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Motivation in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

In this study, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation are examined to establish the correlation between the form of motivation and successful second language acquisition. The analysis studies whether other aspects, such as the degree in which the specificity of the courses or the introduction of an immersive virtual world can modify the students' self-efficacy beliefs. Two groups of students were selected to carry out a qualitative study on motivation. The activities and results obtained in both groups were contrasted in order to determine if the two basic types of motivation played a relevant role in second language acquisition. It can be stated that the results showed that the pre-conceived beliefs of learners were relevant in certain activities, i.e. collaborative, web based activities; and in the demand for a definite syllabus of the course.

1. Introduction

Student's motivation, as defined by Gardner (1982), is composed of three elements; effort (the time spent studying and the drive of the learner), desire (the yearning to become proficient in the language) and affect (the emotional reactions of the learning towards studying). Thus, it could be defined as the various purposes that are part of the goals to learn a second language. Motivation is divided into two basic types: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is characterized by the learner's positive attitudes towards the target language group and the desire to integrate into the target language community. Instrumental motivation underlies the goal to gain some social or economic reward through L2 achievement, thus referring to a more functional reason for language learning.

The concepts of metacognitive knowledge and beliefs are defined in this research considering the points of view of Wenden (1987) and Horwitz (1987). Metacognition is defined as "thinking about one's own thoughts" (Hacker, 1998: 3). From this, several implications can be derived, such as a "reflection and evaluation of thinking that may result in making specific changes in how learning is managed, and in the strategies chosen for this purpose" (Anderson, 2008: 99).

Our main interest has been originated from research on learner autonomy and learner strategies (Wenden and Rubin, 1987). In the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and metacognitive knowledge of the students enrolled in a learning situation have been recognized as significant contributory factors in the learning process. Sakul and Gales (2002), Bernat and Gvozdenco (2006) and Siskin (2008) provide some examples that

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illustrate how second or foreign language students may hold strong beliefs about the nature of the language under study. For instance, they can consider its degree of difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies, etc. Identification of these beliefs and reflection on their potential impact on language acquisition as well as in more specific areas such as the learners' expectations and strategies used, can inform future syllabus design and teacher practice in the course.

There are different kinds of knowledge implied in second language acquisition. In this study, we are interested in the strategic knowledge used by the teacher and its effect when applied to students. Strategic knowledge refers to the information about what strategies are likely to be effective in achieving the learning goal (Flavell, 1979). In other words, strategic knowledge is general knowledge about the nature and utility of strategies (Wenden, 1987). More precisely, it includes information about the strategies as such, why they are useful and specific knowledge about when and how to use them (Wenden, 1998). Metacognitive knowledge is a relatively stable body of knowledge, which may change over time. This knowledge may be acquired formally or informally, and consciously, e.g. in a class or unconsciously, e.g. imitating somebody. As learners gain in cognitive maturity, they may reflect on their learning processes and revise earlier assumptions or develop new ones.

Wenden (1999: 436) also distinguishes metacognitive knowledge from metacognitive strategies and refers to the former as information, which learners acquire about learning, and to the latter as consists of general skills that allow learners to "manage, direct, regulate, and guide the learning process". Wenden (2001) provides further insight on the function of language learners' metacognitive knowledge in learning. She focuses on the nature of the interaction that defines the relationship between what learners know and how they self-direct their learning.

The focus of this research was the analysis of the motivation of Higher Education students when learning a second language, specifically, English. The analysis was twofold; the integrative and the instrumental motivation of students when acquiring a second language were analysed and compared. To do this, we considered their attitude towards the target language, the individual economic and the social factors surrounding their language acquisition, and furthermore, the use of technology as a new type of motivation for some individuals. Henderson, Huang, Grant and Henderson (2009) have also considered this last aspect, specifically the integration of the virtual world as a strategy to motivate students.

The objectives of this research were first, to discuss the role that motivation has in language acquisition as a specific variable at higher education level. Second, to check whether the specificity of the courses had some effect in the student's motivations, and thirdly, to study whether the introduction of technology, by means of self-defined activities and the recreation of an on-line world improved students' capacity to use English language in a variety of real-life contexts.

2. Methodology

Two groups of students were selected for a qualitative study on motivation. One of the groups (henceforth group A) was composed of twenty students enrolled in a specific English class offered as an optional subject in an engineering degree at Universitat Politècnica de València; Technical English, taught in the Degree of Electrical Engineering in the first academic year. The second group included in the analysis (henceforth group B) was composed of twenty university students enrolled in an English course aimed to improve general concepts of English. The subject was taught in the Degree of Geometrics and Topography as an optional subject.

During the classes, group A used a specific handbook as classroom material with references to the economic and social environment of engineering (English for Engineering, CUP); meanwhile, group B used on-line material which mixed grammatical and cultural contents. The activities carried out by this group of students included the selection and completion of online activities as well as the participation in a software programme which invited to the recreation of an on-line world. The motivation shown by students of both groups was contrasted in order to determine whether integrative motivation (which can be measures by means of the positive attitudes shown by students toward the target language and culture) and instrumental motivation (assessed by the gain-related motivation) had played a relevant role in the students instruction considering the different materials used in their