

The Role of the Linguistic Environment in Learning Language

Abstract

The role of the linguistic environment is of great significance when it comes to acquire proficiency in English language. The classroom performance of students from different educational background is the case in point. The social background also accounts. The present paper proposes to take this situation in detail.

Keywords: Motivation, Attitude, Exposure.

Introduction

It is usually observed that students don't perform well in the field of English. This seems to be especially the case in government colleges. Many students from rural areas face a number of problems at college. These students do pass out of school and get admissions to various colleges but their level of written and spoken English is abysmally low. They do not have the basic elementary learning which is expected of them. Students have very little confidence when it comes to English.

Errors in the field of English language acquisition can be traced to various factors. External conditions influence the rate of learning if they do not affect the learning process itself. If a learner with a rural background gets a favourable environment, he excels in his studies. There is no doubt that the inherent capacity is essential to acquire a language but if a good and comfortable learning environment is provided then this capacity will show better results. It is often seen that when two learners are placed in identical conditions, they show different levels of achievement. Research shows that there are certain factors responsible for causing errors in the course of learning a second language.

Obviously, the motivation to learn is most important. Motivation means 'desire to achieve or to do something in life'. If the learner is not immediate or for practical purpose, it will be reflected in his level of motivation and the amount of hard work that he puts in to fulfill his dream of acquiring proficiency in a second language. A well motivated learner will try his best to master the language in the best possible way in contrast to those who are less interested in language learning. Motivation plays an important role in second language learning rather than in first language because as far as second language is concerned, there is no pressure on the speaker as the daily communicative requirements are fulfilled through the use of first language. When no such pressure exists, achievement level is low. A language learning situation is one that provides support, encouragement and motivation to the learners to use whatever second language skills they have acquired. Two types of motivation have been suggested for second language acquisition: 'integrative and instrumental'. The distinction is essentially based on what functions the second language learner envisions for the acquired language. If the learner's motivation is integrative then the desire is 'to identify with the members of the other linguistic cultural group.' There is also a willingness to take on all the subtle aspects of their language or even their style of speech. On the other hand, the instrumental approach has been defined as basically 'utilitarian', a language is acquired as a 'linguistic tool', not as an instrument for 'cultural integration' (Kachru, 151). In the case of instrumental motivation, the learner masters the language quickly. The learner with instrumental motivation learns the language to pass an examination, to get a job, for communication purposes, for higher studies, or simply because it is a part of the college curriculum. In contrast, 'integrative motivation' has a social purpose. A learner with integrative motivation has a soft corner for second language culture; he has a desire to live in a foreign country, curiosity to know about the values and tradition of the people who profess that language or to become an accepted member of that community.

Aim of the Study

The present study aims at taking into account the role of the

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linguistic environment in acquiring proficiency in the English language. It proposes to show how different educational backgrounds and different social backgrounds affect the classroom performance of the students as also their mastery over the target language.

The attitude of the learner towards the English language is also an important factor. A language is not simply a means of communication, but a medium of expression as well. Thus learning second language does not simply mean acquiring a new set of symbols of communication. Littlewood says that "to adopt new speech patterns, we are to some extent giving up markers of our identity in order to adopt those of another cultural group." In some respect too, we are accepting another culture's ways of perceiving the world. If we are agreeable to this process, it can enrich us and liberate us. If not, it can be a source of resentment and insecurity. One of the factors influencing how we experience the process is our attitude towards the foreign culture itself. If this attitude is negative, there may be strong internal barriers against learning, and if learning has to take place because of external compulsion, it may proceed only to the minimum level required by these external demands. This type of situation is faced by the learner of the English language in India. He feels that the study of this language has been imposed on him without due regard to his interest, needs etc. Such learners have an indifferent attitude towards language. Their sole aim is just to pass with the bare minimum of marks. In India, English is a compulsory subject. One has to study it, most students simply read the so-called 'Guides' (the help books) and they are unaware of good quality study material. They simply read the Punjabi version of English lessons. This attitude hinders the learning process and chances of improvement are very rare. On the other hand, those who have a positive attitude towards language, and are keen to learn it, show better results. Students' interest, their learning habit, aptitude and attitude also affect the teaching of English. They may differ in respect of personal goals and motivation. Keeping the goals in mind, they put in varying levels of effort into language learning. Some students are good listeners and pick the language quickly. An extrovert student with an outgoing personality performs better in the classroom. He can interact with the teacher better than those who feel shy and are hesitant to ask questions in class.

According to Krashen's 'affective filter hypothesis' the 'learner attitude' consists of a psychological attitude towards learning, for example, if the learner attitude is positive he is inclined to pick up the language easily and quickly i.e. if the learner's attitude is positive towards learning, then, in spite of a negative aptitude, he will learn faster and quicker than those who have a negative attitude. No doubt, socio-psychological factors have an effect on the ultimate learning of language but they do not change the route and path of learning.

Littlewood draws our attention to the fact that emotional climate of the learner is an important factor in language learning. Lazanovo 'suggestopaedia' and

Curran 'counselling learning' all are based on the theory that the learners psychological problems should be taken into consideration (As cited in Rivers, 1988).

The learner will commit less errors and his level of learning will rise in an anxiety free environment. If the learner feels uncomfortable, he will not be able to concentrate on his studies. The fear of being insulted and pinpointed occasionally in the class creates an inferiority complex in the learner. He suffers alone and this is likely to affect his output. But these factors are largely overlooked in the Indian situation. There is no doubt that the learner is exposed to the target language in two spheres. One is the classroom and the other is the second language community. If inspired by the teacher, his confidence level increases, and he feels motivated to learn it well. The sympathetic attitude of the teacher boosts his moral level. Unfortunately, the typical language classrooms in educational institutions of Punjab are teacher-dominated with little opportunities provided to the learner for interaction. The learner's state of ignorance and dependence make him feel insecure, shy, helpless and shaky when he is asked to produce unfamiliar sounds in front of an audience. He feels de-motivated with the teachers' comments. Occasionally, the keen and daring learner who, with the desire to learn, approaches the teacher, often has to face harsh comments like 'you don't know the basics, 'you cannot learn, English'. This closes all doors of interaction. Such comments make students feel embarrassed, in front of the peer group and snap even a minimal chance of improvement. Students coming from the rural background are already scared of English having been given the false notion that it is a very difficult language to learn. The attitude of teachers who, in order to establish their superiority, frighten the young mind, is questionable. A relaxed and co-operative atmosphere is needed for smooth language learning. Teachers should discard their authoritarian approach towards learners and make them approachable to the students. The classroom learning in India is associated with the old school traditions like 'teacher driven method' or 'lecture-method'. Such methods leave no room for interaction. Teaching is one-sided and students are passively at the receiving end. As sensitive teachers, we should help them realize their dreams. We should avoid humiliating the students in front of their classmates and not make them feel that making a mistake is 'bad'.

Exposure to the target language is helpful in learning second language. The schooling of the learner matter a lot as it indicates his 'circle' and the kind of language he is exposed to. For instance, reputed English medium schools aim at 'Received pronunciation' and discourage 'Code-mixing'. On the other hand, for students coming from rural background or government schools, the level of exposure to the target language is not up to the mark. They do not engage in extra co-curricular activities, do not read the newspaper, do not watch Standard English channels and do not indulge in extra reading. In most of the cases, exposure is limited to the atmosphere prevailing in the class. This limited classroom situation adversely affects their level of achievement. The root cause of the errors, they

commit is their faulty schooling. We, as teachers, have noticed that such students stick to 'Help Books'. They are just not interested in reading the original prescribed texts.

As far as the classroom situation is concerned there is no segregation on the basis of proficiency in English. The role of the linguistic environment becomes significant when one observes the difference in performance of students from English medium schools and students from vernacular medium schools. Students from schools where the medium of instruction is English perform better as far as English language learning is concerned. Students, coming from schools where the medium of instruction is not English, find it difficult to fare well in English language acquisition.

Sometimes the fault lies on the part of the teachers also. They fail to understand the problem faced by the learner. Some of them are so used to the passive lecture method; they are not prepared for any kind of change in curriculum and methodology. Their old traditional way of teaching sometimes makes the classroom boring and monotonous. Teachers should adopt such methods and techniques that encourage the learner to interact, discuss and express his views. A good example of activities centered programme is Prabu's task based model. That will make teaching not only interesting but entertaining also. But, in the institutions of Punjab a passive non-practical method is considered normal and memorization is the most favourable learning style. Apart from this, it is not possible in colleges, as the pressure to finish the syllabi on time, an inordinately large number of students (100-110), with no aids and unpleasant classroom surroundings prevent interaction and opportunities to explain or correct the errors of the students.

A lot of research has been carried out in this respect. The common hypothesis is that with increasing age there is a decreasing capacity for language learning. The evidence that children can learn second language better than adults comes from neurophysiology. Penfield has argued that 'the brain of a young child is much more receptive to the development of speech mechanism than the adults' (Stern, 362). For an adult, learning a new sound system is a problem as the tongue gets stiff from pronouncing one type of language. He cannot adjust his speech organ according to the new sound system of second language. It has been observed that after the critical period of language-acquisition has passed, around the time of puberty, it become very difficult to acquire another language fully (Yule, 164). Some suggest that adults achieve great expertise in the written language but not in the spoken language. They can be successful in some features of second language, such as vocabulary and grammar and can concentrate more than children. On the other hand, children are better off than adults as far as phonology is concerned. They acquire better pronunciation and show better results in accent too. It is observed that despite an ideal acquisition situation, a very few adults can be seen achieving nated-like proficiency in using second language. The brain loses its

flexibility with age. This is the logic behind teaching of second language at the primary age. The govt. of Punjab decided to teach English at the primary level. But, there is no evidence to support the view that after reaching the teens it is difficult to acquire another language fully. It is a matter of debate.

It is assumed that the learner will be able to translate the knowledge and skill of the second language into practical reality. Khanna, 101) states that 'learner must have the ability to operate language as a finite system of rules and use these rules in a variety of socio-cultural settings'. In the regional colleges of Punjab, the learners have been imparted knowledge of grammar rules and structures of English but they are unable to use it when faced with the demands of real life. There is no doubt that many learners are capable of producing perfect sentences in the 'controlled situation' but they feel nervous and shaky and do not have the confidence to use in real life situation. For instance, it is observed that they often use the correct form of verb in the class when it is part of a drill or exercise, yet make errors and are unable to use the appropriate and correct form of verb in a given social context. The need is to provide them with a rich variety of linguistic and socio-cultural teaching techniques.

Conclusion

Language teaching should be context based. Students should be given opportunities to interact with the native speakers of the language. Recently, a new trend of introducing 'study abroad' programmes, and 'exchange programmes' is becoming popular as a part of the learning process. The motive is to provide a chance to the learner, to interact with the native speakers of the target language and to use the language in a given cultural context. Such programmes not only bridge the cultural disconnects between the students and the target language society but also help them to better understand the norms of behaviour of those whose mother tongue is English and to use the target language in a more effective manner. In Punjab, educational institutions are welcoming such programmes and encourage the students to interact with the native speakers of the target language and to attend their weddings and festivals, not only to understand the cultural difference but also to use the language in a new cultural context.

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