The Focus on Individual Learner in SL/FL Classrooms in Bangladesh

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Abstract

In the field of SL/FL teaching, emphasis now has been shifted from teacher-dominated approach to learner-centred one. Given the crucial link between learning and learner variables like psychological factors, social parameters and motivational factors, teachers are now expected to look more closely into those variables for information that can be manipulated in setting methodology, materials and class activities The current study is actually a survey research that brings learner's variables to bear on variable rate of SL/FL learning success. The study has been done through questionnaire and interviews both from teachers' and students' perspectives. With the help of questionnaire survey and interviews, the current study concludes that despite some satisfaction shared by both the teachers and students in learning outcome at the tertiary level, there are still gaps in terms of addressing different learner's factors the filling up of which would significantly enhance success rate in learning.

Introduction

With the focus shifted from the teacher dominated teaching perspective to learner centered one, learners get priority in the SL/FL class rooms as their needs, personality and attitudes have considerable impact on learning success. Hence, teachers have to take individual care of learners getting them to do a diverse

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range of tasks in the class rooms. To facilitate learning, SL/FL teachers now are required to have adequate knowledge about psychology, sociology, linguistics, and pedagogy. Knowledge of these areas is the essential components that underpin the devising of effective course materials and teaching strategies so as to facilitate learning.

In learner-centred teaching approach, imposing fixed learning strategies on learners without considering cognitive, motivational, socio- cultural factors and individual learning styles that affect learning, is largely discouraged. The effectiveness of strategies may largely depend on the characteristics of the given learner, the given language structures, the given contexts or the interaction of these. (Cohen 1998:12)

Traditionally, in regard to SL/FL teaching, the main focus was on curriculum development, teacher's personal growth, test instruments, and methodology. In these cases, learners' characteristics were overlooked. As a result, learning success rate greatly varied from learner to learner. Hence, the need for monitoring SL/FL learner's behavior became crucial as learner's behavior variables veritably influence learning outcome. (Ellis 1994).

Objective of the Study

The current study aims to find out what negative implications are there when some learner's variables are not adequately considered in devising teaching and learning strategies. It also aims to find out whether there are any inadequacies in addressing individual variables at the tertiary level of language teaching particularly in some private universities in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

Among learner variables, psychological factors are very important. These include learning "schemata" (Carrel 1983:78), cognitive learning style (Skehan 1991:275), individual learning style (Brown 1994: 104), of SL/FL anxiety (Maclntyre and Gardner (1989: 251) etc**. T**hese factors account for varying responses to the second language acquisition. So the postulation that a fixed teaching method and strategies will bring expected outcome in learning has proved wrong for quite some time now. The postulation was the result of the ideas that learners have some general tendencies to learning. So the individual's peculiar tendencies, idiosyncrasies and other variability in personality were rather ignored. Research shows that despite individuals showing general tendencies toward one style or another, they may be identified by differing contexts evoking in them different styles. (Brown 1994: 104-110)

Field independence/dependence that is also included as one of the psychological factors has relative implication with SL/FL learners. SL learners with field independent style perform more successfully in deductive lessons while those with field dependent style perform better in inductive lessons. (Abraham 1985: 689). Moreover, more recent studies have shown that field independence is superior to field dependence for SL/FL learning. (Chapelle and Greene 1992: 47-83)

Individual need is another learner variable that has to correspond with course objective, methodology and curriculum. A mismatch between learner's needs and course curriculum would hamper the expected level

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of learning. Hence, analyzing learner's needs is very important. Haque and Zaman (1994) suggested that employment of "immediate needs analysis" is much effective for making the learner feel interested, motivated and overcome his/her deficiencies to meet his/her needs. Haque and Zaman (1994) have further stated,

" therefore, the teacher has to be qualified, experienced and skilled enough so as to carry out Immediate Needs Analysis, and at the same time to provide with appropriate and adequate instructions, activities and equipment: and that should make the whole class appear lively and the whole programme successful. (87)

Needs are closely associated with motivation. (Ausubel 1968). According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), motivation is of two types. These are 1) integrative and 2) instrumental. Integrative motivation is one through which learners wish to be integrated into the culture of the second language group whereas instrumental motivation is one that stimulates learning of language for instrumental goals for examples career development, translation, reading etc. According to researchers, (Lambert 1972), integrative motivation generally accompanies higher scores on proficiency tests in foreign language. Another studies, however, shows that Indian learners learning English in India, with higher instrumental motivation scored higher in their English proficiency tests. (Lukmani1972:261-274).

The socio-economic positions of learners in their own society and their attitude towards the culture of the target language play an important part in SL/FL learning. Therefore, teachers should take into consideration learner's position in his/her own society as well as his/her attitude to culture of the target language. Learners can feel alienation in the process of learning second language, alienation from people in their home culture, the target culture and from themselves. (Stevick 1976)

According to Skehan (1990), upper class and middle class learners learn a second language better than lower class and socially disadvantaged learners.

In view of the above, it is advisable for teachers to pay more attention to various psychological, needs-related, motivational and social factors i.e. social background, attitude towards culture and learning styles of learners before designing course curriculum and teaching methodology as these factors have a lot to do with varying rate of learning.

Methodology

A total of 200 students were randomly chosen from different sections of English Speaking and writing courses offered by American International University-Bangladesh, Eastern University, Millennium University and University of Liberal Arts-Bangladesh for survey based on questionnaire consisting of eight MCQ questions relevant to the subject of study. In addition, 20 teachers were also randomly selected from the same universities for interviews. These are private universities situated in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The writers themselves took the interviews and conducted the survey. Later the responses were typed on computer and the frequencies of the answers were counted by the writers themselves. In

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the case of interviews, the responses were open-ended and elaborate. What was interesting was that the responses of both the students and of teachers were mostly found in conformity to each other.

Analysis of Information both from Students and Teachers

In response to the first question about the rate of learning success, more than half of the respondents (112) have expressed their satisfaction while 43 have remained neutral. In this respect, 12 teachers have provided similar responses while 5 of them have remained neutral.

Need analysis being very important (Haque and Zaman 1994) our second question was "Do your teachers do needs analysis either at beginning or any other time during the course?" In this case, 114 respondents opined that need analysis is not done by all the teachers. In this regard, when teachers were asked for their views, 11 teachers stated that they did need analysis occasionally but not in all semesters. Only six teachers averred that they do need analysis at the beginning of the course. However, most teachers agreed that they should do needs analysis more closely and should provide individualized classes in case individual learners have special needs that do not match with the general course curriculum and teaching method. They also agreed that if needs-based lessons are provided, learning outcome would become more satisfactory.

In response to another question regarding temporary adjustment of course curriculum and method, 122 students have opined that they do language course under a fixed curriculum and teaching method, and these are not altered or adjusted depending on the arising needs of students. In this case, the responses given by teachers were not wholly incompatible to those given by students as 14 teachers have admitted that though they adjust or alter course curriculum and method occasionally, there should be more flexibility for readjustment and alteration time to time. Research shows that in today's SL/FL classrooms, the teaching approach that recognizes the scope for temporary adjustment and alteration so as to fulfill differing contextual demands is the most effective one. This is arguably the best method where it is possible to ensure that every learner is properly accommodated. (Willing1987).

With regard to whether individual's background and learning style are taken into account, 103 respondents have ticked off "Sometimes" adding that no special actions were taken to analyze the learner's background and learning style. More than half of the teachers (12) have shared the same opinion. They said that they hardly do any sorting out or categorization based on learner's background or learning style before batches are formed.

In a mixed class like this, learners would have different learning backgrounds accounting for different learning styles. (Brown 1994:104) As such, applying a fixed curriculum and method no matter how rich those are may prove ineffective to reap the expected learning success.

Maclntyre and Gardner (1989: 251-275) have identified three components of SL/FL anxiety that cause impediments in successful language acquisition. Regarding anxiety, students were asked "Do your anxiety, fear or nervousness affect your learning?" In answer to this question, 107 respondents have replied in the positive. In answer to another related question "Are actions taken to have students

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overcome anxiety, fear or nervousness sufficient?" They have replied in the negative saying that no special measures were taken. When the same question was asked to teachers, 11 teachers responded in a way that can be summed up as follows: while no special measures are taken for students to particularly overcome their anxiety like psychological therapy, they try to be friendly and non-threatening both in and outside classes. Besides, they do not interfere with negative feedback even when students make mistakes. Besides they encourage students to do more and more performance-based activities in the class without hesitation. However, they agreed on the need for taking further measures for the problem to be overcome. They agreed that taking more individual measures would contribute to increasing learning output.

The negative attitude to different culture (Stevick 1976), being another variable affecting learning, our next questions were "Do you feel some kind of negative attitude towards the target language?" and "What actions were taken for the removal of the negative attitudes?" About the first question, 109 respondents have answered in the positive saying that they feel inherently inhibited towards the target language learning resulting in lack of motivation. About actions that were taken in this regard, they have said that no significant steps were taken. As for the same questions, more than half (12) teachers agreed that there should be more activities that would expand cultural knowledge of our students and minimize cultural prejudice.

Donahue, Parsons and Heyde (1982: 359-365)) suggested the use of role-play in SL class rooms as a means of helping learners to overcome the problem of cultural gap. In addition, diverse materials such as simulation games, films, culture assimilators, "culture capsules" and "culturegrams" are suggested to SL/FL teachers to help them in the process of acculturation. (Levine et al. 1987)

Conclusion

With regard to SL/FL teaching, traditionally, the views that learners possess some universal common properties in respect of learning ability and style influenced the development and application of a fixed type of teaching techniques and instruction materials. The consequences in most such cases were not wholly positive as there appeared significant disparity in the rate of success among learners. Such experiences of varying learning output under an inflexible and fixed formal method attested to the fact that the learning styles of all learners are not same and no fixed teaching methodology is the most effective one.

Taking account of different studies as noted above, a methodology that is based on specific needs and learning style of individual learner should be substituted for the one that is formulated without taking account of learner's needs**.** The need of flexible and dynamic teaching techniques today, presupposes selecting relevant materials from wide ranging sources. Thus, SL/FL teachers who would be obliged to do these tasks should take on more responsibilities and should be well informed about diverse subject areas and materials.

As the survey research demonstrates, though both teachers and students have expressed their satisfaction about learning success, full attention is not yet paid to the learners' variables that clearly influence learning. Different individual learning factors being not taken into accounts, it is yet not being possible to

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achieve more satisfactory results. Further, most respondents (teachers) have agreed that still there are gaps in terms of consideration of these variables. They further said that if more emphasis is placed on these variables, learning success will be highly satisfactory.

Recommendations

In light of the above views, the suggestions for SL/FL teaching can be summed up as follows:

1. Teachers as facilitators and guide should focus on learner's psychological factors i.e. cognitive, affective, social, motivational factors, learning style, attitude etc, that vary learner to learner and that are responsible for varying learning success.
2. To successfully measure the learner variables (mentioned above) for using them as clues for selecting teaching methods, materials and for planning activities, SL/FL teachers should have enough knowledge about psycho-socio-linguistics, socio-cultural aspects of target language, motivational factors, linguistic universals, formal aspects of SL/FL learning, SL/FL language learning/acquisition principles and class room interaction etc
3. Teachers should have good level of basic competence in target language and should have sufficient knowledge about pedagogical theories to develop apt course materials, to devise suitable methodology and to perform diverse class activities for effective learning.
4. Finally, teachers should create friendly learning atmosphere so that students do not feel threatened any way and feel encouraged to interact proactively. Teachers should be flexible and creative and should make learning as pleasant as possible. They should emphasize those activities that evoke strong interest in learners for the target language.

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