Linking Devices as a Remedy for Improving Coherence of Speech of Telugu Students in Group Discussions – A Study

AV Surya Seshagiri,

Dept. of Applied Sciences and Humanities,

Sasi Institute of Technology & Engineering, AP,

Research Scholar,

Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, (Deemed University), CHENNAI.

Dr. Akkara Sherine,

HoD,

Dept. of Languages,

Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, (Deemed University)

CHENNAI.

ABSTRACT

Speaking English effectively is an essential skill for engineering students. Speaking English clearly and coherently is an essential skill for all undergraduate students though they belong to various streams of technical education. Notwithstanding the fact that universities best efforts in designing English course curriculum, many of the students fail to get the required speaking skills in order to get the campus placements. Especially, the problems of students who hail from rural areas remain unaddressed when they participate in group discussions conducted for job selections. They fail to make themselves intelligible when they speak in English. The present paper focuses on the factors that make their speech unintelligible and traces the gaps in the existing course and argues for introducing short duration courses with special focus on specific areas, which if the students learn, can make their speech coherent and effective. The present study involving ten students belonging to different branches of engineering, has revealed that a short duration course on 'coherence and connective devices' has resulted in considerable improvement in the overall intelligibility of the students' speech.

KEYWORDS: Linking Devices, Coherence, Intelligibility

INTRODUCTION

Oral communication skills play a vital role in students' learning in all areas of Curriculum. It is the fundamental means for communicating with others and the cornerstone for building a brighter career for all engineering students. Students listen and speak in order to understand and explore ideas and concepts, identify and solve problems, organize their experience and knowledge, express and clarify their thoughts, feelings and opinions and convey information.

However, learning a foreign language is learning to speak a foreign language which requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules. Learners must also acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange, in which many factors interact.

Therefore, it is difficult for EFL learners, especially adults, to speak the target language fluently and appropriately. In order to provide effective guidance in developing competent speakers of English, it is necessary to examine the factors affecting adult learners' oral communication, components underlying speaking proficiency, and specific skills or strategies used in communication.

DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

According to Canale and Swain (1980) communicative competence includes four competencies: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence, which reflect the use of the linguistic system and the functional aspects of communication, respectively. These competencies can be shown graphically in the following diagram.
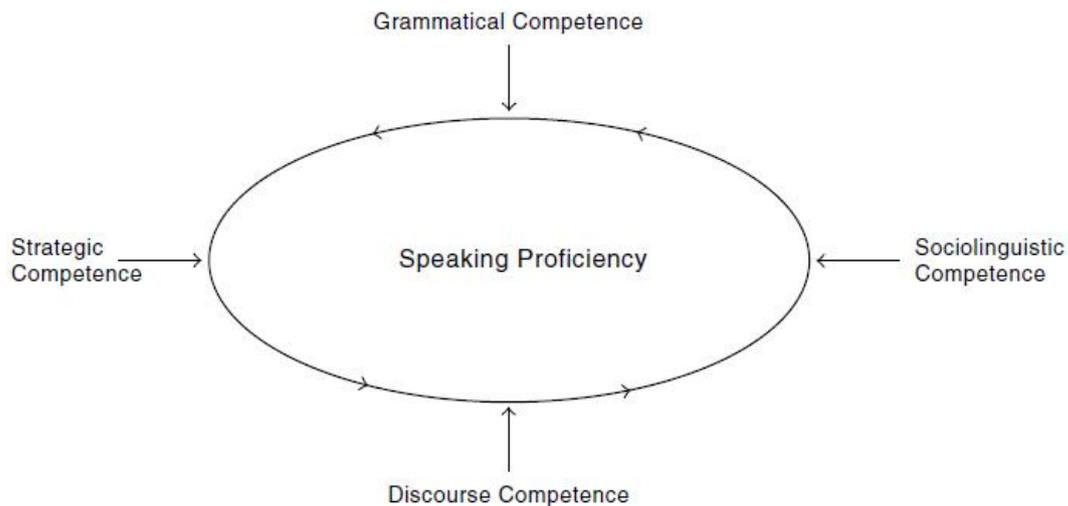
In addition to grammatical competence, EFL learners must develop discourse competence, which is concerned with intersentential relationships. In discourse, whether formal or informal, the rules of cohesion and coherence apply which aid in holding the communication together in a meaningful way. Therefore, effective speakers should acquire a large repertoire of structures and discourse markers to express ideas, show relationships of time, and indicate cause, contrast, and emphasis (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). With these, learners can manage turn taking in conversation.

SETTING

Universities across the country have developed curricula for all the undergraduate students to develop the required language skills. In the state of Andhra Pradesh, JNTUK is the biggest University with the more than 200 engineering colleges affiliated to it and with more than 2,00,000 students pursuing undergraduate courses in engineering.

It is the premier technological university playing a defining role in planning the curriculum and shaping the future of thousands of engineering students by imparting the required skills. The university has developed curriculum for improving English language skills of engineering undergraduate students. There are two courses to be completed in the first two semesters of the first year.

A close examination of the existing course prescribed by the university and its learning outcomes reveals that though the course aims at integrating all the four skills in the curriculum, major focus is on the writing skills only in the first semester. In the second semester, an attempt has been made to balance it by incorporating listening and speaking skills as well.

In the second semester course, students are expected to actively participate in group discussions, debates and mock personal interviews as they would prepare them for the campus selections.

While participating in the group discussion many undergraduate students are facing it a daunting task to get through the group discussion round in the campus selections.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

In ESL classrooms group discussion can be used as a tool for improving both listening and speaking skills and prepare them for campus placements. Teachers adopt structured or guided group discussions for classroom purposes. During group discussions, the participants will share their opinions, agree or disagree, take decisions, solve problems etc. This practice will enhance their discussion skills and build confidence in them.

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

As a preparatory step to involve the students in Group Discussions, students were taken to training hall where the seating arrangement is flexible and students can sit round in circles for group discussions. Group discussions were conducted for 10 students by making them two teams who showed interest for training. They were divided into two teams They were video recorded for analyzing the problems faced by students in group discussions.

After analyzing their speeches, the following problems have been identified

1.   Inability to form sentences resulting in sentence fragments
2.   Inability to form correct sentences with proper subject and verb agreement
3.   Wrong use of tenses
4.   Lack of connectivity in their speech and absence of connective words in their speech
5.   Lack of interaction and problems in turn taking while discussing
6.   Absence of discourse markers
7.   Mispronunciation of certain words
8.   Improper Intonation

NEED FOR SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

As the syllabus in the existing course does not offer a complete solution for the above problems faced by the underprivileged students who had their education in their mother tongue, a series of support programmes are essential to bridge the gaps and make them confident and communicative. As the researchers have found that the speeches made by students are lacking in coherence and thus making their speeches unintelligible, it is considered to start a supporting programme on connective devices and discourse markers initially.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In order to improve their interaction skills in group discussions, rural engineering students must be provided with short duration courses that aim at enhancing discourse competence.

OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The basic objective of the study is to analyze the challenges and issues faced by engineering undergraduate students from rural areas while participating in group discussions. It also aims at bridging the gaps in the existing course by introducing short duration support programme for enhancing the interactive skills of the disadvantaged students.

The present study has analyzed the problems faced by fifty undergraduate engineering students from rural areas while they were participating in the group discussions in their second language. It also attempts to study the results of a short duration support programme on 'connective devices and discourse markers' for improving their interactive skills in group discussions.

METHODOLOGY

A group of ten students belonging to different branches and coming from rural areas is selected for the present study on the impact of the short duration programme on their interactive skills.

For evaluating the impact of the program a simple mechanism has been devised following the storable data format shown here

Behaviour	Number of Contributions					
	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F
1 Total number of contributions made						
2 Responding supportively						
3 Responding aggressively						

Table 1

Research Questions

1.   Is there is any significant improvement in the use of connective devices and making their speech intelligible?

2.   Is there any significant improvement in the turn taking ability of the students while participating in the group discussions?

3.   Has the short duration support program helped the participants in improving their interactive ability?

PARTICIPANTS

Ten students who are studying the second year of their four year engineering course have been chosen for the short duration course as they find it very challenging to actively participate in group discussions and contribute to the discussion sharing their views. The students belong to different branches of engineering coming from villages. Out of these five are boys and the other five are girls. Six students had their schooling in English medium and the remaining studied in their vernacular language i.e. Telugu medium. The present level of their English language skills match the pre-intermediate level and they can understand English but their speaking skills in English are moderate.

MATERIALS

Handouts are prepared taking the list of connective devices and discourse markers. Fill in the blanks exercises are given to be filled in with the right connective device. A few one minute speeches of other students, who are proficient in English language skills, are provided as examples.

PROCEDURE

Three hours of intervention programme was conducted using connective devices, discourse markers and other general expressions useful for group discussion. A batch of 10 students from different branches of engineering coming from rural areas was selected for the intervention. They were made two teams of 5 students each who participated in two 10-minute group discussions separately on the topics of their own choice which was videotaped and analysed. As shown in the table 1, their total number of contributions, responding supportively and responding aggressively noted down.

INTERVENTION: A SHORT DURATION COURSE

In order to rectify the above problem, a short duration course for three hours was developed on the connective devices and discourse markers and delivered to the students who are interested in rectifying the problems in their speech and improve their intelligibility levels. Handouts with blanks for incorporating connective devices were used along with a list of connective devices with a brief description of their purpose and use.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Analysis of **1st & 2nd Group Discussions** conducted BEFORE intervention:

Parameters/ Student Name		No of contributions			Responding supportively			Responding aggressively		
		GD 1	GD 2	Total	GD 1	GD 2	Total	GD 1	GD 2	Total
Group 1 A-E	Student A	2	2	**4**	1	0	**1**	1	2	**3**
	Student B	1	1	**2**	1	0	**1**	0	1	**1**
	Student C	1	1	**2**	1	1	**2**	0	1	**1**
	Student D	1	2	**3**	1	1	**2**	1	1	**2**
	Student E	1	2	**3**	1	1	**2**	1	2	**3**
Group 2 F-J	Student F	2	1	**3**	1	1	**2**	1	1	**2**
	Student G	1	1	**2**	2	1	**3**	0	1	**1**
	Student H	1	2	**3**	0	1	**1**	1	0	**1**
	Student I	1	1	**2**	0	0	**0**	0	1	**1**
	Student J	2	1	**3**	1	1	**2**	1	1	**2**

Analysis of **1st & 2nd Group Discussions** conducted AFTER intervention:

Parameters/ Student Name		No of contributions			Responding supportively			Responding aggressively		
		GD 1	GD 2	Total	GD 1	GD 2	Total	GD 1	GD 2	Total
Group 1 A-E	Student A	2	2	**4**	3	3	**6**	2	3	**5**
	Student B	2	2	**4**	1	1	**2**	1	2	**3**
	Student C	1	1	**2**	2	0	**2**	0	1	**1**
	Student D	3	3	**6**	2	3	**5**	3	2	**5**
	Student E	3	3	**6**	3	2	**5**	2	3	**5**
Group 2 F-J	Student F	2	3	**5**	3	3	**6**	2	2	**4**
	Student G	2	2	**4**	3	2	**5**	1	1	**2**
	Student H	1	2	**3**	2	2	**4**	1	1	**2**
	Student I	1	1	**2**	0	1	**1**	1	0	**1**
	Student J	2	4	**6**	3	3	**6**	2	2	**4**

Following diagram displays students A-E performance before and after the intervention:
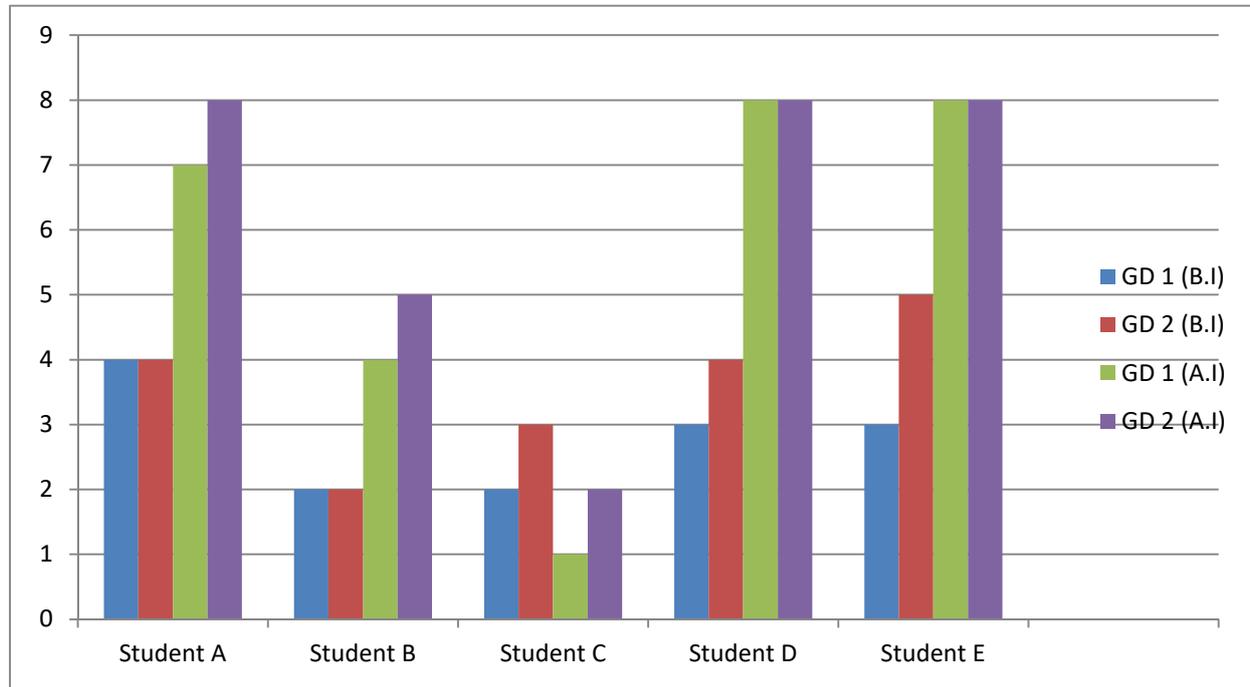
B.I = Before Intervention   A.I = After Intervention

Following diagram displays students F-J performance before and after the intervention:
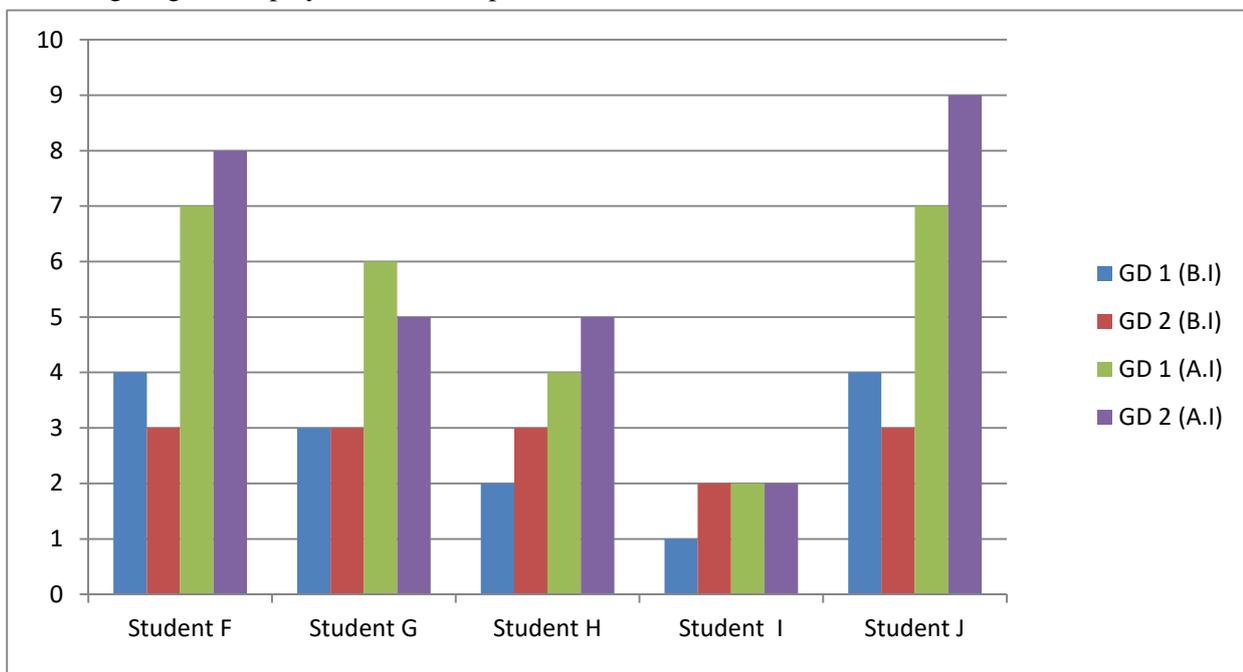
B.I = Before Intervention   A.I = After Intervention

Above tables and bar charts clearly indicate the rise in the students' performance especially in their number of contributions, agreeing and disagreeing. The students A,D,E,F & J improved their interaction almost two times of their previous performance whereas the students B,G & H have showed moderate improvement in

their interaction. In contrast, the students C & I have not showed any improvement. When overall performance of the students is taken into consideration, their interaction levels have increased by two times which has provided the scope for further research.

LIMITATIONS

This study focused on only ten second year B.Tech students belonging to various branches and coming from rural background. Study was conducted only for the students who showed interest for intervention program and want to stay back after hours.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Though the present study is limited to 10 students, the result is very encouraging. The research helps in bridging the gaps in the courses of undergraduate engineering students by introducing short duration support programmes for enhancing their interactive skills not only for effective participation in group discussions conducted for selections but also for improving their intelligibility of speech.

CONCLUSIONS

There is an improvement not only in their number of interactions and contributions, but there is a qualitative improvement in their intelligibility and coherence levels. 8 students out of 10 students showed improvement out of which the improvement in 5 students is remarkable. 3 students' performance is above average and 2 students' improvement is below average.

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