

LEARNING SPANISH LANGUAGE: MOTIVATION AND CHALLENGES AFFECTING ARAB COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Concern over low performance in learning Basic Spanish as a foreign language is evident among the students whose first language is Arabic (L1). This alarming situation has become prevalent among the Bahraini college students who still have inadequacies in English as Foreign Language (EFL). The condition poses challenges to both teachers and students of Spanish language (L2) in the tertiary EFL classrooms as it is commonly observed by the language teachers and the researcher himself. Hence, the importance of this study which, by using a semi-structured interview and focused group discussion (FGD), was conducted with the primary objective of finding out the motivations and challenges affecting Bahraini students enrolled in four classes of Basic Spanish. The participants were purposively chosen based on the following considerations: students enrolled in Basic Spanish Class; had the ability to communicate in English; and had good class standing. The researcher noted that most of the participants had been motivated by their dreams of travelling to Spanish-speaking countries in the future and the desire to learn people's cultures. While learning basic Spanish language, the students were experiencing difficulty in applying vocabulary producing correct vowel and consonant sounds, grammar rules, translating Spanish phrases and sentences, and conjugating and using irregular verbs. Applying grammar rules was considered the most challenging tasks among the participants followed by translating and conjugating irregular verbs.

Keywords: Spanish language, language acquisition, motivations, challenges, foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

Acquisition of foreign language as a second language has been a major obstacle for college students across societies. In the case of students enrolled in AMA International University in Bahrain similar problem has been observed by the members of the Language faculty which prompted the researcher to conduct this inquiry. In this era of globalization learning a second or foreign language enhances the competitiveness and success of students to enter the labor market. Hence, this study contributes another dimension in the expansive body of scientific knowledge about the importance of acquiring a second or foreign language in the context of the twenty first century.

Language acquisition is very analogous to the method that students use in acquiring first and second languages. It requires consequential interactions in the target language – usual communication – in which speaker is concerned not with the form of their speech but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. Learning a new language in the classroom requires a certain process and motivation. According to Dörnyei, “motivation is one of determinants of second/foreign language achievement and, accordingly, the last three decades have seen a considerable amount of research that investigates the nature and role of motivation in the L2 learning process. Indeed, during the previous years there were evidences that learners' motivation had been studied by many scholars” and most of them

focus on L2 acquisition. What affects foreign language learners' motivation has been hardly ever explored.

According to Husen & Postelthwaite, motivation to acquire new knowledge refers to the internal force or external drive that commences, upholds or causes to stop a student's manners towards learning subject matter that is targeted and is student's objectives. Motivation is classified into two types; namely, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is a reaction to person's inner desires, such as, individual satisfaction in accomplishing a task, or curiosity with a topic or lesson that is naturally appealing. Extrinsic motivation is aimed at receiving rewards that are outside of the student, such as teacher's motivation, optimistic feedback or learner's accomplishment on assigned tasks.

Gardner enthuses that much research has supported that motivation is a key factor for successful and sustained L2 or FL learning. Identification of learners' motivational orientations is also important in finalizing language learning objectives and having an appropriate classroom environment: controlled or autonomous. According to Gardner and MacIntyre, several research findings disclosed that L2/FL learners may be intrinsically motivated. As quoted by the aforementioned researchers, some investigations also claimed that learners of foreign or second language are extrinsically motivated. They mentioned that the studies conducted by researchers who had reaffirmed the previous research findings. They also said that some studies revealed that learners may learn a language using both types of motivations. As proofs, they quoted Deci and Ryan, (2008), Al-Khatib (2007), Obeidat (2005), Malallah (2000) and Williams (1994) as researchers who corroborated these results.

As this study is part of a bigger investigation, more than one data compilation was used to corroborate the findings. However for the benefit of conciseness and simplicity the findings in this study were purely drawn from the semi-structured interview and FGD or focused group discussion. The participants who provided feedbacks were responsible second and third year students, who have substantial knowledge in English, and who could articulate their ideas and honest views about the study. The study investigated important details of participants' profile as learners of Spanish language in order to find out the motivations and challenges influencing their acquisition of Spanish as a foreign language. As mentioned earlier, we are now in the era of globalization learning a second or foreign language that enhances the competitiveness and success of students to enter the labor market. Hence, this researcher is assiduous to pursue this study as he truly believes this adds to the expansive body of educational knowledge about the importance of acquiring a second or foreign language among the Arab students learning new knowledge and skill in the in the context of new century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Spanish Language

The popularity of the Spanish language is because there are more than four hundred million native speakers in Spain, Latin America and the USA. As published in the World Wide Web, Gooding explained that "Spanish is the certified language of twenty countries all over the world as well as an official language of the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, and several other international organizations."

Based on the abovementioned information, the researcher may assume that Spanish has become popular language throughout the world. Its popularity and importance as a foreign language has been considered in college curricular programs. In fact, the university, where

this study was conducted, offers Basic and Advanced Spanish Courses, which turned out to be the best foreign language options among the Arab students taking up Bachelor of Science in International Studies (BSIS) every semester. As indicated in BSIS program, students are required to finish fifty eight subjects—including two foreign language courses of their choice—in order to obtain their baccalaureate degree.

On Motivations

What is motivation? What are the two important kinds of motivations? The term motivation refers to “inner and outside factors that inspire aspiration and power in people to be frequently concerned and dedicated to profession, role or focus, or to make an effort to achieve an ambition. Educational psychologists recognize the two most universal motivations as “intrinsic and extrinsic” motivations.

In his research material, Stribling explained learning the foreign language is based on different factors or influences: both internal and external factors. He quoted Deci & Ryan stating that the language motivation depends on a complex interplay between internal and external factors. While significant factors influencing motivation will differ among subject areas, motivation is also subject to the influence of mediation discussions on learning approaches.

Intrinsic Motivations

The term intrinsic motivation is the inspiration that motivates an individual to assume or amend a behavior for his or her own inner fulfillment or satisfaction. According to Deci & Ryan and Pintrich, an intrinsically motivated person experiences enjoyment in the quest of their interests and in the nonexistence of outer rewards or controls. According to these authors learning to meet people is a normal step towards development and it is also a vital factor for integration into society. External values and beliefs become internalized and thus intrinsic. An adjustment to external values and the situation allows the person to follow self-determined interests.

Extrinsic Motivations

What is extrinsic motivation? According to Business Dictionary, this kind of motivation is a kind of drive or force that triggers action that comes from the outside environment or influences of the person instead from the person’s inner feeling. The term is external in nature as opposed to intrinsic motivation. Thus, this means that motivation or stimuli or encouragement may be from the other people or outside environment. In other words, the person’s aspiration to execute a task is directed by an outside source. It can be further noted that even though the stimulus is coming from outside, the effect of performing the task will still be gratifying for the entity performing the job.

Students’ Motivations in Learning FL?

What motivates students in learning foreign languages (FL)? As many language specialists have studied motivation and language learning for decade, they claim that there are two important types of motivation that play important roles in learning foreign languages. These motivations are integrative and instrumental. Those terms’ real meaning is discussed here below.

Integrative Motivation

An ESL lecturer currently based in South Korea, Anne Merritt, explains that “cross-cultural romance” is a common form of integrative motivation. It is where the students would want to learn the foreign language with the objective of understanding the cultures and language of a certain society. Thus the student is required to have good language aptitude as his tool for building relationship and important communication. Language gurus and their studies illustrate that “integrative motivation is faster and more effective in terms of language learning results than other type.”

Merritt further explained in her article published online that “integrative motivation also applies to relationships with cultures, not just individuals. Learners from multilingual nations can be integratively motivated to learn their national languages as a way of connecting with their countrymen: English and French in Canada; German, French and Italian in Switzerland; Hindi and regional languages in India.” Noted interestingly here is the fact that “the integratively motivated learners with positive attitudes towards the target culture are better at learning pronunciation and accent. These learners often communicate more with foreign language speakers, and are more exposed to spoken language.”

Instrumental motivation

On the other hand, Merritt, in the online publication of Atlantic International University, explicated the instrumental motivation which also plays important role in learning foreign languages like English and Spanish. She underscored that “learners who study a foreign language in order to achieve another goal are instrumentally motivated.” It means that language adeptness isn’t the aim in itself, but rather the channel to achieving a separate proficient or individual success. It further explains that for college learners, second language acquisition is frequently motivated by occupation or profession. Merritt added that a lot of adolescents learn foreign languages to fortify their credentials such as CVs and resumes and meet the criteria of prospective industries or companies. Since the goal is to find a work or promotion, then the stimulus is to improve the person’s record, such as diploma, university credentials, or aptitude test scores. Hence, the young adults would keep the aim in mind: Language learning is a key in achieving that goal.

Challenges affecting students in learning foreign languages

Why is language learning so difficult for some students? What makes the learning of the second language challenging? What are the challenges that affect the learners of the foreign language? Why do (at-risk) students fail foreign language classes? The term “second language challenge” refers to the difficulty in acquiring a second language or any responsibility that is motivating to one working on it.

In her workshop presentation titled “Teaching Foreign Languages to Students with Learning Differences” for the faculty and staff at Brandeis University, Linda Hecker, Director of Educational Services at Landmark College, explained the language based difficulties experienced by students who struggle in FL classes. These are “dyslexia, specific learning disability, weak language processing, weak native language learning skills, phonological processing difficulties, auditory processing difficulties, language difficulties/ language learning disabilities, foreign learning problems.” She considered dyslexia, the name for specific learning disabilities in reading, is the most common challenge. It is often

characterized by difficulties with accurate word recognition, decoding and spelling. She added that dyslexic students learning a L2 may have the so-called “phonological processing difficulties.” These students may add, mix or omit letters, add or drop syllables and know the beginning and end of the word, but not the middle. The typical errors of students with severe phonological problems are as follows: “vito for vivo,” “extudiante for estudiante,” “doso for dos,” senta, setenta for sesenta,” “mucho gusto for me gusta,” amazna for manzana,” and “sabador for sabado.”

The foregoing literature and studies like of Merrit, Deci & Ryan and Pintrich on motivations deemed important as they corroborate with the present study because they presented good insights and viewpoints on some variables being explored in this research such as the kinds of motivations and challenges that affect learning among students. Some studies on challenges, like of Linda Hecker, were also included because they support the standpoint of the researcher in making his research more reliable and effective.

METHODOLOGY

Twenty-seven Bahraini college students taking up Bachelor of Science in International Studies (BSIS) were the participants in this study. Second and third year students were targeted because they take Spanish as one of the foreign languages required in BSIS curriculum. They were chosen as participants on the basis of their active participations in the Spanish class and their ability to communicate in English. A purposive sample was used in this study. The researcher himself constructed a semi-structured interview. It contains thirty-five questions with general prompts to motivate students to participate actively and to speak about their background, motivations and challenges affecting their performance in learning Spanish as a foreign language. The questions underwent content validation from the language gurus and expert researchers. The researcher used focused group discussion or FGD to corroborate, substantiate and develop the data obtained from the interviews.

The researcher used thirty-five questions for the semi-structured interview. He used lead-in questions as preliminaries of the interview. One important lead-in question was “*Tell me about yourself as a college student?*” The two other leading questions were “*What/who motivates you to learn Spanish?*” and “*What challenges do you face while studying Spanish?*” Prompts or follow up questions were also asked like “*Can you give me examples?*” “*Can you rate your level of motivation in learning Spanish?*” “*Can you order the challenges for me?*” They were asked whenever they are necessary. Follow up questions were spontaneously asked to verify and validate responses. Sometimes the researcher had to rephrase the question or simply modify it whenever the participant could hardly decipher it. New questions emerged as a result of discussion on the topic. Some questions were not asked because sometimes the student’s answers substantiated already and corroborated answers to other pre-determined questions. The questions were divided into three parts in such a way that the answers could easily be transcribed, organized and categorized according to theme or factors, such as, participant’s pertinent backgrounds, motivations and challenges.

Procedures

Each participant was formally requested and met individually for the interview. A room in the university designed for Consultation Hours with students was used as a venue of scheduled interviews and for focused group discussions. There had no time limit to allow the interviewees to speak generously as much as they wanted. The average interview time was 15

minutes while 20 minutes for the FGD. The interviews were all transcribed, categorized and analyzed. The profiles of the interviewees as learners were drawn from their background factors while the motivations and challenges were categorized according to themes or factors affecting Bahraini college students in acquiring Spanish as a foreign language. The study presents the qualitative analysis of the data while discussing the findings at the same time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Profile of Participants as Learners of Spanish

All twenty seven participants—fifteen female and twelve male—spoke excellent Arabic. All of them could communicate very good English. They were all Bahrainis living in the different areas of Bahrain. Some of them can speak other languages like French, Hindi, Persian, and Urdu. Twenty of the participants were already in third year college while seven of them were still in second year. Twenty-five were educated in public schools; two obtained high school diploma in private schools. Only seven of the participants revealed that they first heard a few Spanish words in high school while twenty of the participants disclosed that they only heard the Spanish words and expressions in college. Nobody among the participants visited any Spanish-speaking country; neither had they experienced talking to a person who could speak the language. Participant 4 explained opportunities for them to travel to other country are quite limited due to some cultural and political issues. He said that he could travel only if he is with his family and they never choose Spain or any other Spanish-speaking country as their tour destinations. Participants 9 and 14, on the other hand, explained that France, London and other Far Eastern countries were placed number one in their priority list of previous travels.

The participants had varied perceptions and opinions about the Spanish subject before they enrolled it as one of their class programmes in the BSIS curriculum. Twenty-four of them pre-conceived Basic Spanish a ‘difficult’ subject, but two of them considered it ‘easy’ while one said it is ‘very easy.’ Six of the participants said that Basic Spanish is challenging yet interesting. Participant 16 put it, *“It is very nice to study Spanish because I can use it in communicating with other people who speak the language.”* For Participants 11 and 22, the subject is really strange and therefore it might be complicated. Some participants predicted that it was a good language while four of the participants opted not to give their comments.

The Motivations of the Participants in Learning Spanish

The information obtained from the interviews and FGDs with the participants made apparent the interlaced relationship between language learning and motivations. In contemplating the questions about the motivations they experienced in learning the new language, the students admitted that learning of the foreign language and the inspiration really intertwined affecting the intensity of motivation and the extent of learning. This section presents the background of language learning as well as the motivating factors that influence the participants’ acquisition of Spanish language. The researcher underscores the association between the two factors (language and motivations) the students conspicuously revealed.

Extrinsic Motivation Factors

Motivation to acquire new knowledge refers to the internal force or external drive that commences, upholds or causes to stop a student’s manners towards learning subject matter that is targeted and is student’s objectives (Husen & Postelthwaite, 1985).

Motivation is classified into two types; namely, intrinsic and extrinsic (Biellher & Snowman 1997; Good & Brophy, 1995). Intrinsic motivation is a reaction to person's inner desires, such as, individual satisfaction in accomplishing a task, or curiosity with a topic or lesson that is naturally appealing. Extrinsic motivation is aimed at receiving rewards that are outside of the student, such as teacher's motivation, optimistic feedback or learner's accomplishment on assigned tasks. (Good & Brophy, 1995).

Most of the participants had been motivated by someone very important to their lives and something worthy of their career and upcoming professions. The participants believed that the people around them had huge influence in tackling their college education with confidence while taking the exact path to success. Twenty-three of the participants agreed that their family had been the key factor while four of them considered their friends and managers influential.

Intrinsic Motivation Factors

The data obtained from the interviews and FGDs for this section were anchored on the Socio-Educational Model of Language Learning (Gardner, 1985 , Gardner & Tremblay, 1994) which prompted that language motivation has two orientations, namely: 1) integrative orientation (positive attitude toward the foreign culture and a desire to participate as a member of it); and 2) instrumental orientation (goal of acquiring language in order to use it for a specific purpose, such as career advancement or entry to further studies and education).

On integrative orientation, participants conveyed affirmative outlook toward the foreign culture and a need to play a part of it. In fact, almost all of the participants considered travelling to Spanish-speaking countries and know people's culture. They acknowledged the fact that going to these places and meeting people who speak the language is one of the best ways to learn the language. Participants 2, 3, 4 and 6 said they've planned to go to Spain (particularly Barcelona), learn their culture and use the language they speak. *"I want to learn more about Spanish language because I want to work in another country."* Participant 26 shared enthusiastically. Participant 23 enthused, *"I want to have more knowledge about Spanish, so if I travel to Spain I know how to deal easily with the people there."*

On the instrumental orientation, participants agreed that they must have goals to be able to acquire the foreign language in such a way that they may use it for any specific purpose in life, such as career development or access to further studies and education. All participants, except two, agreed on the idea that Spanish language will help them in their future career. The participants believed that knowing how to speak the Spanish language could elevate their present career and fortify their morale.

Vocabulary as a Challenge

Most of the participants viewed learning Spanish language generally challenging. And there are many linguistic factors that contribute to its degree of difficulty. One of the notable barriers that obstruct the acquisition of this foreign language is vocabulary. Participants, without exception, agreed to have problems in studying Spanish due to difficulty of words. They reported that words in Spanish are far different from English, hence agreeing with Alonso's (2012) contention stating that fifty percent Spanish vocabulary is way far from English. The participants further explained that frequently the disparity is found in very familiar words which make the problem even heavier. Many participants (e.g. 13, 18 and 27) admitted that they could not possibly guess that the word "mesa" means "table" or "puerta"

for “door”. Another complexity found to seem obvious is that words seem the same in two unlike languages but whose meaning is not closely the same. Participant 8 inclined to believe that “carpeta” (file folder) and “carpet” (alfombra), among others words, are alike but not absolutely the same.

In general rules, Spanish nouns ending in “o” are masculine and those ending in “a” are feminine. However, this is not always an easy case for the students. There are exceptions to the rules. Many participants agreed on the exceptions to the rule affect their use of very usual words. They maintained the thought that the rules created trouble in them. Participant 19 and 20 reported that they frequently committed mistakes when the very common words like: “*la mano*” (hand, feminine), “*la foto*” (photo, feminine), “*el día*” (day, masculine), “*el problema*” (problem, masculine), “*la disco*” (disco, feminine) were given in the exam.

Phonology as a Challenge

The sounds of Spanish letters entail overwhelming problems among Bahraini students. Since Spanish uses the Latin alphabet, the vowels can take a sharp accent, and there is the extra letter ñ (pronounced, ‘*enye*’). When spelling Spanish words or writing them from the teacher's dictation, beginning Bahraini students make mistakes with the Spanish vowels *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*. The consonants *g*, *h*, *j*, *k*, *q*, *r*, *ll*, also cause trouble, since they have significantly different names in English or Arabic. Many participants disclosed that they are always mistaken in writing the correct spelling of the Spanish words because they are not familiar with the sounds.

Finally, all participants, without exception, strongly agreed that one of the most challenging parts in learning Spanish was the use of word ending, such as “*ito/ita*” [to indicate something small or alternatively something for which we show affection, for example: “*la casita*” (the little house), “*mi casita*” (my beloved house), “*azo/aza*” [to indicate something big like “*la casaza*” (a very big house)], “*ucho/ucha*” [to denotate disdain like “*la casucha*” (a hovel)]. Participant 14 put it this way, “*remembering all of these is one of the most difficult thing for me...I don't think this is basic of Spanish. I tried hard to learn the suffixes, but it takes a lot of time.*” Participants 9 expressed strong affirmation by saying that this lesson should not be part of the Basic Spanish. He said, “*it is so complicated!*”

Grammar Rule as a Challenge

Grammar tops the list of very difficult lessons in Spanish as perceived by the participants. According to them, the set of rules adds to its complexity and intense of difficulty. All participants, except two, reported rules in grammar are difficult and that demand much focus and perseverance in order to assimilate them in their learning scheme.

The researcher believed the participants because Spanish is a much more heavily inflected language than English. The regular verbs in Spanish, when conjugated in the present tense, create six different inflections. For example, the verb “*hablar*,” to speak, produces the following inflected forms: “*hablo*,” “*hablas*,” “*habla*,” “*hablamos*,” “*hablais*,” “*hablan*.” The participants understood the rules; however, they admitted that they had to familiarize themselves with the verb forms. Another topic which the participants were claiming to be harder was irregular verbs. They clarified that the rules are totally different although irregular verbs also have six inflections when conjugated. For instance, the verb “*tener*,” to have, produces the following forms: “*tengo*,” “*tiene*,” “*tiene*,” “*tenemos*,” “*teneis*,” “*tienen*.”

All participants, without exception, accepted that familiarizing with the verb inflection forms gave much difficulty. They all averred that this had impacted negatively their marks. Participant 9 mentioned that he failed his exam because he could not remember the rules governing verb inflections. He maintained that he should have strategized to ease the difficulty of the topic.

Translating and Conjugating as Challenges

Following vocabulary, phonology and grammar come translating and conjugating. All participants, without exception, considered translating one of the most difficult tasks to do in Spanish. They reported that they always committed mistakes whenever they were asked to translate phrases. They found translating familiar words easier than writing phrases containing nouns, definite articles, possessive adjective, such as “*las hijas hermosas*,” (the beautiful daughters) “*tres coches nuevos*” (three new cars), “*mis abuelos y abuelas antiguos*” (my old grandfathers and grandmothers), “*los edificios altos*” (the tall buildings). They also mentioned that they were always tempted to punctuate questions or exclamations as follows, since this is how it is done in English “*Como se llama?*” (instead of *¿Como se llama?*) / *Fabuloso!* (instead of *¡Fabuloso!*)

When requested to provide their views on translating sentences in Spanish, All participants expressed complete rejection of the learning task. They revealed that translating sentences was really the most difficult lesson in Spanish. They admitted that translating words and phrase is harder, but translating sentences, including questions, is the hardest. They confirmed by saying words in asking questions, such “*¿Que?*” “*¿ Como?*” “*¿ Quien?*” “*¿ Donde?*” “*¿ Cuando?*” “*¿ Cuantos?*” “*¿ Para quien?*”, among others, were difficult to learn.

CONCLUSIONS

The researcher found out that most of the participants had been motivated by their dreams of travelling to Spanish-speaking countries in the future and the desire to learn people’s cultures. While learning basic Spanish language, the students were experiencing difficulty in applying vocabulary (particularly the use of definite articles ‘el and ‘la’ and plural counterparts), producing correct vowel and consonant sounds (e.g. *g, j, ll, ñ, q, rr, x*), grammar rules, translating Spanish phrases and sentences, and conjugating and using irregular verbs. Applying grammar rules was considered most challenging, followed by translating and conjugating irregular verbs (*los verbos irregulares*).

As explained at the beginning of the study, learning Spanish as a foreign language in the EFL classrooms is an engaging yet challenging task among the Bahraini college students. Many factors interacted and intertwined that impacted the acquisition of the “new global language” (Gooding, 2007), an assertion that can be derived from the findings of this study. To simplify, the present investigation has disclosed the interface of two major factors with the learning of the language, such as motivations and challenges. Motivation is one of the important determinants of second/foreign language achievement (Dörnyei 2009) which interrelated with learning of Spanish among the Bahraini students. Extrinsic and intrinsic were two of the motivational factors impacting on their learning scheme.

Participants’ background and their profile as beginning learners of Spanish language emerged to have direct control on their motivations of learning the foreign language. The same factors

also appeared to have direct influence on facing challenges and overcoming them. As revealed during interviews and FGDs, the participants showed little tolerance and patience in the learning process. They disclosed the challenges compelled them to lose interest and abandon learning the language.

The present investigation revealed that students were fully aware of the challenges that affect their learning of the Spanish language, and it clarifies some ways they could possibly use to overcome these challenges. However, the focus of this study was not on the strategies but on the motivations and challenges. Hence, conducting new and in depth investigations on strategies or other factors could probably be considered for future researches. This qualitative research reports the data obtained from small population of 27 participants using one data collection instrument; hence, it can be regarded as investigative or exploratory one. In the desire to improve the learning experience of students and to produce solid and more conclusive results, the researcher wishes to have further study on the subject triangulated by other data gathering tools, using bigger samples and other relevant variables that might have influenced in the possible enhanced learning of Spanish as a foreign language among Bahraini college students.

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