

TUTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SPEECH AND LISTENING SHORT COURSE IN ENGLISH FOR SCHOOL LEAVERS IN SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

The growing need for effective communication skills in English has created a demand for quality English language teaching, and quality English language materials and resources. This is especially important in the Sri Lankan context seeing that employability and fluency in English language skills are intrinsically linked (Perera, Silva & Marambe, 2009, Wipulasena, 2013, Youth Employment Network, 2007). Under these circumstances, in 2011, the Ministry of Education of Sri Lanka decided to empower students who have gained entry to universities in Sri Lanka by conducting a Pre-Orientation Programme (POP). The course content attempted to develop their leadership skills, proficiency in English and IT skills. The success of this course prompted the Ministry of Education of Sri Lanka to offer a similar programme: "Education for Knowledge Society Project" (EKSP) to students who have passed the G.C.E. A/L examination but could not gain entry to universities to make them employable. This project included a short course in English and Soft skills in 9 provinces of Sri Lanka. The Department of Language Studies of the Open University of Sri Lanka was selected to offer students a short course in Speech and Listening. The course is of 03 months duration; 5 hours per session, and offered to batches of 30 to 40 students consecutively over a one year period. The course commenced in January 2012 and classes were conducted in 16 Regional and Study centres of the Open University of Sri Lanka. Teachers from 9 provinces of Sri Lanka who have experience in conducting the Pre-Orientation Programme for University entrants in 2011 were employed to teach in the course.

The Short Course in Speech and Listening aims to develop the English Speech and Listening skills of learners at basic proficiency level. Learners are provided with a Course Book comprising 10 lessons accompanied with a CD containing listening dialogues and activities focusing on functional areas that the learners encounter in daily life. Also included in the Course Book are speech practice activities. Hand-outs containing supplementary activities are also provided to learners; tutors are provided with CDs containing songs to be used during class sessions to give learners further practice in developing speech and listening skills.

The Department of Language Studies has made a consistent effort to upgrade and revise its courses to meet the needs of its students. With this in view an evaluation of this course was deemed necessary. The evaluation of an educational programme according to Steele (1970) needs to take into account five aspects: *quality, suitability, effectiveness, efficiency, and importance*. Steele (ibid) further explained that these five aspects take into consideration the content, learning activities, the media, the difficulty level of the tasks, whether the programme reached its desired expectations, learner satisfaction and the accomplishment of the objectives of the programme with the available resources. Ellis (1997) added another important aspect; that a retrospective evaluation of course material is important since it sheds light on whether the course material can be reused or revised, which tasks work and which do not. Endorsing this view Tomlinson (1998) states that in order to cater to the needs of second language learners (L2), it is not sufficient for learners only to enjoy and value the material but it is also necessary that the learning procedures ensure that the learners actually learn what they want and need to learn. Therefore, Tomlinson

(ibid) advises that an effort must be made to strive towards the development of materials that will give learners satisfaction and success.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the Short Course in Speech and Listening that was designed for school leavers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study focused on two research questions: 1) How do tutors teaching on the course perceive the effectiveness of the Short Course in Speech Listening? 2) What suggestions do they offer to improve the course?

METHODOLOGY

Using questionnaires, a total of 16 tutors who taught on the course; 10 females and 6 males, from the 9 provinces were asked for their views on the following aspects of the course: (1) content, (2) activities, (3) attendance, (4) duration of the course and each class session, (5) availability of resources, and (6) willingness to teach again on the course. The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. Thirteen (13) tutors responded to the questionnaire. This was followed by semi-structured telephone interviews with a sub-sample of 8 tutors representing the 9 provinces.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The tutors' perceptions are analysed according to the questions focused in the questionnaire and the comments by tutors in the semi-structured interviews are also integrated under the discussion of each question.

Perceptions of tutors on the difficulty level of the content of the course book

The first question focused on the perception of the tutors regarding the content of the course book. Table 1 shows that the majority felt that the lessons were just right. A tutor commented; *“most of the lessons were appropriate and the students enjoyed the lessons”*. Three (3) tutors, from Colombo, Kandy and Hatton where the learners had greater exposure to the language, considered the first five lessons as being very easy. These tutors suggested that three lessons (4, 5, and 6) devoted to locations and directions could have been incorporated in a single lesson and other relevant lesson topics added, and more activities for speaking included. The three (3) tutors who considered lessons 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 as difficult were from the Northern, North Central and Eastern provinces where learners have limited exposure to the English language, unlike their counterparts in the Western and Central provinces.

| LESSON | TITLE | Too Easy | Just Right | Difficult | Very Difficult |
|--------|---------------------------|----------|------------|-----------|----------------|
| 1 | Making introductions | 3 | 10 | - | - |
| 2 | Make a Request | 3 | 10 | - | - |
| 3 | Let us Apologize | 3 | 10 | - | - |
| 4 | Know your Place | 3 | 9 | - | - |
| 5 | Finding Places | 3 | 10 | - | - |
| 6 | Getting there | - | 11 | 2 | - |
| 7 | Using the Telephone | - | 12 | 1 | - |
| 8 | At the Bank | - | 12 | 1 | - |
| 9 | Would you buy them | - | 11 | 2 | - |
| 10 | Welcome a Guest of Honour | - | 12 | - | 1 |

Table1: Perceptions on difficulty level of the content of the course book

Perceptions of tutors about the activities contained in the course book

Tutors' perception of the activities contained in the Course Book shows that here too the majority nine (9) viewed the activities contained in the Course Book as just right and matched the level of students' language proficiency. Two (2) felt the activities were too easy because of repetition of similar processes as well as being predictable. More challenging activities in greater variety for listening and speech were suggested. A comment was made that a guideline to design some activities (with lesson objectives) will be more effective. The two (2) tutors who felt that the activities were difficult, and very difficult were from the Northern and North Central provinces where students were less exposed to the English language than their counterparts in other provinces

Perceptions of tutors about attendance at weekly class sessions

Student attendance at weekly classes indicate: the majority eight (8) reported the weekly attendance at classes was average (50% to 60%), while five (5) stated that attendance was very good (75%). None indicated that attendance was poor. The interview comments revealed that the primary reason for the drop in attendance (25%) was due to students having to attend extra tuition classes on receiving their A/L examination results. Some continued to attend the English classes in preference to classes held to develop soft skills. The good attendance at weekly classes indicates that the students placed high value on the importance of gaining fluency in spoken English.

Perceptions of tutors on the (12 week) duration of the course and each class session

Regarding the duration of the course, the majority (9) indicated that the duration of the course was just right or adequate. However, four (4) tutors were of the view that it was too short because the students felt the need to get more practice, as well as to get help with pronunciation. Suggestions were made to extend the course by three or four weeks for these reasons. Regarding the duration per session, the majority nine (9) were of the view that the five hour duration of each class session was sufficient. However, four (4) felt it was too long, because students were very tired by having to travel long distances in locations such as Vavuniya, Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura. None indicated that it was too short.

Perceptions of tutors regarding the facilities provided to conduct the course

Tutor perceptions were obtained on four aspects which would impinge on the smooth running of the course: The availability of – (i) adequate classroom space, (ii) audio equipment, (iii) photocopying facilities, and stationery for hand-outs.

(i) Availability of adequate classroom facilities

The majority, eight (8), was of the view that the classroom facilities provided at the Study Centres and Regional Centres were good, with adequate space. Four (4) were of the view that facilities were average, for a maximum of 30 students. One (1) tutor indicated that the classroom facilities provided were poor.

(ii) Availability of CD Audio Player

Regarding the availability of CD/audio equipment at the Centers, the majority of eight (8) indicated that CD players were available and in working order, but on some days the player was not available. One tutor reported that power break downs were overcome by students who transferred the recorded dialogues to their mobile phones. Another reported: “*I was never sure about the CD player, so I got my students to go through the listening sections before they came to class, so we had no problem.*” Four (4) indicated that CD players were not available

and one (1) indicated that even though a CD player was available it was not in working condition.

(iii) Availability of Photocopying facilities & Stationery

Photocopying facilities were available in all the relative Centres. However, regarding the availability of stationery for hand-outs while eleven (11) indicated that stationery was available, two (2) indicated that it was not available. One tutor obtained photocopies from a nearby service provider. Another suggested that for some activities Bristol board, marker pens and Blue Tack would have been very helpful.

Tutors' view of willingness to teach on programme again

All thirteen (13) tutors, given the opportunity, said they would be willing to teach on this programme again, because they enjoyed the experience, and it gave them a sense of satisfaction. A reason for their feelings of fulfilment was that they were happy to see students making progress and gaining confidence in speaking English.

Further comments about the course made by Tutors

There were several comments made regarding suggestions for improvement on various aspects of the course. Regarding the content of the course, the following suggestions were made: (1) Include more role-play, drama and songs, (2) include grammar activities into the lessons, (3) make available to tutors, a printed book that can be used in the event of power cuts or malfunctioning audio equipment.

Many suggested the inclusion of a placement test to address the issue of varying proficiency levels. The reasons given were because most students lacked Basic English competency skills, and students need to be of the same proficiency level to reach the desired standard at the end of the course.

One tutor recommended that a follow-up course be conducted to take students to a higher level.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey results indicate that the majority of Tutors viewed the Short Course in Speech and Listening positively in achieving the objective of enhancing the speaking and listening skills of the learners. A high level of attendance and participation was reported despite a drop in attendance after the release of the A/L results. Noteworthy is that all tutors perceived that all students had indeed gained greater confidence in listening and speaking by the conclusion of the course. Another positive factor was that all tutors were agreeable to teaching on the programme if it is to be repeated. The non-availability of the desired facilities at some centres did not impinge on the overall success of the course. The variance in views of the difficulty related to lessons and activities is to be expected because the course material was prepared with the objective of assisting O/L students who possessed Basic English language speaking and listening skills. Not all students possessed a similar level of these skills.

It is therefore recommended that the present course design would have to be adapted to also meet the needs of students who are less exposed to English language usage. For students who found the course work very easy, it would be necessary to design a more advanced course that would be different to the course for less advanced students. Furthermore, it appears necessary for the time allocations and activities chosen for the course to be revised and adjusted to meet the needs of students at two levels, which means that two separate courses would have to be held.

Additionally, for greater efficiency in teaching as well as for obtaining better results, a placement test before commencement of the course appears to be necessary in order to cater to the varying levels of language proficiency. Feedback from tutors at different centres indicates that there is a need for the OUSL to ensure that all centres are adequately equipped with essential facilities for the course to be conducted in the proper manner. This study focused primarily on tutors' perceptions of the course, and did not investigate students' perceptions and experiences with the course which would be an area for future research which would help to further enhance the quality and effectiveness of the course.

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