THE EFFECT OF LEARNERS' BELIEFS AND CLASSROOM CLIMATE ON LANGUAGE LEARNING

C. Alamelu[1] and S. Usha Menon[2]

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the soaring prominence of English language have been in tandem in recent times in developing countries like India, as a means for achieving success. This has resulted in growing interest and unimaginable pressure among students to achieve proficiency in English. But experience reveals that there is a lacuna in achieving this aspiration. Factors, both current and past, may be responsible for this predicament.

One of the most critical problems in skill based language teaching at tertiary level emanates from the extent of impact created by the inadequate language background of the learners. The same opinion is echoed by Susan et al (2010) in **"**Students' prior knowledge can help or hinder learning**."** The students enter the tertiary classrooms with feelings of anxiety, apprehension and nervousness. Moreover, the class room climate and the heterogeneous nature of classrooms also exert a negative and detrimental effect on the learning process. "How students feel about classes has a direct impact on how much they learn in them" (Julie Driver, 2014).

While investigating into the major contributory components, we need to make comprehensive analyses of the affective factors that stymie the process of learning. Some of the factors are: anxiety, low self-esteem, inadequate knowledge, limited exposure to target language, lack of preparation and so on. Students who possess such challenges also find it difficult to cope with the demands of the English curriculum.

The onus is on the English language teachers to make students comfortable in classes by understanding the factors that impede learning. This can be accomplished by taking into account the difficulties students from rural backgrounds face in a mixed ability classroom and by creating a positive learning environment.

BACKGROUND

Many students in engineering courses find it difficult to comprehend lessons not only in English classes, but also in other subject classes. It is true that some of these students are from vernacular medium and some are first generation graduate

[1]   Professor English Division, SSL, VIT University, Chennai Campus, Chennai, India.

[2]   Professor & Head, Department of English, Easwari Engineering College, Chennai, India.

learners. But the astonishing revelation is that many of such students have in fact had their entire school education in English medium. The inadequate language skills are the outcome of faulty, unsuccessful teaching methods adopted at schools. This results in negative beliefs and perceptions about English language and negative attitude towards language learning when students enter tertiary classroom.

| Unsuccessful teaching methods | → | Negative beliefs and perceptions | → | Negative attitude towards language learning | → | Inadequate language skill |
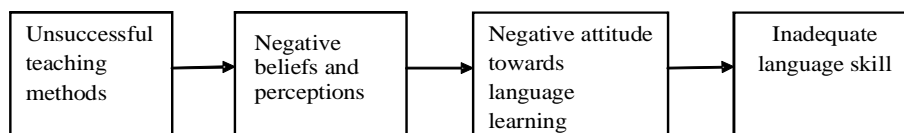
The reason for inadequate language skill

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present research aims to study and assess the students' beliefs and perceptions about their language ability and the influence of classroom climate on language learning.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

- Learners' attitudes and beliefs towards language learning and influence of previous English learning experiences
- Change in class room climate and its correlation to learning outcome as an impetus to learning
- The correlation between class room climate and learners' outcome.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A sample consisting of 20 students from I year B.E/B.Tech. stream was selected based on the scores in the first assessment test which was below the class average scores. A Questionnaire with 15 qualitative questions was administered to the students. The 'Yes/No' and 'why' questions, covered areas such as general importance of English language, its usefulness for them, their views on reasons for poor scores in English, their learning experiences in school, the method in which English was taught in their school, what are their fears related to English language and so on. They were required to answer all the questions stating the reasons very clearly. The questionnaire was analyzed by taking into account the common statements written by students which are stated to justify the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data was analyzed to explore and assess the reasons for poor performance and focused on correlating the poor performance with students' language background and class room climate. The students stated a variety of issues relating to their beliefs and perception of language ability.

Students evince deeper interest to learn English, primarily, for the purpose of communication. They are aware of the fact that a lot of placement opportunities are available for those who communicate well in English, and so they aspire to improve their career prospects by learning English. Learning English is for survival in this globalised world and to achieve excellence in their career path. This perception towards learning English is expressed by all the respondents:

> 'It important language for communicating purpose.' Without knowledge of English we cannot survive around this world.' 'I want good placement in my future.' 'Common language used around the world.' 'English is main language, if we know English we excel everywhere in the world.'

When questioned about their proficiency level in English, majority of the students had negative perception about their language ability and they ascribed it to improper teaching methods adopted in schools which developed neither fluency nor accuracy of language. Only rote learning method was widely employed. The results prove that in order to learn and perform well at tertiary level, the background knowledge of the language serves either as a progressive or detrimental factor.

Many students agreed that they are unable to cope with the affective factors such as lack of confidence, lack of fluency, fear of making mistakes and fear of ridicule that derail the process of learning. It is also evident from the data that poor performers lack confidence and are scared of making grammar mistakes and mistakes in pronunciation, in framing sentences and incorrect spelling. Students indicated the following as determinative factors for their beliefs and perceptions:

> 'I need to rectifies the grammar mistakes'. 'My English not good I make more grammar mistakes'. 'I from tamil medium till 10th standard'. 'I like talk in English but grammatical and spelling mistake I do.' 'I have improve that much more.' 'Others good'. 'My class mates english good'. 'I like talk English. It more interesting but uncomfortable.' 'Others more fluent more me.' 'No good learning in school, make grammar mistake'. School teacher tamil, 'My fluency no good. Less knowledge English because higher secondary school'

Students with greater self confidence perform better in classrooms. Similar sentiment is expressed by Ashley Miller (2013) in **"**Students with self-confidence pay more attention in class, get along better with their peers and generally have a more focused and inquisitive attitude." Every student agreed that he is unable to mingle with his peers and does not communicate in English in the class because of lack of confidence and is aware of his limitations and inadequate language ability. Students often compare themselves with their peers and are concerned about the peers' response to their mistakes.

'They are highly effeicient than me'. 'I unable to understand conversations.' 'I not well in my language.' 'Fear of friends laughing to mistake in my speak so speak in mother tongue'. ' I not speaking or interacting English'.

The students' highlighted the fact that the classroom climate should be conducive to increase their level of confidence. "How students feel about classes

has a direct impact on how much they learn in them, and Millennial generation students expect a classroom environment that is emotionally supportive" (Julie Driver 2014). The students want the teachers to be very friendly, ask less difficult questions and encourage them. They should not be ridiculed or grouped with high performers during activities as it will make them non-performers. The students feel that friendly teachers, more attention from teachers and positive feedback from peers will motivate them. The impact effected by peers is revealed in "Students who are accepted by their peers also become more successful learners' Ladd (1990) and 'Peers can have a positive or negative influence on language learning' Goodenow (1993). The students desire to mingle in groups for the purpose of learning but their expectation in terms of promotive learning environment is clearly stated.

'want to involve in group activity we get to know more thinks, ideas from others, but fear of mistake. Group members be friendly and do not laugh' 'want more exercise in class'. ' Extra home work given'. 'teacher friend clear doubts'. 'give more examples' . Want tamil meaning for words' . 'want to ask doubts nobody laugh.'

The results, thus, prove that though students understand the need for and the importance and advantage of learning English, their previous learning experiences at the primary and secondary levels create a mental block towards the language making it appear like a formidable task. This leads to negative attitude towards language learning, as the students question their ability to learn which in turn drastically decelerates the movement of the wheel of teaching learning. This view is expressed by Hosseini & Pourmandnia (2013) when they say that "Having positive or negative attitudes towards a certain language and the way learners perceive that language can exert considerable influence upon their performance on the language itself."
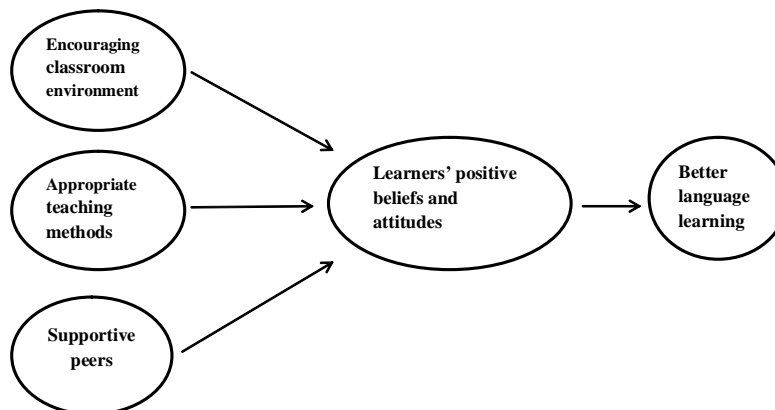
Effective Teaching Learning Process

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the learners' beliefs and attitudes play a crucial role in ensuring a meaningful and successful teaching learning process. Appropriate teaching and learning methods that address the individual needs of the students should be employed and the class room climate should be judiciously changed to facilitate language learning.

References

Ambrose A Susan., Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPietro, Marsha C. Lovett, Marie K., (2010). 'How learning works-7 research based principles for smart teaching,' Norman John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ISBN: 978-0-470-48410-4.

Driver, Julie. (2014). 'Are millennial generation students changing the roles of teachers?' Communication Education, National Communication Association.

Goodenow, C. (1993). 'Classroom belonging among early adolescent students' The Journal of Early Adolescence, 13, 21-43.

Hosseini, Seyyed Behrooz & Pourmandnia Delaram (2013). 'Language Learners' Attitudes and Beliefs: Brief Review of the Related Literature and Frameworks', International Journal on New Trends in Education and Their Implications, 4 (4) ISSN 1309-6249, 63-74.

Ladd, G.W. (1990). 'Having friends, keeping friends, making friends, and being liked by peers in the classroom: Predictors of children's early school adjustment' Child Development, 61, 1081-1100.

Miller, Ashley. (2013). 'How to Build a Student's Self Confidence,' Livestrong.com