

**THE IMPACT OF TEACHING-LEARNING
ENVIRONMENT ON SECOND-LANGUAGE
ACQUISITION: A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN THE
TEACHING OF ARABIC AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
(TASL) AT THE INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION,
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The importance of having a second language

Nowadays, in the context of globalization and information technology, the world has become a small village where people can communicate easily with others using sophisticated communication devices without leaving their place. The communication conducted, be it in political, diplomatic, cultural, economic, sociological or scientific spheres among individuals, communities or nations, requires people to know more than one language. Thus, learning a second language has become crucial, at least for educated people. Knowledge of a second language would enable one to carry out the following:

- communicate easily with others
- travel without fear
- establish businesses in other countries
- know other cultures
- know the latest global issues
- live up-to-date within his local and international community
- participate in international intellectual activities, such as seminars, debates, conferences, etc.

In order to achieve the above successfully, one should go through an education system where the necessary teaching and learning facilities are available and facilitate his second-language acquisition in a proper way and within an adequate time period.

Second-language acquisition

Literally, second-language acquisition refers to learning a language after having acquired a first language or mother tongue. However, the term is frequently used to

refer to the acquisition of a second language after a person has reached the age of puberty. Although children experience little difficulty in acquiring more than one language, the task becomes more difficult after puberty. In this case, people generally have to expend greater effort to learn a second language and they often achieve lower levels of competence in that language. People learn second languages more successfully when they become immersed in the cultures of the communities that speak those languages.

First-language Acquisition

First-language acquisition is a complex process that linguists only partially understand. Young children have certain innate characteristics that predispose them to learn a language. These characteristics include the ability to understand a number of general grammatical principles, such as the hierarchical nature of syntax. These characteristics, however, do not predispose children to learn only one particular language. Children acquire whatever language is spoken around them, even if their parents speak a different language. An interesting feature of early language acquisition is that children seem to rely more on semantics than on syntax when speaking.

Learning first and second languages

In the case of a first language, a speaker acquires and uses it in his daily life within the community where he lives. The language is used in school to teach writing, reading and grammar. To study the language in depth, the speaker would have to specialize in linguistic studies where emphasis will be given to the syntax of the language and its literature.

In contrast, a second language cannot be acquired without fulfilling a particular interest or need. The need to learn a second language could arise due to professional reasons, such as working in a foreign country, for example, non-Arabic speakers working in Arabic-speaking countries or non-English speakers working in English-speaking countries. In such situations, a person has no option but to learn the host country's spoken language for his own convenience.

In a country's educational setting, a second language in the national curricular would be an advantage, where every student has to learn and acquire a certain level of competence in that assigned language. Foreign languages are normally offered as electives in educational settings.

Teaching first and second languages: similarities and differences

Some of the similarities and differences in the teaching of first and second languages are as follows:

Similarities: The similarities lie in the concepts of how to teach the language, in that both need teachers, teaching methodologies, strategies, styles, techniques, teaching aids and teaching environments.

Differences: In terms of the lingual concept, they differ in their characters, structures, phonics, morphologies, syllables, and grammatical systems. In terms of the teaching

and learning processes, they differ in their curricula, syllabuses, objectives, methodologies, materials, techniques, strategies and practices.

What is teaching?

Teaching can be defined as a systematic, planned sequence of events that facilitates the communication of an idea, concept or skill to a learner.¹ Teaching can be defined as the interaction of a student and a teacher over a subject. Students can be young or old, high or low achievers, “normal” or physically-challenged, highly or lowly motivated, rich or poor, male or female. The subject taught can be easy and straightforward or difficult and complex.

When this teaching definition is applied to the teaching of second languages, it involves a teacher trying to teach learners the concepts, content, skills, morphology, grammar, lexis, literature and pragmatic knowledge of a language different from the students’ native ones.

Teaching-learning elements

The major elements in the teaching-learning process are the teacher, student, curriculum, material, method and environment. Other supportive elements include learning activities, co-curricular activities, teaching aids, technological devices, etc.

The teaching-learning environment

The activities of teaching and learning “meet” in the teaching-learning environment (classroom). Building a good learning environment means taking into account both psychologist’s and instructionalists’ perspectives, as stated by Kirschner:

Learning takes place everywhere and at all times. This learning is often not intentional in nature and is simply the result of having had experiences. This means that life itself is the primary environment for learning, albeit not necessarily for intentional learning. Society has deemed it desirable and necessary to create artificial environments for intentional learning both to increase its efficiency and to standardise or certify its nature. The school is an example of such an environment.²

Webster’s New World Dictionary of American English defines ‘environment’ as “all the conditions, circumstances, and influences surrounding and affecting the development of an organism or group of organisms.”³ When this definition is applied to education, a teaching-learning environment includes all the conditions, circumstances and influences that affect the learner’s development. Every aspect of the milieu in which teaching and learning take place is an element in the teaching-learning environment, from physical surroundings to the instructional events that occur within those surroundings.

The teaching-learning environment can be split into two: the physical and non-physical environments. Generally, the physical environment includes the space and facilities in which instruction occurs. The classroom or learning space itself, the students’ furniture and its arrangement in the instructional space and the

teaching facilities built into the classroom are all essential elements of the learning environment. Each can have a significant impact on the teaching-learning process. By adjusting these elements to be consistent with the students' learning styles and the educators' teaching styles, the effectiveness of the instructional space can be maximized.⁴

On the other hand, the non-physical environment is the teaching-learning processes within the physical, the roles a teacher plays as an instructor, coach and facilitator. The non-physical supportive classroom environment is one characterized by⁵:

- openness rather than defensiveness
- confidence rather than fear
- acceptance rather than rejection
- trust rather than suspicion
- belonging rather than alienation
- order rather than chaos
- control rather than frustration
- high expectations rather than low expectations.

There are two major parties which are responsible for the classroom environment. They are:

1. The *school authority* is responsible for the setting up of the classroom physical environment. They must therefore take into consideration factors such as furniture, equipment, facilities, lights and decorations.
2. The *teacher* is also responsible for creating the non-physical classroom environment/climate, which can be an active, comfortable, co-operative, friendly and enjoyable one. On the other hand, it can be discouraging, uncomfortable, frustrating, boring and embarrassing one. This non-physical classroom environment depends on the teacher's personality, attitude towards teaching language, mood, teaching style, strategies, technique and experience.

The teacher can create a conducive learning environment in various ways, for example through encouraging teaching-learning interaction between himself and the students and among students themselves. Other ways in which the teacher can make learning enjoyable and optimistic include language activities or exercises assigned to students, the teacher's character and his attitude towards the students. The teacher's ability to empathise, display confidence, be polite and skilled with non-verbal immediacy,⁶ such as giving compliments to students, are just as important. Furthermore, willingness to become engaged in conversation with students before, after or outside the class also matter in creating a conducive environment for learners.

In other words, to create a good teaching-learning environment, the onus is on the teacher to encourage students to talk, use the language they are learning, talk to them on a friendly and informal basis, listen to their needs, ask them questions, give them a chance to answer, appreciate their answers, accept their ideas, use humour to joke with them and solicit viewpoints.

Author's experience in teaching Arabic as a second language at IIUM

The author started teaching Arabic as a second language in 1986 in the Philippines, before joining IIUM in 1996 where he has been teaching various groups of students. Recently, the IIUM has started to offer the Bachelor of Education Programme in Teaching Arabic as a Second Language (TASL), as well as Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) for in-service teachers.

During these 20 years of experience in teaching Arabic to non-Arabic speakers, the author used to establish an interesting teaching-learning environment in such a way that let students perceive the teacher as a friendly and an approachable person with whom they could feel safe and secure. In addition to this, the author's encouragement to his students to positively participate, cooperate, get involved in class activities and practise the language they are learning contributed to an interesting teaching-learning environment.

How to establish an enjoyable and interesting teaching-learning environment?

In order to create an enjoyable teaching-learning environment the teacher should start by introducing himself to the class by using humour. Then he should ask each student to introduce him/herself by name, citizenship/ nationality/ hometown, his/her reason for learning a second language, etc. Students should be told that a language is easy to learn if they perceive it as an easy and practical language. In contrast, if they perceive it as difficult to learn, then they will experience problems in learning and acquiring the language.

At the induction stage in normal teaching, the author greets the students and requests them to ask him questions, whether personal, general or academic, in nature. He answers them with respect and appreciation. When students are encouraged to speak, he asks them a few simple questions related to the previous lesson and/or the new one. He shows appreciation for their answers by using verbal language, such as "wow", "great", "very good", "excellent", "wonderful", "thank you very much" (in Arabic: "*aḥsanta/aḥsanti*", "*aẓīm*", "*jayyid jiddan*", "*mumtāz*") as well as non-verbal, positive facial expressions.

Second, at the sequencing stage, interactions and activities should be based on the content of the lesson to be taught (e.g. speaking, reading, writing, listening, grammar, etc.). At this stage, the author avoids long explanations or giving lengthy instructions to students to carry out simple tasks or activities. For instance, schoolteachers are known to give long instructions when assigning tasks to students such as:

I'm going to read this passage loudly and slowly, please listen carefully. Once I've finished, each one of you has to read it silently within ten minutes and underline new vocabularies found in the passage. Then, read out loudly what you have underlined and I'll list them down on the board. And then, I'll explain the meaning of these listed vocabularies one by one.

With such instructions, students tend to get confused and end up asking one another what they should do, instead of listening to the teacher and carrying out the correct instructions. The author gives very short yet concise instructions followed by a period

of activity, because he believes that action is more important than instruction.

To explain new vocabulary, the author solicits ideas from students. Should the students find difficulty in giving meanings, he explains new words in a simple way using all possible means. As part of practicing the language in the classroom, the author asks students to join new words with other words to form complete sentences using the vocabulary they have just learned. If the lesson content needs examples for explanation or clarification, examples must be picked from the surrounding environment, where students can easily understand the content and feel that the language they are learning is practical.

The author involves all students in language activities. In addition to this technique, he also facilitates their activities, bearing in mind that he should not show any negative signs or expressions to the individual or the group. To the author, all students in his class are equally entertained, motivated and valued. Under such mentioned situations, students are able not only to learn and practice the Arabic language, but also to love it.

Using e-presentations and its impact on learning a second language

In most educational settings in the past, the use of teaching aids was limited to audio-visual teaching aids, such as the TV, video, radio cassette recorder and the OHP. These require costly materials and much time to prepare. Available present-day equipment, like computers, CD Rom, DVD, LCD, and digital cameras etc., still need time for preparation and requires expertise in using them. Both old and new teaching aids play a major role in enhancing teaching-learning performance and elevating students' achievement in the acquisition of a second language.

The author has observed that students pay more attention to the topic when it is presented with electronic devices, especially the LCD projector, where the topic is presented clearly and interestingly using coloured markers and sometimes has attached to it animated clips or video clips related to the topic concerned. These kinds of presentations keep students alert all the time, motivate their learning interests, encourage them to positively participate and cooperate in discussion activities, enhance their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and eventually help to achieve their intended goals.

Summary

Teaching and learning a second language is different from teaching a first language and the task is challenging. Teaching and learning a second language needs an attractive learning environment where the learners can be motivated, relaxed, enthusiastic and optimistic about their learning achievements. The more the learners have a positive and interactive environment, the more they learn and achieve. On the other hand, the quieter the classroom environment they have, the less they achieve.

Creating a conducive classroom environment suitable for teaching and learning a second language can be realized through:

- a positive teacher-student relationship; mutual respect, appreciation, cooperation and valuation
- good teaching methodology, style, strategy and technique

- positive teacher's attitude toward teaching and toward learners as well
- positive students' perceptions of teacher and language
- use of a variety of language activities
- use of teaching materials, books, articles, handouts, CDs, diskettes, cassettes, etc.

The following table summarizes the relationship between teaching-learning environments and the learner's outcomes.

Table 1: Classroom Environment for Teaching/Learning Arabic

TEACHERS	TEACHING/ LEARNING	STUDENTS	OUTCOME
1. Qualified, skillful, loves teaching, creative, democratic, understanding, facilitator, learners' leader and friend.	Two-way communication channel; sending and receiving.	Satisfied with teacher's character, teaching style, language activities, discussions, and practicing. Motivated, respected and appreciated.	High achievements; easy to acquire the language.
2. Qualified, but superior, dominating, doing teaching as a job, giving no extra activities, pays no attention to students' needs.	One-way communication channel; sending only.	Dissatisfied with teacher's attitude towards teaching and towards them. Doing less language activities and practices	Low achievements; difficult to acquire the language.

as a Second Language

Recommendations

To have an effective second language teaching-learning environment, the following recommendations are made which are based on psychological, sociological, and educational theories and on the personal experience of the author. The teacher should:

- Generally love teaching and enjoy teaching the second language
- Expect students to enjoy the learning process
- Relate the language content in the text/syllabus to their actual lives
- Know how to entertain the class
- Be energetic when teaching the second language
- Anticipate how to attract students' attention

- Avoid needless or lengthy explanations and instructions and let the students get on with the job of learning
- Use a variety of activities within a lesson, rather than spending the whole lesson on one activity
- Select activities of an appropriate level of difficulty
- Set a time limit for activities
- Monitor and facilitate students' activities
- Make the class laugh, use humour to reduce tension, facilitate self-disclosure, relieve embarrassment, entertain and alleviate boredom
- Give the students chances to practice speaking the language in the class
- Appreciate their speaking, reading and writing, either correct or incorrect
- Correct students' mistakes with positive expression, using verbal and non-verbal communications or body language
- Create an artificial language environment, where students can practise their reading, speaking and writing skills of the language concerned
- Maintain direct eye contact with a smile to students
- Act as an educator, counsellor, motivator, guardian and leader.

Conclusion

In the contemporary borderless world, acquisition of more than one language seems to be unavoidable in many countries. When we intend to acquire a second language, we must first have a plan, strategy, curricula, syllabus, materials and manpower for implementation. Second, we must have an environment where teaching and learning can take place. If we, as learners, find the environment interestingly suitable for our target, we will eagerly acquire the language. In contrast, if the environment is less interesting and below our expectations, we might not be able to acquire the language at an acceptable level. Hence, in reiteration, the classroom environment plays a major role in the acquisition of a second language.

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