A Study on the Factors Affecting the Teaching and Learning Process of English as a Foreign Language: Possible Remedies

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Abstract

This paper examined some of the factors that adversely affect the acquisition of English as a foreign language in the Department of English at Guelma University. The work was elaborated through the following variables: 1) the students' motivation and attitudes toward the target language, (2) the availability and frequency of the use of adequate teaching materials, (3) quality of the teaching staff and their ability to use modern instructional methods, and (4) the learning environment and the amount of exposure to the target language. The main intention, however, was to identify the various factors that negatively influence the teaching/learning environment, and to suggest possible solutions in order to promote the teaching and learning of EFL in our department. The findings revealed that students lacked the necessary materials, and appropriate environments in and out of the classrooms to practise the target language. Moreover, students' psychological obstacles, cultural background, teachers' problems of teaching methodology, lack of motivation and proficiency, all proved to be additional factors of poor performance.

***Keywords*: Motivation, Attitudes, EFL, Teaching materials, Learning environment, Instructional methods, Teachers' proficiency**.

الملخـّـص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في العوامل التي تؤثر سلبا على اكتساب اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة الجزائرية. وفي هذا الإطار تم طرح عدة أسئلة تدور في مجملها حول المتغيرات الآتية: (**1**) حوافز و آراء الطلبة اتجاه اللغة المستهدفة، (**2**) مدى وفرة وسائل التدريس المناسبة واستعمالها، (**3**) نوعية هيئة التدريس و قدراتها على استعمال طرائق التدريس الحديثة، (**4**) مدى جاهزية المحيط التعليمي و نسبة استعمال اللغة المدروسة من قبل الطلبة. أما الهدف الأساسي فهو التعرف على العوامل المختلفة التي تؤثر سلبا على المحيط التعليمي، و من ثم اقتراح حلول من شأنها ترقية تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة الجزائرية. لقد كشفت النتائج المتوصل إليها نقائص ملحوظة في الوسائل التعليمية الضرورية وفي المحيط التعليمي داخل قاعات الدراسة وخارجها. كما خلُصت هذه الدراسة إلى أن العوامل النفسية والمرجعية الثقافية للطلبة، وكذلك عدم إلمام هيئة التدريس بالمناهج التعليمية الحديثة، وغياب الحوافز والمهارات لدى بعض الأساتذة هي عوامل إضافية للأداء السلبي.

Introduction

The reforms introduced by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education in recent years brought forward the implementation of the LMD system as a significant step towards globalisation in higher education. Yet, despite the gradual integration of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a useful support for enhancing students learning and improving current teaching methods, high education is still plagued by the falling standards of spoken and written English.

Oral and written performances of the majority of students generally tend to be comparatively poor to what is regarded as the norms of Standard English. Frequently the finger is pointed at the lack of the most important socio-psychological factors such as motivation, attitude, and language anxiety in the teaching/learning process.

While we would like to believe that the cognitive and affective dimensions may cause teachers to be less successful in teaching English as a foreign language. This is apparently the tree that hides the forest. Instead, in most EFL contexts, the root of the problem lies in the lack of almost all of the conditions that would contribute to successful foreign language teaching/learning.

A thorough understanding of the adverse factors that impede our students from becoming proficient in English is necessary. It will help us as higher education managers and teachers provide the necessary instructional means, review, and even change some of our

teaching practices. The outcome is to improve and facilitate the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language.

1. Factors Affecting the Learning/Teaching of EFL

The teaching/learning of English has declined due to a number of reasons. To explore the factors which contribute to the falling standards of the learning/teaching of English as a foreign language in tertiary education, one has to examine the environment in which the foreign language teaching/learning process is conducted in the Algerian context. The survey conducted with a group of teachers and students in the Department of English at the University of Guelma by means of interviews, and debates revealed that in addition to the socio-psychological factors such as motivation, attitude, language anxiety and gender have a negative impact on students' English learning. The survey also revealed the existence of other factors related to the use of instructional media.

These adverse factors include flaws within the university admission system, large classes, limited contact hours, diminution of English proficiency of teachers and students alike, insufficient number of experienced teachers, teachers' limited vision of the role of ICTs in teaching, absence of English input in the environment, and the lack of opportunities for interaction with native English speakers for both teachers and students. The objective of this study is, therefore, to investigate the various factors that cumulatively contribute to the falling standards of English learning, and propose possible solutions to

this problem in order to promote the teaching/learning of English as a foreign language.

2. Motivation as a Motivating Factor

Before examining the effect of motivation on foreign language learning it is important to consider that motivation is only one factor, which, combined with other variables, influence learners' success. Many researchers underlined the major part learners' motivation played on language learning. In their work entitled *Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning*, Gardner and Lambert dealt with the impact of attitudes on language learning, and described motivation as a construct made up of certain attitudes. They found that the absence of a positive attitude towards the target language and the target culture was responsible for the lack of success in most adult learners. In his paper, "Learning another Language: A True Social Psychological Experiment", Gardner stressed that learners' attitudes to the target language, target language learning, and to the whole language situation "determined the level of their motivation" (220).

Crookes and Schmidt identified motivation as the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a foreign language ("Motivation: Reopening ..." 469-71). In the same vein, in his book *Linguistics and Language: A survey of basic concepts and implications*, Falk thinks that students who are most successful when learning a target language are those who like the people who speak the language, admire the culture and have a desire to become familiar with or even integrate into the society in which the language is used.

This form of motivation is known as integrative motivation. In *Essential Introductory Linguistics*, Hudson too refers to another motivation known as instrumental motivation. This is generally characterised by the desire to obtain something practical or material from the study of a foreign language. And, consistent with Gardner's socio-educational model, motivation is a significant factor that contributes to foreign language learning ("Language Attitudes ..." 132-147).

According to such viewpoints, motivation appears to be the backbone of any classroom learning/teaching. When the students are motivated, the teacher can perform his work in the most convenient and easiest way. On this part, too, a motivated teacher can do a lot to improve the students' motivation. The effort involved is an essential part of the teaching profession. Conversely, lack of motivation may cause teachers to be less successful in teaching a foreign language (Hawley 58). Cook also endorses this concept by deducing that "high motivation is one factor that causes successful learning; in reverse successful learning causes high motivation" (118).

The socio-economic environment in which teachers live and work does not encourage them to show high performance. The majority of them are part-time teachers who lack the necessary teaching experience and teaching methodology, and are not well paid. They also face some limitations: not all have Internet access. Combined together, the lack of motivation and lack of proficiency proved to be factors of poor performance.

The findings of the study as we will see further down reveal that students lack appropriate materials, such as textbooks, handouts, audio/video recorded CDs and appropriate environments in and out of the classrooms to practice the target language. Results also show that students' negative attitudes towards the syllabi and teaching in general badly affect their motivation. Most of them claim that the contents and topics of some of the courses are irrelevant to their needs. They also contend that teachers have to alter their traditional educational customs and supplant them by patterns pertaining to the new era requirements to keep up with the pace of the global educational trends.

They were disappointed by their teachers' slow move to a position where ICTs are integrated into their classrooms in order to produce work of high quality, achieving a range of learning outcomes. They perceive themselves to belong to a rapidly changing world characterised by a revolution in the information and communication technologies, and consequently they need stimulating and interesting topics that relate to present-day life. Many of them claim that they have a lot of theory and not enough practice. They also mention that they lack feedback, and complain about the fact that some of their teachers do not always correct their written work, so they do not have enough opportunities to see where and why they had failed, and hence learn from their mistakes.

Likewise, many teachers admit that their students lack practice. They recognize that, because of time constraints, they give them a lot of theory and not enough practice, and that they do not have enough time to prepare them to write different types of essays, and correct all

the work they assign to them. However, they complain about the fact that many students rarely do the required work in time and complain about both poor attendance, and poor class participation. Most of all, the majority of the interviewed students believe that following graduation, they will face great difficulties finding jobs. Taken together, all these shortcomings badly affect their motivation.

3. Adverse Conditions that Contribute to the Unsuccessful Foreign language Learning

All respondents in this study agree that the conditions surrounding the EFL teaching/learning process simply do not contribute to the successful foreign language acquisition. What are these unfavourable conditions?

3.1. Large Class Sizes

Only those who have taught English in Algerian universities can visualize the sight of forty, even fifty students learning together in a single classroom. Recent English teaching/learning theories, approaches, or methodologies do not often take the reality of large class sizes into consideration. Little praise can be given to their practicality in terms of actual application in such classroom conditions that meet once a week for only 90 minutes or less, and teachers are usually hopeless and helpless in attempting to adopt the newest established theory, approach or methodology.

3.2. Lack of Qualified Teachers

The results of the survey show the insufficient experienced teachers may have caused the decline of the English language learning standards in the Department of English at the University of Guelma. Fifty out of the sixty-nine teachers working in the English teaching undergraduate programme are part-time teachers, mostly newly graduated students, who lack the necessary competence and adequate qualifications and professional experience. The study reveals as well that the total absence of native speakers as teachers of English in adversely affects the process of foreign language learning in the department of English at the University of Guelma. Their presence in the Algerian universities in the past provided sound teaching and served as a form of supervision and reference for both teachers and students.

3.3. Limited Use of Modern Instructional Methods

So much has occurred in the language classroom over the last decades that it can be depicted as a digital revolution. The findings of this study, however, indicate that English teachers are not familiar with a variety of modern instructional delivery methods. They are understandably more cautious, more hesitant at integrating technology into their language courses. They still rely extensively on the traditional lecture method, at a time when technology is ready to enable them to extend the reach of the classroom and take students into a world of authentic language use (Street 88-9).

3.4. Absence of Training Workshops

Another reason is the lack of training workshops for teachers. Such workshops would help teachers update their knowledge with the current teaching-learning trends, especially the less experimented teachers who lack knowledge, skill, and experience and who desperately need training on how to learn new effective teaching methods and techniques.

3.5. Slow Integration of ICTs

Over the past two decades new technologies (ICTs) have gradually been integrated in the foreign language learning environment in many universities around the world in order to help and motivate both teachers and learners (Cornu 3-11). In The University of Guelma, however, the integration of ICTs to support the learning environment in teaching foreign languages is still in its early stages, and chalkboards in the teaching of English are still dominant. Apart from language laboratories, modern media such as computers are rarely used. This means that teachers are not changing their instructional practices. Consequently, teachers, university managers and policymakers are requested to view ICTs as beneficial tools that can make the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language more stimulating, rewarding and rigorous for all.

3.6. Insufficient Amount of Exposure to the Target Language

The learning environment in which students learn the foreign language is limited to the classroom. Out of this setting, learners are

provided with no opportunity to use the target language and, therefore, no chance to interact with members of the target community. Students simply do not speak, write, read or listen to English outside the classroom or even know about the culture of the target language. We all know that learning a foreign language increases with opportunities to use it to communicate with others.

The results of the survey indicate that a substantial number of students do not use English to communicate even in the classroom. They refrain from interaction with their teachers or classmates because they do not want to embarrass themselves by making mistakes. In classrooms, our students are unwilling to state their views even when they want to ask and participate. These students admit that they are very afraid of making errors in front of their classmates.

The study also reveals that students of the English language just do not read despite the availability of reading magazines and novels both at home and at the university library. This is unfortunate because the more one reads books and high quality magazines; the more one learns spellings, structures, and idiomatic expressions.

3.7. Administrative Reasons

There are administrative causes as well. Often there are no assessment means applied in our department to test if the students who wish to enrol are fit to pursue the course they intend to take. This leads to future frustrations and eventually wasting the time and spending money for education. The process used to register students in Algerian universities in a particular stream of study requires

applicants to fill in forms in which they have to select nine choices according to their personal preferences, on the condition that they meet certain academic requirements. We believe this registration system contains certain flaws. It allows a substantial number of candidates to obtain access to study English as a foreign language even if their English language marks are below the average of 10/20.

In the same way, another number of candidates find themselves studying English, simply because they mentioned English among their choices but without personal conviction or motivated selection. Our assumptions were confirmed when we asked a group of twenty-two students whether English was their first choice on the list of preferences. Only Seven students replied that they selected English as the fourth or fifth choice and that in reality they never wanted to study this discipline.

To enforce the obtained results from the data received from this small number of participants, we decided to investigate the question at the registrar office. The findings showed that only 90 students out of 160 selected English as their first choice, which means that 43.75% of students study English not because it was their first preference, but because of a bad selection. This denotes that almost half of the students enrolled to study English lack motivation which is one of the most important contributing factors in foreign language learning, and the backbone of any classroom learning, which is motivation.

4. Recommendations and Possible Remedies

It appears that the department of English at the University of Guelma is far behind time in offering multiple pathways to the teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Little wonder that the process has been witnessing steady decline. Consequently, we would like to make the following recommendations; these are ways teachers, students, university administrators, and policymakers can do to reduce some of the causes that may have hindered the teaching/learning in order to promote the teaching/learning of English as a foreign language:

- There is a high need to screen the students admitted in our universities to learn English as a foreign language through aptitude tests that take into consideration the candidates' abilities and potential skills with regard to the target language. Student screening will enable the university to choose only the good ones.

- Class sizes must be reduced to 20 students. This would make students get more interaction, more practice and feedback from the teacher.

- Native speakers are needed to teach the foreign languages at universities to make up for the lack of qualified staff, or at least to supervise teacher training workshops in order to exchange ideas and experience as well as update teachers' knowledge and skills on language and learning processes.

- Foreign exchange programmes with other universities, overseas home stay programmes, or any other activities must be promoted to help motivate teachers and students to improve their language proficiency.

- Teaching syllabi must be constantly updated so as to be more relevant to learners' needs and interests.

- More efforts must be constantly made to provide the university library with the more recent publications and reading materials.

- ICTs must be used in our universities to make the teaching and learning of English more stimulating, rewarding and rigorous for all.

- Teachers must apply adequate teaching methods, using sophisticated tools or making graphic presentations. With regard to this matter, the university managers must recognize the need to conduct trainings and seminars that will improve to help these teachers ascertain the proper use of such techniques.

- Computers and Internet connection must become an integral part of our classrooms because their efficient and effectiveness and used of must be prepared for video and audio editing (hardware and software), connected to a video projector, a white screen, a printer, and a scanner.

- Because experience showed that students learn more and enjoy group discussions, activities and demonstrations, teachers must use websites or weblogs for instruction.

- Students must be aware that library assignments are very important since they would allow them to discover things they would not normally learn if they were just told about them in the classroom, and they would broaden their interests in other subject matters as well. Regrettably, many students nowadays would rather "Google" their homework than go to the library because the internet search is more convenient and time-saving. This is both a welcome convenience and

an alarming trend that has obviously become a dilemma not just for teachers but for the whole educational system of the world.

- Teaching is a dynamic profession. Hence, teachers must not only upgrade the courses' content but also the way that they should be delivered in the classroom.

- Teachers must use the PowerPoint to present their lectures. It is an innovation that has improved teaching strategies. Animations and videos would appeal more to the students' imagination and understanding about the subject matter, and would indeed help them retain most of the lectures.

- Teachers must take into account the impact of their characteristics such as personality and character on students' interest in attending and participating in class. Students are fond of attending classes with teachers who are competent and expert on the subject matter they are teaching, who encourage their students, who require analytical thinking to make classroom discussion interesting, and open to any relevant ideas or suggestions.

Conclusion

To conclude, one may assume that many variables account for the poor quality of the teaching of English as a foreign language, as well as the poor performance of students in our department: negative attitudes, lack of motivation on the part of teachers and students alike, large classes, and an inadequate teaching/learning environment. It is imperative that any solution aimed at improving the students' English implement an approach which would encompass the aforementioned

recommendations. We are convinced that the high potential for enhanced learning through the provision of a conducive-learning environment can be achieved. It is strongly recommended that the learning environment must be given priority attention so that teachers can perform well and students can learn well.

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