

THE RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL EXPOSURE IN ESL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Second language acquisition specialists all over the world are familiar with generations of students who, despite having spent ten, twelve or fifteen years in classes learning a second language, emerge as non-functioning adults in second language performance, especially with respect to oral performance. On the other hand, countless number of cases of second language learners can be cited who have learned to use the second language with ease and facility without ever going to school. They seemed to have acquired this skill virtually in the street, far from the classroom.

These apparently contradictory cases represent two different approaches to second language development. The first group represents the formal group that learns the second language through formal classroom instruction and the second group represents the informal group that learns the second language through informal natural exposure.

There seems to be no clear-cut superiority of one approach over the other as far as ESL development is concerned. One group of literature indicates that formal classroom instruction does indeed help in developing ESL proficiency (Krashen and Seliger, 1975; Krashen, 1976; Karshen and Seliger, 1976; Krashen, Jones, Zelinski, and Usprich, 1978; Briers, 1978; Chihara and Oller, 1978; Bialystock, 1979; Pica, 1983; Long, 1983). The other group of literature points out that formal classroom instruction does not make any significant contribution to ESL development, especially when opportunities to practice it exist outside the classroom (Upshur, 1968; Hale and Brudar, 1970; Mason, 1971; Martin, 1980; Kadià, 1989).

The Study

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate how formal classroom instruction and informal natural exposure operate in the context of second language development, especially with reference to the development of oral proficiency in English as a second language.

The significance of the study lies in the fact that the field study was conducted in Nepal which provides a unique opportunity for this kind of study. It is one of the few countries in the world where there exist possibilities for people to learn English through their exposure to mutually exclusive formal and informal language learning environments. One can identify people whose ESL proficiency can be attributed without doubt to either a formal language learning experience or an informal natural exposure.

Therefore, this study explored the following research question:

Were there significant differences between formal classroom instruction and informal natural exposure in the development of oral proficiency in English as a second language as measured by a holistic scoring method, errors in grammar and structure, fluency in speech, and extent of vocabulary used.

Method

Subjects: The subjects included two groups of people who learned English in two different ways. They were selected on the basis of a simple random sampling method which gives an equal opportunity for every member of a population to be represented in the sample of the study. The procedure adopted was to write on a piece of paper names or numbers of every member of a population group, such as a classroom at a school for the selection of formal subjects or a trekking agency or similar other gathering place for the selection of informal subjects. These slips of papers were placed in a container and about ten percent of those names were drawn to be represented as samples.

The first group of subjects were twenty nine people who were regular students at public schools and colleges in Nepal. They represented the formal group in the study. They learned English mainly through formal classroom instruction which was grammar-based and had Nepalese teachers for models ESL speech.

These formal people did not have exposure to English-speaking environment by way of visiting English-speaking countries, nor did they have any chance to come in contact with native English-speaking people within their own country on a sustained basis. Other than an occasional and sporadic use of modern cultural blessings such as a radio, video, television and movies, these formal people have had no access to natural exposure to English learning environment at all. Moreover, almost all the subjects in the

formal group were from outside the city of Kathmandu or who happened to be there just for a brief period of a year or two for their study purposes. Their exposure to informal natural environment is minimal and their ESL proficiency can be attributed mainly to their formal classroom instruction.

The second group also consisted of twenty nine people who represented the informal group. These informal subjects virtually picked up their English in the streets of Kathmandu or on trekking routes of the hills and mountains of Nepal. The majority of these subjects came from the legendary Sherpa community, who work as mountaineering and trekking guides for foreign tourists and expedition teams.

Most of these informal subjects have had no formal schooling at all. A few of them who had somehow managed to go to school early on in their life were either pushed out or pushed themselves out of the formal school system before long because of their need to work. Even those who had a few years of formal schooling had no formal instruction in English because it is taught only from grade four onward in public schools of Nepal. As working adolescents and adults, these informal people could ill afford to go back to school to learn English and remedy the situation. Therefore, it is fair to state that the ESL proficiency of the informal group was a product of untutored, natural exposure to English.

Data Collection: Both the formal and informal subjects were interviewed individually with the help of questionnaires which were designed to gather background information as to the type and period of exposure to ESL and other socio-economic variables (See Appendix A and B). They were also presented a series of pictures from *The Ramayan* and *The Mahabharata*, the two popular sources of the Nepalese culture and tradition. The subjects were asked to tell in English about the important episodes and events presented in the pictures and describe about the main characters presented there.

Both the questionnaires and pictures were given a trial run before they were actually presented to the subjects. Appropriate changes were made after this trial run. This improved their effectiveness by way of generating free and unrehearsed samples of ESL speech that was appropriate for tapping ESL competence (Littlewood, 1984). Every effort was made to collect an adequate sample of ESL speech from both groups of subjects. For example, they were constantly reminded of the fact that there was no truth value attached to their description of the events presented in the pictures so that they would feel free to express whatever they liked. Moreover, it did not require any technical know-how or other extra linguistic abilities on the part of the subjects to respond to the pictorial presentation. All the interviewer was interested in was the collection of adequate samples of ESL speech from the subjects and

he would continue to reinforce positively whenever they made an attempt to speak freely without hesitations.

In this way, speech samples were collected and preserved on cassette tapes. They were later analyzed to test the hypothesis.

Data Analysis: The speech samples were first analyzed holistically by a team of five independent judges who were educated Americans. Four of them had Ph.D. degrees and the remaining one had a master's degree, teaching ESL. They based their judgement on their overall impression of the individual speech samples, each about five minutes long which did not follow any particular order of presentation. There was no way of knowing for the judges whether a particular speech sample represented a formal or informal group. Their identification was masked.

Prior to scoring the speech samples, all the judges went through a practice session which lasted till they were fully confident with and fairly unanimous in the use of the scoring criteria that emphasised the use of language as a tool of communication. The criteria were developed on five point scale, with one being poor and five being excellent (See Appendix C).

After the holistic scoring of each speech sample by the five independent judges, a holistic mean as computed for each subject by way of averaging the five holistic scores.

In order to address the issue of reliability of the holistic scoring method, a correlation matrix among the five raters was computed. The correlation coefficients among the raters ranged between 48 to 90 which were all significant ($p < .01$). The average intercorrelation coefficient among the five raters was 67, calculated by the Z-transformation method. The standardised item alpha analog for interrater reliability of the average score across five raters using the Spearman-Brown method approached 91.

After completing the holistic scoring, the speech samples were further analysed for grammatical errors and fluency related problems. The grammatical errors were measured in terms of subject verb disagreements, adjective-noun disagreements, word order problems, and problems related to copula ('to-be' verbs) such as omissions and substitutions of 'to-be' verbs.

Fluency related problems were measured in terms of number and frequency of pauses made, such as hisses, hesitations and false starts, words and phrases repeated, and fragmentations in the utterances occurred. Later composite scores on fluency related problems and grammar related problems were obtained by combining the subscores.

Results

First, a t-test, based on holistic mean scores, was computed to determine if there was any significant difference between the two groups of subjects who learned English in two different ways. The results are presented below:

Table 1: T-test of the Holistic Mean Scores
Variable: Holistic Mean

Group	N	Mean	S.D.
1. (Formal)	29	2.675	0.890
2. (Informal)	29	3.282	0.624
T	DF	Prob >	P
-3.005	56		0.004

The t-test on the holistic mean scores indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups ($p < .01$). The informal group secured significantly higher holistic mean score than the formal group. In the opinion of the five educated American judges who spoke standard English, the informal subjects were better than the formal subjects in their ESL oral proficiency.

T-tests on specific measures and problems related to fluency in speech also yielded significant mean differences ($p < .01$). The mean score of the formal subjects on the fluency related problems which consisted of pauses, repetitions, and fragmentations was significantly higher than that of the informal group. On the other hand, the formal group had significantly lower mean scores than the informal group on grammatical and structural errors ($p < .01$). This suggests that the formal group suffered more from fluency related problems than the informal group and the latter had more grammatical and structural problems than the former.

How do they affect their oral proficiency in ESL? As stated earlier, in the opinion of the five judges, the informal group was significantly better than the formal group in their ESL oral proficiency. This indicates that for effective communication purposes, the ability to speak fluently is more critical than the ability to speak grammatically correct but halting English sentences. The fact that fluency is more important than accuracy, in the opinion of the five judges, is also illustrated by the following correlation table:

Table 2: Correlation Between the Holistic Mean Score and Composite Mean Scores on Grammar and Fluency Related Problems (N = 58)

Holistic Mean		Grammar
Grammar	- 0.0246 (0.8545)	
Fluency	- 0.6339 (0.0001)	-0.1060 (0.4282)

Note: Probabilities are shown in paranthesis

As the table indicates, there was no significant correlation between the holistic mean score and errors on grammar. In other words, grammatical and structural errors (subject-verb disagreements, Adjective-none disagreements, problems with 'to-be' verbs, and word order problems) did not significantly affect, disrupt or breakdown the communication between the speaker and listeners. What seemed to disrupt the communication was the lack of fluency in ESL speech, because there was a significant negative correlation between the scores on the fluency related problems and the holistic mean score ($r = -0.63$, $p < .01$).

The data analysis also indicated that there was a significant correlation between vocabulary development and the holistic mean score ($r = .42$, $P < .01$). Earlier, it was found that there was no significant correlation between the score on grammar and structure problems and the holistic mean score. This would indicate that a good stock of the ESL vocabulary was more useful than having a good command over grammar and structure with poor vocabulary for basic communication purposes.

Discussion

In the final analysis, the study seems to throw some additional light of support to Krashen's input hypothesis which states that second language acquisition is a function of comprehensible input designed to convey messages in low anxiety situations (Krashen, 1985). The formal subjects' preoccupation with the form of the language at the expense of the meaning it conveyed not only hindered the smooth flow of their ESL speech but also disrupted the line of their communication.

When the focus was on the form of the language, their anxiety level heightened because of their concern for the grammatical accuracy. As a result, their ESL speech suffered from pauses, hesitations, repetitions, false starts, and fragmentations which inevitably annoyed the judges and might have thus contributed to their lower scores.

On the other hand, the informal subjects' concern for the meaning the language conveyed rather than the form it carried not only relieved them of the anxiety and tension that caused the fluency related problems for the formal subjects but also facilitated their flow of speech and, thereby, improved their communication. This probably was the reason for their scoring higher grades from the judges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study seems to suggest that formal and informal language learning environments contribute to second language development in different ways. The former seems to promote accuracy and the latter seems to promote fluency. Depending upon one's priority, one can make an appropriate choice. If both of these abilities are something to be looked for, harmonious blending of formal and informal exposures might produce a better result.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire For Formal Subjects

Name:

Address:

a) Permanent Address

b) Temporary Address

Level of Schooling Completed

Name of the School/College

Age Sex First Language

1. How long have you been studying English?
Ans.
2. How long did you study English at
 - a) Primary school?
 - b) lower secondary school?
 - c) secondary school?
 - d) college?
 - e) university?
3. Do you also go to private tutors or coaching institutes to learn English?
If so, how many hours a day/week and how long has it continued?
Ans. hrs a day/week for yrs.
4. How many hours do you spend for your English home work?
Ans. hrs a day/week.
5. In addition to doing English home work, do you write or speak English for any other purpose? If so, what is it for and how many hours a day/week?
Ans. hrs a day/week.
6. How often do you read books, magazines, and newspapers in English?
Ans. hrs a day/week.
7. What other language (s) do you speak in addition to your mother tongue?
Ans.
8. Have you ever travelled or lived outside Nepal? If so, where and how long?
Ans in for mths/yrs.
9. How often do you watch television and listen to radio programs in English?
Ans. mts/hrs a day/week.
10. What are your parents' occupation?
Ans.

11. What are your parents' education?
Ans. mother father
12. What kind of house do you live in?
a) thatched roof and mud built b) mud and brick built
c) cement and concrete built d) specify others
13. The house you live in
a) belongs to you. b) belongs to your parents.
c) is rented. d) specify others
14. How difficult is English for you?
a) very difficult b) not so difficult c) easy and simple
15. Why is English important for you?
a) It helps in higher education.
b) It helps in travel.
c) It helps in obtaining better jobs.
d) It gives social prestige.
e) It helps in understanding and developing friendships with English speaking people.
f) Specify others
16. Do you ever think or dream in English?
a) never at all b) sometimes c) often
17. How do you spend your leisure time?
a) reading books and magazines
b) going to movies and theaters
c) watching or playing games and sports
d) playing cards, Nepalese chess, Chinese checkers or similar other games
f) spending time together with friends
g) specify others

Appendix B. Questionnaire for Informal Subjects

Name

Address:

Permanent address

Temporary address

Current position

Age Sex First language

1. How long have you been working in your present job?
Ans.
2. How often do you use English to interact with English speakers?
Ans. hrs a day/week.
3. Did any of your previous jobs require you to speak English? If so, how long have you been speaking English as a part of your work experience?
Ans.
4. Have you ever been to school? If yes, how long?
Ans.
5. Have you ever travelled or lived outside Nepal? If so, where and how long?
Ans. for mths/yrs.
6. How long do you watch TV or listen to radio programs in English?
Ans. mts/hrs a day/week.
7. How often do you watch English movies in theaters or videos?
Ans.
8. Do you read any books, magazines or newspapers in English? If so, name them.
Ans.
9. What language do you speak at home?
Ans.
10. What language (s) do you speak other than your mother tongue?
Ans.
11. What are your parents' occupation?
Ans.
12. What are your parents' educational qualifications?
Ans. mother father
13. Why is English important for you? Because
 - a) it helps in business

- b) it gives social prestige.
 - c) it helps in obtaining better jobs.
 - d) it helps in higher education.
 - e) it helps in developing an understanding and friendship with English-speaking people.
 - f) specify others
14. How difficult is English for you?
a) very difficult b) moderately difficult c) easy and simple
15. Do you ever think or dream in English?
a) often b) sometimes c) never at all
16. How do you spend your leisure time?
a) going to movies and theaters
b) playing cards, Nepalese checkers, Chinese checkers, carom board or similar other indoor games
c) playing outdoor games, such as football, volley ball, ping-pong etc.
d) taking long walks, hiking or biking
e) Just hanging around with friends
f) specify others
17. What kind of house do you live in?
a) thatched roof and mud build b) mud and brick built
e) cement and concrete built f) specify others
18. The house you live in
a) belongs to you b) belongs to parents.
c) is rented d) specify others

Appendix C. Instructions for Holistic Scoring

Holistic scoring is a method designed to assess the 'overall' effectiveness of a written or oral performance. In the present study, we are concerned with judging the oral performance of a group of people who have learned English as a second language in Nepal. The oral performance is judged on the basis of speech samples that were collected through a picture description task. The pictures were related with *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, the two most popular religious scriptures in the country.

As a judge, you are kindly requested to listen to each speech sample attentively and score each of those samples holistically. The main assumption of the holistic scoring is that each of the factors involved in the oral skill is related to all the other factors and no one factor can be separated from the others (Conlan, 1976).

As you listen to the tape, you will notice that the investigator is frequently expressing some kind of favorable remarks, such as 'that's good, 'that's very true' or a simple hum of positive expression. They were simply designed to keep the speaker talking and in no way implied that the message was successfully conveyed. As a judge, it is up to you to determine whether a message was conveyed or not.

A set of scoring criteria is available for your reference. Read the criteria carefully and refer to it whenever necessary. Score each sample immediately after you finish listening to it. Unless there is some technical problem, please avoid the temptation of listening to the samples repeatedly to justify the scoring in terms of specific errors. The overall concern should be on the communication of the message. A detailed description of the scoring criteria along with the points they carry is given below.

Criteria	Point
A sample which clearly communicates a message and compares favorably with the oral proficiency of an educated native English speaker in terms of pronunciation, intonation fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and structure.	5

A sample that contains only minor inaccuracies in pronunciation, intonation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and structure and these inaccuracies, in no way, interfere with the communication of the message.

4

A sample in which communicability is affected due to inaccuracies in one or more of the following areas: pronunciation, intonation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and structure. These deficiencies may cause an occasional recourse to the use of the native language, audible and inaudible pauses between words and phrases, and some hesitation in speech.

3

A sample in which communication breaks down due to apparent deficiency in pronunciation, intonation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and structure. It also contains one or more of the following deficiencies: hisses, hesitations, repetitions, long pauses between words and phrases and frequent use of the native language.

2

A sample in which the message is barely communicated due to serious gaps and deficiencies in pronunciation, intonation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and structure. It also contains more of the deficiencies listed earlier for the sample carrying a score of 2 which include hisses, hesitations, repetitions, long audible and inaudible pauses between words and phrases, and frequent and prolonged use of the native language.

1