

Lack of Vocabulary: A Barrier to the Oral Communication Skills of GCE A/L Students in the Trincomalee District of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Vocabulary plays a vital role in communication as it is the basis of all languages. It is the building blocks that can be used to share information, express thought and build personal relationships. Wider vocabulary supports the development of all four language skills and can be a stepping stone to higher levels of fluency. However, most ESL learners in Sri Lanka do not possess sufficient proficiency in vocabulary. As a result, learners' effectiveness and fluency in communication are interrupted. This study was conducted to investigate the barriers in oral communication skills of GCE (A/L) students in the Trincomalee District, Sri Lanka due to a lack of vocabulary. In this study, 50 G.C.E (A/L) second-year students in the Arts stream of three selected schools in the Trincomalee District were randomly selected as a sample population. Two data collection instruments; a speaking test and a questionnaire were chosen for primary data collection in this study, the quantitative design was applied in data collection. The findings of the analysis of the speaking test show that a majority of the participants had obtained lower marks (between 1 -10) in subcomponents of speaking i.e. in Lexical Resource and Pronunciation. Further, the findings of the analysis of the questionnaire show that most of the participants' vocabulary power is significantly low showing less interest to learn English and that they do not spend time at home learning English. Moreover, according to the participants' response regarding the factors affecting participants' speaking proficiency, 56% of the participants pointed out that a low proficiency in vocabulary affects their speaking proficiency.

Keywords: Oral communication, English as a Second Language, General Certificate of Education

1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays a vital role in human communication. Vocabulary is significant for written and oral discourses in any language. As reviewing a study on teaching vocabularies, vocabulary is a large stock of words in a language. Memorizing a large number of vocabularies in any language can help the speakers to communicate with people effectively. (Oljira, 2015).

Similarly, Yang and Dai (2012) report that in learning a mother tongue or any foreign language, vocabulary is the most significant component. Language acquisition cannot take place without learning its words with unlimited shifts in meaning caused by various contextual variables. Therefore, vocabularies are important for effective communication, whether it is oral or written communication. The lack of vocabulary leads to communicative barriers, particularly the majority of the second and foreign-language speakers struggle to speak the language due to insufficient vocabulary. Effective oral communication is regarded as a flow of speech. Therefore, a large number of vocabulary is needed for fluent speaking. According to the review of a book titled "Methodology in Language Teaching", the language of human beings depend on the vocabulary used or gained. Thus, without vocabulary, the learners will be demotivated to use the language (Richards and Renandya, 2002).

Low proficiency in vocabulary is a common problem among most English as Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speakers. As a result, it leads to a communicative barrier among ESL and EFL speakers. Concerning the English language in Sri Lanka, it is spoken as a second language which is offered as a compulsory subject from grade 3 to 11 at government schools in terms of the educational curriculum of Sri Lanka. According to the school ESL curriculum in Sri Lanka, General English is offered for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level (A/L). The curriculum of General English covers all language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Most importantly, lower proficiency in vocabulary has been the primary barrier to effective oral communication among the students. Despite this, very little focus is given to improving the speaking ability of the students at schools. Although the writing skills of some students are good to a certain extent, they do not have the sufficient vocabulary to expand their writing skills. However, the majority of the students fail to give their attention to mastering English, and more focus is given to other subjects. Halik and Nusrath (2020) find that many students in Mutur, in the Trincomalee District give importance to the other three main subjects and focus on studying them only to get university admission. As a result, students get lower results in General English in G.C.E (A/L) examination.

The oral communication skills of the GCE A/L Students in the Trincomalee District of Sri Lanka were investigated since students' oral communicative barrier was observed in classroom teaching due to the lack of vocabulary.

Therefore, this study was carried out to investigate the oral communicative barriers due to low proficiency in vocabulary.

Problem Statement

To communicate with people in a language, either oral or written communication, vocabularies are reckoned to be a significant part. However, the lack of vocabulary has been a huge challenge for effective communication among second and foreign language learners. As a result of low proficiency in vocabulary, fluency in written and oral communication is interrupted. In particular, the lack of vocabulary specifies an extreme barrier for learners' oral communication. Likewise, it was observed in classroom teaching among the GCE (A/L) second-year students at the selected schools in Trincomalee District that they face several difficulties in speaking English. The primary problem observed in students' speaking performance was low proficiency in vocabulary. When the students perform speaking activities, they are unable to speak fluently with proper pronunciation, and they fail to use the relevant words in their spoken discourse according to the context which leads to a barrier in oral communicative skills.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives are addressed based on the problems of this study. They are as follows.

- To investigate the factors for oral communicative barriers among the G.C.E (A/L) second-year students of the selected schools due to low proficiency in vocabulary
- To identify the factors which affect students' low proficiency in vocabulary

Research Questions

The following research questions are posed in this study. They are as follows

- Does the majority of the GCE (A/L) students at the selected schools find difficulties to speak English as a result of low proficiency in vocabulary?
- What are the reasons behind the low proficiency in vocabulary among the GCE (A/L) students at the selected schools?

The significance of the study

This study is beneficial for the ESL teachers in Sri Lanka to utilize suitable remedies and recommendations for improving students' vocabulary and speaking skills.

Finally, this study will be significant for all ESL/EFL learners, teachers, and curriculum designers around the globe.

2. Literature review

This part presents the review of secondary sources according to the problems and objectives of the study.

2.1 Importance of Vocabulary

The connection between vocabulary size and second language attainment has been widely researched over the years. As reviewing secondary sources about the importance of vocabulary in verbal communication, Balqis (2018) comments regarding the importance of vocabulary that vocabulary is one of the most important elements in learning a foreign language. Learning vocabulary is considered a basic step for learners. Balqis (2018) further states that the learners who have a lack of vocabulary cannot express their concepts as clearly, fluently as they want, and also, they cannot understand the books which are written in English. According to the statement of Balqis (2018), the lack of vocabulary is a major challenge among the ESL/EFL learners which affect the flow of speech of the speakers. Therefore, learning vocabulary is significant for ESL/EFL learners.

Rivers (1998) indicates that learners cannot learn a language without sufficient word power. Furthermore, Kufaisi (2012) claims that without possessing a sufficient vocabulary, the learners of English who follow an academic program will find difficulties in developing language skills. According to their statement and claim, due to the lack of vocabulary, the learners fail to perform well in both oral and written communication in the particular field. When the learner fails to utter or use a particular word in discourse, the flow of speech is interrupted.

2.2 Factors affecting Oral Communication

Several factors affect learners' effective oral communication. Since this study focuses on the factors which contribute to the learners' oral communicative barrier, certain factors are discussed by reviewing other relevant studies. According to the classification of Syah (2005) regarding learning factors, there are two main factors; individual factors and social factors (P.132). Syah (2005) further describes that the individual factors come from the learners' side, which can be growth, aptitude, exercises, motivations, and attitude. Social factors, on the other hand, come from the surrounding of the learners such as family, teacher and teaching method, facilities, social motivation, environment, and chance (P.132).

Further, as far as pronunciation is concerned, poor pronunciation affects learners' effective oral communication. In this sense, Balqis (2018) claims that pronunciation is one of the most significant elements of a language. Another factor affecting oral communication is the lack of learning facilities. Learning facilities can help the learners to achieve the outcome in the teaching-learning process. (Sari, 2010, P.14). In particular, lack of vocabulary and lack of speaking environment badly affect the learners' effective oral communication. In the current study, it was observed that due to a lack of vocabulary, most of the students face difficulties in speaking English.

2.3 Oral communication

Since this study aimed at investigating the barrier to oral communication skills due to low proficiency in vocabulary, other relevant secondary sources are reviewed. Hence, according to the review of other secondary sources, speaking is defined as a productive and interactive process that involves receiving, constructing, and conveying meanings in the form of spoken words (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). Further, Al-Ma'shy (2011) has highlighted the importance of the speaking skill that it is the most frequently used skill in a language classroom.

Seidlhofer (2015) indicates that the English language plays the prestigious status in the modern world since it has become the global language of communication. However, the ESL and EFL learners do not reach the expected level of communicative competence. In Sri Lanka, most ESL learners are still poor in speaking proficiency. Al-Ma'shy (2011) reveals that the majority of the English language teachers concentrate on improving reading and writing skills, and they do not pay attention about the importance of speaking and listening skills.

3. Methodology

This part presents the materials and methods used in this study. The materials and methods are elaborated under these four sections: research design, sample population, research instruments, and data collection procedure.

3.1 Research Design

The study was carried out to investigate the barriers to oral communicative skills due to low proficiency in the vocabulary of the G.C.E (A/L) second-year students in the Arts stream of the selected schools in Trincomalee District, Sri Lanka. A quantitative design was applied in primary data collection since the instruments; speaking tests and questionnaires were quantitative. The sample population was selected through random sampling. Further, in this study, descriptive and statistical methods were used for data analysis.

3.2 Sample Population

The total population of this study was 123 G.C.E (A/L) second-year students in the Arts stream from the three selected schools in the Muttur Education Zone, Trincomalee District, namely: T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Muttur, T/Mu/Kiliveddy Maha Vidyalayam, Kiliveddy and T/Mu/Ilangai Muhaththuvaram Hindu College, Lankapattinam. Out of the total population, 50 students were selected as the sample population for primary data collection. The sample was selected through random sampling. The sample size of this study is 123 G.C.E (A/L) second-year students in the Arts stream.

3.3 Research Instruments

Research tools are significant for primary data collection in research. In this sense, speaking tests and questionnaires were used as research instruments of this study, and they were quantitative instruments. The speaking test consisted of an oral speech. Five minutes of oral speech with optional titles were given. Hundred (100) marks were allocated for the test. In the speaking test, four aspects of speaking were considered, namely: Fluency and Coherence (FC), Lexical Resource (LR), Pronunciation (P), and Grammatical Accuracy (GA). Twenty-five (25) marks were given for each aspect. The speaking test is attached in the appendices (Appendix A).

Further, the questionnaire consisted of 10 close-ended questions. The questions focused on participants' demographical information, learning facilities, and resources, interest in learning English, vocabulary power, oral communicative skill, and factors affecting students' English-speaking proficiency due to vocabulary. The questionnaire is attached in the appendices (Appendix B).

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

After the sampling process is complete, the speaking test was conducted among the participants. The participants were given clear instructions on how to perform the test. The aim of conducting the speaking test was to identify the participants' oral communicative barriers due to low proficiency in vocabulary. After conducting the test, the questionnaire was distributed among the participants to collect the required information concerning the problems and objectives of the study.

4. Discussion and findings

This part presents the findings of the primary data analysis and the discussion of the findings.

4.1 Discussion and findings of the speaking test

The test consists of an oral test which was an individual activity. The marks for the test were given according to International English Language Testing System (IELTS) marking criteria for the speaking test. In this sense, four aspects of speaking such as Fluency and Coherence (FC), Lexical Resource (LR), Pronunciation (P), and Grammatical Accuracy (GA) were tested among the students. Twenty-five marks were given for each aspect of the test. In particular, more focus was given to FC and pronunciation to see how lack of vocabulary and pronunciation affect participants' oral communicative skills.

4.1.1 Participants' Performance on LR

This section presents how far the participants had used vocabulary to perform their speech test, and a discussion of the findings based on the objectives and questions of the study. The marks obtained by the participants are given by a percentage. The following graph (4.1) shows participants' performance in the test based on LR.

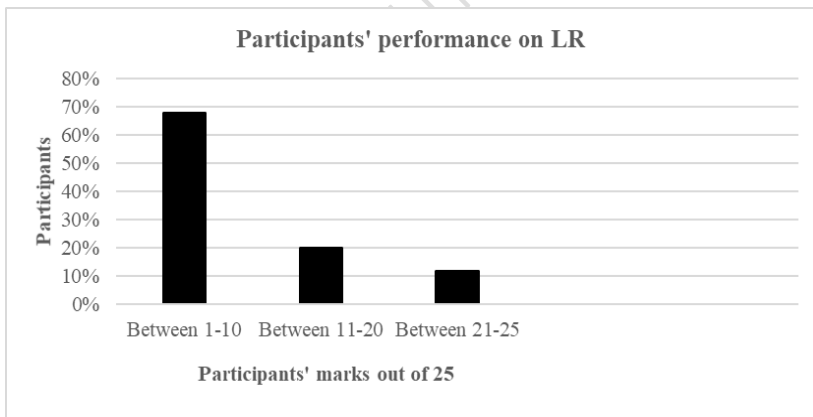


Fig. 4.1 (Participants' Performance on LR)

As shown above in the graph, out of 50 participants, 34 participants had obtained between 1 – 10 marks, 10 participants had obtained between 11 – 20 marks and 6 participants had obtained between 21 – 25 marks. As far as the lexical resource or vocabulary power of the students is concerned, the majority of the participants had failed to use sufficient and relevant lexemes according to the context.

Lack of lexical resources has been the primary problem among the students in speaking English fluently. It affects students' effective oral communication. When the speakers fail to utter the relevant word in the appropriate context, the flow of speech is interrupted. Therefore, their speech performance was dissatisfactory in the test. 86% of the participants' performance was lower in FC. It is obvious that if the students have insufficient word power, students cannot speak a language fluently and they are unable to pronounce words effectively.

Therefore, the findings concerning the participants' use of vocabulary reveal that lack of lexical resources is one of the primary factors affecting students' oral communicative skills. Insufficient vocabulary was a barrier to communication for a large number of students in the speech test.

4.1.1 Participants' Performance on pronunciation

This section presents how participants pronounced words, phrases, and sentences in the test, and the discussion of the performance on pronunciation. The marks obtained by the participants are given by a percentage. The following graph (4.2) shows participants' performance in the test based on pronunciation.

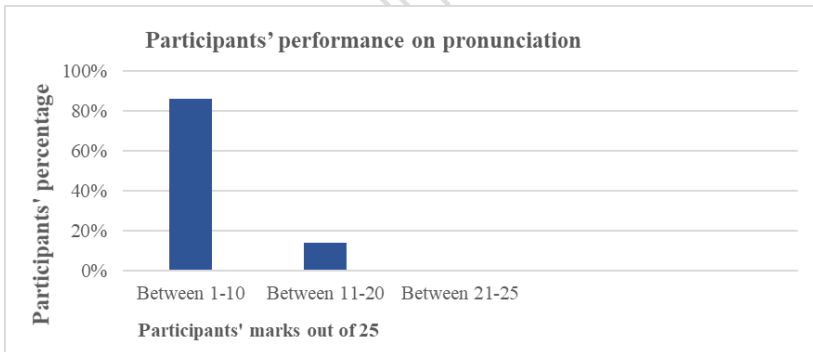


Fig. 4.2 (Participants' Performance on pronunciation)

As far as the participants' performance, based on the pronunciation, is concerned, 43 participants had obtained between 1 -10 marks, 7 participants had obtained between 11 – 20 marks and no participants had obtained between 21 – 25 marks in pronunciation. When the participants' performance in pronouncing words is discussed, a large number of students who mispronounced the words and sentences did not have sufficient vocabulary.

Further, the opinion survey shows that the majority of the participants (76%) accepted the fact that the pronunciation rule was not taught in the classroom. Therefore, they were unaware of the pronunciation rule of words. However, a few numbers of participants' pronunciations were good. The factors behind their good pronunciation are sufficient vocabulary, their interest in learning English, and positive learning background. The following graph shows participants' performance in the test based on pronunciation.

4.2 Findings and discussion of the questionnaire

This questionnaire was designed to collect the opinions among the participants regarding participants' interest in learning English, their lexical resources, pronunciation, and barrier to oral communication. It consists of 10 close-ended questions. The following table presents participants' responses to the questions in the questionnaire.

No	Questionnaire questions	Percentage for participants' response	
		Yes	No
01	Are you interested in learning English?	32%	68%
02	Do you agree that vocabulary is important to speak English?	100%	-
03	Do you think that your current English vocabulary is sufficient for your oral communication?	16%	84%
04	Do you spend time at home for improving your vocabulary?	10%	90%
05	Do you follow any techniques to improve your vocabulary?	14%	86%
06	Is speaking practice done in English classes at school?	42%	58%
07	Is the rule of pronunciation taught to correct pronunciation error	24%	76%
08	Is pronunciation practiced in the classroom?	18%	82%
09	Do you think that your pronunciation is good in your loud reading?	20%	80%

Table 4.1 (Participants' response to the questions in the questionnaire)

As far as the data presentation of the questionnaire is concerned, students' lack of interest has been a huge challenge among the ESL teachers. In particular, GCE (A/L) students do not give much concern to learn English while more focus is given to other main subjects. According to the findings, 34 out of 50 participants responded that they were not interested in learning English. However, a few numbers of participants (16) were interested in learning English.

This could be a reason for the barrier to oral communicative skills due to low sufficient vocabulary. Because all the participants (100%) accepted that vocabulary is important to speak English. When the speakers are having insufficient word power, they struggle to speak fluently. It interrupts the speech which was observed in the speech test.

Further, as per the findings of the opinion survey, a large number of students (42 out of 50) accepted that their current vocabulary power is not sufficient to communicate with people effectively. As a result of a lack of vocabulary, learners' pronunciation becomes poor. Despite, according to the analysis, 8 out of 50 participants had good vocabulary power to communicate in English. Even they do not spend time or use any techniques to improve their LR. The opinion survey shows that most of the students fail to take an effort for improving their vocabulary and oral communicative skills. Participants' lack of interest could be a factor for not taking efforts to improve their vocabulary and speaking ability.

Another problem identified based on the participants' opinions is that the majority of the participants (58%) accepted that speech activities were not practiced in the classroom. This act could give students a negative reinforcement in speaking English. Further, pronunciation skills are interconnected with vocabulary. If ESL learners have lack vocabulary, they will be poor in pronunciation because the opinion survey shows that according to the response of the majority of the students (80%), the pronunciation was not taught and practiced in the classroom. Pronunciation plays a vital role to speak English fluently, when students lack vocabulary, their pronunciation error increased. Therefore, 80% of the participants accepted that their pronunciation was not good in loud reading. Moreover, regarding the factors affecting participants' speaking proficiency, the following graph (4.3) shows factors affecting participants' oral communicative skills.

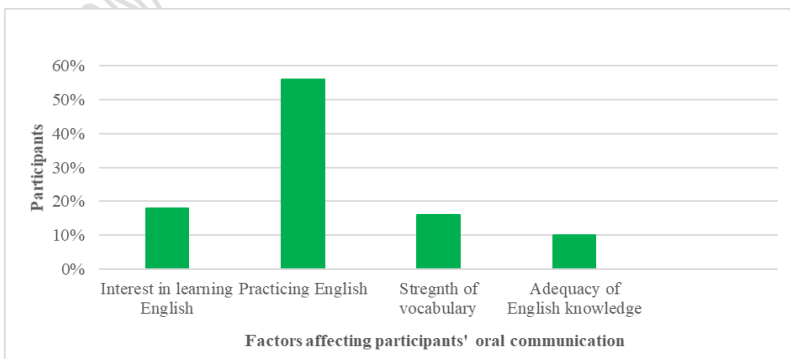


Fig. 4.3 (Factors affecting participants' oral communicative skills)

According to the above data presentation, a large number of participants (56%) had responded that lack of vocabulary affects students' oral communicative skills. Therefore, the data presentation and results undoubtedly show that low vocabulary is a barrier to oral communicative skills. Although there are factors that contribute to the oral communicative barriers, lack of vocabulary has been the key factor for the oral communicative barrier among the GCE (A/L) students at the selected schools in Sri Lanka.

5. Conclusion

This study can be concluded based on the findings that according to participants' performance in the speech test, the majority of the participants (34) had obtained between 1 – 10 marks out of 25 in the lexical resource. Similarly, in pronunciation, 43 of the participants had obtained between 1 -10 marks out of 25.

Likewise, according to the findings-based conclusion, the opinion survey shows that most of the participants were not interested in learning English. Therefore, they failed to improve their vocabulary by self-learning and other learning techniques. Further, insufficient vocabulary is a key reason for pronunciation problems among ESL learners. However, very little focus has been given to teaching pronunciation rules and practicing pronunciation. Concerning factors affecting participants' oral communicative skills, 56% of the participants had pointed out that lack of vocabulary affects their oral communicative barrier.

Hence, it can be concluded that the lack of vocabulary has been one of the primary factors which affect participants' effective oral communication. Vocabulary is important for language learning as it underpins all other language skills. Therefore, the ESL teacher and the student need to dedicate a significant amount of time in developing this core language skill.

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