MENTORING ENGINEERING STUDENTS IN A MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In a multicultural classroom, where English is taught as a second language (L2) to a usual mixed-ability group of learners, the concept of mentor-mentee can be considered paramount. The picture remains ubiquitously the same in almost every technical institution regarding the use of the English language for various academic and professional purposes. Students from different cultural backgrounds are still in awe of this second language despite its universal appeal and importance. The study deals with this issue of petrified learners.

The technical institution where the researcher works comprises several engineering students from the northern part of the country, and for them, the first stint with the English language (who still consider it *a subject*) started in the 8th standard only. They learned some basic sentence patterns and grammar activities in their 12th standard, as these primarily form the major writing

component in the board exams. However, this gradual practice of getting acquainted with the syntactic features of L2 does not always manifest communicatively in every student. Despite learning English since school, many of my students appear to be afraid to use English confidently amongst their peers and teachers.

The mentor and mentee concept seems feasible in a multicultural language classroom and can be viewed as a positive step towards reinforcing language speaking skills because students very often feel shy and become conscious in the presence of their teachers; however, they feel comfortable and do not become image-conscious when it comes to speaking in English with their batch mate (mentor) outside the formal classroom atmosphere.

Keywords: *Mentor-mentee relationship, Multicultural classroom, Second language (L2) learning, Language proficiency, Feasibility*

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Every year, innumerable students join engineering colleges and universities in India due to the vast opportunities for professional and financial growth. However, these opportunities always come to them at the cost of challenges. One such challenge is the need to be proficient in the target language to meet the global demands. The lack of proficient communication skills in Indian engineering students could be seen as one of their major drawbacks according to Blom and Saeki (2011), Clement and Murugavel (2015), and Sinha et al. (2020) when it comes to meeting the global demand and the need to equip oneself with skills necessary to become a global workforce. (Abbas, 2020).

English stands just next to the Hindi language in our country in terms of being the most spoken language. It would not be an exaggeration to say that India has two national languages: Hindi and English. Besides these two primary languages, we do have 22 other officially recognized languages to cater to the multilingual and multicultural needs of the educated as well as uneducated population of the country. Just like almost any other nation across the globe, this second language (L2) has become a part and parcel of the Indian sub-continent right from education to employment, entertainment to entrepreneurship.

Even though English is a prerequisite language in almost every technical institution in our country, the vast majority of our student population, who desire to pursue engineering programs, do not seem to enjoy effortless communication skills. The reasons could be multiple. Most of them hail from vernacular medium education background which acts as a stumble on their way to use English confidently. And this is not a case seen in one single region of our country. This is seen in various places where students stumble in speaking due to various reasons. Besides this, the mixed ability groupings in the communication classrooms also seem to create linguistic gaps among these L2 learners. Sometimes, the mechanically driven and conventionally designed language syllabus in these institutions may fail to make the learners aware of the target culture. English officially holds the status of the most widely used academic and professional language in our country, regardless of the urban-rural tag.

However, when it comes to the use of the English language for various academic and professional purposes, the picture remains ubiquitously the same in every educational institution, be it a private or government institution. Students are still in awe of L2 despite its universal appeal and national and international importance alike.

The study emphasizes the researcher's work as a language teacher, and it has been observed that a good number of students whose medium of instruction was vernacular in class 12. Although the subject emphasizes developing the Soft Skills of these learners, it is not possible to remain oblivious to the fact that for most of them, their first stint with the English language generally started from the 8th standard onwards. By the time they reached the 12th standard, they had managed to learn some basic sentence patterns and grammar activities, since these form the major writing component in their board exams. However, this gradual practice of getting acquainted with the second language's syntactic features did not manifest intelligibly in every student. Despite learning English since school days, many of these students appeared to be petrified of using English confidently amongst their peers and teachers. For various such kinds of reasons, colleges and institutions have adopted the Mentoring concept.

MENTOR AND MENTEE CONCEPT

The concept of mentor and mentee can be considered a major paradigm shift in the present-day teaching scenario, especially in a multicultural classroom, which generally has a mixed-ability group of learners. The mentor and mentee concept offers learning feasibility in a language classroom. Through mentoring, a teacher also gets the opportunity to understand the learners' mindset and understanding level.

The same concept has been implemented in the researchers' classroom too, which comprises 1st-year engineering students, hailing from various social and educational backgrounds. The class acts as a sort of social platform where students are encouraged to interact with one another and share their views without any hesitation. Unfortunately, not every learner participates actively due to the fear of being singled out for improper use of language skills.

This is where the mentor-mentee relationship can be viewed as a positive step towards reinforcing speaking skills because students very often feel shy and become conscious of their teachers; however, they feel a little bit comfortable and do not become image-conscious when it comes to communicating in the English language with their batch mates (mentors) outside the formal classroom atmosphere.

ASSOCIATED FACTORS

The mentor-mentee relationship is governed by a host of significant factors that one cannot expect to overlook. Here, the mentor has to play a very crucial role in helping his/her mentee overcome language problems. The following factors seem worth noticing in this relationship:

Cultural Backgrounds: Language and culture are intricately connected according to the researchers Jiang (2000), Byram & Grundy (2003), Gao (2006), Tang (2009), Xu (2009), and Mahmoud (2015). Language helps to communicate beliefs, convey ideas, and share knowledge about customs and values. According to Genc and Bada (2005) through knowledge about culture, a student can understand the target language much more in a meaningful manner. The implication of culture in language teaching classes cannot be overlooked, specifically more so in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms. ESP is a branch of applied English

Language Teaching (ELT) which revolves around the specific needs of the learners. Therefore, the cultural background of a learner can be a determining factor in assessing their language proficiency. A learner eventually grows up to be that sort of a person as conditioned by his family atmosphere at home and the kind of education that s/he receives. A learner whose upbringing bears the trademark of his societal values tends to behave in that fashion. These social and cultural norms are very much ingrained in their psyche right from the childhood stage till the adolescent stage.

Target Language Proficiency Level: The level of target language proficiency is also one of the most important factors that can and should be taken into account for assigning the role of a mentor to a student. A mentor must have adequate knowledge of the target language to help her/his student mentee maneuver language problems. The mentor is expected to be familiar with the grammar of the target language apart from a good command of it. The level of vocabulary is another dimension of the target language proficiency level that one must not overlook in a student mentor.

Willingness to Guide the Mentee: A mentor must have the willingness to groom the mentee because the result would vary invariably in case the mentor lacks intrinsic motivation.

Dedication towards Mentorship: Dedication towards mentorship is another crucial factor that can work in getting the desired outcome. The whole idea of the student mentor and mentee concept would lose its gravity if this important factor is missing from the list of associated factors.

Compatibility Factor: Compatibility issue is another feature that needs our discussion. The compatibility between the mentor and the mentee can work wonders in reinforcing language learning. The mentee could become more focused on achieving the goal of language learning if s/he is quite compatible with the mentor.

CLASSROOM RESEARCH

The concept of mentor-mentee was implemented in the Soft Skills paper that forms a part of the first-year university curriculum in our college. The concept was introduced in the first semester with the sole aim of developing language proficiency among all the engineering students who somehow seemed to lack proficiency in L2. These learners belonged to different cultural backgrounds. While most of the learners hailed from Greater Noida, Noida, Gurgaon, Faridabad, and Delhi and a handful from Jammu and Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, and North Eastern India, a vast majority of them were from the rural areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

It was no surprise that learners who belonged to local areas were also the ones who passed their senior secondary exams from vernacular medium or government schools where the medium of education was Hindi. English, as mentioned earlier, was generally taught to them from class eight onwards. Hence, the proficiency level of such students could not be expected to be of an appreciable level. Both written and spoken English remained below an intelligible level. Very often, the Hindi language ruled the roost in the ESP classroom.

The researcher's intervention during language teaching was sometimes considered a thwart by most of these learners because they became very conscious of my presence. That was why it was decided to assign some students the role of mentors who could help in teaching the basics of the English language to their *language-phobic batchmates*. The classroom comprised 58 odd candidates, all packed in one section and since the time factor was a big challenge for the teacher (half the semester had already passed by when the concept of mentorship was implemented), Two students were selected from my first-semester data science engineering class who were fluent enough in English and could confidently display their proficiency before the entire class.

These two students were picked up for the role of peer mentor after carefully examining their sensibility level, confidence quotient, social skills, and reliability. Thorough interaction with both of them was done and with that the idea of mentoring was proposed on any two less privileged candidates in terms of language proficiency. At no point could it was sensed in them that there was an unwillingness to mentor their peers. Rather they took it as an opportunity to

showcase their linguistic talent before their batch mates by helping their protégés in developing their language speaking ability and inculcating a sense of confidence in them.

When it came to choosing the mentees, the researcher zeroed in on two very shy and submissive students who often remained absent in the communication lectures due to the fear of speaking the language. They were also the ones who were found to possess very limited language skills and vocabulary.

FINDINGS

As mentioned above, the whole idea of having a student mentor, who would try to guide a student mentee in enhancing his/her language skills and developing personality, germinated nearly at the end of the first semester classes, therefore, the desired outcomes could not be seen as effectively as expected of their collaboration. The time constraint proved to be a deciding factor that worked against the effort. The mentees were made to interact on two basic aspects of the English language: *the construction of proper basic sentences and the pronunciation of some common words for everyday use*.

The onus of monitoring their progress was primarily on me. However, other students were also given the liberty to share their feedback with the mentors and the mentees from time to time.

The mentors were given four weeks from January 30, 2024, to February 28, 2024, during which they had to teach their respective mentees about proper sentence construction and pronunciation. Before teaching the mentees how to speak confidently, with whatever linguistic repertoire the mentors had at their disposal, each one of them (the mentors) was clearly instructed by me to start their training with a self-introduction technique that would later on also include a few sentences each about their family background, education background, hobbies or leisure pursuits and finally the reason for choosing the particular engineering trade and of course, the institution.

The mentors were also instructed to note down any incorrectly pronounced words in the mentees' speech so that the same could be practiced by the mentees with their help. The mode of

interactions was not only confined to classroom discussions during recess but also extended to telephonic conversations sometimes, and very often informal chit-chats in the college canteen.

The monitoring used to be done thrice a week (for four consecutive weeks) during communication lectures. The mentees were assessed at two levels – the level of progress made by them in understanding, using, and creating sentence structures, and the level of effort put in by the mentors to guide them in learning and speaking the language. Once the session began, the mentees were invited to share their feedback about the sort of training received by the mentors. These feedbacks were openly shared with other students too. The mentees were then assessed on their speaking skills, along with the right diction.

CONCLUSIONS AND SCOPE

The classroom research that started with two pairs of mentors and mentees had enough potential to offer practical feasibility in learning and using the English language confidently if the concept was reinforced regularly with different pairs. As we all know and understand, any language can be learned proficiently if we practice the same daily with other fluent speakers of that language; therefore, we based our research work on that principle.

For a class that boasted 58 odd numbers students, and that too from different cultural backgrounds, it was not practically easy for the researchers to pay individual attention to every one of them in monitoring and enhancing their English speaking skills. The help and guidance of those two student mentors, who were capable of producing any number of grammatically correct sentences, certainly proved to be a boon for an L2 teacher like me. Their mentorship helped remove some degree of hesitation in the two mentees, apart from empowering them with the basic skill of introducing themselves to others in a fairly confident manner.

Therefore, this study could offer possible implications of teaching English language skills to vernacular medium students in a multicultural context if carried out on a large scale in every teaching organization where English seems to be a wicked monster to L2 learners.

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