

Situational Problems as a Major Factor in the Inadequacy of Speaking Competency in Sri Lankan Adult ESL Learners

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Abstract

The main objective of the current study was to explore the impact of situational problems i.e. poor input, low topical knowledge, lack of time for practice, lack of opportunities to practice, the inability to make constructions, and low feedback on adult English as a second language (ESL) learners in learning speaking skills at a government monitored institute of higher education. The current research was prompted by major research done previously in the same local context on problems faced by ESL learners in learning speaking skills which revealed that cognitive and psychological problems are made worse by situational problems. This qualitative exploratory study was done with 50 adult ESL learners following the higher national diploma in English HNDE at this institute. Open questionnaires and interviews were used as the data gathering instrument of the study that followed the grounded theory. A triangulation of questionnaire data and transcripts of interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings confirm the existence of situational problems in the particular context and disclose the lack of time and space given to the subject speaking skills in the curriculum following unwise revisions brought to it. The main cause of students' low speaking competence is sadly bad teaching.

Keywords: learner inadequacy, speaking skill, situational problems, speaking competency, teacher misbehavior

INTRODUCTION

Speaking or spoken language production is considered by many researchers as a most difficult aspect of language learning and a most difficult skill to acquire (Brown & Yule, 1983; Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000; Gan, 2013). Research findings in the ESL, as well as EFL contexts, testify to this reality. Few studies done in the Sri Lankan ESL context also attribute to it (Perera, 2001; Karunaratna, 2003; Wijesekara, 2011; Samaranyake, 2016). In both western and local ESL and EFL contexts, a variety of learner problems and difficulties with speaking skill is found. A careful analysis of all these speaking problems can be categorized as cognitive, psychological, and situational problems. Lack of knowledge of grammar; vocabulary; pronunciation difficulties and other language-related issues which can also be called linguistic difficulties are cognitive problems. Shyness to speak in English, anxiety, and fear for that which contributes to hesitation, inhibition and lack of motivation are different forms of psychological problems. This situation promotes a lack of confidence causing an unwillingness to speak. These are psychological problems. The findings of this research confirm this view of problems of learning speaking skills. These cognitive and psychological factors appear to be all problems for poor speaking competence. However, there are situational factors such as the lack of curriculum emphasis on speaking skills, teacher factor, unsupportive class conditions for practice, limited opportunities outside of class to practice, exam-

ination system regarding speech testing, environmental support, and motivation of learners. The findings of an earlier major research on the speaking competence and learner problems in learning speaking skills in adult ESL learners following the English diploma at a government-monitored institute have revealed that the cognitive and psychological problems in learners are made worse by situational problems. The findings of that research postulate that the teaching and learning process of the speaking skill was a failure due to situational problems in the particular learning environment (Jayanetti, 2017). The students who enroll in the English diploma course in this government institute are post A/L students having studied English for more than ten years and having sat for two general examinations. However, there is hardly any emphasis on speaking and listening skills in the general curriculums. Therefore, it is a fact that the students are weak in their speaking competence (National Education Commission, 1997; Fernando, 2010; Wijesekara, 2011). This conclusion is supported by Fernando (2010) where she rather reveals that listening and speaking have been 'irresponsibly left aside' from the general curriculum. However, unlike the Sri Lankan general curriculum, the curriculum of this government-monitored diploma awarding institute regards listening and speaking as being as important as the other two skills, i.e. reading and writing, and they are two core subjects in it. These diploma students are supposed to have a fair command of communication skills in

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English mainly because lectures on all subjects in the course are conducted in English medium. Apart from that, these students aim to find themselves employed as government teachers of English upon completion of their diploma. While all this stresses the significance of the speaking skill and speaking competence for the followers of the particular English diploma, the findings of the previous research done in 2017 in the same setup revealed that the teaching and learning experience of speaking there was a failure (Jayanetti, 2017). The study revealed situational factors as the major causes of speaking failure. Thus, the objective of this research was to explore if the situational problems still prevail in the same learning environment three years after the aforesaid study and if yes, what particular factors cause to contribute to them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In language, learning speaking is perhaps considered the most important skill because 'people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language' (Ur, 1996). However, speaking is a difficult skill not only for ESL and EFL learners but also for L1 speakers of English worldwide (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000; Tsou, W., and Huang, Y., 2012; Avery, 1999; Ping and Gu, 2004; Singh, M., 2013; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Wijesekara, 2011).

Situational problems have been the focus of research in English as a Foreign Language EFL context. In a previous study on speaking problems conducted on Sri Lankan adult ESL learners in a government-monitored institute, all learner problems were categorized as cognitive problems, psychological problems, and situational problems. The findings of the study postulate that psychological problems are caused by cognitive problems and made worse by situational problems. The study identifies poor input, lack of practice, and lack of opportunities to practice as the main problems that fail the learners in achieving speaking competence. These are all situational problems that aggravate cognitive and psychological problems in learners (Jayanetti, 2017, pp. 85-86).

In a recent research in the Spanish EFL context based on 100 high school students, Garcia and Maria, (2015) state that situational factors such as teaching styles, teacher's attitude, class environment, and materials must be improved to firstly meet students' expectations about learning English and secondly to motivate students positively towards the practice of oral communication in English. They further concentrate on the teacher's involvement in error correction in the EFL class and maintain the subjects' dissatisfaction with the teachers' less involvement in their language learning process.

In a Hong Kong-based study Gan, (2012) identifies problems with oral English skills of ESL teacher trainees at a tertiary teacher training institution and categorizes them in sociocultural, institutional, and interpersonal contexts. He identifies the following six problems facing the undergraduate teacher trainees regarding their English speaking skills: inadequate vocabulary, grammar as a barrier, imperfectly learned pronunciation and intonation, inadequate opportunities to speak English in class, lack of focus on language improvement in the curriculum, and input-poor environment outside class (pp. 49-53). He stresses the teacher's ability to speak the target language fluently and confidently in the classroom as an important factor and that the teachers' lack of this ability will have an impact on their teaching when they start to teach (p. 55). The last four of the six speaking

problems facing the undergraduates in Gan's 2012 research are situational problems. Although incorrect pronunciation and intonation can be considered cognitive problems, since with the subjects of this research it is 'imperfectly learned', the cause of this deficiency can be attributed to the teachers of these learners. Thus, it can be taken as a situational problem. This is further proven by the alarm Gan (2012) sounds that a 'teacher's ability to speak the target language fluently' (p.55) is important.

Li & Li's (2009) study identifies ineffective teaching as the main reason for the poor speaking competence of university students. They identify three important factors which they call 'abnormal phenomena' as time-consuming but low efficiency, mute English, and high grades but low competency. They suggest that college English teaching usually emphasizes imparting language knowledge and language skills but neglects the cultivation of English apprehension ability.

In a research based on the Indian sub-continent on the problems facing higher secondary students in learning English speaking skills Riyaz and Mullick, (2016) identify six problems disturbing the students in achieving the speaking competence. They are 1. Inadequate vocabulary, 2. Grammar deficiencies, 3. Pronunciation problems, 4. Inadequate opportunities to speak, 5. Large classrooms and 6. Lack of audio-visual aids. These problems are very similar to those found in the Sri Lankan context also (Perera, 2001; Karunaratne, 2003; Samaranyake, 2016). The researchers make three conclusions: 1. There is no significant difference in speaking skills from their initial level to final levels, 2. Poor performance in speaking skills, and 3. Poor exposure to English language use inside and outside the classroom. As a remedy, they recommend interactive activities that consider all skills.

Another study was done by Younes & Albalawi, (2016) in the Saudi university context to investigate the factors leading to speaking difficulties that involved both university students and teachers and the data from class observations show that students' speaking performance is mainly affected by four factors: insufficient input, time for preparation, poor instructions and the unsatisfactory amount of practicing speaking. Thus, it is clear that situational problems are not uncommon in foreign EFL contexts.

Sri Lankan Context

In the Sri Lankan English language teaching (ELT) context few important ESL studies related to the current research can be found (Perera, 2001; Karunaratne, 2003; Samaranyake, 2016).

Perera (2001) researched the role of classroom interaction in second language acquisition based on four urban schools in Sri Lanka collecting data from both the teachers and students. She concentrated on two factors. The first was the relationship between the teacher, learner, and the learning materials in the classroom in providing opportunities for learning the second language. The second was the teacher-pupil oral interaction in the classroom that would promote possibilities for second language development. Her findings reveal that the teaching of English in Sri Lanka is not satisfactory and does not meet the needs of the majority of Sri Lankan students. A few of her outstanding findings include teacher inadequacy concerning training, complex relationship between teacher, students, and the learning materials, and too much use of L1 by both teacher and students during the English lesson although the use of L1 to some extent in the L2 classroom is recommended (Perera, 2001, Karunaratne, 2003).

Karunaratne (2003) conducted a qualitative study on teaching English in urban Sri Lanka with grade nine students and teachers. She focused on the methodology of English instruction with special reference to the communicative language teaching-CLT and its achievement of communicative objectives apart from the GCE O/L exam-focused developments of writing and reading stressed in the curriculum. There are three main findings and the first is textbook-based teaching. She observes the textbook being used by the teachers and (therefore) by students as the 'syllabus' placing importance on completing the textbook instead of the actual syllabus, taking away students' opportunities of listening to or speaking English in the classroom. Karunaratne (2003) attributes this heavy dependency on the textbook to two factors. One is the inadequate use of non-textbook-based teaching material in the classroom while the other is teachers' lack of English proficiency and maintains that '... many Sri Lankan teachers of English lack this competency (linguistic knowledge) even after some years of pre-or in-service training' (p. 12). The second main finding is students and teachers seem 'accustomed' to using the mother tongue in the English classroom because the wider school curriculum is in the mother tongue medium. The third finding is that students and teachers seem comfortable with a teaching approach that attributes a dominant role to the teacher in the classroom also because all other school teaching occurs within a similar framework. Their (teachers) lack of English proficiency is to result in excessive dependency on the textbook and the mother tongue. The students' lack of proficiency, she maintains, deviates them from group work that would enhance their ability to communicate in English. To remedy the situation the researcher proposes teacher training that focuses more on improving English proficiency and communicative teaching abilities of English teachers.

Samaranayake (2016) does a case study in the rural school context on the oral competency of ESL learners and finds that the instructional method used by English teachers does not provide the learners with adequate input of the target language to improve their oral communication skills in rural school contexts. Samaranayake's sample comprises 54 students of Grade 10 in two-state school classes and their two teachers who teach English to them. He had two research questions through which he wanted to know why a majority of students in rural schools show a low or limited oral proficiency in the target language and if their teachers apply CLT in their classroom teaching. The literature gathered showed that the students in rural schools do not receive adequate language input that leads to the oral proficiency of the learners. Regarding the teachers' application of CLT strategies properly to facilitate and encourage student oral activity Samaranayake's finding is the teachers' failure to do it. Therefore, based on these findings Samaranayake suggests using unorthodox teaching approaches and classroom techniques along with the appropriate materials to help students improve their oral proficiency. Samaranayake (2016) also stresses the need for teacher training on classroom instruction and CLT like Perera (2001) and Karunaratne (2003). While the studies of Perera, (2001); Karunaratne, (2003); and Samaranayake, (2006) are situated in the Sri Lankan school context, perhaps the only study on speaking problems in the adult ESL class (as already mentioned above) of the higher education setup is done by Jayanetti, (2017). While cognitive, psychological, and situational problems prevail in the particular college context also, as elsewhere, the research has found input poor speaking class, lack of practice, and lack of opportunities to practice as the real

problems there. These problems account for the student's lack of confidence and poor speaking competence. While all four types of research suggest that English education is not very successful in both the Sri Lankan school system and the higher education sector, the study by Jayanetti, (2017) goes beyond the scope of traditional research that gives only a picture of the problem or situation since it probes into the root causes of such problems which ultimately unearths revolutionary findings. Bad teaching or teacher inadequacy is exposed as the main cause of failure of speaking competence of the research subjects in the particular setting. However, a comparative study in a similar context done for getting verification of the causes of student failure in gaining speaking competence has proved that quality teaching with knowledge of the subjects, skill, and commitment to teaching together with love and satisfaction with the work done can make a difference despite other lapses and limitations in the teaching-learning context.

Teacher factor

As it has come out very clearly, successful learning is always impacted by good teaching. The impact of the teacher factor on the success or failure of the learner achievement has been the focus of research in the foreign EFL and L1 contexts although such research seems almost nonexistent in the local ESL context except in the study by Jayanetti, (2017).

Until the last decade of the 20th century (1990) learner difficulties and learner failure in gaining speaking competence were attributed to other factors and the learners themselves other than teachers. The first study that focuses on teacher behavior that students do not like (misbehaviors) is reported to have been conducted in 1991 by Kearney, Plax, Hays, and Ivey (Banfield, et al., 2006). Kearney, et al. (1991), did their study with more than 500 university undergraduates in two European universities as a two-way investigation. The study made a lot of findings that prompted the researchers to analyze teacher misbehavior under three factors: teacher incompetence, offensiveness, and indolence. Misbehaviors represented by incompetence reflect the lack of very basic teaching skills; offensiveness entails several misbehaviors that implied teachers can be mean, cruel, and ugly. Offensive teachers humiliate students in front of the class: insult and publicly embarrass them. They may use profanity, become angry or yell and scream in their efforts to intimidate students. They are rude, self-centered, moody, and whiners; moreover, they condescend to students by acting superior and arrogant (Kearney, et al., 1991). Indolence is defined as a teacher's disregard for students. They are also called 'absent-minded professors' (Banfield, et al., 2006).

Research has been done to find out the operation of teacher nonimmediacy and misbehavior. In instructional research, nonimmediacy is behavior that distances the instructor from the learner in the classroom. Not smiling, lack of eye contact, lack of movement in the classroom, not encouraging student input and discussion, not having relaxed body language, etc. are traits of nonimmediacy. Thweatt and McCroskey, (1996, pp.198-204) discovered that teacher nonimmediacy and teacher misbehaviors cannot be manipulated independently. The findings indicated that nonimmediate teachers were perceived to be misbehaving even when no misbehaviors were induced in the experiments. It was concluded that students perceive teachers who communicate in nonimmediate ways as misbehaving. This means students perceive nonimmediate teachers as misbehaving

teachers. Thus, the finding was that teacher misbehaviors and immediacy are interdependent variables.

In another research done, later on, Thweatt and McCroskey, (1998) studied the impact of teacher immediacy and misbehaviors on teacher credibility. Credibility was considered in three dimensions as competence, trustworthiness, and caring (goodwill). Two studies were conducted with 350 undergraduates in a large university in the east of America the results of which indicated the presence of strong positive main effects for teacher immediacy and strong negative effects for teacher misbehavior on all three dimensions of credibility. However, significant interaction effects were observed between immediacy and misbehavior on all three dimensions of credibility. Probing of the interaction results suggested that high immediacy tends to soften the negative impact of teacher misbehavior, particularly on the caring dimension. They further advise teachers that, '...since behaviors that are likely to be seen as 'misbehaviors' by students are often unavoidable by teachers, it is very important that teachers maintain high immediacy to protect their credibility in the classroom" (p.348).

It is clear now that negative teacher behavior (misbehavior) in classroom instruction as the main cause of learner failure in gaining speaking competence should be a vital factor of focus and concern.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the situational problems facing the English diploma students in gaining speaking competence?
2. What are the causal factors of the situational problems they face in acquiring communicative competence?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative, exploratory study used a thirty-item open questionnaire to know learner attitudes, abilities, and specific problems about their learning of the speaking skill as the main instrument of data collection. According to Brown, (2004) "Questionnaires are any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers (p.6). The thirty-item questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part One of the questionnaire sought demographic information of the subjects through six items including their English language and literature qualifications at the General Examinations, the type of schools they attended (urban, rural dichotomy), and their Advanced Level stream. Part Two contained twenty-four open questions that sought attitudes, abilities and specific problems the research subjects had about speaking in English. For every item in Part Two of the questionnaire, the option of multiple choices was given in addition to space for expressing their views and opinions. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher after casual conversations with some of the subjects and on-site visits. The informants selected for the study were the final year (year two) students on the higher national diploma in English, HNDE at the particular college. The researcher got all the research population for an informal meeting where they explained of his research intent and its pure academic purpose. The consent of the population to be informants was obtained verbally; the questionnaire was delivered to them and the questionnaire items were explained to them for their clarification using English and their L1 Sinhala for nearly

two hours. This informal meeting aimed to enlighten or familiarize the informants with the items so that the possible disadvantage of pencil-and-paper questionnaires that the respondents may not understand questions may be eliminated. They were asked to respond independently with concern and were given a week to attend to it at home and then submit it. The thirty-item open questionnaire was administered to the entire population of second-year English diploma students that was 50 in number. These informants were on their final (fourth) semester having had Speaking as a subject in the first three semesters and Speaking was not a subject for them in the final semester. The questionnaire was meant for them to respond to the items in it independently based on their learning experience of speaking skills in the first three semesters. 44 completed questionnaires were received and the data in them were triangulated on a coding system. Based on the triangulation of questionnaire data, semi-structured open-ended interviews were held with four students who had best articulated in the questionnaire. These were individual interviews based on 10 semi-structured open-ended questions. The interviews were held two weeks after the reception of the completed questionnaires from the student informants. All interviews were conducted in English; the informants were asked to respond in English or their L1 Sinhala. All interviews were audio-recorded with the prior permission of the subjects. The prior permission of the Head of the particular diploma awarding institute was obtained in writing. The transcripts of interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis. In this analysis, the data were closely examined to identify the common themes - and their patterns of meaning that posed themselves repeatedly.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Higher National Diploma in English is a course of two and a half years duration having four academic semesters and a six-month teaching practice in a government school. The course stresses the four skills in addition to linguistics, literature, and teaching methodology. However, while writing and reading occur in all four academic semesters, speaking occurs only in the first three semesters comprising a four-hour weekly classroom learning time with listening being confined to the first two semesters. The 30-item open questionnaire had two parts demographic information and learner attitudes, abilities, and specific problems with speaking in English. 57% of the informants have been educated in popular and urban schools mainly in the Southern province while 43% of them come from rural schools. However, all the informants (100%) have passed GCE O/L English language with or above the C grade. 85% of the students had done A/L in Arts and Commerce streams and only 09% of them had done Maths and Science for A/L. When asked about their participation in speaking activities, all informants stated that they participated in speaking lessons/activities because they believe speaking competence is very necessary for their future employment: teaching in the government and private sectors. The informants' concern when speaking English is accuracy (50%), and 43% of the informants maintain accuracy and fluency together. They also opined in favor of discourse competence (40%) over sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence as what they should improve most to become an efficient speaker.

The responses given to other items of the questionnaire, however, gave the idea to the researcher that the learners have many situational problems and that they are not satisfied with their speaking competence after learning speaking

skills for three semesters in class. Therefore, in the student interview that included ten semi-structured, pre-prepared questions, the researcher wanted to know the informants' ideas about their improvement in speaking during the three semesters separately, because the informants were taught speaking in the first two semesters (Effective Communication Skills) by one teacher and the third semester (Technology-Based Communication Skills) by another teacher. The unanimous idea of the respondents was that their learning experience during the first two semesters was more successful than that of the third semester:

"First-year second semester our lecturer gave a topic to hold a debate. He divided us into many groups and gave us the positive side and negative sides of the topic. In the debate, my part came. At the end of my part, the lecturer discussed errors in my speech. Then he told me, 'Your presentation is good.' I was happy. I like to say first-year experience is better than Second-year first semester in improving my speaking skill" (Respondent D, from transcription)

When asked about the factors affecting their speaking performance in the questionnaire, the respondents had mentioned topical knowledge (68%) as the most affected factor. The other factors they identified as affecting their speaking performance were respectively confidence (66%), pressure to perform well (59%), time for preparation (50%), and motivation to speak (50%). As the respondents had mentioned too, topical knowledge, pressure to perform well, and time for preparation are situational problems whereas confidence and motivation are psychological problems. While it is clear that the respondents don't get enough time and opportunities to practice speaking, pressure and topical knowledge seem to be different knots of the same thread. "Topical knowledge can be attributed to the 'input' learners are provided with as the first step of a speaking activity" (Jayanetti, 2017, p.54), because it activates "Language Acquisition Device (LAD)—an innate language-specific module in the brain" (Chomsky cited in Lightbrown & Spada, 2006, p.38), which carries out the further process of language learning. As "in classroom learning situations, 'input' mainly comes in the form of teacher talk" (I bid., p. 60), it seems something to do with the teacher's role. Thus, as this researcher has stated previously, "Teachers can encourage students and guide their speaking practice by providing them content-oriented input as well as form-oriented input" (I bid., p. 60).

Since the questionnaire data revealed that the learning of speaking skills in the particular setting was not successful and that it was due to situational problems mainly, the researcher wanted to know more about the ground picture of teaching and learning experience of speaking in the class over the three semesters and asked the following question from the respondents at the interview: **What semester or semesters do you think was/were most fruitful for you in improving speaking? What would you attribute the success/progress to?**

The student responses to the above are worth quoting:

"In these two semesters (first two semesters) I had the chance to learn many new things that were a new experience for us. And there were many presentations and many speaking

activities in the first two semesters. So I think these two semesters were better than the second

year first semester" (Respondent A, from transcription).

"It is first-year first semester. We learned a lot in this period. ...But the first time we did English Society and it was a very new experience for all of us.....and it was a good chance for all the

students to talk and improve their speaking ability" (Respondent B, from transcription).

"Among the three semesters we had, first-year first semester was the most fruitful for my

speaking practice. After leaving school I couldn't get a chance to speak in English. So,

entering back to speaking, having chances to speak in front of the class, having a teacher

to demonstrate the way how we should speak, and getting feedback attribute to that success.

The first semester moved us to the correct way of speaking" (Respondent C, from transcription).

"The first year was most fruitful for me to improve my speaking.I like to say that the

lecturer is the main reason for that saying. He wanted to improve students' speaking ability.

He used different ways for that. He acted his feelings about the lesson to achieve skills of

students" (Respondent D, from transcription).

When asked about the effectiveness of the College speaking course in the questionnaire 61% of the respondents maintained that only the first-year speaking courses were effective whereas 30% of the respondents claimed that the second-year speaking course was not effective. Upon investigation, it was revealed that it is not a problem with the curriculum content for speaking. As it has already come out through the responses of the respondents above, the reason for the degree of success in the learning of speaking in the first year and the failure of it in the second year is the teacher factor. However, the researcher wanted to get it further clarified. Thus, the following question was asked from the respondents during the individual interviews:

According to the Questionnaire data, the College speaking course was successful and effective in the first year, some say that the speaking course was not effective during the second year. What is your comment on this?

What one respondent said opened up another complication that prevailed in the second-year speaking class:

"I say the main reason is the subject lecturer. I remember the Effective Communication Skills

assignment day in the first semester. All students in the class participated in it. I also,

remember the second-year Technology-Based Communication Skills assignment day. Some

students didn't come for it. Presenting a recipe of Mrs. Mayadunne (a famous chef who often

appeared on television) was our second-year assignment. All the students downloaded Mrs.

Mayadunne's food recipe the previous night, noted it down on a sheet and presented in

class. I don't think this is proper to improve our speaking ability. These reasons prompted us

to say the second-year speaking course was not effective. Also, the second-year lecturer disturbed our presentation

while we were doing it to correct our errors despite our being students. That action of the teacher affected fall down our self-confidence" (Respondent D, from transcription).

This episode can be situated with teacher misbehavior of all incompetence, offensiveness, and indolence dimensions (Kearney, et al. 1991, p.29). Not doing anything to give input to students, developing brainstorming attribute to incompetence while disturbing students at presentation and thereby collapsing their self-confidence and interest for the activity is offensiveness whereas letting all the students read out a downloaded piece of secondary information as if it were their self-prepared presentation and evaluating them on that is indolence misbehavior. This can also be attributed to teacher nonimmediacy which distances the teacher from the learner in the classroom (Jayanetti, 2017, p. 22).

In the English diploma curriculum that was designed by an expert in curriculum and material design in 2011, all four skills came as main subjects in all four academic semesters. However, less than two years after the introduction of that original curriculum, many revisions were introduced to it by the English teachers in the College. Removing speaking from the final (fourth) semester syllabus and listening from the second year both semesters was a result of these curriculum revisions. Speaking entails only 60 hours per semester thus, being a four-hour block of teaching and learning a week. The insufficient time allocation for speaking and the removal of the subject from the final semester have been discussed by this researcher earlier: "It cannot be helped recording that removing speaking from the fourth-semester subjects is an unwise and arbitrary decision of the reviewers" (I bid., p.74). What the respondents stated to the following question when asked during the individual interviews confirms the researcher's comment made in 2017:

Questionnaire data reveal that opportunity to practice speaking in class was not enough. You also know that speaking is missing from the final semester. What is your idea about the allocation of time for speaking and the unavailability of the subject in the final semester?

"Yes, that opportunity is not enough to practice speaking in class. Speaking is essential to the final semester. It must be included in the final semester" (Respondent D, from transcription).

"As I think, the final semester is the semester which highly requires speaking subject. Now we are aware that we have to go to school and work as English teachers. So we try to speak in English. If there is a speaking period, students will join it effectively" (Respondent C, from transcription).

"I think that not only the final semester but the timetable of all semesters should also be revised for developing our speaking skills" (Respondent B, from transcription).

Correcting the students while they are making presentations as well as pointing out their strengths and areas to work further on after the student has finished in the form of feedback are methods of correcting students adopted by teachers teaching speaking skills. However, in this particular ESL setup, the first method seems to be considered a disturbance by the learners:

"Our first-year lecturer never disturbed us while doing speaking practice. He corrected our errors at the end of our speaking time. I remember while doing my presentation in the second-year first semester the

word 'five' was pronounced by me. The lecturer suddenly stopped me

and told me that my pronunciation was wrong. At that time I was shocked. That incident killed

my self-confidence and presentation" (Respondent D, from transcription).

The following question was also asked of the respondents at the individual interviews:

70% of your responses in the Questionnaire suggest that the English diploma curriculum does not emphasize speaking. At the same time, 73% of the Questionnaire responses say that the College examination system emphasizes speaking. Can you explain this with reasons?

To this question, three respondents answered that both the curriculum and the examination system emphasize speaking. One respondent opines that the curriculum emphasizes speaking, however:

".....the improvement is not enough. The College system can do better than this. The time duration

for speaking should be increased. And one teacher should take the responsibility throughout

the whole two years because he knows our weak points and how to correct them. And

selecting the right person to teach speaking is very necessary. And the final semester should

have more time for speaking. If space for speaking cannot be found, it should be situated at

the cost of one other subject. My idea is any of the other subjects is not as important as speaking.

However, the examination system of College indeed emphasizes speaking more than

the curriculum does. On the exam day, we had to do our best and participate in many

presentations. Though curriculum emphasizes speaking examination does it more than that"

(Respondent C, from transcription).

Respondent D also laments over the insufficient time and opportunities in the College classroom for improving their speaking competence. What Respondent C says as quoted above sheds light on some complications of the English diploma curriculum and the teacher factor again. All they say gives a notion that the removal of the speaking subject from the current curriculum following revisions brought about by College teachers is an error. Whereas the four-hour weekly time allocation for speaking is inadequate, removing the subject from the final semester from these students who are going to be future teachers of English is an error by all means.

By removing listening from the second year and speaking from the final semester, the curriculum reviewers introduced three new subjects such as 1. Principles of Education, 2. Educational Measurement, and 3. Educational Psychology while English Language Teaching Methodology ELTM is also available as a subject in the last two semesters. What Respondent C above referred to as 'other subjects' that are 'not as important as speaking' are the above-mentioned three subjects. These are subjects introduced to teachers doing professional courses. Although those who were involved in the HNDE curriculum revision may have Master's degrees, the researcher has doubt if their academic qualifications, skills, and experience could justify the work they did. The 'examination day' the respondent referred to is the

semester-end diploma examination of speaking skills which is methodical and conducted in the English language.

Although the researcher's idea regarding teaching speaking skills is that it is better for learners if they can learn speaking from many teachers so that they can learn more from a variety of teachers, Respondent C above reiterates that they wish it to be 'the right person teaching the subject all four semesters'. This claim may be an outcome of their experience of learning speaking in the class since they found a good teacher during their first year and its opposite in the third semester.

61% of the respondents had mentioned in the questionnaire that opportunities for practicing speaking outside of the class are 'limited'. This was questioned further during the individual interviews. They stated that they come from humble family backgrounds and that they don't have English-speaking members in their families. One student said that they don't have opportunities since they are not connected with English-speaking people. Respondent D lamented, 'If we talk to students following the other courses in the College in English, they laugh at us. This is disappointing and at the same time, the information gives the notion that the standard of English of College students following non-English diploma courses may also be very poor despite that they follow their courses in the English medium. This remains a whole research area to touch on.

"Language-related extracurricular activities such as oratory, debating, drama, English literary

association etc. can be of immense value in finding more opportunities to practice and

improve speaking skills" (Wijesinha, R. 2016, p. 27).

This was inquired in the questionnaire to which 61% of the respondents had indicated 'not at all while 39% of the responses had indicated 'plenty' and 'somewhat'. Thus, this was inquired of the respondents during the interviews. Their answers were two-fold. One respondent told that there are extracurricular activities in Sinhala, their L1. Two respondents stated that they had activities such as English association, debate, and conducting meetings in the speaking class during their first year:

"To promote students' speaking ability there should be extracurricular activities. Once we

held an English society in our class. That gave us many chances to improve our speaking. We

had debates and picture descriptions, also. We learned how to conduct meetings also. We had

a very short time for that subject. However, we did our best with that time" (Respondent C,

from transcription).

Brainstorming, writing the script of the speaking task, getting it corrected by the teacher, and the teacher's feedback/comment after they have presented the speaking activities are very important for the

improvement of the speaking skills. The respondents were asked about their experience of this procedure in their speaking classes finally. Three respondents appeared not to have understood the question and maintained that they agree with the procedure but didn't apply it to their learning experience. However, one respondent indicated that the procedure is very important and she experienced it from the first-year speaking teacher:

"Yes, I agree with that comment. It is very important to us. I have experienced that. It helped

Me to achieve and improve my skill. The teacher's feedback gave me strength and confidence. I

experienced it in the first year more than the second year first semester" (Respondent D, from

transcription).

CONCLUSION

Since the present study is based on the English diploma students of a government-monitored institute of education, the findings here will not perhaps be generalizable to all ESL situations in the country's tertiary education fields such as the universities. Even in other similar situations such as other diploma awarding institutes the major findings in the present research may perhaps not be generalizable if the teacher factor is positive there.

As has already been discussed in this study, the speaking problems prevailing among the adult ESL learners in Sri Lanka are very many cognitive, psychological, and situational problems. Problems in the three categories are almost interrelated and bound to one another. However, the current study concentrated only on the situational problems facing ESL learners, and that makes the problems of the other two categories worse. The research was done on adult ESL learners facing cognitive and psychological problems in Sri Lanka, unfortunately, seems hardly exists. Especially, in the tertiary education sector including the universities, empirical studies on speaking skills and speaking problems appear to have been minimal. Thus, these can be considered as further directions for much-needed research in the ELT field in Sri Lanka.

However, the present study of situational problems as a major factor of the inadequacy of speaking competency in Sri Lankan adult ESL learners has been able to draw a worrying picture which is the reality of the particular ESL teaching and learning context. The findings that came through questionnaires and interviews have answered the two research questions that have also been situated in the review of related literature.

Lack of opportunities to practice, lack of practice, and lack of time to prepare are three situational problems that prevail in this ESL setting. These problems can be attributed to the current, revised English diploma curriculum in which only four hours weekly are allocated to the speaking skills subject which is not enough at all. In such a situation the successive curriculum revisions brought to the original English diploma curriculum have removed the speaking subject from the final (fourth) semester subjects depriving the students of non-English speaking family backgrounds and who aspire to become teachers of English in the future, of the opportunity to practice the language in the classroom under a teacher. It should be stated here, that the removal of the speaking subject from the curriculum is an error.

Input poor speaking class where they are not engaged in brainstorming is a prevalent problem in the particular ESL context for which bad teaching or teacher misbehaviors are responsible. Low topical knowledge in students and pressure to perform well are two other situational problems that coexist with the aforesaid poor input caused by teacher misbehaviors. Inability to make constructions too is a situational problem that may be symptomatic of low or hardly any feedback given by teacher misbehaviors or teacher nonimmediacies (Thweatt and McCroskey, 1996). The non-availability of extracurricular activities can be a cause for other situational problems such as the inability to make constructions and pressure to perform well since authentic and creative

opportunities to practice speaking do not turn up due to this. Curriculum designers and strategic decision-makers in the College are partly responsible for this situation.

As it has been disclosed in the findings of this research that the real problem in this particular College setup is that the situational problems are not addressed there. Addressing situational problems is vital because they make worse other links of the chain: cognitive problems and psychological problems in ESL learners.

Lapses of the new curriculum as mentioned above and those who took part in the successive curriculum revisions become causes of the situational problems with bad and irresponsible teaching or teacher misbehaviors being the main cause of the inadequate speaking competence in the learners.

The findings of this research generate new and revolutionary knowledge and address a long-standing research gap in the tertiary ESL setup in Sri Lanka. The findings affirm that situational problems prevail in the particular ESL setup and they make cognitive and psychological problems worse. This may be a common finding in any ESL situation. But the real problem in this particular institution is that those situational problems are not addressed there. The main reason for that is bad teaching or teacher misbehaviors. This study becomes important among similar works in Sri Lanka because it probes into the problems (situational) and continues until it finds out the real reason for speaking inadequacies of the subjects: bad teaching. In this respect of the findings, this research becomes an eye-opener to all stakeholders in the tertiary ESL field in Sri Lanka. At the same time, this study has also shown that the teacher can be an oasis in a desert for students. From what the students have mentioned in the questionnaire and the interviews, parts of which are quoted for the discussion in the previous chapter, it is very clear that with a good teacher who is committed and cares for the students some degree of success can be achieved despite all other situational problems.

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