

Fluency in Speaking: Exploring the factors affecting the attitudes of Blind/ Visually Impaired (BVI) students

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Introduction

The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching (2002, p.297) defines 'language attitudes' as follows: "the attitudes which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other's languages or to their own language. Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc. Attitudes towards a language may also show what people feel about the speakers of that language. Language attitudes may have an effect on second language or foreign language learning. The measurement of language attitudes provides information which is useful in language teaching and language learning." Bui and Intaraprasert (2013) says that those learners with positive attitude towards speaking English will be more involved in speaking activities and may try to make use of more strategies that help them deal with their difficulties in the course of conversation; and learners with negative attitude will be less willing to participate in speaking activities. Sadighi and Zaradshan, (2006) in their study reveal that learners who have positive attitudes toward language learning are likely to use strategies more frequently than those learners with negative attitudes. (cited in Toomnan and Intaraprasert, 2015). This paper aims at exploring the attitudes of visually impaired students towards speaking fluency. These students are from College for Integrated Studies, University of Hyderabad. It envisages that positive attitudes will help in their progress and improvement while negative attitudes will hamper or obstruct their level of fluency. The research questions are

- 1) What kind of attitude do BVI students have towards learning a language in general and learning English in particular?
- 2) What could be the factors that could have led to such attitudes be it positive or negative?

Methodology of the study

This study was explorative in nature. A semi structured interview schedule was used to collect the data from the BVI learners. It was collected from the learners studying in the College for Integrated Studies at the University of Hyderabad. The interview schedule includes questions about their educational background, level of their blindness and their attitude towards fluency in speaking English. Interviews were conducted with 10 BVI learners. The data were collected individually by asking about their opinions on speaking fluency.

Findings and discussion

The data collected from the BVI students shows that the following factors influence their attitude towards English language speaking fluency:

Educational institution studied

BVI students who studied in English medium did not have any problem in speaking English fluently because they have studied in the institute where every subject is dealt in English and students who have studied in their regional language medium institutes pointed out that due to their educational background they are not able to speak fluently. They said that they have studied in the regional medium institutions where they received the instructions or the teaching in regional language rather than English. Even in English class, the teachers did not use English to deliver the instructions. They think that if they would have studied in the English medium institutions where every subject is taught in English then they could have been fluent in English. This opinion or the attitude they have on their educational institution is a limitation to their fluency in English.

Class activities

BVI students were of the opinion that they do not receive enough attention from the teachers if they study along with sighted students. In most of the classes they remain unrecognized and unnoticed. They feel that if they would have got the required support from the teachers like getting involved in classroom activities they would have been able to enhance their speaking skill. They said that if there was more pair or group classroom activities to improve English speaking, then it would have contributed to the development of their speaking fluency.

Technology

The students who lack vision completely or to a maximum level use screen readers to listen to the classes and other useful information related to their subjects by using computers. They expressed that they don't have the proper skills and knowledge to use the computers efficiently. This is because they were not given proper training to deal with the same for which it is difficult for them to navigate various websites to get different kinds of information. In addition, they feel that they could have improved vocabulary to speak fluently in English. There were also students who are good at using technology. They said that they are very comfortable in using technology and therefore can access all the information required to improve their fluency in speaking English. These students studied mostly in English medium schools.

Exposure

It is found that most of the BVI students were friends with those with whom they were comfortable to speak in mother tongue and since they are BVI they had friends who are BVI mostly rather than sighted students. This is one of the reasons for lack of exposure to English. The BVI learners who were fluent in English said that they communicated in mother tongue only with friends who studied in regional medium schools except during classroom presentation or in the presence of teachers in class.

Conclusion

The opinions of the students reveal their attitudes towards fluency in speaking English are influenced by numerous factors. However, it is found that these factors are or may not be applicable only for BVI students but also for the sighted students. These factors that contribute to develop either positive or negative attitudes should be given importance and initiatives should be taken to give opportunities to all learners to develop fluency in speaking. In general, there is also a need for better facilitation of the BVI students to improve their English language fluency.

References

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