



## Hindrances to English Language Acquisition: Student Perception

Sylvia James D'mello

English Language Department, Scientific College of Design, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

### ABSTRACT

*The field of second language acquisition has historically blamed language learning failure on a number of factors. This study investigates these factors by acknowledging students' perception in their endeavor in the English language learning progression at Scientific College of Design, Sultanate of Oman. It evaluated a questionnaire in which one hundred three students who had enrolled in the General Foundation Program were involved. Data collected revealed motivation, environment and individual aptitude as some of the factors that play an important role in hindering the learning process. The questionnaire also examined what the mainstream teachers need to know about the English language learners. It will help teachers to understand the hindrances that are negatively affecting their student's language learning experience, so that they can choose content, vocabulary, and tasks that are appropriate to learners' language-learning needs.*

**KEYWORDS:** Foreign Language, learning difficulties, Students' perception, Learning Strategies

### 1. Introduction

Foreign Language learning is often a difficult task for students. In recent years, some researchers have proposed the existence of an explicit "foreign language learning disability," which prohibits some students from being able to be successful. However, Sparks refutes the existence of a separate foreign language learning disability. His research has shown that all types of learners can be successful in language classes, given the right stimuli and assessments. "The focus of native and foreign language educators and researchers should be on developing effective methods for teaching FLs to low-achieving students." (Sparks 2006). Firstly, like Sparks; I assume that all students can learn other languages though anyone could experience learning problems in Foreign Language classes. Secondly, I assume that they should learn English language in order to be fully functional in our global society and also help them to efficiently complete their further studies in this college. This research was initiated to examine the patterns of English language use among our GFP students, their learning strategies and perception of their language abilities. The findings of this study would be of value for instructors to understand their learners' needs so that they can design courses that can more effectively meet the requirements of their students

### 2. Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study was to refine our current understanding if our English Language pedagogies help or hinder students in their endeavor towards English Language Proficiency. Moreover, we wanted to know why some students are unsuccessful in English Language classes and what teachers can do to help them. Finally and most importantly, we hoped to find specific strategies to ensure success to improve content retention and ability, increase motivation, lower anxiety, and improve study skills.

### 3. Research Question

**The researcher seeks to answer the following research question:**

Why are some students unsuccessful in learning English Language in the General Foundation Program (GFP)?

### 4. Background

As the medium of instruction in Omani schools is Arabic, the students do not have a strong English background. To promote students English language acquisition, the Higher Education Council issued a ministerial decision stating that the General Foundation Program should be adopted by all public and private higher education institutions operating in the Sultanate of Oman. The students undertake the General Foundation Program so as to assist them in their further studies namely; their postsecondary and higher education studies.

Scientific College of Design is a college providing curriculum in the field of art and design which leads to a Diploma or Bachelor of Science in Graphic Design, Interior Design or Fine arts. Before the students can embark on their journey towards their major, they are supposed to complete the foundation program if their English proficiency is below the required level. The students are placed in the GFP after going

through the placement test and are introduced to the four language skills: Reading, Writing, Grammar, Listening in addition to CALL, computer and math. The program is limited to one academic year distributed along two semesters – Fall and Spring. Though most of the students had significantly improved their language skills after a semester in the GFP, a need was felt to research the reasons that were hindering the students from performing to their fullest.

### 5. Methodology

The participants were students from 6 sections of the General Foundation Program studying English Language at Scientific College of Art and Design in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman. The first language of all the students is Arabic and their ages range from 19 - 21.

### 6. Data Collection and Procedure

The students' responses from the questionnaires, which were collected by the experimenter, myself, were grouped, classified and analyzed in relation to the points under investigation. Percentages and frequency counts were provided; sometimes the respondents supplied more than one answer, so the total count of the answers/scores, not the total number of students, was taken into consideration when calculating percentages.

The data are presented, and discussed in relation to the following major points:

- English Language Usage
- Students' Perception of their English Language Ability
- The Students' Learning Strategies

### 7. Data Analysis and Recommendations

English Language Usage: In this section of the questionnaire, the participants had to respond to 6 questions about the frequency of English language use in their daily and college activities. The study found that students had a very limited use of the language inside and outside the classroom. Teachers should encourage students to communicate as much as possible in English language because language flourishes best in a language-rich environment. Teachers should encourage students to practice English as much as possible and provide reinforcement by expanding on their vocabulary repertoire and by speaking coherently. It is important to interact in English with others in the classroom as much as possible. This is especially important as literacy activities outside the classroom are rare. Use of English movies, songs, story retelling and documentaries are an added advantage. Office hours can be utilized beneficially for communicating in English. Instructors should promote a conducive learning environment to promote use of the language frequently. These findings agree with Rausch who found that students should be motivated to utilize and apply the language they are learning. "Ask students to summarize or paraphrase in English language; encourage them to ask for clarification; and work to negotiate meaning based on prior knowledge" Rausch (2000).

Technology, especially the emergence of the Internet, is affecting every aspect of education and changing the way we teach and learn. However, students are not aware of the role of the internet in language

learning. Paulsen focuses on its importance by stating that "It is no longer a question of whether to take advantage of these electronic technologies in foreign language instruction, but of how to harness them and guide our students in their use" Paulsen (2001) Instructors should provide students with English-learning websites and to communicate through college e-mails using only English. Homework and assignment should be web based making use of the numerous language learning websites. This will wean students from dependability towards language autonomy.

**Students' Perception of their English Language Ability:** In this section of the questionnaire, the learners had to respond to 2 questions about their perception of their English language proficiency. Students have absolutely no knowledge about the integrated-skill approach of the English language. They should be made aware through workshops, presentations or talks about the integration of English language skills. Furthermore, they should be aware that English is not just an object of academic interest nor merely a key to passing an examination; instead, English becomes a real means of interaction among people. Teachers need to approach organizational strategies too. They should help students analyze language rules and apply real language. 'When presenting content, they should compare and contrast, transfer and translate, and combine and recombine. They should integrate mind mapping, categorizing, note taking, and graphic organizers. Assignments outside the classroom should include repeating and reviewing, practicing patterns, employing computerized language programs, and seeking real language opportunities.' Felder (1995)

**The Learners' Strategies used:** To obtain a clear idea of students' learning Strategies in terms of the skills to be acquired, they were asked to answer 4 questions. Students don't have the information about the application of learning strategies. They need to be introduced to direct strategies which involve cognitive strategies for identification, retention, storage, or retrieval of words and phrases. On the other hand, they also need to learn how to use indirect strategies to help them manage their learning. These include activities as: needs assessment, activities planning and monitoring, and outcome evaluation. The teacher should provide a wide range of learning strategies and Hodge gives us a per-

fect picture of it 'Teachers need to help students manage their own English Language learning. They should ask students to self-reflect on their learning environments (i.e. Do I have a quiet place to study? Am I seated where I can be productive?), prepare learning objectives (i.e. What am I trying to learn/make/solve?), and create learning schedules (i.e. When is the test?). They should help students focus their learning before starting (i.e. What is the purpose of this assignment? Do I have all my materials? Where can I find resources?). They should keep motivation high by praising students often and encouraging students to monitor their own progress' Hodge (1998).

The participants cited various sources for their anxiety, such as speaking activities, inability to comprehend, negative classroom experiences, fear of negative evaluation, fear of peer humiliation and the teachers themselves. Teachers who provide a supportive and understanding environment, who employ non threatening teaching methods, and who use appealing and relevant topics seem to enhance the foreign language experience. These findings were congruent with those of Price (1991) who reports that her research clearly showed that "instructors had played a significant role in the amount of anxiety each student had experienced in particular classes" (p. 106).

## 8. Conclusion

The findings of this study appear to corroborate in suggesting that limited English exposure, anxiety, dwindling motivation and incorrect learning strategies are some of the hindrances and these can negatively affect the language learning experience in numerous ways. Therefore, it is suggested that awareness of these factors be heightened and taken seriously by teachers and students alike to make the teaching-learning process highly beneficial to both. To sum up, teachers should be responsive to the learning styles or learning preferences of their students and attempt to use a variety of activities and practices during a class period that may honor all learning preferences. A distinction established by Widdowson (1983, pg44); they should try hard to enhance students' curiosity about the language, foster their interest, and develop their desire to learn the language.

## REFERENCES

- Burton, D. & Bartlett, S. (2005). Practitioner research for teachers. London: Paul Chapman. | Castro, O. (2006). Learning Styles- How Making Too Many "Wrong Mistakes" Is the Right Thing to Do: A Response to Sparks. UK: Foreign Language Annals. | Felder, R. (1995). Learning and Teaching Styles in Foreign and Second Language Education. UK: Foreign Language Annals. | Hodge, M. (1998). Teaching Foreign Language to At-Risk Learners: A Challenge for the New Millennium. Spain: Inquiry. | Joppe, M. (2000). The Research Process. Retrieved June 25, 2009, from <http://www.ryerson.ca/mjoppe/rp.htm> | Paulsen, P. (2001). New Era Trends and Technologies in Foreign Language Learning: An Annotated Bibliography. Retrieved on June 1, 2009 from <http://imej.wfu.edu/articles/2001/1/05/index.asp>. | Price, M. L. (1991). The subjective Experience of foreign language anxiety: Interviews with highly anxious students. In E. K. Horwitz, & D. J. Young (Eds.), Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. | Sparks, R. (2006). Learning Styles – Making too many "wrong mistakes": A response to Castro and Peck. UK: Foreign Language Annals. | Widdowson, H.G. (1983). New starts and different kinds of failure: In Learning to write: First language/second language, New York: Longman.Inc.