

A Study on the Acquisition of Paralinguistic Features of Oral Presentation Skills Challenges to the Rural Students[†]

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Abstract

Acquisition of second language (L2) has always been challenging; the related theories and proposed ways to help students understand, grasp and use L2 for expression keep evolving. The present paper focuses on the problems faced by rural students while practicing oral presentation. The oral presentations of the rural students (Classes IX, X, XI and XII) enrolled in Pilani schools and nearby village schools were recorded and played for them to observe themselves. The students seemed to be keenly observant about the areas of improvement. Learners use a language better when they get to know the specific areas of problem and an explanation for each digression. Hence, the paper also focuses on how these errors, especially regarding paralinguistic features, are committed and how awareness can help these students polish their oral presentation skills.

INTRODUCTION

English, the undisputed language of the professional world, predominates in the field of education also. In China “English as a foreign language is a compulsory course in colleges and universities. Without passing the English exam, students cannot obtain their graduate diplomas or become post-graduate students”

(Keqiang, 1986). The use of its communicative competence is varied and vast, encompassing sometimes even societal factors. “English is a foreign language in Tanzania, but but it comes with tremendous power and prestige” (Rugemalira, 2005). However, the acquisition of English as a second language (L2) is not without challenges. Effective command over

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speaking skills ensures sustenance and success; selection of proper words, exquisite placement of these words in the thought process, and immaculate and expected uttering of sounds help the rural students keep their confidence sanguine but only after overcoming these problems. The rural students in Pakistan also undergo the same trauma. "Students' speaking skills are at a pitiable state. Not to talk the weak students even bright students who get high scores in English written examination are unable to speak English language properly" (Bilal et al., 2013). Rural students despite being intelligent face a different kind of challenge.

Second language acquisition is very time consuming and it is more challenging for rural students; they start getting relegated in this race since the very beginning. Urban students seem to enjoy the lead and rural students seem to lag behind. "[U]nfortunately there is discrimination between urban and rural primary school students' English language learning. Students from urban areas show better proficiency in comparison with the students from rural areas" (Salahuddin, Khan and Tahman, 2013).

The essential boost to display the subject competence, linguistic competence and organisational competence is dependent on the extent of the command gained and groomed by umpteen practice sessions of oral presentation skills. No wonder, steps are being taken in this direction also. "Oral Presentation

is one of the courses introduced to English majors in order to enhance their speaking abilities" (Al-Hebaish, 2012). Awareness leads to acquisition and practice leads to perfection but with proper self-analysis and expert feedback.

Rural students seem to be at a disadvantageous foothold (Kannan, 2009) probably due to improper teaching methodology, lack of facilities, lack of proper guidance at home, paucity of time, etc. When placed against the students who speak English fluently, rural students seem to be rough and raw in their speaking skills. Muhammad Younas (2013) in his study has found that even after learning English for about eleven years, especially rural area students are incompetent in language and unable to communicate the target language.

The process of seeking the understanding enables them to churn the thoughts to find a clue about one specific piece of information with very specific and concrete answer. Exposure and chance to share their opinion, raise their doubts, state their agreement, observe differences and suggest alterations work miraculously. Learning of simple basics is the first step. During the oral presentation, the attention is primarily caught by paralinguistic features. Little attention needs to be paid to their understanding which automatically leads to refinement in the speaking skills. The present paper focuses on the level of awareness and

acquisition of paralinguistic features; it also traces the level of challenges to be overcome by the students to reach the comfort zone.

METHODOLOGY

The research design of the study is descriptive in nature. The respondents of the study are the rural students, who study either in Pilani or nearby villages. The data comprises 9, 16, 16 and 11 students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. The tool used for data collection for study is questionnaire. The questionnaire measures parameters like paralinguistic features of an oral presentation. The questionnaire is divided into two parts: the first part includes categorical questions in nature (yes or no) which seek information about the awareness of these rural students regarding paralinguistic features such as quality, volume, pitch, pace, pronunciation, articulation, modulation, pauses and vocalised pauses; the second part of the questionnaire includes questions based on five-point likert scale ranging from excellent to poor which tests their acquisition of these features while giving an oral presentation. The respondents were asked to give a presentation on the topic of their own choice. The presentation was recorded. The recorded version was shown in the presence of all students seeking feedback first from the presenter and then from the students. Students were given the feedback and requested/suggested to work on their

weak areas. After a week, another recording was done and again shown to all the students. Again the feedback was collected for each presentation from all the students.

SPSS was used for data analysis using descriptive statistics. To analyse the data, frequency percentage was calculated for first part of the questionnaire to find out their awareness about the paralinguistic features. For the second part, mean was calculated to find out the level of the respondents' acquisition of the paralinguistic features. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed and it was found to be $\alpha=0.976$ which is under acceptable range.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are:

- to gauge the level of awareness of rural students' paralinguistic features; and
- to gauge the level of acquisition of rural students' paralinguistic features.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study focuses on the dual aspects, i.e., awareness and acquisition of the paralinguistic features which exercise an indelible importance during speaking, an intrinsic part of daily communicative framework, be it social, personal or professional.

Quality

Quality, the permanent feature of voice, classified as deep, sonorous, squeaky, nasalised, etc., was known

to 55.55%, 87.50%, 93.75% and 100% students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. However, when the recorded presentation was played, the level of acquisition was varied. Students were really surprised to note that the quality of voice did help them seek immediate attention. During the second recording session, those who had good voice quality tried to make use of it, while those who didn't have good voice quality tried to work on their pace of words, volume of voice and voice modulation to seek the attention of the audience. The mean value for parameter quality of voice is 2.46. Now, after the exposure the students feel that the level of difficulty has come down.

Volume

Volume, the loudness and softness of voice, was known to 66.66%, 93.75%, 100% and 100% students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. When the recording was shown, students were surprised to note that volume can affect the content so drastically. The presentations with low volume gave the impression to the students that the students with low volume seemed nervous, unprepared, shy and even unwilling to speak, whereas the students with high volume seemed boisterous, rude and shouting for no reason. During the second recording session, the students tried to speak at a level that was perfectly audible to all students with no extra effort to be dominating. The mean value for the parameter volume of the voice

is 2.44. The students seemed to be more confident and happy to know their own stand.

Pace

Pace is the use of words per minute; it might vary from 80 to 250 words per minute but in professional communication the acceptable range varies from 120 to 150. It was known to 22.22%, 81.25%, 93.75% and 100% students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. While they observed themselves, they found that too fast as well as too slow the pace seemed extremely preposterous, even to the extent of amusement. Fast-paced speakers, with an air of affectation, seemed to wind up everything in a hurry, causing unintelligibility and great irritation to the onlookers. The second recorded session was marked by conscious and conscientious effort of the students to keep a check on their pace, though the original pace could not be drastically altered but the effort made was considerable. The mean value for the parameter pace of the voice is 2.58. The students learnt a lot after the recorded sessions but they still seemed to have some problem in overcoming the difficulty and regulating their pace.

Pitch

The highness and lowness of the voice known as pitch was known to 44.44%, 100%, 93.75% and 100% students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. Its absence makes it more conspicuous; obviously "when

it comes to speaking English, it is no surprise to find that many students sound monotonous” (Binghadeer, 2008). While watching the first recorded session, students noticed that the inappropriate use of pitch changed the meaning of the stated information leading to different mistaken perception about the concept shared. They seemed happy to learn on their own that high pitch is used for anger, agitation, frustration, etc., whereas low pitch embraces calm, composed, relaxed, sad or dejected piece of information. The mean value for the parameter pitch of the voice is 1.12. The students found very few challenges to overcome for the acquisition of pitch.

Voice Modulation

The ability to vary and regulate pitch and volume, known as voice modulation, was known to 44.44%, 75.00%, 93.75% and 90.90% students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. Too much use of voice modulation seemed artificial and concocted, whereas its absence marked dullness and monotony. Those students, who did not use voice modulation properly during the first recording, seemed pleased with the output of their second recording. Some even tried to use voice modulation to convert a statement into a question, a good and fruitful observation and implementation. The mean value for the parameter voice modulation is 2.71. The students had to first strengthen their awareness and acquisition of this parameter; hence the level of the challenges was highest for this parameter.

Pronunciation

To speak all the sounds according to the accepted norms, known as pronunciation, was known to 66.66%, 93.75%, 93.75% and 100% students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. “English as a second/foreign language need special attention paid to communicative skills in general and to pronunciation intelligibility in particular” (Morley, 1991). While watching the first recorded version, they became aware that they pronounced the same words in different ways which made them cross-check their pronunciation. Some of them were not even aware that they could not pronounce those words properly; some had the inkling that something was wrong but did not know what was wrong; some knew for sure that the pronunciation was not right but did not know how to rectify that. During the second recording, it became clear that they had come prepared after looking up for the proper pronunciation from audio dictionary and seemed to slow down to pronounce that word properly. The mean value for the parameter pronunciation is 1.10. The students had good awareness and good acquisition of pronunciation; and the challenges were the least.

Articulation

Articulation, the ability to speak all the sounds (accepted and prescribed) distinctly was known

to 55.55%, 93.75%, 93.75% and 100% students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. During the first recording, the articulation was not at all in the mind, the mere knowledge did not seem to help much. After watching the recorded video, they realised their errors and found scope for improvement. During the second recorded session, every student seemed chary of not eating, slurring, chopping or truncating the sounds. The mean value for the parameter articulation is 1.12. The students had knowledge about the articulation; they had good grasp of it and the challenges to overcome were very less.

Pauses

Silence flanked by words is the pause. Natural and spontaneous pauses were known to 55.55%, 93.75%, 93.75% and 100% students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. While watching the first recorded session, students found that a proper pause helped them convey the message with assertion. Absence of pause, caused by the desire to bring in fluency, only led to perplexing unintelligibility, whereas misplaced pauses led to distorted meanings, sometimes with hilarious outcome. During the recording of the second session, students seemed more comfortable and confident while using pauses, that too properly. The mean value for the pauses parameter is 1.15. Students had good awareness and good acquisition; and the challenges were not that great at all.

Vocalised Pauses

Vocalised pauses are the meaningless sounds made by speaker while giving oral presentation. The consciousness of not speaking for a longer period of time seemed to propel the students to make sounds or use stereotype expressions to fill the engulfing and threatening gap. Vocalised pauses were known to 33.33%, 87.50%, 81.25% and 81.81% students of Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 respectively. During the first recording, students seemed to consider it an intrinsic part of their presentation. While watching the recorded session, students were really surprised and found it almost unbelievable that they kept using these vocalised pauses so frequently. They did agree that an elongated pause was much better than a vocalised pause. These vocalised pauses seemed to take away the very credibility of their point. The mean value for the vocalised pauses parameter is 2.65. The students found that challenges were more and needed to be worked on properly.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study hint at many important conclusions. Students of Class 9 were less aware about all paralinguistic features probably because they have not been taught the theory. Once the theoretical knowledge is gained, it leads to awareness; once awareness is settled, it strengthens the process of acquisition. Overcoming the challenges becomes easy when they get to know

their individual and specific errors instead of group and general errors. If facilities are available and used, the process of understanding is easy, quick and extremely efficient. The amount of effort put in is very high and the process of acquisition is in the right direction. Technology can be instrumental in the exposure to their problems in an extremely befitting

way. Display of perfect presentations or videos does not help them learn much as the students need an exposure not for perfection but those hurdles which block the way to perfection. If students are exposed to the acquisition of speaking skills at an early age, the time during the graduation can be devoted to the acquisition of field-specific knowledge.

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