuracy measurements and factors influencing fluency and accuracy of learners. The informal interviews of 20 learners are taken on the basis of judgment selection. The volunteers are selected for an informal interview. The responses of the learners are in their regional language i.e. Marathi, so these responses are translated in English for analysis. The responses to 10 questions indicate that the learners are not so much aware of the fluency but they are conscious about accuracy. They have

pointed out the parameters of accuracy but not fluency. They express that the mother tongue and family background can affect their fluency and accuracy.

In the same manner, the informal interviews of 5 English teachers are taken to confirm the parameters of fluency and accuracy for measuring oral communication skills in English. The views and opinions of teachers on fluency and accuracy are considered while measuring oral communication skills. The responses of the teachers give confidence to the researcher and show the following things:

Fluency can be measured with the parameters-

- * Words per minute
- * Pauses per minute
- * Fillers per minute
- * Repetitions per minute

Accuracy can be measured with the parameters-

- * Accurate sentence structure
- * Accurate vocabulary
- * Accurate tense
- * Accurate cohesive device

Factors affecting fluency and accuracy –

- * Mother tongue
- * Domestic background

- * Education
- * Economical status
- * Region or geographical area
- * Social background
- * Interest and knowledge in English

The researcher has observed compulsory classes in her institute. From her experience of teaching and observations, we can conclude that the ESL learners use the following communication strategies in the classroom-

- * Over generalization
- * Paraphrasing
- * Switch to their mother tongue
- * Seek help of listeners or teachers
- * Miming
- * Gesture
- * Make a note of words and ask later to their teachers.

Statistical Testing

Some statistical tests are done to get the answers to research questions. The tests are done as follows:

Three Way ANNOVA Test

This test is done to test the hypothesis that oral communication skills can be measured in terms of fluency and accuracy. The test is insignificant for the measurement of fluency and accuracy of male and female learners and Arts and Commerce learners. Therefore it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between the scores of fluency and accuracy. Thus we can state that fluency and accuracy are dependent variables with the help of which oral communication skills can be measured.

Multiple Regression Test

This test is done to test the hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between fluency and accuracy of the learners. The test is significant; therefore we can conclude that there is a significant difference between the correlation of fluency and accuracy. As the scores of fluency increases, there is increase in the scores of accuracy. So it is clear that there is positive correlation between fluency and accuracy of ESL learners.

$\beta_1 = \beta_2$ Test

This test is done to test the hypothesis that fluency and accuracy cannot be affected by faculty or sex of the ESL learners. It can be affected by the region of the learners. The test is insignificant for fluency and accuracy of male and female learners. In the same manner, the test is insignificant for fluency and accuracy of Arts and Commerce learners. But the test is significant for fluency and accuracy of rural and urban learners. Thus we can conclude that there is no any significant difference between the fluency and accuracy of male and female learners as well as Arts and commerce ESL learners. But there is a significant difference between the fluency and accuracy of rural and urban ESL learners.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The findings of the study have given us the information about the measurement of oral communication skills of second language learners in Solapur University and about the correlation between fluency and accuracy. In this regard, some suggestions and recommendations can be made which might enable second language learners in Solapur

University to improve their oral communication skills in English.

In the course of data collection, when the learners described the pictures in the visual clip, they participated actively. They thought that there was no point in describing a picture if there was no final right or wrong answer. Sometimes they felt insecure when they were in front of camera. My suggestions on such issues are -

- * Some activities which give a right or wrong answer could be included in the study. Such activities will create interest and confidence among the ESL learners.
- * A word puzzle can be included as an activity for the ESL learners for developing their vocabulary based on the pictures in the visual clip.

The findings of the study indicate that communication strategies are used by the second language learners to overcome their problems of oral communication skills in English. They have the ability to use communication strategies. Hence, the teachers should promote the communication strategies which can develop oral communication skills of the second language learners.

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Suggestions for Teachers:

- * Teachers should have to shake off their traditional methods of teaching.
- * Teachers should have to encourage the learners to participate actively in classroom activities.
- * Teachers should have to use more tasks and activities for the learners.
- * Teachers should focus on the development of oral communication skills of the learners.
- * Teachers should have to assess the fluency of the second language learners and not the accuracy.

Conclusion:

From the present study, we can conclude that communication strategies are used by ESL learners to overcome their problems of oral communication skills in English. The most important finding of the study is oral communication skills can be measured in terms of fluency and accuracy. The next finding of the study is that there is positive correlation between fluency and accuracy. The last finding of the study is that fluency and accuracy cannot be affected by faculty or sex of the ESL learners but it can be affected by the region of the ESL learners.

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