

THE UNFORESEEN SIDE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING; AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE YOUNG LEARNERS' MISCONCEPTIONS IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT.

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ABSTRACT

Competence in English is considered as an essential requirement for the undergraduates to be successful while studying and even after their graduation. Nevertheless, considering Sri Lankan government universities and especially the Faculties of Arts, low competence in English of the undergraduates has become a severe and a long lasting issue. Thus, many of the attempts exercised by English Language Units to uplift the language proficiency of the students ended in vain. Since the issue seems to have different dimensions the present study aims to find out the misconceptions of the language learners in learning English as a Second Language and to suggest remedial actions to overcome such fallacies. As the discourse aspect of the study is regarded to be vital, a qualitative analysis was carried out by distributing 100 open-ended questionnaires for the second year students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Ruhuna. Besides 10 language Teachers of the English Language Teaching Unit were interviewed and classroom observations were also done. It was revealed that the students carried language related as well as socially constructed misconceptions which diminish their motivation and impression in learning English. Such myths have taken enough scope in their minds simply because the university has failed to establish a sound language learning environment inside the university. The absence of language empowering bodies, innovative teaching methods, English medium studies, and a number of new language courses appear to comfort the students to hang on their misconceptions until they pass out. Thus, prior to any change, it is suggested that the language related delusions of the students towards language learning need to eliminate from their mindsets and from their language learning environment.

Keywords: Language Proficiency, Misconceptions, Socially Constructed, Undergraduates.

1. INTRODUCTION

A Sound knowledge in English is considered as a prerequisite required by undergraduates to face the challenges of the modern era. Thus, English fundamentally opens the door for the attainment of employment, power and privilege in a society (Ranasinghe, 2012 as cited in Wijewardena, Yong and Chinna, 2014). However, it is pathetic to deal with the reality since insufficient knowledge of English is projected as a serious issue that obstructs university students in achieving the best out of their academic life. Moreover, the arts students are so miserable in the case that the majority of them do not even have the basic knowledge of English language. Consequently, many of the arts students fail their language paper which is an obligatory requirement in obtaining the degree (Perera, 2013). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that everybody knows the value of English. However, still they are less enthusiastic and hardly motivated to learn English. In a way this is an attitudinal issue. Therefore it is believed that learner misconceptions regarding language learning may discourage them to be dynamic and energetic. Basically, a misconception refers to a wrong assumption or understanding which can cause serious learning consequences in the long run (Farji, 2016). Misconceptions emerge as a result of experiences and

wrong beliefs of individuals (Baki, 1999 as cited in Yasin, 2017). Since misconceptions are consistent and supported by the individuals' experiences, they steadily resist changing (Cox & Mouw, 1992; Karataş, Köse & Coştu, 2003 as cited in Yasin, 2017). English is no longer an ornament belongs to the upper class; not an icon of the elites. Today it has become a basic skill needed for the students who owns the future of the country (Gunasekera, Abeysinghe & Devanarayana, 2016). Therefore, this study intends to identify the misconceptions carried by undergraduates in Learning English with the intention of converting the lethargic young language learners into energetic and dynamic group of students who want to learn the language in passion and style. At this juncture the study aims to address the research questions such as;

- What are the misconceptions carried by undergraduates in learning English as a second language?
- To what extent these misconceptions impact undergraduates in learning English?
- How to overcome these misconceptions to encourage and motivate them to enhance their language caliber to meet the challenges of the modern era?

1.1. Research Problem

It is a well-known fact that teaching English in Sri Lankan public universities is so far an unsuccessful attempt. It is just a struggle with less results achieved. As Perera (2013) pointed out, although the universities have taken several steps to improve the language capacity of the students many have not been fruitful. Specially, considering the faculties of Arts the teachers are in a constant battle to collect a suitable number of students to conduct language classes. Students rarely attend lectures though they have numerous language difficulties (Gunasekera, Abeysinghe & Devanarayana, 2016). However, the final accusation comes to the faculty and the English Language Teaching Unit when the students record high fail rate in English and lack the required language skills once they stepped into the job market. It is true that many of the students have encountered issues due to lack of opportunities, interest, environment, socio-cultural setup, poverty and shortage of teachers and resources during their school time period (Rahuman, 2017). Nevertheless, when the same demotivation remains even inside the university even when the students are offered with a plenty of resources both human and material to learn English the matter seems to address in deep. Hence, this problem may carry an attitudinal, internalized and hidden causes than what is obvious.

1.2 Research Objectives

The research intends;

- to find out the misconceptions carried by undergraduates in Learning English as a Second Language
- to find out what extent these misconceptions impact undergraduates in learning English

- to suggest new mechanisms to overcome the so called fallacies by giving the students an authentic language learning experiences.

2. METHODOLOGY

As the discourse aspect is more concerned here, the research was developed on a descriptive mode of analysis.

2.1 Research Setting and Participants

The study was qualitative in nature and for the analysis 100 second year students of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Ruhuna were selected. The sample of students were selected from language classes based on convenient sampling method. Second year students were specially focused as they had a three months of intensive period prior to the university entrance and have already learnt English a year at the university. However, they are the most criticized set of students for recording low results, hardly attending language classes and exhibiting less enthusiasm in language learning. They have to pass English in First year to obtain their degree and get selected for a special degree though English is a non-credit course. Thus, they are consider as the most ideal group for the resent study.

2.2 Techniques of collecting data

The sample population was provided with open-ended questionnaires each including twenty two open-ended questions; two background questions and twenty questions focusing their language beliefs. Besides, in-depth interviews were also carried with randomly selected 10 English teachers belong to the English Language Teaching Unit of the university. The interview questions were open-ended. Moreover, observations were also carried out during class hours.

2.3 Data Analysis

The answers provided for the open ended questionnaires were coded and categorized in analyzing. Along with primary data the research has used the secondary data taken form relevant literature for a sound discourse analysis.

3. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

3.1 Basic Knowledge in English

It was impressive to reveal that nearly 40% of the population recorded that they had gained just a C or S pass for the General English Paper. Besides the rest of 50% have failed whereas a small number of 10% were achievers of A and B grades. The reasons for such a pathetic condition were reported as no attention was given to General English as it has no connection with the university entrance, hardly met good language teachers at their rural schools, missed English from the primary grades which continued forming no taste for language learning and postponements occurred in language learning with expectations to start learning English from the university from the beginning. By reporting such loop holes in their process of language learning the majority of 50% believed that they did not have sufficient knowledge in English, whereas just 40% believed they can manage English to a certain extent when only 10% was in the notion that that they have good English Knowledge. Analyzing the overall context it is obvious that the group is diverse and symbolizes the unsuccessful story of language teaching

in Sri Lanka. This goes in line with the research findings of Wijesekera (2012) which highlighted that so far there are no good records to prove English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka achieved the intended objectives. Ultimately, English has made a barrier by many of the undergraduates in Sri Lankan public universities thus making it a challenge for language teachers to achieve the expected outcomes of their language programmes.

3.2 Misconceptions in Learning English

The misconceptions in learning English as a Second Language were found to be language related as well as socially constructed.

3.2.1 A must achieve native like language competence which is a miracle

The research findings revealed that the students falsely believed that English is difficult and it is another miracle to achieve the language competence. Simply depending on the erroneous notion the students believed that language competence should be native like language competence. Paikeday (1985) as cited in Selvi (2014) argued that “the native speaker exists only as a figment of linguist’s imagination” (p.12) and proposed a more encompassing term “proficient user” of a language to refer to all speakers who can successfully use it. Along the same lines, Davies (1991) argued that “the native speaker is a fine myth: we need it as a model, a goal, almost an inspiration; but it is useless as a measure; it will not help us define our goals” (as cited in Selvi, 2014). Thus the students must identify that there is no need to differentiate native speakers from non-native speakers. What they truly need to develop is the language competence.

3.2.2. English language must be learnt with the use of first language.

The majority of the sample population was in the wrong belief that they need the help of the first language in each and every language learning exercise. First language can be a beneficial tool in learning Second language, but to a certain extent. The teachers revealed that due to such wrong beliefs the students expect the teachers to translate everything as much as possible in second language especial in conducting reading and grammar lessons. Further as teachers found the students seem to feel uncomfortable if the teachers use only English and most of the time they were criticized by the students. The students had no good image about the teachers who use only English. They found it as showing off the English accent. Nevertheless, the truth is good exposure to the language plus hard working and less use of mother tongue will be beneficial (Kahn, 2011 as cited in Seefa, 2017).

3.2.3 Too old to learn English; childhood is the best time to learn language easily and quickly

Another misconception was that the students believe that now they are too late and old to learn English. Many of the students revealed that they did not get good opportunities to master the language during their schooling and now it seems difficult to absorb the language. But the point to remember is that there is not a simple correlation between age and language acquisition in any area other than pronunciation. Even where pronunciation is concerned, some adult learners do achieve impressive native-like pronunciation. Languages can be learned at all ages. There is no evidence to suggest otherwise. (Common Misconceptions about Language Acquisition). Hence when the students have a load of other subject matters to cover and study the best option they select in language learning was just to postpone it until

they finish their degree. The teachers constantly complained that it was really hard to motivate the young graduates because most of them wrongly believe that since they were unable to master English well in their young age, during university period they need English only to pass the language paper to obtain the degree which is a must.

3.2.4 It takes just 1-2 years to acquire language competence. English Unit must start teaching from the very beginning.

Furthermore it was found that the majority of the students want English Unit to teach English from the beginning. However as teachers revealed it cannot to be done as simply they have assigned to teach three hours per week. Even as the classes are heterogeneous teaching English from the basics will not be a sound strategy. The teachers revealed that once the students do not achieve their expectations they seem to diverge towards the tuition classes which then and there brainwash students that they can do miracles. The teachers complained that the ever increasing number of low quality English classes which mushroom outside the university is a real threat in changing the mentality of the language learners because most of the tuition masters have given false promises for the students that they can help students achieve native like language competence overnight. During interviews the teachers complained that even if they start special classes for the needy students they never attend. Many of such attempts have been failed due to poor attendance. As per Rathnayaka (2013) these misconceptions are called unreasonable expectations.

3.2.5 Grammar is everything. Learning English means learning Grammar.

Another widest misconception found was their belief that grammar is everything. If they know grammar it means they are fluent in English. Thus, the students want their lessons to be grammar oriented and the teachers revealed that it was so hard to conduct interactive activities with the students. It is a myth that grammar is everything because English is an integration of all the four major skills. This goes in line with research findings of Silva and Devendra, (2014) which highlighted that students falsely believe that the ability to handle a few grammar points correctly means they have achieved the language proficiency. Most of the students expect their courses to be grammar oriented and they do not like silks or activity based teaching. Further as Bruzzano stressed this might well be the major misconception about language learning. It happens often due to previous learning experiences with methodologies akin to grammar translation and deductive teaching of grammar. Learners will expect “a lot of grammar” and equate this to successful language learning. Their expectations will simply not be met if the teacher follows a communicative approach (2018). However at present lack of communication skills has found to be the major issue which paralyzed many graduates in finding a secured and well reputed employment especially in the private sector.

3.2.6 Language can be learnt as other subjects.

Through the questionnaires it was revealed that the students mistakenly believe that English can be learnt as any other subject by taking down notes and memorizing things. Passing exams means they have achieved the language competence in all the four skills. The teachers also pointed that the students are so happy if they give notes and if they ask them to engage in interactive activities the students believe that the teachers waste their time as they have nothing to teach or the teachers are not prepared for lessons. The students need handouts to

be placed on their hands for each and every lesson. As Seefa (2017) quoting Mackey (2002) clearly pointed that we should understand English is a language it needs to be acquired first instead of being learnt. It is of no use to limit learning English just to a classroom setting. If they really want to learn English as another subject they must understand that English is not content learning, it is over learning which never stops. The learning never stops and it is a process of creative constructions of a system in which learners are consciously testing hypotheses about the target language from a number of possible sources (Brown, 2010).

3.2.7 Cannot speak and write because they do not have enough words.

The majority of the sample population pointed that they are weak in handling the language because they cannot remember words. This is kind of an erroneous belief as language fluency cannot be measured by the number of the words that learners know. The teachers revealed that their students always point that it is difficult to express something in second language as they lack necessary vocabulary. Besides as per teachers not only the lack of vocabulary but also the other factors such as shyness, anxiety and excessive focus on accuracy anyhow contribute to their backwardness. This goes in line with the argument brought out by Bruzzano (2018) in which she pointed that lack of vocabulary may not be the core issue that the learners suffer because the learners with this belief might be overly focused on accuracy to the detriment of fluency, native-language interference might be frequent and they may not be at all trained in the use of communicative strategies or they may have high affective filters, such as speaking anxiety.

3.2.8 Listening is just a matter of practice. Other three skills should be mastered.

As per the data gained through questionnaires the students falsely believed that learning English means learn to write, read and speak. These are productive skills and listening is a receptive skill. As per teachers it is a real challenge for them to encourage students to conduct listening activities. It was identified that the teachers lack necessary resources to conduct listening activities in language classrooms. However, even rarely performed the do not like listening exercises. It is their misconception that listening is ideal for practical purposes which is totally wrong. The students who believed language learning in the point of passing exams stressed that they did not worry about listening since it is not tested in their exams. As per Bruzzano (2018) this belief can be the result of previous learning experiences lacking any specific listening instruction. When she researched this topic in Italian secondary schools, some teachers even said that they did not believe in explicit listening instruction and teacher talk time was all the listening practice that the learners needed. Many learners are not at all aware that all the four skills are interconnected. Listening sets the background to acquire new vocabulary, identify correct pronunciation and enhance communicative competence.

3.2.9 Arts students usually have less competence in English compared with science and management students.

Naturally arts students are less capable than other students. That is what they wrongly believe. In a way it is a socially constructed misbelief because as the teachers revealed most of the times arts students are labeled as weak in English. This is just a misbelief that they have created by themselves because no subject matter can decide one's language competence. On the other hand a significant number of students falsely revealed that this weakness are natural because they do not have English medium studies. Actually following English medium

studies is not the case. Although many predict that, following an English medium degree itself will be an added advantage in improving English it is another false perception since most of the students who follow English medium neither grab subject matters nor they develop their language proficiency as they have a number of language difficulties (Navaz, 2016).

3.2.10 Priority should be given to other subjects; not to language learning

Moreover the research findings revealed that believing other subjects as more important than English and giving them priority is widely accepted. Thus, the students believe that there is no need to attend language classes because every time English Unit gives the same language paper. The system has paralyzed them to be such imprudent because still they believe that credit courses are more important than English. Though the students in Sri Lanka underperform in English still they progress through the education system on the courage of passing the special subjects. Actually, linguistic difficulties become less important and do not stop students from completing their degrees. Unfortunately, the aftermaths of language deficiencies remain so crucial when most of the graduates work for low salary, less recognized jobs and when the leading national and international private firms do not welcome them (Liyanage, 2014).

3.2.11 Fluent in English means having connections with English culture and English family background

The main reason students pointed for their backwardness is they do not have exposure to an English speaking culture. Basically most of their parents cannot speak or write in English. Inside the university they do not live with the language. It was not their culture to speak in English inside the university. Thus, language learning was just limit to the classroom setting. The teachers pointed that students thought they know how to use language based on what they have learnt and remembered. The students are so narrow-minded in their language learning they do not like to think that they have to go in search of knowledge. Their dedication to language learning is a must. Lastly as per research findings the students falsely believe that English is an ornament of the upper class. The students who came from city high schools can work well with English because English is owned by them. The students revealed that they are scared to use somebody else's' language in a wrong manner because the capable students will cheat them. In that aspect the language teaches exposed the fact that even some students are in the opinion that the aim of the English Unit is to fail the students and take revenge which is totally a wrong belief. Anyway it is a false belief that English is owned by the upper elite social class and thus it is a symbol of class, a social indicator, *kaduwa and para bashawa*. It is of no use to bring the ideas reek of nationalism as 'English is the language of the colonizers and hence we do not learn that' into the language learning environment (Bandaranayake, 2009).

4. CONCLUSION

As per the research findings the prevailed misconceptions towards learning English seem to block the smooth function of the entire language learning and teaching process. It is one among the main reasons which demotivates both the language learners and language teachers. Anyhow, it is difficult to say that the students should bear the total responsibility of the issue because this is an intergradation of a variety of factors. The primary education institutions needs to set a sound language learning environment simply because the majority of the students are not exposed to second language at their homes. The first impression needs

to be profound. Even Advanced Level English can be changed to a valid subject which impacts the university admission process of the students. It is the prime duty of the English Language Teaching Units to change the traditional conceptions towards learning and teaching English. They should not allow to regime the mushrooming low quality English tuition classes to brain wash students by giving overnight promises. The language teaching staff needs to go for the most innovative, student-centered, technology based teaching style in creating an authentic language learning environment. The teaching should not limit to the classroom environment and optional courses. They must introduce a variety of language courses such as academic writing, speech and communication, English for employment etc. Even the introduction of English medium will be also advantageous. As Fromkin et al. highlighted age, talent, motivation and language learning environment emerge to be vital (2003). By any case it must stop allowing anyone to compartmentalize the ELTU and isolate it. Simply being a unit does not mean that it hasn't got enough capacity to stand strong amidst all the other departments. Hence, it is vital to change the misconceptions of the students because it means an attitudinal change which will hopefully leads the graduates towards the attainment of the expected goals of language learning.

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