

A STUDY OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN THE VELLORE DISTRICT

M. VINITHA

Research Scholar, Department of English, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research.

Dr. V. MANIMOZHI

Research Supervisor, Department of English, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research.

Abstract:

This is a study of social-psychological perceptions and practices affecting English language learning in a bi/multilingual socio-cultural context. The area of study is set in the field of social psychology in Language learning. The attitudinal and motivational perceptions toward language learning indicate the social and psychological nature of language learning. These perceptions are formed among individuals through an interaction between the individual personality and social-context factors, thus, the label 'social-psychological' is used to refer to these factors. A social psychological approach necessitates an integration of micro-individual psychological aspects with the macro-collective socio-cultural contextual factors. Therefore, theoretical orientations from Sociology and Psychology will place the issue of language learning in the socio-cultural contexts of its occurrence at the same time giving the individual investment in the activity its due importance. Sociology helps to account for the infinite inter-relationships between 'the individual' and 'the society'. The Sociological Paradigms provide different perspectives to perceive societal phenomena. A sociological point of view focuses on the dichotomous position of the world of Language and the language in the World. So much so that we cannot teach a language for long without coming face to face with social context factors, which have bearing on language and language learning processes.

Keywords: Social Psychology, ELT, History of Language Policy at the Tertiary Level.

Introduction

The social-psychological perceptions are cultural filters. In the language learning process they reflect the personal, educational, and parental background factors and are translated into individuals' attitudes and beliefs, motivational orientations, states of anxiety; and self-assessment in language proficiency. To account for success or failure in English language learning, therefore, at the tertiary level, in the Vellore district in Tamilnadu, the micro individual, instructional, and parental background factors are studied in the backdrop of the macro, forces of globalization, and urbanization. In the minds of the learners, English is associated with a spreading international culture incorporating business, technological innovations, consumer values, democracy, world travel, and the multifarious icons of fashion, sport, and music. In the face of this situation the students at the tertiary level comes with a skewed view of the nature of language learning and adopts a negative self-concept about learning English.

An insight into why some students do not do well in learning English is sought by looking into the profile of their social-psychological perceptions vis-ii-vis attitudes and beliefs toward language learning; Motivation in language learning, Anxiety in language learning, and Self-assessment in language learning. Further, to understand the relation of these social-psychological perceptions with the ecological/contextual background factors, an analysis is taken up of the actual frameworks of practice vis-'a-vis the students' exposure to English, the instructional parameters of 'methods' and 'materials' used, and the parents 'socio economic' and 'educational' background.

The study discusses the social-psychological perceptions of the students differentiating them in terms of those who studied in Tamil Medium (TM) till their schooling or Intermediate education and those who studied in English Medium (EM) all through. It is hypothesized here that a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning will help students who hold certain social psychological perceptions which hinder their achievement in language learning. The assumption here is that every context is unique in its social-psychological and ecological factors and thus the descriptive profile of the present context is presented here vis-'a-vis these perceptions and the actual frameworks of practice.

The attitudes and beliefs toward language learning are studied concerning beliefs and attitudes toward the nature of language learning, aptitude in language learning, communication and learning strategies, bilingualism, and the importance of English. The attitudes/ beliefs towards these categories show the students' stance on the ownership of language; the components involved in language learning; the role of age and intelligence; the advantage of knowing the mother tongue; the strategies that help improve learning English, writing language tests and examinations, learning words, and handling errors; Use of mother tongue while teaching and learning, for writing exams, and An insight into why some students do not do well in learning English, is sought by looking into the profile of their social-psychological perceptions vis-ii-vis attitudes and beliefs toward language learning; Motivation in language learning, Anxiety in language learning, and Self-assessment in language learning. Further, to understand the relation of these social-psychological perceptions with the ecological/contextual background factors, an analysis is taken up of the actual frameworks of practice vis-'a-vis the students' exposure to English, the instructional parameters of 'methods' and 'materials' used, and the parents 'socio economic' and 'educational' background.

This study explores social-psychological factors in operation among the tertiary learners in learning English in the multilingual context of the Vellore district in Tamilnadu. The study is located at the tertiary level. At this level, learners move into English medium education regardless of the medium they have studied at the plus two level and secondary levels. It is a "watershed" therefore, where students can be labeled and streamed while experiencing deep-seated anxieties about job prospects and higher education admissions, all of which necessitate the need for English. The proficiency levels of the

students at this advanced stage of education are very low even though students are bright, intelligent, and cognitively competent in learning other subjects. English as a second language is taught at this level for the two last years. After this, the students face the prospect of pursuing higher education available only in English or doing jobs most of which require them to have good proficiency in English. A large number of students do go for higher education and also get into high-profile jobs. However, there are still large numerical majorities whose aspirations to fare well in their educational pursuits and to get good jobs are thwarted for a lack of proficiency in English. Even if the students have some proficiency, it is unintelligible because of the heavy mother tongue influence on their pronunciation. These students are out of the race even before they want to do something because of a lack of a level playing field where English is the main criterion for entry or participation. Even as the subcontinent struggles with riots to this day over issues of social equality in terms of the caste stratification on which ancient India was structured (Bidwai, 2006), currently as Theory (2006, p.18) says "one aspect of English, has the potential to become, if it hasn't already, a detriment to the democratization of education and equality of access and opportunity". It introduces a "language bar", another social evil in Indian society like the cast bar, because there is "an increasing mystification and deification of English socially and pedagogically" (Agnihotri and Khanna 1997) English, it might seem, is meant for a social group of people who come from prestigious public schools and not for the underprivileged. But the desire for English exists. In Mathew's (1997) terms, "English medium education, however impoverished, is a dream they (the underprivileged) would like to see come true". The teaching of ESL, however, on the other hand, continues in traditional ways, using traditional texts and approaches.

Students are exposed to 'Classroom English' or 'textbook English' and their main problem is "what to say when and how in an Indian setting" (Verma 1994). The teaching of skills is specified only in the syllabus, but in practice, English is taught like any other subject, and grammar is taught in isolation. This situation in the current context of globalization where much importance is given to English (see 1.2.3) within a context of urbanization (see 1.2.4) breeds a generation of "disillusioned teenagers" who are not prepared adequately by the educational system for job requirements. Therefore, there is a need to "start from where learners are learning, taking into consideration their languages, aspirations, motivation, and capabilities and build on them" (Mathew, 1997). This mismatch is because learners' needs are not taken into consideration in language policy and planning. Multilingualism in India is the perspective of this study and the basis for analysis of the language learning processes against different agendas for language learning at societal, institutional, political, economic, and individual levels. The multilingual milieu also determines the extent of availability of exposure to language and the attitudes and motivation towards each language and language learning within the context. Second language learning theories and models provide an insight into different factors at work in the language learning process. A discussion of multilingualism and second language learning theories relevant to the study is presented in sections. The motivational orientations for learning English are informed by different views and agendas for language learning in this context.

Research Questions

The research questions being focused on in this study are as follows;

1. In what ways do the social-psychological perceptions operate within the context of learning English at the Tertiary Level in India

- a) What are the attitudes and beliefs that learners hold towards learning English?
- b) What are the learner's motivational orientations to learn English?
- c) What are the issues of anxiety in learning English?
- d) How do students self-assess their proficiency?

India is divided into states based on the language spoken by the majority of the people which becomes the official language of that state. Hindi is the official language of the Central Government. English enjoys the status of an associate official language in India and is used in higher education, administration, the judiciary, journalism, and the media. It is the link language for a large number of people in the country. In other words, English has retained its standing within the Indian society and is what Kachru terms 'institutionalized second language variety', which arises when a society makes use of English on a day-to-day basis along with one or more languages. This is the complexity of the linguistic landscape of India, and against this backdrop, this study is conducted in the State of Tamilnadu. The language of this state is 'Tamil', which itself has several dialects spoken in different parts of the state. The following discussion further elaborates the description of the unique case of Indian multilingualism in different ways as put forth by several theorists familiar with the situation here. The sociolinguistic context of India, secondly, is predominantly, societal multilingualism of an 'organic and heterogeneous' character.

According to Kubchandani's description, Indian multilingualism is at once organic and differentiating as opposed to American multilingualism which is organic but homogenizing (Agnihotri, R.L. and A.L. Khanna, 1998). It was observed by Southworth (1980) that the effects of bilingualism may be quite different in India compared to what has been observed in Western societies because of the unique features of "Indian bilingualism where individual bilingualism or multilingualism is variously supported by the Indian social system. Indian society is characterized by a grassroots type of multilingualism in which languages are maintained in a non-competitive and differentiated role relationship and the language identities of people are multilayered configurations involving different languages and codes operating a hierarchical pattern of significance. Thus, it is not similar to the western social context where language contact is of a competing, overriding nature.

History of Language Policy at the Tertiary Level

The historical development of policy at the tertiary level, however, did not lead to any definitive solutions like the three language formula at the school level. In the following

section language policy at the tertiary level will be presented. At the level of tertiary education, it is recorded by Howatt and Widdowson (2004) that failure in the initial attempts to translate basic science texts into the ancient learned languages of Sanskrit and classical Arabic resulted in the adoption of English as the medium of instruction at post-elementary schooling to prepare pupils for higher studies in the language.

Students' Interviews

Thus thirty (30) Students have been interviewed based on their responses to the questionnaire using a semi-structured interview schedule. Out of the thirty students fifteen were interviewed from English medium background and the other fifteen were from Tamil (regional) medium background, which has studied till their schooling or Intermediate in Tamil medium and then shifted to English medium.

The interviews have been conducted keeping the following rationale in

1. To enrich the data obtained through the other sources of data.
2. To fill in the gaps in the questionnaire data.
3. To identify contradictions in questionnaire data when compared with the interview data.
4. To triangulate the data by asking the same questions asked through the questionnaire using different words.
5. To give scope for open discussion to accommodate new categories arising out of the interview.

Teachers' Interview

Five teachers have been interviewed concerning the categories that this study is examining, by using a semi-structured interview schedule. The teachers are from colleges where some of the students who participated in the study were pursuing their courses. The insights from teachers have analyzed triangulate data collected through other sources.

Parents' Interview

Five Parents of the students included in the Interview study have been interviewed. Three parents of the students from Tamil medium background who shifted to English medium and another two parents of the students from English medium background were chosen for this purpose Parents were interviewed, with re-concerns about the long opinions and importance of English in India, and their encouragement and motives in shifting their children to the English medium.

Classroom Observation

Another source of data employed in this study to look at the social-psychological frameworks that influence practice in language education is Classroom Observation. Actual proceedings of the language classrooms in the undergraduate colleges in the Vellore District in Tamilnadu have been observed. The rationale for conducting Classroom Observation was to get an overall picture of the English classes at the tertiary

level. The methodology adopted by the teacher, interaction patterns in the classroom amount of teacher talk, learner participation, and the extent of the use is observed. Altogether five classes are observed. Each class focused on different aspects of language learning i.e. prose, poetry, essay writing, individual presentations, and group discussion. Field notes were taken down, for an in-depth analysis.

Textbooks

The prescribed General English textbooks of the Thiruvalluvar University in Tamil Nadu have been evaluated for content, language, and tasks and exercises. These are two separate sets of Prose, Poetry, and Grammar texts for both the first two years of undergraduate study.

Pilot study

The questionnaire and the proficiency test were tested with 30 students in a pilot study have been piloted among 30 students from the 1st year Bachelor of Commerce and management. The group has been of specific interest to the researcher because of their by and large "good" entry-level in terms of their cognitive abilities, their particular need for English in their future and the kind of a communicative curriculum they have in contrast to the other regular streams of under-graduates. The performance of the students on the proficiency test was seen to concur with their performance on the usual class test.

Conclusion:

To summaries it is often an overlooked notion that social environments and classrooms are complex tension systems comprised of interacting factors recursive psychological processes deserves the attention of researchers. Thus the study discussed the Social Psychological perceptions of the students differentiating them in terms of those who studied in Tamil medium till their schooling, while the students from the two streams were largely different with respect to all the social-psychological factors.

References

1. Agnihotri, R. K and Khanna, A. Land Sachdev, I. (ed.), (1994). Second Language
2. Acquisition: Sociocultural and Linguistic Aspects of English in India. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
3. Agnihotri, R. K. et al. (eds.), (1994). Prashika: Eklavyas Innovative Experiment in Primary Education. New Delhi: RatnaSagar.
4. Agnihotri, R. K and Hanna, A. L. (ed.), (1997). Problematizing English in India. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
5. Agnihotri, R. K and Khanna, A. Land Sachdev, I. (1998). Social Psychological Perspectives on Second Language Learning. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
6. Allport, G. W. (1954). The Historical Background of Modern Social Psychology. In Lindzey, G. (ed.), Handbook of Social Psychology. Cambridge, Mass: Addison-Wesley.
7. Althusser, L. (1969). For Marx. London: Allen Lane.
8. Althusser, L. (1984). Essays on Ideology. London: Verso.

9. Alwright, D. (1996). Social and Pedagogic Pressures in the Language Classroom: The Role of Socialization. In Coleman, Hywel. *Society and the Language Classroom*; Cambridge: CUP.
10. Baetens, Beardsmore, H. (1986). *Bilingualism: Basic Principles*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
11. Bailey, Kathleen M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: looking at and through the diary studies. In Herbert, W. Seliger and Michael, H. Long (eds.), *Classroom Oriented Research in Second Language Acquisition*. Boston MA: HeinleHeinle Publications.
12. Baker, Collin. (1988). *Key Issues in Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters Ltd. Clevedon.
13. Baker, Colin. (2006). *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. New York: Multilingual Matters Ltd Clevedon.
14. Ball, P, and Giles, H. (1982). Do I choose to master your language? *Polycom*, (30, 2-6).
15. Ball, P., et al. (1984). Second Language Acquisition: The Intergroup theory with catastrophic dimensions. In H. Tajfel (ed.), *The Social Dimension*, Cambridge: CUP.
16. Bandura, A. R. (1977). Self-Efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, (41, 191-215).
17. Carrell, Patricia L., Prince, Moneta Sand Astika, Gusti G. (1996). Personality Types and Language Learning in an EFL context. *Language Learning*, 46, (1, 75-99).
18. Carroll, J. B. (1981). Conscious and Automatic Processes in Language Learning. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, (37,462-474).
19. David, Block. (2004). Globalization and language teaching. *ELT Journal*, 58, (1, 75-77)
20. Deci, E. L, and Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self Determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum.