

Learner's Attitude and Its Impact on Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper studies the attitude of learners towards language learning in a second language learning environment. The author has selected the group of students pursuing different under graduate courses after secondary examination in Uttar Pradesh (a state in India). While the paper discusses learner's attitude it also highlights the teacher's approach and methodology to teach the pre-designed curriculum. Proficiency in English Language can only make you successful – this is the belief spreading all over giving rise to the study of the learners' needs from the grass root level. Today learners want English Language Teaching to be customized according to their needs. Pursuing a pre-designed syllabus does not always satisfy their needs. The paper will study the curriculum followed by various universities in relation to the attitude of the learners learning English language, who feel that learning English Language for their use and pursuing a syllabus to pass an examination are two different situations and it effects their attitude towards learning English. The paper also studies the sociolinguistic factors responsible for their attitude towards language learning.

Key words

Language Learner, Language Learning, perception, attitude, behaviour, L1, L2, second language learning environment

Introduction

In India, English is not used only for the utilitarian purpose but also for the interpersonal and inter-institutional communication. It works as the Business Language as well as the Lingua Franca, which means that it is required to carry out the business and also to communicate with people of different cultures as India is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country. It is no more working as the status language of the elite class or the educated class of the society, rather it is working as an instrument to bring success in life. The youth of India are aware that English can win them good jobs with rich salary if they are good in English. A study of Gardner and Lambart (1959) has been done in order to find out if the research findings of Gardner and Lambart in regard to 'attitude and motivation' towards language learning are applicable in this context. Gardner, Lambart and Smythe (1979) have done extensive research on attitude and motivation and their co-relation with linguistic performance of learners. They suggested that an L2 learner needs to be psychologically prepared to acquire a second or a foreign language as it is a part of different ethno-linguistic community. An L2 learner is required to impose elements of another

culture into one's own life space (Khanna & Agnihotri:1994). Therefore, he needs to be psychologically prepared. There are other factors like age, anxiety, aptitude and amount of exposure responsible for the language learning. The present investigation is also being done to study the influence of these factors on the target group learner. It is also being observed how the classroom environment and teachers' attitude influence the attitude of target learners.

Background

English medium education in India has flourished recently because of the global standards aimed at by educational institutions in India. English has given students and academics global mobility. Books and other learning materials are easily available in English. With over 68,000 titles brought out annually, India is the third largest publisher of books in English, after only the USA and Britain (Graham, 1995). There may easily be over 200,000 English Medium schools in India today in government and private participation. Private colleges and universities are also playing key role in imparting education. These private institutions provide education through English medium after class XII. The stakeholders in these classes come from heterogeneous background. They are from ICSE Board, CBSE Board or from State Board. State Board schools prefer regional language as the medium of instruction. In Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), as the regional language is Hindi, which is also the national language, the medium of instruction in state board schools remains Hindi. On the contrary, ICSE and CBSE Board schools treat English as the medium of instruction. In these schools English receives the status of L1. In U.P. State Board schools, English gets the status of L2 or L3 as Sanskrit is also taught alongwith Hindi. Sanskrit is introduced in class V and English is introduced in class VI. In 2007, a change in the curriculum has been introduced and now English is being introduced from class III in state board schools. All rural areas are covered with these state board schools as providing education to all sections of the society is one of the primary responsibilities of the government. These schools teach the largest number of students in Asia.. Because English is introduced to them under the Three Language Formula, it does not get the status of L1. Besides, the curriculum of English is grammar based in comparison to the Communicative English syllabus of CBSE Board. As a practice, teachers use grammar-translation method and structural approach. Bilingualism is the main aid in the classroom. During for six years from class VI to class XII, theoretically students are introduced with the grammar-translation rules and they know reading and writing. But it has been observed that their knowledge to use written or spoken English is miserable. The biggest factor is that in spite of studying English as a subject, they do not get exposure to situations where they can use English or they can observe how English is used by others. Their knowledge

is restricted to writing an examination of English. On the contrary, students from CBSE and ICSE board schools get English speaking environment in their schools. They are practiced to use English in day to day contexts. Teachers use communicative approach and direct method to teach.

Alongside, we cannot neglect that these different boards represent different economic sections of the society at large. State Board schools provide education on very nominal rates. Therefore, the economically weaker sections of the society never go for a second choice, while who can spend more prefer to teach their wards in ICSE and CBSE schools. Children from economically weaker sections obviously do not get exposure to English at home also as they are deprived of the facilities like television or convent educated English speaking parents, relatives or friends in comparison to the children studying in ICSE and CBSE board schools. Thus, these classes of students come from different social backgrounds. They form a common group in professional classes. It is observed that many students of state board schools are good in technical subjects, but due to lack of language skills they fail to produce good result.

Methodology

A questionnaire was administered to collect data from 350 students pursuing different professional courses in different English medium universities. The following number of students were randomly selected for the survey :

B. Tech	150
BBA	100
BCA	100

The objective of the survey was to find out

- i) Learners' motivational level
- ii) Anxiety level
- iii) Their involvement in a language learning class
- iv) Their confidence level.
- v) Their perception about the language classroom and language teacher
- vi) Their perception about the curriculum

The learners under 18-21 years (undergraduate students) have been intentionally selected for the study as they have reached to a certain level of psychological maturity as compared to the school going students and also that their learning objective at this stage is directly related to their future

career. It has been observed that they are the highly motivated group of learners as their career needs are specified and their objective of learning is clear to them.

Literature Review and Findings

To study the impact of teaching English upon the students in schools pursuing curriculum of different boards and compare their learning outcome a study of the behaviourist school and cognitivist school has been taken up. While the behaviourist school propagates that language can be learnt by imitation and habit formation, the cognitivist school suggests that human beings do not always speak what they are taught, they also speak more or less. The faculty of Language is a creative entity. It is not a motor skill like walking or running. It is a faculty of mind. Even if language is not taught to humans, they are capable to developing their own rules of grammar to express and communicate themselves. Understanding plays an important role in communication. Language learning is not merely listening and speaking. Humans can go beyond what has been listened by them and form new ideas. It is observed that the state government run schools largely follow the behaviourist pattern of learning. This leaves students merely memorizing the rules of grammar taking the help of their mother tongue in spite of developing an internalized grammar which can help them utter the target language naturally.

In second language learning two social psychological variables - attitude and motivation - play the key role. According to Gardener (1985) the term '*motivation*' means 'referring to the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity (p.10).'

According to the Pocket Oxford Dictionary (2004), motivation is

- i) The reason or reasons behind one's actions or behaviour
- ii) Enthusiasm (p. 587)

Gardner highlights two different kinds of motivation in second language learning situation :

- i) **Instrumental motivation** – When the learner wants to learn a language to fulfill immediate goals, such as getting a job or passing an examination etc., his/her motivation is of instrumental kind.

- ii) **Integrative motivation** – when the motive to learn a language is to communicate and integrate with people from another culture who speak the same language, it is called integrative motivation.

The study shows that in the present scenario the motivation to learn English by the target group is of instrumental kind. Their aim is, of course, to pass their current examinations and then to appear for an interview for a job. They want to pursue only the most required portions of their syllabus, which will fetch marks in the examination. They are also keen to join personality development and spoken English classes, which prepare them for interviews. They concentrate on hypothetical questions which may be asked by the interviewer. According to Gardner and Lambart (1959, 1972) - when a language is learnt only for the utilitarian purposes, the success in a foreign/second language is supposed to be lower than if it is learnt for the integrative purpose. But this claim seems to be doubtful as the instrumentally motivated students are effectively learning English. The reason seems to be that instrument motivation works as the force or the pressure to get a good job. Another reason which needs consideration at this stage is – the invent of English for Specific Purposes. ESP is an area which has successfully been explored and organized on the basis of needs of students pursuing different courses. They are showing up effective results as they are sounded with knowledge of the language items related to their field. If an engineering student is only taught literature with the motive that he wants to communicate with the native people, he might not show progress unless he has interest in literature. Instrumental motivation is not only contributing to the progress of students, it is also providing employment and job opportunities to those who are proficient in English. They are opening up institutes to teach Spoken English to career aspirants as it is their extreme need. A number of such institutes are seen in every nook and corner of the streets in every town.

Having studied that the target learners are instrumentally motivated, the impact of '**intrinsic**' and '**extrinsic**' motivation is also reviewed. 'Intrinsic' motivation means the urge to engage in the learning activity for its own sake and 'extrinsic' motivation means motivation that is derived from external incentives. To know which among the two is predominant with the learner is crucial but important for teachers. Learners who are intrinsically motivated learn faster than learners who need external incentives to get motivated. Their learning is more likely to become mechanical learning in comparison to self motivated lot of learners. **Self motivated** or intrinsically motivated students with **high aspirations** and **goal orientation** show better results.

The data collected was statistically analyzed and the following results were identified.

78% of B.Tech students think that they do not require much study to cover their syllabus of English. They gave preference to their engineering subjects. 96% wanted to excel in English, but they do not want to write an examination. 30% students think that giving an examination at this level is useless, but they want English should continue to be taught in all four years of engineering. 100% were aware that they need good English to appear and qualify in an interview. All of them want an informal class with formal real life activities, such as mock interviews and seminars. They commonly expressed an opinion that teachers' behaviour should be empathetic to them. The teacher must understand their weaknesses and needs to improve. 6% of them did not show any inclination to the class, activities or teacher. They were indifferent to all situations except realizing that they need proficiency in English.

In BBA, 94% students put *communication skills* on priority and they prefer to study communication strategies in business environment. 72% wants to improve their language skills. They give priority to spoken English as they need to carry out their business assignments with different people.

In BCA 98% students prefer technical knowledge over English language or communication skills. 2% were not able to give their specific opinion.

As compared to B.Tech students BBA and BCA students are less keen to improve language proficiency immediately because they plan for MBA or MCA after graduation and think that they have ample time to develop proficiency in English.

Attitude Vs Behaviour

Attitude can be defined as a set of beliefs developed in a due course of time in a given socio-cultural setting. Although it necessarily so not determine behaviour but can have some impact on it. It is studied that positive attitude facilitates learning. If the learner is reluctant to learn or he/she does not have a positive attitude, he/she does not produce any result. Language learning is effected by the attitude and motivation. Motivated, demotivated and amotivated students have different perceptions of their class, teacher and curriculum. Their perceptions are responsible to for their attitudes. An individual's perception of the class, perception of the teacher, peer group, syllabus and his/her awareness for future needs effect hi/her attitude to language learning.

Teacher's Attitude

Teachers' attitude plays an important role in the present context. In the professional courses, the teachers' have changed their role from being the controller of the class to the facilitator. They accept students mistakes in the language use as a necessary part of the language learning. They help and motivate students use more and more language in their daily life. Learners learning outcomes are influenced by the interpretation of teachers' interpersonal behaviour. If they believe that the teacher is associated with them and their learning outcome, the teacher empathize with them, understands their problems, they react positively and this factor contributes to their motivation level in the classroom.

Teacher's Role

With the age of paradigm shift, the teacher has come a long way from being a strict disciplinarian to a facilitator. The teacher needs to make them realize that I am the one like you who also commits mistakes in the use of English and mistakes are a natural part of learning a language.

A teacher needs to remember that a demotivated student cannot learn. In our classes, we need to keep an eye on

- i) What are my learners' problem in learning English?
- ii) How these can be removed?
- iii) Are they related to the grammar or to the student's perception about learning a language?
- iv) What does my learner want?
- v) Why he/she is learning English?

Student's Attitude towards Teachers

They want a teacher who can motivate them to speak more and more in the classroom and teach them how to use language outside the classroom. They want their teacher to be good at English and capable of correcting their mistakes without hurting their ego or without accusing them of not having knowledge of English. They want their teacher to create an informal environment in the class where they can learn with fun.

Conclusion

The social scenario in Uttar Pradesh has changed from 'Banish English' to 'Welcome English'.

A few years back the U.P. state government was trying to implement only Hindi in all offices and public places in place of English. It did not succeed. Now with the invent of multinational companies and the young professional getting a number of jobs with them need to know not only workable English but good presentational and communication skills too. Therefore, English has become a 'welcome' phenomenon all around. Blooming tourism industry, MNCs, BPOs, NGOs, missionaries and native speakers of English in India are demanding its youth to be proficient in English and the young people of India are aware of the usefulness of the target language. 'Parental encouragement' and 'communication with teachers' in schools providing English speaking environment and communication with the English speaking peer group are some of the external factors at the school level which motivate students learn English at faster pace. At college two factors come up as most important – i) to pass an examination ii) to get a job. A very less percentage of students are indifferent to learning English at the college level. In spite of their desire to learn, they are not seen putting effort to learn. They are fearful of making mistakes. The grammar-translation method at school level and the teachers' pressure on making correct structures are responsible for their inhibition. Their anxiety level is high whenever they are asked to read, write or speak English. This results in slow learning or in no learning. Students are seen leaving courses due to lack of proficiency in English, although their number is less than 1%.

Future of English in India is bright as we have got students who are aware of the usefulness of the target language. U.P. State board schools require a reorientation of its curriculum to make it practically useful for students and provide a strong base in English Language proficiency by the time they join any professional course. Grammar-translation method makes the students in the class passive learners as the class remains teacher-centered. Most of the time the teacher speaks in the class. Whether he/she speaks with the students remains doubtful.

In spite of the grammar-translation method the U.P. state board schools must adopt task-based and communicative curriculum and humanistic approach to teach English. Communicative competence should be given priority over grammatical competence.

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