

Attitudinal factor in second language acquisition in India

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Abstract

The present paper explores the dichotomous nature of English language teaching-learning and acquisition in the Indian context. From being lingua franca of the country to facing contending status with respect to its usage and need, the paper underscores how important the language is for the Indian milieu in the age of globalization. This paper also revisits some theories of second language learning and acquisition and how one's attitude towards a foreign language can influence one's proficiency in the language and how the bipolar attitude of Indians towards English have resulted in the abominable plight of English teaching and learning in India.

Key word: Second language acquisition, proficiency, language attitude, motivational orientations, bipolar attitude.

Introduction

In India, as in many other countries English is considered as the language of globalization. Its increasing importance as the language for economic development and of economic opportunity for individuals cannot be over-emphasized. It has become the "working tongue of the global village"(Svartik& Leech,2006, P.1) and a source of aspiration for many of its learners representing the promise of a bright and better future. The scale and variety of the use of English in India encompasses part of government administration, politics, law, medicine, internal trade, education. The relevance of English in India is further fortified given the linguistic complexity of India where there are 447 living languages& English acts as a binding language. The present vital status of English in the country was envisioned way back in 1986 in the National Policy on Education, "world knowledge is growing at a tremendous pace, especially in science and technology. India must not only keep up this growth but should also make her own significant contribution to it. For this purpose, study of English deserves to be specially strengthened."However, the level of introduction of English in schools has always been a matter of debate among academicians. The bitter conflict between advocates of English, Hindi and regional languages led to the three -language formula as enumerated in the Kothari Commission(1964-66)." This relatively late introduction of English in classes 4,5,6 as reflected in the spirit of policy documents led to dissatisfaction among masses who considered English as the passport to social mobility, higher education and better opportunities. They contended that principle of equality entails that English should not be the prerogative of the rich, elite or the upper middle class only but should be equally accessible to the underprivileged and the rural community so

that they may not suffer discrimination for lack of it. Thus, attempts were made through the education system in recent years to democratize its possession beyond the top 10% of the population. English is now taught from standard 1 in 26 of the 35 states and union territories (Yadav,2011, p.40). Only 7 states introduce it in class 4 or class 5(Khan 2005).

Yet, the role and contribution of English medium schooling and its early introduction in schools in attaining “basic proficiency in the language and development of English language into an instrument of abstract thought and knowledge acquisition through literacy” (NCF 2005 on goals for an English curriculum) requires critical evaluation. Various studies and surveys have revealed a deplorable state of English performance in India. According to Cambridge Assessment, the testing body of Cambridge University, the minimum language requirement for a primary English teacher is B1 and for high school teachers is C1 on CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference). But a survey conducted by the British Council in 2010 revealed that in some states the majority of teachers in Class 1 have proficiency in English which has proved to be too low to be measured on the CEFR. In another assessment by the British Council, commissioned by the state government of Maharashtra in 2014, the English language proficiency of class 9th & 10th students of government and government aided schools was found to be abysmally low (A1 or even lower). Around half of the 404 English teachers in secondary schools in Maharashtra who were evaluated in speaking, reading, grammar and vocabulary had a very low (A2 or below) English proficiency levels (The Indian Express,2014). The results of the Annual Status of Education (ASER 2014) indicate that for English in government schools only 25.2% of children could read simple English words ,only 24% could read easy English sentences. The proficient users of the language come from the urban private English medium schools which remain the prerogative of the economically privileged class. The degree of expertise also varies within this class.

The burning question that arises here is what ails English teaching-learning situation in India? Annamalai (2013) attributes the appalling state of English performance of students in Indian schools to lack of trained, English proficient teachers. Available data indicate that in most areas of the country there are significant shortages of well qualified teachers with appropriate language skills and that the necessary enabling environment is generally lacking (Bhattacharya,2013; Hayes and Rahman, 2015; Meganathan,2011). India does not have sufficient English –proficient teachers to deliver the programs now being embarked on (Graddol,2010). He further contemplates in his book *English Next India*, that the standard of English ... tends to be particularly poor among older teachers in lower primary schools many of whom are taught in District Institute of Educational Training (DIET). There is no denying fact that teachers’ limited proficiency can be one of the reasons for poor performance in English by Indian students (English teachers being the language models for their learners) yet, they should not be held wholly and solely responsible for the poor English teaching learning situation in India as these teachers themselves must have a been at the receiving end of this cycle.

Here, we must consider that any language is a socially situated artefact and English in India is no exception. Moreover, language learning must be primarily considered a socio-psychological phenomenon rather than a purely academic one. Hence, we must delve into the various other factors (leaving the teacher variable aside), theories that explain the process of second language acquisition to have a better understanding of why students in India despite early introduction of English fail to achieve desirable level of proficiency in it.

The question why some learners acquire native like proficiency while some struggle to progress beyond the basic levels has always interested the researchers. Over the years, linguists have been pondering over the various factors both internal and external that influence second language learning and acquisition. According to Ellis(1997) the social milieu in which the learning takes place, opportunities the learners may have to hear and speak the language comprise the external factors while the attitude the learners develop towards the target language is the significant internal factor that influences the process of second language acquisition. Although other internal factors like intelligence, anxiety, aptitude, level of anxiety, need for achievement etc. have been found to influence the language learning process, in this paper, I would like to focus and discuss about the potent role of attitude in second language acquisition.

Language Attitude and Second Language Learning:

Kim & Merriam (2004) defined attitude as the general feeling (positive/negative) or evaluation (good or bad) a person has towards self, other people, objects or event. According to Chapman & Mc. Knight (2002) attitude is the way you look at things mentally and it all starts inside your head.

Ryan & Giles (1982) described language attitude as “any affective, cognitive or behavioral index of evaluative reactions towards different language varieties or their speakers” Savignon (1976) argued that attitude is the single most important factor in second language learning. Spolsky claimed that of all school subjects’ language learning is the one where attitude is especially relevant. Fasold (1984) maintained that an attitude towards the language are often the reflection of attitudes towards members of various ethnic groups. Gardner & Lambert (1972) studied the interrelationships of different types of attitudes and stressed on the significance of group specific ones – the attitude learners possess towards the speakers of the language they intend to learn and concluded that learners possessing positive attitudes towards people who speak the language and the language itself can help them to learn the target language. Later, Gardner (1985) expanded his ideas in the socio psychological model of second language acquisition. According to this model a learner’s motivation to acquire a second language is determined by his or her attitude towards the target language group and by his or her orientation (integrative/instrumental) towards learning L2 (second language). Thus, a student’s attitude towards the target language group will influence how successful he or she will be in incorporating aspects of that language into his or her repertoire. Gardner hypothesized that it is not possible for an individual with an unfavorable attitude towards acquiring a language to find the high drive, to invest the effort and to seek opportunities required to learn. Central to Gardner’s idea of language attitude is his postulate of motivational orientation which clearly answers the

question why learn a second language. According to Gardner motivation in second language learning is a construct with three interacting components, a combination of-

- 1: desire to learn L2(second language)
- 2: expenditure of effort to achieve L2 proficiency
- 3: favorable attitude towards learning the target language.

Learners may be driven by the following two types of motivational orientations in acquiring the second language:

- 1: **Integrative Motivation:** It refers to a desire to learn a language in order to communicate with people of another culture who speak it, the desire is also there to identify closely with the target language group.
- 2: **Instrumental Motivation:** It refers to a desire to learn a language because it will fulfill certain utilitarian goals such as getting a job, passing an examination etc.

Gardener proposed that an integrative orientation leads to higher motivational level and more successful learning than instrumental orientation. In the same line Ellis (1997) also contended that it is integrative motivation that helps to sustain long term success when learning a second language. However, Lukmani (1972); Mansoor (1993, cited in Khalid, 2016) found that instrumental motivation leads to more effective learning and subsequently higher proficiency in the second language. Braj Kachru (1977, cited in Brown, 2000) pointed out that in India where English has become an international language it is not uncommon for second language learners to be successful with instrumental purposes being the underlying reason for studying English.

Spolsky (1969, cited in Gardner, 1985) also argues that a learner who has a positive attitude towards a target language and its speakers will exhibit a stronger desire to learn that language as compared with learners with a negative attitude. The ability of students to master a second language is not only influenced by the mental competence or language skills but also by the student's attitude and perceptions towards the target language (Abidin, 2012). Similar ideas were expressed by Latchanna & Dagnev (2009) who postulated that motivation, attitudes and beliefs about learning a language are among the determining factors that influence a student's proficiency and must be taken into account when understanding second language learning processes. Lennartson (2008) proposed that a negative attitude and lack of motivation can lead to obstacles in learning a language.

Grosjean (1982) writes, "wherever languages are in contact, one is likely to find certain prevalent attitudes of favor or disfavor towards the languages involved which can have a profound effect on the psychology of individuals and on their use of these languages". In a multilingual country like India where different languages co-exist it is imperative to realize that language attitude would play an important role in facilitating proficiency attainment in English as a second language. Thus, attitude variables should be considered while making second language policies as they serve to maintain levels of motivation.

Role of parents in attitude(positive/negative) formation:The concept of integrative motive entails that proficiency in the second language depends upon a willingness to be like the valued members of the “other language” community. Besides the verbal habits the learner must adopt various characteristics of behavior peculiar to the other linguistic group and role of parents in fostering this integrative motive cannot be over emphasized. From his extensive researches in different countries R.C.Gardner distinguished active and passive roles of parents for their child’s success in second language learning.

Active role is that where parents actively and consciously encourage their child to learn a second language (for instrumental reasons). The parents not only monitor the child’s language learning performance but also endeavor to promote success ensuring the child completes his homework, inspire him to do well and reinforcing his achievements. Passive role is subtler and of paramount importance, where parents unconsciously transfer their attitude towards the community whose language the child is learning. Parents’ negative attitudes may diminish their active role by covertly conveying to the child their negative attitude about the second language community. When the parents refrain from using the language, it creates confusion in the child concerning the real need for the second language. Hence, he may rationalize his failure in the second language by arguing that when his parents are doing well in life without it, he may not gain much by excelling in it. Thus, a child reflects the attitudinal atmosphere of his home and the parents play a significant and dynamic role in the development of attitudes about other ethnic groups which in turn affects the rate, degree and interest with which a child acquires mastery over a second language.

Bipolar attitudes towards English /English speaking people in India: In India, English language is faced with two bipolar attitudes in Indian homes. Few regard its usage as a form of neo -colonialism and a symbol of western culture and thoroughly resist its usage. This section of the Indian population clearly manifests a strong negative attitude towards the language and its bonafide users. Some other prejudices which accounts for this negative attitude are:

A: It is the language of the rulers.

B: Language used by the rich and the sophisticated.

C: complicated language, difficult to learn (this perception has some validity given the chaotic English spelling, syntax and difficulty to imitate native stress system.)

The other group, the advocates of English believe that they and their children would be guaranteed better economic opportunities if they have English as a part of their linguistic repertoire. For them “it is a symbol of peoples’ aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life”. (Position Paper on Teaching of English, NCERT, 2005). Surprisingly this demand for English medium schooling is no longer restricted to the elites and the rich in the urban areas but has gradually seeped into the psyche of the rural denizens as is clearly evident from the mushroom growth of private English medium schools even in rural areas.

Building positive attitude towards English:

Although the role of English language and English medium schooling in providing a better life and upward social mobility to its users in India is still debatable yet the desirability and the need of this language in the modern global scenario is well established and cannot be ignored. Hence our goal should be to affect attitudinal changes in the Indian students and parents. This can be attained in two important phases:

1: realization of the importance and benefits of using English

2: gradually uprooting the prejudices associated with English.

They must be convinced that learning and using the English language has many advantages. Proficiency in English will not undermine their love and respect for their native language and culture but will only enhance their personality and yield various benefits in the competitive world.

Conclusion: Against this backdrop of conflicting attitude towards English and the benefits surrounding it, I would like to conclude by emphasizing that the panacea of deplorable English teaching- learning situation in India lies in attitude transformation of the Indian learners, parents and policy makers. Improving teachers' proficiency in English, providing a rich enabling environment and early introduction of English in schools alone will fail to fulfill the national vision voiced in the NCF (2005) "within the eight years of education constitutionally guaranteed to every child, it should be possible to achieve basic English language proficiency in span of about four years" without addressing the attitude variable and undertaking measures to mould the negative attitude to ensure desirable proficiency in English in India.

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