

An Investigation On Iranian Students' Weaknesses In Spoken English

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ABSTRACT: There have been a lot of debates within the English language learning profession on issues related to the students' learning of English, especially the speaking component. Non-English speakers have no choice but to learn English in order to survive in an international market and in an education institution, in particular. In Iran, how Iranian students learn the spoken English, is more complicated than in the case of other skills. A total of 100 male and female third – grade students and 20 teachers in two high schools were asked to state their views on Iranian students' English speaking weaknesses. The most significant finding was improper method used to teach English language in Iran.

Keywords: Weaknesses, English & Speak

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For many years research in foreign and second language development in natural as well as formal setting has encouraged us to pay attention to the learner and learning oriented activity. Therefore, nowadays there has been more and more emphasis on the basic role of the learner in the language learning process.

Speaking English is usually the first step to learn the three English language skills (speaking, reading and writing) if the curriculum is learner – centered, as it has shown that learners have the greatest role in a learning process and it can be the result of the students' interest in language learning. This claim has been supported by some researchers like Makarova (1997) and Rifkin (2000). Along the same line, Nunan says “no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learners' subjective needs and perceptions relating to the process of learning are taken into account” (1988: 177). In the context of this paper the speaking process is the learners' subjective need stated by Nunan and therefore this need has to be taken into account. Although Allwright says, “very many teachers seem to find it difficult to accept their learners as people with a positive contribution to make to the instructional process “(1984:167) the general impression is that learners do have to play a major role in the learning process to ensure success in learning, especially the oral skill of the language being learnt (i.e. English).

2.0 THE METHOD

Moved with the conviction that Iranian students and teachers' preferences are of essential importance in the findings of research on the causes of their oral English language learning problems, the researchers asked 100 male and female third – grade students and 20 teachers in two high schools to state their views on the students' English speaking weaknesses. In this study, the questionnaire items were designed for an explanatory study in which all questions were simple and understandable for Iranian Persian language speaking students.

3.0 THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The present study aimed at investigating Iranian students' weaknesses in English speaking skills in relation to the use of grammar- translation method and the use of Persian language to teach English language.

4.0 PREVIOUS STUDIES

Insights from the Iranian Education System have assumed that using grammar – translation method in English language teaching by using Persian language to teach English has been useful and the System is much inclined to continue with this method in schools. Based on the different tests and surveys on students and teachers in many schools in Iran carried out by researcher like Mahdi Dahmardeh (2010) and Azam Noora (2008) it can be claimed that the method used is actually not effective. This method in fact drives away students from these schools as this compels students to refer to outside institutions to learn spoken English.

5.0 THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The described situation more specifically gave rise to the formulation of the following objectives:

- i. To determine the problems of Iranian students in speaking English language
- ii. To describe the value of grammar –translation method in increasing their abilities to speak English
- iii. To evaluate the usage of Persian language in teaching English language

6.0 FINDINGS

The findings of the research are reported according to the elements found in the objectives of the research, mainly on problems, grammar-translation method and the use of Persian language to teach English.

6.1 The problems of Iranian students in speaking English language

The problems faced by the Iranian students in spoken English were related to the curriculum itself and the focus on reading comprehension.

6.2 Curriculum

It was found that Iranian students' national curriculum for teaching English formally as a foreign language started from the second year in junior high school. For each week, the students had at least three hours of formal instruction in English language. The teaching approach consisted of a combination between grammar- translation and audio-lingual method. This combination was considered of central consideration for teaching in all schools.

6.3 Focus on Reading Comprehension

One of the main aims of the national curriculum was to teach the four skills of English language. However, it was found that, for many years, English language teaching in Iran within its education system the component that gets most priority was reading comprehension. Grammar and other skills were explained and defined in the framework of reading.

It was found that giving emphasis on reading comprehension and grammar was one of the most serious matters in increasing the Iranian students' weakness in spoken English. This was done under the assumption that, in education, these two skills were required more than the listening and speaking skills.

Thus, the textbooks which were prepared and designed to prepare students for examinations were the main and the only materials available in Iran for guidance in high schools. The text has been accompanied with a large number of exercises and questions for practice on what they have assumed to be more important for examinations.

Results showed that the teachers had to obey the education system and focus on reading and grammar skills for the past 20 years. The spoken component of English language has been treated as unimportant as sports and painting in the primary schools.

The teachers admitted the usefulness of the use of contemporary materials to teach and to learn English language. Unfortunately the lacks of these materials cause a significant number of students to lose their interest to learn English language. In addition, the time spent on learning grammar and reading comprehension was so much that not only speaking skill but also English language learning has lost its value in Iran.

Although the grammar skill is emphasized in these schools, insights from the findings showed that students' inability to make correct sentences to converse was not due to their weakness in grammar (they memorized some formula and structure to make sentences in their drills) but because of passing an examination and achieving mark.

6.4 The Value of Grammar –Translation Method in Increasing Their Abilities to Speak English

This is essentially on methods used in the English classrooms. The approach of teaching English in Iran was found to be teacher-centered. The method was found to be Grammar Translation Method (GTM) which focuses on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabularies and of various conjugations, translation of texts, doing written exercises. These were also the series of exercises and activities in teaching the speaking skill which should be taught by a more relevant method like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Instead, this method was found to be refused in Iran to accommodate grammar-translation method.

Grammar-Translation method requires a teacher-centered approach to explain and translate English grammar to Persian and vice-versa and students are good listeners so they can memorize the formulas and adapt English language structures to Persian grammar and structures. This was found to be the main duty of students and later to drill and prepare themselves for examinations.

The findings of the research illustrated that most students and teachers have used this traditional method for years and have preferred to follow it. Their perceptions of the English lecture concentrated on entering a university and pass.

6.5 The Usage of Persian Language in Teaching English Language

Our findings showed that, regardless of the current method, the Iranian Education System has made it compulsory to use Persian Language in teaching English language, the most serious issue in relation to this problem. Using the Persian language in teaching English when it should be taught by using English language if the method is communicative. But because the approach was translation teachers have to use their mother tongue to translate the meaning of words and structures. The perceptions of teachers and students in learning English were not in real and authentic circumstances. Although grammar translation was the method used, the teachers could have been encouraged to use English language. The results have illustrated that the advantages of using English language for teaching was one of the basic elements to persuade students to acquire communication skills.

The absolute majority of the teacher participants have stated that their English instruction started in Persian language. The English language structures and vocabularies were translated into Persian. The use of Persian language has grown into a habit to students and teachers. The GTM method has aggravated the situation and that was how teachers presented their lectures in Persian language. .

7.0 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

According to Mahdi Dahmard (2010) Iranian textbooks could not meet the requirements of the learners and the teachers. As a result, it emphasized structural methods and ignored the communication role of the language. Iranian Education Ministry should think about this seriously. Technological materials such as those using TV, video and movie were available in Institutions and those who were interested to learn English could enroll in these Institutions. Nevertheless, materials used in school had been textbooks.

Many learners wished their teachers would consult others and know their actual needs in relation to learning language activities. Unfortunately, they were never asked about it due to their teachers 'beliefs on students' inability to express their requests and needs that they want to know or to learn. However, some researchers like (Block 1994, 1996) claims that the learners should be aware of what goes on in classes and their teachers should meet their students' requirements to learn in class.

Knowing about the students needs is one critical matter for the teachers to teach and authors to write school books. Most of students in Iran tend to participate in communicative activities type to learn English. Some students tend more opportunities to participate in free conversation classes, expressing their wish towards a more communicatively oriented approach. On the other hand there are those who prefer more emphasis on grammar teaching and learning (Bada and Okan 2000). Thus, the syllabuses should be observed based on to all students 'requires and interests.

Although, GTM method is usual method for teaching in Iran however, it should be give opportunities to students to drawing themselves forward the language creatively by practicing some substitution drills to dialogue with their partner thus, it will be the basic eager for communication thus, GTM method will be interesting method to them and they will attempted to understand the structures and formulas instead of memorization which it is one of their problems in making good sentences to converse.

According to Harmor (1991) one of the more effective and interesting – ways of presenting GTM method is to let students see/or hear a new language, drawing their attention in a number of different ways to the grammatical elements of which it is made. Based on this words Mahdi Dahmardeh (2010) says that the first and fundamental problem which refers to

grammar drills is its contradiction with the basic and primary principles of CLT obviously is its emphasizes on drilling exercises . In order to achieve a good level of speaking skill and having high quality of communication ability the essential matter is using different varieties of methods for learning English.

Based on Azam Noora (2008) English speaking and communication skill requires a well- structured teacher training and useful method in relation to communication.

7.1 Recommendation

The following recommendations for further researcher could be possibly improve the findings on this area:

- a. Based on the study carried out, it is recommended that similar research to be conducted should take into account other types of factors of Iranian English language learning weaknesses used in this study. Therefore , time, students' psychological problems, CLT method , teachers' regulated method for teaching and other types of factors and problems need to be added to tested and studied. The comparisons of these factors are essential in order to find out the most effective type of English language learning methods in particular speaking skill that can be used in English language learning.
- b. Besides that, it is also recommended that the ability of the subjects (students) to be varied from advanced, intermediate and low level of proficiency. These subjects need to be grouped separately according to their abilities of English speaking proficiency and comparison will be made among the groups. By having these three levels, the appropriate questionnaires should be designed and the finding will be easy to classify and it can give a clear evidence of which group is in the lowest level of weaknesses. Thus, the best way of English speaking skill method will be advised to come over to their problem.
- c. Another recommendation is that the subjects chosen for the study can also be selected from different schools which consist of only female students or only male students. In this case, the students' English language learning level will be measured in terms of gender differences for learning English language special in speaking skill by using of GTM method and using of Persian language in teaching. It is a good way of studying in depth the effect of using English language for learning English course is different form using Persian language for learning English language.

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