

The Significance of Building Confidence to Speak English as a Teaching Methodology

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1. Abstract

Despite having studied English as a compulsory subject for over a decade at school, a large majority of Sri Lankan, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi learners are unable to make a meaningful utterance in English. This is owing to the fact that curriculum designers ignore the context-specific needs of learners in developing teaching methodologies. Societal attitudes create a psychological barrier that manifests in learners with a low proficiency in English lacking confidence to speak English. Language attitudes in society affect English language learners in post-colonial South Asia, which results in them suffering from Language Attitude Anxiety (LAA). In order to eliminate this special type of anxiety, there is a dire need for a context-specific teaching methodology aimed at building confidence to speak English as a central concern in English language education as the first step for all learners other than those in primary/lower secondary classes¹. To this end, we have developed a course, “Building Confidence to Speak English”, that uses a novel approach incorporating principles of habituation at the core of the teaching methodology.

2. Sub-theme

This paper belongs to the sub theme of ‘the speaking and listening challenge’. It discusses the importance of speaking as a skill with major significance in language teaching and learning, the most important function of a living language, as well as the most sought-after skill among English language learners.

The study

This contributes to the study of English language curriculum practices in post-colonial South Asia. The need for English in South Asian education arises due to the changing demands of employment against the backdrop of globalization. When we consider the efforts and other resources that post-colonial societies such as Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have put into ELT, the output is far from satisfactory (Awan & Zia, 2015; Begum, 2015). While there may be a number of socio-economic issues behind these outcomes (Ramanathan, 2005), they can also be attributed to poor

¹ Learners in primary and lower secondary classes are generally oblivious to societal language attitudes.

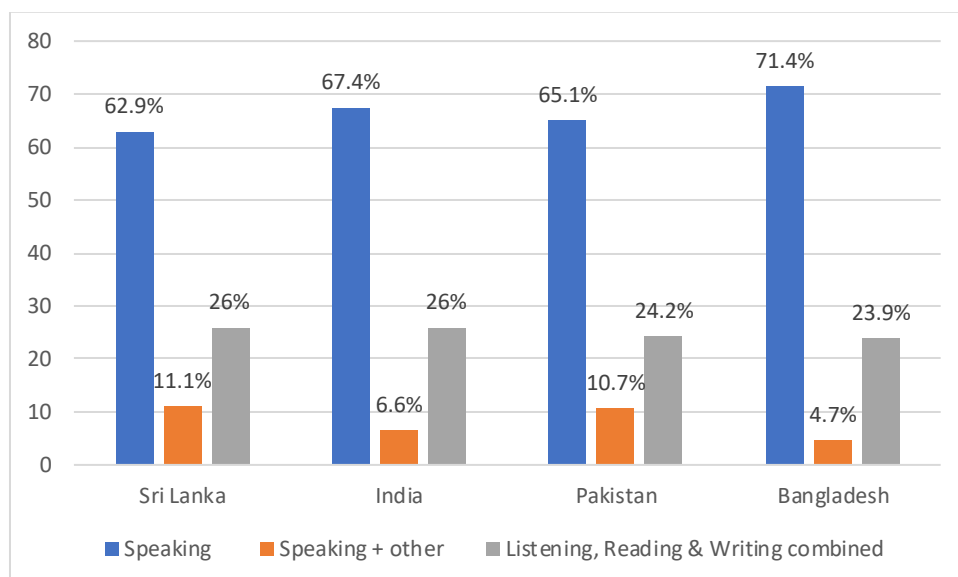
teaching methods and a complete disregard for context-specific learner needs in ELT (Attanayake, 2019).

This study aims to uncover the existing attitudes of undergraduates in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka towards the English language, its fluent speakers and their influence on English language learning. Also, it attempts to examine the contexts that hinder learner performance when speaking English. The sample consisted of 4,600 undergraduates from universities in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India with relatively low proficiency levels in English. A questionnaire was administered to the selected students and semi-structured interviews were conducted by a native speaker of English with a randomly selected 10% of the sample.

Analysis

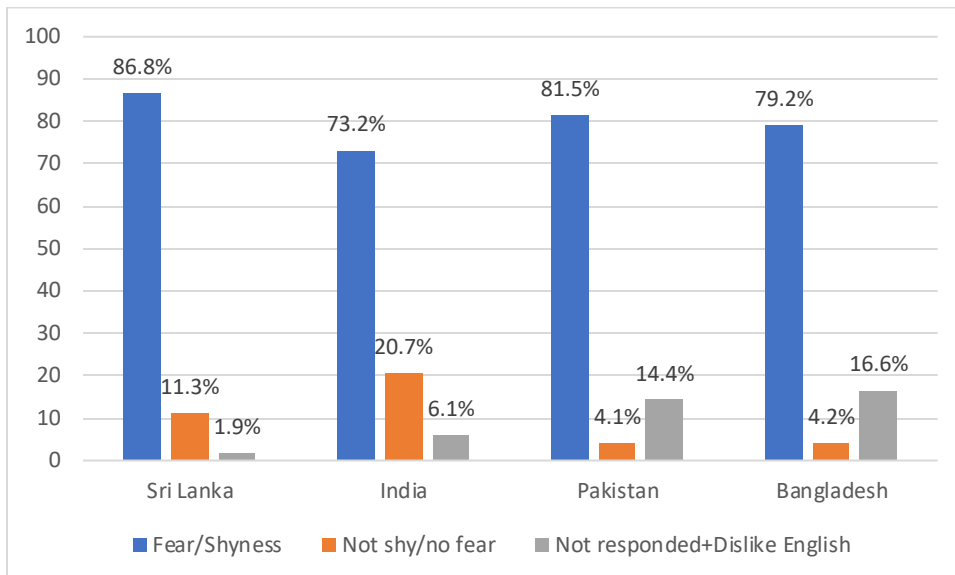
What is presented here is an overview of our large-scale study of the post-colonial ELT scenario.

Table 1 English language skills students desire to learn across post-colonial South Asia:



The data show that the most desired skill among South Asian students is speaking. All four countries have similar percentages of students preferring listening, reading and writing and these are all far less than half the percentage that prefers speaking. The middle column shows a preference for other skills accompanying a preference for speaking.

Table 2 Reasons for South Asian students not wanting to speak English



A large majority of students in each country are reluctant to speak English as they are either afraid or shy or both that others will laugh at their mistakes. The fear factor seems to lead to them developing an aversion to speaking English.

Table 3 The context/place where South Asian learners experience fear, shyness or both when speaking English

Country	Inside classroom	Outside the classroom	Both inside & outside	Nowhere
Pakistan	44.5%	23.1%	8.3%	24.1%
Bangladesh	29.7%	30.9%	20.5%	18.9%
India	15.8%	12.9%	45.6%	25.8%
Sri Lanka	9.2%	20.8%	54.4%	15.6%

The data show that a large majority express fear, shyness or both when speaking English in some settings.

Table 4 The people in front of whom South Asian learners experience fear/shyness or both when speaking English

Country	Outsiders	Friends	Teachers	Teachers & Outsiders	Teachers & Friends	Friends & Outsiders	All above	No one
Pakistan	26.4%	11.5%	31.6%	4.2%	2.8%	0.5%	3.6%	19.3%
Bangladesh	32.2%	5.5%	23.8%	7.5%	2.4%	1.7%	10.7%	16.3%
India	18.0%	5.9%	17.0%	2.3%	0.6%	0.1%	33.4%	22.7%
Sri Lanka	23.3%	2.5%	6.8%	6.5%	0.9%	0.6%	44.7%	14.6%

This table clearly shows that a large majority feel the emotions such as fear, shyness or both with both close associates and outsiders when they speak English.

The qualitative data has been incorporated into the discussion.

Discussion

The preference for speaking English over the other 3 skills shows how our examination-oriented teaching and testing of English ignores students' primary desire when learning English. It also shows that students' desire to speak surpasses their desire to pass examinations, which are paper-pencil based.

The overwhelming preference for speaking English may also exist because, unlike school students, undergraduates are well aware of the practical need for English in securing a profession in today's competitive, market-driven society. As one Bangladeshi student revealed, "If we good at speak [sic] in English we will get a good job undoubtedly" as it is "the most influential language." The same idea was repeated by many other students in all four countries. This proves that being able to speak English is thought to be a clear manifestation of one's suitability for a white-collar job.

At the same time, those who are unable or reluctant to speak English are aware of an "other" who acts as a "watchdog" and judges them on the basis of their spoken English. Even when the "watchdog" is not actually present, its effect on the learners is not imaginary. People in South Asia who can speak English are well aware of the existence of a language hierarchy and are often perceived to be asserting their supremacy over those who lack this ability, acting as a "watchdog" of the former colonial master's language. This serves to establish and reinforce the fear/shyness/uncertainty factor among learners who do not speak English. Proficient speakers of English tend to dismiss these concerns, perpetuating this dynamic. There needs to be a counterforce to withstand the pressure of the "watchdog", present or not.

While some learners are afraid, shy or uncertain about speaking English inside the English language classroom (meaning, in front of teachers and peers), others experience the same emotions outside the English language classroom (in front of outsiders) and some experience the same emotions everywhere when they try to speak English.

There is, therefore, more to this than the presence of Foreign Language (Classroom) Anxiety (FLCA) as defined by Horwitz et al. (1986). Our findings clearly demonstrate that some learners do have FLCA, but they also experience another type of anxiety that does not involve teachers, peers and the foreign/second language classroom but comes from the larger society. We call this Language Attitude Anxiety (LAA) (Attanayake, 2019). In the interviews, learners from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh seemed to enjoy talking with a native speaker of English, with negligible worries about accents. This reveals that the feared "watchdog" is from the local population.

Building confidence to speak English

It is of paramount importance to build learner confidence to speak English as part of our teaching methodology. The course we propose uses habituation, a technique used in clinical psychology, to eliminate fear in patients (Attanayake, 2019). The course is

specific in its teaching material, developed using Speech Act Theory (Bach and Harnish, 1979), and in its methodology, using some principles of Co-operative Language Learning, in addition to other principles we have identified, to create a safe-zone within the ELT classroom for learners to speak without fearing ridicule for their non-standard varieties of English, a stepping stone in achieving fluency.

4. Lessons and/or recommendations

This study reveals that the teaching of English in South Asian countries, which is examination-oriented and paper-pencil based, conflicts with the primary desire of students to speak English. Their lack of confidence due to societal language attitudes both inside and outside the ELT classroom is crushing and leads to Language Attitude Anxiety (LAA). Rectifying this problem will require building student confidence to speak English and helping students to project this confidence towards the general English language learning process.

5. References

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