Factors behind EFL Learners' Low Proficiency Level : Tertiary-level EFL Learners' Perceptions

Muslima Jannat Mou*

[Abstract : Students' low proficiency in tertiary level is a matter of concern. This situation is the result of incomplete learning during primary, secondary, and higher secondary level. The purpose of this study is to find out the reasons behind their low proficiency level from the perceptions of those students who could not develop their English language learning as expected from them. The participants selected for the research were 10 students who are extremely weak at English and are at present studying at University level. Data were collected from individual and focus group interviews. This study has brought this fact in light that teachers non-cooperative attitude has caused these limitations. This study can at least change the perspectives, attitudes and mind set-up of those teachers who somehow do not co-operate with shy, introvert and weak students. This paper does not only focus to find out the reasons of students' low proficiency level but also how counseling can bring students' thoughts outside of their mind. Future study can be conducted by giving suggestions to students on how to overcome several challenges and make improvement in learning English.]

[Keywords : Proficiency level, weak students, challenges, suggestions]

Introduction

Students' low proficiency level causes difficulties for teachers who teach at university. Teachers teaching at university expect that at this level students will come up with their creative idea. They will represent something new , something innovative . But the real scenario is not so welcoming to fulfill teachers expectations. In a classroom where the number of students is 40, at least 5 to 7 students have low proficiency in English Language. At this point low proficiency level means confusion about easy spelling, sentence making, making of frequent mistakes, poor development of ideas and so on. Students' low proficiency level is not limited only for one skill but this condition is found in all four language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening.

There is a gap between participants' existing level and expected level of proficiency in English language. It is expected from them that they will be able to understand other speaker's messages, communicate effectively with others, read comprehensibly, use all reading strategies, write something properly avoiding grammatical problems and other confusions while making sentences. But participants cannot understand the meaning of messages by listening once, find

* Lecturer, Department of Rabindra Studies, Rabindra University, Bangladesh.

exact words and make sentences while speaking, use different reading strategies, write something appropriately.

Nature of students differ from one another. It is a very common issue that in one classroom there are good students, average students and also weak students. Each student has their own way of learning. Some students are extrovert, some are introvert. Some student are industrious, some are lazy. A teacher has the responsibility to make students improve their level of learning. In this condition, sometimes only teaching itself can not help to improve the proficiency level of weak students. Counseling can play significant role in bringing motivation and confidence of the students.

This study aims to answer the following research questions

1. Do the students feel that they are responsible for their low proficiency level in English?
2. What are the reasons behind the tertiary level students' low proficiency level?
3. Which areas do they find difficult in terms of applying English Language?

Literature Review

Academic performances in terms of examinations and classroom learning tasks help to distinguish low English proficiency learners according to Hsu & Sheu (2008). Sijali K. K. (2016) states, "English language proficiency (ELP) refers to the learners' command over English language to use it in the variety of purposes." Due to student's low proficiency level in English language, students cannot use language in variety of purposes. They face difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. There is also a relation between classroom instruction and students' proficiency level.

Low proficiency in listening and speaking skill

Eckard and Kearny (1981), Florez (1999), Howarth (2001 : 39-44), and Abd El Fattah Torky (2006) have agreed at this point that speaking is not a one way process , it is a two way process which includes a real exchange of opinions, emotions, information. Speaking and listening are linked with one another. It is commonly said that a good listener is a good speaker. According to Doff (1998), without developing listening ability, it is impossible for learners to bring improvement in their speaking ability.

Students' low proficiency level mean their weakness to decode meaning from the person standing in front of him or her, to find the right word to express their thoughts, lack of confidence, lack of enriched vocabulary, fear of being embarrassed in front of classmates while trying to speak in classroom, lack of not

developing thoughts process in English, lack of proper environment and so on. Vocabulary acquisition plays a central role in learning a second language (Sökmen, 1997 : 237-257). Tendency of using mother tongue also inhibits the learning badly. According to Tuan & Mai (2015 : 8-23), learners use mother tongue in speaking class because they find it easy to use.

Speaking is the primary way of communication. Above mentioned limitations play vital role to make students think twice whether they will try to speak or not. At this point students choose to be silent. There are several variables that affect students' ability to practice speaking smoothly. According to Krashen (1982), affective variables like anxiety, motivation, self-confidence influence the acquisition of second language. Enriched vocabulary increases confidence of the learners and makes them feel comfortable while speaking. Sharma (2010) has given emphasis on teaching active vocabulary because it makes everyday communication easy.

Low proficiency level in speaking is found for almost 80% students of rural area. There are lots of students who have good expertise in reading and writing but are not good at speaking. This scenario is found both in rural and urban area. Shyness, fear of comments, fear of taunts inhibit learners to flourish properly.

Low proficiency in reading and writing skill

These two skills are also related with one another. Reading enriches ideas, comprehension level and contributes in developing a good piece of writing. Reading ability does not include only the ability to read but it includes the ability to use different reading strategies to comprehend a specific passage or topic. Only reading without decoding meaning and understanding will not help. There are issues like extensive reading and intensive reading. Spelling corrections while writing demands intensive reading habit. In terms of writing, students face problems like not getting enough ideas to develop a good piece of writing, not able to make sentences, not able to translate those sentences quickly that he or she thinks in their mother tongue, spelling problems, For example : 'professor or profesor' 'village or villeage' and so on. Minimum required vocabulary knowledge is a must to write at least an average piece of writing. Nina MK opines, æ Once you are sure that your students are ready for some independent work and that they have the minimum required vocabulary, allot writing tasks."

There are lots of words that they feel confusing to remember the spelling. This problem is not created within only one day, one week or one month. It has become the habits of students not to read something carefully. Weak students have problems with adopting strategies also. For example, there are students who

spends more than enough time on a topic but due to lack of strategic approach all theirs efforts do not bring something good for them. Hsu and Sheu (2008) found that good learners lack proper learning strategies, proper learning behavior, aptitude in comparison to good learners. Weak learners also differ from good learners in terms of their beliefs.

Writing is related with creativity. One can write well means one can think well. If one always reads and does not use the information available from reading to make analogy and to come up with something similar or close but different idea then it is not going to help that particular student at all.

Relation between proficiency level and classroom instruction

It can be debated whether using English language as medium of instruction will accelerate the learning process or not. Only using English or using students' mother tongue will not be helpful to develop students proficiency in English. There should have balance in using both English and mother tongue. According to Keomany (2006) one of the important reasons of students' low achievement is, using English as medium of instruction in English class.

Methodology

Participants

For this study, ten students have been considered as sample of this study who are very weak in English and have low proficiency level. The method that had been followed to select those students was to give 100 students a topic to write a paragraph. They had written and after that all those scripts were checked to select the appropriate sample for this study. Participants whom the researcher has got, are from outside of Dhaka. Some of them live in rural areas.

Data collection process

Qualitative research method is used in this research. Individual interview and focus group discussions were carried out in order to find out the answers of few questions. Questionnaire is also prepared but only to get the demographic information of those participants. Interviews were recorded. Questions asked by the researcher were in Bengali, mother tongue of those participants so that they could feel comfortable to share their thoughts clearly. Questions asked through questionnaire were close ended and responses were predefined.

Data Analysis Process

Responses got from the questionnaire and focus group interviews are analyzed and presented as answer of the selected research questions.. Interview, though

followed by asking few questions, was an in-depth discussion about the participants' thoughts, feelings, attitudes towards learning English language. Recorded responses and discussion were analyzed according to the themes, presented differently in this paper.

Findings and Discussion

Participants' age varies from 17 to 24 years. They all are from rural areas. They are aware of their weaknesses in using English language both inside and outside of their classroom. Their family income also differs from one another. These facts contribute on learners' proficiency level.

1. **Do students having low proficiency level feel that they are responsible for their existing level of English language learning?**

Students believe that they are responsible for their low proficiency level but they claim that they are responsible partially not totally. They agree at this point that, there are several other issues that has affected their learning.

2. **What are the reasons behind the tertiary level students low proficiency level?**

According to students, main reasons are lack of teacher's co-operative attitudes, lack of family members attention, lack of alternative options, lack of opportunities to develop, lack of other assistances. It is accepted by all that Bangladeshi classrooms are mostly conducted using teacher-centered not student-centered instructions. Though this situation is changing day by day but the change is not rapid. This issue of being cooperative comes when weak students do not get opportunities to be connected with their teachers directly. Teachers are busy with their own issues. They are not interested to give extra time out of the class and to listen problems of students individually.

They do not get proper feedback. Learning a language, without that language community and proper environment where that particular language can be practiced, is difficult. Family members also play important role in the development of the foundation of each student. Educational background, income of family, family environment all these affect learners a lot. For example, one of the participants said that his school teacher was not co-operative enough. So, his family appointed a private tutor. But, that tutor was not careful to student's study but did other works while teaching the students at home. He always spoke over phone for hours. That student informed to his parents. But parents' opinions regarding this issue were unexpected. They thought this tutor is giving more time to their child and the child is not attentive, that's why he is complaining. They thought he is a good teacher as he

is spending more time. They started misunderstanding their child and trusting that tutor blindly. Being surprised with this incident, researcher asked him about their parents educational back ground. They replied their parents were not so educated. Another important thing was noticed that whether they had any elder brother or sister, or not. Two of them said that they had elder brother and sister but they did not give attention to them. Where family should be ultimate educator, these students have not got any logical support from them such as students who are very weak and need extra assistance and care out of the classroom, do not get that sufficiently.

Family environment should also be considered. If a student luckily get a student friendly environment from their family then it is a blessing for them. They will get all the opportunities to flourish. But if the environment is not friendly, means there is no environment to study, there is always chaos and their parents are always fighting, then this environment will play negative role to build a student for future.

Family income also influences the development of students' proficiency level. Due to a small amount of family income parents cannot afford to appoint a private tutor for their children. Family tutor provides extra assistance needed for particular student who is not capable to solve his or her problems alone. If weak student does not get proper assistance at the right time they start to fear and lose confidence and ultimately they lose their interest of reading and learning.

There are also lack of alternative options. It means that the students have no alternative option to choose but to accept the existing system. Suppose a student is brought up in a rural area, for them it is tough getting friendly environment. If she or he wants a school where there will be extra-care, fun, study, all that we find in the kindergarten schools from urban areas, will not be found there. In remote areas, only two or three schools are found and environment of these schools are more or less same. There is nothing different or special. So, students who can be shifted to better places can not be shifted due to lack of alternative options.

3. Which areas do they find difficult in terms of applying English Language?

These participants are easy with reading skill but they find difficulty in writing, listening and speaking. Lack of listening practice and speaking from the very beginning of their study is the main reason. Students have not got instructions in English in their English language classroom also. So, they feel hesitated and they are shy to speak in English. In their classroom, equipments for practicing listening were not available. This is a case for almost all the schools situated in rural areas. Schools where these facilities were available, these students could

not afford to go there. Every English classes they have got were conducted in Bangla. So, it is difficult for them to cope up with a class conducted in English. They are slow to deduct the meaning of every sentences. Condition of writing skill is really poor. Students frequently make spelling mistakes like 'negetive'instead of 'negative', 'socity' instead of 'society', 'carrier' instead of 'career' etc. They are also weak in word meaning. So many spelling mistakes are found within their writings. What they do actually, they forget the spelling and they try to pronounce that particular word and following the pronunciation they try to arrange the letters of a word like 'negetive' (ˈ/negətɪv/). They can make sentences in Bangla about a topic but they can not convert the sentences in English. Even they forget the known things while writing and end up with making mistakes.

In this study, student has also been found who is very weak but he does not care. He does not want to remove his weaknesses. He does not care about grades, he thinks whatever he is afraid of is not necessary to learn. This is really shocking for a teacher. A teacher can remove all those fear from that student but how much it is feasible for a teacher to counsel him for hours and hours to remove a deep rooted fear from a student. This student has expressed this but there are other students who have same fear but have not expressed as they feel they will be embarrassed before others.

Conclusion

Limitations in tertiary level students mean there were limitation in primary level, high school level and also in intermediate level. All these problems can not be sorted in one day but it is needed to go for long term planning. It is necessary to find out the roots of these problem. Root of problem for every student is different because each student has his or her own specific problems. It can not be expected that within night all parents will be educated and take proper care of their children. But some suggestions can be made like doing workshop or seminar in schools to make parents aware about making right decisions from their part. Counseling opportunities should be mandatory for all educational institution. Each student is special but for a single teacher it is not possible to reach every student personally. But family members can reach to every child and bring their problems in front of teachers, institution. Then teacher and institution can take necessary steps to bring improvement of those students. When members of a group are increased in number, it becomes difficult to control the group by the group commander only. Then we decide to make several sub-groups. Naturally, there are sub-groups of students. Only teacher can not take care of all the students. But family members can take care of their two or three children and provide reports to the teacher. Then it is possible to bring change in the existing system.

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Questionnaire

1. Age : a) 17-20 b) 21-24 c) 25-30
2. Name of school (primary level) :
3. Name of school (secondary level) :
4. Name of college :
5. Family income : a) 5000–15000 b) 16000–25000
   c) 26000–40000 d) family income $\geq$ 40000

6. English language proficiency level : a) excellent b) average c)low

Questions asked while taking interview and doing a group discussion :

a) Do you feel that you are responsible for your existing level of English language learning?
b) What are the reasons do you think behind your low proficiency level?
c) How many members are there in your family?
d) Tell me about the educational background of your family.
e) Tell me about your family environment. Is the environment friendly or not?
f) Did your teacher co-operate with you when you were in your primary level, secondary and higher secondary level?
g) Is there any opportunity in your school or college to counsel students individually?
h) Is there any elder sibling of you in your family? Do they help you in your education?
i) How is your relation with your parents?
j) Did you have any private tutor to teach you?
k) Did your teacher use English language in classroom to instruct you?
l) Have your parents ever attended any kind of meeting or workshop in your school?
m) Which areas do you find difficult in terms of applying English Language?