Mapping Perceptions to Practices: Learning English as a Second Language Inside and Outside the Classroom

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ABSTRACT The paper reports the findings of a study conducted to find how the students at the tertiary level in Indian settings perceive their language learning habits and practice them inside and outside the classroom. A descriptive survey design was used for the study in which 92 students participated and responded to questionnaires with Likert-type questions. Random sampling method was used to select the sample out of the larger student population. The data analysis was done through percentages and central score median method. The results show that almost all the respondents have positive or favorable perceptions about learning the language English inside and outside the classroom but the implementation of the perceived notions in language learning remained by and large absent in some of the students' practices.

INTRODUCTION

The role of English language remains undisputed in the personal, academic and professional achievement of students in a country like India. With a proliferation of multinational companies offering ample job opportunities and a raising number of students aiming to pursue their higher studies abroad, the position and the functionality of the language in these areas are expansive. With scores of language-teaching methods and language-learning strategies being implemented in the classroom, no teacher can deny the importance of extending language learning outside the classroom. The life-changing revolution brought about by the Internet and its reach among digital natives has also been factors catalyzing the process of blurring learning inside and outside the classroom. Though the awareness level among language-learners at the tertiary level is on the rise, there is also a need to execute a reality check regarding such perceptions. It is one thing to conduct discernment studies but a completely different one to investigate how much of the cognizance is transformed and effected in actual practice that can produce substantial results. This paper is an attempt to study this gap of the difference between perception and practice.

Literature Review

English as a second language is generally understood to be learnt in the classrooms but the level of ability attained in communication is not uniform. To study the reasons, beliefs, behaviors and attitudes of learning the English language in the classroom, various surveys and researches have been carried out. The motivation of the learner and the teacher, the classroom environment and the pedagogical strategies employed are few of the key factors that influence language learning inside the classroom.

Williams (1971) in his study 'Language Learning Outside and Inside the English Classroom' presents the earlier practices of language learning in classrooms where teachers employed various methods ranging from grammar-translation to drilling. Discussing learning outside the classroom, he emphasizes observation and immersion as two strategies for effective language learning.

Hawkey (2004) studied the mismatches between language learners and teacher perceptions of classroom activities that may have implications for language learning and teaching in an article titled, 'Teacher and learner perceptions of language learning activity'. While both sides agreed in general on the virtues of communicative approaches to language teaching, there were

interesting differences in the perceptions of learners and teachers on the prominence of grammar and pair work in their classes.

Krashen and Terrell argue that the purpose of language instruction is to allow the learner to "understand language outside the classroom", so that ultimately he or she can "utilize the real world, as well as the classroom, for progress" (Krashen and Terrell 1983:1). The EFL/ESL student learning English in an English-speaking country is, it is often said, at a great advantage, because he or she is surrounded by an environment saturated with potential language input. Such students "…will have far greater exposure to the language and this should help them, not only in the retention of items previously encountered but also in the acquisition of new items" (Gairns and Redman 1986: 67).

To quote Pegrum exactly from his article, "The outside World as an Extension of the EFL/ESL Classroom" (2000) elaborates how building bridges between the classroom and the outside world, and facilitating students' entry into that world, has many benefits for lower-level students as:

"Whatever language students encounter in the outside world is authentic language. By engaging in real transactions involving relatively limited areas, and with sufficient preparation, students are exposing themselves to input which is largely comprehensible because they themselves are initiating the transactions and have some idea of what kinds of responses to expect. When well prepared, students can gain a lot of fruitful listening practice and vocabulary reinforcement from television shows, films and lectures. Students may also gain practical information, such as how to find their way around, where to purchase certain products or even how much it costs to send letters to their own countries. Students gain a great deal of cultural knowledge and insight. Once initiated into the international Anglophone cyberspace community, whether through surfing, emailing or webpage building, they will be able to participate in it long after having finished their studies, and continue to refresh and develop their language skills in this way. This puts them on track to becoming independent learners, who can make use of the English-speaking environment to learn in their own time (Pegrum 2000).

Objectives of the Study

In English language teaching, the importance of right perceptions of students' knowledge about language learning has been emphasized. However, there are gaping holes caused by lack of empirical insight into the relationship between students' perceptions of such knowledge and their real time practice. The study aims:
- To investigate the perceptions and practices of students in the ESL context with special focus on the gaps between the two parameters.
- To explore the differences of perceptions among students and juxtaposes it with the actual practices the students employ to improve their language proficiency.

Hence, this paper analyzes the data from a group of ninety-two students in the third year of undergraduate degree in an engineering college and presents the findings and interpretation based on a descriptive survey study.

METHODOLOGY

The study was designed as a descriptive investigation of student' perceptions in an engineering college of their activities in the learning process of English at Anna University in Chennai. To this end, an online survey questionnaire was administered to ninety-two randomly selected students. Questionnaires were distributed and collected via Google Forms. Prior to the main study, the questionnaire was validated by seeking suggestions from the students and the senior colleagues. Besides this a pilot survey was conducted with ten students who were not included in the sample and reviewing relevant literature.

The survey instrument used for the respondents consisted of two sections. While the first section of the instrument dealt with the students' background information, the second section was intended for identifying their perceptions on and practices of language-learning (20 items). The questions in the second section were 4-point Likert-style questions. The reliability of the items in the questionnaire was measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which at 0.8254 was within the acceptable limit as per Nunnally (1978). For collection of secondary data books, journals, unpublished research reports, websites and other publications were consulted. The data was

analyzed and described with frequency distributions, percentages and a central score or median. Correlational analyses were conducted to determine relationships between students' practices and their beliefs regarding their perceptions and practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sample Students' Profile

A brief analysis of the demography of the student sample implicates the following. As the students belong to the third year of their engineering degree they are of the age twenty or twenty one. The average age group of the sample is 20.43. Of the total sample, sixty-four are male and the rest, that is, twenty-eight are girls. This shows that the sample is male-dominated. Regarding their immediate plans on completing their degrees, thirty seven students wanted to pursue higher studies, twenty nine were looking forward to placements for employment opportunities, five wanted to be entrepreneurs and twenty one students were indecisive. All students, nearly eighty-eight of them, firmly believed and agreed that proficiency in English was vital for their academic and professional success (Table 1).

Table 1: Profiles of the student

Profiles of the student	No. of students	Percentage
Age (in years)		
20	49	
21	42	
Total	92	100
Mean Age	20.4	
Sex		
Male	64	
Female	28	
Total	92	100
Plans After Completion of		
Under-graduation		
Pursue higher studies	37	
Placements for employment	29	
Entrepreneurial activities	5	
Indecisive	21	
Total	92	100
Importance of English Language		
in Their Profession		
Yes	88	
No	3	
Total	92	100

Source: Field Survey

Perceptions and Practices: Data Analysis and Interpretation

The present study was undertaken to examine what the selected students believed and what they actually did about the 20 behaviors. The study had questions relating to specific areas of the language-learning process-learning language consciously and incidentally, using media and other technology to enhance language learning and peer learning habits. Respondents were asked to respond to the items using a scale from 1 to 4 where 1 was useless, 2 was useless to an extent, 3 was useful and 4 was extremely useful. The learning habits included in the questionnaire covered all the four aspects of the LSRW skills and ICT for language-learning both inside and outside the classroom. The study found that the participants perceived that the language learning habits mentioned in the questionnaire were highly useful and graded them accordingly. However, when it came to actual practice, students fell short miserably. As the questionnaires were administered anonymously, the responses were candid and reflected the students' real time practices (Table 2).

Though the perceptions were highly positive as a considerable number of students, mean percentage of 83.7 have realized that good language-learning habits are foundational, the practice parameter of the same behavior was found to be as low as 33. Examination of correlations between practices and beliefs indicate that few significant relationships exist. The correlational value of 0.58961 shows that in many instances beliefs appeared to be stronger than practices would indicate.

It is obvious from the data interpretation that out of many factors causing the gap between perception and practice, student motivation is a crucial one. Students have to be intrinsically motivated in order to initiate activities promoting language learning by themselves. In an age of information overload and increasing opportunities for interaction at a global level, students should shed their fears of committing grammar errors and participate in discussion forums. Time management also plays a major role in transforming perception to practice. Students pursuing degrees in engineering are mostly preoccupied with the core subjects of mathematics and other sciences that their perceptions come to realization only towards the end of their gradua-

Table 2: Perception and practice in language-learning

S.No.	Student behavior in language-learning	Perception (Agree %)	Practice (Agree %)
1.	Reading a newspaper in English everyday at least for 30 minutes	92.4	44.6
2.	Listening to a TED talk or similar program	78.3	26.1
3.	Speaking to your friend in English	89.1	43.5
4.	Watching an English movie with subtitles	89.1	70.7
5.	Watching an English movie without subtitles	75.0	33.7
6.	Watching a movie in other language with English subtitles	78.3	26.1
7.	Sending SMS or Whatsapping in English	60.9	26.1
8.	Visiting a local library regularly to read books in English	89.1	52.2
9.	Listening to English songs focusing on the lyrics	92.4	45.7
10.	Maintaining a journal to write something	60.9	10.9
11.	Referring to a word in a dictionary	78.3	52.2
12.	Using a word learnt recently in the classroom	92.4	26.1
13.	Participating in a discussion in the classroom	89.1	56.5
14.	Reading articles online	89.1	45.7
15.	Sharing opinion with a friend on a topic	88.0	52.2
16.	Writing a piece of creative writing – a poem or a story	73.9	26.1
17.	Submitting written assignments on time	71.7	46.7
18.	Asking doubts to the teacher concerned	89.1	52.2
19.	Commenting on a Facebook post	60.9	39.1
20.	Enroll and pursue an online course to improve language proficiency	75.0	22.8

Source: Field Survey

tion when they have to face employability. Though grammar and its reinforcement takes place in the classroom, application of it in realistic situations adds strengthening such structures over time.

CONCLUSION

Implications for further study include examining how to help learners implement what they believe can help them learn language effectively in appropriate ways. Further research can also explore the reasons why students practice certain activities in which they do not believe or do not practice activities in which they do believe and what can be done to change the situation. A replication of this study with a larger sample would be of interest in determining whether these tendencies are more widespread.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The very idea that the perception levels are high indicates that adequate awareness has already been created in the minds of the students and they are well informed of the ways in which they can enhance their language skills. When it comes to their perception levels, though they are well aware that reading a newspaper in English everyday at least for 30 minutes will help

them in developing their language skills the practice of it is very low. While 92.4 percent of the respondents are sure that reading newspapers will help them, only 44.6 percent execute it. The huge gap between the two numbers indicates several challenges faced by the students. Accessibility and availability are quite major factors that influence reading newspapers. Listening to a TED talk or similar program with emphasis on listening and speaking is another activity that can help language learners. While 78.3 percent of respondents agreed to the idea, only 26.1 percent actually practiced it. Motivation and interest play key role in accessing such sources and using them. Though every English teacher emphasizes on the importance of speaking with other students and friend in English to which a majority of 89.1 percent of respondents agreed but only 43.5 percent of the participants agreed they actually did speak in English. Watching an English movie with subtitles was felt to be important by 89.1 percent of the respondents but nearly 70.7 percent students practiced it. The entertainment factor overrules the learning experience, but students felt watching along with subtitles helped in better comprehension. While many students understood that watching an English movie without subtitles nearly seventy-five percent of them, but only 33.7 percent of them actually did that. The additional effort in-

volved acts as a huge demotivating factor. The following recommendations have been arrived at the end of the study.

A conscious, methodical and disciplined outlook towards language learning employing pragmatic strategies embedded in the curriculum in a well-spaced out manner can also be effective. Though blended-learning is popularly practiced in most curricula, student-initiated activities should be encouraged and incorporated. It is the proper implementation of the perceived notions that can bring about effectual realization. Teachers should improvise certain techniques to aid students implement what they perceive to be right for enhancing language proficiency.

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APPENDIX

S.No. Students' behaviour in ESL context	Students' perception number of students 1= Useless 2= Useless to an extent 3= Useful 4= Extremely useful					Students' practice number of students 1= Never 2= Rarely 3= Sometimes 4= Regularly				
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*Central score*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*Central score*
1. Reading a newspaper in English everyday at least for 30 minutes	1	6	34	51	4	12	39	33	8	2
2. Listening to a TED talk or similar program	2	18	23	49	4	33	35	18	6	2
3. Speaking to your friend in English	4	6	12	70	5	29	23	29	11	2
4. Watching an English movie with subtitles	1	9	22	60	5	9	18	43	22	3
5. Watching an English movie without subtitles	9	14	22	47	4	49	12	13	18	1
6. Watching a movie in other language with English subtitles	2	18	23	49	5	33	35	18	6	2
7. Sending SMS or Whatsapping in English	13	23	33	23	4	33	35	18	6	2
8. Visiting a local library regularly to read books in English	4	6	12	70	5	12	32	33	15	3
9. Listening to English songs focussing on the lyrics	1	6	34	51	5	13	37	34	8	2
10. Maintaining a journal to write something	13	23	33	23	4	58	24	9	1	1
11. Referring to a word in a dictionary	2	18	23	49	5	12	32	33	15	3
12. Using a word learnt recently in the classroom	1	6	34	51	5	33	35	18	6	2
13. Participating in a discussion in the classroom	4	6	12	70	5	19	21	23	29	3
14. Reading articles online	2	8	23	59	5	13	37	34	8	2
15. Sharing opinion with a friend on a topic	4	7	43	38	5	13	31	33	15	3
16. Writing a piece of creative writing – a poem or a story	11	13	22	46	4	33	35	18	6	2
17. Submitting written assignments on time	14	12	23	43	4	13	36	35	8	2
18. Asking doubts to the teacher concerned	4	6	12	70	5	12	32	33	15	3
19. Commenting on a Facebook Post	13	23	33	23	4	23	33	32	4	2
20. Enrol and pursue an online course to improve language proficiency	12	11	42	27	3	42	29	15	6	1