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Problems Faced by Students using English as a Second Language

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ABSTRACT

The English language is an essential tool for communication in today's world. In India, English is a second language to many and an official language of the nation. Its importance cannot be denied. However, in the college classroom it is often found that the students from vernacular medium schools are at a disadvantage in comparison to their counterparts from English medium backgrounds when it comes to English language acquisition or usage.. The present study has thus been undertaken with a sample size of sixty (60) undergraduate students, thirty each from English and Bengali medium backgrounds. The purpose of the study is to find and assess the differences, if any, in the problems faced by students from the different mediums of instruction while acquiring and using English as a second language. A questionnaire with 22 items has been framed to find and identify the problems prevalent among the students. It has been found that the students from Bengali medium schools face a greater number of difficulties in acquiring and using the English language. Students from Bengali medium students have significant problems in speaking, writing and reading in English as well as with spellings and grammar. The number of students from Bengali medium schools who felt that they did not receive enough opportunities to learn the language is also significantly higher. The implications of this study are that if these problems are assessed and rectified, the process of language teaching can be improved leading to better command over the language.

Key Words : English language, Second Language, English Language Acquisition, English Medium, Vernacular Medium

INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition (SLA) is the study of how students learn a second language (L2) in addition to their first language. Although referred to as second language acquisition, it may be the process of learning any language after the first language (Saville Troike). In India, English was originally a foreign language but in the present day it is an associate official language of our country. The predominant factor behind this unique status of an apparently foreign language is India's colonial legacy. The English language had been introduced into India under the colonial rule with the objective of creating an educated class of upper and upper middle class Indians who would be able to look after English administration and governance efficiently (Esfandiari, 2013). The English Education Act, 1835 and the establishment of the Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857 in which English was the main medium for imparting higher education gave further impetus to the introduction of the English language in the education system. During the freedom struggle eminent, educated freedom fighters supported the use of vernacular languages as a medium of instruction. However with the spread of English education the enlightened Indians also came into contact with the ideals and visions of philosophers like Mill and Rousseau .Thus English education also fostered the rise of nationalism though many nationalists were against it. Ultimately it was decided that the English government would sponsor both the English and vernacular languages. Thus we find the co-existence of both vernacular and English medium schools in India today and consequently English has become the second language to a vast majority of Indians.

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In the present day where English has acquired the status of a link language and is the most popular second language to be learnt in all corners of the world, the importance of being educated in English cannot be denied. At present, India is the third largest English speaking country after the USA and the UK. Despite our colonial past and relatively early introduction to the English language we find that competence in the English language is not a common occurrence. Indian students begin to learn English at a young age. In fact, most students begin learning in nursery. However, their performance after being taught for almost twelve years in school is quite dismal. Students from both English and vernacular medium schools face difficulties in acquisition of the English language which often acts as a barrier to higher education and better career opportunities. Students from vernacular medium schools are generally found to have further disadvantages. In our country, in vernacular medium schools English language and literature are taught as separate subjects while all the other subjects are taught in the mother tongue whereas in the English medium schools all subjects are taught in English. The exposure to English language is thus far greater for students from English medium backgrounds. However, the syllabus, textbooks, time allotted for teaching and evaluation are the same for both the medium (in the case of schools belonging to the same board of education). In spite of the similarities, there is a difference in the achievement in second language between the students of the two mediums. It is often observed that those students, who are extremely weak, shy away from answering questions and hardly participate in class as they do not want to be embarrassed in front of their classmates. However, this does not mean that they are not keen to improve themselves as they are also aware of their deficiencies and how it will be beneficial for them once these are overcome. Many are first generation learners and their lack of competence in English may affect their employment opportunities as well as their personality development. A major challenge is to find means and ways to discover the factors that retard and facilitate second language acquisition so that everyone with access to education may be competent in the English language

Many studies have been undertaken by researchers in various countries all over the world attempting to assess the differences in the problems encountered by students from the target language medium of instruction and vernacular medium schools. The basic difference between India and these countries is that in most cases, English is taught as a foreign language whereas in our country it has been accepted as an Indian language. In many of these countries, English and vernacular medium schools co-exist as in India. Wong (2010) in her study on two separate English classes in Hong Kong found that the class in which English was used strictly as the medium of instruction showed higher proficiency than the class in which both English and Cantonese were used . In some countries like Saudi Arabia, primary school students are taught in their mother tongue and there is a sudden shift at the secondary level to English medium instruction. Ebad (2014) in his study on students in Saudi Arabia where education is imparted in the vernacular Arabic until the secondary level has found that it is difficult for these students to comprehend English later on. In spite of these differences parallels can be drawn as these studies have highlighted that the medium of instruction does have an impact on language acquisition proficiency. Against this backdrop, an empirical study was undertaken to find the various problems faced by students from different medium backgrounds so as to identify the major areas, if any, where students from vernacular medium schools are lacking or are at a disadvantage in comparison to their English medium counterparts. By identifying, assessing and rectifying the problem areas, the process of language teaching can be improved leading to better command over the language.

METHODOLOGY

Materials:

A General Information Schedule was designed to gather the respondent's personal information, name of college, course of study ,medium of schooling, area of residence, income group etc. A separate questionnaire was developed to identify the problems students face in acquiring and using the English language. After discussion with English teachers from other colleges about the problems and difficulties they have observed in students and oral interactions with students on the same subject a questionnaire comprising of thirty questions was formulated. This questionnaire was administered to 100 college students and it was found that nineteen (19) questions were found to be significant. The final questionnaire consisted of a total twenty two (22) questions comprising these nineteen questions (yes/no questions) and three for information regarding the age when they started learning English and their academic

scores in English in major examinations.

Method:

A list of colleges in Kolkata affiliated to the University of Calcutta was downloaded from the internet. Ten colleges were randomly selected from the list. Permission was sought from the concerned authority to conduct a survey on the students of the particular college and was obtained from three of these colleges. Twenty students were purposively selected from each college, ten each from English medium and vernacular medium backgrounds. The students comprised both male and female students in the age group of 18-21 from high, middle and low income groups. The students were administered the two separate sets of questionnaires. The questionnaires were coded and tabulated on a spread sheet. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, comparative means and t-test using SPSS 20.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the first category comprising problems related to communication skills, there were seven questions of which all seven were found to be significantly higher in students from vernacular medium schools. The significant items are questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 18 and 20, as shown in Table 1, which are about finding the language difficult, having problems in speaking, writing, reading comprehension, listening comprehension and expressing thoughts in English and finding the right words while speaking.

In the second category comprising problems related to academics, there were four items in the questionnaire of which three were found to be significantly higher in vernacular medium students as shown in Table 2. Question 19 asked whether the teacher helped weak students in the classroom. A significantly higher number of vernacular medium students replied in the negative to this question. The other 2 questions are related to spellings and grammar. These are question 21 and question 22. The other question (no. 16) on whether the teacher in the English classroom facilitated the students to gain command over the language was not found to be more significant among vernacular medium students.

In the third category comprising their personal problems regarding the English language there were eight items. Of these, six were found to be significantly higher among vernacular medium students as shown in Table 3. These are items no. 9, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17. The number of students who feel that they cannot do well despite putting in their best efforts is significantly higher among vernacular medium schools. The number of vernacular medium students who feel that their basic foundation in the English language is weak is also significantly higher. Vernacular medium students feel that they have not received enough opportunities to learn the language in their childhood. A significant number of students from vernacular schools also feel that the fact that their family members are not strong in English has impeded their proficiency in the language. The number of students from vernacular medium schools who were not satisfied with their command over the language was also significantly higher. There was also a significant difference in the number of students not using the English language outside

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Problems relating to communication skills according to medium of instruction and the t-values

	Medium	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-values
Q4	Eng.	30	0.07	0.254	4.176**
	Vern.	30	0.5	0.509	
Q5	Eng.	30	0.07	0.254	10.003**
	Vern.	30	0.86	0.351	
Q6	Eng.	30	0.03	0.183	3.203**
	Vern.	30	0.33	0.479	
Q7	Eng.	30	0.000	0.000	3.808**
	Vern.	30	0.33	0.479	
Q8	Eng.	30	0.10	0.305	2.249*
	Vern.	30	0.33	0.479	
Q18	Eng.	30	0.13	0.346	4.942**
	Vern.	30	0.67	0.479	
Q20	Eng.	30	0.47	0.507	2.47*
	Vern.	30	0.77	0.73	

**p< .01, *p< .05

the classroom amongst vernacular medium students. Eagerness to learn and gain good command over the language was not significantly higher in either English or vernacular medium

The findings of this study thus show that the students of vernacular medium schools are at a disadvantage regarding proficiency in the English language in comparison to the students who have received English medium education. Vernacular medium students find the language difficult. They have problems in speaking and writing in English. They face problems while trying to express their thoughts in English. They find it difficult to read and understand magazines, books and newspapers. They find it difficult to follow English movies and news channels. This implies that these students are lacking in the basic communication skills of reading, writing and speaking and listening. Students from vernacular medium schools also face greater problems in spelling correctly and using grammar. Vernacular medium students also have expressed that teachers do not pay special attention to weak students. The role of the teacher in the English classroom in facilitating students in gaining command over the language, however, was not found to be significant in either medium of instruction.

Certain personal reasons behind their lack of proficiency in the English language have been found to be significant among students from vernacular medium schools. They feel that their basic foundation is weak since childhood which implies that they have not learnt English effectively in the initial years of study. They also feel that they have not done well despite putting in their best efforts. They are not satisfied with their command over the language. Among the personal causes behind the lack of proficiency in the English language, a significant number of vernacular medium students have also identified lack of enough opportunity to acquire the language properly and the fact that none of their family members are strong in English. The students of vernacular

Table 2 : Descriptive Statistics of Problems relating to academics according to medium of instruction and the t-values

	Med X	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-values
Q16	Eng.	30	0.13	0.346	0.000
	Vern.	30	0.13	0.346	
Q19	Eng.	30	0.23	0.43	2.193*
	Vern.	30	0.50	0.509	
Q21	Eng.	30	0.13	0.346	2.688**
	Vern.	30	0.43	0.504	
Q22	Eng.	30	0.27	0.45	2.72**
	Vern.	30	0.60	0.498	

**p< .01, *p< .05

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Personal problems according to medium of instruction and the t-values

	Med X	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-values
Q9	Eng.	30	0.07	0.254	6.537**
	Vern.	30	0.70	0.466	
Q10	Eng.	30	0.07	0.254	0.851
	Vern.	30	0.13	0.346	
Q11	Eng.	30	0.000	.000[a]	0
	Vern.	30	0.000	.000[a]	
Q12	Eng.	30	0.27	0.45	3.664**
	Vern.	30	0.70	0.466	
Q13	Eng.	30	0.10	0.305	9.106**
	Vern.	30	0.87	0.346	
Q14	Eng.	30	0.10	0.305	5.06**
	Vern.	30	0.63	0.490	
Q15	Eng.	30	0.33	0.479	2.693**
	Vern.	30	0.67	0.479	
Q17	Eng.	30	0.20	0.407	1.973*
	Vern.	30	0.43	0.504	

**p<.01, *p<.05

medium schools also do not use English outside the English classroom as do their counterparts from English medium schools. This also indicates that the practice of speaking in the English language is hardly prevalent among vernacular medium schools. The classroom hardly provides them an opportunity to speak and they themselves do not use the language in their social and personal lives which instills a fear of using the language and lack of confidence.

It is therefore apparent that the students of English medium schools are much more proficient in English and face lesser problems in both the acquisition and usage of the English language. This finding is supported by Komba and Bosco (2015) who have found that students studying in English medium schools from the primary level do better than the students studying in Swahili when they undertake higher studies in English. Rogier (2012) in his study on students in the United Arab Emirates also stresses that students become more proficient in the English language if they are exposed to English medium education. Mudzielwana (2014) also emphasized the greater proficiency of students who have been studying the English language since pre-school.

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to highlight the importance of English medium education. Rather, it is an attempt to find some of the reasons why the students from Vernacular medium schools cannot usually attain the same level of proficiency in English language acquisition and usage. If these problem areas are addressed early, then perhaps vernacular medium students will be able to increase their competence in the English language.

Increasing proficiency in English language learning is not an easy proposition and second language researchers from all over the world are continually searching for solutions. However, as students from English medium schools generally fare better than those from vernacular medium schools, the above dimensions may be stressed upon at the school level in vernacular medium schools in order to improve the command of their students over the language. This should be implemented from the day that students start learning the language. The syllabus may be modified as to include a communicative way of teaching so that students get to interact in the classroom which will thereby increase their confidence in real life situations. Emphasis must be given to all four communication skills in the classroom and the students must be encouraged to utilise them outside the classroom as well. The fear of the language as difficult must be removed in the initial years of learning the language. Opportunities must be created for the students to learn the language and create a strong foundation for them. Stress must be given to functional grammar and spellings. The English teacher must play a positive role in helping weak students in the classroom. If in this way the separate problems faced by vernacular medium students are addressed, they will surely be overcome.

Research in English language acquisition has also revealed the importance of various other psycho social factors in facilitating language acquisition. A recent study by **Neogi** and **Khastgir (2015)** implied that achievement motivation and exposure to English language differed between English and Bengali medium students and ultimately influenced their Second language Acquisition (SLA). Further, Bengali medium students with low scores in English language test reported that they were not motivated to learn English as they found it difficult and lacked confidence in using it. If alongside the problems, the role of factors like attitude and motivation are also studied in depth, a major change in the language proficiency of vernacular medium students may be brought about.

Conclusion:

Further research into the various problems and psycho-social factors which impede or facilitate second language acquisition in the case of Bengali and other vernacular medium schools, thus, need to be carried out on a larger scale to arrive at more specific results. These results, in turn may be analysed to bring about positive changes in which the vernacular medium children are taught or exposed to the English language and benefit the vernacular medium students in becoming more proficient in the English language.

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