

## DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND OR FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Globalization has placed a growing importance on the English language. English as a foreign language is nowadays more a commodity than an advantage. As a global language it develops very fast and it is both studied and used everywhere in the world as an official language, a second or a foreign language. It is probably no coincidence that at the same time that education and business have become more globalized, and the number of students studying English language has grown, research on the issues, difficulties and problems of such studies has also become more intensive. The research shows that what people study in the classroom or at home is not always the language spoken by native speakers [2].

The balance of emphasis in the use of English as a common cross-border language has shifted, from a primary focus on written communication to continued written communication plus a growing emphasis on oral communication. Linguistic globalization, which is driven by closer cross-border ties in business, education and other sectors, becomes manifest in intensified communication and travel. Increased spoken interactions, and English language exposure in media, have placed a growing importance on listening and speaking skills. When people need English competence for their practical life – and

in nearly all professional and business domains, in every nation, English is more and more necessary – they often need oral skills [3]. This is especially the case if they are working in sectors involving international dealings or actually crossing national borders themselves.

For example, classic pre-recorded listening exercises learners hear in the classroom are different from what they hear in real life situations. The recorded voice does not speak spontaneously, using an ordinary, casual vocabulary, with an informal language and it only occasionally presents real life situations of normal people in modern world. The recordings often use a standard language, underline some grammar or vocabulary features and their purpose is mainly to help the learner solve an exercise or do some tasks. It does not familiarize the student with real, spontaneous conversations [8]. For example, the learner will not hear an utterance which contains mistakes or people who swear, lose their temper, get angry, judge in a wrong way a situation or a person, use jargon and slang and many other non-formal or less formal language varieties.

Learners of English who get employed and work for multinational companies in their own countries or overseas need further in-company communication and culture-bound training or more practice in order to be able to cope with professional non-formal interactions. The Internet is fostering new varieties of language, which are more frequently used or which the audience prefer [8]. These varieties are not controlled by any grammatical correctness filter and thus generate new word forms or uses which may not necessarily conform to accepted grammar rules.

Traditionally, for decades if not centuries, pedagogies took a scholastic approach in treating English as if it is outside the national or local linguistic environment. Thus they focused almost exclusively on learning to read documents in English, to prepare English language essays and letters, with little attention to the skills of conversation in English, let alone the ultimate communicative goal of native speaker-level proficiency. Teachers who were themselves schooled in a scholastic approach to the language, and focused on grammar and correct usage with little attention to oral communication, normally feel most comfortable in reproducing this same approach with their own students [7]. However, the scholastic approach has become obsolete because of the growing role of English both inside every local environment, and at the borders between nations. The profound need for listening and speaking skills cannot be avoided. The problems created by a scholastic fixation with grammar to the exclusion of oral communication are still with us [4].

Textbooks, even the most recommended language proficiency books, prepare learners mostly for formal encounters. They offer the students the opportunity to carry out language and profession-related tasks that are less frequent in casual professional interactions [8].

Textbooks have come a long way and have developed well in consonance with several teaching and linguistic principles. However, they cannot cover the broad array of teaching issues required by different target groups for which appropriate solutions are yet to be found [4].

When learning English at school, the students are usually loaded with grammar lessons, and develop a strong awareness of this aspect. Regardless of the difficulties this created at the time, or the later consequences for their conversational skills, they become convinced that grammar is the most important aspect in the English language learning. They absorbed the teachers' lessons that if they first mastered the grammatical aspects of English they would then be able to learn other skills.

At the same time, they are focused on avoiding grammatical mistakes. This fixation with mistake avoidance makes it difficult for them to take the risks that are always inherent when speaking a language that is only partly understood. For some, the concern about grammar may directly inhibit speaking and listening skill development. The students' beliefs about language learning, instilled into them both implicitly and explicitly at school, directly shaped the way they use and learn English in later life – and in the case of some of the students, continue to set limits on what they could achieve. If learners believe that making errors will impede their language learning progress, these learners may actually refrain from engaging in communicative activities, thus hindering the development of their communicative competence [4].

Most recent research studies of students learning English as foreign language, identify their problems in coping with English – both academic English and conversational English – in the field of education. These difficulties are felt especially in relation to speaking and writing. This is especially made clear in the evidence of students themselves. Of all the social and academic issues and problems facing international students that are cited in recent studies the problem they themselves most often refer to is difficulties with English [6].

Obviously, success in language acquisition is influenced by many interrelated factors. These include the social context of the learning, the status of the target language, and the processes of language learning itself. If learners believe that the best way to learn a foreign language is to memorize its component parts, it seems likely that they will hold positive attitudes towards vocabulary and grammar learning and they will be predisposed to adopt a range of strategies involving analysis, memorization and practice. If learners believe that the best way to learn a foreign language is to absorb it in natural contexts of use it is likely that they will hold positive attitudes towards communication with speakers of the language and that they will be predisposed to adopt a range of social and communication strategies. In addition, learners come from different educational backgrounds and have enjoyed a different way of

learning the English language. In this respect, there are several aspects that must be tackled. First of all, the difference between what a learner should study and what he will experience is a difference that cannot be ignored. The English teaching books include recorded conversations and listening exercises, which have already been mentioned to be rather formal. This difference was reported on by the students who went abroad to an English-speaking country and who experienced difficulties or needed a while to get used to the native-speakers' speech variety and pronunciation. However, once they noticed the difference and became aware of the unfamiliar language features, they could improve their speaking skills and performance. After they have overcome this barrier, they had no problems acquiring those features of the foreign language which brought their speaking performance closer to that of the native speakers [9, 10].

All these suggest that spoken English has to be practiced a lot in circumstances that come as close as possible to conversational situations and verbal reactions practiced by native speakers. In addition, language must be taught in relation to the cultural context to which it belongs. Intensive and guided tuition whereby the teacher raises awareness of the native language environment and the speakers' linguistic behavior helps learners to cope easily with the verbal interactions with native speakers and to become fluent speakers without jeopardizing the relationship.

It is necessary to remember that people learn English for various reasons and the language they learn should be the language they need. However, any variety is subject to great variations which range from pronunciation to vocabulary and grammar. Some people need a language for travel purposes, others to study, work, socialize or entertain. This needs analysis will tell the teacher what 'special' language he must teach the learner. It also tells the teacher how he should teach the particular variety of language, since the teacher's mission is to provide his student with the variety of English that will satisfy his general and specific learning needs [8].

Amid the confusion that has been created by so many challenges and pressures, the teachers must find the right method and teaching materials, and create a relaxing teaching environment in which the learners get what they need and want.

The teachers of English have taught British English as a standard variety for a very long period. It used to be the only variety learned by teachers and transmitted to their students. It was mainly acquired from very good teachers, who may have had more experience in verbal interactions with native speakers and from textbooks. It was the only used variety for a long time and had no rival variety to compete with [7].

But in later decades, the mass media, and the Internet in particular, exposed teenagers to American English, which acquired a privileged status beside British English. Economic and business culture was also more and more influenced by the prevailing American model. In the latter half of the 20th century and until today, many areas of professional concern, business and international relationship were taken over gradually and dominated by the American English [1].

The second issue faced by the teacher is how to eliminate the mismatch between the formal English, taught by books, and the everyday, casual talk of the native speakers. On the one hand, the world we live in is different from that of our parents'. Business, technology or science, and any other field, are conducted in a looser way, in a way in which the most effective approach that guarantees the success will be used. On the other hand, in order to succeed, an employee must certify his competences and skills, which are always reflected in certificates and obtained through examinations.

An informal English material can be easily criticized by the students, but the idea is to understand it, not to correct it and make it formal. More debates and discussions, some spontaneous conversations between the students on many ordinary situations are useful exercises. The difference between conventional and real has to be very well presented and understood by the teacher and the student, because then its importance is easier taken into consideration [11]. However, this is not the only aspect that the students have to understand and use. This is just a bonus, a part that helps them to prepare for life, and the sooner the better. This does not mean that the teachers have to change their teaching methods and materials.

Given the difference between the learner's culture and the target culture, one of the teacher's major concerns may also be to raise awareness of the native speakers' culture-specific ways of expressing themselves. Teachers should turn their attention to the research on culture-specific discourse and linguistic behavior [5].

If only one or two decades ago the teacher relied entirely on the use of textbooks, nowadays he can use many on- and offline sources in the classroom. In spite of the apparent advantage they bring to the learner, such as a spoken or written internet language shared by the specific community, recently updated language data and exciting interaction, they rarely keep up the formal standards of English [8].

In the end, it is most important for teachers to foster a good background knowledge and deal with all the potential situations, since the learners need to use the appropriate language for each situation, at school, at work, at the supermarket, with a stranger in the street. Any situation requires a different

language and behavior, which is not similar to the speaker's native language and specific interactions.

Therefore, the teachers should expose the students to as much variations as possible and it will be best if the variety they teach dependson where the students are going or for what purposes they are going to use their English.

The teachers should expose the learners to asmany situations and scenarios as they may encounter in real-life professional interactions and develop their intercultural adaptation and communication strategies.

Consequently, the teacher's task will be to choose the materials, texts and exercises that best suit the variety of English needed by the students. Last but not least, the teacher should create a friendly, relaxed learning environment, capable of enhancing the students' reaction and adaptation capacity to specific professional or other situations.

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