

Stories of English Teachers on the Obstacles Faced in Improving their Speaking Skills - A Narrative Inquiry

P. K. D. T. SACHITHRA

Student

*Department of Language Studies
University of Vocational Technology, Sri Lanka*

L. H. D. L. RANASURIYA

Lecturer

*Department of Language Studies
University of Vocational Technology, Sri Lanka*

Abstract

The English Language is a compulsory subject in Sri Lankan school curriculum. Despite thirteen years of study, students struggle with speaking English. Many qualified non-native English teachers have been recruited in the schools and they have improved their speaking skills. They might face many obstacles when they develop speaking skills. The current study focused on finding out the obstacles faced by these teachers when they developed speaking skills. Eighteen English teachers from nine Sri Lankan government schools were selected as the sample. A semi-structured interview was conducted using a narrative technique to gather qualitative data. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. According to the analyzed data, the obstacles such as fear of making mistakes, pronunciation problems and lack of vocabulary were identified. It could be recommended to overcome the obstacles by using remedies such as speaking with friends, loud and silent reading, practising pronunciation and learning vocabulary, writing speeches, poems, stories and, and listening to songs, conversations, and speeches by native speakers or SSLE speakers the students in Language classrooms can improve their speaking skills.

Keywords: *English Teachers, Speaking, Develop, Remedies, Obstacles.*

Introduction

The students are required to gain competencies related to speaking, reading, writing, and listening in the English as a Second Language classroom. In the classroom, students are given fewer opportunities to speak due to time-consuming and the main focus is on enhancing writing skills. Even though the students get the opportunity to speak in English during the English periods or in any other public places, they hesitate to communicate in English. Thus, it is clear that they have developed a kind of fear of speaking in English. Many scholars have identified many obstacles to speaking in English. Davis, (2008), suggests that the classroom should provide a good communication environment and further suggests teachers should convert the classroom into a conversational place. However, the students hesitate to speak in English due to many inabilities. According to Balqis (2018), the lack of vocabulary is one of the challenges among speakers and it

affects the flow of speaking. Lightbown & Spada (2013) mention that having high self-esteem, less anxiety, and being able to take risks are characteristics of a good language learner. Having less self-esteem, anxiety, and inability to take risks are some obstacles among speakers of English. It is true that speaking tasks automatically generate anxiety among learners. (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2015). According to Fernando, Raja (2011), Selvi (2011), and Verghese (2011) there are some challenges to learning English as poor family background and rural settings. To improve the English proficiency of Sri Lankan students, many non-native English teachers have been recruited to government schools. These teachers have received their education from the National Colleges of Education and state universities in Sri Lanka. Even though they have improved their four skills now, as learners, they might have faced many obstacles when they were improving their speaking skills. Thus, this study focuses on

finding out the obstacles that they faced when improving their speaking skills.

Research Objectives

To find out the obstacles that English teachers faced when they were developing their speaking skills as students.

Research Question

What were the obstacles that English teachers faced when they were developing their speaking skills as students?

Literature Review

Teachers as learners have faced many obstacles when improving speaking skills. When considering the term obstacles, obstacles are something that block you so that movement, from now on, or action is prevented or made more difficult (Cambridge, 1999). As learners are non-native speakers, they should learn the English Language. Only a few learners get the opportunity to speak in English at home as English is a language of a minority in Sri Lanka. According to Fernando (2010), English is not an official or national language but it is one of the languages used in Sri Lanka and always becomes a language of a minority. Thus, most of the learners' only exposure to speaking English is in the classroom. According to Davis, (2008), the classroom provides a good communication environment and teachers should convert the classroom into a conversational place. Although the learners get opportunities to speak in the classrooms, most of the learners do not produce a single word in English due to poor speaking skills. Then they miss the opportunities to speak in the classroom. Less participation in speaking activities limits the opportunities for speaking in the classrooms (Rahmadeni, Amri, and Adnan, 2013, p. 413). Although the learners need to improve their speaking skills, they have to face many obstacles like lack of vocabulary, poor family background, rural setting, anxiety, and lack of confidence. According to Balqis (2018), the lack of vocabulary is one of the challenges among speakers and it affects the flow of speaking. Lightbown & Spada (2013) mention that having high self-esteem, less anxiety, and being able to take risks are characteristics of a good language learner. Having less self-esteem, anxiety, and inability to take risks are some obstacles among

speakers of English. It is true that speaking tasks automatically generate anxiety among learners. (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2015). According to Fernando, Raja (2011), Selvi (2011), and Verghese (2011) there are some challenges to learning English as poor family background and rural settings. These obstacles are visible among Sri Lankan speakers of English. Similarly, Mahripah (2013), points out that support from the family is important to learn a second language. As Sri Lankan learners overcoming these obstacles leads to becoming successful speakers of English.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research paradigm. A narrative style was adopted to find out the obstacles the teachers faced when they were improving their speaking skills and semi-structured interviews were conducted as the research tool. The Purposive Sampling technique was used to choose the sample for the study. Hence, my sample consists of 18 English teachers employed in schools and universities from nine provinces in Sri Lanka.

Results and Discussion

According to Oxford (2010), an obstacle is a thing that prevents progress. In this research, the researcher uses the word "obstacles" in terms of the obstacles that the teachers of English came across when they were improving their speaking skills. As they overcame these obstacles, they have become prominent figures in the field of English at present.

"While reading came across difficult words and when it was difficult to understand the rest of the sentences or the context, I noted them and looked them up in a dictionary or I figured it out by reading the context several times." (p1)

This was a statement given by one of the participants and it was seen in her story, that she had difficulty in understanding the words while she was reading. But she overcame it by referring to a dictionary or reading several with the context to figure out the meaning. As reading and speaking skills are interconnected and having rich knowledge of vocabulary improves speaking. This particular participant might be able to enhance her

knowledge of vocabulary with the use of a dictionary and it might be the reason for her fluency in speaking.

"Normally we had class meetings every week and grade meetings once a month. We had to deliver a speech at the assembly, so it was a challenge for us."(p2)

This particular participant is another prominent figure in the field of education. It was a challenge for her to deliver the speech without preparation when she was schooling. Lack of confidence in delivering impromptu speeches was one of the obstacles and she had to prepare for the speeches before presenting them. It might help her to become a successful speaker in the field of Education. This scenario was same with the most of the participants that the researcher interviewed.

"The obstacle was anxiety."(p3)

"When I started to speak English, I was nervous, shy and I felt that I was not confident enough to speak."(p4)

Another two participants too mentioned that anxiety about speaking in English was an obstacle for her when she developed her speaking and by practising only, she was able to overcome it. Lack of confidence in speaking English is a common obstacle among Sri Lankan learners. Juhana (2012, p. 101), has identified some psychological factors related to the discouragement of speaking English as being afraid of mistakes, shyness, lowering anxiety, lack of confidence, and lack of enthusiasm. Similarly, Baldwin (2011) and Humaera (2015) have observed that English public speaking can be a daunting experience for some individuals due to shyness. This can lead to a blank mind and forgetting what they want to present, resulting in poor performance.

"I hesitated to speak thinking that I would make grammatically incorrect sentences."(p 9)

This statement was given by another participant and she was afraid of making mistakes. As ESL learners, they always think of producing grammatically correct sentences that make them not produce a single utterance. Moreover, According to Humaera (2015), learners may be hesitant to speak because they fear making grammatical errors and being judged for it. As learners learn through their mistakes, this particular participant missed this opportunity

to learn from her mistakes but she was a book lover and through reading, she might be able to catch the grammar structure. Now she is too working as a prominent figure in the field of education.

"I had pronunciation issues and I participated in an elocution class and it helped me to overcome it."(p12)

This particular participant is a Tamil and she had difficulty in pronunciation while she was developing her speaking but she had attended elocution classes which might have helped her in overcoming the influence of her mother tongue on her speech.

"Mother tongue influence could be seen when I talked."(p11)

She was another Tamil participant and it can be seen her mother tongue influenced her speaking. Still, it is there in her speaking as she lives with the Tamil community. When comparing these two Tamil participants, it can be seen that the one who attended elocution classes showed less influence of their mother tongue. Thus, practising leads to better pronunciation ability.

"When I started to speak, I was struggling to speak because I did not enough vocabulary to speak. Then I started to find new vocabulary using a dictionary."(p15)

"I read books to improve my vocabulary."(p13)

This statement was given by another participant when questioned about obstacles she came across when developing speaking. According to her, she had the obstacle of lack of vocabulary. Thus, she used to read books to improve her vocabulary. However, word power plays a key role in the fluency of ESL learners. As Balqis (2018) mentions, lack of vocabulary is a big issue among ESL learners and it affects the flow of speech of the speakers. Although ESL learners find an English equivalent for every Sinhala word, there is a tendency to borrow from the Sinhala language when speaking the English language. As Gunasekara (2010), mentions, there is a tendency to use English equivalent when writing rather than borrowing, unless there is no equivalent. As examples,

"We had kiribath for breakfast." (Speech)

"We had milkrice for breakfast" (Writing) and some vocabulary such as *pettagama*, *konde*, *aiyo*, and *machan*.

(Gunasekara, 2010)

"Basically, speaking for a long time at a stretch was a big challenge., Most of the time I spoke with myself to overcome this."(p 16)

This statement is given by another participant and she has the problem of speaking for a long time in English. Most of the time she used short sentences to communicate and because of her desire for long sentences she practiced it with herself. It was beneficial and she uses it as a strategy to improve her speaking.

"I think I did not get enough people to talk with as most Sinhala people are reluctant to talk in English but I tried to talk as much as I can."(p5)

This particular participant stated that not having more people to converse with in English was an obstacle for her to improve her speaking skills. When there is more interaction there are more opportunities to share the ideas. When considering Sri Lankan classrooms, only a smaller number of students speak English during the English period. If the students speak with other students, it provides chances to improve themselves and it reduces the fear of speaking. Similarly, if the students talk with the teacher, there is a good opportunity to get feedback from the teacher. As this participant points out Sinhala people are reluctant to speak in English and some of them have the habit of cheating saying "*kaddanawa*, *kaduwenkotanawa*." However, she tried to talk as much as she could as a remedy for that and she succeeded. At present, she is contributing to the field of English.

By considering the responses given by the participants it can be understood that all the English teachers have developed their speaking by overcoming the obstacles that they came across. Moreover, ESL learners can get an idea of how to overcome the obstacles they come across when they are developing their speaking skills and suggestions for overcoming the obstacles to improve speaking skills as these are real-world experiences that have proven to be practical and effective.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The main objective is to identify the obstacles that English teachers faced when they were improving their speaking skills. The teachers have used remedies to overcome these obstacles to develop their speaking skills. Most teachers have the problem of lack of vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, anxiety, thinking of grammar concepts before speaking. Mother tongue influence is another obstacle that Tamil English teachers came across when they were developing their speaking skills. English teachers have used remedies to overcome these obstacles and become successful speakers. As remedies, speaking with friends, loud and silent reading, practising pronunciation and learning vocabulary, writing speeches, poems, and stories and listening to songs, conversations, and speeches by native speakers or SSLE speakers have been used. Thus, the use of these remedies are the successful strategies to overcome the obstacles that ESL learners face when they develop their speaking skills.

As English is learned as a second language, ESL learners encounter many obstacles when they develop speaking skills. But it can be recommended that the obstacles can be overcome with the use of above remedies. Most of the obstacles such as fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, lack of vocabulary, and pronunciation difficulties can be overcome by practising speaking. It can be recommended that the remedies used by the participants can be used to overcome obstacles for the learners who are trying to develop speaking skills.

The findings and recommendations in relation to the current study could be used to develop speaking skills among English language learners not only Sri Lankan context but other ESL learners of foreign contexts. As there is less research available related to stories of English teachers about how they develop their speaking skills in the Sri Lankan context, more research is encouraged to be conducted to enhance speaking skills.

References

1. Arachchi, N. W. (2020). A Study to Identify Sri Lankan Dialects of English- A Linguistic Exploration: Based on Tertiary level Students in SLIATE- Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Scientific and Research*

- Publications (IJSRP)*, 10(4), p10037. <https://doi.org/10.29322/ijrsrp10.04.2020.p10037>
2. Alrnaies, S. (n.d.). *www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/elt-masters-dissertations Stories of Kuwaiti English Language Teachers: A Multimodal Narrative Inquiry*. www.shu.ac.uk/tesol
 3. Ann Wright, K. (2022). *Narrative Inquiry of Early Career Teachers' Experiences Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd>
 4. Ayawan, J. E., Duyapat, N. O., & Martin, A. B. (2022). An Analysis of the Oral Communication Barriers in Face-to-face Communications Towards the Development of an Intervention Program in Speaking. *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, 31. <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v31i1.6487>
 5. Dincer, A. (2020). Proficient Speakers of English as a Foreign Language. *IAFOR Journal of Education: Language Learning in Education*.
 6. Gunasekara, M. (2005). The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English.
 7. Hosni, S. A. (2014). Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Young EFL Learners. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSSELL)*, PP 22-30
 8. Kaur, D., & Abdul Aziz, A. (2020). The Use of Language Game in Enhancing Students' Speaking Skills. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(12). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarv10-i12/8369>
 9. Kardwish, N. A. (2016). Investigating Speaking Difficulties that Encounter .
 10. Larenas, C. D. (2011). *Exploring Knowledge of English Speaking Strategies in 8 th and 12 th Graders* (Vol. 13, Issue 2). <http://www.fondecyt.cl/578/ar->
 11. Lopez, M. M. (2011). Speaking strategies used by BA ELT students in public universities in Mexico. *MEXTESOL JOURNAL*.
 12. MstMoriyam, Q. (2005). Speaking Strategy Use by the EFL Students in Japan and Bangladesh. In *Journal of International Development and Cooperation* (Vol. 12, Issue 1).
 13. Moussu, L., & Lllurda, E. (2008). Non-native English-speaking English language teachers: History and research. In *Language Teaching* (Vol. 41, Issue 3, pp. 315–348).
 14. Mendis, D., & Rambukwella, H. (2020). *Sri Lankan Englishes View project International Corpus of English-Sri Lanka (ICE-SL) View project*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342698157_National_Policy_1997-I.(n.d.).
 15. Pawlak, M. (2018). Investigating the use of speaking strategies in the performance of two communicative tasks: The importance of communicative goal. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 8(2 Special Issue), 269–291. <https://doi.org/10.14746/sslt.2018.8.2.5>
 16. Reddivari, M. (n.d.). *Mother Tongue Influence in English Pronunciation: Problems of Learning English as a Second Language in India*.
 17. Rianingsih, R. (2015). The Teacher Strategies In Overcoming Students' Difficulties In
 18. Sosas, R. v. (2021). Technology in teaching speaking and its effects to students learning English. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(2), 958–970. <https://doi.org/10.52462/jlls.66>
 19. Sultana, N., & Jamin, B. (2021). Overcoming Fear to Improve English Speaking Skill. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 05(12), 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2021.51202>
 20. Shen, B. (n.d.). *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking*.
 21. Seefa, K. R. (2017, December). *research and publications*. Retrieved from www.seu.ac.lk: <https://www.seu.ac.lk/>
 22. Ruzkina, R. F., Nizla, M. L. F., Marjiya, M. I. F., Arjiya, & Rushda, M. R. F. (n.d.). *A Study Of Pronunciation Problems Among Tamil Speaking English Learners In Srilanka*.
 23. *Teachers' Lives A Life History Narrative Inquiry into Chinese College English Teachers' Professional Development in the Context of Chinese Culture Ling Meng*. (n.d.).
 24. Triyoga, A., Sa'diyah, H., & Hidayati, R. N. (2022). A Narrative Research of an EFL Student's Speaking Learning Strategy. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and*

- Literature*, 10(2), 1671–1683. <https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v10i2.3159>
25. Triwittayayon, T., & Sarobol, N. (n.d.). *Factors Enhancing English Speaking Ability: Perspectives from Thai High School Students and Their Teachers*.
26. Zaher, A. A. (2006). *The Effectiveness of a Task-Based Instruction program in*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/>