MOTIVATIONAL TEACHER SUPPORT IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING - A STUDY OF THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES FACED BY THE STUDENTS OF THE FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO

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ABSTRACT

In order to obtain a BA degree from the University of Colombo it is compulsory for the 1st year students of the Faculty of Arts, to secure a pass in English.

The objective of this presentation is to identify the psycho-social, physiological and economic factors that contributed to the failure of 5% of these students, and demonstrate the help given to them by me, as an English Language Teaching lecturer. A case study method was followed and data collected through informal interviews and observation.

About 90% of the students who failed lacked the lower order needs of security, love and acceptance connected to Maslow’s Humanistic Needs theory.

How my encouragement provided these basic lower order needs and how the syllabus and methodology was adapted to suit their special circumstances are discussed.

Key words

Psycho-social, physiological, economic challenges, IPUR cycle, motivation, Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs.
Introduction

According to the bylaws of the Faculty of Arts University of Colombo, it is mandatory for all students who register with the faculty to complete the Proficiency Course in English conducted by the English Language Teaching Unit.

These students are placed at level 1, 2, 3 or 4 according to marks obtained at the placement test conducted at the beginning of the 1st year. To obtain the BA degree in their chosen disciplines it is compulsory for them to complete which ever level they are placed in the Proficiency Course in English, by securing a pass mark of 40%. For a special degree student the requirement is a pass in Level 2. The first year course comprises of two Foundation units, FNDE 1108 in the 1st semester and FNDE 1209 in the 2nd semester. Each FNDE unit comprises of two continuous assessments which carry 35% marks. 05% is allocated for attendance and 60% for the final paper. If the students do not complete both units they fail to gain eligibility to complete their BA degree. The students may complete these two units within the four years in the university or else even after leaving.

The Proficiency Course in English has been planned, in keeping with the general aims of the English Language Teaching Unit where it is expected to:

- Empower all undergraduates following the ELT courses to be effective in communication skills using English Language as a tool.
- Improve skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, delivering effective presentations and acquiring transferable skills to enhance the quality of their undergraduate education, to help them secure gainful employment and higher educational opportunities.
- Make them confident in using English Language as a link to act as change agents in the multi-lingual and multi-cultural modern society.

Against this back drop it is generally observed that 95% of the students do complete the two FNDE units to overcome the hurdle of completing the two compulsory course units during the first academic year. Inquiries have revealed that the 5% who fail to complete the units are the students who have not attended classes regularly and those who have not completed their continuous assessments. Although they have sat for the end of semester examinations they have failed to secure the 40% pass mark. This general trend was also observed in the 1st year was coordinating the Proficiency Course in English for the English Language Teaching Unit.
This co-relation between attendance and examination results is to be expected as the ELT programmes are constructively aligned in relation to the course objectives, teaching material and assignments. (Biggs, J.1999) Thus failing to follow classes makes it difficult to successfully answer the questions in the final paper to obtain the pass mark. These students also miss the 5% allocated for attendance and the students who fail to complete the assignments lose 35% of the full mark.

It has also been observed that many of the students who do not complete the FNDE units during the first year often fail to do so during the next years as well. This too is often due to absenteeism and also due to the additional course units and extra assignments they have to complete during the final years.

It is argued that 5% failure rate is an excusable figure in terms of English Language competency, but it is the significant impact on the lives of these individual students who comprise of the 5% failures that should be taken into consideration. The complications which arise due to their failure to obtain the BA general or special degree after spending three - or in the case of the special degree students- four years at the university, due to their inability pass in English, only add to the reasons for their absence from class during the 1st year initially.

This paper is a reflection of my personal experience on why about 5% of the students failed to obtain this basic requirement within the course of their academic career. Twelve case studies were conducted, and according to the data obtained and analyzed, a lack of motivation due to many psycho-social and economic factors were identified in relation to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

This theory together with how ELT lecturers should observe, monitor and encourage these students within a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, to provide the basic lower order needs whenever possible will be discussed in this paper.
Background

As the coordinator of the English course for the 2005 intake of Arts Faculty students, I remained the coordinator for the batch in the second third and fourth year too. As I was aware of the problems faced by the students who had failed the Proficiency Course in English in the previous years, I was determined to closely follow the students who fail and make them complete the FNDE units during their second academic year. Experiencing and reflecting on the problem of these failed students was the first stage of my study.

The total number of students registered for the placement test was 1084. After the test, the student breakdown according to the marks obtained were: level 01 – 426, level 2 – 328, level 3 – 117, level 4 – 98, and exempted – 55. It was not possible to systematically monitor the absentees during the first year as there were 25 classes and the teachers had not even seen some of these students in class as they were the ‘permanent’ absentees. Thus it was only during the second year that I was able to track down these first year regular absentees – when they had to be accommodated in repeat classes due to their inability to complete their FNDE units. The information that was obtained from these students and the findings and analysis will be discussed in the study later. Chart 1 below displays the student breakdown of the years and the levels they were placed in after the placement test, and the subsequent levels they were in during the following years. The numbers in bold indicate the students who had failed the first year and had to be in the same level in the consecutive years.
I realized that I was undertaking a learning process when I decided to investigate the problem of the 5% failures in my batch of students. The active reflection I did was according to the Experiential Learning Cycle (I P U R Cycle) which stands for ‘Identify, Plan, Undertake and Review’. (Figure 1) This is a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. The immediate experience led to observations and reflections which were translated into action which helped my students to overcome their problems and finally achieve success. (Atherton, J S. 2011)

**Theoretical perspectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark range</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>st year 2005</th>
<th>nd year 2006</th>
<th>rd year 2007</th>
<th>th Year 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>00-39</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-55</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>272 + 3</td>
<td>116 + 1</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>117+ 1</td>
<td>207+ 1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66-79</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>42+ 3</td>
<td>124+ 1</td>
<td>55+ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>05</td>
<td>(2nd yr. onwards)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 &lt; Exempt</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1084</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second stage of my study, the planning stage was to find a theoretical underpinning to support my study.

Thus in examining the reasons for the failures of the students the lack of motivation due to many psycho-social and economic factors were identified which could be mapped to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. (Figure 2)

- Theoretically motivation to learn is both extrinsic and intrinsic and the sources of motivational needs are external, social, biological, cognitive, conative and spiritual. It is also directly connected with the Humanistic Needs Theory of Maslow where the lower order needs of security, love and acceptance are necessary for motivation to take place.
- According to Maslow there are two groupings: deficiency needs and growth needs.
- Within the deficiency needs, each lower need must be met before moving to the next higher level.
- Once each of these needs has been satisfied, if at some future time a deficiency is detected, the individual will act to remove the deficiency.
- The first four levels are:
  - Physiological: hunger, thirst, bodily comforts, etc.;
  - Safety/security: out of danger;
  - Belongingness and Love: affiliate with others, be accepted;
  - Esteem: to achieve, be competent, gain approval and recognition.
- According to Maslow, an individual is ready to act upon the growth needs if and only if the deficiency needs are met.
  
  (Maslow & Lowery, 1998)
When considering the lack of motivation in the above mentioned Arts Faculty students, it is obvious that they were lacking in these lower order needs identified by Maslow.

Figure: 2.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs 1954

Objectives

The main objective of this presentation is to demonstrate how I identified the reasons for the absenteeism which resulted in 5% of students failing at the English Proficiency Course examinations. Another objective is to explain how to motivate these students to overcome their challenges and to discuss how as ELT lecturers we can minimize similar occurrences in the future by addressing the major issues by mapping them to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.
Methodology

The study was based on a quantitative and qualitative mixed design. The third stage of the study according to the IPUR cycle was to undertake to find out the reasons of the 5% failures by following the appropriate methodology.

Method

A case study method was followed with 12 students which included a longitudinal study of two to three years with five case studies and a shorter period of one year with the other seven. The longer period included the students who did not complete the FNDE units until they reached the fourth year, and some who had to complete it after leaving university.

The Sample

The students who were subjected to this study were of the following categories:

- Failed or not completed one or both FNDE units in the 1st year.
- Failed or not completed one or both FNDE units within the 2nd, 3rd or 4th year.
- Failed or not completed one or both FNDE units after leaving university. (these comprised of students of the earlier batches)
- Not completed level two within the 4 years. (which is necessary for special degree students)

The number of case studies conducted were 12 as mentioned earlier.

The Instruments

Quantitative data was obtained from the mark sheets submitted by the individual teachers, and the final class lists that were prepared for the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year classes following the final exam of each year.

Qualitative data was through face to face interviews, telephone interviews and observations.
• Face to face interviews

With students

A quota of the qualitative data obtained was from the interviews conducted with the students identified from the repeat class lists. It was not possible to contact all the failed students, as only a few attended the repeat classes. It was only when I was contacted by the students to check on the assignment dates that they could be identified.

With teachers

Interviews with the teachers of the repeat classes provided useful information to identify the reasons for student absenteeism.

• Telephone Interviews

With students

Telephone interviews were conducted with some of the absentee students by obtaining their numbers from peers. Most of these students were employed, and were unable to apply leave to be present at lectures and even for assignments.

With employers

According to the information received from the employed students, it was important to communicate with their employers, and the data obtained from them helped to formulate a feasible programme for these students.

• Observation

Some of these students were observed being engaged in other activities while the English classes were being conducted. Completing their other assignments, reading in the library or simply carrying on conversations under trees or canteen were some of these.

Findings

According to the data obtained the reasons for absenteeism which resulted in the failure of these students who sat the English examination was a lack of motivation due to the following factors:
• Inability to grasp the fundamentals due to lapses in teaching during the primary and secondary education. This was a demotivating factor for many students to follow the English lessons in the university.

• Unfamiliarity with the language due to social background leading to an inferiority complex (comparing themselves with others and feeling rejected) which prevented them from attending classes.

• Low attendance in class in the 1st year due to economic factors (being employed and difficulty of obtaining leave.)

• Sickness (personal or of family members)

• Psychological reasons (broken love affairs leading to depression, compulsive obsessive disorders, phobia of the English language due to previous experiences etc.)

• Physiological reasons - visual, hearing or speech impaired, physically disabled etc. – (visually impaired and physically disabled students had difficulty in attending the English classes which were conducted in a different location from the Arts Faculty. Hearing and speech impaired students did not have special classes with teachers knowledgeable in teaching such students.

• Peer pressure (involved in political activities and being suspended in the 1st year)

• Lapses in teaching by the ELTU teachers was mentioned by one student.

Positioning these reasons for low attendance in broad categories revealed that:

• 75% of the students mentioned major economic problems, which made it necessary for them to be employed.

• 20% was due to personal sicknesses and disabilities which also included psychological sicknesses where the students still continued medication. Sickness of family members, where the students were the care givers were also mentioned.

• 5% attributed their absence to being suspended from attending lectures due to disciplinary action by the authorities and some to peer pressure where other students have discouraged them from attending classes.

Given below in chart 2 are the details of the five case studies conducted over a period of three years. Out of these two students completed the FNDE units in the fourth year, two during the 3rd year and one student after leaving university.
Chart 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>1st yr level</th>
<th>O’L result</th>
<th>Home town</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Other details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ranjan</td>
<td>02 ( His. Sp).</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>Anuradhapura</td>
<td>Father dead. Supports family</td>
<td>NGO K’gala Police</td>
<td>No leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tilak</td>
<td>02 ( Econ. Sp).</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>Tangalle</td>
<td>Father dead, Supported by aunt’s family</td>
<td>Private school teacher/tuition master</td>
<td>Discouraged by inability to do law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inoki</td>
<td>03 ( General)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Gampaha</td>
<td>Father sick brother studying</td>
<td>Bank assistant</td>
<td>Worked after 1st semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramani</td>
<td>01 ( General)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Ratnapura</td>
<td>Middle class Financially stable</td>
<td>__</td>
<td>Psychological treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamal</td>
<td>01 ( General)</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>Wellawayaa</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>__</td>
<td>Visually handicapped/No English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Implementation**

After examining the findings of the study, an action plan was initiated. This was the final phase of the IPUR cycle, which was: ‘Reviewing’ the problems faced by the students who had failed the FNDE units.
Action Plan

- I was in constant touch with these students, talking and encouraging them, which proved to be highly productive. The students with psychological problems benefitted greatly by this activity.
- Listening to the problems of the students, adjustments were done to accommodate the employed students to follow classes at times convenient to them. Even special assignment dates were arranged so that they could complete both writing and listening or writing and orals on one day. For this the support of the ELTU coordinator as well as the support of many willing ELTU staff was obtained, which was a call beyond their duty, as they had to spend extra hours to accommodate these students. All of them were extremely helpful which greatly facilitated this action plan.¹
- Some staff members helped these students by discussing the lesson material with them over the telephone or by e-mail.
- Special permission was obtained from the employers, by personally contacting them, which enabled some students to be present at the assignments, since no official time tables for assignments were issued to individual students by the university.

Discussion

Success stories:

- All five students mentioned in chart 2 above, and the other students who were monitored completed the FNDE course.
- Two psychologically disturbed students in the 1st year managed to pass level 1, through constant encouragement. These two students would not have attended classes if not for the encouragement and concern shown to them. One had a resentment against everything English and manifested it by chewing betal when he arrived for the English class.
- The other student did not have confidence in himself and had a phobia that some students were always out to attack him, and used to hide in a lecturer’s room constantly. This student needed much encouragement to be made sufficiently confident to attend class.
- One student who was employed as an Economics tuition master did not want to face assignments and examinations as the current batch included students who were following
his classes. It was through intense persuasion that he was made to face the assignments which finally helped him complete the FNDE units.

- A visually impaired student of an earlier batch was helped by accommodating his plea for a change of date for an assignment, as he had to admit his six-year-old daughter to school on that particular date. This enabled him to finally complete his assignments after a lapse of several years, which helped him to obtain 40% marks to complete the compulsory FNDE unit.

- The fourth-year FNDE results were not released up to the time this paper was written, to obtain details of those repeaters who sat for the FNDE 1209 unit.

**Unsuccessful ventures**

- In spite of repeated telephone calls it was not possible to get one student who had left university three years ago to face the FNDE assignments. He had a history of sitting in class and leaving it as soon as the assignment papers were distributed.

- There were some repeat students who could not be contacted and the final examination results showed they were not successful in completing the FNDE units.

**Conclusion**

Based on the findings and the successes observed after implementation of the action plan it could be concluded that:

- When students have economic problems, psychological issues or physical disabilities they find it difficult to overcome challenges in learning.

- If they are given encouragement and motivation they are more likely to succeed.
Reflections and Recommendations

It is recommended that together with identifying the failures in the second year, a comprehensive programme should be implemented to monitor the absentees during the first year itself and thus avoid these students failing in the first year.

The class teachers should monitor the absentees and inform the coordinators so that they could contact these students and offer some relief to their problems at the early stages.

Thus it could be seen that it is imperative that all ELT lecturers should observe, monitor and encourage these students and provide the basic lower order needs whenever possible. This will help them to fulfill the basic requirement of passing the two FNDE units to obtain their Arts degree.

The human interest stories which emerged during the course of the study makes it extremely important to consider the following ideas on relationships with the youth whom we deal with:

- One of the key elements of positive youth development is having relationships with caring adults.
- These relationships are important as adults may provide both emotional (caring and nurturing) and instrumental (practical and helpful) support to youth.
- Different youth need different support from adults at different times in their lives. (Digby, J and Ferrari, T.M. 2005)
References


Abbreviations

ELTU  English language Teaching Unit
IPUR  Identify, Plan, Undertake, Review
ELT  English Language Teaching
FNDE  Foundation in English