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Attitudinal Factor in Second Language Acquisition
An Illustrative Example from a Class in University

V. Kavitha, Ph.D. Candidate

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There are many factors that hinder second language learning and acquisition. Among all the factors, the psychological factors greatly influence second language acquisition.

Action Research

I conducted a survey among 120 first year engineering students through questionnaire and personal interview at the beginning and at the end of the semester. One significant finding was that most of the students had negative attitude towards English and learning of English.

The major reasons for their attitude, according to them, were:

- I am from the Tamil medium class in my previous school.
- English is a difficult language to learn.
- I don't know grammar.
- It is too late for me to learn English.
- I did not have a good English teacher.
- Nobody encouraged me.
- I did not like the English language.
- Learning English is a threatening experience.
- No opportunity for the exposure to the use of English.

Follow Up

As a follow up of this survey, students were given both individual and group counseling, where the difference between a subject and a language was explained to them. And also we tried to make them realise that age was not the deciding factor in acquiring a language. Our goal was to remove their psychological inhibition and communicate to them the importance of acquiring English language for better career prospects.

Language activities were introduced in the class. These activities gave them good opportunity to practice English in the class. At the end of the semester, there was a

notable change both in their written and oral performance. So many also stated that they improved their learning to impress upon their teacher!

Thus, there was a change in their attitudes, expressed through statements such as these:

- I am from the Tamil medium class in my previous school. But I can learn English.
- English is not a difficult language to learn. It is a beautiful language.
- I am learning grammar. It is not the only deciding factor to acquire oral English. I clarify my doubts with my teacher.
- It is not too late for me to learn.
- I have a good English teacher.
- My teacher encourages me.
- I like English. I feel confident about using it.
- It is not threatening.

Perceptible Changes

I noticed that the students' attitudinal change directly influenced their performance both oral and written. Once they are psychologically prepared to receive a language, acquisition became easy.

From this experience of mine, it is clear that the attitude of the learner directly influences the accomplishment of Second Language Acquisition. Thus, it is vital to study the attitudinal factor to enhance language learning.

Definition

Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary defines "attitude" as "a complex mental orientation involving beliefs and feelings and values and dispositions to act in certain ways", while *Collins Cobuild Student's Dictionary* explains: "Your attitude to something is the way you think and feel about it".

There is some difference between *attitude* and *motivation*. The latter can be internal or external. Even if it is internal, it is a conscious drive in attaining a goal, whereas attitude is a subconscious drive towards the destination.

Attitude in Language learning

Researchers have identified attitude as a very important factor in second language learning. For example, Savignon (1976) says that attitude is the single most important factor in second language learning. Spolsky (1989:149) declares: "Of all school subjects, language learning is the one where attitude is specially relevant." We must recognize that most success stories begin with the acquisition and earnest practice of appropriate and

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positive attitude toward the task on hand. For too long, we have let our political desires, goals and propaganda come in the way of language learning. For any significant change in the mastery of a second language, teachers must acknowledge and respect students' attitudes, beliefs, and expectations and help them overcome any harmful perceptions and blocks.

Beliefs about language learning consist of "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockhart 1995:224)

Stern classifies attitudes into three types:

- Attitude towards the community and people who speak the L2
- Attitude towards learning the language concerned
- Attitude towards languages and language learning in general.

There are so many factors that affect the attitude of a student in second language acquisition. Attitude towards:

- Institution
- Teacher
- Course materials
- Methodology

And also general attitude, preconceived attitude, attitude transferred from friends and seniors should be included in the list. We become the way we think.

Attitude as a Behaviour

In most homes in India, mothers try to control their mischievous children by telling them about the immediate presence of the devil, owl, cat, witch or a policeman. As the child grows, she understands the reality. But the fear created within her is not wholly deleted. Though there is not much fear about these persons/objects as the child grows, the child develops an aversion towards these persons/objects. The child may continue to feel that cats are harmful. Slowly the child may overcome such impressions through real life situations. The same thing may happen to second language learners. If they do not change their misconceptions, it becomes very difficult for them to learn English.

Two Important Phases

In the Indian context, there are two important attitudinal changes a student should undergo:

- Realisation of the importance of English
- Eradicating the Prejudice against the language

The prime task of a teacher is to bring about these changes in students. Before learning anything, one should know the advantage of learning it. Today there is much competition for enrollment in computer-oriented courses because of the vast job opportunities such studies offer. Most of the parents and students prefer computer courses. It is the end result of the course that drives them to take up the course. But getting a good and well-paying job in this field requires communicative abilities in English. So, it is the task of the teacher to make the students realize the importance of second language acquisition. Usually the realization comes to students at a later stage, especially in their final year of study or after the completion of their degree, but by this time it may be too late. This is the first phase.

In the second phase, the teacher should remove the language-fixation of the students. Most of the second language learners have misconceptions about English like:

- Very difficult to learn.
- Complicated grammar.
- Impossible to learn at this stage (adult learners).
- It is the language of the sophisticated.

While such perceptions may have some validity (for example, the chaotic English spelling and difficulty to imitate the native English stress system, see Thirumalai (2002), *An Introduction to TESOL: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages* <http://www.languageinindia.com/april2002/tesolbook.html>), English is more easily learned around the world because of the attitude and motivation of the learners and their need for learning it.

The learners' wrong attitude to language prevents them from learning it. The teacher should make the students feel comfortable with the language. The students should feel that learning English is as easy as learning any other language.

Attitude Towards the Educational Institution

Institutions greatly influence students' attitude on varied perspectives. When they enter a particular institution, students' attitudes are shaped to a great extent. As far as language learning is concerned, students tend to feel that they would acquire English language better, if they pursue education in a particular institution. This is perhaps due to the better exposure to English caused by the fact that in such educational institutions, students come from different states and countries; and thus obviously English serves as a link language. It is also possible that the students may increase their self-motivation to match the high standards of the institution.

Attitude Towards the Teacher

Students inevitably have different views about the kind of the teacher they think is best for them. Some prefer a teacher who provides space for them to pursue their own learning paths. Some prefer a teacher who structures the learning process rigidly. Some prefer an orthodox teacher like that of Goldsmith's "The Village Schoolmaster". Some prefer a teacher to be a friend. Some expect a teacher to be a counselor. Different students have different expectations about their teachers.

Attitude to subject is directly related to attitude towards teacher. When a student likes a teacher, automatically she starts liking the subject. She might like the teacher for any particular reason – teacher's methodology, approach, unbiased behaviour, caliber, teaching style, voice, accent, gestures, teacher's skill in giving individual attention to all the students, and so on. At one point, students may attempt to score maximum marks just to impress the teacher. This happens in every student's life. Every student would have a favourite teacher but for whom she would not have strained so much in that particular subject. It is the duty of a teacher to leave good and positive impressions in students' minds.

Students' attitude towards the teacher would form a platform conducive for second language learning.

Attitude Towards Course Material

Students vary in their attitudes to teaching materials also. In general adult learners dislike having a course book imposed upon them. They prefer a variety of materials and the opportunity to use them in ways they choose for themselves. For young learners, a course book should be colorful and full of pictures. In some cases, the quality of the paper used, even the wrapper, makes the students like or dislike the course material.

The course materials should not put students under pressure. The course materials should match the expectations of the students. It should be simple but not too simple, innovative with challenging tasks for students to work with. The course material should comprise a variety of tasks and should satisfy learners of all levels. If it is too simple, smart learners may not be interested. On the other hand, if it is too hard, slow learners may develop aversion to it.

Students prefer practical sessions to theory. For instance, rather than telling students to write a conversation between a teacher and a student, they can be told to enact it as a role play. So, the course material should facilitate group activities rather than individual exercises. Once the interest of the students is induced by the materials, it is easier to make them interested in learning the language. A teacher should be vibrant while preparing the course material which contributes much in second language learning.

Attitude Towards Methodology

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Teaching in a new way is like giving old wine in a new bottle. Students are usually thrilled to follow innovative methods. They usually consider traditional methods of teaching mundane. Even a novel twist in the usual method would interest them. In language learning, especially the grammar part, the students show aversion because of the routine definitions and examples. On the other hand, if the students participate doing the grammar in conversation, they would be successful. Once they start getting involved in the class, learning would become easy.

Thus, changing the attitude would bring drastic changes in language learning. Rather than changing the teacher or the syllabus, attitudinal change should be brought in first, which would facilitate English learning.

Not only the student's attitude, but also the teacher's attitude plays a significant role in language teaching. The teacher should also have positive attitude towards students and her methodologies. This would directly influence student's attitude.

Conclusion

Of all the factors, psychological factors influence second language learning to a great extent. The attitude factor directly contributes to the success of second language acquisition. Teachers need to focus on this aspect before starting the language classes. The positive attitude of the learners to English and learning English can bring sweeping changes in their English acquisition.

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