

Learning Experiences and Motivation of Undergraduate Students in Pakistani EFL Classrooms: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

In this study, the researcher explored various aspects of Pakistani undergraduate students' learning experiences in their immediate (both formal and informal) learning context. In addition, the researcher also found out and discussed the possible motivational role of these aspects of participants' immediate learning contexts. This qualitative study is based on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted after seeking the written consent of the participants, selected among the students, participated in a large-scale L2 motivation research (Islam, Lamb & Chambers, 2013). In general, the majority of participants appeared overtly enthusiastic and satisfied with their experiences of learning English in their universities. This enthusiasm may largely be because of their strong internalization of the utilitarian roles of English in their future lives. Participants with the English medium background and good communication skills were more confident and satisfied with their English learning experiences as compared to those with the Urdu medium background or less proficient skills. Teachers may create an enabling learning environment, based on necessary motivational tools, to encourage even less proficient and shy students participate in the classroom interaction and learning process. Teachers may also assess the learning preferences of their students, especially those of the less proficient, to address psychological and social obstacles/issues, which hinder their participation in the class.

Keywords: L2 Learning experiences, L2 motivation, Pakistani EFL classrooms

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Introduction

At the beginning of my five years' career as an English language teacher at three different Pakistani universities, I was intrigued by the ambivalent learning attitudes of my students. Most of them appeared unwilling to participate in the classroom interaction and would make little noticeable efforts to learn English. At the same time, many among them would show an enthusiastic attitude outside classroom and follow me after the class in order to seek some advice/tips to improve their English skills. Leaving aside some occasional moments of negative feelings when I considered their enthusiasm a trick to please me in order to seek some favour in the classroom assessment, I always regarded their urge to know a positive sign for their learning success in future, which also made me curious to know more about their enthusiasm about English. Therefore, I started asking them simple inquiries – e.g. Why do you want to learn English? Why is English important for you? - during our interactions outside the classroom so that I could build an argument to encourage them to learn English.

Their responses to my enquiries were also equally fascinating for me as they involved a variety of reasons to like/learn English ranging from personal to social, national to international and intrinsic to extrinsic. For example, I was surprised sometimes by the huge importance my students used to attach with the uses of English related to international communication (including through internet) and access to the knowledge of the West. Overall, their responses made me aware of the changing and increasingly diverse role of English in the contemporary world as well as its deep penetration into their prospective personal and social lives. My interest in knowing my students' reasons to like/learn English was my first/initial experience with learner/Second/foreign language (L2) motivation even without knowing academically its theoretical basis and practical manifestations. This interest grew with the realization of a discrepancy between my students' apparent enthusiasm to learn English and their lack of participation/efforts to learn English in the classroom.

My experience as an English language teacher coupled with my readings, later on, provided me a view of various aspects of Pakistani students' L2 motivation as well as an understanding of my initial experiences of learner motivation. I realized that our students' learning experiences in the classroom as well as in the immediate learning context, in addition to their personal associations with English language and its gains in Pakistani society, may be of critical importance to get a detailed view of their L2 motivation. Therefore, I, in this qualitative study, seek to gather an in-depth view of Pakistani undergraduate students' learning experiences (of immediate learning context) in order to comment on the possible ways these may affect their L2 motivation. In this regard, it may be pertinent to discuss, first, the overall state of English language teaching in Pakistan.

English Language Teaching in Pakistan

English is taught as a compulsory subject even at the graduation level (after intermediate classes – Grade 12) in Pakistani universities in addition to its role as a medium of instruction for higher education in most of degree programs excluding the courses about local/international languages and some oriental studies only (Hafeez, 2004; Islam, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2009). English language teaching (ELT) has always been a complex and much debated field in Pakistani education system. Most commentators argue that there have been deficient language policies, which ignored the realities of the context (Shamim, 2008). Moreover, there has been a serious lack of commitment to implement the policies aimed at ensuring the access of English on democratic lines, as successive governments failed to take practical steps to eradicate the problems and issues of ELT in Pakistan (Ministry of Education, 2009, Shamim, 2008). The prevalent method of teaching in public schools/colleges is grammar-translation, which is, according to some researchers, out-dated and does not reconcile with the future academic and professional communication needs and aspirations of young Pakistani learners (Hafeez, 2004; Warsi, 2004). It may also be argued that it is not the method itself but its weak implementation by some inexperienced teachers, which causes most of the problems for our students.

There is also a huge shortage in ‘the quantity and quality of resources’ (Shamim, 2008, p. 244), which broadly includes a lack of funds, skilled and proficient English language teachers, educational technology and effective teaching materials (Rahman, 2004; Shamim, 2011). In addition, the curriculum development programmes, mostly conducted under the patronage of foreign funding agencies, were also not sustainable (Shamim, 2008). Overall, this situation has resulted into ‘a general sense of dissatisfaction with the current level of English proficiency of the graduates of public sector universities’ (Shamim, 2011, p. 297). If government has to disseminate English language education and its benefits to the common people of Pakistan, as claimed in the education policy of 2009, it will have to develop an indigenous ELT policy based on the socio-contextual realities of the country. It has to overhaul ELT sector with comprehensive reforms, otherwise, the present situation will continue.

Motivation

Motivation involves the factors behind human actions; ‘why people think and behave as they do’ (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 1). The perceived indirect connection of L2 motivation with successful learning makes it an interesting area of inquiry in various EFL/ESL contexts, where the understanding of L2 motivation also ‘contributes to our knowledge of how people see themselves in relation to both their immediate surroundings and the world at large’ (Ryan, 2008, p. 45). This deep understanding is based, primarily, on the fact that the knowledge of English in these contexts is seen as an important social advantage (Pan & Block, 2011) as well as a tool to access people and their communities because of its use as a global lingua franca (Crystal, 2003).

L2 Learning Experience

Generally speaking, learning experiences include learners' beliefs and experiences about the context and situation of learning. As a construct in L2 motivation theory, it focuses on various aspects of students' immediate learning contexts and their attitudes and reactions towards it. L2 learning experience is also the third important aspect of Dörnyei's 'L2 motivational self system' (2005). It relates to learners' attitudes towards 'immediate learning environment and experience' (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). Dörnyei (2005) associated this element with Ushioda's (2001, p. 107) notion of 'causal' motivation that implies that students' motivation may vary based on their levels of satisfaction with learning conditions. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 86), L2 learning experience may involve 'the impact of teacher, the curriculum, the peer group or the experience of success'. Dörnyei (2009) proposed that a positive learning experience also affects learners' motivated behaviour positively. Learning experience has emerged as an important contributor to L2 motivation in various EFL contexts. For example, a similar construct, 'Attitudes to Learning English' - appraising participants' overall enjoyment of the L2 learning process - made the strongest contribution to their expected motivated behaviour in a Pakistani context which is generally marked for its unsatisfactory learning conditions such as lack of facilities and very traditional pedagogic style of teachers (Islam et al., 2013).

Research Questions

The researcher focussed on the following questions in this study:

1. What are the views of Pakistani undergraduate EFL learners about their learning experiences in the immediate learning context?
2. In what ways these learning experiences may be important to understand and explain their motivation to learn English?

Method and Procedures

The semi-structured interviews of 20 students were conducted individually after seeking their informed consent on a written form - containing the title and purpose of the study. In addition, the purpose and procedure of the interview were also explained orally to every participant before seeking their consent. The interviewees were informed that the confidentiality of their talk will be ensured. The semi structured format allowed me to plan the initial structure of the interviews in advance, therefore, an interview guide was prepared and piloted prior to the data collection process. The interviews included questions about participants' overall learning attitudes subsuming both within and outside classroom experiences (e.g. 'How has been your experience of learning English so far?'; 'Do you enjoy learning English in your classroom?').

The interviews were conducted within the university premises of each participant so that they may feel at home during the interviews. Interviews are the most frequently used tool for qualitative data collection in various spheres of knowledge generation including applied linguistics (Dörnyei, 2007). They provide an opportunity to the participants to share their understanding and detailed interpretations of various issues in their contexts. Because of its valuable role and capacity to allow the researcher to collect in-depth data, an interview may be used as a sole means for data collection in a study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 351). The content and wording of the interview guide was carefully selected to ensure that they might not put the participants at any socio-psychological risk. All interviews were recorded with the explicit oral and written consent of the participants (who were given pseudonyms in the reporting of the data). The data, later on, were analyzed with the help of thematic analysis based on a group of categories. First, I arranged the data into different open codes partly derived from the existing literature and partly from new ideas emerging from the data. Then the codes were revised to simplify and interconnect the important characteristics of the data, which helped me to prepare a comprehensible group of pre-existing and emergent categories. Finally, I presented categories/themes of the qualitative data by highlighting their particular motivational aspects and contextual background available in the data.

Findings of the Study

The data revealed the themes ranging from participants' formal to informal learning experiences as well as the ones focussing on the role of academic institutions and teachers in shaping their experiences.

Experiences of Learning English

Generally speaking, the interviewees appeared satisfied with their overall learning experiences of English when I asked them some general questions; e.g. 'How has it been your experience of learning English so far?' However, they showed a mixed response to the specific questions about classroom environment and teachers' roles. First, I will report the details and possible reasons of their surprising excitement and enjoyment of learning process and experiences despite the relatively poor learning conditions in Pakistani context. The statement 'Learning English was pleasurable and profiting experience as well' (Interviewee G) reflects, similar to the views of other interviewees, a highly enthusiastic learning attitude which combines the pleasure and excitement of learning with the realization of the advantages attached with it. Probably, it is the strong internalization of the vitality of this social capital – English language – in Pakistan, which makes these young learners discount the difficulties and problems inherent in the classroom context.

They feel motivated and enjoy learning this language every time they learn a new thing without paying much attention to the classroom facilities. Another interviewee when asked 'why English is important for you to learn?' echoed a similar response (intrinsic and extrinsic motives) and which also goes beyond immediate learning goals of passing exams and the details of classroom environment; 'It was my own interest I would say. English is also a genuine concern as it is a lingua franca...from individual to society level, you need English'. He added, 'As far as my interest in English language is concerned, I feel in English another life. I feel English as my own friend'(Interviewee B).

Some other participants felt proud of their association with English and were keen to make its learning a permanent feature of their life. This is quite evident from the following responses to the question 'Have you enjoyed learning English so far?'

Yes, why not, I feel it my objective and wish to learn English (Interviewee D).

I like it so much that I will keep on studying and reading English till I die (Interviewee C).

Another enthusiastic and self-motivated interviewee (originally belonging to a remote area of Pakistan) while also acknowledging the importance of English in various walks of life and for his future endeavours, considered its learning an end in itself. The following series of comments, uttered in a confident and resolute tone, demonstrated this point:

I love learning this art...I enjoy a lot learning English... I speak with others even I shut the door of my room and I speak with the walls in isolation... it was a wonderful experience for me to learn a language which was not my mother language and I have learned a lot and I am still learning it and this journey will last forever (Interviewee A).

In such a state of self-motivation, it seems likely that a learner may overlook the difficulties of immediate learning context and focus on her/his prime goal of learning itself. Strong sense of self-belief and inner satisfaction while learning English also drives some students' motivational energy above the considerations of classroom environment. For example, the statements 'I haven't felt that English is a different kind of language... it comes to my mind as I want to say it' (Interviewee N) and 'It was very natural and it was very comforting' (Interviewee G) indicate students' strong liking for the learning of English.

It was interesting to note that for many interviewees, the learning of English was not restricted to its association with their future career plans or material gains. They see different exciting places of English in their future lives that make their learning processes interesting and enjoyable. They believe that English may still have some emotional and personal role in their lives even if they fail to achieve their perceived career goals. For example, Interviewee (H) said that English language competence is ‘a kind of knowledge and this knowledge is always there even if you can’t accomplish your aims... knowledge is within you, I think it really helps’.

The Role of Educational Institutions, Classroom Environment and Teachers

Although the participants, at times, seemed to overlook the difficulties of learning conditions while enjoying learning English for various reasons, they also appeared to understand the importance of broader educational system, classroom environment and teachers in the learning process and discussed their different aspects and roles. I noted that interviewees were conscious of the class-based educational divide and its strong influence on English related learning ability and self-confidence of Pakistani students; ‘Some people study from very good institutions and they are very fluent in speaking English’ (Interviewee A).

During interviews, I observed that the students with English medium background, in line with the common perception, were more confident about and satisfied with their present knowledge of English, learning skills and experience. In comparison, the participants with Urdu medium background were less expressive and sometimes less sure of what they were saying. They took long pauses, switched to Urdu and became nervous more frequently as compared to the participants from English medium schools. They were also hesitant to speak sometimes as their answers to my inquiries were shorter and the average length of their interviews is also shorter than their English medium counterparts. Here, I will refer to the words of interviewee (F) that may explain the difference of Urdu and English mediums in the minds of young Pakistanis:

Definitely those students who are from Urdu medium they would have some difficulty in that because they have done their matriculation in Urdu medium then again all of sudden they have to study all in all in English. They would have some difficulty and might be they cram... Because I have been from the English medium school, I have been learning English since my childhood. I have been interacting that’s why it’s easier for me and I was always good at English.

English medium educational background implies a critical advantage for an already advantaged class of the society. Some participants expressed that good communication skills of English language are directly linked to an elite social background. Let us see what this interviewee has to say about one of her class fellows:

In fact, there is just one girl who speaks good English and it is just because of good schooling because she comes from a very good, I would say an elite kind of background. So, that is why she speaks good English (Interviewee G).

The students from less elite English medium schools/institutions, for the people falling in or about middle class, may not have the quality education similar to those from elite schools but they still have an advantage over purely Urdu medium students. One participant from a similar institution comments about teaching practices there:

It was a practice that you have to speak in English because it is an English medium school so it is a rule that you have to speak whether you speak it wrong or right (Interviewee C).

Because of this approach in relation to English speaking in their previous institutions, the students from less prestigious English medium schools appear to be more proficient in English than those from Urdu medium schools.

The interviewees also acknowledged the critical role of classroom environment and teachers in improving English language skills of the students. However, they showed mixed responses to the questions specific to the practical working of their classrooms. Most of the students with good communications skills appeared more satisfied with the environment. However, less proficient and less confident students found classroom environment less friendly and below their learning expectations. An interviewee complained about the non-availability of the conducive environment for speaking English, when asked about the experience of speaking English in the university class, in the following words:

I am telling you that I don't have the environment in which I could easily convey my thoughts or anything what I have to say in English (Interviewee N).

When asked, most of the participants suggested that their teachers encourage them verbally to learn English by emphasizing the importance of this language for their future. However, the opinions of some participants suggested that teachers do not devise a practical motivational strategy to make less proficient and shy students participate in the learning process and classroom interaction. Therefore, some students, despite their desire and effort to participate, feel alienated in the classroom settings. As this participant opined:

And teachers can play an important role. So far, I have seen so many teachers that students while talking in their class feel that nobody is accompanying us. The thing is that teachers should support students, whether they are committing mistakes, whatever they are doing. They should just create that environment (Interviewee B).

The authoritative and less friendly role of teachers make these students feel in this way; 'someone superior to you is standing right in front of you' (Interviewee J). In this regard, even some good speakers hesitate to participate in the classroom interaction in order to avoid committing any mistake because of the fear of being judged by their teachers. When I asked a hypothetical question to a relatively good speaker of English about the disadvantages he might have to suffer in the absence of good communication skills, he replied; 'my teachers would not have known me well. And in a semester system, it is very important that your teachers should know you' (Interviewee G). This statement reveals that this participant's teachers are more interactive and friendly with those who already participate well in the classroom.

Informal Experiences of Learning English

In addition to formal classroom teaching, most of the participants also seemed to adopt some informal methods of learning English. They discuss their knowledge of and communicate in English with their friends and class fellows outside the classroom (hostel rooms, canteens, etc.). Some highly motivated students told me that they make it binding among friends to communicate with one another in English in certain settings. Such an informal/broader environment seems helpful in learning and making their learning experiences enriched, varied and entertaining. As interviewee (D) pointed out 'If you discuss with your friends in English like general discussion, your English definitely will improve'. The students feel much at ease/liberated while communicating in these informal settings. This compensates for the controlled and less friendly classroom environment:

Mostly I speak English when we are having fun, I can really express myself better when I am with my friends and they also realize me that I can speak good but I personally think that I can't speak well while in front of the class, while in front of my teacher (Interviewee H).

This additional informal platform for learning English (e.g. with friends at different social places) seems to have broadened the scope of learning environment of students and contributed to their overall liking for the learning process.

Discussion

Interviewees' strong liking and enthusiasm about their general experience of learning English may be seen in the light of learners' earnest desire to learn English, based on a realization of its utilitarian worth and place in future lives. This realization may have made them rely so heavily on or develop positive feeling about the classroom setting. In addition, for most of these students, classroom or university environment is the only opportunity to learn and speak English because it is not spoken frequently in their homes or society at large. Therefore, it seems likely that they would like these places in general as these provide them with the necessary exposure to the language of their choice. Besides, the traditional element of respect for teachers and classroom environment in Pakistani society may be another reason why the participants have shown liking for the immediate context. It was also observed in other settings that 'language learning attitudes of younger students are primarily based on classroom experience and are largely shaped by teachers' (Kormos & Csizér, 2008, p. 22). A quantitative study in a similar Pakistani context (Shahbaz & Liu, 2012) has also revealed a strong and direct relationship between its participants' reported learning efforts and L2 learning attitudes.

The liking of the participants for their learning context seemed to be a surprising finding in view of the often unsatisfactory learning conditions - e.g. lack of classroom facilities, traditional teaching styles and methods of teachers (Warsi, 2004) - in the Pakistani context. They found their experiences of learning English pleasurable as well as profitable. However, some participants also raised their voices against learning conditions and teaching practices in their classrooms. Most of the students with good communication skills appeared more satisfied with the environment because they got lion's share of their teachers' attention and class participation. In contrast, the data also revealed that less proficient and less confident students found the classroom environment less friendly and below their learning expectations. The feeling of classroom isolation may also be heightened by the fact that teachers in the Pakistani context primarily focus on writing skills and pay little attention to students' speaking skills, which are desired most by them. Though teachers encourage students sometimes verbally to learn English by emphasizing the importance of this language for their future, they do not devise a practical strategy to involve less proficient or shy students in classroom interaction and activities. Instead of working on students' learning needs, teachers spend most of their time in lecturing course items in a non-interactive and boring way. In the process, some students, despite their desire and effort to participate, may feel alienated in classroom settings.

The data shed light on the broader educational divide in Pakistani society, which also defines students' experiences of their immediate learning context. The participants with the English medium background were more confident and satisfied with their

English learning experiences as compared to those with the Urdu medium background. The participants rightly believed that studying in an English medium school is a big advantage in Pakistani society and it makes the task of getting proficiency in English a lot easier. This supports Rahman's (2016, p. 26) view that Pakistani elite has 'appropriated' English for their own gains. The discriminatory role of English medium schools was also observed in other EFL contexts; e.g. Coleman (2011) argued that the Indonesian upper middle class wants their children to study in English medium schools to provide them with a competitive edge over others in relation to future opportunities in higher education and jobs. Similarly, Lamb (2011) also found that an affluent/educated family background coupled with good early education experiences of Indonesian teenagers may result in their better command over English skills later on. Lamb (*ibid*) relates this situation to 'Matthew Effect', where the cumulative effects of a slight early advantage lead to the 'rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer' (p. 187). This also reminds me of domestic continuation of linguistic imperialism of English by the elitist social classes in various post-colonial societies as proposed by Phillipson (2009). From this perspective, the motivation to learn English is also a reflection of a race between haves and have-nots. It is probably also this compulsive social condition, which makes these Pakistani students like even less favourable classroom environments since it is the only place for them to learn English.

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

Overall, the study has shown that participants' L2 learning experiences may be important to enhance their motivation, which echoes the findings of many other L2 motivational studies (see Discussion). The motivational role of teachers, academic institutions, classroom settings and school background (English and Urdu medium) appeared extremely prominent in this Pakistani context. The satisfaction of these participants with their learning experiences appeared partly related to their self-confidence and learning achievement so far, which might have induced them to overlook the problems of learning conditions. However, the data revealed that in the dichotomized education system of Pakistan, where state-owned Urdu medium and privately-run English schools continue to exist simultaneously, the broader role of educational institutions in disseminating knowledge and developing attitudes for English language education becomes extremely important. It is pertinent to mention here that the participants of this study were studying in the universities situated in urban settings, therefore, it may be assumed that a study in remote/rural areas of the country may possibly present different experiences of L2 learning in the classrooms.

From a theoretical perspective, the richness of participants' learning experiences emerged in the data of this study suggested that the items included in various quantitative studies (e.g. Islam, Lamb, & Chambers, 2013; Shahbaz & Liu, 2012) to measure EFL learners' attitudes to learning experiences may not fully cover/justify the scope of participants' L2 learning experiences in this Pakistani context. These items in these studies have been adapted from Ryan (2009) and Taguchi et al., (2009) and represented Dörnyei's (2009) theorization of L2 learning experiences. Based on the findings of this study, it may be argued that more items representing learners' experiences within and outside classroom may be added to broaden the scope of the traditional construct of L2 learning experiences adopted by Dörnyei in his L2 Motivational Self System (2005, 2009). It may be pertinent to mention here that Lamb (2012), probably for similar reasons, used two different constructs – 'Learning experience in school' and 'Learning experience out of school' (p. 1007) - to capture his Indonesian participants' L2 learning experiences.

In addition, some specific item/s to investigate student-teacher interaction in EFL classrooms may be included in future studies to gather a more detailed view of participants' learning experiences. Similarly, some aspects of learners' interactions/experiences with their class fellows/peers within and outside the classroom may also be included. The data suggested that learning experiences in the broader university/college/school environment (hostels, canteens, tours, sports), and not only within the classroom, may also be vital for their learning and therefore, may be investigated to have a comprehensive view of L2 learning. The role of English and Urdu medium institutions in shaping L2 learners' experiences may also be investigated in detail in future studies (also in similar EFL contexts) as they seem to have strongly affected the language attitudes and learning experiences of the participants of this study. The researchers may also need to investigate how regularly learners participate or desire to participate in English classrooms in order to have a better view of their L2 motivation.

Teachers may make efforts to create an enabling learning environment for their students in order to make their learning experiences pleasant. For example, instead of overlooking less proficient and shy students, they may develop motivational tools to facilitate their participation in the classroom interaction and learning process. In this regard, teachers may also 'resist the temptation to associate lack of early achievement in English with lack of potential to learn' (Lamb, 2011, p. 293). Similarly, teachers may also assess the learning preferences of their students, especially those of the less proficient, and ensure that they are not anxious or afraid of embarrassment in the class. Teachers may talk to them individually to address psychological and social obstacles/issues, which hinder their participation in the class.

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