

BICS, CALP, AND PROFICIENCY ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE AMONG THE STUDENTS OF ENGINEERING IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in any language is determined by the ability of a user to create a balance between the transferable and transferring skills in a particular language. It is further impacted by a user's awareness of the rules between interpersonal use of a language and the use of the same for academic purposes. The paper analyses the factors that impact proficiency in English as a second language. The findings are based on a research conducted among three hundred students pursuing undergraduate programmes in different branches of engineering in Arunachal Pradesh.

Key words: BICS, CALP, Language Anxiety, Transfer Skills, Competence

INTRODUCTION

Proficiency implies a balance between ability, competence, and performance and it is directly related to the academic ability of an individual which is defined as 'successful performance on a defined set of tasks' (Caroll, 1993). Proficiency impacts the 'transfer skills' (Botha and Cillers, 1993) of an individual. Lack of proper and augmented development of the transfer skills limit the academic ability of a learner thereby impacting negatively on his proficiency levels. Transfer skills fall under two categories:

(a) Lower Order Transferable Skills and (b) Higher Order 'Transferring Skills' (Bridges, 1993). Transferable skill implies learning of a specific skill under a specific situation or circumstance and applying the learned skill in a different situation or circumstance. In other words, it implies a transference and application of a specific skill set to a different situation or circumstance. Some of the common transferable skills include using a particular language code learned in a specific environment, such as school and transferring the same to a different environment such as restaurant or home, etc. or a child learning new words and applying the same to denote the number of activities or events, etc. Transferring Skills, on the other hand, refers to three basic meta-competency skills (Bridges, 1993), viz.,

- (i) Skill to make a distinction between similarities and differences
- (ii) Developing cognitive ability to modify, adapt and expand
- (iii) Attitudes and Dispositions supporting the two skills above (Bridges, 1993)

Proficiency development is directly related to the higher order transferring, or meta- competency skills in that without being able to distinguish between similarities and differences, a skill that was learned in

a particular situation cannot be suitably modified, adapted or expanded. Further, the skill to modify, adapt or expand depends on the learner's attitude and desire to learn which makes all three meta-competencies interlinked. An improper development and subsequent lack of application skills hamper the proficiency level as the learner finds it difficult to adapt and appropriate the skills in a new context suitably. For instance, the errors committed by students while translating the source language to the target language, like from their respective mother tongues to L2, could be attributed to the lack of proper meta-competency skills.

Thus, transferring skills which are cognitive and based on the abilities have to be developed through the innate and inborn mechanism of an individual using which he can hypothesize and make distinctions between different concrete situations.

BICS and CALP

Proficiency in a particular language is impacted by the gaps between the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) on the part of a user (Cummins, 1979) particularly in case of the bilingual students. At this juncture, it is important to make a distinction between 'being proficient' and 'being fluent.' Fluency implies oral communication in a language expressed in a flow without any halts. While using L2, fluency relies on the prosody of the language used, articulation, pronunciation, and timing of the dialogue. Fluency is directly dependent on the use of the language in real life contexts with the native or an equally fluent speaker of the same. Proficiency, the other hand, refers to the ability on the part of the user to understand, communicate and translate in a particular language. Proficiency relies more on the skills of listening, reading and writing, apart from speaking and translate, along with a sound knowledge of grammatical rules in the said language.

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are basic language skills required to communicate in a particular language in social situations in a contextually appropriate manner. BICS are generally proficiency independent and fairly *relaxed* and *liberal* regarding adherence to the rules. As far as English as L2 is concerned, the problems with fluency and proficiency are due to an emphasis on acquiring and developing BICS, prompting a deliberate and systematic compromise on teaching and learning of English in India. Such an emphasis on developing oral English skills to make one fluent has more of social value as fluency in English is inseparably attached with the notions of class, status, social positioning, cultural sophistication, and general social acceptability. Its impact is also evident financially in the opening of a large number of non-accredited institutions offering courses on spoken English with the help of non-customized and non-standard study materials. The students, to get a quick grasp over the spoken component, use these materials and learn the content generally by rote, followed by using the language mechanically devoid of contextual considerations. Since the material provided doesn't take into consideration the unique and individual problems experienced by the users and is rather general and often copied from eclectic sources, the students are, therefore, seldom exposed to the customized solutions to the errors they commit while using English. Regarding the material available online, the students are found to follow the results generated by the search engine on the basis of the keywords fed, rather than searching for the material based on a careful understanding and identification of their specific problems. All these factors contribute towards forming their notions of

the *correctness* of using English in oral as well as the written medium in both off and online modes.

The Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), on the other hand, implies formal academic learning with an adequate focus on developing listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating skills in a given language. Apart from the emphasis on the basic skills stated above, CALP also stresses on other major aspects of language learning as classification, comparison, the skills to synthesize, infer, evaluate and interpret in both context-bound as well as context-free or displaced situations. CALP is cognitively more demanding than BICS and plays a pivotal role in developing proficiency in a given language. Excessive emphasis on developing BICS tend to compromise with the learning of CALP which is comparatively rigorous and content- intensive than the former.

In case of the students who have been surveyed, it has been found that barring 4.5% of the respondents (14 students), the rest of them have been institutionally exposed more to BICS than CALP in English, with their syllabi too focussing more on improving communicative skills than developing or learning languages. As a result, the students are found to have a slightly better command over spoken skills of English than written and translation skills. Further, it has also been found that the students cannot classify the grammatical components of English and are unable to specify the nature of errors they commit while using English in all three modes of usage, viz., reading, speaking and writing. Moreover, it has also been found that in a significant number of instances, the students are not even aware of the fact that they have committed errors in their use of English in all three modes of usage.

Thus, it is evident that there has to be a balance of both CALP and BICS to make a learner proficient as well as fluent in L2, with the former playing a major role in the development of the latter.

TESTING PROFICIENCY OF THE STUDENTS

The research was conducted involving 300 students of engineering with 245 males and 55 females pursuing undergraduate course in different branches of engineering at Arunachal Pradesh. 97% of the respondents (291 students) belong to the following communities of the Northeast: Garo, Nyshi, Bodo, Chokri, Khasi, Manipuri, Mizo, Lushai, Ememei, Galo, Adi, Apatani, Assamese, Tagin, Kokborok, Sangtam, Hrangkhawl, Meteilon, Sumi, Lotha, Mizotawng, Dimasa, Bhutia and Thadou-Kuki with each having their own distinctive cultural, linguistic or dialectal pattern. 77% (231 students) of the respondents had English as the medium of instruction in their schools, 11%, i.e., 33 students had Hindi, and 12% (36 students) had their school education from the vernacular medium schools. Like the medium of instruction, the affiliating boards too vary from state to state. For instance, all government and private schools in Arunachal Pradesh are affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). On the other hand, in Assam and Meghalaya, there are private schools which are affiliated to the Assam State Board, CBSE and ICSE along with the government schools. Other states of the north-eastern region also have the same composition as far as the affiliating boards are concerned. 72.3% of the total respondents (217 students) learnt to communicate in English through formal classroom instruction, 16.7% (50 students) through interacting with people and 11% (33 students) through self-study mode which includes learning through online learning videos as available on YouTube or the learning materials provided by the British Council or offline study materials like books and materials given by the coaching institutes.

To test the proficiency level of the students in the English language, English Language Use, and Proficiency Questionnaire has been used. The questionnaire is designed taking into account the classroom composition, prospective respondents and their levels of the English language use. 'The Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire' (LEAP-Q) (Marian, Blumenfeld, and Kaushanskaya, 2007) and 'Language History Questionnaire' (Li, Sepanski, and Zhao, 2006) served as the models for designing this questionnaire. The composition of the respondents remained the same as was in the case of the questionnaire designed for measuring the English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. The questionnaire contains twelve questions, which are used to measure the English language proficiency level of the students regarding reading, writing, speaking and the knowledge of grammar. Further, the questionnaire also assesses students' use of their respective mother tongue vis-à-vis English for speaking and reading. For the analysis of responses, the Likert scale has been used. Descriptive analysis has been done to analyze and interpret the responses.

Prior to designing the English Language Use and Proficiency questionnaire, a detailed study of both the Language Experience and Proficiency questionnaire and the Language History questionnaire was done. While both the questionnaires deal with a standardized set of parameters to measure the proficiency level of the L2 users, yet considering the unique composition of the respondents of this study, a certain degree of appropriation was required as some questions in both the questionnaires do not fit into the testing criteria of the surveyed group. Hence, adopting these two questionnaires without any modification would not have generated the correct findings.

Considering the uniqueness of the composition of the respondents and also taking into consideration their academic, linguistic and social backgrounds, a new questionnaire has been designed by re-appropriating the Language History questionnaire and the Language Experience and Proficiency questionnaire (LEAP-Q). The new questionnaire factors in the background of the respondents and as a result, appropriate and context-specific responses could be collected.

ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

All the respondents *consider* themselves as fluent in their respective mother tongues and English. Their belief stems from the fact that a majority of them have been speaking English right from their school days and have preferred it as the primary medium for writing and reading over other languages. However, when tested on the parameters of speaking, reading, writing and translatability to determine fluency, 87.5% of the respondents (263 students) are found to be lacking in skills of writing and translatability in English with moderate to a significantly high range of errors in speaking and reading. As far as their use of the mother tongue is concerned, 77.3% respondents (232 students) cannot do the translations from L2 (English) to L1 and vice versa correctly and 68.3% (205 students) couldn't write their native tongue correctly. While testing fluency with the indigenous students from Arunachal Pradesh, given the fact of their lack of script, their reading, writing and translation skills were tested using the Roman script and as a result, the students from Arunachal Pradesh have scored marginally higher compared to those from other states in terms of reading and speaking skills of English.

Foreign Language Anxiety against English too is a major limiting factor for the students during speaking, reading, and translation of English. As far as writing skills are concerned, it has been found that anxiety

impacts less on offline writing than during synchronous messages online, especially when they are aware of the presence of the evaluator or observer on the other end. In case of offline writing, however, due to the possibility of delayed feedback, unlike the instant ones online, the users are less anxious.

Following are the primary reasons which impact English proficiency and fluency:

(i) Translations from English to Hindi or other vernacular languages.

In the feeder level, the emphasis on language teaching is primarily to *score* in examinations than to *learn* to use the same in different situations and contexts. Translation method is widely followed while teaching language in which English gets invariably translated either to Hindi or the respective vernacular without creating any opportunity for the students/learners to express their understanding in English. Further, the learners were given specific topics, areas or questions to prepare for the examinations, to which the answers are dictated in the class, and the students are required to cram and write. Such an examination-centric focus on English, as well as the mother tongue or Hindi, has resulted in incomplete learning of all the three languages. The outcome, therefore, is a lack of proficiency or fluency in either language.

(ii) Language Anxiety

Foreign Language Anxiety, particularly towards English, has been found to be a significant limiting factor towards becoming fluent or proficient in the target language. The most prominent reason for triggering anxiety that impacts proficiency is the lack of knowledge of grammatical rules and inadequate vocabulary, particularly in the oral mode of communication. However, it is worth noting that the same set of students are *not* anxious while using English as the target language in other subjects and courses of their study. They become anxious at the presence of the teacher or anyone who possess better oral or written communication skills in English. This has been observed during the group discussions which are a part of compulsory class assignments and other group tasks. These groups are formed by mixing students with different levels of proficiency and fluency in English so that with peer effort, the respondents could solve their problems among themselves. However, it has been found that those students who have issues with oral communication skills found such an arrangement with the fluent and proficient peers *dominating* and it impacted their performance severely. 73.5% respondents (220 students) who have the problems with oral communication in English have pointed towards this problem forcefully. While writing, on the other hand, the number of errors is few while writing spontaneously and without the *fear* of instant feedback or evaluation. The same is true in case of asynchronous updates online, but the errors compound once the respondents become *aware* of instant feedback or assessment offline or an immediate corrective comment online.

(iii) The standard medium of communication or the link language happens to be Hindi.

Students use English as a medium of oral communication primarily in the language classroom. For the rest, they use Hindi or their respective mother tongues which serve as the primary link language. Thus, on the face of Hindi or mother tongue, the use of English gets compromised, and the students get no opportunity to work on it to gain fluency or become proficient.

(iv) *Lack of curation and management while using web resources for learning.*

On being pointed out the errors and emphasized on developing speaking, reading and writing skills along with the knowledge of grammar, it has been found that the respondents' first option is to search the online resources available and typically, they *rely* on the first three results of any search that the search engine displays. Rarely they engage in an extensive search of the subject and seldom are they found making a comparative assessment of the results which are available. With the lack of region-specific pre-curated content on the web for learning L2, the respondents get a general treatment of the subject which doesn't serve their purpose. Only 30% of the respondents (90 students) have stated that they follow the curated online material provided in the class and the rest relied solely on the search engines for getting the content. With a lack of proper, systematic knowledge about language and communication skills, such a reliance on unmonitored and unmanaged resources have compounded the problem further as the respondents started *using* the screen knowledge in their oral and written modes of communication.

(v) *Lack of regulation and evaluation or feedback while communicating online*

While the respondents have been encouraged to use technology and internet-mediated tools to learn the language, but it has been found that their use of the language online is substantially *liberal* regarding grammar, style, punctuation, and choice of words, mainly while communicating in an asynchronous mode. With a considerable amount of data getting generated every minute, evaluation and instant or timely feedback are not possible. As a result, the errors go unnoticed or unchecked which makes the respondent *believe* that whatever is communicated or posted by them online is correct and thus, they form their *notions of correctness* which they use across mediums. Even the options of auto-correct in a word document or app-based or extension-based corrections in online portals haven't helped as the students respond to the blue or red squiggle intuitively than basing their choice on logic or reason.

(vi) *Extreme emphasis on oral skills, mainly English and using non-standard offline learning materials.*

Proficiency and fluency are directly related to the knowledge of grammatical rules as well as the ability to make the distinction between the lexical and contextual meaning of any word or expression. While Harmer (2001) opposes the use of L1 in an L2 class as it becomes 'uncommunicative, difficult and irrelevant' (2001), studies by Ross (2000), Mattioli (2004), Carless (2008) have strongly advocated the use of L1 for teaching L2 as it is essential to develop 'accuracy, clarity and flexibility' (Ross, 2000). Further translation is considered as the 'fifth skill' (Ross 2000) of the communication process along with listening, speaking, reading and writing, which helps in fulfilling 'cognitive and [numerous] social functions' (Carless, 2008). According to Schweers (1999), L2 taught by keeping L1 as a base lends a positive impact in that it helps in providing a sense of 'security' to the learners and 'validate' their experiences (Schweers, 1999).' Thus, it is evident that a sound knowledge of L1 is a must to make a learner proficient and fluent in L2.

CONCLUSION

It has been observed that one of the major reasons for the students' lack of proper development of communicative skills in both their mother tongues and English result from an emphasis on developing oral skills in English over the other skills in the same as well as the mother tongue. As a result, the

learner gets *exposed* to learning materials and, in many cases, getting enrolled in spoken English programs, which makes a negative impact on learning a language. More than applying reason and rules, the learners have mastered the materials by rote and use the same without any consideration for contextual appropriateness and correctness. The outcome of such an application of language is an unintended gap between the ideated and the conveyed message. Further, with the emphasis on learning only a single skill of L2, the other skills and the learning of mother tongue gets compromised. This is evident from the responses of the students as lacking in one or more skills in both L1 and L2. The offline materials as available in the market or the institutions providing courses on developing oral proficiency in English are just copied materials taken either from the web or materials which are developed in other countries for a specified target group. Using the same material by the students devoid of any guidance towards relating the same to the rules of their respective mother tongue have impacted their proficiency and fluency in English as well as their respective mother tongues.

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