Learning Patterns Opted for Developing Competency in English By The Students of Trincomalee Campus: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper is based on an action research taking 60% of the student populace of the Trincomalee Campus of the Eastern University, Sri Lanka as its universe in order to understand the poor performance of the learners when it comes to English. A structured questionnaire through stratified random sampling was administered and the results were cumulated and analyzed through percentage analysis. This paper analyzes the various strategies used by the students of Trincomalee Campus, who mostly belong to the underprivileged strata of the Sri Lankan society where many are first generation learners with regard to Higher Education. Majority have done their schooling through their L1 along with their underprivileged status, makes this study unique since the Trincomalee Campus of the Eastern University, Sri Lanka is different from other HEIs in Sri Lanka due to the greater mixture and proximity of various ethnic and religious groups and thus the learning patterns opted by these students to achieve competence in L2 (English) is a unique mixture prompting validity with a potential for further development in Second Language Acquisition policy decisions.

Introduction

In the student centered teaching and learning process the vital part is not in the hands of the facilitator but in the hands of the learner where the patterns opted to learn any subject plays the most important role in the erudition and with regard to developing a competency in English as a Second Language the patterns opted by a learner is vital, even more important than what is facilitated through the syllabus. In fact, the student-centered approach values the part played by the learner as part of the curriculum. At this juncture it is pertinent to note that learning patterns vary from learner to learner making it more personal than universal but at the same time these personal patterns when observed, one could identify that most patterns are common. This paper is based on a filed study taking all the departments in Trincomalee Campus of the Eastern University, Sri Lanka into consideration.

Background of the Study

The Trincomalee Campus facilitates higher education to students of all creeds, class, ethnicity and castes but most of the strata belong to the economically lower ladder of the society and moreover they are unable to get admission into the prestigious institutions in Sri Lanka due to their underprivileged nature. 538 of the students from 723 overall strength of Trincomalee Campus, receive scholarships such as Mahapola (scholarship provided by the government), Bursary (scholarship provided by the Campus) or EDCS (scholarship given by the Education Employees Co-operative Thrift and Credit Society) further validates the above claim that the students who belong to the underprivileged sections of the society form the major component.

231(61.8%) of the students have done their education through Sinhala (L 1) medium at the government schools in Southern and Central Provinces and 130 (34.8%) who are from the North and Eastern Provinces have had their schooling through Tamil (L 1) medium and only 13 (3.5%) have done through English as a medium of study. In addition, from grade 3 to A/L students are taught English as L2 but no true erudition takes place other than in cities due to the lack of competent teachers.

The medium of instruction and learning at the Trincomalee Campus (EUSL) is in English for all subjects making learning a difficult one for a student who has completed his/her schooling through their L 1. In the campus, students have the chance to learn English for Specific Purpose but without having the general skills in Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing these ESP based course works become null and void creating a mirage which is not only dangerous for the learner but in the long run will tarnish the name of the Trincomalee Campus.

This paper is based on a study where the sample size is 374 out of the total population of 622 taking the I, II, and III year students into consideration through stratified random sampling using a structural questionnaire method, covering a population of 60% thereby giving more credibility to the results of this study.

Objective of the Study

The major objective of the study is
1. To analyze the English language learning patterns of the undergraduates
2. To suggest new learning patterns
3. To provide suggestions to enhance the already existing learning patterns

Hypothesis

The following are the research hypotheses for the present study:
1. The undergraduates have poor English skills that falls short for a learner at Higher Education
2. Undergraduates have poor study skills
3. The Learning patterns adopted to learn English are not a well-structured one

Research Question

The following questions were set at the beginning of the present investigation:
1. Do the learners fulfill the prerequisite with regard to possessing skills in English?
2. Do the learners have good study skills to study independently?
3. Are the learning patterns adopted by the learners a well-structured one?

Discussion

	Factor	Yes	No
a	Whether the respondents study lesson items not covered by the English teacher	127 34%	247 66%
b	Whether the respondents' make an attempt to do the self–check questions/ exercises/ activities provided in the units	154 41.2%	220 58.8%
c	The respondents' usage of guides as study materials	279 74.6%	95 25.4%
d	Respondents' opinion whether bazaar guides are more useful than the English textbooks	299 79.9%	75 20.1%
e	Whether respondents' memorize their English lessons	330 88.2%	44 11.8%

The study shows that only 127 (34%) study the lesson items not covered by the teacher but majority of 247 (66%) of students do not engage in self-study. This shows that even though the learners have stepped into the portals of higher education, they still harp on to the sense of studying only lessons items covered by the teacher as in their school days. This shows that majority of them lack the maturity to step into higher education, where the teacher only acts as a facilitator, or a catalyst, or a pointer and it is the learners who have to walk the extra mile. The table projects the fact that a large portion does not study on their own pointing to the fact that may be this is due to lack of interest in learning English for many have not understood that underdevelopment with regard to English skills will hamper their not only their future career avenues but also their academic achievements.

154 (41.2%) of the respondents make an attempt to do the self–check questions/ exercises/ activities provided in the units wile 220 (58.8%) of the respondents do not make any attempt. When the researcher inquired about the negligence on the part of the students, some of their views were in accordance with the factor that, English is not a major subject in their syllabus even though it is the medium of instruction. Hence, they give priority only for their major courses except English and therefore do not attempt to do the self-check questions or exercises and activities provided in the units.

A majority of 279 (74.6%) respondents use guides as their study materials while only 95 (25.4%) of the respondents do not use guides as their study materials. When the researcher inquired the respondents about using study guides, the researcher was able to find that, majority of the respondents used to get the help of these types of guides in order to be prepared with the ready-made answers. This is a very good consolation for the rat race of the examinations. These guides are written for the commercial purposes which are far from having the real intention of improving the skills of the students. Sometimes these guides are chosen by the teachers, but sometimes it is noted that some of the materials like these give misinformation. Majority of the students bother about the marks and not about their language skills. So, they simply rote learn from these guides turning themselves into a robot or a passive thinker.

A major populace of 299 (79.9%) respondents think that bazaar guides are more useful than the English textbooks while only 75 (20.1%) of the respondent believe vice versa. The above table proves that the bazaar guides are used by the students than textbooks. They think that bazaar guides will fulfil their need of English rather than textbooks since the use of bazaar guides is easy for them to prepare for their examinations rather than improving their knowledge and skills. The other factor is that, most of the respondents are from underprivileged section of the society. So they do not have enough income to buy prescribed books and they have to be always

content with bazaar guides. In addition to this, the due to the taxation problem on imported books (most of the books have to be imported at least from India, since the printing industry in Sri Lanka is not well developed) even the library is unable to procure all the needed standard secondary materials since it also houses cheap bazaar guides. Only if the government establishes government run bookshops that deliver quality products at a good discount, true education could be a possibility in the coming years. Thinking that one can learn from the internet is a mirage with which the country is fooling itself, since anything free on the internet is something that cannot be trusted and at the same time real knowledge is only provided at a cost which is highly unaffordable. Creation of Government run bookshops in each district will not only help the school sector but also the higher educational sector where books when sold at a discount would increase the knowledge wealth of the students. In addition to this, the Government should only give a minimum part of the scholarship for the student and insist that the students have to buy books and show them for physical verification along with the procuring bill for the refund of the remaining money. Since education is free in Sri Lanka and in most cases since the government is paying the students in addition to free education, the students have not understood the importance attributed to their education but have taken it as a kind of privileged to be enjoyed rather than to be accountable. Only if the student community is made accountable in one way or the other for the scholarship given to them, true erudition will take place. One way to make them accountable is to enable them to pay a minimum tuition fee each semester, where standing in a line in the bank to make the payment will install a sense of responsibility.

The above table shows that majority 330 (88.2%) of the respondents memorize their English lessons when they face the examinations and only 44 (11.8%) of the respondents have disagreed to the factor that they memorize their English lessons for the exams to get high marks. They used to follow this method in order to get high marks at the examinations, but this method of rote learning may be a shortcut towards getting a high score but this methodology does not develop the fluency in English with respect to all the four skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing). When the researcher interviewed, the respondents revealed that sometimes they might use guides such as bazaar guides to memorize lessons or their self-made answer. In addition, this method is not a conducive one since they are restricted only for that answer and in the long run their thinking power gets often impaired, because the capacity of thinking and their creativity will be blocked by this method and they try to repeat the same thing rather than creating new things, using their ideas.

When considering the overall responses, majority of the respondents 216 (57.8%) use English – Sinhala or English–Tamil dictionary since it is easy for them to understand. This bilingual method of learning English has been effective since most of them have done their education in their mother tongue. So they try to find the exact word or meaning in their mother tongue rather than using English itself. This process is supportive for the understanding but it is worst for improving language skills. If a student uses English for their education, they should use dictionaries in English because it gives much more clues to dispel their doubts and

make them have a clear understanding of the word by referring to more and more information about it. So it indirectly gives more knowledge and information rather than restricting it to limited set of information.

Furthermore, majority of the respondents do not have hard copies due to the huge pricing of print materials and therefore rely on technical development. They have the free dictionary software installed in their mobile phones. This usage makes their search a much easier one but using the electronic device the students do not learn other words in the process of searching whereby their photo-memory gets developed and thus their exposure gets narrowed down. When somebody refers to a dictionary (a hard copy), they have the chance to know everything about the word they search for. Most of the dictionaries in mobile phones give only the meaning sometimes along with synonyms, however the rest of the details (such as how to use that word) are not available.

When considering the overall percentage, majority of the respondents 168 (44.9%) use internet when they have doubts. Internet is the source which we can be trusted within a limited framework. Sometimes wrong and misleading information are channeled through the internet. Students may not be clever enough to get the right information leaving the wrong. They meet their teachers rarely to clear their doubts.

When the researcher had a conversation with few students, they declared that they feel free and easy to get their doubts cleared using internet rather than meeting their teacher due to the limited time they have. Sometimes, their inability to provide the relevant feedback for the problems raised by the teacher or their inability to cope up with the teacher in an effective manner makes them feel awkward. But when they meet their classmates, they feel free and try to clarify their doubts easily. But that is also not a very efficient method because it is the same teacher that teaches the whole class and many in the class sometimes might have doubts in their understanding of the subject matter. Other respondents might have got the doubts cleared in the same classroom but they might not be proficient enough as the teacher. If they have a proper way to get their doubts cleared without misleading them, it will be beneficial for them.

Way of clearing doubts in English	Department				
	Languages & Communication Studies	Business & Management Studies	Computer Science	Physical Science	Siddha Medicine
Teacher	20 15.3%	10 7.9%	Nil	4 12.5%	9 16.4%
Classmates	4 3.1%	1 0.8%	Nil	Nil	Nil
Dictionary	34 26.0%	28 22.2%	7 23.3%	13 40.6%	13 23.6%
Internet	44 33.6%	57 45.2%	20 66.7%	15 46.9%	32 58.2%
Grammar books	29 22.1%	29 23.0%	1 3.3%	Nil	Nil
Leave it	Nil	1 0.8%	2 6.7%	Nil	1 1.8%

Factor	Yes	No
Listen to news bulletin in English both in TV and radio	40 10.6%	334 89.4%
Read newspapers and magazines	136	238

in English	36.3%	63.7%
Watch good English movies or dramas	290 77.5%	84 22.5%
Listen to English music	317 84.8%	57 15.2%
Try to converse in English with fellow students and teachers	116 31.0%	258 69.0%
Happen to listen to anyone who speaks in English	63 16.8%	311 83.2%
Try to speak in English in your day to day life	161 43.0%	213 57.0%
Listen to cricket commentary	58 15.5%	316 84.5%
Watch English programmers on TV	214 57.2%	160 42.8%
Buy books in English to read (novels or other books)	6 1.7%	368 98.3%
Participate in class room interactions in English	41 11%	333 89%
Try to transact business in English at banks post office and etc.	48 12.9%	326 87.1%
avail extra coaching in English like spoken English	7 1.9%	367 98.1%

The below tables show the respondents' various efforts taken to learn English outside the classroom. Some of the informal learning patterns adopted by the students can be seen. The informal learning patterns adopted by the respondents in their day to day life could be seen according to the descending order with regard to the percentage as the percentage would be more useful for the discussion. 89.4% of respondents do not listen to news bulletin in English both in TV and radio. 89% of the respondents do not participate in class room interactions in English, 87.1% of the respondents do not try to do business transactions in English at banks, post office and etc., but 84.8% of the respondents listen to English music, but 83.2% of the respondents do not happen to listen to anyone who speaks in English, 77.5% of the respondents watch good English movies or dramas, 57.2% of the respondents watch English programmes on TV, but only 43% of the respondents try to speak in English in their day to day life, and only 36.3% of the respondents read newspapers and magazines in English, and only 31% of the respondents try to converse in English with fellow students and teachers, and only 15.5% of the respondents listen to cricket commentary, and only 10.6% of the respondents listen to news bulletin in English both on TV and radio, and only 1.9% of the respondents go for extra coaching in English like spoken English, and most important of all only 1.7% of the respondents buy books in English to read (novels or other books).

Classroom is not the only place to learn a language. It is a place based on the prescribed syllabus with a limited time frame and it is the learning that takes place outside the classroom that fulfills the curriculum as a holistic one. Learners learn languages having the interaction with the society. The lecture hours in the campus and the environment where they live should be considered when analyzing their learning patterns.

According to the above listing, majority of the respondents participate in classroom interactions in English. The medium of instruction in Trincomalee Campus is English. Sinhala and Tamil native speakers can be seen in a class. They have to interact with the others, using common language in their working hours. The interactions may occur among friends or with the lecturer. If it happens with the lecturer, students have no option other than using a common language, English. So these types of interactions between the teacher and the students whether they are qualified enough or not pave the way for positive aspects towards the learning patterns.

In modern world, business and banks use English for an effective communication. Although respondents have a lesser chance of using English in their daily life, respondents are used to do transactions using English and it is a common factor now.

Listening to music is one of the other learning patterns and most of the respondents listen to English music. They listen to it for their pleasure. When the researcher had informal conversation with the respondents they said that they listen to music but it does not give any support to improve their English.

Majority of the respondents used to interact with others in English during their lecture hours. After that, they simply follow the method of interaction in their native languages. In the campus, in their academic hours, they happen to listen to anyone who speaks in English but they spend much time without using English.

The above table shows the various attempts made by the respondents to learn English, except the teacher-controlled classroom. Several informal learning patterns adopted by the respondents in their daily life, can be identified proving the fact that the learning patterns are a poor one to gain communicative competency in English.

Suggestions

The following are a list of suggested learning patterns that could be opted by the students of the Trincomalee Campus in order to improve their erudition of English:

1. The students have to visit local libraries within Trincomalee
2. They can get together and each can buy a novel from a second-hand book shop and they can exchange the novels among themselves.
3. Two hours of reading novels at a stretch per day should be adhered to carefully covering the principles of reading.
4. Listening to good English music is a must where mobile phones have to be stocked with The Beatles, John Lennon, Simon & Garfunkel, Boney M, and ABBA. But one must listen to The Beatles.
5. Listening to music in L1 in the cafeteria should be discouraged.
6. The TV in the cafeteria should play only English channels and all the other channels have to be blocked by the campus management.
7. Students in the hostel should listen to an English news every night before they go to bed.
8. Watching good English movies instead of watching Korean Series, Hindi Movies and Sinhala or Tamil movies should be avoided.
9. Instead of watching cricket, one should listen to cricket commentary on a radio.
10. One should imitate his/her poetry teacher and read poetry aloud.
11. The free internet provided by the campus should be used in downloading and listening to TED talks.
12. Most important of all, each student should be given The Bible to read. Reading The Bible in L2 and L1 simultaneously enhances the skills not only of language fluency but also translation.
13. One should join the Campus Choir to sing songs in English.
14. Those, who are using iPhone should download podcast and make it their primary learning app. Even others should try to use podcast if their android mobiles support such an application.
15. Forming of Reading Clubs will help in motivating one to read better and share whatever they have read with others.
16. All events within the campus premises should be conducted only via English.
17. Since most of the lecturers are Tamil speakers, learners (majority having Sinhala as L1) have to force themselves to interact every day with them through English.

Our Heritage

Conclusion

One should be aware that these underprivileged learners spend their scholarships to meet their day to day needs than investing it on studies like buying books etc., which is also attested from the personal interviews. Further, the campus management should make the orientation programme a fruitful one by meeting the needs of the students by helping them to set goals and attain them through proper time management and advocate on the ways and means the respondents can cultivate an effective learning skills and patterns. In addition to this, it is the taxation on books that hampers learning in Sri Lanka making only the rich and the affluent to be educated. The Government of Sri Lanka should change its policies on the taxation of books if it wants the country to be uplifted. This paper projects the fact that students are ill-equipped with regard to learning-patterns. They are running a rat race to get good marks without addressing their real needs and aims. Instead of using cheap Bazar guides, they should give priority for their own writings with the help of the prescribed text so that they will be rich in forming new syntaxes and creative thinking. Instructions should be imparted to them in order to discourage wrong methodology. If the learners start using the methodologies found in the suggestion they will improve their erudition of English at a much greater space bringing-in gradual development.

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