Getting Learners Motivated To Become Functional Literates In English As A Second Language

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Abstract

Acquisition of the literacy skills in a second or foreign language is more difficult than acquiring oral proficiency. Literacy in English as a global language and a language of opportunities has become a necessity for the Indian adolescent learners. Motivation plays the most important role in mastering the primary or secondary skills. The term 'mastering's has been juxtaposed with 'learning', as it has been used the conventional way. Mastering includes functioning in the target language through all modes. When exposure to the spoken idiom of the target language is almost nil, when the available input through writing (advertisements, TV etc.) is rarely made use of, and when teaching-learning gets confined to paraphrase and questions and answers, learner motivation gets reduced to the immediate target, that is performance in the examination. What, in this context, classroom instruction can do is to maximize learner motivation by mimicking the real world experience within the four walls of the ESL classroom. This paper (a) tries to put together a very brief summary of the latest theories and research findings related to motivation within the context of English as a second language (ESL), and (b) argues that reading and writing may be considered as the two sides of the same coin, and not to be segmented in teaching, and (c) proposes a few ways of getting learner motivation enhanced through near-life activities in the class room with special focus on reading and writing.

Key words: Motivation, instruction, literacy, exposure, target language.

Introduction

The psychological phenomenon called motivation may be as old as humanity itself. The first act or action performed by the first human being might have been triggered by some kind of motivation, whether the action was crying, shouting, mating hunting or killing. Thus, as an integral part of human mind and brain, motivation has been there behind each and every activity performed by human beings so far.

But the presence of motivation may not be felt in concrete terms as in the case of non-voluntary activities (yawning, falling asleep etc.) and accidental happenings (falling off the ladder, getting the finger cut with the kitchen knife etc. But all voluntary acts, action and activities are likely to have a shade of motivation behind them. Leaning a new language is one such voluntary activity which needs a will and a way, as the proverb goes. Creating the will is much more important than finding the ways in the case of second language instruction.

English as a foreign, second, and global language

Almost by the time India became independent, the first phase of English as a foreign language started fading down. By the time the Constitution asserted its role as the co-official language in general life and as a second language in the school-college curricula, the second phase started dominating the cultural space of India; occasionally pushing the hundreds of native languages, and their thousands of dialects to the backstage. By the end of the last century, English occupied a key position in the socio-cultural domains of India, as a global language, and a language of opportunities for Indians who migrated to almost all parts of globe. Even in countries where English was totally alien, the migrants believed that they would be able to manage with English. Only recently the Indian public started becoming aware of the fact that a mastery of English may not be enough for the young Indian generation to live successfully in countries like Germany Japan and China. As a result, institutions, both in the public and the private sectors have started offering proficiency course in German and Japanese and Mandarin.

Even then English is (falsely) considered to be a stepping stone to master those new language of opportunities. School leaving children across India are more or less aware of this fact. That way, they are motivated to some extent, imagining themselves away from the homeland in another five or ten years for higher studies or better job.

How to kindle the little motivation that children bring to school

Two definition follow – One from a general dictionary and the other from a professional one. The New Oxford Dictionary of English defines motivation as "the general desire or willingness to do something … or a set of facts and arguments used in support of a proposal".

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines motivation as "the impetus that gives purpose or directions to behavior and operates in human at a conscious level.

An ESL classroom in expected to provide an atmosphere 'consciously' created jointly by the teacher and the learners. This conscious efforts in the form of role play, acting and several other non-conventional modes may gradually lead the leaners to sub-conscious level of getting self- motivated.

Review of Literature

What are the factors that demotivate ESL learners? Four major barriers have been identified by Nosirova, Dilnoza (2023). They are: total lack of exposure outside classrooms, limited exposure in the classroom, limited access to materials and resources; and difficulties in learning formal grammar. These are true in the case of the average Indian learners of ESL.

A change in methodology in general and in daily classroom techniques may result in better motivation. A recent study by Rahman et al. (2024) focused on EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions regarding modern approaches to learning and teaching of skills. The study points out the important aspects of teaching approaches that lead to enhanced learner motivation. Another recent study focuses on feelings and emotions as key variables in determining learning outcome. Javaid and Samina Rana (2023) discuss the role of both positive and negative feelings involved in the process of acquiring the advanced level capabilities in language learning. Learner's personal attitude also matters, argue Zulaiha and Yunika Triana (2023) who review students' attitudes on the utilization of Open Educational Resources (OER) to improve the writing skills of students.
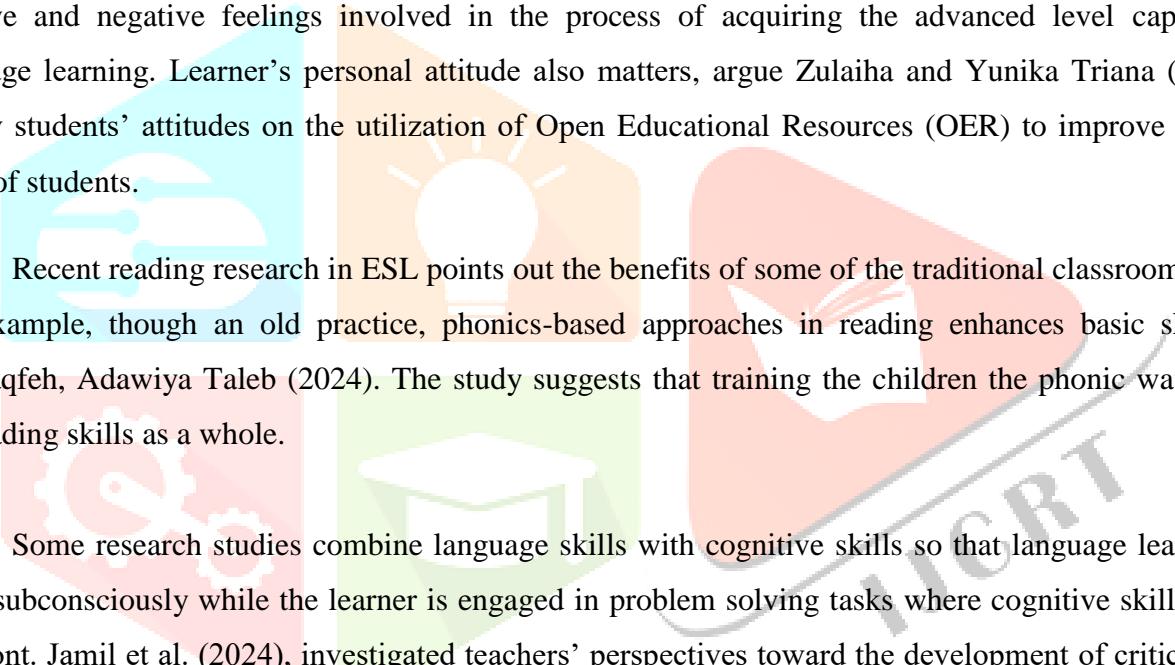
Recent reading research in ESL points out the benefits of some of the traditional classroom strategies. For example, though an old practice, phonics-based approaches in reading enhances basic skills, argue Shawaqfeh, Adawiya Taleb (2024). The study suggests that training the children the phonic way improves the reading skills as a whole.

Some research studies combine language skills with cognitive skills so that language learning takes place subconsciously while the learner is engaged in problem solving tasks where cognitive skills are in the forefront. Jamil et al. (2024), investigated teachers' perspectives toward the development of critical thinking skills in secondary English lessons. Still, some other research shows that though most teachers understand the importance of critical thinking, they have challenges in implementing the related tasks due to set curriculum and time constrains.

How to get rid of boredom in the class has always been a matter of worry for teachers. Psychological factors such as ennui or boredom demotivates anyone—children or adult. A study by Solhiet et al. (2024) demonstrated the relationship between L2 writing motivation and the possibility of coping with this boredom in EFL learners.

When it comes to adolescent learners, it has been proved that self- regulatory practices, provided in class from early stage can enhance motivation. An experimental study by Baiet et al. (2023) focused on the analysis of students' self-regulation when reading and writing in ESL/EFL settings to investigate relations between motivation and writing performance.

Domain- specific motivation

As it has been stated earlier, the average ESL learner in subconsciously aware of the fact that English is a language of opportunities – in tangible terms such as higher studies and job opportunities. The ESL teacher's responsibility is to reduce the large and vague circumstances of this motivation in to a shorter and clearer periphery, that is domain-specific. By the term 'domain- specific I mean literacy skill-based. How to get the learners more involved in personal reading and how to provide them with near-life opportunities to write in English. Reading anything other than for classroom and examination performance may be encouraged both inside and outside classroom. Just urging them to do so may not result in the desired effect – some incentive must be provided so that classroom tasks and take-home assignments should have direct relevance to their personal and social life rather than the academic life. A few instructional strategies for promoting personal reading have been listed below.

1. Reading detective stores: The adolescent mind always wants to do something challenging, thrilling and adventurous. One group of students who share this mind set may be assigned a small, simple, retold version of a detective story to read and discuss, and each of the group may be assigned the role of the characters in that story. If there are seven characters in the story, the group may consist of seven members. Each student, after reading the story in collaboration, may be asked to present his/her version of the incident. The versions of the suspect or the accused, the police officer, the witness, the detective officer and the person who suffered the loss are expected to vary in details. Naturally the short classroom presentation in the form of reading out the pre-written text leads to disagreement and controversy because the witness's version may differ from that of the police, or the detective may have a different version from that of the police. While defending one's own version, learners are subconsciously engaged in real communication. All the four skills have been amalgamated in this make- belief activity.

2. Another classroom activity that promotes reading and writing together has been outlined below. A group of students collects the various version of newspaper reports of the same event or a development as appeared in various local newspapers. The original version in the mother tongue is to be translated into English by working the collaborating way, and with the help of the teachers – any teacher, not just the teacher of English. For example, the report of a local bank scam which may have political intervention, may be appearing in different ways in different local newspapers. This reading–writing activity, when presented in the class, is likely to trigger agreement and disagreement that leads to effective communication.

3. Yet another near-life actively is to prepare collages working in groups. Pictures, paper cuttings, advertisements, photographs and other visuals related to a central theme such as environmental protection and woman empowerment can be first displayed on the classroom walls. Students, working in groups may prepare brief evaluating comments on each of them. They may even be encouraged to rank all collages, according to their likes by giving marks. The cumulative marksheet can be displayed on the classroom wall. A healthy competition among students to get ranked high leads to better academic writing.

Conclusion

This paper is based on the hypothesis that when teaching learning activities are brought closer to real life, learners especially the adolescent learners are likely to get more involved in the teaching- learning process. If not real- life activities, classrooms may promote near-life activities, because learners are willing to be a part of 'the willing suspension of disbelief'.

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