

Gravitas on Grammar: Pedagogy to improve English Language Skills of Migrant Children in UK

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Abstract

Language learning, particularly to the language of power, has provoked immense interest among the people. Among a few influential languages in the world, English as a lingua franca is used as a medium of communication by several non-native speakers. Given various job opportunities in the UK for international community and particularly for a large number of migrant workers and their children, UK faces a major problem in providing language training for its immigrants. Focusing on reading and writing, this article analyzes problems in learning English amongst migrant children who have enrolled in various online platforms.

Key words

Migrant learners, English language skills, English language acquisition

Introduction

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world"(Wittgenstein)

It's quite fascinating to note that there are hundreds of English language learners in UK who take additional help to master the various skills of English language due to not reaching the expected level of performance in tests. There are many tuition centres, online platforms etc where students get themselves enrolled. This might be an interesting piece of information as we don't usually find so many Arabic learning centres in the Middle East or Malayalam learning centres in Kerala or Hindi learning centres in Delhi or Mumbai.

English is no doubt one of the most powerful languages in the world,”the study of English has the potential to open professional and academic doors to students that might otherwise remain closed”. (Asok) British Council states that at any given time of the day there would be at least a million people who would be learning English language in different parts of the world. English has become a lingua franca that serves as a connecting link between people of different culture, race, and language. Knowing English has become an indispensable requirement in today’s world.

Britain, the land where English language originated saw the influx of large number of immigrants from different countries, since a few decades. The reason for the migration varies like for studies, job opportunities, better living standards or even to take refuge. Statistics shows how much the face of UK has changed due to the quilt of other languages covering the country. Census shows that more than four million people in UK have got a different mother tongue other than English or Welsh and among them nearly 138,000 people do not speak English at all. Findings also throw light on the fact that 1 in 5 people in Britain only speak English as their second language. Britain too can be called, so as is the case with many countries, a melting pot of different cultures and languages.

The present work analyses migrant learners in UK who are children of parents who are migrants, but born and brought up in UK and have acquired UK citizenship. There are thousands of such migrants in UK. Students who are analyzed are those learners who had enrolled in online coaching platforms, to improve the various skills in English language. Even though their mother tongue would be different, majority of them hardly use them or use them only with their parents or relatives, and they use English more or less as their first language.

“Language acquisition is a natural process that evolves rapidly within a first few months of a child’s birth” (Joy) During second language acquisition the mother tongue of the

learner will influence the language learning process, as an internal translation happens from the mother tongue to the new language which is known as transfer and Ellis refers to this transfer as “the influence that the learner’s L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2” (Forsyth). However this process is much less with the learners who are born and brought up in UK. They hear English language around them most of the times. Even parents make a conscious effort to talk in English language with the kids as they realise the importance of knowing the language well for their kid’s better survival in the country.

Migrant UK learners however face some difficulty when it comes to reading and writing, mostly writing. ESL trainers state that the reason for their difficulty in writing skills especially grammar rules, spellings and creative writing could be because they might have not taken the subject seriously and since English is like their first language they might have thought that they can get away with it easily.

A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.”(Mann). Writing is a craft or skill which can only be developed over the years with constant practice and hard work. Not everyone would be blessed with creativity and spontaneity to write on a given topic. “Good Writing skills are essential for effective communication. The better you write, the more easily the readers will understand you. Learning to write will take time and practice” (Naveen).

Any individual need not learn the grammar of their first language. It’s a natural process where we imbibe along with what we hear around us. Grammar is one of the resources which will facilitate the learning of any language. The migrant learners in UK though they are good at spoken language when it comes to facing tests involving grammatical questions, a good number of them don’t reach the expected standard.

For the better understanding of the difficulties faced by the learners an analysis of the English syllabus of year 6 is done. This is a list of English skills that the students need to learn in year 6. Year 6 is an important year for the learners in UK as it is the time where their English skills are being tested through SAT exam and before moving to the middle school.

A good number of grammatical structures are to be imbibed and it is often found to be difficult by the migrant learners though they are good at using the language orally. A few of the skills to be mastered are stated. Students need to understand the difference between declarative, imperative, interrogative or exclamatory sentences. For e.g. Identify the sentence Go away. (Imperative sentence) May I come in (interrogative sentence) .To identify the simple subject or predicate of a sentence is another skill to be acquired. For e.g. She loves playing. (She- Subject loves playing-predicate). To identify if a sentence is a complete sentence or a fragment or a run-on? For e.g. After the storm (fragment) John took the bus because his car had broken down (run on)

Learners also need to identify if sentences are simple, compound or complex and also to identify dependent and independent clauses For e.g. He is a good boy. (Simple sentence) She cooked and he cleaned. (Compound sentence) My dad smiled when I made dinner. (Complex sentence). Another area to be covered is to identify nouns-abstract and concrete, common and proper, regular and irregular plural nouns. For e.g. The teacher is marking a book. (Common noun) She is Gertrude. (Proper noun) He is filled with joy. (Abstract noun). To identify subject and main verb in a sentence is yet another set of structure to be learned like what is a helping verb? What does modal verb show? Use the correct modal verb. For e.g. She loves dancing. (She- subject, loves-verb) Does he have a car? (Helping verb)

To identify if the sentence is in present, past or future tense is an exercise they need to tackle like to correct inappropriate shift in verb tense, use perfect verb tenses for e.g. I shall go there tomorrow (future)She had been working at that company for three years. (Past perfect continuous).

Learners also need to identify different types of pronouns such as possessive, reflexive and relative pronouns, to replace noun with a pronoun and to choose between subjects and object pronoun needs to be tackled too for e.g. George and I are going out for dinner. Students also need to identify adverbs and different types of adverbs and also to use adverbs to compare for e.g. He drives carefully.

Adjectives needs to be mastered by learners as well like to order adjectives, use adjectives to compare and to use adjectives with more and most for e.g.I love that beautiful old big black antique car which is parked outside the garden(quality, age, size) His slim new Chinese bag. (Dimension- age-origin). Learners also need to choose between adjectives and adverbs. Is the word an adjective or adverb for e.g.Ted is careful. (Adjective) Ted walks carefully. (Adverb)The bed was hard (Adjective)I worked hard (Adverb)

Parts of speech such as prepositions and conjunctions, and pronoun- verb contractions need to be mastered by the learners like to identify prepositions, to identify preposition and their objects, and to identify prepositional phrases for e.g.We climbed up the hill to see the view (Prepositional phrase. What is a conjunction? Identify coordinating and subordinating conjunctions.fore.g. Tom and Jerry is my all-timefavorite. To understand pronoun-verb contractions and contractions with 'not' needs to be tackled for e.g.I'll go there tomorrow.

Appropriate use of capitals and punctuation marks needs to be learned such as to correct capitalization errors and capitalizing titles and formatting titles for e.g. i)Last spring, I visited Paris. ii)President Barrack Obama. iii) I just read the book Pride, Prejudice and

Zombies. Appropriate use of commas with direct addresses, introductory words and interjections and commas with compound and complex sentences are to be learned.

Learners also need to identify which sentence matches the definition? And which definition matches the sentence? For e.g. i) He is strong, healthy man. ii) Last Sunday, evening classes were cancelled iii) Mark Twain's book, Tom Sawyer, is a delight.

Proper use of homophones and frequently confused words and to detect and correct errors with frequently confused words are also parts of the skills to be acquired for e.g. There/their, Here/hear, Ad/add, Piece/peace. Another set of skills are to choose the synonym and to find synonym in context for e.g. Interesting-Fascinating, Awful-Horrible and to choose the antonym and find antonyms in context for e.g. Heartfelt/insincere, Excess/Lack. Word and literary analogies for example Pencil:write:scissors:cut

To describe the difference between related words, positive and negative connotation for e.g. i) There's no place like home. ii) What do you expect from a politician? iii) That woman is a dove at heart. To attach prefixes and suffixes and to identify Greek and Latin roots for instance words with pre-, re-, sub-, mis-, un- and words with dis-, in-, im- and non- for e.g. Un+happy, Im+possible. Words with -ful, words with -less and words with -able, -ible for e.g. Joy+ful. Use of Greek and Latin roots and to determine the meanings of Greek and Latin root for e.g. Greek roots Anti, auto, biblio etc. Latin roots Dict, gen, log.

Figurative languages such as metaphors and similes needs to be mastered that is to determine the meanings of similes and metaphors and to identify similes and metaphors for e.g. Simile example My baby brother is like a cute little teddy bear and metaphor example My baby brother is a cute little teddy bear. Students also need to identify formal and informal sentences like which sentence is more formal? for e.g. As the price of four Euros

was reasonable, I decided to make the purchase without further thought. (formal) It was, like, four bucks, so I was like “okay”. (informal)

From the analyses, of the various language skills that need to be acquired by the students of year 6 in UK, it's been found that the students face difficulties in a number of areas. Few areas where they face difficulty are the inability to identify between different sentence types like imperative and declarative sentences as these sentences cannot be identified just by looking at the punctuation marks at the end of the sentence and also at times they have problems in identifying verbs in sentences. Students also make errors while identifying if a sentence is a fragment or a run-on sentence. The learners make errors in identifying the right punctuations in run-on sentences. Another area of difficulty is to identify if a sentence is simple, complex or compound especially to differentiate between complex and compound sentences. They turn out to be confusing for the learners. A compound sentence is formed when two independent clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction and a complex sentence is formed when a dependent clause is joined by an independent clause. Though the learners don't face much difficulty in identifying nouns, when it comes to identifying specific type of nouns such as common, proper, abstract, concrete, regular and irregular plural nouns learners make errors.

Verb is the most important element in English language. Sentences do not exist in English language without the use of a verb. It is the verb that changes to indicate the change in tenses. It's found that learners make errors in identifying the main verb, helping or modal auxiliary verb. Though there are only 3 major tenses: past, present and future, there are 13 different types which would fall in to one of these categories. During oral communication these learners use tenses effortlessly but when asked as questions such construct a sentence in past perfect tense or to identify the tense form used in a sentence, they make errors. In the case of pronouns mastering English pronouns takes time and effort. Those people who use

English as a second language make errors while choosing the correct form of pronoun as they might be used differently in their L1. Migrant learners have a difficult time as there is no differences between subject pronouns 'you' and object pronoun 'you'. So also there is no difference between relative pronoun 'who' and the interrogative pronoun 'who' which are used differently. Often errors are found in these types of sentences.

Another area is adverbs. They are one of the often asked questions found in SAT question papers. Hence students are given a lot exercise on adverbs and its various different types. Since adverbs modify verbs, adjectives and other adverbs and also the fact that different types of adverbs have different sentence positions, it turned out to be quite difficult for the students to master. The area where the learners make mistake in adjectives is in the adjective order. Generally the adjective order is quantity or number, quality or opinion, size, shape, colour, age, proper adjectives (often nationality, other place of origin or material), purpose or qualifier. A related problem is with the punctuation of group of adjectives especially if it's a cumulative adjective. Another difficulty is in understanding the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives. The proper use of punctuation is challenging for people of all ages and one of the biggest punctuation culprits is a comma. Meaning of sentences completely changes with a misplaced comma. The correct usage of commas is a skill to master with constant practice. There are several rules which students will have to learn. Though it's difficult to comprehend when to use and when not to use commas, once mastered it would make the writings better. Another area is the use of homophones or homonyms. They are words that sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings. Learners often have to choose appropriate words from similar sounding words. At times students face difficulty in choosing the right spelling. So also with multiple meaning words, they are words which have more than one meaning. Such words are often found in

everyday conversations. They are at times unavoidable and confusing. Even learners who are good at language encounter difficulties in comprehending and using appropriate words.

When it comes to writing, while writing any piece we make a series of choices. A word can have many different shades of meaning. In fact the correct use of homophones, synonyms, antonyms, analogies can only be achieved only through constant practice. When it comes to prefixes and suffixes, they have different origins like Latin and Greek roots. Many languages in the world have words that are of Latin and Greek origin. Having an idea of the origin of different words would expand learner's perspective and knowledge of language. It would also enable a better understanding of vocabulary. Learners face difficulty in learning roots as they have to learn a whole list of words that have different origin. Difficulties are also found in distinguishing between a simile and a metaphor and also formal and informal language.

Spellings:The use of shortcut words while chatting and texting for example U instead of you, V for We, 2NTE for tonight, 2MOR for tomorrow 1CE for once are a few among frequently used words. This tendency often confuses the spelling skills of young children. Now this phenomenon can be seen among those students who use English as a medium for chatting and texting purposes of the other two categories as well. The problem arises when they have to face competitive exams like SATs.

Creative writing: Creative writing is an important element found in the test papers. Students are often asked to write on given topics. They are to write in narrative, descriptive or persuasive style. Writing something on a given topic is not everyone's cup of tea. If the learner hasn't developed certain skills, writing won't be an easy task. One of the main issues seen among learners is trouble in developing new ideas and elaborating on them. Some of them have difficulty in dealing with writing tasks that require creativity or critical thinking.

Some of the reasons pointed out for errors in the writing of the learners are the increased use of technology. The moment you type in something, the grammar, spellings, sentence structure are all auto corrected by respective soft ware. These factors hamper the learners' interest and requirement in knowing these skills as they know it can all be done without any efforts.

The cultural background of the learners can also be one of the reasons for the difficulty in the acquisition. Most of the learners use English as their first language. In fact this happens with a conscious effort on part of the parents too. However most of these migrant families also maintain their culture. For instance if it's an Indian family most of their social contacts would be mostly with people of their culture like their friends, prayer groups and so on. This is the case with not only Indians but also people from Pakistan, Arab countries, Philippines, Sri Lanka etc. People always try to form a social bond with people of their culture. This is mainly because these grownups migrated after they grew up and they prefer to be with people of their culture. Children who are born in UK naturally grow up in a multi cultural environment. Though the oral communication of these children would be as close to that of the natives which they would imbibe mostly from school, their stock of vocabulary and certain natural expressions would be less than the natives who are only exposed to English language through their parents or anyone around them. This can be one of the reasons why they face some difficulty in writing skills especially creative writing.

Reading comprehension: Comprehension means the ability to understand what you listen or read. Reading a comprehension passage and answering questions based on the given passage is an unavoidable question found in the question paper in most of the tests and hence it's a skill which learners need to master. Students often face a number of problems while tackling reading passages. One of the problems is lack of time. Due to inappropriate reading skills the students often doesn't get enough time, as a result of which they will have to leave

few questions unanswered. Lack of vocabulary is another reason. When learners come across unfamiliar words they spend time thinking over its meaning and thereby losing time. Not being able to understand the main idea of the passage is another difficulty that some learners encounter.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the oral communication of migrant learners in UK is as close to that of the natives. However they encounter some difficulties in writing and reading skills. These skills are required when they have to face certain exams. Cultural background of the learners can be considered as one of the reasons for their difficulty. However with proper guidance and training these learners can easily overcome the difficulties they encounter.

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