

Major English Students' Perceptions on English Language Learning at University Level

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Abstract

English occupies an outstanding position both in academic and non-academic sectors of Nepal. Therefore, it is taught both as a compulsory and major subject from the basic to advanced level in the Nepalese academic institutions. Although an enormous number of students study English as a global lingua-franca, not any formal researches have been conducted from Nepal to explore their attitudes towards the English language learning, so far. Thus, this study explores the attitudes of the students studying bachelor first year in Prithvi Narayan campus, Pokhara. To address this objective, this study has adopted the phenomenological design under the qualitative research approach. The required information was collected from six students studying major English under the faculty of education, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. The randomly selected informants were interviewed and three classes were observed to obtain authentic information. The data were processed, analyzed, interpreted and presented in three distinct themes as reasons for studying the English language, instructional procedure and course contents and classroom environment and learning aids. The results explicated that the major English students in the faculty of education have positive attitudes and intense motivation to English language learning. They are satisfied with the English teachers' instructional approaches and classroom procedures. Yet, they recommend bringing improvements in syllabus designing, content arrangements, classroom environment and individualized instruction in the classroom.

Key-words: attitudes, English, language classroom environment, learning, instructional activities

Introduction

English has long been assuming a dominant scope in business, education, science, technology, international relations and popular culture across the world. It is widely asserted that gaining expected level of fluency in the English language is a key to lead a successful life. Therefore, the teaching

and learning of English has been attaining a global status in every walk of life (Crystal, 2009). The current scenario of English indicates that more than 50 percent of the world population will be using English language worldwide by 2050 (Johnson, 2009). The powerful nations in the world have already gained significant achievements by integrating English language into science and technology besides education, politics and economics. Supporting this thought, Durbin and Kellogg (2012) explicate that the scientists from around the world can delve into the vast disciplinary literature and explorations through the English language. There is hardly any field of interest which does not keep either an implicit or an explicit concern with the knowledge of English language.

There is no doubt that English has proved to be a universal lingua franca. Therefore, it is taught and learnt both formally and informally. Millions of schools and colleges across the world seem to be offering several academic programmes on this subject. Nevertheless, the range of success obtained in a foreign language programme, the English language in particular, is conditionally affected by several implicit and explicit factors. Among them, the students' attitude towards learning the language is one of the most basic and affective factors in predicting their future achievement level. Admitting this as a pivotal aspect, Hall (2009) argues that the language teachers and other designates concerned with the programmes, need to consider the students' attitudes and motivation range while orchestrating the English language programmes. If the students, by some reasons, happen to groom negative attitudes towards the programme, it obviously impedes their learning (Ellis, 1994). Even so, the students' negative attitudes and deviations could be inhibited and positivity fostered if proper measures are adopted for this end (Lennartsson, 2008). The favourably induced positive attitudes towards a programme ingrained in the initial stage do ensure better performance and higher achievements in the future. Paying due regards to the value of learners' psyche, Kramsch (2006) states that language learners are not only the communicators and instruction bearers but also the whole persons with individually distinct body, mind and soul. This spectrum to perceive an individual validates the argument that, beyond other factors, the attitudes inherent in the learners play an enormously vital role for theologically successful end.

It is a widely accepted fact that the level of motivation towards a goal is directly proportional to the prospects of future success. Assenting to this stream of thought, Lennartsson (2008) claims that will power and motivation are more prominent factors than any others belonging to social dimensions. The learners require having a positive attitude to gain remarkable success in any academic programme. Keeping regards to the significance of attitudinal motivation, Saville-Troike (2006) states that higher the motivation in students, the more successful they could be in learning a new language. Likewise, stressing upon the role of motivation, Reece and Walker (1997) argue that a student with mediocre capacity can achieve a greater success than the more capable ones who are not well motivated or have kept negative attitude to the academic programmes. In case of a formal programme, the students' attitude to their teachers, classmates, classroom environment, course contents and prospective gains play the most important roles in their learning endeavours.

Shedding light on the notion of attitude, Ellis (1994) states that attitude is the students' composite psychological state constructed jointly by combining varied factors like the target language culture their own culture, classroom environment, instructional procedures, teachers' behaviours, course contents, supportive learning aids and the tenets of syllabus. If all such factors contribute

to create a favourable environment, in general, the students engender positive attitudes to learning ultimately leading them to a spectacular future success.

Review of Literature

A range of diverse opinions have been set forth by different scholars on the issue of learners' attitudes towards learning. Shams (2008) states that attitude is a set of beliefs a person develops on some subject or context which guides him while taking decision about something. Likewise, Munir (2015) defines that attitude refers to a psychological tendency which is reflected in the assessment of a particular subject or phenomenon either positively or negatively. As the range of motivation determines the shape of someone's attitude, the rate of success in language learning is directly proportional to the intensity of motivation. Positive attitudes to the target language are a must for successful language learning (Yu & Watkins, 2010). Clarifying the interrelationship between motivation and attitude, Gardner (1985) defines attitude as a major component of motivation. Motivation, on a higher premise, incorporates the learners' efforts and desires ingrained for the long term goal of learning language ; in turn, providing an impetus to groom positive attitudes keeping a symmetric view, Gardner, Oroujiou and Vahedi (2011) claim that possessing positive attitude is a fundamental prerequisite to effective language learning. Conversely, shaky motivation accompanied by negative attitude is bound to hinder the efficient learning process.

Attitude, being a prominent phenomenon in teaching and learning, has been anatomized detailly through different perspectives by relating it to the matter of interest. Regarding the internal structure of attitude, Baker (1992) presents a three- component model of analysis as:

Cognitive Affective Readiness for Actions

Attitude

(Adapted from Baker, 1992, p.13)

Firstly, the cognitive component refers to the knowledge or belief that individuals pertain to the subject or entity. The knowledge, beliefs and experiences interacting together contribute as a constituent in the body of attitude. Secondly, the affective dimension as a component is broadly concerned with the emotive responses incited into a person in reaction to a subject or entity. It is the assessment driven response depicted towards the issue or context either positive or negative. Finally, the third component specified above keeps a huge concern with the practical implementation. The knowledge gained and beliefs sprouted within a person shape particular lines of action to bring into practical execution. Thus, it can be justified that the cognitive, affective and behavioural factors, by and large, are equally responsible constituents for the construction of attitude, a psychological body of perceptual concepts.

Numerous empirical studies have been carried out to investigate students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language. Regarding this, Shams (2008) conducted a research to explore students' attitudes, anxieties and motivation to learning the English language. His findings underscored that the students were highly enthusiastic for learning English. They had positive attitudes since they

mentioned that English had multitudes of significance in every field of their interest. Likewise, Idrus and Falita (2017) conducted a research entitled 'EFL Students' Attitudes and Perceptions toward English Language Learning'. Altogether 12 students from Assadah Islamic Boarding School, Bantan, West Java were interviewed and observed for information collection. The findings revealed that the higher the positive attitudes to language learning, the more successful they become in learning a foreign language. Moreover, Jannati, Maryam and AminMarzban (2015) conducted a research to explore Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards the learning environment at the academic institutions and its influence on the learners' English language proficiency. It involved 100 students for sample population in the survey. The results exposed that there was a remarkable interrelationship between the learners' perception on the learning environment and their proficiency level in the English language. If the various components existing in the learning environment are favourable as per their expectations, it proves to be instrumental for a more efficient learning. Furthermore, Ara (2009) conducted a study to unravel the influence of attitudes over Kashmiri students' English language proficiency. He concluded that positive attitudes of the students taken towards various language learning components, (teacher, textbooks, classroom environment, support services) its nativespeakers and their culture resulted in more intense motivation towards learning the English language with higher precision and proficiency.

The theoretical and empirical literature reviewed here stress that attitudes and motivation of the students bear a paramount significance for their effective learning. The level of motivation and tenets of attitude directly shape their psycho-motor efforts to a specific goal. Therefore, domestic environment, their perception to peers, viewsformed on the classroom context and institutional environment have been validated as playing pivotal role in second and foreign language learning. Therefore, this article aims at finding out bachelor's level students' attitude towards English language learning by collecting data from Prithivi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal.

Methodology

This research has been conducted within the framework of phenomenological research design which is based on interpretivist's paradigm (Leavy, 2017). It is an objective procedure for collecting information, analyzing them and investigating the Phenomena concealed within. Compared with other designs, this is the most widely adopted research design especially in the field of humanities and social sciences. In this stance, investigating students' attitudes on the programme that they are pursuing; learning English as a second language, is considered essential.

The study has been based on both the primary and secondary sources of information. The student-respondents were the primary source of information while various books, journal articles, past research reports and website materials concerned with the title were used as the secondary source of information.

As a phenomenological study carried out under the qualitative paradigm, the researcher used unstructured interviews and non-participant class observation (six interviews & three class observations) as the data collection tools. Therefore, the researcher did not use any observation schedules and interview protocols. For maintaining variedness and objectivity in the research, the researcher collected primary information from the six students studying major English at Bachelor of Education, first year, in Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara. To carry out direct observation of the phenomenon in question, the researcher, as a non-participant observer, observed the participants'

activities without any prior information to the students. Therefore, not any observation schedules and interview protocols were utilized for information collection.

All the information collected from the interviews and class observations were processed and analyzed stepwise in the later stage. Then, the researcher developed appropriate thematic topics categorically. The researcher has maintained maximum accuracy and scientificity while incorporating the collected ideas. The ideas and information processed thus were analyzed and interpreted in the discussion section. The research has fully complied with the principles of research ethics by controlling all forms of plagiarism through proper citation, quoting, paraphrasing and summarizing the ideas allotting due credit in each part of writing. Further, the researcher has done coding, categorizing, analysis and interpretation by using symbolic names for the informing students as SA, SB, SC.... to substitute their real names to be abided by the ethical norms of the research.

Results

It is a commonly accepted fact that the extent of proficiency in second language learning is determined by several underlying factors. One of the first and foremost factors exerting direct influence upon is the learners' attitude towards the language (Dashti & Aldashti, 2015). When the students exhibit their maturity to perceive the second language, its overall culture and the native speakers positively; they can prove to be more successful in learning the language efficiently. Beside their domestic contexts, parental cooperation, classroom environment, teacher's behaviours, classroom procedural patterns and views towards and relations with the peer groups are equally responsible for effective learning. The prime objective of this study is to explore whether the students studying at Bachelor level first year with English as major in Prithvi Narayan campus under the faculty of education have possessed ample range of positive attitudes towards the componential factors for learning the English language. Moreover, the researcher intended to investigate the newly admitted university students' initial perceptions to the campus environment and classroom dynamics compared with the schools that they got ahead through after completing the secondary level education. Therefore, this study attempts to discover the nature of students' attitudes (both favourable & unfavourable) towards English language and the immediate components for its smooth learning.

Reasons for Studying English as the Major Subject

Second language learners could have a range of varied goals and objectives behind choosing particular language to study at schools and universities. Regarding their choice of English as their major subject of study, the participating students expressed distinct arguments and opinions based on diverse interests and alignments. Concerned about this, one of the informants (SB) stated:

Although I am not so good in English, I chose this language as the major subject of study on my own reasoning. I think that English is a very useful foreign language in the Nepalese context. The knowledge of English seems a fundamental prerequisite to prepare own self for the prospective careers both in the domestic and international job market. If someone has a good command over this language, they do not need to remain jobless anywhere. My father is an English teacher and always inspires me to do the best in this subject by dreaming for the golden future.

Similar to this explication, another student (SA) said, "I decided to choose this subject hoping that it would pave my way for foreign employment. If the knowledge of communicative English

is good, one can easily sell own self out in the international employment market". Likewise, other students (SC,SD, &SF) expressed their views that they liked the English language and studied it to become good English teachers. But, abit different from the rest, one of the students (SE) stated that she studied English to learn about the external world through art, literature and culture that are enormously publicized in the English language.

Instructional Procedures and Course Contents

The researcher attempted to delve into the students' perceptions on the teachers' instructional procedures and the nature of the course contents that they are adopting currently. Regarding the concern raised about the teachers' instructional procedures, one of the students (SB) mentioned:

The teachers teaching English in our class are kind, supportive and frank. They present the subject matter with full concentration and dedication. Yet, the aspect of comprehension rests on the part of the students as well. I fully pay attention to the teachers and white board by keeping distracting factors to minimum level. I think I would be able to do the best in major English.

In the same stream of arguments, other informants, on the whole, didn't exhibit any remarkable reservation on the teachers' approach of instructional activities. Responding to this concern, another student (SD) mentioned, "The teachers are good. I understand their classes very well. Sometimes, I confront phonological errors due to not having individualized instruction". But, slightly different from the rest, one of the students (SF) put forth:

Compared with the school level teachers, I found the teachers here adopting somewhat different approaches of presentation. The classes seem mostly teacher dominated. I want t h e teachers to ask me some individualized questions and facilitate on personal problems. Students feel it better and become attentive if the teachers could keep eye contact to all the students and involve them in group works and pair works as learning activities.

Concerning the nature of course contents incorporated in major English, the students expressed varied opinions. Many of the students reported that there is much disparity between the courses that they got through at secondary level and the ones that they are currently pursuing. When asked about the perception on the nature of the courses, one of the participants (SF) said:

The course contents and the prescribed textbooks are good. I like the 'Reading and Writing' course more than ' Foundations of Language and Linguistics". As the students of English language, we need to study and be familiar with the native culture and practices of the English people. The nature of language used in the reading texts is fairly comprehensible. Yet, the linguistics paper is rather more difficult perhaps by having technical contents unlike our previously studied subject matters.

All the other informants expressed their views almost around the thrust of these foregoing quotes. They did not express totally negative attitudes on the nature of course contents.

The researcher unobtrusively assessed the students' responses keeping the proposed research into focus. He found most of the students happy, cheerful and sharing during the informal conversations. When the teacher indirectly intended to know their feedback, many of the students responded as having been satisfied with the classroom presentations. They also informed that the subject matters in the syllabus were varied and interesting. However, some of the students seemed to be frowning for the classroom noises (side talks among students, shiny board, irregularity of teachers,

huge classrooms, etc.). They reported that novice teachers' classes are noisier than that of the senior ones.

Classroom Environment and Learning Aids

The researcher aimed at investigating the students' classroom environment and the availability of other support materials for learning English. Regarding this, different informants expressed diversified opinions and arguments. As they were asked about their classroom environment, SB explained:

The classroom environment, perhaps by reason of having nearly 80 students in my class, is rather noisy. Despite the teachers' attempt to maintain silence in the class, the students make noises; though in low chattering voices. However, I do not pay attention to side talks, and noises and try to connect mind to the teacher and text.

In the same way, one of the students (SC) illustrated that she finds the English classes interesting. It is not difficult to understand the taught contents if listened to attentively. Some friends, especially on the back benches, create noise by side talks and eye chattering. Some friends express their dissatisfaction with the poor classroom management and lack of discipline among the students. The number of students in the class is very high, which is a problematic factor.

Likewise, in response to the concern raised about learning aids, SE expressed that she finds the classes impressive. Beside the textbooks, she frequently surfs different websites on the computer and involves in self study on different aspects of the English language which are related with the course contents. Another student (SB) reported that there are ample support materials on the internet and physical library. Every topic that they study in the classroom can be searched and studied in the Google and Wikipedia.

She further said that inquisitive students do not have to face the scarcity of supportive learning aids. Similarly, another student (SF) stated that she often listens to English programmes on TV and also reads English newspapers in the library. Her plan is going abroad by securing a good score in the IELTS test.

The researcher, as a non-participant observer, identified several distracting factors against the conducive environment for learning. He found the classes crowded, noisy and suffocating. It was challenging to produce voice loud enough to ensure everyone hearing the teachers' voice. Nor was it really practicable to adopt individualized instruction in the class. The only approach feasible in the classroom context was proceeding through the teacher centered lecture method throughout the presentations.

Discussion

This research was carried out to answer the main research question that is delving into the students' attitudes towards the English language at first and then its instructional activities that are taking place at Bachelor level under the faculty of education, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. The information was collected from six students pursuing these courses as the newly admitted university students. As an English teacher teaching them, the researcher got incited to explore their reflections on the programmes launched formally by the university.

Having collected the required data, the researcher analyzed them by considering all the basic parameters of a qualitative research. After analysis, it was explored that the informants expressed

their distinct views regarding the English language education and its procuring environment. They underscored that the English language learning has emerged as an obligatory phenomenon in the Nepalese context. They explicated that the knowledge of English is an essential gateway to enter the enormous national and international avenues of the lofty prospects.

Regarding the concern raised to investigate the rationale behind choosing English as the major subject of study, the results cited that almost all the students decided to study English by assessing its premier significance in the national and international market on the foundation of their sound proficiency in the English language. A few others, without any reservation, stated that they intend to go for abroad study by making their English language qualitatively robust to compete in the international arenas. The gravity of their motivation to learning the English language seemed remarkably high. They confidently argued for becoming a competent human resource through labour and dedication to English language learning. None of the students seemed shaky and dubious on their goal.

Concerned with the issue of teachers' instructional procedures and nature of the course contents, the informants came up with fairly varied attitudes. Basically, they were positive to the teachers' activities and class presentations. Yet, they did not forget to mention the condition that the learners themselves need to be inwardly driven to achieve the previously set goals i.e. being successful in mastering the English language and obtaining the academic degrees. Similarly, their response to the course contents and subject matter was found at some mediocre point of the continuum between excellent and satisfactory. Two of them mentioned that the course contents are interesting just similar to the ones that they got through the school level. On the other hand, some others said that the course contents of 'Foundations of Language and Linguistics' are new in nature. Possibly it was due to not having been introduced to similar courses in their prior studies. It implicates that the students feel easier to catch up such contents which are congruous with their former studies. And, abrupt introduction of a heavier course can inhibit their range of motivation.

Likewise, the study explicated that the overall classroom environment is not so favourable. Most of the informants pinpointed the troubles caused by different forms of classroom noises. The class consisting about 80 students is unquestionably crowded, noisy and suffocating. Furthermore, they indicated that; compared with the senior teachers, the novice teachers' classes are noisy and compromising. Yet, they did not report the classroom environment as being intolerable. The researchers' observation of the classes also validates that the major English classes are rather complex to handle due to greater number of students kept in the same class. Three of the informants even requested for running the classes in the morning shift (the B.Ed. classes were run only in the day shift at the campus) for doing some job and occupational trainings at the day time.

As with the concern of learning aids, the students did not cite any problem, perhaps by not being well familiar with the requirement of learning aids and other support materials in the initial stage of joining the campus. Only two of the students mentioned about using Google sites, language focused videos, listening to English news on the radio and television, reading English newspapers, watching English films. The researcher, after taking interview and observing three classes, realized that the language teachers need to make the students aware about additional teaching aids (both physical and virtual) that are essential for authentic language learning.

Conclusion and Implications

This phenomenological study was conducted to explore the novice students' attitudes towards English language learning under Bachelor of Education first year, in Prithvi Narayan campus, Pokhara. The results depict that the English language learning and teaching programme, on the whole, seems satisfactory from the students' perspectives. Despite having some pitfalls in the classroom management, content selection and organization, in general, the students studying major English in B.Ed. first year have positive attitude and noteworthy motivation to learning. They express the reflection that their classes are rather crowded and noisy. They also point to the asymmetry between the courses studied at school level and the one that they are following at campus. However, they did not express any point sheer negative towards the course contents. They report that the teachers' approaches and activities in teaching are satisfying; except a lack of group work, pair work, and individualized instruction.

The study explicated that the students have some reservations in the overall teaching-learning environment of the campus. As suggestive concerns, they want the interesting subject matters symmetrical to those which they studied at school level. They also expect individualized instruction and interactive environment in the class. They wish to study in a peaceful environment by not keeping more than 40 students in the classroom. Though they bear higher motivation and positive attitude to learning the English language, willing to have the best learning environment further, they set forth invaluable suggestions to incur reforms in the policy, practice and management related issues as hinted above.

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