

# The Role Motivation and Exposure Play in the Learning of English

Interview with Shreesh Chaudhary

Robert Bellarmine

Former English Studies Officer, British Council

Robert Bellarmine served as British Council's Manager of English Studies programmes & ODA/DFID projects and Teacher Educator at CIEFL (EFLU), Hyderabad and currently he is Consultant & Trainer, English Language Communication and Success Skills.

Shreesh Chaudhary served as Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Madras and currently he is Professor at GLA University, Mathura.

The main purpose of the interview is to discover the role Motivation and/or Exposure have played in the interviewee's learning of English. What do the terms 'exposure' and 'learning' mean? Influenced by Dr NS Prabhu, the interviewer uses the word 'exposure' in an inclusive sense. It denotes not only exposure to the target language data but also to the method used to teach the language, that is, to both material and method. Unlike in Krashen's, "learning" is not to be contrasted with "acquisition".

Robert: All in all, what do you think has been the sole or most important factor in your learning of English: Motivation or Exposure? (You can choose both, if that's closer to reality.)

Shreesh: Both, but motivation has been



more important. Students getting good marks in English were looked upon favourably by all even at my village. Though I attended a Hindi medium school and college, there was a lot of English in the form of books and journals all over MY home. My father, Govind Chowdhary(1909-2002), was a lawyer and avid reader of books in Bengali, English, Hindi, Maithilli and Sanskrit. Even before I realised what they meant, I had titles of these books staring into my face. But a still greater factor was the sense of prestige attached with English. Anyone, even with a modest proficiency in English, had no difficulty finding a job. Like others, I also wanted one.

Robert: What was the earliest time when you became aware of this?

Shreesh: I entered high school at the age of eleven and began learning English there. I saw that those good at English, i.e. good at spelling and meaning of words, were looked

upon favourably by all. It was a pastime with elders at my village, for those who knew any English to frequently embarrass young students by asking them to spell a relatively difficult word or to test their students knowledge of meaning of these words. Those that answered correctly rose in public esteem.

Robert: Was the integrative aspect of Motivation part of your Motivation? In what ways did it originate? How has it been strengthened or weakened?

Shreesh: Not quite. I did not want to belong to any group other than my own in the village. But within the village, and in the town of Darbhanga nearby, there were people who used English comfortably. I did not want to become exactly like them, some of them were seen as snobs, and a few of them affected a strange pronunciation; but, even if involuntarily, I wanted to speak like them or even better than them.

Robert: “Machiavellian” motivation is the opposite of integrative motivation. For example, the Indian leaders of our struggle for independence learnt English to fight against the English, to argue with them, and in various ways, use English in their struggle for freedom. In some ways, was this one of the aspects of your Motivation? Can you please explain and illustrate this?

Shreesh: No, I had no such designs. I did not learn English to fight or oppose anyone. For that and for me, even Maithili was enough. But English definitely opened more doors, than any other language, even in that

small town. If I was late taking a relative for a hospital appointment, then, I found, speaking in English helped.

Robert: In your high school and college days, what ELT methods did your teachers use? (Please note: Although the “Language through Literature Method” has not been as well known as the Grammar Translation, Structural, Direct, Communicative and Communicational methods, it was certainly recognized as a method by CIEFL.)

Shreesh: My teachers used what generally has come to be called Grammar Translation Method (GTM). We were taught basic structures of English along with frequently used words of this language within two years of starting. I started learning English, as I have already said, at the age of eleven.

Robert: Can you recall the teachers, both in your school and college days, who contributed to the increase and decrease of your Motivation? In what ways did they increase or decrease your motivation? Were the materials and techniques and personal rapport some of the aspects of what affected your Motivation?

Shreesh: I remember a few teachers, both at school and college, who were great motivators. They convinced me and my friends that learning English was easy and enjoyable, that regular work gave power and prestige, and that we could approach them for help and advice anytime we needed it. They sustained our motivation across our school and college careers. All of these teachers were, perhaps, not equally great

scholars, but none was less loving than the others.

Robert: Apart from the prescribed texts, what did you use as sources of your Exposure to **written** English?

Shreesh: As I said above, I found illustrated books and journals all around me, though in a limited quantity at my home in the village, and far too many more at my father's residence in the town nearby which I was allowed to visit during school vacations. By the time I reached senior school class, I had begun reading stories and newspapers in English on my own.

Robert: Apart from the prescribed texts, what did you use as sources of your Exposure to **spoken** English?

Shreesh: I had little exposure to spoken English. Hardly, anyone spoke in English at my village, where I stayed until I was sixteen. Even today that situation hasn't changed much. Those that speak in English to members of the family or community in the village are seen as utter snobs. Even in the town, where I studied for college, hardly anyone spoke in English. Even English teachers, very often, used Hindi or Maithili even in the class. But my father had a radio set at his home in the town, and he listened to the English news on radio every morning and evening. That, I remember as my first exposure to the spoken English. I still remember the opening words of the new broadcast every morning, "This is all India radio giving you news read by Lotika Ratnam."

Robert: Approximately, from what age to what age do you think you learnt English, irrespective of the levels of mastery? Are you still learning it? During this period, have Motivation **and** Exposure played the same role with the same intensity and vivacity? Can you explain or illustrate it?

Shreesh: I began learning English alphabet when I was eleven, and have continued learning the language ever since. Of course, I am still learning it. I continue to be unsure of pronunciation, spelling and meaning of many words. Motivation and exposure have played an important part in my career with English. I still take a lot of time to write; I have to do several drafts even for an ordinary mail, and many more drafts for anything more formal. I still commit errors of pronunciation, particularly of those words, that have clusters of consonants at the beginning of the word, such as, split, school, strike, street, etc. Only recently, did I learn the meaning of words like "sinecure". Many technical terms from other fields, such as medical and engineering, continue to tell me how much more one dozen know yet.

Robert: Pit Corder said, "Given motivation and exposure, second language learning is automatic". But I believe that given motivation, exposure is automatic and therefore second language learning. In contrast, Dr N S Prabhu said in the eighties that the only thing we can be sure of in second language learning is Exposure, Exposure in an extended sense to include methods and materials. What do you think?

Shreesh: Both exposure and motivation are

important. I am motivated to learn Persian, but I cannot learn it because it is not easily available to me. On the other hand, I was in Andhra Pradesh, now Telangana, together for over ten years, and in Tamil Nadu for almost thirty years, yet, I could learn neither Telugu nor Tamil. To learn a language, in my opinion, one needs both motivation and exposure; no matter how they are defined. Actually, one also needs a third thing without which neither of the above could be useful. One needs “aptitude” to learn a language. I know that current theories of language learning do not recognize this factor, but there are a lot of overwhelming data such that the significance of this factor in language learning cannot be denied.

One set of evidence to support this claim comes from human biology. In no aspect of creation any two human beings are exactly and totally alike. Even cattle and other animals are not totally alike. They differ in many ways including in aptitude for things, just as they differ in height, weight, looks and other attributes. God, or Nature, has a mass production factory where each piece is customary.

There is yet another piece of evidence in support of this claim that aptitude is a significant factor in language learning. There are some celebrated examples. Srinivasa Ramanujan was a genius at Mathematics but not in languages. On the other hand, Rabindranath Tagore was great at languages, including English, in spite of being a school dropout, though he was no great guns at Mathematics. There are many

other examples. Even within the same family, and within same classroom, where a number of factors are identical, children differ in learning a variety of things in a variety of ways. Some write beautiful handwriting but cannot spell entirely correctly, just as some spell quite correctly but can hardly write legibly. There are people who write well, like Gandhi ji, but cannot speak; just as, there are those who can speak well, like Kabirdas, but cannot write. Some are good at sports, but not in academics – Sachin Tendulkar, M S Dhoni; some are good at acting, but not in academics – Amitabh Bachchan, Rajni Kant; some are good in academics, but in nothing else – a whole lot of academicians in universities and colleges. We have similar examples from sciences, business, politics, arts, crafts, music and sports. Similarly, some people are good at all of these things. I have had the good luck to know some who are good at music, sports, literary arts, sciences and languages. Who can deny the power of language of Stephen Hawking, whose book on astrophysics, *A Brief History of Time*, sold more copies than any other published in English since the King’s Bible. Hawking was otherwise barely able to do anything with his body. Aptitude is a huge factor, given this factor, all else, including motivation and exposure, can be created; without this neither will help.

Robert: In the ELT contexts, do you think creating, arousing and maintaining motivation is partly the responsibility of the classroom teacher(s)? What about syllabus writers, textbook writers, and question-

paper-setters? Alternatively, is it solely the responsibility of the learner and their parents?

Shreesh: No. No learner is born motivated. Motivation to learn anything, other than answering the biological necessities, such as sleep, hunger, sex, fear, etc, is a cultural influence. We learn not all, yet only those skills or ways of life for which we have motivation. This applies as much to children learning how to pick pockets, how to tell lies, as to how to learn English or Mathematics. Motivation is provided by the community. It is, therefore, teacher's job to create and sustain motivation. By this same yardstick, it is also the job of the syllabus designer and materials producer to create methods and materials such that would interest and benefit the learner. A lot of failures in learning languages, or Mathematics and Sciences, can be directly attributed to unimaginative methods and boring materials and to insensitive teachers. Families are as much duty bound to create and sustain motivation as schools and colleges are. Many grandparents and some parents, as well have made history by helping their wards learn beyond what was ordinarily possible.

Robert: If Motivation is of paramount importance, why have the editors of professional journals not included a permanent section on it? Will ELTAI's **JELT**

one day do this?

Shreesh: There is no need of special section for essays and articles on motivation. Any success story in any field is a saga of motivation. I would much rather have my children, my students and colleagues read the biographies of Abraham Lincoln, Akio Morita, Dhirubhai Ambani, Henry Ford, JRD Tata, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, etc. than read my article on motivation in any journal. Our problem is that we have lots of theories but limited data. I would much rather have ELTAI journal to publish success stories, like it did of Robert Bellarmine (ELTAI Journal, Vol... No... Pp...) himself, than have very generalized articles.

Robert: Can English or any L2 be learnt without any motivation? Is such a situation imaginable or plausible?

Shreesh: Nothing can be learnt without motivation.

Robert: On the theme of this interview, Motivation and Exposure, what are your final comments?

Shreesh: I seriously believe that motivation and exposure both are equally important. Neither would help without the other, but both of these would produce fabulous results when combined with aptitude.