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Challenges of Communicating in English by Native Speakers in the Northern States of India

*¹Dr. Kaushal Yadav*¹Assistant Professor, Amity School of Languages, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, India.

Abstract

Now the world has become approachable to one and all at a few digital clicks, still the role of language has to be appraised highest in making this possible. Communicating, in a new code of communication, is a unique challenge for the people of other ethnicity. The influence of society brings numerous changes to the personality via language use. There are many reasons as to why a non-native English speaker might find it difficult to communicate in English, out of which a few challenges get resolved whereas some others become habit (as part of unintentional mistakes). Pronunciation, anxiety, motivation, linguistic ability and social wisdom play vital roles in production of speech in a new language and culture. The reasons pertaining to these challenges would be explored for different language speakers in India. In this paper, an attempt will be made to identify pattern of similarity of mistakes by non-native English speakers in India.

Keywords: Communication, language anxiety, native speakers, pronunciation, language anxiety, language and culture, motivation

1. Introduction

Since the outset of British and French colonies in Indian territories, it became a universal problem for the Britishers to communicate with the natives of the land because of language barrier. Observing the diversity of Indian Linguistic Tradition and its richness in multilingualism, they chose an easier path to teach their language to us rather than learning our languages one after the other. Even after two centuries, that diversity still exists according to the Census of India (2011), as the total number of languages stands at 121: 22 scheduled and 99 non-scheduled (Source: Language: India, States and Union Territories (Table C-16). The bilingual method of making the list of trade related words can be traced as the first attempt to lessen the communication gap among the speakers of two different cultures.

Every state in India gets the liberty to choose its own official language. In the northern states of India, it is considered the six states are prominent, namely Jammu and Kashmir (JnK), Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand and they are linguistically highly rich areas where the literature and language has flourished in diversified manners. Considering only official languages of the six states, it becomes a trouble to interact with each other formally. Hence English enjoys the privilege of being the connecting language and people of these states give value to this language as a Foreign Language and a Second Language, rather we may call it 'the lucrative language in vogue'. There cascade multiple challenges of learning the foreign language for the native speakers of other languages, discussed further.

Pronunciation

The biggest problem faced by the non-native speakers of English is the mispronunciation of certain phonemes. It must be noted that it becomes considerably difficult for those who start to learn English speaking after school years. In other words, the older the person is, the more difficult it is for him to learn the language, especially to grab the pronunciation right. David Birdsong (2012) ^[4] suggests in his essay. 'The Critical Period Hypothesis in Second Language Acquisition' that "there exists a specific window of time during which language learning is most effective. Beyond this critical period, achieving native-like proficiency becomes increasingly challenging."

Every language has its own pattern of sounds, rules, stress, intonation, rhythm, etc. the problem for the non-natives is that their learning of foreign language is influenced by the sound patterns of their mother tongue (MTI) to which they are accustomed to from the time they were able to distinguish between sounds. The native language causes certain barriers in learning a second language as for e.g., there might be certain sounds in the target language which are not there in the person's mother-tongue which will render him unable to make those sounds or distinguish them. For e.g. the sound /p/ in Hindi has two pronunciations, when spoken without aspiration [p] sound is produced while with aspiration [ph] sound is produced. But in English, it is always said with aspiration when it occurs at the beginning of a stressed syllable. That is why we say please with the [p] sound while the natives say it with the [ph] sound. Similarly the [zh] sound

as in pleasure is not present in Hindi language thus such words would naturally be difficult to pronounce for someone whose first language is Hindi. Another hindrance while using English as a second language is that it could be that one's mother tongue has different intonation and rhythm than English. A very good example is the difference between Korean and English. The former is a syllable-timed language i.e. all the syllables are pronounced with the same stress and there is no considerable change in pitch or tone while speaking. But English is a stress-timed language.

Some syllables are stressed while some are not. For example in the sentence I am going to the park, the stress will be on 'park' while 'going to the' will be relatively unstressed. It is not the case in Korean as every syllable gets the same stress. Thus a Korean speaker will find it somewhat difficult to understand and speak English as a second language because of the difference in the rhythm of his mother-tongue and that of English.

Another reason why pronunciation is one of the main problems faced by the non-native English speakers is that the approach to teaching English as a foreign language focuses least on pronunciation as it is not considered very important in communication skills. Differences between different sounds of the target language and the first language are not made clear. This eventually leads to mispronunciation. In order to overcome this problem the learner must listen critically to the natives speaking English and try to imitate the sounds repeatedly. Critical listening is very important for getting the pronunciation right. Also one must learn the sounds of the target language and focus on that as much as one focuses on grammar. One should also try to converse with the people who are native speakers of English and these days there are many apps available for this purpose. Listening to the correct pronunciation and repeating it is the key to getting it right.

2. Language Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the biggest barriers for the non-native English speakers. One's first language or the mother tongue comes naturally to one however the foreign language can be intimidating especially if it has not even been introduced to one in school. Thus talking in English makes the learner anxious especially if the conversation is with someone who is a native or speaks fluent English. This consciousness makes it worse for the non-natives to speak or at times understand the other person speaking in English. Language anxiety directly interferes with the ability of processing of incoming language and speaking. This causes loss of self-esteem in the speaker and he avoids speaking in English lest he will use the wrong word or incorrect grammar and will be laughed at.

One way to tackle language anxiety is through conversation in English. This will increase the confidence of the speaker as he will have dealt with many situations already through conversations. Thus to conclude, more practice will lead to less language anxiety.

3. Motivation

In order to be good at communication in any foreign language one has to put in effort in learning the language. Learning a foreign language in turn requires motivation. One has to be properly and sufficiently motivated when it comes to learning English. Learning any language is always a time consuming process and if the learner is not motivated then it can get quite tiresome. It is often observed that this lack of motivation has been one of the causes why it is difficult to learn English as a second language. Learning grammar is especially more

difficult and often confusing which eventually leads to loss of interest in the language at the very early stages of learning.

It is thus important to keep one motivated. This can be done by the teacher who is teaching the language by making the teaching a bit fun and innovative by using audio-visual aids and fun activities as a part of the teaching program. The learner can also keep himself motivated by listening to people speaking fluent English and imagining that he will also be able to talk like them in future. Also one can hear or read the various interviews of people who have successfully learned the language. If one is learning English to shine at the interviews and bag good jobs then thinking about the end result will help keep one properly motivated. In short, one must find a proper motivation for oneself before venturing to learn the language and make sure.

4. Language and Culture

Popular saying goes as, 'Language is culture and culture is Language'. Language has its root in the culture of the place where it is spoken. In other words, language is a reflection of the culture itself. For example, in Spanish male groups are referred to as "ellos" and female groups as "ellas". But a mixed group having both males and females, even if there is one male, the group is referred to as "ellos" i.e. pronouns for males. This shows the male-dominant culture of the place.

Another example of culture influencing the language of people is that in the USA people often use words like 'weekdays' and 'weekends' because the work is divided like that for them. But in agricultural societies time is more often referred to in context with the season, because that is how their work is divided-according to seasons. Thus the learner of English is not only learning a new language but is also learning a new culture. But sadly the latter is not emphasized enough in the learning process. The knowledge of the culture can fill many gaps for the learner. Indian culture is such that it lays a lot of emphasis on politeness to all and respects for elders. Therefore many such words are found in our vocabulary. Similarly in America people are very assertive and to us Indians, they can come off as rather rude but the fact is they don't try to please you in the conversation rather they try to be genuine, something which is a little different in our culture.

When we talk to someone we want to like them and thus use pleasing words rather than being upfront. This cultural difference creates a problem for the non-native speakers as when he talks to someone in America and uses indirect references or flattery then he might come off as showing inclination for the person (could be sexual) or come off as someone pulling leg. On the other hand an upfront American might come off as rather rude to us. Thus it is very important for the learner to play close attention to the English culture while learning the language.

5. Expressing Ideas

One of the major uses of language in communication is expression of ideas. However different ideas are often expressed differently in different languages. For example there are three speakers. One speaks Urdu, the other speaks Persian while the third is a Canadian and speaks English. The manner in which these three speakers will narrate a particular story will be different for each speaker. The speaker of Urdu will use metaphors and poetic language while the Persian speaker will give way to grand statements while the Canadian will use more facts in his story. Thus every language has different norms when it comes to expressing ideas. This

becomes another problem for the non-native speakers of English as they might come across as beating around the bush if they are for example, originally Urdu speakers and are accustomed to use flowery language and metaphors rather than taking straight to the point while in the U.S. as the way of speaking is quite upfront they might come off as being rude on occasions. Thus again this emphasizes the importance of learning about the culture of the place besides learning about its language.

Conclusion

In light of the aforementioned points, it is rather safe to conclude that there are many barriers for the non-native English speakers other than simple lack of knowledge of the language. People who know how to talk in English also find it difficult sometimes to communicate in the language because of one or the other reasons mentioned in the previous chapter. Thus it is first of all important to acknowledge all the existing barriers for the non-native speakers of English and then the teachers and learners of the language need to tackle them efficiently. Language is more than a set of grammar rules and it should be taught and learned the way it deserves i.e. as a part of one's upbringing and behavioural growth in a socio-cultural setting. For maximizing the output of language learning the learners be exposed to the real-life model of language use that takes place in ideal situations. It is evident that the states which were governed more closely and thoroughly for longer periods of time, there the better variety of English can be observed among the users, as compared to the other states.

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