

LOW ACHIEVERS AT ELEMENTARY STAGES OF EFL LEARNING: THE PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE WAY-OUTS

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ABSTRACT

In the domain of second language learning the target language learners are a challenging reality. In every learning situation, the teachers encounter multiple types of learners who, on the basis of their receptivity, creativity, and I.Q. possess capability to assimilate learning experiences at varying degrees. But the most crucial and experimental segment is the low-achievers who face difficulty to gather and master both the receptive and the productive skills in terms of second language acquisition. This low achieving criterion may spring from numerous factors; some of them are internal, and others are extrinsic in nature. The present paper happens to explore the multi-faceted nature of the problems of low-achievement and also tends to prescribe some strategic dimensions to get rid of those problems.

Key Words: Elementary Learners, English as a foreign language (EFL), Low Achievers, Target Language Learning,

INTRODUCTION

Low achievement is a challenging phenomenon in every domain of learning but the scenario happens to be more conspicuous in the context of language learning. Usually we ascribe the term 'low achievers' to a group of learners who fail to exhibit expected capability in attaining specific grades in traditional evaluation mechanism. This, in turn, tends to leave exclusive focus on the role of intelligence in relative achievement of the learners. But examined psychologically, the factors contributing to the low achievement of the learners are multi-dimensional in nature. Whatever might be that, low in educational domain is the possible outcome of the psychological reality of 'individual difference', which postulates that learners enter the learning backdrop with varied genetic constitution. This implies that their distinctive capabilities spring from their unique physical and mental make-up. Naturally the learners gifted with intelligence perform better, whereas, the boys having low intelligence can't expose proficiency to a requisite degree. Again there are mentally retarded children whose population is not more than 5% at primary level, lag significantly behind their peer learners. Children who suffer from malnutrition or anaemia form a section of the low achievers in learning situations. In addition, disease and disorders of the nervous system cast a crucial impact on the learners' cognitive domain resulting in

their incompetence and unsatisfactory performance in the learning situation. A physiological problem originating from hormone malfunctions may give birth to behavioural disorders like depression, sadness, inferiority complex, anxiety, strain, etc. which individually or cumulatively stands in the way of expected performance of the learners. Social reasons like unsettled family disputes, divorce, apathy towards the academic achievement of the child, big family, wretched economic condition, parents' over ambition for the children etc. act in a way other for the dismal academic performance of the learners.

Multiple Reasons of Low Achievements

Let us now move our direction from the areas of inherent causes related to the physiological and psychological anomalies resulting in the learners' poor achievement, to the extrinsic factors and agencies where the learners' language acquisition level cannot gear up due to multi-faceted reasons. Multiple reasons have conducted experimentally to expose the fact that apart from the children's socio-economic circumstances that explain to some extent pupil's individual performance criteria, school as an agency do make a distinctive difference to outcomes. In traditional school set-up, the problem children instead of getting treated experimentally happen to be a matter of concern. Thus they take the problem children out of the immediate classroom situation into socially isolated individualized 'skill drill' lessons to dispel their areas of learning difficulty. But what happens is contrary to expected outcome. Once they get segregated from the charged and simulated classroom situation, both their productive and receptive skills instead of getting consolidated becomes narrowed and incoherent. They feel that they lack the general potentiality and learning capability like their peer learners and a feeling of inferiority complex emotionally stands in the way of language acquisition. Ultimately the problem children get branded as 'low achievers' in the domain of target language teaching due to the teachers' lack of acute experimental strategies.

Problems of Low achievers in English learning

Since English is skill subject, the mastery of it demands consistency and rigorous efforts not only on the part of elemental learners but also on the prospective and practising teachers who has to be inquisitive about the problem areas that thwart the little learners to be motivated to learn and interact. Teachers have to think that sometimes surface language problems may be symptomatic of deep rooted difficulties. The most obvious problem of the low achievers in English at the elemental phases of learners lies in their inability in managing the task of communicating both in terms of speaking and writing. Power of communication is the resultant effect of 'Communicative Competence', a term used by Dell Hymes to underlie the intrinsic potentiality of sentence formation. 'Communicative Competence' is the innate ability to abstract the rules of grammar and syntax that govern the matrix of language. The low-achieving students, in fact, do not feel the communicative pressure that will imbibe them to express themselves at multiple social and contextual fields. Again, dearth of requisite awareness regarding punctuation marks sometimes poses a problem for the low achievers in English. As the low achievers at the elemental level of EFL learning are not provided with extensive exposure of written materials, they habitually fail to apply the signs of punctuation even when they feel the urge to communicate through written or oral form. Thus the orderly thought development is not made transparent in the dense presentation of information. Since development of receptive skills is not nurtured to a requisite degree, they do not develop the intuitive sense of organisational structures that build up the matrix of writing. More to say, the productive skills in the form of writing is not duly generated among the learners since they are not given the chance to write or rewrite for the day to day world. Naturally they cannot construct connections between ideas and punctuations. Here again isolated punctuation drills may not be a remedy. Rather they are to be provided interesting study materials so that they can linger over books by themselves, get acquainted with specific rules and patterns of punctuation by individual efforts. They are to be encouraged to write something in their own way so that they can apply those abstract symbols in a conscious manner in relation to the logical sequence of thought process.

Lack of sufficient exposure of the target language in the EFL classroom situations results in a way or other in creating apathy of the target language learners towards English learning. Initially they enter the backdrop of learning with the repulsive strain that generates in their minds due to their ingrained fear about English language itself. Sometimes in the rural backdrop the learners in the overcrowded are not exposed with requisite scope to converse with or express themselves among their peer learners even in the medium of

mother tongue. Naturally, finding themselves in stimulated EFL learning situations where they will be called up to communicate is a distant and far-fetched dream. Thus they happen to be earmarked as the low-achievers in as far as their productive skills (speaking and writing) develop below the level of expectancy.

One further problem of the low-achievers in the domain of second language learning is the marked difficulty experienced by them to pronounce an English word accurately. Sometimes they make isolate individual efforts to pronounce and spell out a word in line with the pronunciation pattern governing their mother tongue words. Consequently in most of the cases they are drawn to a misleading direction. This happens as because most of the teachers teaching target language at elementary level are not properly trained with the English phonetics. Naturally they get almost ignorant of the idiosyncratic phonetic symbols of English. The pupils are thus the worst suffers and fail to achieve the desired degree receptive skill in the mode of reading English consistently.

Two critical concepts that are oftentimes talked about with regard to language acquisition and language learning are the concepts of 'mistakes' and 'error'. But the problems arise when the teachers due to their prejudiced notions on these concepts oftentimes treats the language deviant behaviour in the identical manner. Judged from the perspectives of ELT, whereas, 'mistakes' occur due to lack of attention or consciousness regarding a regarding a typical structural pattern, 'error' occurs due to dearth of knowledge in a particular language domain. Thus mistakes occur infrequently and unsystematically but error occurs systematically and consistently. Mistakes oftentimes do not necessarily project the learners' gradual acquisition of language but errors categorically underlie the strategies that the learners gradually adopt to tackle and master the language. Thus the elementary second language learners mostly and naturally commit these sorts of language deviant behaviour. Problem of the learners happen to be a problem with the EFL teachers who either get emaciated through the unscientific and strenuous process of unending correction or repeatedly snub the little learners without having the necessary degree of patience to treat those errors experimentally to have an insight into the unconscious process of language learning. The resulted effect is that the learners urge of self expression in the mode of speaking or writing cannot develop in an uninterrupted and spontaneous manner. Furthermore if the learners' errors are over criticized, they suffer continually from inferiority complex with the effect that the mentally withdraw from the whole instructional process. Sometimes it happens that both the reading portion and the exercise domain incorporate such learning materials that hardly smack of real phenomena. This detachment from the real scenario of the educative process is in a way or other fails to motivate the target language learners to get associated with learning process.

Now let us probe into some social factors that oftentimes get instrumental in creating setback in the second language acquisition process among the so-called low achievers in English. Children from minority communities often struggle with a typical sort of broad underlying language problem. They may not possess any specialized kind of communication on which literary instruction is based. Consequently the whole instructional system may appear to be confusing to them with the effect that they constantly react or withdraw from the standardized process of target language teaching. It may also happen that they are ignorant of the basic assumptions regarding the nature of the fundamental nature of the language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing and thus they cannot share the learning experience equally to that degree which majority of children share. Again this should not be taken for granted that low achievers in English hardly exist in the so-called higher societal backdrop. The children from the well-to-do families have the ample scope to afford the learning materials in the sophisticated and state-of-the-art institutions. But sometimes their productive skills cannot develop to that expected level simply because their language skills development takes place in the artificial and stimulated classroom situations. They do not afford to have the requisite degree of exposure of the target language at home. More to say, in some communities, children are not exposed to converse with adults. They are at free to converse with their peers but they have to face severe restrictions with regard to any enquiry from the adults. They passively listen to adult talk, but they have little experience in managing a conversation with adults. This avoidance on the part of the adults to nurture the communicative skills is done in an unconscious manner. This lack of freedom to express themselves in household situations acts as a stumbling block to the proper growth of communicative competence.

The Way Outs

Thus viewed from multiple perspectives the problem of the low- achievers in the target language situation is multi-dimensional in form. To search for remedy or possible way-outs is a tremendous concern for those associated in the instructional process of target language acquisition. To dispel the disappointing scenario of low achieving learners calls for the formulation of feasible strategies by the ELT experts experimenting in the instructional process at the elementary and upper primary level.

Motivation as a Driving Force

Motivation is one of the most vital determinants of educative process. According to, Frieze (1981), people's belief about the causes of their success and failure influence their motivation for learning. In this regard we can also take into account Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs. It prescribes the teachers how to motivate a learner to get associated in the environment. Since most of the low achievers are victim to a sense of inferiority and to some extent insecurity due to their inability to be active participants in the learning process. Their prime need is love and a sense of proximity. Teachers teaching the target language must feel that the repulsive strain of learning a second language can be dispelled from the low achievers' mind only if their self esteem need is satisfied prior to satisfying their intellectual and linguistic needs. The institution has to strive to cast an air of social acceptability that ensures that pupils' needs are valued. Instead of underestimating the low achievers the teachers have to modify their behaviour pattern so that it guarantees deeper level of interaction with the with the problem children in the domain of language acquisition. Graham (1991) experimentally proved that the low achievers attribute their failure to their lack of ability when teachers express pity or hollowed praise. In addition, this sense of inability may also spring in the low achievers when teachers proceed to help them even when they don't ask for any.

Integrative Motivation is thus the stimulating factor to uplift the low achievers in the level of skill development of target language. Falk (1978) thinks that the students who are most successful when learning a target language are those who like the people that speak the language, admire the culture and have a desire to become familiar with or even integrate into the society in which the language is used. This type of motivation is known as Integrative Motivation. Similar view is supported by Crookes and Schmidt (1991) who opined that motivation itself can be identified as the learners' orientation with regard to their goal of learning a language.

Encouraging Participation in Group Interaction

The teacher should follow the basic assumption that being a part of the action is basic to learning appropriate behaviour. Thus he should tolerate the deviant behaviour of the low achievers and allow them to exercise their acumen to learn to participate confidently. The teacher should keep in mind that a certain degree of deviant behaviour is essentially the experimental strategy that the learners adopt to learn. They should have freedom to construct their hypotheses and to communicate their idiosyncratic conception based on those ideas. He should not exercise the dictum of criticism and correction of the pupils' errant behaviour since his attitude will be basically teacher-centric then. Cazen (1979) prescribes a strategy to provide supportive help to children who cannot participate in classroom activities. She suggests that the teachers in this regard should try to engage withdrawn children by constantly speaking as if the children knew how to behave and respond. If the teachers did not get an expected response, they should interpret a look, a gesture as if it were at least an attempted response and answer it as such. In such a manner the low achievers are actually receiving practice in appropriate instructional interactions. They are not treated in isolation nor are they placed in a remedial group which in a way create a sense of humiliation among them. What the teachers strive to achieve is a sort of behavioural modification technique called shaping to gradually and consistently move the problem children in the direction of competence.

Gillam Mcnamee (1979) provides an idea of the kind of stimulation that teachers can provide for children who are obstructed at immature level of language learning. She thinks that 'retelling' can be used to help children learn to follow, anticipate and create story structure. Though a story becomes familiar a child hesitates to

narrate it before an adult. The difficulty they feel is in sustaining any extended connected discourse. It is observed that the children have the tendency to name the objects, person or events rather than weaving connection among those events or objects. Thus, what the teacher needs in the situation, is to provide supportive framework so that they can utilise their cognitive ability to coherently describe those events in a sequential manner. This will not only stimulate their creative faculty but also nurture their proficiency to communicative competence.

The pupils who fall behind in reading skill can be provided with compelling reading experiences and this is termed as “assisted reading”. This can be done in three strategic ways.

1. **An adult reader reading with the child** – Sometimes it is seen that some low achievers due to their slow pace of reading fails to gain the impact of the story. In this case the ‘assisted reading’ where an adult or a peer reads with the child acts as a therapy. Here the text is to be split up with conversational or manageable part. This technique is helpful for material which is slightly above the learners’ instructional reading level.
2. Providing **freedom to the learners to select items already familiar** -This goes with the psychological principle of learning English from familiarity to unfamiliarity. This helps the learners anticipate the special vocabulary and specific structures.
3. **Use of audio materials to consolidate their reading practice** –The proper utilisation of audio aid stimulates the slow readers to grasp the expected rate of reading. This can be done by drill and practice of selected reading materials.

Selection and gradation of vocabulary and structure

Proper selection and gradation of structures is a pedagogical principle to facilitate the process of the low achievers. The following principles are to be followed to enable them to grasp the learning experiences.

1. **Simplicity**: The vocabulary is structures which are simple are to be selected first to enable the learners to master. For example, in Indian context ‘fire’ is to be taught first, then ‘ice’.
2. **Teachability** : This structures which are easy from the standpoint of teaching are to be given priority. For example, present continuous structures denoting concrete actions are easy to teach than present indefinite structures.
3. **Productivity** : The structures which can produce large number of sentences are to be selected. For example, ‘Ram gave the book to me’ (subj+verb+direct obj+prep+indirect obj) can produce larger number of sentences than ‘Ram gave me the book’ (subj+verb+indirect obj+direct obj).

CONCLUSION

So, taken a comprehensive viewpoint, the possible way outs of the low achievers in English are essentially strategic in nature. The fundamental assumption is that the low achieving pupils are to be reminded of their inherent potentialities to change and grow. The problem children learn the same way that more proficient learners do- that is, they learn new language ability when they are in situation that require it. But they encounter numerous problems in learning situations due to their inherent lack of proficiency and acquired ability. Naturally they suffer from strain and anxiety which again stand in the way of their subsequent learning progress. So to get over this trauma they need supportive help from their teachers, peers and adults which will boost their tenacity to get associated in the learning situations. The spurt should originate also in the target language teachers who have to be technically strategic, experimentally rigorous and psychologically tolerant so as to render utmost effort to dispel this stigma of low achievement from the learning domain.

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