



WCES-2010

Language learning stories of university summer school students

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Received October 30, 2009; revised December 8, 2009; accepted January 15, 2010

Abstract

The present explanatory study aims to investigate the views of a group of participants taking English as a common compulsory course in summer school at a state university about English language, language learning and taking this compulsory course. It also aims to discover the reasons for their previous failure in this course. Participants' written stories of language learning and in-depth audio-taped semi-structured interview transcriptions provide two data sources. Although nearly all of the participants held positive views on English language, they complained mostly about their previous language learning experiences and their lack of hard work as the main reasons for failure.

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Keywords: Language learning; views on language learning; failure; stories.

1. Introduction

Although English language does not have the biggest number of native speakers, it has gained the status of a lingua franca (Seidhofer, 2001; Alptekin, 2002) which can be defined as a language widely used for communication between two people with two different first languages (Harmer, 2001). The number of schools offering English language education is high in Turkey and with a major curriculum innovation project supported by the Ministry of National Education (MONE) and the Turkish Higher Education Council (HEC, 1998), some nationwide changes were made in English Language Teaching (ELT) practices to introduce communicative approach into ELT and improve learning English (Kirkgoz, 2005, 2007). This recent curriculum movement including ELT aimed to restructure and standardize several different curricula followed in all subject fields of teacher education into a uniform one as well (Grossman, Onkol, & Sands, 2007; Grossman & Sands, 2008; Seferoğlu, 2004). In spite of the innovative acts, it would not be at odds with the reality that there are still problems attached to ELT and language learning (LL) which refers to learning English as a foreign language in this article.

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2. Conceptual framework

Due to the recent influence stemming from humanistic and communicative theories, there is a greater emphasis on learner-centered teaching. According to this framework, learners' needs and their LL experiences are at the centre of teaching practices and curriculum design. There are several roles that a teacher must possess to be defined as a good teacher who ceases to be the only source of knowledge or the authority in class but a facilitator and a resource assisting students in their LL attempts (Harmer, 1998, 2001). Also, there is a great deal of research relevant to how to promote LL in classrooms. Classroom data from a number of studies pinpoint the fact that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback should be provided in a communicative context (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). That is, teachers, for instance, should be sensitive to errors the majority of learners are making if they are the speakers of the same first language. Similarly, learners should be encouraged to participate in and even design some communicative activities in which they can approach English critically to raise their awareness of English and LL.

In their attempts to define a good language learner, Lightbown and Spada (2006) emphasize the challenge in the relationship between individual differences, social situation and success in LL. In essence, individual characteristics (McDonough, 1986; Williams & Burden, 1997) and sociopolitical and institutional contexts learner is involved (Brown, 2001) are two main issues giving shape to success in LL. In their analysis of individual differences, Lightbown and Spada (2006) refer to some concepts such as aptitude, intelligence, learning styles, personality and motivation. On the other hand, in terms of the impact of social context, identity and ethnic group affiliation, learner beliefs and age of acquisition are discussed as influential factors. Social dynamics and power relationship between languages come into play while learning a second language. Although it is nearly impossible to capture the exact effects of societal factors on LL, teachers and researchers still need to have a sharp sensitivity toward the role social dynamics and power relationships play in language teaching and/or learning to avoid possible problems.

In spite of all the previous literature and the innovative acts and reforms that seek to improve ELT and LL in Turkey, problems are still observed both on part of teachers and learners. Although there is vast literature on problems in ELT and LL, research with data collected to describe problems in local contexts is scarce. In one of the few surveys, Enginarlar (2003) lists the main problems which English language teachers working at various schools are observed to suffer from as follows: (1) They have never had a native speaker teacher, (2) They have never been abroad, (3) They do not use English outside the class as they feel limited or no need, (4) They have never watched a film without subtitles, (5) They do not possess a habit of reading international journals or newspapers and (6) They frequently use their L1 as a teaching tool. In a descriptive study, Paker (2006) investigates the problems that English teachers working in a small region verbalize in a questionnaire to find out that the lack of qualified teachers, teaching materials at schools and motivation of students seem to form the main reasons of problems in ELT and LL. Similarly, in another descriptive study, Çakıcı (2007) investigates the attitudes of 427 freshmen studying at several departments of a state university in Turkey towards English within the scope of common compulsory courses by using an attitude scale to see whether the participants' attitudes indicate a significant difference with regard to sex, department and the type of high school they studied before. The findings indicate that half of the participants hold a negative attitude towards English as a common compulsory course. Also, the attitudes of the participants differ significantly according to their departments and the type of high schools they graduated from but not according to gender. While the freshmen enrolled in Turkish language department hold a highly positive attitude towards English, the attitudes of the Vocational Training department are mostly unfavorable. In terms of the high school type, Anatolian high school graduates exhibit a negative attitude. The graduates of state high schools however indicate the most favorable attitude to English as a common compulsory course. Thus, the main suggestion made is that the content of this compulsory course must be designed according to the needs of the students and departmental expectations.

3. The study and the methods

The present explanatory study aims to investigate the views of a group of summer school students taking English as a common compulsory course at a state university about English language and LL. It also aims to shed light on the reasons for their previous failure in this course that are embedded in their stances. In higher education, first-year university students are supposed to attend an English language course as a common compulsory course unless they are exempted from it. Some students failing this course suffer a lot because of repeated failure and some of these

students take it in summer school to get rid of the so called “trouble” of their academic lives. Therefore, research is needed to analyze the stances of students taking English as a common compulsory course to capture their views about English language and LL and their reasons for failure.

This study has a qualitative design as the data were obtained through two sources: (1) participants’ written stories of LL and (2) in-depth audio-taped semi-structured interviews. The convenience sampling method (Gall et al, 1996) was used and I was the instructor of a group of students taking English as a common compulsory course at summer school in the 2008-2009 academic year. 55 participants, who were students of faculty of education, volunteered to share their language learning stories and 10 of them volunteered to be interviewed for a deeper understanding of their views and reasons for failure included in their stories. In their language learning stories, they were asked to describe their previous English courses, their teachers, their teaching styles and everything that came to their minds related to language issues. In the in-depth interview, my questions were as follows: (1) What do you think of English?, (2) What do you think of English as a common compulsory course? and (3) Why do you think you have failed this course? These questions were scaffolded with why and how questions to capture all the details as much as possible. Both stories and transcriptions of interviews were back-translated into English and analyzed through qualitative theme-based analysis. Emerging themes were categorized and discussed with some excerpts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2004). Half of the emerging categories were crosschecked by a colleague and there were no major disagreements. Also, participants were referred to with pseudonyms in order to hide their identities.

4. Findings and Discussion

The themes emerged in personal stories and interview transcriptions were discussed under two headings as follows: (1) views on LL and (2) reasons for failure.

4.1. Views on language learning

The participants’ views on English, LL and taking English as a common compulsory course were all gathered together to discuss their stances toward these language issues. Nearly all the participants were observed to hold positive views on English language:

Although I failed this course three times, I am well aware of the reason why we are taking it. It is because everybody needs to know some English to communicate with foreigners. (Sema)

I think knowing English is necessary to everybody because without English for instance it is hard to use a computer. (Hale)

English is commonly used by people today. There are some TV commercials in English and I feel very happy when I understand some of them. (Sabri)

I never liked English courses because I never had a real English teacher until I started college. (T: Were you successful in this course before college?) Yes, I always passed this course but I learnt nothing. We sometimes played football or did painting in English classes. At college I saw that my classmates were a lot better than me in English so I was frustrated and demotivated to study. Although I do not have a problem with English language, English course at college became a real problem. (Harun)

However these positive attitudes were observed to diminish when they reflected on their LL experiences.

In the fourth and fifth grade, I was very fond of English because our English teacher was great and liked by all students. But at the middle school English course turned into a trouble because the subject of the teacher was French and he knew no English and forced us to memorize reading passages in our textbook. I got a very low grade and naturally started to hate this course. (Ali)

I like English very much but I am a terrible language learner because I am bad at memorizing. (T: Do you think this is how people learn a language?) No, of course not but since I don’t have enough time I try to memorize words the day before the exam. (Lale)

Since I started English as a common compulsory course in the first year with no previous knowledge of English, I could not motivate myself to study. (T: What do you mean?) I did not know how to study. I felt like an underdog

when I compared myself to my classmates. I wish I could travel in time. Now in this summer school I am doing a lot better and I can see my mistakes in my previous way of thinking. (Harun)

A few of the participants believed that they did not need language courses at university as their majors did not have anything to do with a foreign language. These participants believed that their time would be better used if they focused on department courses.

In fact I like English very much but I don't like studying it as a course. Then I need to memorize things and it is hard especially because teachers expect to see correct fixed phrases in exams. But in normal life I can speak with foreigners in summer, they understand me and I understand what they say most of the time. (Sema)

I think learning a language needs real motivation and interest and they are things I do not possess. That's why I think the motivated and interested students should take this course and not all students should be forced to take it as a compulsory course. (Ali)

4.2. Reasons for failure

Besides their views on English, LL, and taking English as a common compulsory course, I felt a need to go deep into the details of the reasons the participants gave for their LL problems. Although nearly all of the participants held positive views on English language, they complained about their previous LL experiences as they saw them as the main reason for their failure.

English language has always been the most difficult course for me all my life. I have had no English classes at elementary or middle school as there were no English teachers at my school back then. I started learning English at high school and I was bad at that. I even attended a private course for a couple of months to pass the class but that was all. At college, I was very upset when I heard that there was an English course. I failed it three times so I am taking it in the summer school because I want to graduate on time. (Sabri)

I am not good at English that's why I always fail. (T: Why do you think so?) This is a kind of learned helplessness because the more you fail the worse you feel. I have never been successful in that. Now English looks very difficult to me. (Nuray)

The English teacher I had at middle and high school were not motivated teachers. (T: What do you mean?) They did not try hard to teach it. But here at college I think we have better teachers who care whether students are improving their English or not. (Harun)

Besides their previous LL experiences, some of the students put the blame on themselves stating that they did not put necessary effort into LL. Also, the reason for not having studied hard was stated to stem from their unfavorable attitude to this course.

This is the fourth time I am taking this course and the reason for my failure is myself. I never studied hard or as hard as I studied the other courses. But this time I am doing much better because I have learnt that I need to study and revise things at home as well and that I need to start doing these long before exam time. (Lale)

In spite of all the failures I had in that course in the past, I could have studied harder. I never put a lot of effort into it. Instead of keeping thinking that I would never be successful, I should have started taking it seriously long ago. (Sabri)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As exemplified in the excerpts above, the stories of the participants are full of disappointments, which leads to repeated failure in English language course. This in turn affects their motivation and self-efficacy beliefs in learning a language, which are the backbones of being a good learner (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). This thus means a robust responsibility on the shoulders of elementary and secondary education English language teachers who need to design better language learning atmospheres to be called good teachers (Harmer, 1998, 2001) instead of forcing learners to memorize long texts or imposing stereotypical behaviour on them. In terms of college level English, it is hard to disagree with some participants who state that English as a common compulsory course should be changed into an elective one to cater for the needs of the interested/motivated students. Another solution to offer that is in line with a previous study (Çakıcı, 2007) would be the redesign of this compulsory course according to departmental expectations. Hence language teachers may work together with the department teachers in collaboration to create syllabuses for the English needs of the departments.

One limitation of the study was that personal stories were used as a data source. First-person accounts of LL have been received with suspicion as they are criticized of being incomplete, unreliable or naïve (Bailey, 1991; Fry, 1988). However, very few researchers are overtly critical of their social effects. Besides, in the present study, 10 of the personal stories were scrutinized by probing into details with in-depth audio-taped semi-structured interviews. Therefore, it can be suggested that strengthening personal stories with some other qualitative data collection sources would bring more clarity and reliability to observe several dimensions of problems encountered in LL.

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