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WEAK FORMS IN THE ENGLISH SPOKEN BY ENGINEERING STUDENTS: EFFECTIVENESS
OF INTEGRATED APPROACH OF INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Intelligibility of English is considered one of the most important criteria while assessing the language skills of a person. In order to be intelligible one needs to be good at both segmental and supra segmental features. Students of engineering colleges in Andhra Pradesh have some problems in pronunciation due to various reasons and the major reason is mother tongue influence. English is a syllable timed language as it is produced by a combination of weak and strong syllables where as the mother tongue of students in Andhra Pradesh is Telugu, a syllable timed language. This variation between the first language and English causes many difficulties in mastering the English language. Weak forms in English are very important for the language to sound natural and fluent. Telugu speaking students find a great difficulty in using weak forms in their speech and this is one of the reasons for the unnaturalness and unintelligibility of the English spoken by them. This provides the context for the present research.

The present Action Research is a collaborative study that has germinated in the wake of the need to produce efficient speakers of English. The aim is to help students in gaining mastery over weak forms in spoken communication that would result in proper pronunciation and intelligibility. The present research has been undertaken to identify the problems in engineering students in using the weak forms and stress-timed spoken English and training them in this regard to attain 'Accent neutralisation'.

Key Words: English language, Accent neutralisation, ELT, pronunciation, spoken English,

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INTRODUCTION

The debate on whether students of English should learn the finer aspects of English pronunciation such as rhythm and intonation has been existent for quite some time. However, it is undeniable that in order

to sound natural and neutral learning the nuances of English pronunciation is vital. Most of the graduating engineers in India usually are being recruited by software companies, Business process outsourcing companies and multinational organizations. Most companies spend time and money in training their new recruits in voice and accent such that there is hassle-free communication between the employees and their clients. English pronunciation instruction has gained prominence off late due to these reasons. According to McKinsey Global Institute Survey, approximately only 10 to 25% graduates can be readily employed by companies. Recently in a National Conference, Dr.V.Bhujanga Rao, Director, CC R&D (R&M), New Delhi, elaborated on the present IT scenario that is confronting problem with only 3% employable candidates who after recruitment are unable to deliver the goods. India must gear up to face these challenges by exposing its students to the right language skill. In the context of employability skills language skill (especially spoken English) stands out as a barometer that indicates the efficiency of a global employee.

The present Action-Research has germinated from the fact that intelligibility of English is considered one of the most important criteria while assessing the language skills of a person. In order to be intelligible one needs to be good at both segmental and supra segmental features. Students of engineering colleges in Andhra Pradesh have some problems in pronunciation due to various reasons and the major reason is mother tongue influence. English is a stress-timed language as it is produced by a combination of weak and strong syllables where as the mother tongue of students in Andhra Pradesh is Telugu, a syllable-timed language. This variation between the first language and English causes many difficulties in mastering the English language. Weak forms in English are very important for the language to sound natural and fluent to sound rhythmically. Telugu speaking students find a great difficulty in using weak forms in their speech and this is one of the reasons for the unnaturalness and unintelligibility of the English spoken by them.

In the wake of broadened horizons where the world has shrunk into one global village, it is imperative for foreign speakers of English to use kinds of reductions which are normally made by English native speakers in connected speech. These reductions are important for non-native speakers as they often cannot understand speech with these reductions, and this prevents their interacting successfully with native speakers. It is in this context that the present action-research has been undertaken to identify the difficulty of Engineering students in understanding normally spoken English and also to understand whether their ability improves once they are taught conversational speech reductions.

The main objective of the proposal is to identify the problems in engineering students in using the weak forms and stress-timed spoken English and training them in this regard, equipping them with better pronunciation ability. The aim is to attain 'Accent neutralisation' and help the students speak English Rhythmically. To achieve this, a blended approach has been adapted where students were given theoretical instruction in the use of strong and weak forms of English speech. This was followed by practice in listening and speech skills. During these practical sessions, the group was exposed to various contextual utterances and each learner was given an opportunity to assimilate it in speech.

The research is an exploratory study that focused on,

1. The problems of engineering students in using weak forms
2. Providing an intervention in their course which in turn would help them in learning how to use weak forms

It is a collaborative study that has germinated in the wake of the need to produce efficient speakers of English. The aim is to help students in gaining mastery over weak forms in spoken communication that would result in proper pronunciation and intelligibility. It is a fact that a huge number of students in English find it difficult to use appropriate weak forms in spoken language.

Action Hypothesis

The research has been conducted over a period of 6 months. In the said duration a pilot group of 10 Engineering students was formed for the study. Since it is a Classroom-based research, data gathering, testing and training was conducted smoothly. The select group was tested and trained for the given period and the results are provided below.

The training period accommodated the pre-training, training and post-training activities. The scheduled 6 months is segregated accordingly: Pre-training test, assessment, and preparation of training modules in the initial month, followed by a 3 month training period during which period the experimental group received special training in using stress and weak forms once a week, which means they get an extra instruction of 12 hours. The remaining 2 months has been used to analyse and publish the accumulated test results.

Since the present research is to both identify and train students who do not use weak forms, it is imperative to identify such students. For this, a task on spoken English was given to 2nd year B.Tech students chosen at random from all branches. This activity was recorded, and based on the test results 20 students were filtered. The identification was done on the basis of use of weak forms and fluency in speech.

After this initial process the pilot group was trained for 3 months, one hour per week, both theoretically and practically, towards attaining a better fluency and accuracy in pronunciation. During this training period an eclectic approach was adapted for a holistic improvement. This included, theoretical instruction in sentence stress, strong and weak forms of Auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles; Listening to podcasts that include comprehensions, phonetic utterances to some extent, speeches and so on. There was a simultaneous recording of students' speech where they were asked to share their personal opinion, notions, and experiences on specified contexts. This made the evaluation a continuous process where students were trained and tested even during the training period. This was done by regular speech recordings, and analyzing the improvement through an inventory checklist.

The post-training session includes the final stages where individual students were tested again. This post-training recorded speech test was compared to the pre-training speech test. The differences and improvements were analysed in view of the proposed objectives.

Procedure

The following is a report of the procedure/Methodology:

For the selection of the 20 students a speaking assessment was done informally and the subjects for the experiment were identified. A free speaking task, for example "what are your future plans for the next five years?", was given to the students and their speech was recorded to identify the problems in using weak forms of spoken English. The students were asked to speak for one minute which was recorded. The speech samples were then transcribed in English to identify whether the students were able to use weak forms. An inventory of weak form usage was made to record the data.

After the selection of the experimental group, a special training module was prepared in order to give them proper instruction in sentence stress, using strong and weak forms of Auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles---. The experimental group received a special training in using stress and weak forms once a week for a period of 3 months which means they got an extra instruction of 12 hours.

Evaluation

After the completion of training, the speech of the subjects was recorded again to see if there is any improvement. A free speech task was given to them where they were asked to speak for one minute. They were also given isolated sentences in which they were required to identify the weak forms. The recorded speech samples were transcribed in English to see the changes in the speech patterns. An inventory was made again on the use of weak forms by the group.

A comparative study of the baseline record of use of weak forms and the post line record was done. As expected there has been a great improvement in the use of weak forms by the subjects. Also the confidence levels of the students increased as they could speak more fluently and accurately after they learnt how to use strong and weak forms.

A questionnaire was distributed to the students to find out how the training in using weak forms has helped them in feeling more confident about their English.

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