

THINKING IN ENGLISH: A MINOR STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Practicing teachers of English as a Second Language know that fluent speakers are those who 'think in English' and not those who frame the utterance in the mind in the mother tongue and then translate it to English. Do Indian teachers of English in schools and colleges 'think in English'? If the teachers think in English, are they familiar with the strategies to be employed for developing in learners the ability to think in English? If fluency in speaking is a proposed goal of teaching English as a Second Language in India, do teachers take the extra effort to nurture this ability in students? The investigator, a teacher educator by profession recently attempted a review of responses given by teachers regarding 'thinking in English' and compared it with years of learner responses in own class rooms and arrived at the conclusion that teachers seldom take the extra step to foster in their learners the ability to 'think in English'. It was also found that those who 'think in English' are ones who had meticulously nurtured the habit of activating an 'inner voice' in which they frequently practiced utterances in English when they are alone. This study begins by highlighting the significance of 'thinking in English', underscoring its benefits for speakers of English as a Second Language. This is followed by a brief review of the habit of thinking in English among learners and teachers of English. Before concluding, it reviews certain workable strategies for nurturing the ability to 'think in English'. It is hoped that the presentation would sensitize participants to the need for developing the ability to 'think in English' and also trigger an interest to employ the proposed strategies for developing own fluency to speak in English.

Keywords: Fluency, Learners, Speaking, Teachers, Thinking.

Introduction

The reason why so few people are agreeable in conversation is that each is thinking more about what he intends to say than others are saying."

-Francois de La Rochefoucauld (1630-1680)

(Accomplished French Moralist in the era of French Classical Literature)

"The secret of living a life of excellence is merely a matter of thinking thoughts of excellence. Really, it's a matter of programming our minds with the kind of information that will set us free."

- Charles R. Swindoll (Born 1934)

(Christian Author, Pastor and Educator -USA)

The perception of the cognitive process which human beings engage in by two notable writers of two different languages (French and English), living centuries apart in two different continents quoted above have one thing in common: Individuals think and those who think will succeed by responding appropriately. Now the whole world is mesmerizingly exploring the possibilities of the AI-based tool, ChatGPT. So it was not surprising to find Wong in Jan 2023, commencing a post in the Atlantic by referring to ChatGPT's unique ability which matches human sentience –the ability to use language, to 'talk it out'!

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Background

Educationists across the world have cogitated on the thinking process and its relation to teaching of languages. And of late, Neuroscientists have come up with the concept called 'mentalese' or universal human mental language. Accordingly, there are layers of language, lexicon and grammar underneath which there is the language of thought which humans share (Wignall). Cognitivism, Constructivism and Connectivism have all completely obliterated the earlier language learning principles of imitation, repetition and reinforcement characteristic of Behaviourism by underscoring the importance of thinking in language pedagogy.

The Problem

According to Bryant (2019) when people live in a place where many speak the target language (English), there is every possibility of English becoming the inner speech of individuals learning English. And once this happens, one is closer to fluency. But the investigator, a teacher educator found that many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners despite studying in campuses where a number of peers regularly converse in English, they seldom think in English. Instead they think in their mother tongue, finds the appropriate words in English and then speaks. This habit, the investigator noted was affecting their ability to speak fluently in English.

Research Questions

The main focus of the study was on identifying the practice among teachers and learners to think in English. So the following research questions were framed:

- What is the significance of thinking in English in the ESL classroom?
- How do teachers of English perceive the ability to think in English?
- Do ESL learners think in English?
- What strategies can be employed to foster the ability of ESL learners to think in English?

Methodology

The population for the study comprised teachers and learners of English in schools and colleges. The sample consisted of teachers of English in South India who are members of an online community. The learners comprised students in schools and colleges which the investigator taught/interacted with.

The empirical data collected from teachers was analyzed to identify (1) the extent to which teachers employ the practice of thinking in English and (2) whether they employ specific strategies to foster the ability in own ESL learners. A review of the data related to assessment of speaking ability of own learners (both smart and weak) maintained by the investigator during his two decade long career was undertaken to identify their ability to think in English. A review of studies related to thinking in English was also attempted to identify its benefits and ways of nurturing the ability among learners.

Brief Review of Studies

• On Language and Thinking

The Irish poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde once observed that human beings do not share any form of emotion with the lower animals and that we rise above them by "language", which is the "parent and not the child of thought". To the Austrian Philosopher, Wittgenstein is attributed the famous claim : "the limits of my language means the limits of my world". Here, both Wilde and Wittgenstein are indirectly affirming that the root of our awareness is language which enables us to think and communicate.

• On Language and Speaking

Meyer and Konopka (2014) reported an attempt made by scientists at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics to find out how speaking and thinking are coordinated temporally by analyzing the speaker's eye movement. Their study demonstrated how the temporal course of construction of sentence in the speaker's mind being shaped by the content and form of the utterance.

• On 'Inner Speech'

Writing about self-talk, in the Scientific American Fernyhough (2017) observed that most people talk to themselves in their head. To Psychologists, this phenomenon is 'inner speech'. A cousin of such an activity is termed 'private speech' in which people talk to themselves audibly. Decades ago, the conversations people have with themselves were discussed by the famous Swiss Psychologist, Jean Piaget and the Russian Psychologist Vygotsky. The latter held a view different from that of Jean Piaget's

understanding of learning and development. To Piaget, 'egocentric speech' follows from 'inner speech' which later dissolves away when children mature. Vygotsky on the contrary proposed that 'egocentric speech' became 'inner speech' which was later called 'thought.'(1930). That is to say, thinking is triggered by the internalization of the real voice or speaking by an individual. Ariel (2022) writing almost a century later held a similar view: speakers express what they have thought in thinking and thought itself can be theorized as a kind of inner speech.

- **On the Impact of Thinking in Daily Life**

Shahani (2020) in her post in The Mind Fool, a website which specializes in self improvement observed that thinking before speaking will help one strategize ones approach and achieve good results. Costa and Kallick in their post on 'Thinking and communicating with clarity and precision' for the Institute for Habits of the Mind observed that intelligent people strive to communicate precisely and accurately and when they strive to do it has an effect on their thinking too. And, recent research has suggested that besides developing the ability to speak fluently, thinking in a non-native language can influence the cognitive process responsible for decision making and judgment.(McFarlane et al. 2020)

- **On the Advantage of Thinking in the Classroom**

Besides improving the ability to speak well, developing the ability to think, has other advantages too. As early as 1973, researchers had argued that neither speaking or writing are primary but are functionally complementary systems.(Vachek) If this be so, the active skill of writing can certainly compliment the active skill of writing and in the process create an environment conducive for thinking in English. Garside (2022) referring to the learning of English in the second language (ESL) classroom pointed out that teachers should not confine themselves to making learners merely recall the right word to use. They should activate their critical thinking brains, and employ higher-order thinking skills which can result in their developing flexibility and confidence.

- **On Thinking in English by Non-Native Speakers of English**

Expresso English, which offers training for different levels of learners to improve the ability to speak in English in a post discussed the ability to think in English. According to their faculty, many learners were found to be worried about their vocabulary repertoire. This makes thinking in the mother tongue and then translating to English a necessity. They even listed four steps for developing the ability to think in English. (1)

One of the questions posed by an Indian who had been closely following the author of English Harmony which uploads posts related to developing the ability to speak in English is worth quoting here. In the comments section to a post on 'Developing the ability to think in English' the following question was posed:

"...I take long pauses and speak up incoherently ..I don't understand what went wrong...any suggestions from you??...The reply by the author, Robby to this query not only displays an empathy for the person who posed the question, but is also quite encouraging: "...believe me! I've been in the same situation, I was struggling big time and at times I even thought I was having some sort of a mental issue... it's all part of your overall English improvement trend." In fact, Robbie's post in the website, provided a point of view seldom seen in articles discussing the ability to think in English. According to Robby, it is possible to eliminate the tendency to translate. This can be made possible by make the brain think in English, by speaking in English. And as the speech process is closely bound to ones thoughts, it will automatically become very difficult to think in the native language!

- **On Thinking in English in the ESL Classroom**

O' Hare (2021) who offers training in speaking for the IELTS exam in a post on the ways of thinking in English observed that the ability to process language and participate in conversation becomes easy when one commences thinking in English. But unfortunately many being taught using the Grammar-Translation method finds it difficult to break the habit of thinking in the mother tongue and then translating into English.

Findings

On the significance of thinking in English in the ESL classroom

Most Indian learners, grow up in an environment where they are exposed to the use of mother tongue for everyday conversation. They hear and learn to speak English in snatches. And in the process, the tendency to find mother tongue equivalents for the target language becomes common. As the learner grows up, if he/she is not regularly exposed to English, both inside and outside the classroom, and does

not take the initiative to use English regularly for conversation, the habit of translating from the mother tongue to English becomes a fixed habit. A review of the ability of learners found that many ESL learners seldom think in English.

One of the objectives of teaching English at the secondary and higher secondary level in India is "to build greater confidence and proficiency in oral and written communication"(NCERT). The review of studies in this paper has highlighted the fact that language and thinking are closely intertwined. So if the ESL learner makes a sincere effort to develop the ability to think in English, there will be an improvement in the way one speaks. Interestingly, Just Learn, an online tutoring forum, in a Blog post, while revealing the secrets for nurturing the ability in non-native speakers of English to speak fluently, identified among others, two specific things: 'talk to oneself' or develop an inner speech and 'think in English'.

Perception of ESL Teachers who favour Thinking in English

- It's a good idea but needs to be taught.
- Thinking in English is an important stage in the mastery of productive skills like speaking and writing.
- Thinking in the mother tongue and then translating it to English is a complex process because:
 - There is a structural difference between the mother tongue (Malayalam and Indian languages) and English.
 - There is a complexity of thought process. The vocabulary of students are far advanced in the mother tongue, compared to the target language, English.
 - There will be a tendency to create complex and erroneous structures. This can however be overcome by asking students to begin by constructing simple sentences in English.

Perception of ESL Teachers who do not Advocate Thinking in English

- Teachers should not frighten students with ideas they themselves are not clear about.
- It is pointless, telling students to think in English as they can do nothing consciously to this end.
- If teachers insist on students thinking in English before speaking, there is a danger of making learning of English more difficult than it really is.

It was found that many ESL teachers are aware of the need for learners to think in English and empathize with learners who lack the ability. Yet they conveniently ignore this aspect because their prime objective as a teacher of English, is to develop the ability in learners to speak and write grammatically correct sentences.

On ESL learners thinking in English

- The investigator's observation and review of own learner performance recorded in assessment reports found that those who speak well in English are ones who had meticulously developed own ability to speak in English. Such learners used to grab the opportunity to speak in English even when it was not a necessity to speak in English. On the contrary, weak learners seldom explored an opportunity to speak in English and tended to withdraw and preferred using the mother tongue even in contexts where speaking in English was a necessity. That is to say, smart ESL learners who constantly strove to speak in English developed the ability to speak fluently while the weak learners who tended to withdraw from conversing in English, seldom developed the ability to speak fluently in English.
- ESL learners who had the ability to speak fluently in English were found to possess a fairly good repertoire of vocabulary which aided in their ability to think in English. They did not have the habit commonly found in the less fluent ESL learners who think about the context in the mother tongue and then try to find the appropriate word in English for speaking.

Specific Strategies to Develop the Ability to think in English

- Practice speaking aloud in English, say for 15 minutes every day. (Wright)
- Acquire new vocabulary in context. (Robby)
- Surround yourself with English and repeat phrases and words you see and hear. (O'Hare)
- Write ten new words and phrases each day. When this becomes a habit, the right word would pop into the mind when the necessity for speaking arises. (Thomas)

Implications of the Study

The review has highlighted the fact that the ability to think in English takes a lot of time and regular practice. If a learner commences to think in English and if this becomes a habit it will be reflected in the ease with which that person converses in English. And if the goal of teaching English in schools and colleges in India is to develop in learners the ability to speak and write fluently in English, teachers have to make a conscious effort to nurture the ability in ESL learners to think in English. Teachers can commence by giving daily tasks for learners such as describing the plan for the day, or before going to bed recalling every important thing done that day and writing them down in a diary. In addition it would also be a good habit to make learners switch to a Monolingual dictionary instead of a Bilingual dictionary for personal use.

Limitations of the Study

The data for the study was collected from teachers with whom the investigator was connected with. Most of these teachers were teaching in bilingual settings in the urban areas and it is not known whether teachers teaching in tribal areas or rural settings engage in thinking in English before speaking in English. The sample of learners comprised ones whom the investigator taught during his two decade long career and is not fully representative of ESL learners from varied backgrounds such as tribal, rural, semi-urban, urban and metropolitan cities in India. Further, there is a paucity of research in this area particularly in the Indian context and hence the conclusions drawn in this study cannot be fully generalized.

Scope for Further Study

Study of both teachers and ESL learners hailing from different backgrounds both geographical and socio-economic can be attempted to find out the practice which aids and deters the ability to think in English. Further, studies in collaboration with Neuroscientists may be undertaken to find out the ability in ESL learners to speak in English utilizing the strategies proposed for fostering the ability to think in English, identified in this study.

Summing up

This study has tried to find out the habit if any among teachers and learners to think in English and have highlighted the benefits of the same. The acknowledged fact that thinking in English will foster fluency in speech should act as a strong motivator for teachers and learners of English. It is hoped that the findings and the strategies proposed for fostering the ability to think in English will benefit readers unaccustomed to the same and even trigger an interest among teachers to foster this ability among own learners.

Notes

Thinking in English is a skill that can be developed and the following steps can be followed:

- Step 1:** Think of individual words associated with your life such as brush, clothes, coffee, car etc.
- Step 2:** Practices speaking in complete sentences and phrases.
- Step 3:** After using own native language, think how the same would be uttered in the target language. This will soon become a kind of 'mental practice'.
- Step 4:** Tell a story in your head in the target language.

Meticulously following the four steps along with acquisition of vocabulary and grammar can help improve fluency in English.

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