

Variation in Learner Effort – Effects of the Teaching Setting

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Correlations between two teaching setting measures (the learner's attitudes towards the teacher and towards the English course) and the effort the learner expends in order to learn English as a foreign language are looked into and discussed.

The learner effort component of the foreign language (FL) learning process has been included in most studies dealing with achievement in general, and with motivation in particular. The amount of effort the individual expends in order to learn the foreign language has been termed motivational intensity by Lambert and Gardner (1972). Assessments of the effort that the learner invests into FL learning have so far been based on self-report, although Gardner (1985) claims that more objective measures could be developed. The existing self-report measures focus on the amount of effort spent on homework, willingness to take on special assignments, activity spent on improving the level of knowledge, and intentions about using available opportunities to improve FL knowledge. This pure effort component is distinguished from the desire to learn the FL in question, which is viewed as an affective index.

Learner effort, or motivational intensity in Gardner's terminology, is a notion that came to be one of the key concepts in Gardner's revised model of motivation as it relates to second language acquisition. In his 1985 book, Gardner differentiates between orientation and motivation. While taking orientation to refer to a class of reasons for learning a second language, motivation in his revised model refers to a complex of three characteristics that may or may not be related to a particular orientation: attitudes towards learning the language, desire to learn the language, and motivational intensity.

A classification of attitudes which differentiates between the so-called educational and social attitudes considers attitudes towards the teacher and the course as educationally relevant. Literature on studies in this area suggests that in language courses educational attitudes are implicated in achievement more than is true for other subject areas.

Aim

The study reported here aimed at finding a connection between the effort that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) invest into learning and their attitudes towards the EFL teacher and the course. According to a wide-spread belief, the way the learner sees his teacher affects the way he views his course, and this in turn determines the amount of effort the learner is willing to expend in order to learn.

Method

Sample

The sample comprised 340 learners of EFL. There was approximately the same number of male and female subjects. The subjects belonged to three age groups: primary school, secondary school, and adult. The three age groups corresponded to three levels of proficiency in English.

Instruments

Effort invested in learning English was measured by a ten-item multiple choice test developed by Gardner, Smythe and Clément (1979). The test was translated into Croatian. The items dealt with work done for assignments, future intentions to study and make use of the language, amount of practice with the language outside school, and the importance attributed to knowing English.

Attitudes towards the EFL teacher were assessed by means of semantic differential scales developed by Gardner, Smythe and Brunet (1977). The following four measures were estimated by the scales: evaluation of the English teacher, rapport, competence, inspiration.

Attitudes towards the English course were measured by the 7-point semantic differential scales developed also by Gardner, Smythe and Brunet (1977). The following measures were estimated: evaluation of the English course, difficulty of the course, utility of the course, and interest of the English course.

In both cases, the scales were arranged so as to make sure that the subjects would not give automatic answers but would consider their real feelings.

Procedure

The subjects were acquainted with the purpose of the investigation and were carefully instructed on how to fill in the semantic differential scales. They seemed to appreciate the cooperation they were supposed to offer.

Results and discussion

All the results obtained were correlated using the Pearson correlation coefficients.

Figure 1 presents the correlations thus obtained. The coefficients of .30 and above were considered significant.

		Learner Effort
COURSE	Evaluation	.448
	Difficulty	.177
	Utility	.471
	Interest	.455
TEACHER	Evaluation	.191
	Rapport	.169
	Competence	.350
	Inspiration	.291

Figure 1: Correlation coefficients between the included variables

The correlation coefficients show significant positive correlations between learner effort and all course measures but one, while effort correlates significantly with only one teacher measure.

The more highly the learner evaluates his English course, the more effort he seems to be willing to put into learning. It is interesting to note a lack of significant correlation between effort and difficulty of the course. One would expect that the more difficult the course, the more effort the learner would be investing into learning. Learners who find their English course useful expend more effort into learning English. The same is true of interest: the more interesting the course, the more effort the learner invests.

One may be tempted to conclude that, in terms of the cause-and-effect relations, learner effort is the result of evaluating the course highly, of seeing it as useful and interesting. However, it is also possible that these relations are two-directional: the more effort the learner invests, the more useful the course becomes in his trying to become proficient in English. A higher level of invested effort may also enable the learner to feel more involved with what goes on in his English classes and, consequently, the course becomes more interesting.

The missing correlation with difficulty is not easy to explain. In order to get a better insight into this, the achievement measure was introduced and its correlation with effort computed. The result ($= .167$) points to an unexpected lack of significant correlation. A possible explanation is that the criteria for knowledge evaluation in schools are such

that high grades can be achieved without much effort if the learner finds the course easy and, with poor learners, a lot of effort may lead to little success only. In this way the criteria for evaluating learner achievement become an important variable of the teaching setting that directly influences learner effort.

As far as teacher measures are concerned, it is interesting to note that effort does not correlate significantly with teacher evaluation. The learner may think highly of his teacher and still not be willing to invest a lot of effort into his English course.

The rapport the teacher may have does not seem to have any effect on learner effort either. The same is true of teacher inspiration.

The only teacher characteristic that shows a connection with learner effort is teacher competence. It seems that our learners are motivated for learning only by a teacher whom they consider expert in English and in teaching. This is a very significant finding. The aspect of the teaching setting that has any bearing on learning effort may, then, be teacher competence, thanks to which the course may be viewed as good, useful and interesting enough for the learner to invest effort into his learning.

This may be an important fact for practising teachers to know: it may be more important that their learners think of them as well-organized, industrious, intelligent, capable and competent than as friendly, considerate, patient, imaginative and interesting. From practical experience we know that the proficiency level of most teachers remains the same as at graduation and, in a lot of cases, even deteriorates with time (due to a lack of time and opportunity to improve). Most attention in their in-service teacher education, on the other hand, is devoted to developing those characteristics that, according to our findings, are not connected with learner effort.

Conclusion

Learner effort, being an important component in the FL learning process, has been shown in this study to correlate with the way the learner views teacher competence, course utility and course interest, and the way he evaluates his English course.

Some other aspects of the teaching setting, such as course difficulty and teacher evaluation, rapport and inspiration, seem not to have any bearing on the amount of effort the learner is willing to invest into learning EFL. Although this study is a correlational one and gives no proof for the cause-effect relations between the variables included, we may assume that teacher competence is of key importance, i.e., it is teacher competence that contributes to the course measures which show significant correlations.

This is a finding that merits further consideration and investigation since, if this conclusion proves correct, it should point to some new directions for in-service teacher education too.

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RAZLIKE U UČENIKOVU TRUDU – UTJECAJ NASTAVNE SREDINE

U članku se razmatraju korelacije dvaju elemenata nastavne sredine (učenikovi stavovi prema nastavniku i satovima engleskog jezika) i truda koji učenik ulaže da bi naučio engleski kao strani jezik.