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EXPLORING LEARNER BELIEFS, ATTITUDE AND MOTIVATION TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Although many educational institutions have started the blended learning system (integration of face-to-face and online mode of teaching and learning) all over the country, the language learning system in Sri Lanka has been predominantly following the traditional classroom, including Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) for decades. However, the unexpected outbreak of the deadly disease called COVID -19 has changed the language learning system across the country. It has almost forced the educators towards the paradigm shift from the face-to-face classroom to the online mode. The technological innovations primarily assist in enhancing the spread of knowledge through e-learning, even during the pandemic condition. However, in the language teaching-learning context, it seems to be a challenge to some extent. The objective of this study is to profoundly examine to what extent the learners acquire the practice of ESL virtual learning, the facts that influence their beliefs regarding the online learning process, and the effectiveness of e-learning regarding their beliefs, attitude, and motivation level in language learning in the virtual classroom. This study also attempts to shed light on the challenges associated with online teaching-learning practices. The research scenario of this study is the learners who are following the course unit 'Business Communication' in the Faculty of Business Studies of the Vavuniya Campus. The focus of this course unit is on the theoretical aspects of business communication along with the four language skills; speaking, writing, reading and listening. This study is based on the qualitative methodology, while the interviews play the key tool for collecting data from the study group. The data were collected unbiasedly regarding ethnicity, religion, gender, and the target group's socio-economic status. From the data analysis, this study formulates

that the learners' beliefs, attitudes, and motivation showed less focus on virtual language learning than the traditional mode of language pedagogy.

Keywords: virtual classroom, traditional classroom, language learning and paradigm shift, outbreak

INTRODUCTION

The processes of learning a second language are contrasting to learning a first language. Because learning a first language seems to be a natural process in which a language is unconsciously acquired by the learner while many factors such as learners' belief about the target language, their attitudes and range of motivation influence learning a second language conscious process of learning. Like in Sri Lanka, English is widely learned as a second language in many Asian countries.

It also has certain domains in socio-cultural facts among Sri Lankans. It constructs several perceptions and beliefs among the learners and teachers regarding English language learning as a second language in Sri Lanka. In particular, ESL learners in Sri Lanka have different attitudes towards the ESL learning processes. Along with learner beliefs and attitudes, other factors such as the opportunities for learning English, cognitive variables, age, family background, and social-economic factors play an essential part in ESL learning in Sri Lanka.

Presently, a new era emerged in language learning that has revolutionised language learning and has given virtual learning. It significantly leads to the paradigm shift from traditional language learning to virtual language learning. Due to Covid – 19, the education system is totally transformed to the online mode mainly in the tertiary level education. However, the virtual mode of teaching-learning, especially language teaching-learning,

comprises several challenges. Technical teaching strategies and assessment methods are needed to cope with the challenges encountered in virtual language teaching. Thus, this study examines the learners' beliefs, motivation and attitude towards virtual language learning and to what extent it gives platform to practice language skills effectively at the tertiary level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focuses on several kinds of literature that deal with learner beliefs, their attitude and motivation about language learning and the impact of virtual mode in language teaching-learning. Therefore, incorporating ideas are presented primarily from the learners' point of view.

Learner Beliefs

Though some researchers claim that beliefs, in terms of language learning, are part of metacognitive knowledge, the clear-cut definition was not given in the previous studies. For example, Abdi and Asadi (2015) suggest that Elaine Horwitz, one of the pioneer researchers of the studies on beliefs about language learning, did not give a meaningful definition of beliefs about language learning. Instead, she uses a few terms to refer to "beliefs", such as preconceptions in 1985, preconceived ideas in 1987, and preconceived notions in 1988.

This study contemplates Riflin's perception of learner beliefs about language learning "Learner beliefs about foreign language learning is at least as diverse as the languages, levels, and institutions in which the learners are studying and that teachers and researchers cannot assume that

beliefs identified in one group of learners are representative of the beliefs of learners of different languages, at different levels, or different kinds of institutions.” (Riflin, 2000). He indicates that the learner beliefs about a particular language learning can be generalised to all the languages learned as a second or foreign language. Gabillon (2005) indicates that learner beliefs can be viewed from cognitive psychology, social psychology and socio-cultural milieu. In this sense, it is believed that learner beliefs are shaped by the influence of external factors, social transactions and the knowledge acquired from the environment. He further supports this conception by Vygotsky’s constructivist model that emphasises that several artefacts (social tools) play an important role in learner belief – formation.

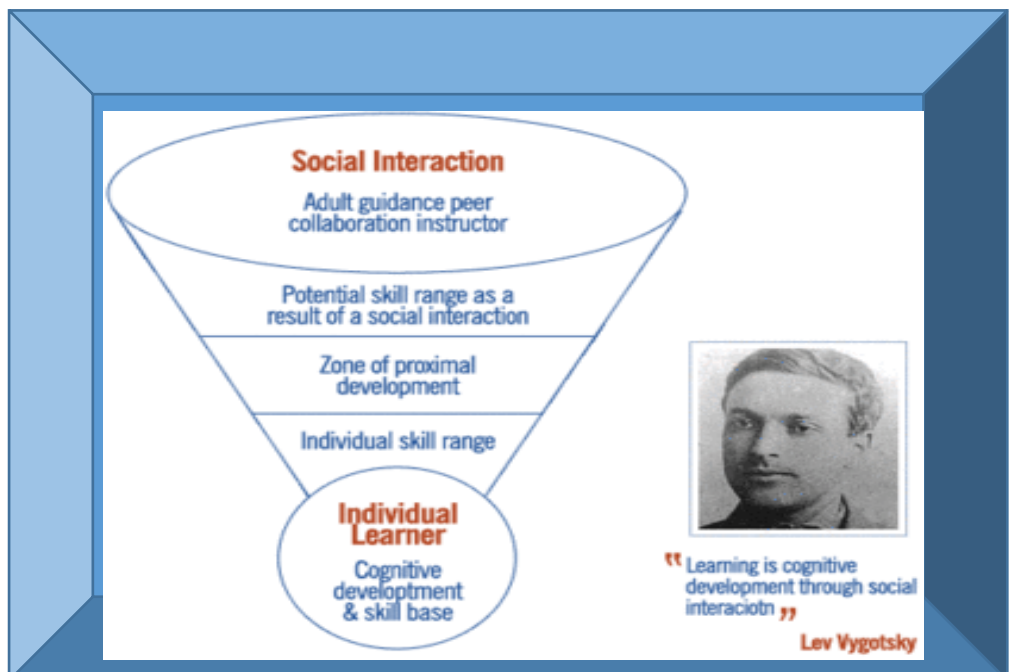


Figure 1. Vygotsky’s Constructivist Model

Further, Gabillon (2005) distinguishes different aspects of learner beliefs as follows:

Metacognitive knowledge

It refers to the individual's beliefs or knowledge (cognitions) about (his or other's) processes (Flavell, 1979).

Mental and social factors

The parameters of culture and society influence learners' beliefs about languages and learning (Gremmo, 1993).

Self – beliefs

It refers to self-worth belief, self-concept belief and self-efficacy beliefs. Self-worth represents the opinion the individual has about himself/herself; self-concept belief refers to the self- descriptive judgement, including evaluation of competence and the feeling of self-worth and self- efficacy reflects personal beliefs about one's capabilities to perform a task (Pajares & Schunk, 2002)

Control- beliefs

It refers to the beliefs about the factors that promote or affect performance (Ajzen, 2002).

Attributions

Weiner (1986) defines those attributions as the individual beliefs about outcomes' internal and external factors.

Horwitz (1988) asserts that the gaps between teacher and learner beliefs cause ‘negative outcomes’ for learners. She further describes that these gaps reduce learner confidence to involve in language learning. She also proclaims that “Teachers will likely encounter ... many unanticipated beliefs, some enabling and some truly detrimental to successful language learning. . . foreign language teachers can ill afford to ignore those beliefs if they expect their students to be open to particular teaching methods and to receive the maximum benefit from them” (Abdi & Asadi, 2015).

The facts analysed from the above literature show that learner beliefs play a crucial role in language learning. The language learners possess certain beliefs about language learning and the beliefs are shaped by various internal and external factors. Additionally, although their beliefs can be generalised to any language learning process, there are idiosyncratic beliefs.

Attitudes

Another fact that this study aims to explore is learners’ attitude towards language learning. Before analysing the role of learners’ attitude towards language learning, it is worth noting what attitude refers to in terms of language learning. Accordingly, Wesely (2012) implies that learners display different attitudes according to their preconceptions in various circumstances. She further contemplates that learner attitude can be seen in terms of two different targets: attitudes toward learning. Attitudes can be referred to as a set of beliefs and they can play a crucial part in language learning.

Motivation

As Gardner (2005), attests motivation can be a way of understanding learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, and it offers “one parsimonious way of accounting for individual differences in second language acquisition”. Gardner (1985) defines the term motivation in the context of second language learning as “referring to the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because they desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity.” Crookes and Schmidt (1991), remark the two types of motivation: Integrative Motivation and Instrumental Motivation. Integrative motivation represents the language learners’ admiration of the target language community, their culture and their desire to integrate. Finegan (1999) defines "integrative motivation typically underlies the successful acquisition of a wide range of registers and a native-like pronunciation". In contrast, Hudson (2000) refers to instrumental motivation as the desire to obtain something practical or concrete from studying a second language. In a nutshell, from all the facts and literature, it is crystal clear that learner beliefs, attitudes, and motivation play a pivotal role in the language learning context and seem to be an equilateral triangle that bounds the learning process.

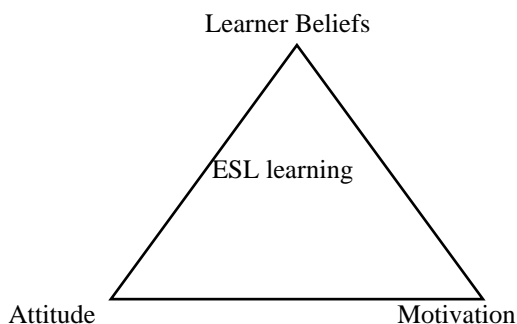


Figure 2: Language learning triangle

Moreover, they bring positive and negative influences on language learning outcomes; if the learner possesses positive beliefs, attitude, and a good range of opportunities to learn a language s/he will receive promising outcomes and exposure in a target language and vice versa.

Virtual Mode and Language Teaching- Learning

The recent study examined the Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by EFL Learners (Mahyoob, 2020). This study analysed the challenges and obstacles English language learners (EFL) encountered in Science and Arts College, Alula, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia, during switching to online learning in the second semester of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The contribution of this study is to assess the learners' new experiences in online education and assess the feasibility of the virtual methods of learning. This study found that technical, academic, and communication challenges are the main problems that influence and impact online EFL learning during COVID-19. Further, this study showed that most EFL learners are not satisfied with continuing online learning, as they could not fulfill the expected progress in language learning performance.

Another study investigates the impact of distance learning on English language teaching during COVID-19 (Kamal *et al.*, 2021). This study examined the changes in the training process and cognitive abilities and academic performance during the coronavirus pandemic. This study compared the samples of classroom and distance English learning before and after the COVID-19. The study results showed that compared to distance learning during the pandemic, the marks obtained in classroom teaching are higher than the distance mode. Further, the researcher had

interviews to find the possible factors influencing the effectiveness of the virtual teaching modes and the results showed that these factors are an increase in the amount of leisure time, ability to take breaks more often, more comfortable learning environment, no need to spend time on the road to the university.

Further similar studies examined online learning problems during the covid-19 pandemic in EFL classrooms and the solution and challenges and opportunities. According to these studies, the virtual mode of English Language Teaching-learning has some significance and challenges. First, however, this study explores the learner's beliefs, perception and motivation about English Language Teaching in the virtual classroom.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the qualitative methodology and the data were collected through interviews. The study population is the second-year students who follow the Business Communication course in the Faculty of Business Studies in the Vavuniya Campus. Their UTEL bench mark can be fit into band number 04. They are mixed gendered, multi-cultural and multi lingual. Most of the students belong to lower-middle-class families. The total number of this study population is twenty out of sixty students. The interviews were conducted individually by the researcher. The interview questions are based on learners' beliefs, attitudes and motivation towards language learning in the virtual classroom as follows:

- Tell about your beliefs regarding language learning in the virtual classroom in terms of pros and cons.
- To what extent the opportunities for input and interaction for

language learning occurs in the virtual classroom?

- To what extent you are motivated in the virtual classroom compare to the traditional classroom?
- To what extent your parents motivate e-learning?
- What is your attitude towards the virtual mode of language learning?
- To what extent do the learners acquire language skills and understand the theoretical aspects of Business Communication in the virtual mode?

The majority of the responses for each question are considered the findings of this study. The learner perception of practising language skills and understanding the theoretical aspects in the virtual mode are categorised as poor, to some extent and fair.

DATA ANALYSIS

According to the survey based on the interviews, the data were analysed based on the number of positive responses from twenty participants. The criteria for the data analysing are as follows:

Table 1: Criteria for positive responses

Range of Positive Responses	Criteria
15 - 20	High
10 - 15	Fair
05 - 10	Moderate

0 - 05	Low
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The learners’ beliefs, motivation, interaction and attitude towards the language learning in through virtual mode are compared with traditional classroom and they are given below:

Table 2: Pros and Cons of virtual learning

Pros	Cons
No travelling cost	Necessity of smartphone/ personal laptops or computers. This may be an obstacle for low economic students to carry out e-learning.
Save time	The physical absence of the lecturer
Able to access and attend wherever and whenever	No face-to-face interaction among the students
Able to get video/audio recordings of lectures. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It facilitates learning through watching/listening those recordings again and again 	Unable to access language laboratory. So that unable to carry out CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) session.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to pause them to take notes 	
Able to access/ read materials and learning resources at anytime and anywhere	High level motivation is needed
Able to participate webinars	Feel shy or hesitate to talk
<p>Studying in a homely environment motivates them to study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having good food • Moral support from their family members 	<p>Limitation of using electronic devices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only one smart phone in a family • Charging the devices
<p>Effectively use technological tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whiteboard • LMS (Learning Management System) • Audio & video recordings 	Lack of Internet and electricity facilities
	Network/coverage problems. So that, have to find a suitable location to attend the lectures
	Unable to get regular attendance
	Doing online tests is a challenge

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening assignments • Written assignments
	Low interest
	Nature hindrance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thunder • Lightening • Raining • Cyclones • Flood

Table 3: Pros and Cons of conventional learning

	Pros	Cons
1.	The physical presence of the lecturer gives a great impact on language learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body language • Expressions • Able to disclose comprehensible input 	Travelling cost
2.	Able to have peer discussions	Consume time
3.	Able to get support from the social interaction	Limited timeframe

4.	Able to monitor individual responses directly	
5.	Able to give effective feedback	

According to the data, the level of motivation, interaction opportunities and attitude in online language learning is ascertained as follows:

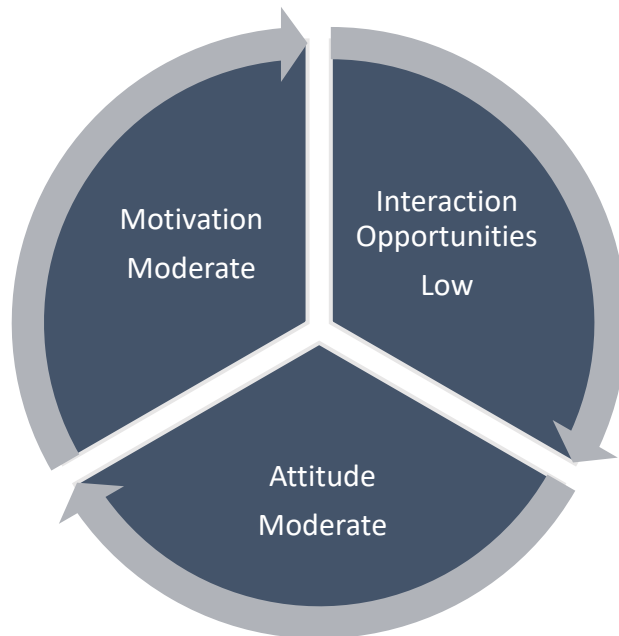


Figure 3: the level of motivation, interaction opportunities and attitude

Further, to what extent the learners acquire the practice of language skills and understanding the theoretical aspects of Business Communication in the virtual mode is shown as follows:

Table 4: The range of language skills and theoretical aspects

ESL practice	Low (0-05)	Moderate (05-10)	Fair (10-15)	High (15-20)
Grammar				
Listening				
Reading				
Writing				
Speaking				
Theory				

According to these findings, the participants disclosed more negative thoughts or beliefs rather than positive thoughts regarding virtual language learning. At the same time, they believe the traditional classroom is more effective than the online mode of language learning. Therefore, learners' desire for online learning is very low. Further, it can be said that they exposed a negative attitude towards online language learning while they expressed a positive attitude towards the conventional classroom practices. Moreover, they exhibited a moderate motivation towards the online language learning mode, whereas they revealed that they are highly motivated in the traditional language classroom.

Further, the opportunities for interaction in language learning is very low. However, according to the learners' point of view of online language learning, they showed less anxiety and low interest in ESL e-learning. Moreover, acquiring theoretical knowledge in virtual mode seems satisfactory, whereas practising language skills, such as writing and listening online, seems difficult and they need teaching-learning strategies. Overall, findings show that practising language skills in online language learning is at a moderate level. None of these is marked by High or Fair while the learners disclosed their satisfaction in acquiring theoretical aspects of Business Communication in the virtual mode.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this study divulges that almost all the students expressed their utmost willingness to learn English in the virtual mode. The new trend of language learning also has a psycho-economic impact among the students. They stated that the physical presence of the lecturer has a great impact in language learning which is not possible in the virtual platform. Because especially in language teaching-learning, the educators' body language and facial expressions play a major role in delivering comprehensible input to the learners. Additionally, language teaching in the twenty-first century is practising a communicative language teaching approach mainly based on interactions and communications with educators and peers. Language learning can be enhanced through various interactions such as group discussion, brainstorming activities, peer activities, and group work that are also limited in the online learning mode. The absence of interaction would reduce their anxiety or motivation to learn English. In terms of motivation, sometimes, the learners' family

background and economic status reduced their level of enthusiasm in learning English via virtual mode.

This study recommends some suggestions to overcome the barriers of online language learning as follows:

- Effectively use the technological application tools
eg., White board, video screen sharing, polls and breakout rooms in Zoom
- Engage the learners in various individual barnstorming activities
- Practice reinforcement, mainly, positive reinforcement
- Introducing and practising flipped classroom
- Encourage Corporative Language Learning
- Facilitate the students to practice self-monitoring, self-evaluation and self- motivation
- Use technological innovations to support language learning
- Practice more especially the listening and writing activities through various strategies.

Even though there are drawbacks in learning English in the virtual classroom, it seems to be the sole platform in which teaching-learning occurs, at least to some extent. It seems to be much better than zero learning practices in deadly pandemic circumstances. Transition and continuation of online language teaching – learning has been the only option during the current global pandemic and fills the gap of emptiness.

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