

Changing Perceptions to Improve Teaching Practices

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Motivating the unmotivated has always been a challenge for teachers across the globe. The task is not unachievable. However, when the socio cultural differences arise, imbalanced power relations take place and intrinsic professional obligations compel, the situation becomes quite sensitive and peculiar. This paper presents a case study of a foreign teacher (foreigners called *kharjies* in Arabic who are hired to work for 'them' hence considered the inferior identities of the 'others') who took the challenge of making an uninterested group of female students read *Alice in Wonderland* which was not part of their curriculum (rather of higher level of reading) in a Saudi Arabian context where the textbooks are provided free and the government pays a stipend to the students not because they cannot afford but for the sheer reason of motivating them. This project was carried out on entirely personal motivation and to meet the professional challenge raised in a specific context.

Keywords: *motivation, perceptions, reading, student and teacher identity*

Introduction and Background

'Society does not exist prior to and independent of language' (Riley, 2000:264). To understand the linguistic scenario we need to be familiar with the social and economic process going on in a particular setting. Yanbu-al Bahar was an old port of Madina which has been complemented with a vibrant industrial town adjacent to the port with the name Yanbu al-Sinnayah, (meaning industrial). The establishment of various petro chemical, glass and other industries gave rise to the employment of a large number of foreigners which naturally led to the construction of hospitals, airport, shopping malls, restaurants and banks having work force from different parts of the world including North America, Europe, Middle east and Asia giving it the true shape and image of a global town with an Arabian shade. However, within this globalized sector specific "speech communities" have taken place. These can be categorized as Urdu/Hindi community including Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis and Malays etc.); Arab community that consists of Arabic speaking countries such as Jordanian, Sudan and Egypt etc.); and finally the English community that has native speakers of English language such as Americans, Canadians and

British. Interestingly all Europeans are included and immigrants having American, British or Canadian nationalities are excluded. These specific and small speech communities exist within the all-pervasive Native Saudi community that includes not only the locals of Yanbu al-Bahar but also people from Riyadh, Jeddah, Badar and other cities. Resultantly a diversified 'discourse community' (Swales, 1990) emerges where English serves as lingua franca but not so frequently because most of the social interactions take place within specific speech communities which are more or less, culturally homogenous also and speak the same language within each community, namely Urdu/Hindi (not same but mutually intelligible); Arabic (variations are there); and English (with minor differences in AE, BE and CE). The students in this scenario have to face a complex situation having to communicate with a variety of people from varied nationalities and linguistic backgrounds.

After this brief cultural and sociolinguistic background a comment on the Saudi educational scenario with reference to language would be appropriate here. Although the Saudi students study English at high school as a compulsory subject their language proficiency level is quite low because of

various reasons. The most significant of which is the lack of linguistic and communicative competence of the teachers themselves that is required to teach at this level (the high school teachers are local Saudis). As a result, mother tongue i.e., Arabic is used to impart English lessons. Short descriptions and essays that the students are supposed to write with the help of the clues and pictures provided in the textbooks are actually written by the teachers and the students are expected to memorize and reproduce the same in the exams. Imagine the faulty answers rote learned by the pupils!

There has been no intrinsic motivation for Saudi students to learn English language for a long time since the Saudi society was a closed society; hence lacking the need to interact in English. Things started changing in the latter half of the twentieth century and with the advent of the twenty first century doors opened to the foreign world. Now a large number of foreign nationals are employed at crucial positions of public interaction such as hospitals, universities, airports and banks etc. More than the linguistic need, people feel a social need of being called stylish and forward looking by talking to foreigners in English even when they can't hold a meaningful conversation.

Another reason here, to learn English is to be able to make way through foreign countries during the holiday time spent on vacations abroad. The trend of spending vacation abroad is on an increase. Other than that English is hardly used in the society. Even the basic numbers such as telephone numbers, dates, addresses, counting figures, all are talked about and written in Arabic. This is in sharp contrast to Pakistan where competence and performance in this area is taken for granted and expected from people even when they do not have appropriate language training. So generally, people in Saudi, do not feel any real need to use English in either written or oral form contrary to what Adamson (2004: 608) tells, 'Communication is viewed as social interaction and therefore dynamic and influenced by the cultural context, rather than being a fixed linguistic system existing in a vacuum.'

Ideologies according to O'Halloran (2011: 445) are 'representations of aspects of the world which contribute to establishing and maintaining relations

of power, domination and exploitation' and thus they construct social, ethnic and linguistic identities. It is imperative here to understand the identities of the students as seen by the teachers to make a fair assessment of the existing situation. "These girls are only interested in fashions and chit chats!" was the frequent comment about the students given by the teachers. In my opinion, it was an easy option for the foreign teachers to attach the label of disinterestedness to the local students whose communicative competence in English language was quite poor. Once the label fixed and accepted by the people around, who mattered, no one would really question the lack of any significant improvement in the language proficiency at the end of the semester. The classroom teachers enjoyed the traditional domination. Thus, in simple diction the scenario could be described as the teacher being 'know all' and the students as "know nothing' and 'disinterested'. So, I decided to use that very power and domination to exploit the situation positively as there is a 'dialectical' or 'bi-directional' relationship between social processes and language use' (O'Halloran, 2011: 445). I take social process as the relationship between the teacher and the students coming from different cultures and backgrounds; and consider 'language use' as the language selected for teaching, either written or spoken.

Another burning issue in this specific setting was the notion of nativity. Most of the teachers including English language teachers working at the Saudi universities are from the Asian countries including Pakistan, India, and Malaysia and also from Middle East. Thus the teachers themselves speak English as a Foreign language (EFL) or Second language (ESL). An unending debate on having native or non-native teachers of English takes a sensitive turn when the Saudi bosses tell their employees that soon all the non-native teachers would be replaced by the natives. One could think of only two reasons: one could be that they wanted to keep their employees under tight control so that they remain on their toes all the time to deliver efficiently. This pressure could also restrict the number of requests for salary enhancement. The second, like the popularity of the American brands in the Saudi shopping malls, they wanted American tutoring for their youth. In contrast to the administrative rationalism and propriety of the

management; academic and research scholars such as Jenkins (2000) very clearly argue that Received Pronunciation (RP) is not only unattainable but also unnecessary. Today the professionals know well that it was the Audiolingualism introduced in 1960s that gave rise to the importance of native speakers in English language teaching learning programs. They were considered “owners of the language, guardians of its standards, and arbiters of acceptable pedagogic norms” (Jenkins, 2000: 5). Today we have come far away from that ownership notion and are more enlightened than our limited knowledge of 1960s. Richards (2008: 3) rightly emphasizes that with the acceptance of non-native varieties of English such as Filipino English, Singaporean English, it does not remain necessary to “try to eradicate the phonological influences of the mother tongue nor to seek to speak like a native speaker”. Thus, we should neither undermine the teaching capabilities of the non-native teachers nor pressurize our learners to be as what Richards (2008: 3) calls “mimics of native-speaker English, be it an American, British or Australian variety”. As far as the administrative control is concerned, teachers should be encouraged to adopt reflective practices (see Richards and Farrell, 2006) so that they can critically review their own style, methodology, theories and approaches followed as well as their classroom personalities.

Materials and Methods

This study falls under the paradigm of qualitative research and the instrument of case study has been employed to explore the topic. The population of this project consisted of 30 female students pursuing undergraduate degree of five year duration. The first year was preparatory year which comprised of two semesters whereby they had to study general courses such as Math, Physical Education, Religion, English etc. The English course had the highest weightage in terms of credit hours. The course was based on language skills and while using split skill teaching, Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing were assigned different classes and at times different teachers. Since the course was obligatory all the first year students were enrolled in it, thus the class size ranged from 30 to 35. The general academic environment was light and free from pressures.

The subjects of this project were taking five

hours of reading and writing and five hours of listening and speaking classes. “Skills in English by Garnet Publishing” books were used as text books. Despite having twelve years of education, these students could be called false beginners based on the “performance” as Chomsky(1965:3) proposed, “Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-communication, who know its (the speech community's) language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of this language in actual performance”. Here Chomsky draws a distinction between linguistics competence and performance arguing that the performance can be affected by many factors thus is not the true gauge of a person’s linguistic capabilities. Unfortunately, most of the foreign teachers in the target department formed their opinion based on what and how the students performed in the class rather than finding out and working on the actual linguistics competence.

Generally the department faculty had the feeling that these girls didn’t have any interest in studying and they had joined the college because the Saudi government paid them 1000 SR (at that time) as stipend along with the original books published by the American publishers. Teachers’ complaints about this lack of interest among the students were common in the faculty offices and lounges.

In this scenario, asking students to do something additional to their curriculum requirements was quite a challenging task and risky too in the sense that a complaint from the students against a faculty member could cost one’s job straight away without getting a chance for explanation – the students being Saudi natives held the power and the expatriate ‘kharjis’ – the teachers lacked. Thus, it was hypothesized that if the teacher’s perception of his / her students is changed, pupils can be motivated to take up challenging tasks with interest. So I had to think of something to trigger their extrinsic motivation along with the intrinsic one. In this peculiar scenario where loss of job is the minimum and the first penalty, the decision to introduce students to Alice in Wonderland which would expose them to an interesting world of fairytales despite having a higher linguistic level than theirs

involved not only an academic challenge but administrative perils and financial risks also.

There was no special method used for teaching as Richards (2001:167) emphasizes on abandoning the search for a “supermethod”. Instead as Adamson (2004:604) states that a repertoire of methods and skills can be used selectively in different contexts. Broadly speaking, the cognitive model of second language acquisition involving a six-step process, proposed by Gass (2003) was followed. The model is outlined below:

1. Input
2. Apperception
3. Comprehension
4. Intake
5. Integration
6. Output

Results and Discussion

The results of this study are discussed here according to the various stages of the model as described above.

Input and appreciation. In the backdrop of cultural and linguistic diversity, the attainment of spoken language becomes the focal point of learning, yet a fairly longer written text of a novel was chosen because as Treiman (2004: 672) concludes that the written language processing ‘influences the representation and processing of spoken language’. The social, cultural, economic and linguistic benefits of being literate are plenty and manifold, however, Treiman (2004) attributes the acquisition of larger vocabularies and more knowledge about the world to more reading. ‘Learning to read also appears to deepen and alter people’s knowledge about language’ (Treiman, 2004: 672). Hence, focus on reading was determined as a significant instrument to develop pupils’ language.

The reason for the selection of a fairly larger text was that they needed to be provided with a ‘comprehensible input’ incorporating the creative construction hypothesis called ‘monitor model’ by Krashen (1982) so that they could focus on ‘acquisition’ which is ‘subconscious and guided by the learner’s innate mechanisms along natural developmental sequences. It occurs as a result of exposure to comprehensible input... and occurs best

when the “affective filter” (e.g., level of anxiety) is low’. (Littlewood, 2004: 516). Special effort was made to keep the classroom environment free of stress with interactional warm ups, icebreakers and student – student sharing experiences. He further suggests that the comprehensible input works best in situations of social interaction with the provision of various opportunities for the negotiation of meaning, requests for clarification, and comprehension check. (see “interaction hypothesis, Long: 1985). This may also take place by creating awareness in the gaps between their target language knowledge. “Especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the Native Speaker or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (Long 1996: 451-2). This self-realization motivates them to seek knowledge they lack.

Along with the regular textbook teaching which was essential to meet the approved curriculum objectives; the students were asked to read “Alice in Wonderland”. The text was divided into twelve parts. Each part was printed on A-4 size paper and numbered. Microsoft Word was used to have the Times New Roman font style, with size 12 and 1.5 line spacing to make it easier to read.

The class was divided into two groups according to the roll call. The project began with a motivational session about reading that included a free discussion on the folk stories of different cultures. “The important thing is to make them realize that a lot of fun and learning awaits them if they do it seriously” as Shehzad (2006: 19) suggests. With the background already described they needed a stronger motivation than that. They were stimulated by an opportunity to avail an extra bonus. They were told that they had a chance to earn 10% marks by joining in the reading project. That made them move.

According to the plan the class was divided into two groups and one student in each group was asked to take home one chapter daily, read and fill in the worksheet which was to be handed over to the teacher next day. The beginning was slow as on the first day only two students of both groups were

asked to read Chapter one.

The second day, in both groups, Student A was given Chapter two and the Student B got Chapter One. On the third day the Student A got Chapter three, the Student B got Chapter two and the Student C got Chapter one. Alice started moving gingerly and the students started looking forward to meet her. As more and more students got involved in this, more interaction, more participation and more communication began. So, on day twelve, we started the last chapter that reached the last student on the twenty sixth day.

In the first few days checking who has got what was quite cumbersome. Where is Alice? was the typical question of the day. Who has read which chapter? Has the attendance been signed? Is the circulation moving in the right direction? Is every student reading the consecutive chapter since skipping any by mistake would have been a disaster for the whole circulation process; were some other worries. Sometimes the doubts shadowed; was I doing the right thing? The journey of shifting from linguistic competence to communicative competence can be tiresome and demands extra patience. To make things manageable an attendance sheet was attached with every chapter that had to be signed by

every student after reading it. Soon a couple of girls came forward and started making sure of these daily modalities. Involvement of the students in the classroom dynamics always works! Thus it became an interesting five minute activity to begin the class which also served the purpose of a warm up leading them to the class lessons. Another five minutes were spent on the feedback on the worksheets.

Comprehension. To check if the students were reading the texts, with every chapter, a worksheet was attached that included tasks such as following. Thus, every morning started with a discussion on the previous day's reading chapter. The worksheets were collected for later assessment and assurance that the students were on the right track.

Intake. Interaction is not a new phenomenon in the teaching-learning process. Long ago Vygotsky (1930) had stressed that social interaction is the most important stimulus for learning. The students were always curious to know about the favorite part of the other students and knowing which sentence and lexical items did they enjoy most. Some of them even shared similar events from their lives that enhanced student- student interaction as Shehzad (2008: 139) emphasizes, 'Bringing students' ...

Alice in Wonderland	Chapter No._____
	Student Name _____
1. Write the summary of this Chapter. (5 points)	
What is the best thing you like in this part and why? (3 points)	
What is the thing (s) you don't like in this part and why? (3 points)	
What is your favorite sentence from this part and why? (3 points)	
What is your favorite word (s) and phrases from this part and why? (6points)	
Is there anything from your life that you can relate with this part? (5points)	

personalities into the class is the acknowledgement of their importance in the teaching learning process'. Thus, the decision to choose a literary text 'to stimulate learners' language development, and at the same time [to] enhance sensitivity to the use of language in literature' (Shehzad, 2006: VIII) resulted into a success story. The increasing involvement of the students into the fantasy world of Alice was seen from the references to the rabbit, queen, tea party, tarts etc. during the rest of the classes which scheduled regular textbook teaching plans. This was a clear indication of their smooth intake and integration as described below.

Integration. Special care was taken to keep the classroom environment friendly and academic at the same time. The 'Affective Filter' as explained by Krashen, 1985: 100), is 'a mental block, caused by affective factors ... that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device'. This hypothesis suggests that feedback obtained during conversational interaction promotes interlanguage (IL) development because it "connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (Long, 1996). Hence the classroom interaction becomes of vital importance not just because it provides various opportunities to practice the learnt material but also because interaction actually triggers acquisition processes. Along these lines Gass (2003) reports, "Conversational interaction in a second language forms the basis for the development of language rather than being only a forum for practice of specific language features". To such a degree, with appreciation and by keeping the anxiety level low, this additional and challenging project was integrated with regular teaching especially in the speaking skills classes that both, the notions and lexical items from Alice in Wonderland got recycled.

Output: Reading in both the groups was concluded with a general quiz that showed 35% A, 50% B and 15% C grades. The completion of the project was celebrated in a party called Alice Party where the students turned the classroom into a fairyland by decorating the walls and putting on various costumes. Special tea shirts were designed by the students with the image of a girl (Alice) in a fantasy land, at the front side and names of the

students at the back side. These were then screen printed and worn with pride. They divided the class into different scenarios for instance at one side of the room tea party was going on and at the other, board games. They got prepared a big cake with Alice written on it. The language code was definitely English, loaded with phrases from Alice in Wonderland, used not out of compulsion but by choice and with interest. The head of the department and other faculty members were also invited to join their success party.

Conclusion

The results clearly reflected that the teachers' perceptions of the students were wrong. After looking at the socio cultural environment of the Saudi town and working closely with the pupils it was found that the teachers' complaints about the students' indifference towards their studies and poor linguistic performance were largely the result of 'social barriers' 'clearly reflected in language' (Trudgill, 2000). These included the foreignness of the teachers and the foreignness of the language used not only for instruction but which was also the sole means of communication with the teachers. Since the teachers were from more than one country, it was too much for the students to deal with a variety of accents, range of personality types, dresses (wearing national dresses was quite common), different ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds. The students were completely overwhelmed which resulted in inhibiting the communication process. As compared to the teachers, the students' background was hegemonic. According to Trudgill (2000: 33), 'to obtain a correct picture of the relationship between language and social stratification we must be able to measure both linguistic and social phenomena so that we can correlate the two accurately'. This case study demonstrated indubitably that better understanding of the social reality and its uniqueness enhances the language teaching learning process. Apart from students' inhibitions resulting from linguistic and social factors, teachers also have their preconceived perceptions from which they need to come out to get the best outcome of their own teaching practices. It would be appropriate here to state that even within Pakistan, looking at the diversified regional scenario; preconceived notions are found about the people from different regions from which they need

to get free for better and positive professional practices. The increasing intercity employment and admissions across regions are making our academic institutions more culturally diversified and vibrant. This is in line with the changes taking place internationally in the universities throughout the globe. Hence, the need for more tolerance, openness, understanding, acceptability, adaptability and flexibility.

Recommendations

A large number of Pakistani work force is present in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Lately, an increased trend of seeking employment in KSA and the Gulf states has been observed in academia also. Teachers welcoming these opportunities must keep in mind that working at such places demands not only professional competencies but a high degree of acceptability of diversity. Joining international academia means joining a discourse community which could be quite different from the speech community in which one is born. Therefore, the proceeding teachers should make a conscious effort to enhance various competencies such as social, emotional and psycho-linguistic.

The social competency is about collaboration and cooperation including understanding and following a classroom and organization procedure or routine which most probably is going to be different from your home institution; showing respect for students and other teachers' cultural and social background; and taking responsibility for actions. Similarly, teachers should get some training in the affective area that would include managing their own emotional reactions within the class and workplace; and embracing positivity and enthusiasm in the face of a challenge. Finally, they should enhance their psycho-linguistic abilities based on learning how to evaluate one's own behavior, strengths and weaknesses which can be done through the skills of deduction, prediction, consequential logic etc. It is also advisable that instead of moving with a predetermined mind set one begins with a small survey about the needs, academic and linguistic level, and socio-cultural background of the students and the society in which one intend to venture.

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