

Language Learning: A Matter of Correct Attitude and Soft Skills

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on the observations made during an informal interaction with students of English language and literature at the graduation level, to understand the reasons governing their choice of English as an optional subject and the main problems they face in achieving their goal of acquiring fluency in it as a second language. Students have an adequate theoretical knowledge of grammatical structure but hesitate when it comes to using the language actively as a medium of communication. On further probing, it is apparent that the stumbling block lies more in the attitude of the learners, which results in their inability to grasp adequately the nuances of the language. The article outlines the skills required by second language learners for effective acquisition of English and the skills developed as an additional outcome of their language learning efforts.

Keywords: Second Language Learning, Fluency, Medium of Communication, Attitude, Soft Skills.

As a teacher of English language and literature in a Hindi-dominated state, dealing with students who by and large have received their school education in the vernacular, and are second language learners, I have had to encounter major problems in achieving a standard level of effective and meaningful intercommunication in English in the classroom, sometimes having to totter on the brink of becoming unintelligible and incomprehensible to the students, due to their inability to grasp the language adequately and the consequential decline in their marks and results. Idealistic attempts to avoid the translation method and conduct the class purely in the language to be learnt while teaching texts have been disastrous, with students failing to make sense of the content or even going to the extent of complaining against the elitism of the teacher who refuses to teach English to them in the vernacular.

The strange anomaly here is that these students are not lacking in intelligence and know the rules of sentence construction and grammatical structures fairly well, and yet fail miserably at putting them into practice in speaking or writing correct sentences that may express the sense of what they wish to convey. If viewed in accordance with the second language acquisition model of Krashen, such students or learners have not been able to advance beyond the early production stage, or at the most, are stuck at the Speech Emergence stage. This issue is critical in the teacher-taught relationship and in the smooth conduct of the process of imparting knowledge meaningfully. The challenge for the teacher is how to work through this problematic situation and lead the learners towards a realisation of actual goals, namely the acquisition of fluency in the language, to be able to put it into use for

all social, academic, and professional purposes. On deeper analysis, it is understood that the crux of the matter rests on the fact that the use of certain soft skills is more crucial than pedantic skills to learn language in a more productive and expeditious manner, with positive outcomes, which in turn would be the catalyst for the development of further life-enriching soft skills.

The role of the English teacher gets magnified in leading the students to that desirable level of language proficiency where they have acquired the requisite knowledge to be able to pass through the exams with flying colours and more than that, are armed with sufficient skills that will help them cope with the situations they will encounter in their work and career or in any aspect of their lives, even if it is being teachers to their own children. Language learning by itself is an empowering skill as it refines personalities and enhances career opportunities, but the process requires concerted effort and dedication. It becomes the responsibility of the teacher to provide the correct orientation to the students and inculcate in them that bent of mind which will help them acquire and assimilate knowledge in a more substantial manner and through continuous guidance and support keep them on the right track for desired progress.

The basic skills for SLA, i.e., second language acquisition, are LSRW (listening, speaking, reading, writing) which address the academic requirements but a diligent pursuance of these activities requires primarily an approach to the problem through the correct attitude and a combination of winning soft skills. In fact, language learning

is a two-way process that not just needs inputs of skills but results in an amazing generation of competence, accomplishment and finesse.

Theories about language learning have been advanced by many philosophers and linguists. Plato and Descartes were of the opinion that language (first language specifically) is innate and natural while others like Locke forwarded the concept of *tabula rasa* (blank slate) implying that no knowledge is innate, everything is acquired through sensory experience and the same applies to learning language too. The most quoted theory of second language learning is the one put forward by Stephen Krashen of the University of Southern California.

Of the five hypotheses Krashen speaks of, I would emphasise upon the Input hypothesis and the Affective Filter hypothesis. Krashen explains how second language learners can acquire and progress in their goal with the aid of Comprehensible Inputs that are of a level higher than their existing level of linguistic competence. This hypothesis pertains to the listening and reading exercises that need to be practiced. Krashen further explains how 'affective variables' have a facilitative role to play in second language acquisition. These variables are factors like motivation, self-confidence, extroversion, a low level of anxiety and a high level of self-esteem. The absence of these factors can create a mental block that would prevent comprehensible output from being used appropriately. In the last hypothesis, namely the Natural Order hypothesis, Krashen discusses a very interesting aspect of language learning. He explores the role of grammar in language acquisition and finds

that the study of grammatical structure may be desirable but not essential to the process of learning any language because such a study firstly cannot be placed in the category of language learning but is rather language appreciation and therefore would accrue advantage to the scholar only if they have a good familiarity with the target language and be able to absorb the difficult and complex rules.

The second point related to this is that the teaching of grammar can cause language proficiency only when it is taught in the target language which once again brings the argument back to the contention that grammar can be understood only when language fluency already exists, or in other words, grammar is of little effect without proficiency in the language. Progress in language acquisition can be brought about mainly by the medium of instruction not as much by the subject matter.

Let us look briefly at the soft skills required to follow the basic processes of language learning. While listening and reading are receptive inputs, speaking and writing are productive outputs. For successful, outcome generating combinations of all these, a set of personal attributes are required that will ensure a more efficacious and productive learning process. In order to be a good listener one has to be attentive, receptive and comprehensive, to be able to absorb the content. Similarly, to be an effective speaker one must be confident, articulate and enthusiastic, to be able to communicate ideas effectively. A good reading skill would require the reader to be discerning and imaginative. Similarly, for a person to be a

good writer it is essential for them to be focused, coherent and correct.

Underlying the effort in learning a language through these exercises or in inculcating all these specific language learning skills, learners have to awaken a greater sense of motivation and exercise a set of interpersonal attributes that will bring them to a realisation of their goal. According to Stephen Krashen's Monitor hypothesis of second language acquisition, language is acquired through natural and informal communication in a subconscious manner. Krashen's theory points to a monitor which is basically anything or anyone that keeps watch over, or 'monitors' the learner's performance and stresses upon correct communication. Thus, learned grammar has a very minimal role to play, serving only as a check or an editor in second language acquisition. In fact, Krashen points out that over-use of the monitor may even lead to a lack of self-confidence. Therefore, the attributes or soft skills required for a language learner which are broad and comprehensive need to be developed through continuous practice and under the guidance of an instructor to become a habit that may prove beneficial. These attributes can be listed as follows:

Focus: Attention to the correct method and concentration on the process without distraction is essential to the achievement of the goal of language proficiency. A regular habit of reading newspapers and magazines (or even their course books in English) will be immensely beneficial to language learners, as the written word will form a visual image in their minds which will leave a stronger impact and will also give knowledge of the correct spelling of words. To learn speaking

students must listen to all the audio inputs available to them, of which there is no dearth in this digital world. The correct pronunciation, nuances of speech such as intonation, modulation of voice, stress patterns can be learnt by students only by listening to quality speeches. In order to learn speech, one must follow the process of imitation or mimicry of their teachers or the speakers they listen to, in conversations with others or if alone, by recording their own speeches and listening to these recordings in order to identify their mistakes. The practice of writing down events and thoughts in a diary daily, is a very fruitful one in learning to be an expressive writer. All these require a concerted and focused effort on the part of the learner who needs to avoid all distractions that may weaken their resolution.

Commitment: A pledge to bring to completion the task undertaken will ensure success. A never say die attitude is the key to open the doors of success. Half-hearted efforts will not be of any consequence in achieving the goal of acquiring language skills. Complete devotion to the task undertaken will definitely bring rewards. Persistence, willingness and a certain level of daring are the prerequisites of a language learner who is not shy of making mistakes in public but is willing to rectify their mistakes in pronunciation, spelling and grammar in order to reach excellence.

Confidence: The faith in oneself and the courage to overcome all obstacles is essential. A language learner, in the beginning is bound to make a lot of mistakes but the ability to continue unfazed and without disappointment is the mark of true spirit.

Trust in one's self to be able to achieve the set goal is a strong booster of confidence and makes overcoming difficulties a challenge that can be positively taken.

Flexibility: The process of learning a language or inculcating any skill requires untiring effort and a willingness to follow all necessary procedures. To be able to adjust and adapt to different learning schedules with varying methods and timings, a flexibility of mind and habits is important. The enthusiasm or zest to experiment with new methods and techniques can be enriching in terms of information and experience and can open new paths to travel on.

Positivity of mind: A positive mind-set is what will enable the learner to overcome all hurdles and awkward situations in the process of learning any language. Disappointment, frustration, fear of failure can all be overcome by the sheer will to persevere with hope of success and will always bring renewed vigour and energy to the effort.

Organisational ability: It is necessary to go about one's efforts in language learning in an organised manner by maintaining a proper file and record of all exercises undertaken and all schedules followed, to be aware of exactly where one is in the process as well as for the sake of ready referencing. The organisation and management of time is also an essential part of organisational ability.

Collaboration: The ability to work with others for the realisation of common goals without allowing a negative sense of rivalry and competition is a commendable skill and can also work wonders in the achievement of the goal. To be able to accept constructive

and honest criticism and to be able to offer sincere assistance to another person helps to develop a conducive and positive learning atmosphere where everyone can be a winner. Moreover, language learning which is an interpersonal and communicative skill cannot be pursued in isolation. It requires interaction and feedback from others (teacher or peer group) will be the best way of measuring progress and identifying weak points. Team work always results in improved outcomes and greater mastery over the work undertaken

Patience: The task of learning a language through all its aspects can be a long drawn out and laborious process that can take its toll on one's patience and weaken the resolve to continue. However, the will to continue with patience is the true test and rewarding.

Language learning is actually an empowering and enriching exercise because in addition to activating the above mentioned personal and interpersonal skills, it also leads to the development of some very practical and advantageous qualities in us that enhance our personalities and ensure success in all walks of life. Let us take a look at these habits and mannerisms that are a rewarding consequence of the earnest and diligent efforts to learn a new language.

Building up a very good memory: While learning a language, vocabulary building can be done in the most fruitful manner by memorising the meanings and pronunciations of new words. The simple exercise of committing to memory five to ten new words every day and remembering specific phrases is a way of accomplishing the feat of learning a language as well as polishing and activating the memory power of the mind. The

Mnemonic technique and the Spaced Repetition System that are used for language learning are techniques that can help one learn long lists of anything from any field.

Becoming a good listener: In the process of listening to speeches for the sake of learning the language, a person becomes an attentive listener to other people's ideas which is a virtue in today's world where there is a clamour to be heard but not to listen. A patient listener is a boon to any organisation or group as this skill goes a long way in easing tension and resolving conflict. This skill effectively completes what is called the communication loop where, by careful listening, the message of the speaker is well received and proper response given that leads to the establishment of a positive connection between speaker and listener. This critical skill brings many advantages on the professional as well as personal front such as increasing popularity, developing leadership and boosting self-esteem.

Becoming a problem solver: In the process of learning and acquiring language, a person can develop very strong problem-solving ability through experience in the necessity of coming up with creative methods and hacks to find solutions to difficult language problems. Studies have highlighted that language learners do have a greater cognitive and higher order thinking ability. Also, an understanding of the culture associated with the new language gives them an added perspective into a different way of looking at things and adds a larger dimension to their personalities. This means they (language learners) develop more tolerance of different and alternate view-points, increased empathy, higher degree of adaptability and a higher degree of perceptiveness as well as the capacity for lateral thinking. Language learning

contributes immensely to an enhancement of social mannerisms as the learner develops skills of conversation and the art of expression.

In conclusion, it can be said that the process of language acquisition or learning is a life-enriching one and worth the effort. The cognitive benefits are multi-dimensional and undoubtedly boost mental powers. Studies have stated that the elasticity of the brain is increased through the study of a second language so much so that it can even delay the onset of dementia or Alzheimer's disease by a few years. Therefore, students who have elected to study English but are weak in it must be guided about the correct approach and must be motivated to put in that extra

effort and acquire a mastery over it for academic success as well as personal and professional benefits.

References

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ELTAI READING CLUBS

ELTAI has launched Reading Clubs in educational institutions with the primary objective of creating a 'culture of reading' among school and college students. This initiative is based on a research-based framework that takes into account differences in age, gender, interests, and location.

Objectives of the Reading Club:

- q To create a love for reading in students and enable them to become better, lifelong readers;
- q To enable them to reflect on what they read in order to lead them to become effective writers and speakers;
- q To familiarize them with different text types (genres) and enable them to engage in appropriate reading strategies; and
- q To employ synchronous (both virtual and physical meetings) as well as asynchronous modes – Web tools, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Blogs, Reading Logs, MOOCs (audios, videos, quotes, blurbs, reviews, etc.) to sustain their interest.

ELTAI would like to have MoUs with institutions that are willing to implement this initiative and help to achieve these objectives collaboratively. Institutions interested in this project may please write, expressing their interest, to: indiaelta@gmail.com with a copy (Cc) to Dr. Zuleiha Shakeel, the Coordinator of the project at: **zoowasif@gmail.com**.

For a brief description of this initiative, visit our website at: <http://elta.in/reading-clubs/>.

For an outline of the respective roles and responsibilities of the host institution and ELTAI, visit the website at: <http://elta.in/roles-and-responsibilities-of-the-host-institution-and-elta/>.