

Why Don't Learners Learn What Teachers Teach?

Shanjida Halim, M.A.
Rizwana Wahid, Ph.D.
Tanzina Halim, M.A.
Oveesa Farooq, Ph.D.

Abstract

Language teaching is a very challenging job for language teachers despite their lots of efforts applied in the classrooms to facilitate and ease language learners in the learning process. Before stepping into the classroom, teachers prepare teaching materials, aids, tools, lesson plans, course plan and so on, and set teaching goals, but these teaching objectives and outcomes are rarely fulfilled. This issue has been addressed in this article that is loosely based on Dick Allwright's (1984) Interaction Hypothesis - 'Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?' from the proceedings of a seminar on Language Learning in formal and informal contexts held in Dublin. In this theoretical paper, the researchers have addressed some basic reasons of students' inability to learn what teachers teach, and teachers' failure to achieve their goals in language classrooms especially although they try their best. The investigators have discussed both the linguistic and non-linguistic factors related to learning and teaching such as internal and external factors, students' approach, attitude and motivation toward the target language, and some teaching factors; teaching experience, comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), teachers' competence and ability to raise awareness, responsibility, motivation and self-regulation among students in achieving the learning outcomes. Furthermore, some very useful tips have been suggested and recommended to be implemented particularly in language classrooms, and in other classes generally such as working on Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) and providing the leaners comprehensible input to get i+1 (Krashen, 1985) for increasing their level of understanding.

Keywords: Learning, Teaching, Classroom, Motivation, Comprehensible Input, Approaches to Learning

Background

In the proceedings of a joint seminar of the Irish and British Associations for Applied Linguistics held at Trinity College, Dublin, 11-13 September 1984, 'Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?' –The Interaction hypothesis has been discussed by Dick Allwright. Although the title of our paper has been taken from Dick Allwright, we are going to discuss in

this article our perspectives as to why learners don't learn what teachers teach them not only in the English Language class but in other classes as well.

According to some experts ' language teaching is an extremely complex activity and not one that we could expect would be done very effectively very often'. In order to achieve specific goals, an English teacher designs his/her class in a planned way because teaching in the class is a profound activity. It is the teachers' awareness of the students' motivation and its relationship with the teaching process that provides a framework by which the teacher can choose effective teaching methods to teach the English language to them. Therefore, teachers attempt to create motivation in the class and attract the learners' attention to the subject. In spite of this, a mismatch is seen between what teachers teach and what learners learn. Now the question which arises is: *Whose fault is it? Is it the learners or teachers who are to be blamed?*

Objectives of the Study

The study discusses why EFL learners don't learn what they are taught. For this purpose, undergraduate students of King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia particularly, and almost all EFL students generally were taken into consideration. The theoretical study is mainly based on the teachers' experience with the students and with the institution as well. Teaching students and fulfilling the teaching objectives is a challenging job for teachers. Therefore, the researchers, here, have tried to get some possible answers to the underlying problems of teaching and learning. The research article intends to find out answers of these research questions.

1. Do the course plan and lesson plan fulfill teaching objectives and learners' needs? If not, what are the best ways to plan classes?
2. Do students have language proficiency and previous knowledge to proceed to a further level of language learning? How may language planners and curriculum designers implement new policies, planning, and textbooks according to the learners' level and demand of the target language?
3. How can teachers adapt their teaching materials to a comprehensible input and their teaching approaches to motivate the learners to become interested, self -regulated and have a positive approach toward EFL learning in the classrooms?
4. Why should university or college administration consider and revise the recruitment procedure of teachers to achieve teaching goals and learning outcomes; infrastructure, teacher's workload, class size and the moderate use of technology to get the best teaching outcomes?

There are a number of factors that influence the success of learning, especially learning English as a foreign language. Slameto (1987) states these factors can be classified into two groups, namely internal and external factors. The internal factor commonly involves the internal aspects of the learners such as physics, psychology, and anxiety, while external factor may cover any aspects out of the learners' point of view, such as environment, school, family, etc.

Some current studies in language acquisition suggest positive views on the importance of exposure to linguistic input in promoting acquisition. It implies that teachers should use the target language and provide input as much as possible since the learners are at the initial stages. Teachers face a dilemma when they are to teach beginners with low language proficiency. Therefore, teachers are required to modify their language in such a way in order to be appropriate with the level of the learners' proficiency.

One of the experts called Stephens (in Ria; 1987) found that external factors such as the characteristic of teacher, class and school condition had consistently no relation to the success of learning a foreign language. On the other hand, students' psychological conditions, as one of the internal factors, were potential to influence the foreign or second language acquisition. However, we do not agree that the characteristic of teacher, class and school condition has no relation to the success of learning a foreign language.

Literature Review

Although there are ample studies on the issues of language learning and teaching or the failures to achieve learning outcomes and teaching objectives, only some very significant research in this arena have been reviewed here. One of the best educational practices, Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy (1956) has introduced three domains of learning such as cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains explaining knowledge, approaches/attitudes, and skills in language learning objectives respectively. This taxonomy in the cognitive domain (revised by Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) has addressed some learning objectives: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating. This hierarchy of learning objectives can be implemented or set by teachers and curriculum designers in the classrooms and course designing respectively, and language learners need to fulfill these educational objectives for a satisfying result. Further, Skinner (1957) in *Verbal Behavior* has paved a new path for language learners through developing new language habits. He has considered language learning is a matter of imitation, practice, positive reinforcement and habit formation. Skinner's hypothesis is very useful for teachers to motivate EFL learners through positive reinforcement and giving them enough drills and exercises for practice, then teaching and learning objectives can be attended. In the same way, Stern (1970) has recommended ESL teaching would be benefited from this approach, so, he also focused on imitation, practice, and modification or simplification of

teaching aids for comprehensible input. Then, derived from innatism approach of Chomsky (1975), Stephen Krashen has introduced a Monitor Model (1985) to second language teachers and learners that played a very significant role in language learning classrooms. His input hypothesis emphasizes comprehensible input which plays a key role when learning a foreign language. According to him, language can be learned by comprehensible input, and learners can reach to a level ahead of $i+1$ (input + further level), but if teachers fail in modifying input, learners' progress will not occur. This is fully consistent with the conceptualization of language lessons as the sets of learning opportunities. It also helps learners learn a new language in a natural order. Dick Allwright's presupposition (1984) of language teaching and learning raises the question to teaching and learning issues and takes the complex task of the relationship between teaching and learning factors into consideration. Further, he adds that lessons, interactions in the class and teaching are important but cannot be taken as a sole factor to achieve learning outcomes. There are so many other alternative factors that affect learning including teaching. He states,

We can look upon language lessons as sets of learning opportunities, some deliberate, but many incidentals, all created through the necessary processes of classroom interaction. It should now be easier to see why the relationship between teaching and learning is problematic. What the learners do learn is presumably limited by the learning opportunities that are made available to them. But the provision of learning opportunities is not just determined by the teaching. The teaching is just one factor (though sometimes a powerful one) in the overall process by which lessons happen and learning opportunities are created. What we need now to account for is the process by which learning opportunities are created and the process by which different learners take different things from the sum total of learning opportunities that each lesson offers. (5)

Slameto (1987) also finds that internal and external factors affect the success of learning, especially for EFL learners. The former commonly involves the internal aspects of the learners while the latter may cover any aspects out of the learners' point of view. Similarly, the early empirical studies of Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Dornyei, (1990, 2001) have also focused the internal and external factors affecting language learners' motivation that play a key role in a language classroom. One more study by Masgoret and Gardner (2003) has shown a clear relationship between the positive attitude toward the target language and the success in language learning. According to them, motivation and positive attitudes of learners are important factors in achieving educational objectives. Moreover, Hedge (2001) mentions that teaching and learning in the language classroom are directed primarily and mainly by language teachers with some experience and though it could be very helpful for teachers to explore on their own. She is of the view that teachers are the decision-makers and managers of the classrooms. She adds further that

a strong foundation of knowledge, experience, and skill may solve classroom problems because a skilled, experienced, competent teacher can apply his/her insights in resolving pedagogical problems. Furthermore, Lightbown and Spada (2003) have listed many internal and external factors that affect the outcomes of language learning and teaching. In their perspectives, learners' intelligence, motivation, positive attitude, introduction of L2 in the early school programs, their L1 similarities with L2, developing L2 vocabulary through reading and direct efforts and self-responsibilities of learners, comprehensible input by teachers (easy rules before complex ones), corrective feedback in the L2 classrooms, modified teaching materials, tools and methods according to learners' needs, and second language as a medium of instruction in other courses (e.g. history, psychology etc.) can lead to the positive and successful results of language learning.

Next, a recent research by Riasati (2012) deals with a very common problem faced by many language teachers in the classroom that is the students' redundancy to speak. Their study took Iranian EFL learners' perception of factors that influence their willingness to speak English in the language classrooms and the results have stated many factors contribute to their willingness to speak, for example, task, topic, learner's personality, and ability, teacher, and comfortable atmosphere of the classroom. In order to generate interest and motivation to speak, learners should be given the topics of their interest to discuss. To do this, teachers need to know their students' area of interest. Another study talks about the teacher as a very important factor in language classrooms. According to Abad (2012), teachers' professional development is a must factor to reshape students' language development. Teachers' linguistic egos, their positive attitudes, beliefs toward target language need revision and adjustments to improve the quality of their teaching and learners' success in learning. Teachers must always be open to develop professional competence to deal with the students of different linguistic backgrounds, attitudes, and beliefs about the target language. In one more work on EFL learners, Msuya (2016) has mentioned that EFL learners of Tanzania do not have one language learning strategy suitable for all learners. The findings have shown that different learners used different strategies for learning a language.

When we sum up all these researches, it may be said one criterion doesn't fit to answer the difficulties related to language teaching and learning, achieving teaching objectives and the question "why don't learners understand what they are taught? How successfully learners learn a language ultimately depends on their own efforts with teaching factors and so many other factors. Thus, any attempt to understand effective language teaching must consider the issue of effective language learning along with some internal and external issues.

Method

As being university teachers, the researchers have applied observational, descriptive, expository and analytical approaches to write and collect the materials about research variables in order to understand the major factors affecting language learning outcomes and teaching objectives. They have used their own observations and experiences of their EFL classrooms.

Discussion

Now this paper is going to discuss how teachers, class and school condition affect the success or failure of learning.

Novice Teachers: In some parts of the world, it is found that institutions employ teachers with no teaching experience and skill at all. Not only that, those novice teachers are asked to teach courses for the higher level of students such as graduating students at the tertiary level. Now the question which arises is: '*How can those inexperienced teachers try to teach students when they hardly have any idea with the texts they are supposed to teach and the skills and knowledge needed to teach students of tertiary level?*'

Research shows that effective teachers are the most important factor which is responsible for the achievement of students (Abad, 2012). An inspiring and informed teacher helps create great students. Teacher quality has a lasting effect on student learning, so choosing effective teachers is critically important for any institution trying to improve their performance. In any institution, if there are teachers who lack certain skills and qualifications such as verbal ability, using appropriate instructional strategies, questioning strategies, monitoring learning, etc., then learners will have a lot of problems in learning what those teachers teach.

Class size: Managing classrooms has always been a challenge for teachers all over the world whether teaching English Language or any other subject. In some parts of the world, the size of the class for teaching the English Language is so big that it becomes a Herculean task for any teacher to either teach or manage the class effectively. For example, in some parts of the world, if any skills class is visited, 50 to 55 students are seen to attending the class. In this case, having student engagement and securing cooperation so that teaching and learning can occur becomes impossible.

The Workload of Teachers: In some Gulf countries it is observed that teachers at the tertiary level are handed in a timetable which is totally unfair because in one day some teachers have to take four to five consecutive classes without any break. When a teacher has this type of schedule, can the institution expect those teachers to give quality education to the students? Teachers need a lot of energy to impart any lesson or conduct any class, but if the workload is like this, then

even if those teachers have the best intention to teach students, they will fail to impart effective lessons in class.

Lack of Funding in institutions: Funding has a great impact on student performance in any institution. A lack of funding typically leads to a shortage of materials and textbooks available for students. In some countries of the Middle East, even today, students do not have the scope of buying original texts for their courses. Year after year, they buy photocopied materials and texts which are extremely unclear with lots of missing pages. Therefore, students are deprived of getting some clear textbooks which would motivate them to delve deep into their studies.

Comprehensible Input: People who design courses are usually thoroughly familiar with what goes on in classrooms, but sometimes some textbooks/materials are selected by curriculum designers inappropriately for the learners and as a result education becomes a failure. We know that the linguist Stephen Krashen (1985, 1987) regards the obtaining of input as crucial, and adds the condition that input, to be of use, must be comprehensible. According to him, input affects the progress of the learner in learning the L2. If the learner has to make progress beyond a given stage of acquisition, he needs to be exposed to the most comprehensible input. Most of the time, it is seen that our learners are exposed to input which is beyond their comprehension. Some examples can be cited below.

(a) Understanding and Using English Grammar- Fourth Edition by Betty S. Azar and Stacy A. Hagen

In some countries of the Middle East, this grammar book is prescribed for students of level 4 even when they have inadequate language proficiency at the tertiary level. There are items like Adverb clauses of the condition, Reduction of Adverb Clauses to Modifying Adverbial Phrases, etc. Now, the question is: *What is the use of teaching or exposing students to grammar items such as the ones mentioned above when they are not able to use the English Tense system correctly and confidently?*

(b) Effective Academic Writing I by Alice Savage and Masoud Shafie

In one of the institutions of the Middle East, this book is prescribed as a foundation course for students who study in the Science College. Not only that, these students have no background knowledge of academic writing and they are forced to learn something which is of no use to them.

Lack of Student Motivation: There are many students in some parts of the world who simply do not care about being serious in attending class or putting in the effort necessary to maintain their grades. The reason is: these students are provided free education and so many other privileges

that they are totally indifferent to learning and improving themselves. It is extremely frustrating to have students in a class who are only there because they just have to be.

Self-regulated learners: Learning is dependent on a complex interaction of factors, in a way that there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for language teachers. The language teachers need to help the learners become self-regulated. In doing so, the teacher can help language learners adopt '**'SMART' goals'** (Doran, 1981), that stand for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and relevant, and time-bound. Self-regulated learners are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, able to set goals to be achieved, and motivated to accomplish these goals, observe and evaluate themselves during the course of language learning processes.

Approaches to learning: There are different approaches to learning which are conditioned by concepts of learning. The surface and deep approaches to learning from a cognitive doctrine developed by language researchers Saljo (1976), Biggs (1999) and the others. They were the innovators who began to study an apparent difference in learning outcome achieved by different individuals.

Surface and Deep Learning: Surface learning (as its name implies) involves simply 'scraping the surface' of the material being studied, without carrying out any deep processing of the material. There are many students who complete the minimum tasks, memorize what is needed for an exam and nothing more. In this approach, students see learning tasks as enforced work. These students are passive learners, working in isolation, and see learning as coping with tasks so they can pass an assessment. In contrast, a student who adopts a deep approach to learning seeks to understand the meaning. They have an intrinsic interest and enjoyment in carrying out the learning tasks and have a genuine curiosity in the subject and connections with other subjects and with building on their current learning. These students may enjoy social learning, including discussing different points of view.

Many students target their studies at simply passing the test rather than understanding the material in an aggregate way. The deep approach requires holistic learning. A learner should be able to decompose the knowledge and possess the ability to grasp new parts by relating to knowledge at hand. The holistic approach implies a systematic organization. A holistic way is helpful in developing a complex understanding. Students who see learning in an atomistic (limited) way are likely to be those who do not adopt deep approaches. A transition from the atomistic to the holistic approach is one of the most important improvements in one's learning experience.

Impact of Online Classes: The rapid growth of online learning is undeniable because of some of its positive sides, but still the majority of teachers and students prefer the traditional classroom setting. Online classes are very much a passive method of learning and for this reason is not ideal for many students who need personal interaction in their learning. Many students need an authoritative figure's presence in order to motivate them to participate actively, to pay full attention to lectures, or to focus more on study or assignments. It has been observed that online classes are good for students who are self-regulated and motivated. It is not suitable for extremely weak students.

Obsession with Technology: Technology has great advantages no doubt but over-reliance on technology can never be a positive thing. The trend nowadays is that the moment teachers ask students to do any activity or work in class, some students will take recourse to their smartphones within seconds. They feel that there is no point in working hard and showing their competence and creativity when they can try to get everything ready-made by the help of technology. When this is the attitude of the majority of the students, then can they ever learn what teachers teach?

Recommendations/Suggestions: It is certainly a difficult task to teach someone who has no intention to learn. Students who see learning as being imposed externally have no intention to cope with their studies. They seek to meet the demands of any learning task with minimum efforts. The following recommendations can be taken into consideration.

Learning Ability: A student should be aware and take necessary measures when one's learning ability stagnates at a primitive memorization rather than structuring and organizing them properly in a systematic way. As teachers, we need to help our students become aware of the study process and the effects the daily study routine may impose.

Deep and Surface Approaches to Learning: All teachers should try to give their students the opportunity to become deep rather than surface learners by presenting clear goals and standards for what is to be learned. It is necessary for the deep learners to have both the study skill and the learning skill developed. Not only this, students can be motivated to use both deep and surface approaches to achieve their goals depending on what is required and the conditions under which they are learning.

Strong Foundation: Students need to have a strong foundation before they can be promoted to higher levels. They need to know the basics of level 1 & 2 at the tertiary level before they reach level 3 or 4. For example, if a student is not able to write a paragraph correctly applying all the rules of writing a paragraph, then how can we expect an essay from him?

Ideal Class Size: All institutions need to keep the class size small having 25 students, especially a language class so that teachers can pay attention to all students and make their teaching effective.

Teaching Time: Teachers should be given ample time for teaching. In a limited time span, they restrict themselves on syllabus completion because at the end of the term, they are held responsible for not being able to complete the syllabus. What needs to be remembered and followed is that cramming students with a lot of information should not be the focus of the teachers and institutions. Students must be provided with some positive experiences of education which will lead to confidence in the ability to understand and succeed academically. Though exceptions are always there, we might come across the students who complete their course with deep understanding, but we have to keep in consideration the ones who lag behind.

Dire need of Trained and Skilled Teachers: It is extremely essential to hire trained teachers in any institute because it is clear that the common factor in school improvement and student achievement is the teacher. Administrators must ensure that they make smart hiring decisions, and the decisions must not be taken lightly.

Conclusion

Teachers and learners need to go to the language classroom with more or less well-determined plans or intentions. Teachers are expected to engage in continuous professional learning activities from the beginning to the end of their careers. They should reevaluate their own practices regarding language teaching and learning, and then perhaps they can get the answer to the question: 'Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?'

References

- Abad, J. V. (2013). Pedagogical Factors that influence EFL teaching: Some considerations for teachers' professional development. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Development* 97-108.
- Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives: Complete Edition*. New York: Longman.
- Allwright, D. (1984). Why don't learners learn what teachers teach? – The interaction hypothesis. In D.M. Singleton & D. G. Little (Eds.), *Language learning in formal and informal contexts* (pp.3-18). Proceedings of a joint seminar of the Irish and British Associations for Applied Linguistics held at Trinity College, Dublin.
- Allwright, D. (1988). *Observation in the language classroom*. London: Longman.

- Azar, B.S. & Hagen, S.A. (2009). *Understanding and using English grammar* (5th ed.). Pearson.
- Biggs, J. (1999), Entwistle, N. (1988) & Ramsden, P. (1992), Compiled. *Characteristics and factors that encourage deep and surface approaches to learning.*
https://teaching.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/upload.../deep_and_surface_learning.pdf.
- Bloom, B., Max Englehart, M. Furst,E. Hill, W. & Krathwohl, D. (1956). *Taxonomy of Education objectives: The classification of educational goals.* Handbook I: Cognitive domain. New York: David McKay Company.
- Chalabine, M. (2004). *What a deep learner does that a surface does not.* Programming Environments Laboratory Department of Computer and Information Science Linköping University, Sweden.
- Chomsky, N. (1975). *Reflections on language.* Michigan: Pantheon Books.
- Doran, G. T. (1981). There's an S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives. *Management Review*, 70, 35-36.
- Dornyei, Z. (1998). Motivation in second and foreign language learning. *Language Teaching*, 31, 117-13.
- Dornyei, Z. (2001). *Teaching and researching motivation.* Essex: Longman.
- Gardner, R.C. & Lambert, W.E. (1972). Motivational variables in second language acquisition. In R.C. Gardner & W. Lambert (Eds.) *Attitudes and motivation in second language learning.* (pp. 119-216). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Hedge, T. (2001). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *Input hypothesis: Issues and implications.* Longman Group UK Limited.
- Krashen, S. D. (1987). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition.* Pergamon Press, Inc.
- Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N. (2006). *How languages are learned.* 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Masgoret, A. M. & Gardner, R.C. (2003). Attitudes, motivation, and second language learning: A meta-analysis of studies conducted by Gardner and associates. *Language Learning*, 53 (1), 123-163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9922.00212>
- Medor, D. (2018). *Real school issues that negatively impact learning.*
<https://www.thoughtco.com/issues-that-negatively-impacts-student-learning-3194421>
- Msuya, E. A. (2016). Language learning strategies by efl secondary school learners in Tanzania: An exploratory account. *Brazilian English language teaching (BELT)*, 7(1), 94-108.
- Ria, R. (1987). *Study Tentang Test masuk Bahasa Inggris PPIV Tahun 1983 dan Test Bakat Bahasa dengan Prestasi Belajar Bahasa Inggris IKIP Malang.* Malang: IKIP Malang.

- Riasati, M. J. (2012). EFL learners' perception of factors influencing willingness to speak English in language classrooms: A qualitative study. *World Applied Sciences Journal* 17 (10): 1287-1297.
- Rutherford, S. M., Limorenko, G. & Shore, A. M. (2016). *Correlations between Deep, Surface or Strategic Learning Styles and Perceptions of Collaborative Learning in Higher Education*. School of Biosciences, Cardiff University, United Kingdom.
- Säljö, R. (1976). *Learning in the learner's perspective. some common-sense conceptions*. In Reports from the Department of Education. Department of Education and Educational Research, University of Gothenburg.
- Savage, A, & Shafie, M. (2007). *Effective academic writing 1: The paragraph*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- Skinner, B. F. (1957). *Verbal behavior*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Slameto, D. P. (1988). *Belajar dan faktor-faktor yang Mempengaruhinya*. Jakarta: Rineka Cipta.
- Stern, H. H. (1970). *Perspectives on second language teaching*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Surface, deep and strategic approaches to learning. Introduction to learning and teaching. UNSW SYDNEY. <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/learning-teaching-university/0/steps/26384>

Teacher Development. Edutopia: George Lucas Educational Foundation.

TESOL International Association. 8 current trends in teaching and learning EFL/ESL. Blogs. <http://blog.tesol.org/8-current-trends-in-teaching-and-learning-eflesl>

Shanjida Halim, M.A.
Faculty of Languages & Translation
King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia
Postal Code: 62529
shalem@kku.edu.sa

Dr. Rizwana Wahid, Ph.D.
Faculty of Languages & Translation
King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia
Postal Code: 62529
rizuwalid@gmail.com

Ms. Tanzina Halim, M.A.
Faculty of Languages & Translation
King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia
Postal Code: 62529

thlem@kku.edu.sa

Dr. Oveesa Farooq, Ph.D.
Faculty of Languages & Translation
King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia
Postal Code: 62529
oveesafarooq@yahoo.com