

Zulfiqar Ali*
Farzana Masroor**
Tariq Khan***

Creating Positive Classroom Environment For Learners’ Motivation Towards Communicative Competence In The English Language

Abstract

The study explores the impact of a conducive classroom environment on learners’ motivation towards language learning. For that to achieve, a questionnaire was developed based on Dörnyei’s (2007) proposal of creating a motivating classroom environment and the ‘Motivational Strategies Questionnaire’ (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007). The questionnaire was distributed among learners to explore their perceptions regarding the positive or negative impact of their current classroom environment over their motivation towards communicative competence in the English language. The study took place at City University of Science and IT, Peshawar and Institute of Management Sciences, Peshawar (IMS). The participants (N=175) were undergraduate students from Freshman English 1, 2, 3 and Functional English, both male and female. The collected data were analysed using SPSS. The results showed that the participants expressed their weak or no satisfaction over the impact of the classroom environment on their motivation towards building oral communication skills.

Keywords: *Freshman Learners, Learners’ Perception, Motivating Learning Environment, Speaking Skill.*

1. Introduction

English is taught as a compulsory subject in all the disciplines offered at the City University of Science & Information Technology and the Institute of Management Sciences. The purpose of teaching English to undergraduate students is to equip them with better communication skills in the English language. The medium of instruction in all other subjects is English, expecting students’ communication levels to increase. However, the situation is not satisfactory regarding communication in the English language.

* Dr. Zulfiqar Ali, Assistant Professor, Department of English, City University of Science and Information Technology, Pakistan, E-mail: zulfiqar.ali775@yahoo.com.

** Dr. Farzana Masroor, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan, E-mail: farzana.masroor@mail.au.edu.pk.

*** Dr. Tariq Khan, Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Malakand, Pakistan, Cell number: +92-345-9456251, Corresponding E-mail: tariqkhan1975@gmail.com.

The researchers have been concentrating on how to engage learners in different activities of language learning. However, the focus has been on introducing different activities regardless of the learners' interest and attention. Meaningful learning requires an active process of integrating and organising information, constructing meaning, and monitoring comprehension to develop a sound understanding of a subject matter (Meece, Blumenfeld, and Hoyle 1988 cited in Young, 2005). For successful language learning, a motivating classroom environment is needed where learners feel free and have the full support of their teachers and classmates. To Dornyei (2001a), the acquisition of an L2 cannot take place unless the educational context provides, besides cognitively adequate instructional practices, sufficient inspiration and enjoyment to build-up continuing motivation in the learners. Duda and Utley (2005) explain that the involvement and support of positive behaviour are proactive, and they are culturally sensitive that protects learners from engaging in problematic behaviours by allowing a change in the environment in which the behaviours occur.

2. Literature Review

Creating a positive learning atmosphere is essential on the part of a teacher to make the language classroom conducive for learners, where they could work cooperatively. Such viability influences the learning capabilities of learners in which they feel comfortable as actively synergetic members of the class. That, too, encourages the emotional well being of learners which are required for both the learning and emotional development of learners (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009). The teacher's efforts can change a dull atmosphere of the classroom into a productive one and enable language learning a successful experience.

2.1. A supportive peer group

A supportive peer group tends to facilitate learning, and the learners who accept their peers can help enhance their learning ratio; even the mere enjoyment derived from collaborative activities can increase learners' motivation. Moreover, since peers help one another in understanding and mastering the subject-matter by discussion, their achievement will also improve. In a classroom environment where learning goals are explicit, learners do not hesitate to seek help if they face difficulties so they might keep engaged in learning activities (Goodenow 1993, Ladd 1990, Slavin 1990, Newman 1994 cited in Heitzmann, 2009).

Theorists have underpinned the importance of supportive peers as a salient feature for the congenial classroom environment. The language classroom is an inherently face-threatening environment as learners are compelled to take continuous risks when they communicate while using a restricted language code. In this case, a norm of tolerance ensures that students will not be criticised if they commit a mistake and, more generally, those mistakes are welcomed as natural to learning. Moreover, when and if the said norm is violated by misbehaving or by not complying with learning activities, the norm is remodelled through negotiating; however, if it does not work, the learners' group on the teacher's side brings the violater back to the line. If learners' groups or subgroups are resistant to cooperation, the classroom setting will stifle both teachers' and students' interests, and as a result, effective learning will not take place. Cooperative learning is a group-oriented activity, which is organised on a socially structured change of

information among learners. In this social change group activity, every individual is accountable not only for his/her learning but also for the learning of their peers, which results in increasing learners' motivation (Dornyei, 2007; Roger, Olsen and Kagan 1992).

Learners bond with peers and with teachers establish a positive learning community that is required to foster the inclusionary climate in the language classroom. In the same vein, Robert Sapolsky (1998) highlights that stress (in the existing case) can be minimised by creating a supportive environment through exemplification:

Put an infant primate through something unpleasant: it gets a stress-response. Put it through the same stressor while in a room full of other primates and ... it depends. If those primates are strangers, the stress-response gets worse. But if they are friends, the stress-response is decreased. Social support networks—it helps to have a shoulder to cry on, a hand to hold, an ear to listen to you, someone to cradle you and to tell you it will be okay. (p. 215)

In all circumstances, the teacher is considered to be the primary source of making the classroom environment conducive for learning; thus, there is a direct relationship between teacher and classroom supportive environment. In culturally responsive classrooms, a teacher ought to establish a participatory learning community, wherein learners are confident of their contribution to the success of the target community. Piniel (2000) argues that in the foreign language classroom, the teachers' imprecise explanations, unfair assessment, and uncertain classroom management lead to learners' unease. The teachers' incomprehensive instructions create an inhibitive comprehension along with the feeling of anxiety among the learners that demotivate them in the long run.

2.2. A safe and caring learning environment

For objective-oriented classroom learning, students should feel safe, connected and share common goals, combined with a caring environment led by the teachers. Yount (1996) suggests ways to ensure the teacher's caring and sharing attitude. Among them, one is to figure out students' aptitude level so the teacher prepares the lesson accordingly, confirming the availability of relevant material and observing the lived experiences of the learners. A safe and caring environment encourages learners' creativity and the ability to express themselves without fear and anxiety. Harman and Smith (1999) suggest that teachers need to identify and remediate the classroom issues for obtaining desirable soundness in the learners' attitudes and enabling their creativity to arise.

A teacher needs to differentiate between behavioural issues that can be corrected through contingency management and those that may be addressed through approaches that modify behaviour. A poor classroom structure causes a disruptive setting that influences learners' behaviour in different ways that require an adequate organisation of the classroom environment (Smith & Misra, 1992). Such an environment should be safe, supportive and sensitive to the needs of the learners because scolding and scorning hurt the learners' effectiveness. Threats may have a positive effect on behaviours that are for survival, but it is awful for learning. (Jensen, 1998). For emotionally safe learning, learners should be assured

of their safety to express and share their thoughts. Promotion of confidentiality and mutual respect ensure the learners' expression of their feelings, emotions and thoughts in the classroom without any fright. The caring and sharing environment lets the learners be tolerant of others' opinions.

Following are some important features of an effective teacher:

- The teacher should be keen on listening to the learners' questions and should promise to answer them later if they do not have ready answers.
- The teacher should be well-prepared and should have all possible teaching aids to facilitate the learners' learning process.
- The teacher should provide well-referenced handouts and other handy learning resources.
- The teacher should be easily available even outside the classroom and should personally know students' acquaintances and their respective concerns (Social Psychology Network, 2016).

By demonstrating care for the learners ensures strengthening their motivation for engagement in the learning activities. Besides, the teachers need to commend students' participation thus: "That's an excellent point...", especially when the students' comments are potentially embarrassing. Likewise, learners' embarrassing remarks can be avoided momentarily, and in effect, can be taken as winning opportunities for future reference.

In a nutshell, a caring environment not only ensures a physically conducive setting but is also responsible for evading domination and intimidation in the learning context. A responsible teacher would equally distribute power relationships to shun inequalities. By doing so, the learners would not only raise voice against disparity (if any) but would also encourage their peers to avoid any unwanted situation in the classroom (Laster & Johnson, 2001).

2.3. Building an interesting classroom environment

To Gardner (1998): "Wise teachers allow each of their students to guide them to what the students find particularly enjoyable and worth learning. The result will be greater student interest, sense of competence, creativity, learning and preference for challenges." For motivation, a language classroom should create an exciting environment to build a positive attitude of learners towards the target language, teacher and learning a foreign language.

The learners' interest in communication in a target language lies in seeing its real-life application, scope and significance. By so doing, they become proactive in achieving their set goals of learning. Meyers and Jones (1993) comment thus: "Active learning involves providing opportunities for students to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read, and reflect on the content, ideas, issues, and concerns of an academic subject" (p. 6).

Likewise, the more personal and cultural meaning is established, the more it evokes curiosity for building a positive attitude towards learning the language as well as the learning environment because humans' choices are rooted in interests that stimulate them to attain the desired objectives. Reeve (2001) remarks that

learners' interest in language activities increase if they match their beliefs and, on the contrary, they dislike activities which they are forced to join in. Therefore, the classroom setting should be so made that it should arouse the learners' interest in it.

2.4. Building an interactive classroom environment

Interaction is essential for improving the communication skill of learners. Interactive classroom transforms learners from passive recipients to active participants. Although a handful of learners have still adhered to their passive learning habits; however, the teacher's role is to trigger off their learning performance. "In the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about" (Brown, 2000). For inciting their creative-critical thinking, the learners need to be engaged in different language activities, because involvement guarantees a risk-free classroom environment where they can explicitly share their thoughts.

Nowadays, the desk aligned arrangement in rows (in the classroom) is preferred, which is likely to lose learners' attention and causes disruption. In this structure, the learners' least interact with one another causing the promotion of individualism than focusing on the group. If the seating arrangement is organised in a circle, it will help promote public speaking and engage learners as a homogenous group. In this model, the teacher invites all learners to equally express their input and insights without fear of judgment; thus, leading to a friendly environment (Hannah, 2013).

Some teachers prefer to use premade practices in the language classroom, that rarely meet the required standard of communication. Learners are set to face one another for reciting the readymade dialogues to practice language learning. To Lytovch Enko (2009) "If activities are primarily focused on drilling and studying grammatical forms, it is difficult for students to communicate since the language situation they are put in is rather unnatural, and their roles do not demand the use of authentic language." Brown (1994) mentioned the following features (as must) for the interactive classroom:

- There is a sizeable amount of pair and group work;
- Students engage themselves in spontaneous and authentic conversations;
- Students work for actual audiences and purposes; and,
- The task-based activities prepare students for real-life applications.

Through interactions, learners can increase their language proficiency by listening to or reading authentic linguistic materials, or even the output of their peers in discussions, problem-solving tasks or conversations. Therefore, they will experience and express in creating messages from what they hear or read, as comprehension is a process of creation (Rivers, 1981). Richards and Rodgers (2001) believe that second language learning is facilitated when learners are engaged in interaction and meaningful communication.

Johnson (1995) underscores that teachers should recognise the differences between linguistic and interactional competencies of learners of the second language and,

more importantly, these competencies do not match their cognitive or social deficiencies. Therefore, teachers are required to create classroom events that allow for significant variability in the academic task structures and social participation.

2.5. Teacher-student relation

Literature shows that supportive relationships between teachers and students are essential for learners' holistic development (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Pianta, 1999). The positive relationship ensures learners' success; that, too, serves to overcome their shortcomings (Ladd & Burgess, 2001). The social quality of relationships contributes to learners' academic and socio-emotional development. For that to happen, the student-teacher relationship validates improvement in the learning environment. Hence a supportive environment positively impacts the learners' behaviour towards participation in academic and social activities (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). To Davis (2003):

Operating as socializing agents, teachers can influence students' social and intellectual experiences via their abilities to instil values in children such as the motivation to learn; by providing classroom contexts that stimulate students' motivation and learning; by addressing students' need to belong; and by serving a regulatory function for the development of emotional, behavioural, and academic skills. (p.207)

Teachers' personal involvement in communication fosters welcoming rapport between teacher and students and help maintain learners' interest in academic achievements. That leads learners to obtain good grades as well as positive peer relationships (Harter, 1996). To Roeser, Midgley and Urdan (1996), a positive teacher-student relationship reflected a sense of belonging, academic efficiency and confidence among students (Cited in Knoell, 2012). Pine and Boy (1997) extrapolate thus: "Pupils feel the personal emotional construction of the teacher long before they feel the impact of the intellectual content offered by that teacher" (p. 3).

Murray & Malmgren (2005) underlines the need for and significance of teacher-student relationship in high school students who have a background of intervention studies. The study aimed to improve the academic outcome of low-income students. In one of the intervention studies, the purpose was to increase the positive relationship between low-income high school students and their teachers; the results showed improvement in their academic grades.

Motivational theorists believe that students' perception apropos their relationship with teachers is vital in increasing learners' motivation for better performance (Bandura, 1997; Fan & Willams, 2010). Allen et al. (2013) suggest that "improving the quality of teacher-student interactions within the classroom depends upon a solid understanding of the nature of effective teaching for adolescents" (p. 77). Contrarily, strict teacher causes damage to the self-esteem of learners, which results in increased tenseness and low confidence. Baker et al. (2008) believe that a positive teacher-learner relationship provides students with safe and secure learning environments along with a scaffold for learning relevant socio-academic skills.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were chosen from the City University of Sciences and IT, Peshawar, and Institute of Management Sciences, Peshawar. They were 175 learners studying in different undergraduate courses, i.e., B.B.A., B.Ed, B.Com, B.S. computer Sciences and B.Sc Engineering. The questionnaire return ratio was 100%, but among them, 12 questionnaires were found incomplete which were rejected.

3.2. Study Design

The study's design was quantitative, descriptive and inferential. The learners were given a questionnaire to fill in the options they considered the closest to their opinions.

3.3. Instrument

The study's instrument was a questionnaire, based on the 'Motivational Strategies Questionnaire' (Cheng & Dornyei, 2007) available on Dornyei's personal website. 10 items were selected while considering the significant areas of the language classrooms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's context. 7 point-Likert scale was employed with 1 Strongly Disagree, and 7 Strongly Agree.

4. Data analysis

The data collected were tabulated and analysed using the statistical technique to examine the mean score on every statement. Based on the analysis and interpretation of data, conclusions were drawn, and recommendations were made.

4.1. Results and Discussion

Questions	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Do you enjoy learning English in the class?	5.0552	1.63016
2. Is your teacher careful in avoiding embarrassment while giving you feedback?	4.6074	1.74779
3. Do you feel free to express yourself in your class?	4.1350	1.28867
4. Does your teacher give you the confidence to speak English in class?	5.3436	1.45033
5. Does your teacher appreciate you when you perform well in the class?	5.7669	1.40796
6. Do you interact with each other in English to improve your communication skill?	4.1166	1.68652
7. Are you enjoying a friendly relation with your teacher in your classroom?	4.0184	1.22461
8. Does your teacher resort to social chat to engage you in the discussion?	5.3006	1.22794
9. Does your teacher get angry when you don't perform well?	3.8344	1.75071
10. Does your teacher ask for your opinion about English language teaching activities in the class?	4.3374	1.76461

The analysis of item No.1 was carried out and found respondents' mild agreement towards the question by securing the mean score of 5.05. It shows that the learners, although they have shown their satisfaction, hesitated to go strong on the question. The learners secured the score on item No.2 that is below the level of satisfactory threshold, indicating that the teachers remain less careful in avoiding embarrassment when giving feedback to the learners. As item No.3 indicates that

the learners secured 4.13 mean score, which explains that they are reluctant to speak out. It further shows that the majority of the students are hesitant to speak out and are afraid of being mocked at by their peers for their mistakes. However, the learners mildly acknowledged that their teachers persuaded them for expression in the target language, which secured a 5.34 score on item No.4. Their hesitation is reflected from the choice they made by marking the strong level of satisfaction. Item No.5 clarifies the point further on which the learners got a 5.76 score that is closer to the strong level of satisfaction. The learners believe that they are appreciated by their teachers on their good performance.

On Item No. 6, the learners scored 4.1, which is neutral. The statistic shows that the majority of the learners do not communicate with one another in the target language. The score further suggests that the classroom environment lacks the encouragement of the learners to communicate. The scarcity of conduciveness in the classrooms be witnessed by the score the learners secured on item No.7, which is 4.1. The learners' responses reflect the unfriendly relationship of the teachers, that restricts them from expression and committing inadvertent mistakes.

Item No. 8 reveals that the teachers, somehow, manage to engage learners in social chat that scored 5.30 from the learners, which is above the satisfactory margin. Social chitchat is an essential activity for engaging learners in informal discussion, interactively, in the target language without being conscious of their mistake. Such activity effectively enhances students' confidence to practice in the target language. However, the learners showed mild satisfaction that suggests teachers' least utilisation of the strategy in the communication skills. Some teachers misuse it by engaging the learners in their local language(s) for refreshment or to while away the time.

The analysis of item No. 9 results in learners' satisfaction by getting a score of 3.83, indicating that their teachers refrain from being angry at them. Anger on the teacher's part causes the demotivation of the learners and exacerbates their anxiety. That, in effect, causes the loss of confidence in students and their urge to participate in communicative activities.

The mean score of 4.34 on item No. 10 is below the level of satisfaction. That suggests learners' failure to choose among the choices. Selection encourages learners to perform language activities and save them from demotivation.

5. Conclusion

The motivation is essential for promoting language learning and helps develop the learners' communicative competence. It may not be easy for teachers to sustain the motivation of learners in the language classroom; however, a conducive learning environment and positive reinforcement can sustain learners' interest to engage in different communicative activities. If teachers expect learners to be motivated, they are required to create a conducive learning environment wherein the learners could discover the reward and excitement of the activity.

From the above results, it is projected that teachers need to build a motivational learning environment so as to promote the communication skill of the learners. The reluctance of learners to express in the target language suggests that the classroom environment is tense that makes them uneasy and discourages their

confidence in communicative competence in the English language. It is observed through results that the teachers are feeling hesitation to keep friendly relations with learners and have multiplied learners' hesitation to speak in the target language. The teachers are less focussed on promoting group norms that support learners to communicate with one another in the target language. Though the learners have acknowledged that they are appreciated by their teachers when they perform well, however, this does not qualify for those who exhibit underperformance. It is, therefore, suggested that class atmosphere should be friendly and tension-free, interactive, synergetic, experiential and based on learners' choices so that the learners are comfortable to communicate with their teachers and peers in the English language without external pressure.

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