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Fear And Ignorance About Learning English (L2):
Influence of Environment And Monotonous Syllabus

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By

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Abstract

This report is based on experiences from the classes I have taught and observed during my internship at Viqarunnisa Noon School and College (VNS&C) with a focus on knowing the facts of fear and ignorance about learning English as L2. During my internship I tried to mix with the students like a friend to figure out the possible means behind their negative attitude about learning English as L2. This paper also includes some suggestions for solving the obstacles the students are facing while studying English as a subject, which I have figured out during my internship as a teacher and observer at the college.

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1. Introduction:

English is the world's most widely spoken language. However, of a total 1.5 billion speakers, only 375 million are classified as native. Therefore, around the world over 1 billion people speak English as a second language. Speaking and writing English language in correct form and fluently is now a basic requirement in job fields. Not only for the job purpose but even to travel and develop international business, communicating in English language is very common now days. But unfortunately, even after knowing its level of importance, people are not taking it seriously; some people are fearful and some are ignoring to learn well. In a developing country like Bangladesh, majority people are linked with the educational curriculum that runs using the first language .i.e. in Bangla version, under national curriculum. From the primary level up to higher secondary level of Bangla version, boys and girls get the chance to study English language as only one paper as a part of their designed syllabus. As a result they do not get the scope to practice English as a second language effectively. Even the limited knowledge they accrue remains confined within the class room. It is seen that meritorious students memorize the grammar rules and have the ability to implement the knowledge properly, whereas the general students are just studying English language as a subject which is given to them as a part of their syllabus.

I got the opportunity to work as an intern in a College, where the system of education is designed by the national curriculum .i.e. learning English as a language is limited to them as just a course. I was appointed there as a teacher of English composition for class XI or first year of college. Also I got the opportunity to observe the grammar classes of class XII or second year of college, conducted by senior teachers. The number of students in each class was 150 plus. Those were big class rooms filled with immense number of students. Managing this big size class room

is no less than a challenge and most importantly to ensure whether all the students have understood the class lecture or not. Specially teaching English language to the L2 learners properly; where English is just one subject and rest of the subjects are designed in Bangla language i.e. the first language. While conducting the classes, I found the environment of fear among the students about writing and specially speaking up in L2. Also I have encountered that students who have proper grammatical knowledge, do not have the tendency to learn more. From my own experience I can feel that it is a big challenge for the teachers of English language to make students learn more and more English, because out of 7 subjects, which are again divided into 2 papers, English language is practiced as 1 unique subject designed in 2 papers .i.e. English first paper- Composition and English second paper- Grammar. Rest 6 subjects are designed in Bangla language. As a result, students have less access to their second language (L2), English. Not only the students get less opportunity in their own educational institutions but also the overall environment of the living style do not encourage students to use English language in their day to day life. As such, English as L2 is feared by most of the students and also being ignored. I am going to pin-point the facts of the fear and ignorance about learning English (L2) influenced by environment and syllabus design of Bangla version in national curriculum.

2. Literature Review:

The issue of ‘fear and ignorance’ about learning English language as a second language is very common especially in the country like Bangladesh. Linguists have discussed about this issue and have talked about various options to deal with the problem. The concept of fear and ignorance is also provoked by the environment as well as the education system to an extent.

2.1 Supportive behavior for ESL students:

Jennifer Gonzalez in her book “12 Ways to Support ESL Students in the Mainstream Classroom” discussed about different aspects of dealing problem and mitigating the fact of fear and ignorance of acquiring English as a second language. She has given examples from real life and also have related believes of various language teachers in the process of teaching and providing knowledge of English as a Second Language (ESL). As per the suggestion some of the supportive points are:

- a) Make it visual: “Avoid giving instructions in the air,” says Melissa Eddington, an Ohio-based ESL teacher. “English Language Learners (ELL) kids have a harder time processing spoken language.” So instructions, the even basic directions for classroom procedures should be written on the board whenever possible.
- b) Build in more group work: “Kids aren’t just empty glasses that we pour stuff into and then at the end of the day they dump it back onto a test,” says Kim, an ESL teacher who was the subject of my very first podcast interview. “If you really want the kids to learn, they’ve got to be engaged.” That means less teacher-led, whole-class instruction, and more small groups, where students can practice language with their peers in a more personal, lower-risk setting.

- c) Communicate with the ESL Teacher: Mary Yurkosky, a former ESL teacher in Massachusetts, credits much of her students' success to the strong relationship she had with the regular classroom teachers. "The classroom teachers were always talking to me about what they were doing in their classes," she says. "They made it so easy for me to support them: If a teacher was going to be doing a unit on plants, I could make sure we used some of that same vocabulary in the ESL class."
- d) Honor the silent period: Many new language learners go through a silent period, during which they will speak very little, if at all. "Don't force them to talk if they don't want to," says Eddington, "A lot of students who come from cultures outside of America want to be perfect when they speak, so they will not share until they feel they are at a point where they're perfect." Just knowing that this is a normal stage in second language acquisition should help relieve any pressure you feel to move them toward talking too quickly.

2.2 Influence of Environment:

In the process of second language acquisition the surrounding environment influences a lot. Even in this process the environment can work as a barrier. "Some of the factors that affects second language acquisition can be determined using the code S= factors primarily in the student, F= factors primarily in the family, E = factors primarily in the environment of the second culture. Age, socioeconomic status, classroom culture, cognitive development in home language, family support, whether environment provides adequate L2 input, literacy level, stage in acculturation, whether school environment provides language use opportunities and maintenance of home language and so on plays an important role in acquiring knowledge of second language .i.e. for English Language Learners (ELL)" – a research developed in university of Alabama at Birmingham.

We came to learn that 12% to 18% of knowledge in language of a child develops by home literacy environment (Adam, 1994). Home where a child lives and his or her family members with whom he or she lives with; a child start learning word formation as per they utter. Home environment is the primary place where children learn different usage of language (Adam, 1994). Social status and economic condition also influences human nature, most importantly the language in use.

Children learn language and speech by listening to the language around them and practicing what they hear. In this way, they figure out the language code. It is not learned all at once but in stages over time. According to Harvey Daniels, “Children learn their native language swiftly, efficiently and largely without instruction”. It is because they are exposed to their native environment. Children construct their own knowledge in response to their experience. Social interaction plays an important role in the learning process.

So it is quite clear that if someone wants to earn good command in English language, they need to practice it in every possible environment.

2.3 Motivation and Learning environment:

Age of a man is an important influential factor in gaining complete SLA competence, motivation seems to be key element in the learning process. However, Gardner (2007) says that “Motivation to learn a second language is not a simple construct. It cannot be measured by one scale; perhaps the whole range of motivation cannot be assessed by even three or four scales” (p. 10). Moreover, he proposes the question why motivation plays so important role in learning a second or foreign language and explains that children that come from bilingual home easily learn two languages. Additionally, they seem to be capable of understanding,

write and read the language properly (Gardner 2007). There has to be some sort of motivation involved in SLA, whether it concerns young learners or adults. The question how motivation is fostered leads to another important aspect of SLA, which involves the learning environment of the student, whether it is classroom instruction or simply a cultural participation.

In an online article about the influence of environment in second language (SLA) acquisition, article named “Creativity and Languages: Learning Languages out of a classroom”, there are six factors that influence second language acquisition. They are:

1. Motivation
2. Regular practice
3. Emotional involvement
4. Playfulness and willingness to make mistakes
5. Humble approach – The basic first
6. Grammar is secondary to practice, theory is secondary to practice.

So it is quite clear that the fear and ignorance about learning English language as a second language need to be boost up from the personal level. The activities for English Language Learners should not be confined in the classes. The students should take some initiatives of their own to polish their knowledge of ESL. Language need to be practiced more and proper guidance is also required.

3. My Experience:

As a student of national curriculum background, I also have ignored the matter of improving my knowledge of English language at the school level. With the passage of time I have understood the importance this language (L2) and went through various practices to improve myself in English language. In my undergraduate level, I am studying in English with linguistics as major. From my linguistics courses I have learnt the techniques of language learning and how to fight back the shortcomings to present myself as a competent second language user of English language, L2. When I got the opportunity to teach students and learn their weaknesses regarding the fear and ignorance about learning English language (L2), I tried to implement some teaching methodologies. During my internship, I worked as a teacher, observer and examiner which all together helped me to figure out the weak points of the students of Bangla version.

3.1 Works as an Intern:

I completed my internship at Viqarunnisa Noon School and College where I was appointed as an English teacher of class XI or first year of college. As per the designed routine, I took classes of three different sections, where number of students are 150 plus in each. VNS&C basically follows national curriculum. While I started taking class, I was worried about the fact whether I can mix with the young crowd and figure out the reason behind their fear and ignorance about learning English (L2), but gradually I blended with them and managed to learn about their flaws.

My first class as an intern was with class XI, section G, science group, housed in a huge class room accommodating 160 students. I requested the students to open their English first-paper book named as ‘English for Toady’, which they follow as their reading material, suggested and designed by National Curriculum Textbook Board of Bangladesh.

The composition that we read first was about adolescence and its related problems in the context of Bangladesh. Before proceeding to the main article, I started the class with asking questions relevant to the topic, to gain knowledge of their view and idea about the subject matter and also to make the class interactive. This session went for 3 to 4 minutes with the participation of 3 students which portrayed a bit of their shyness of speaking confidently in English language. I told them to read the short composition as a part of reading activity which focused on skimming. Along with them I read out the article and delivered lecture in English to make them understand the text. To make the topic easy for them I had to use some Bangla terms and provided required word meanings. The class went for 40 minutes only. The timing was a problem to ensure whether the whole class has understood or not. Though the reading, listening and the speaking skills were conducted but the writing skill was left untouched. As a teacher it became a challenge for me to allocate a specific amount of time for practicing exercises.

To give the students the clear idea of a topic, only delivering a relevant lecture does not work all the time. Teachers apply various methods to make the class interactive. Friendly environment in a class room helps the student to gain proper knowledge. The classes based on second language acquisition require special attention so that the students can learn easily. As per the routine, I was instructed to take next class which earmarked for poetry. I found that I had to teach a poem, named “The Schoolboy” by William Blake. The poem was Unit 5/ lesson 3 in the syllabus. The students of class XI seemed to be less interested about the class of poetry. Still it is an important part of their syllabus as questions may come from this unit in their upcoming exam.

To break the fear about English, the teachers of L2 learners need to focus on their speech first because they have to deliver the lecture in L2, also have to provide clear meaning of the text. As L2 learners have already acquired their L1 and they mostly try to relate L2 with L1. Keeping all

the possible “do’s and don’ts” in mind I started taking the class by reciting the poem. It was a big class, with 155 students. To grab all the attentions, reciting the poem in a dramatic way was the best option to follow. After reading every single paragraph, I tried to relate the plot with their own life, or with other common article they have read before. By providing the meanings of difficult words from the poem, the environment of the class was friendly. Side by side, I asked the students to share their personal views about ‘school life’. This whole session was combined with listening, speaking and reading skills. As a teacher I believe the monotonous attitude should be overcome by more interaction using L2 and also to react positively with the students to drive them forward to participate more in L2.

It is not possible to get rid of the fear about acquiring L2, if the students do not form a habit to practice L2 (English) by using all the four skills at the same time. Also the teachers have to be patient enough and tricky with their presentation, so that the students who are afraid of learning English will try to come out of their shells and the students who are just studying English as a subject of their academic curriculum will explore in other English literary works. As a result the level of fear will decrease and the level of ignorance will diminish slowly. I ended the class by singing a song in Bangla which complements the poem of William Blake’s “The Schoolboy”.

I faced some problems like controlling the large class or dealing with some of the students’ personal problems in the class. As the classes were mixed ability class, all the students were not participative or interactive in the class. To read out the composition in the class room, students were seemed to be less interested. No one volunteered to come to the front and read loud until you call any of them randomly. In the oral question answer round, as practiced for a while, the students were not comfortable to answer in a complete sentence using L2.

3.2 Work as an observer:

To observe an English grammar class I was taken to class XII, section B, science group. The teacher who conducted the class gave me a brief of the running schedule of the second year students and specially described the condition of their English lessons. The class that I observed for the day was based on report writing. The teacher started the class by asking the students about their Eid preparation and the students were very much participative with their Eid gossips. Though the teacher was speaking in English, the responses from the students were not much spontaneous in their second language (L2) .i.e. English. Taking Eid as a point the teacher started discussing about the report writing, its rulings and structure. The teacher read out a sample report for them so that they can get a clear idea. The students were instructed to take essential notes given in the class. The report writing that has been taught was a report for newspaper.

The effort of knowing more were less from the student's side. To make the class interesting, the teacher shared her personal life experience and through sharing this she tried to explain them how to write the portion of collected interviews for the report. The students appeared to have understood the format of report writing was affirmative. But the problem was found in writing as they could not write in correct grammatical sentence structure. As per teacher's suggestion, only practice of writing would help them out. As a result they were given home work on a report and were told to submit in the following class.

The students of second year college have already finished most of their allocated syllabus and were then waiting to sit for the board examination .i.e. HSC exam. In-spite of completing most of their grammar part, these students seemed to be weak in vocabulary and also in forming sentences in proper grammatical structure.

Students of HSC (higher secondary level) were asked some questions relating to their second language (English) acquisition process. 1) What are the mediums that help them to learn English? 2) Do they take extra tuition classes to learn English? 3) Why do they neglect studying English and so on. The replies were very affirmative. Students believe that the class room activities are not enough to learn English, especially when it comes to communication by using L2. With the help of media telecast and published articles in English, they are learning more. Home tutors or coaching classes are also helping them to remove their difficulties, which are not possible to do in a large class room. Also the L2 learners of HSC level admitted that the pressure of other subjects assigned for them makes them to give more time there, rather than learning English (L2). The topics covered in English classes are also not very interesting. As a result students feel less interest in studying English.

Furthermore, the teachers believe that the students, who are weak in English even at this higher level, are actually weak from the primary level as they were not guided and taught well then. Also lack of proper training for the teachers, contradictory guidelines by the curriculum board and poor design of the syllabus are also the reasons behind fear and ignorance of learning English as L2 by the students. Both the teachers and the students have expressed that they do not find interest in the prescribed text book.

The challenge for the language teaching profession is, therefore, to develop language programs that will respond to the practical demands for proficiency in English by conducting research, and implementation of theory and best practices. English (L2) should be learnt with importance and for that proper care is needed. It should not be limited to the class room only. Otherwise the fear and ignorance of learning English will never come to an end.

3.3 Work as an examiner:

As a part of my observation activity, I was given some exam scripts to check and mark. Those were the copies of second year students .i.e. class XII. The question was designed with 40 marks for the grammar items and 60 marks for the composition part. In the grammar based questions students were asked to answer objective type questions, having total eight questions in number, each carrying 5 marks. Articles, preposition, right forms of verb, idioms & phrases, transformation, narrations, tag question and completing sentences were the eight question items, with five stems in each. In answering grammar portion provision was made that one wrong answer will directly cut one mark. The composition part was built with a paragraph, an essay, dialogue writing, an application and short story writing. This part carries the most marks though it was completely free hand writing. The level of marks varies based on the quality of the writing of compositions.

In the higher secondary level, the students are considered to be smart enough with the selection of words, especially while writing the essay and the short story, as these are completely literary works. While checking the scripts I can clearly separate the copies into two parts as half of the students are capable of writing quality essays, while the other half of the students are very naïve in free hand writing. This situation clearly defines that some of the students are confident enough with their second language .i.e. English and rest of the students are afraid of L2.

The point “fear and ignorance” about learning English as L2 becomes quite clear after checking these scripts. Students who are capable of writing good essays have good command in grammar, but seemed to have less knowledge about bringing variation in the sentence formation. This clearly expresses their ignorance about learning English effectively. Their write-ups prove that outside the grammar class, they did not develop any link to acquire L2. By ‘acquiring link’, I

mean reading English journals, listening and watching English movies or documentaries. On the other hand, students who had cut poor marks in the composition part have very less knowledge about grammar and completely have no idea about sentence structure. These students clearly fear to learn English as L2. Students with good grammatical knowledge are less bothered about developing their present position of L2. On the other hand, students with less grammatical knowledge are studying L2 for the sake of passing the exam at this level. Strong influence of L1, less favourable environment and lack of practice- all together is hampering the learners of English as L2.

4. Opinion and Recommendation:

As an intern and class room observer I felt that the English syllabus designed for the students of class XI .i.e. first-year College is quite monotonous. The syllabus has been designed by National Curriculum Text book Board, for the second language learners have failed to create a field of interest among them. As a result students are following the syllabus just as a part of their course material and ultimately are not learning the required second language skills. The book “English for Today” contains topics from various fields which are not interesting compatible with the age of the students. Moreover, these students are studying rest of their allocated subjects written in L1. This in turn is not helping them to create interest in studying English as a course even. Out of twelve papers, only two papers are allocated for English .i.e. English Composition and English grammar, termed as English first paper and English second paper respectively. Furthermore, the subject is only practiced in class room, instructed by the teachers and participated by the students. This attitude has created boredom. The students are not getting the chance of any practical implementation of their learning in L2. Lack of outdoor activities have developed a mind set in the students that learning English (L2) at this level is not so important. Rather they feel, studying rest other subjects will be more beneficial. This in turn is creating a barrier in learning and acquiring English as a L2. Monotonous syllabus and English as a single structured subject out of twelve papers are all together making students feel less interest in learning English as L2.

Some teachers also believe that students are getting well to go for marks in English exams by giving less effort, which is again a reason behind giving less importance about studying English. While conducting classes as a teacher, I realized that in certain areas I should have more careful. Like in one class I felt that if I made them speak in the class rather than reading the text book

line by line could have done better. So I applied it in another class and the response was really good. I should not always make the students sit and listen to my lecture. I realized that for the students of L2, it was better to drive them to be participative in the class. As the class size was so large, it became tough for me to ensure whether all the students are taking part or not. So I should have asked them to work individually on the specific topics and choose randomly for give me the answer.

Another way to drive the students, to make them practice English language, can be the outdoor activities. By assigning them work in group and let them to explore to gather knowledge about the topic and also to mark them as if it's a competition, will boost up their desire to learn more and prove them the best.

If the course can be designed in a proper manner, the students will take English as a serious subject and can learn more. To design a language curriculum some points need to be kept in mind. These are: use of technology and the internet, context and situation-specific learning, assessment linked to task-performance, development of skills needed to access authentic materials, development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills etc.

To fight back the fear and ignorance about learning English (L2), both the teachers and the students have to be careful, should have the tendency to learn more and need to open up to achieve the goal.

During my internship I have pin-pointed a few things that can work to make this second language or foreign subject more practiced by all:

- 1) Instead of starting teaching directly, teacher can drive the students in some warm up activities. This technique will act as an 'ice breaker' and provides the students the notion of upcoming class activity.
- 2) To make the class interactive and interesting, it is essential to think alike with the crowd.
- 3) The classes should not be restricted to lecture by the teachers. Visual effects can be added like short videos, power point slides, q-cards etc. to make the class more meaningful.
- 4) Positive attitude and motivating the students is appreciable.
- 5) To make the class lively, inductive approach is the best way because the learners get the chance to brain storm. They get the opportunity to generate ideas and thus discover the language by them.
- 6) Use humor constructively.
- 7) Relate the lecture text with outside knowledge; it makes the class reader friendly.
- 8) To provide same attention to all the students from the last row up to the front row, via eye contact.
- 9) To let the students speak about the background knowledge of the source text and ask relevant questions.
- 10) For L2 learners, it is fruitful to use the L1 at certain time.
- 11) Giving bonus marks, star grade, acknowledgement of good work and feedback for mistakes, decreases the level of fear of learning L2 among the students.
- 12) A teacher must be prepared with the lecture that he or she is going to deliver in the class.

- 13) Encouraging students to use L2 outside the class room by assigning them outdoor activities.
- 14) Students should feel free to talk to the teachers for that show up as a supporter and helper to the students.
- 15) Providing students with extra text book of literature as reading materials and not to assign those books for examination. This is to develop their reading habit.

These principals should be practiced by the teachers for fighting back the fear and ignorance about learning English (L2). If the teachers can keep these hints in mind and apply properly in real life then L2 learners can overcome the fear about learning English and the ignorant behaviour will decrease too.

5. Conclusion:

Learning English language (L2) is now a basic need. In the boundary of national curriculum of Bangladesh, it seems to be hard to create a perfect environment for practicing the second language and to overcome the fear and ignorance about learning English (L2). But it is not impossible. Motivation, proper guidance and learner's interest etc. can mitigate the level of fear and ignorance about learning English language. An ideal teacher can create a nice environment for the students to learn more. An organized and systematic education system, as per international standard can help the students and encourage them to change their view of acquiring English language without obstacles. From the beginners' level, teachers should be caring about the facts of student's short coming regarding learning second language. The class room environment should bear the essence of diversity; teachers should follow various techniques to make the class reader-friendly so that students get interest in learning English language. The government should take necessary steps regarding the design of English syllabus, exam pattern and teaching techniques. The teachers should be provided with proper training so that they can help the young generation in learning English language as a second language. Also calculative techniques should be applied on students of L2 learners so that they can overcome the fear and be serious to refine their gained knowledge about English language. That co-operative behaviour of the students can change the environment of learning around them. The teachers and the students together can make the class of English language interesting and bring out the best output. It is better to enjoy the leaning of L2 rather than taking it leisurely.

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