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## Oral Communication Difficulties Student-Teachers Face during their Practice of Teaching English at Arba Minch Teachers' Training College: Ethiopia

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### Abstract

This research reports a case study of English majoring student-teachers' oral communication difficulties at Arba Minch College of Teacher Education during their fourth round teaching practice. The overall aim of the study was to investigate the difficulties that English majoring student-teachers face in their oral communication in the teaching of English during their final teaching practice. To do this, the study employed qualitative and quantitative methods. Interview, questionnaire, classroom observation and focus group discussion were used to gather relevant data from student-teachers, students and ACTE instructors. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software and the qualitative data were reported verbally. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the student-teachers have faced difficulties to express and share their ideas using English, to pronounce words correctly, to use grammatically correct sentences and to speak English consistently. Thus, it is better to recommend the concerned bodies should mitigate the identified problems through well built mobilizations.

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Practicum, Catchment area, Oral Communication and Practice of Teaching

### Introduction

Various factors can create difficulties to oral communication. Pathan (2013) indicated that unfamiliarity with the sound system of English, inadequate range of vocabulary, inability to form certain grammatical constructions like WH questions, passive sentences, reported speeches, etc., and failure to use different word classes according to the demand of the sentence are the main barriers of oral communication.

One of the most difficult challenges in teaching oral English is finding effective ways to help students

improve their discourse fluency. Large mixed-ability classes, little exposure to the English language after class and tongue-tied students inevitably form obstacles to teaching (Qiqiyichu, 2003). A research result of Holmes (1998), in Ibrahim (2001), in Indonesia show that second language (English) is not adequately developed; they will have difficulty in expressing themselves in it, and this situation can create a feeling of frustration or powerlessness, which in turn may affect their self-esteem or self-confidence. This condition can be counter-productive for their language and academic developments. In addition to lowering self-confidence, a poor English proficiency among teachers may lead to

students' negative perception of them. This can occur because a person's perception or attitude to a language depends on who uses it and how it is. Since educated people frequently employ the English language in prestigious domains, its image is then associated with these attributes. Thus, teachers who cannot speak or write English well are likely to be negatively viewed and lowly regarded by their students, regardless of the teachers' grasp of the course content material.

The quality of communication is very essential in getting the required message along. For instance, taking the context of language teaching and learning into account, Ibrahim (2001) states that teachers and students' low oral communication proficiency may lead to inefficient and ineffective teaching and learning. Teachers who cannot speak English fluently and accurately will probably be incompetent to perform one of their chief traditional roles, and lecturing. Pauses, hesitations, circumlocutions, wordiness, and grammatical, lexical, and pronunciation inaccuracies may characterize much of their explanation, and this certainly will slow down or even hamper their students' grasp of the instructional content. Those who are poor in oral proficiency will not have courage to ask questions and clarify their confusion.

Shumin (2002), cited in Szelest (2011), who, referring to adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, said that they 'are relatively poor at spoken English, especially regarding fluency, control of idiomatic expressions, and understanding of cultural pragmatics. Few can achieve native-like proficiency in oral communication'

Speaking a foreign language is a very complex skill, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, the ability to structure talk or even non-verbal abilities. Among these elements, pronunciation is one of the most difficult ones, especially if the learner aims at acquiring native like pronunciation. Reaching this aim may require years of hard work and even then some learners may not be successful. Failure in pronunciation acquisition may be caused by various factors, such as age, aptitude, personality, inappropriate attitude, weak motivation as well as application of ineffective learning strategies (Calka: 2011:149).

Wrobel (2011) suggests that anyone involved in language teaching is probably familiar with the fact that no matter how much practice students put into it, they do make mistakes. Their language is communicative but often far from the English that they would like to use.

This may even be considered a disaster as the idealistic goal for many involved in foreign language teaching and learning is native-like fluency and accuracy. A native-like control over a foreign language is not restricted to the knowledge of ability to manipulate morpho-syntactic rules or the possession of vast vocabulary.

### **Rationale**

This study was designed to investigate the existing difficulties on the English oral communication difficulties of third year English majoring student teachers attending a teacher training program at Arbaminch College of Teachers' Education (ACTE), Ethiopia. Therefore, various instances demonstrated that English majoring students of Arba Minch College of Teacher Education have certain challenges with their oral communication. For example, the 2013 students' Certificate of Competence (COC) exam report of the South Nations Nationalities People Regional State (SNNPRS) Educational Bureau showed that English language students of ACTE had very low achievements in the exam.

This study will provide directions for further research in the field of language teaching, particularly in oral communication. It benefits ACTE to revise its materials, to supply possible practical solutions to training sessions, to assess and monitor practicum undertakings of various phases. More specifically, it will give clear picture and direction of improving speaking skills to ACTE teachers and other co-workers in three years training of the college.

This research was conducted to identify the oral communication difficulties that arise during ACTE third year English majoring student-teachers' practice at the fourth round practicum. The general objective, the research tried to answer was the kind of oral communication difficulties that English majoring student-teachers have towards oral communication.

Specifically, this study attempted to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore the level of student teachers' oral communication fluency.
2. To identify the student-teachers' English pronunciation competence.

## **Materials and Methods**

This case study assessed student-teachers' oral communication difficulties at ACTE during their final practicum sessions (Pract-302). The case study used third year English majoring students of the college as the unit of analysis was applied to undertake the study. A mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods is used to collect and analyze data. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software and the qualitative data were clustered under their thematic unit and then reported verbally.

### **Subjects and sampling techniques**

In the academic year (2013/14), 37 English majoring student-teachers were the subjects of this research. The subjects were dispersed to 27 training centers (schools). Therefore, the researcher went to four training centers to make lesson observation and interviews with sample student-teachers and to administer questionnaires to students of these student teachers to understand the student-teachers' oral communication difficulties.

The study embraced 37 English majoring third year student-teachers (35 males and 2 females) and 4 English language instructors of ACTE. All available third year student-teachers of the department were included. 6 of the student-teachers who went for teaching practice in relatively nearby primary schools (Arba Minch, Mirab Abaya and Soddo and Bodditi) were randomly selected for lesson observations and interviews.

Twenty-five percent (25%) of the total number of students of student-teachers was randomly selected to fill questionnaire and 12 students were purposefully chosen for focus group discussion. The students were selected from grades 5-8. They were taken from classes in which the student-teachers were observed during their teaching practice.

From the total number of 37 student-teachers, 6 were randomly selected for classroom observations. This was made to observe any of them without selecting those who are good at English. Each student-teacher was observed twice to find their oral communication difficulties. The observation was made by the researcher and his assistant.

### **Instruments**

In order to answer the research questions, questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations and focus group

discussions were used to gather data. The instruments were prepared by the researcher and approved by the research advisor.

### **Methods of data analysis**

The data collected from different sources were analyzed in two ways.

Firstly, the data gathered through close-ended questionnaire were organized and presented in tables. Data obtained through observation checklist was analyzed in simple descriptive statistical analysis such as frequency, percentage etc.

The responses of the interviews from student-teachers and the instructors were first transcribed before interpreted and discussed as a support for the discussion of the questionnaires and the observations.

Secondly, data from instructors' and student-teachers interviews, open-ended items of student-teachers and students' questionnaires and students' focus group discussion presented verbally.

Moreover, the data obtained through the main tool (student-teachers interview) was organized with data obtained through other instruments (observation, questionnaire and FGD) and from other sources (instructors and students).

Finally, the result of all the interpretations was reported under the findings and discussion part and in the end recommendations were made as well.

## **Results and Discussions**

This chapter presents results of students and student-teachers' questionnaires, instructors' interview, student-teachers' classroom observation and students' focus group discussion. These were made to gather data about student-teachers' challenges of oral communication. The results obtained through different instruments from different subjects are presented based on the themes of the research objective as follows.

### **Student-teachers' oral communication difficulties**

This section deals with the results on student-teachers' oral communication difficulties as assessed through different data collection instruments.

### **Results from Student-teachers' Questionnaire**

Student-teachers were asked to respond to ten items related to oral communication difficulties in their classroom teaching practice and the results are presented below.

Almost all student-teachers (97.2%) indicated that they could give clear oral feedback to their students during their practicum sessions. All of them also expressed their agreement that they were confident to communicate with their students in the classroom. Besides, regarding the ability to share information obtained from radios, TVs, magazines and news papers to their students, the student-teachers tended to agree that they have ability to share information obtained from sources mentioned (mean value 4.1).

Concerning the ability to use classroom language, out of 36 respondents, 31(86.1%) and 5(13.9%) were found to strongly agree and agree, respectively. When we blend the strongly agree and agree, it can be observed that 100% or all of the respondents agreed to use classroom English in the classroom.

Regarding the use of their hands and other body parts to support oral communication when explaining ideas, 22 (61.1%) and 10 (27.8%) of the student-teachers strongly agreed and agreed, respectively that they used their hands and other body parts like fingers to support their oral communication. That means, 88.9% of them either agree or strongly agree to use body language to make their oral communication effective. Besides, 100% of the student-teachers reported either to agree or strongly agree to have eye contact with their students so as to catch the attention of their students towards their lessons.

### **Results from classroom observation**

To further examine if the student-teachers have difficulties of oral communication in their actual teaching learning practices, the lessons of six teachers were observed twice each and the analysis and interpretation of data are presented below.

75% of the rating showed that the student-teachers were confident when communicating orally with their students. Whereas, 70.8% rating showed that the student-teachers were not using jokes to entertain their students during lesson delivery.

Again, 87.5% rating indicated that student-teachers had made a good attempt to forward questions, give comments, suggestions and responses for questions raised from their students.

Nonetheless, many (79.5%) of the student-teachers were unable to identify sounds, failed to pronounce words correctly, found it difficult to identify the rhythm of falling and rising intonation of phrases and sentences, and they also practiced fragment speech.

The rates also indicated the power of words of the student-teachers. That is, 70.8% (No) of the rates indicate that student-teachers have limited word power (vocabulary). In addition to this, the use of some technical words in their speech was also poor as the rate indicates 62.4% (No). Similarly, 75% of the rates indicate that student-teachers were not attractive to students in their speech of the target language. At the same time their grammatical expression was poor as it was observed in 66.6% of the rate.

The researcher, the assistant also noticed the student-teachers' pronunciation difficulty during the lesson observation sessions. Almost all the student-teachers have faced similar problem in pronouncing the sounds /p/ and /f/. They use them interchangeably. The observed mother tongue interference is shown on the table 1 (phonetic translation is made according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 7<sup>th</sup> edition).

### **Results from Students' Questionnaire**

To substantiate data from student-teachers, similar close-ended items with the student-teachers questionnaire were used with 90 students. This was first analyzed using SPSS with a likert scale of five-points and interpreted in terms of frequency, percentage and mean as reported below.

The majority of the students of the student-teachers indicated their agreement that the student-teachers are able to express their ideas freely (61.1%), let their students express their own ideas easily (60%), and to use their hands and other body parts such as fingers to support oral communication (71.1%). On the other hand, the majority of the students reported their disagreement that the student-teachers have oral ability to share information obtained from radios, TVs, magazines and news papers to their students (65.5%), and to comfort their students when they are confused (62.3%).

### **Results from Student-teachers' Interview**

Six student-teachers were also interviewed about their oral communication difficulties to validate their questionnaire data. Four of them stated that they have difficulties in their oral communication skills. Three of them said that they face lack of vocabulary when they start to speak English. Other two student-teachers answered that they always feel bad about their poor pronunciation. The student-teachers mentioned that they had to speak carefully in order to focus on pronouncing certain words (especially some common words) and sound clusters accurately, "When I try to speak fast, there will likely be inaccuracies in some sounds," one of them commented.

One of them said the following regarding his vocabulary problem.

I think there is a gap between my vocabulary range when I write and speak. I mean when I am writing, I have enough time to figure out the most appropriate words and phrases. But when it comes to speaking, some words and phrases may never come to my mind, so my expression may not deliver my intended meaning precisely.

Another student-teacher responded that he fails to memorize words he knows outside when he starts to speak in the classroom. He becomes confused when he encounters new words either in the passage or questions raised from students for meaning.

Again, other three student-teachers confirmed that using correct grammar is their common problem in speaking English. One student-teacher genuinely reported, "I always speak English in mix with my students' and my own mother tongue. This is because of lack of vocabulary." Almost all the students, thus, agreed with the view that vocabulary problem is the major reason that they sometimes fail to express themselves clearly and appropriately. They also believe that this contributed directly to a lack of fluency in their speech. All of the interviewed student-teachers emphasized that they need to further expand their vocabulary.

One of the student-teachers also disclosed his fluency problem as follows.

I always try to speak orally quickly, but I fail to do it. I speak slowly because I fear not to commit grammatical error and forget the word what I intended to say during speaking.

Two student-teachers confessed that they translate to either to Amharic or mother tongue during teaching English in the class. This was because students compelled them to translate to their mother tongue for clear understanding, but unless judicious use of it, extensive use of mother tongue is not advisable. The report from one student-teacher indicates that he did not feel confident during his practice as he attempts to speak fluently.

### **Results from Students' Focus Group Discussion**

Regarding oral communication difficulties, reports from students' focus group discussion indicated that translation was common almost for all student-teachers. The translation to their mother tongue in English class was viewed as positive. However, they also believed that for true learning of foreign language, translation should be avoided/quite limited. The other point from their discussion showed that student-teachers failed to provide meanings of words (vocabulary) clearly. This indicates that the student-teachers have lack of word power.

The other report from students' discussion was lack of confidence of the student-teachers in the classroom. Members of one group reported that student-teachers failed to speak in a correct grammar so as to have connected speech. Usually student-teachers fail to speak correctly because they fear breaking of grammar rules. They also reported that some them do not feel confident during speaking English that is because they think that they are poor in speaking English.

### **Results from Instructors' Interview**

From the interview held with the college instructors, different ideas were obtained. One instructor explained that even though he used simple language in the classroom, student-teachers always wait for Amharic translation. Another teacher responded that many of the student-teachers in the classroom are unlikely to attend his lessons. All the instructors agreed that student-teachers oral communication difficulties are observed during individual presentation, particularly during practicum reflection student-teachers fail to express their idea properly.

The instructors stated that mother tongue interference is another major problem of student-teachers oral communication.



The other problem that the four instructors mentioned is many students from various cultures have come up with different backgrounds. Many of them have no exposure for delivering a speech in their local area (at home, public etc). This made them have little confidence in their practicum reflection. In addition to this, one instructor mentioned that students are unable to express

their own idea because of lack of word power. Finally, two instructors strongly commented on the teachers themselves (teacher-educators) are not well committed for improving student-teachers oral communication skills in the college during the training years.

**Table.1** Student-teachers’ Mispronunciation

No	The original word	Phonetic transcription pronunciation	The wrong transcription	Meaning change
1	Please	/pli:z/	/fli:s/	Fleas
2	play	/plei/	/flai/	Fly
3	open	/əʊpən/	/ɒfn/	often
4	part	/pɑ:t/	/fɑ:rt/	fart
5	copy	/'kɒpi/	/'kɒfi/	coffee
6	Depends	/dr'pends/	/defends/	defends

The study has identified various oral communication difficulties of the student-teachers through various instruments applied. Translation was found to be the common problem (students’ questionnaire, student teachers’ interview, ACTE English instructors and FGD) and was observed among all student-teachers. In line with Ur’s (1996) argument which clarifies that every one tends to use mother tongue because it is easier to speak, some student teachers were speaking their first language while delivering the target language lessons because they thought that such process would help their students understand the lessons well. Harmer (2001) also argues that it is entirely natural thing for students to use their mother tongue in the classroom because they use translation almost without thinking about it when they learn foreign language, particularly at elementary and intermediate levels. However, Atkinson (1987), cited in Harmer (2001), states that excessive use of mother tongue should be avoided.

The results from instructors’ interview, student-teachers interview and classroom observations revealed that mother tongue (Gammo and Wolaita languages) interference (influence) was one of the major problems for student-teachers’ poor pronunciation. The problem was particularly noticed during the classroom

observation. For instance, interference between /p/ and /f/ sounds in their pronunciation was common for almost all student-teachers’. Many student teachers first language was interfering with the target language (English). This interference made meaning change in their speech. These were ‘please’ [pli:z] is pronounced as fleas [fli:z] play [plei] as fly [flai], open [əʊpən] as often [ɒfn] part [pɑ:t] as fart /fɑ:rt/ and copy ['kɒpi] as coffee ['kɒfi]. Szelest (2011) claims that speaking is a process during which speakers rely on all the available information (background and linguistics) to create messages that will be understandable and meaningful to the intended audience. Similarly, Patel and Jain (2008) suggest that the teachers’ pronunciation must be good and correct and it must separately be imitated by his students. Sobkowiak, (1996) cited in Szpyra-Kozłowska, (2011) disclosed that one of the striking features of learners’ English was highly deteriorated of mispronunciations of different words. A useful distinction between global and local errors can be made. Thus, the student-teachers’ pronounced many words wrongly that brings meaning change to their students.

Furthermore, results from the student teachers’ questionnaire and classroom observations indicated that student-teachers faced grammar inadequacy despite the

fact that Mills (1998) argues that grammatical errors damage speaker's credibility and also confuse the listener. It was also noticed from classroom observation that the students of student-teachers were not attracted by the student teachers' English language oral presentation in the classroom though a teacher needs to possess an ability to render an idea in a clear and comprehensible way in our complex and ever-changing society as to the view of Mills (1998).

The result from students' questionnaire also revealed that the student-teachers were unable to share information they obtained from radios, TVs, magazines and news papers to their students. However, Mills (1998) makes clear that at all levels of communication, both formal and informal people engage in informative speaking, and in this "Information age" it is used with accelerating frequency. We are now experiencing an unprecedented explosion ideas and information; new concept is one of the hallmarks of an educated person. Moreover, this informative speech imparts materials that increase a listener's knowledge of a given subject. Nowadays, information is source of life. We are in the information age. Thus, student-teachers need to be aware of the time. They should be alert for timely messages.

Though student-teachers tried to give oral feedback, they were not confident to allow their students to ask them to provide feedback. Scriver (2005) pointed out that many teachers never ask their learners for feedback as the teachers fear hearing comments about their work and teachers are unsuccessful in giving oral feedback on spoken errors because they did not involve students actively. The author also advises that students must be involved actively in the feedback process if learning is to take place.

The other report from student-teachers questionnaire and interview, classroom observations and focus group discussion revealed that student-teachers lack word power. This made them fail to express their ideas. In their teaching, some student-teachers were frustrated during oral communication and their speech was disconnected. However, Patel and Jain (2008) state that when teacher introduces new ideas, then new word also should be introduced to students so that students could be acquainted of new words. With little efforts, students can learn two or three words of English language. Thus, students can be strong in remembering of words. Mills (1998) says that "when words are scarce, they are seldom spent in vain".

All the instructors participated in the study agreed that student- teachers' oral communication difficulties were observed during individual presentation, particularly during practicum reflections. Ibrahim (2001) states that teachers and students' low oral communication proficiency may lead to inefficient and ineffective teaching and learning. Shumin (2002), cited in Szelest (2011), says that adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners 'are relatively poor at spoken English, especially regarding fluency, control of idiomatic expressions, and understanding of cultural pragmatics. Consistently, the student teachers in the college faced similar difficulty.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Under this chapter, conclusions of the results and important recommendations are made.

### **Conclusions**

As indicated, this study was designed to investigate the existing difficulties on the English oral communication difficulties of third year English majoring student teachers attending a teacher training program at Arbaminch Teacher Education College. The various linguistic problems (for example, grammatical, lexical and phonological problems), the tendency to use mother tongue, translation, inability to express their ideas using English were found to be oral communication challenges of the student-teachers.

Diverse strategies could be used to minimize student-teachers' oral communication difficulties of ACTE. Some of them include using simple language, by teachers, allowing student-teachers to speak more in the classroom, letting the student-teacher share experience with teachers working at schools during their practicum sessions and exposing them to relevant trainings besides the regular classes. Student-teachers may also apply their effort to improve their oral communication proficiency.

The student-teachers seem to possess positive attitudes towards oral communication skills. This helps them to better prepare themselves to improve their oral communication proficiency and thereby their actual teaching practices

The sources of the prevailing attitudes of the student-teachers towards the oral communication consist of the wide importance of English language in academic and

public sectors and the role that the language plays in worldwide communication.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings, and conclusions drawn from the study.

- Oral communication skills are required by teachers to facilitate understanding of teaching and the ability to accomplish their responsibilities effectively. Not only do teachers need to accomplish technical tasks, they must also communicate effectively and efficiently. Therefore, ACTE English instructors need to exert their effort in every aspect of the college's training programs to improve their student-teachers oral communication difficulties.
- At the institutional level, it is recommended that efforts must be made to ensure adequate exposure to English oral communication in the campus. Student teachers should also be encouraged to engage in extra-curricular activities using English such as dramas in mini-media club, role plays in debate club and only English day in the campus so that student teachers can be helped to become confident in their career.
- Additional studies should be undertaken on larger and more diverse populations to further validate the outcomes. Further studies across different semesters and in other educational colleges are required to gain an insight into the problems of oral communication skills.

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