EFL Motivation in the Saudi Public Schools: Problem, Causes and Solutions

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This paper discusses the effect of the motivational factor on the process of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Saudi public schools. It suggests that the decline or lack of motivation to study EFL by students in these schools is one of the main factors causing their low achievement in this foreign language (FL). The writer maintains that the status of the mother tongue, nature of the society, lack of awareness of the goals and needs of EFL in Saudi Arabia, and the unpleasant experiences of studying EFL in the Saudi public schools are among the important reasons and causes that have led to the decline or lack of motivation in this regard. After classifying EFL motivation in the Saudi Public Schools into long-term and short-term motivation, the paper proceeds to suggest some solutions for the problem under discussion.

There are different factors affecting achievement in foreign language (FL) learning such as age, sex, aptitude, and many others(1). However, the present paper focuses on the effect of the motivational factor with a special reference to the situation of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Saudi public schools. In particular, it attempts to suggest that the decline or lack of motivation to study EFL among many of the Saudi students in the public schools is one of the main factors that cause their underachievement in this FL. Then the paper endeavours to discuss and explore the causes involved in this problem of EFL low motivation and tries to propose some solutions for it.
The Effect of Motivation and Attitude on Foreign Language Learning

The effect of the motivational and attitudinal factors on FL attainment has been widely discussed in the EFL literature. For example, Nida\(^2\) suggested that motivation is one of the important factors affecting FL achievement, despite the effect of other factors such as intelligence, auditory memory, analytical ability, and skills in mimicry. Gardner indicated "...results of studies conducted in Montreal and London, Canada, as well as in Maine, Louisiana, and Connecticut. In each of these areas the results clearly indicate that a particular pattern of attitudinal-motivational components facilitated second language acquisition\(^3\)." Lambert et al.\(^4\), Spolsky\(^5\), and Lukmani\(^6\) also found a positive correlation between FL achievement and the attitudinal-motivational factor.

FL Motivation Types

The needs and motives to acquire a first language are self-explanatory—one has to acquire his first language in order to survive and interact with his society. However, the case of an FL learner is different. His motivation to learn an FL results from a great variety of needs and goals. In general, these needs and goals can be categorized according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs\(^7\). They may range from meeting basic physiological needs, for example, in the case of newly arrived immigrants, to goal directed and self-actualization needs, for example, in the case of scholars.

Gardner and Lambert\(^8\) were able to differentiate between two types of FL motivation that cover a broad range of needs and goals. They call them "instrumental" and "integrative" motivation. The former type results from utilitarian needs and goals such as job requirement, and travelling and studying abroad. The latter type results from, for example, desires and needs to integrate with the native speakers and culture of the FL. Earlier, Carroll\(^9\) had suggested that FL motivation can be either extrinsic or intrinsic. It is intrinsic when it arises from inner needs or goals within the FL learner. And it is extrinsic when it is caused by needs and goals in the educational system, conditions at home, or in the society at large.
The Problem of Motivation in the Saudi Public Schools:
An Inquiry into the Causes

After studying English for six years in the intermediate and secondary public schools, many Saudi students from these schools can hardly construct one correct English sentence either in writing or speaking. Although the problem is not as bad as it may sound, it cannot pass unnoticed. A host of factors that can be causing this predicament may be suggested; however, it is the present writer's thesis that the decline or lack of motivation to study EFL is one of the main factors in this respect. Based on years of experience as an EFL teacher and researcher, it has been this writer's field observations that some Saudi students in the public schools do lack the motivation to study EFL from the very early stage of their learning of this FL. Others might start with neutral or high motivation (perhaps due to the novelty of this school subject) which tends to decline as these students proceed to learn this language. An inquiry into this problem, based on the writer's experience, has revealed that the following causes are among the most important ones that might be involved in this regard.

Lack of Awareness

While learning English in the public schools, the majority of the young Saudi students cannot normally conceive of the potential needs and significance of learning this FL. Moreover, they do not see any functional importance for English in their daily lives, simply because they already speak a native language with which they are able to fulfill all of their needs of knowing a language in their own society. Evidently, the absence of daily functional use of the English language in Saudi Arabia, and the lack of awareness of its potential or future significance in the eyes of our young Saudi students may abate their motivation to learn this FL, which, in turn, results in underachievement.

Conversely, when these students become aware of the needs and the significance of the English language, they tend to overcome the motivational problem and learn English with a reasonable command within a relatively short period of time, provided, of course, they exert the required efforts. For example, Saudi students who go abroad for further education in English-speaking countries or those who study at local institutions where English is the medium of instruction, are normally able to learn English in a year or so after they have been enrolled in intensive language programs. Likewise, private and public sector employees
whose jobs require English also manage to do the same within a comparable period of time. It should not take one long to conclude that the awareness of these employees and students of their needs and the significance of English for their careers has instrumentally motivated them to learn it, which, in turn, led to better attainment. Although one cannot attribute this success solely to the effect of motivation, one can say that higher motivation, as a result of the learner's awareness of his needs and of the importance of English, has played a major role in this case.

A contrast of the public student situation with the situation of the employees and students aboard clearly demonstrates the tremendous effect of the motivational factor on FL achievement.

Status of the Mother Tongue
The status of the mother tongue (Arabic) is another cause that may contribute to the reduction or lack of motivation to learn English among many young Saudi students in the public schools. Besides being their native language, Arabic is the language of the Saudi students' Religion (Islam) and its holy book (The Quran). What is more, Arabic is associated with the glorious Islamic civilization and great Arabian heritage. All of these facts make the Arabic language occupy a very high status in the view of the Saudi society and their young learners.

In light of this, learning any FL may be perceived by this society as a threat to the mother tongue (Arabic). Such perception can be transferred by the parents or the teachers to the young learners in the public schools in very subtle ways. Gardner (1973) stated “By his own attitudes the parent may develop in the child doubts about the real need for the language.”(10) This process may decrease motivation to learn any FL. Thus achievement in this language will be negatively affected.

Nature of the Saudi Society
The particular nature of the Saudi society is probably another cause behind the decline or lack of motivation to learn English in the Saudi public schools.

Saudi Arabia can be characterized as a cohesive and conservative Muslim society that is earnestly striving to develop and promote itself through the acquisition of sound education and modern technology. At the same time, it is trying
very hard to preserve its Islamic values and national heritage. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is the locale of the most important Muslim shrines. All of these characteristics make Saudi Arabia occupy a respected position in the Muslim and Arab worlds and enhance the Saudis' consciousness of, and attachment to, the preservation of their Islamic and national identity and culture of which Arabic is an inseparable component.

In such a society, learning any FL and the cultural aspects that may accompany this learning may be seen as acquiring foreign traits whose spread might endanger the native culture and language. A cultural challenge may arise then because the society is aware of the importance of English for its development, but it resists the intrusion of a foreign culture and the spread of an FL. Normally, such a situation will have an impact on motivation to learn this FL as well as its resultant achievement.

Previous Unpleasant Experiences

The unpleasant experiences of underachievement in English among many Saudi students in the public schools (because of many factors, including low motivation to learn EFL) have prompted a common false belief that English is a difficult subject to study.

This belief is usually communicated by older students to their younger peers who have not studied English yet or are about to do so. Consequently, some young Saudi students come to the English classroom for the first time with such an attitude toward learning this FL. This attitude becomes reinforced in the minds of these students by observing failure and low attainment in English among many older peers as well as by their stories of how difficult it is to learn it. As a result, fear of this language, expectation of failure, and a negative attitude toward learning English become dominant, which are finally followed by loss of interest and decreased motivation to study this FL. Later on, all become confirmed by subsequent failures.

The above mentioned causes are not the only ones behind the decline or lack of motivation to learn EFL in the Saudi public schools; however, the writer's experience confirms that they are the most salient ones. Similarly, the lack or decline of motivation to study English in the case of many young Saudi students is
not the only factor behind their under-achievement in this FL, yet it plays a major role in this regard.

**Short-Term and Long-Term Motivation**

Before any attempt is made to propose a solution for the problem of low EFL motivation in the Saudi public schools, motivation will be classified into two categories: long-term and short-term motivation. This dichotomy will help in facilitating the discussion of the suggested solutions.

**Long-Term Motivation**

It is the one that results from the learner’s ultimate needs and goals of learning FL.

**Short-Term Motivation**

This type of motivation is best described by Grittner’s definition of the intrinsic motivation (1977): “It involves those techniques that induce the learner to do what he has to do in order to accomplish the task at hand.” In other words, it is the motivation that the teacher or the textbook writer arouses in the learner by utilizing different activities, techniques, or instructional aids in the classroom in order to impart a particular segment of the course.

**Techniques for Stimulating Long and Short-Term Motivation**

Good practitioner teachers probably need not be told how to motivate their students because their professional experience, intuition, and sensitivity to their needs will perhaps provide them with better techniques than what is going to be mentioned here. However, the following techniques may have some value for novice teachers and may also be helpful for experienced teachers.

**Techniques for Stimulating Long-Term Motivation**

The following are suggestions to stimulate the long-term motivation to learn English in the Saudi public schools:

1. For the Saudi students who study English as an FL for the first time, the teacher may want to prepare a list of the goals and needs of learning English in Saudi Arabia and its potential functional significance, and to discuss this list with his students, of course in Arabic, in the first week of classes. The teacher can elic-
more related goals, needs, and reasons from his students to reinforce their awareness of them.

2 - The teacher of the native language (Arabic) could be asked to make these students write a composition paper on the values of, and reasons for, learning English in Saudi Arabia.

3 - Successful students in English from higher classes in the school can be asked to demonstrate their ability in front of their fellow students who are learning English for the first time. The hope is that this activity will inspire these young learners and rid them of their false belief that English is a difficult subject to study.

4 - Parent’s attitude is very important in shaping their children’s attitude toward and motivation to learn an FL. Meyer offers a good suggestion to elicit a positive attitude from the parents toward the study of the FL. Meyer suggests setting up a festival for the foreign language program to share with the students’ parents and local community its various outcomes in such a way that classifies the goal, needs, and scope of the program as well as the students’ achievement. This will help in giving the society a clear picture of the educational role of the FL, and hence reduce their fear of its advent.

5 - EFL textbook writers and teachers in Saudi Arabia ought to choose EFL instructional materials that reflect the needs and goals of EFL in this country. They should also focus on the language skills which they believe to be most needed in the case of Saudi students. Thus the EFL goals and needs will always be clear from the instructional material and the emphasized skills. Normally, students will gear their behavior toward these goals and needs as long as they are kept aware of them.

6 - The same textbook writers should select topics and situations from the Saudi students’ own culture and values in order to teach the foreign language elements. This will reassure the students and their society that learning a foreign language does not constitute a threat to their native culture and its language.

7 - The content of EFL tests should always signal, as much as possible, the goals and needs of learning English in Saudi Arabia. Students should always see
a clear connection between EFL tests at hand and the EFL material and skills taught to them in the classroom. Tests are forceful tools in shaping students’ behavior because each student wants to do well in the tests; therefore, they serve as excellent incentives to achieve the goals and needs of a program and always keep the students aware of them.

The intention here is not to give an exhaustive list of suggestions and techniques to induce long-term motivation, but rather to give some examples of them.

Techniques for Stimulating Short-Term Motivation

The literature on foreign language learning is rich in ideas and techniques on how to raise short-term motivation; therefore, an attempt will be made here to summarize the general areas in which these ideas and techniques may fall.

1) Tests and Grades

Knowing the powerful effect of tests and grades on students’ motivation, teachers may want to use easy tests and be generous with grades at the beginning of the language course. This should build up confidence in the students and rid them of their false belief that English is difficult. As the course proceeds, tests can increase in difficulty, and the teachers become more accurate in giving grades so that the students do not get wrong ideas.

2) Material

It should be carefully graded. It can be easy at the beginning, and then gain very gradually and smoothly in complexity.

3) Audio-Visual Aids

Films, pictures, records, language laboratories, etc. make foreign language learning pleasant, easier, and attractive.

4) Games and Dramatization

Games, dramatization, and role playing can serve as tools to motivate students to learn the EFL material at hand.

5) Exercises

Exercises have to be communicative and pleasant and not only meaningful and mechanical\(^{(14)}\).
Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper has shed some light on the causes that are related to the problem of the decline or lack of motivation to study EFL in the Saudi public schools. Moreover, teachers, textbook writers, and curriculum planners of EFL for students in these schools are invited to further explore this problem and also to find more solutions for it than what has been proposed here.

Notes

(10) Gardner, op. cit., p. 3.
(12) Gardner, op. cit.,
الدافعية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية بالمدارس الحكومية السعودية: المشكلة أسابها وحلوها

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تبحث هذه المقالة بشكل عام في تأثير عامل الدافعية في عملية تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في مدارس التعليم العام بالمملكة العربية السعودية. وتثير المقالة بالتنديد إلى أن تدهور أو نقص الدافعية لدراسة اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية بين الطلاب السعوديين في تلك المدارس هو واحد من الأسباب الرئيسية التي يمكن أن يعزى إليه ضعف تحصيل الطلاب في تلك اللغة الأجنبية. وينبغي كتاب المقالة على أن مكانة اللغة الأم، وطبيعة المجتمع السعودي، ونقص الرعي بالأهداف والحاجة لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في المملكة، والخبرات غير السارة أثناء تعلم تلك اللغة في مدارس التعليم العام تقع ضمن الأسباب الهامة التي أدت إلى تدهور أو نقص الدافعية لتعلم هذه اللغة لدى الطلاب السعوديين في تلك المدارس.

وستعرض المقالة بعد ذلك بعض الحلول للمشكلة المطروحة في هذا البحث. وذلك بعد أن صنفت الدافعية لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في مدارس التعليم العام بالمملكة العربية السعودية بالدافعية ذات المدى الطويل، والدافعية ذات المدى القصير.