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ESP Course for Development Professionals in Bangladesh: Motivational factors and Learning Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the motivational factors behind learning English by some development professionals and the learning strategies exploited by them during their three-month-long in-service English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. Taking fifty managers of a renowned non-governmental organization (NGO) as the subject of the study, the researcher investigated their motivational factors behind learning English language and their favored language learning strategies during the process. Following a mixed method approach, the researcher administered a twenty-three-item survey questionnaire to fifty respondents and conducted two focus group discussions (FGD) with ten of them. The accumulated quantitative data were presented in chart form and triangulated with the qualitative data got from the FGD and analyzed under the framework of Gardner's socio-educational model of language learning and Dörnyei's motivational self-system. The study revealed that learning English language at a later stage of life was driven by various extrinsic or instrumental motivations like feeling secured in job, possibilities of promotion, opportunity of foreign deployment, communicating better with visitors, increasing employability and, even, helping the younger children at home, all of which goes under the instrumental motivation. Besides, the respondents disclosed their favored learning strategies during the course. At the end, this paper comes up with a list of major findings of the research which may guide future ESP practitioners who intend to deal with adult professionals of different other sectors.

Keywords: adult learners, professionals, motivation, learning strategies, employability

INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, non-governmental development sectors provide job opportunities for many graduates in the grassroots-level where medium of communication is predominantly Bangla (Bengali) and professionals, very naturally, lose much of their English language proficiency as time pass by. Nevertheless, some of the competent professionals gradually go up the hierarchy to take

superior responsibilities and face the overwhelming demand of better communication and language skills with government officials, foreign donors, personnel of humanitarian organizations, and the programme beneficiaries. At this juncture, many mid-career adults start to learn English again realizing the importance of English language skills in the growth of their career. Now, learning any second language is usually a daunting task, if

someone leaves the formal teaching-learning setting of schools and colleges. Therefore, the researcher found it intriguing to investigate the motivational factors for (re)learning English by these development professionals and the strategies they used to reach their goal.

Context of the ESP course for development professionals

The subject of the present study were all mid-level managers of a renowned non-governmental organization (NGO) who has been working in the sector for a few years to maximum fifteen years with a good understanding of the challenges and opportunities of any low-cost, need-based and realistic development intervention in changing poor people's lives. When some of these organizations go to expand programme operations in any of the Afro-Asian developing countries, these managers, well-equipped with the operational know-how of multifaceted development programmes, work as the driving force for the organization. For the successful implementation of development programmes in foreign terrains, the organizations feel the extreme need of the Bangladeshi NGO professionals' expertise; of course, with English language proficiency and cross-cultural communication skills. In that line, a reputed language institute of a private university of Bangladesh offered ESP course for the professionals of the aforementioned development organization.

Changing nature of economic migration Since 1976, Bangladesh has experienced mainly two types of migration. One type is the economic migration of dominantly unskilled and semi-skilled workers to the Middle East and the South-East Asian countries. The other group represents the educated and/or skilled class who migrates to the developed countries with a view to reside their permanently in a better socio-economic condition. ADB reports, "Overseas employment itself represents over one-fifth of the annual addition to the country's [Bangladesh's] total labor force" (1). However, the subjects of the current study represent the third type of migrants, who intends to go to some other Asian and African developing countries with the know-how of the grassroots-level development interventions. During the period of foreign deployment, these professionals need to

work with beneficiaries in multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural setting and communicate with all sorts of people from top to bottom. Therefore, English language becomes essential for this group of professionals. The study tried to identify the motivational factors of this group of adult learners with their favoured language learning strategies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Various previous research activities and projects dealt with the motivational issues behind learning English in schools, colleges and universities of Bangladesh – in both publicly and privately funded ones. A few of the studies dealt even with the parents' motivation behind having their children being proficient in English and sending them to English medium schools. Surprisingly, researchers are very reluctant over the motivational issues of the mid-career English language learners in the context of Bangladesh, which was, perhaps, a few decades ago, a world-wide phenomenon if we take note of the seminal book of Malcolm Knowles' *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*. To make up for the existing paucity of research on the motivational aspect of mid-career language learners, the researcher investigated the following two research questions:

- What are the major motivational drives of mid-career NGO professionals to learn English language skills again, after leaving their academic life far behind?
- What are the common learning strategies followed by these mid-career professionals while learning English?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Bangladesh, professionals of the non-governmental sectors, regularly face various job-related uncertainties, because their jobs are not as taken-for-granted as the governmental ones. To adapt with all the drastic changes, professionals need to go through continuous learning and updating of their knowledge and skills – with opportunities provided either by the organization, or self-initiated ones. In a research article, Burton puts the changes brought by learning thus: "Learning is a change in the individual, due to the

interaction of that individual, and his environment, which fills a need and makes him more capable of dealing adequately with his environment” (7). Learning, thus, results in some sort of change within the individual so as to help the people, society and country where s/he is working. To draw our attention towards the distinction between the learning in childhood and learning at a grown-up age, Knowles in his 1973 book entitled *Adult Learners: A Neglected Species* propagates the assumptions of andragogy, or adult teaching-learning theory, which unlike pedagogy holds “as a person grows and matures his self-concept moves from one of total dependency (as is the reality of the infant) to one of increasing self-directedness” (45). Professionals continue to or desire to learn beyond the institutional setting to bring change within them with a clear sense of self-directedness.

Language Skills need for economic migrants While investigating the necessity and usefulness of language skills for unskilled economic migrants, Erling et al. expresses their view thus: “One of the most oft-cited reasons for wanting to learn English given by people from rural areas was that the language would provide them with the tools for pursuing economic migration” (2). In September 2019, the official statistics of Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) reports that around 12.66 million Bangladeshi unskilled and semi-skilled workers went abroad as economic migrants between 1976 and September 2019 earning around US\$ 205205.53 million. However, things are not often rosy for many of these economic migrants as they lack the necessary trade skills and the language skills. The 2008 UNDP report by Buchenau states that language skills gap often creates a barrier in understanding the customs, legal systems of a foreign country and also to seek for remedies through appropriate channels in case of any sort of maltreatment or injustice. Regarding this issue Coleman laments thus: “The role of English in international migrant working has received relatively very little attention” (10). Therefore, language skills require special attention before sending economic migrants to a foreign country. In 2016, Khatun’s newspaper article entitled “Migrant workers deserve better” puts the

plights of Bangladeshi migrant workers and probable remedies thus:

Migrants from Bangladesh get one of the lowest payments compared to migrants from other countries. This calls for skills development. Along with the government, the private and non-government organisations should impart training on skills upgradation, English language, rights and obligations, safety, accidents and hazards, savings and money transfer before the departure of the migrants.

Motivation and foreign language learning In 1959, Gardner & Lambert propose their version of socio-educational model of language learning with two-fold categorization of learners’ motivational issues, namely “integrative and instrumental motivations” (267). Here, integrative motivation refers to the learners’ eager intention to be integrated as a member of the target language community with a deep attraction towards all the socio-cultural and literary issues emanating from that language. On the other hand, instrumental motivation refers to external factors or influences connected to the learning of a language. These external factors are like getting good grades by students, securing a good job by graduates where employers value good English proficiency, earning more money or maintaining social status by being a user of that language, etc. However, academics consider the issue of integration with the native speaking community critically as the possibility of such integration often remains very limited for most of the language learners.

In the field of educational psychology, Deci & Ryan (qtd. in Nasmilah 299) used two terms “intrinsic and extrinsic motivations” with near close interpretation of Gardner & Lambert’s “integrative and instrumental motivations”. Building on all the previous research and adding new ones Clement et al. (qtd. in Nasmilah 298-299) identified four orientations among the foreign language learners, namely “(a) instrumental -friendship and travel-related, (b) integrative - identification with the target language group (c) sociocultural orientations - general interest in the culture and in world events,

and (d) knowledge expansion and career improvement”.

Strategies for learning a foreign language Working for years on the L2 learners, Dörnyei developed the motivational self-system of L2 [FL in Bangladesh] learning with three inseparable components; “the ideal L2 self”, “ought-to L2 self” and “L2 learning experience”. Whereas the “ideal L2 self” is some utopian target of a language learner where s/he aspires to reach through hard work, the “ought-to L2 self” includes the drive to meet the expectations, may be of own and of the organization, or to avoid any negative outcome due to gap in L2 skills. The “ought-to L2 self,” thus connects to the extrinsic motivation of Gardner’s model. The L2 learning experiences shade light on the language learning process and the experiences of the learner. Reviewing Oxford’s seminal work Goethals identifies two sets of strategies: direct and indirect. Making a summary of the learning strategies, he presented those two sets of strategies thus:

A first set of strategies are labelled 'direct': “memory strategies (for remembering and retrieving new information), cognitive strategies (for understanding and producing language), and compensation strategies (for using language despite knowledge gaps). The second set are called 'indirect': metacognitive strategies (for planning and coordinating the learning process), affective strategies (for regulating emotions while learning), and social strategies (for learning with others). (475-476)

Oxford (qtd. in Nasmilah 302) identifies some conditions under which learning strategy is useful:

(1) the strategy relates well to the L2 task at hand, (2) the strategy fits the particular students’ learning style preferences to one degree or another, and (3) the learner employs the effective strategy and develop a bridge to relate it with other relevant strategies.

However, findings from various research literatures suggest that learners do not equally practice all the strategies and even successful language learners differ from one another in terms

of the language strategies they follow or favour. In this line, Nasmilah comments: “Empowering memory is the most favorable learning strategies found to be utilized by the students when engaged in language learning” (306). She also asserts that “language learners with higher motivation tend to employ more varied learning strategies compared to learners with lower motivation” (306). Briggs in Ehrman et al. (qtd. in Nasmilah 302) brought the issues of motivation into learning strategies and categorized them into surface, achieving and deep; where the first one demands little personal investment, the second looks for success or grades and the third requires personal investment through various means. Ehrman, though, suggests the combination of appropriate learning strategies and motivation as “deep and achieving” accepting the “existence of a place for surface strategies, because sometimes the cost/benefit ratio of a task does not justify any deeper investment” (174).

METHODOLOGY

For the study the researcher took fifty mid-level NGO professionals as the subject, all of them held master’s degree from different streams and were working in the organization from a few years to around fifteen years. The researcher selected respondents from three different batches of the ESP course and each of them got a twenty-three-item survey questionnaire graded in five-point Likert scale. Ten purposively selected professionals participated in two FGDs where they came up with their insights on motivation and their language learning strategies. Then the researcher analysed the accumulated quantitative data and categorized the data in five groups: self-perceptions, need of English in development sector, motivation and feedback, learning strategies and possibility of professional growth and presented the responses as charts in percentile points. From the two FGDs, the researcher gathered qualitative data and triangulated with the quantitative data. At the end of the findings section, the researcher listed some of the major findings of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

To investigate into the motivational issues and learning strategies of the development

professionals, it was very important to know how they placed the state of their existing language proficiency, level of anxiety and age to go forward with the course and the researcher presented learners' response on the abovementioned issues in figure 1 (Learners' self-perceptions).

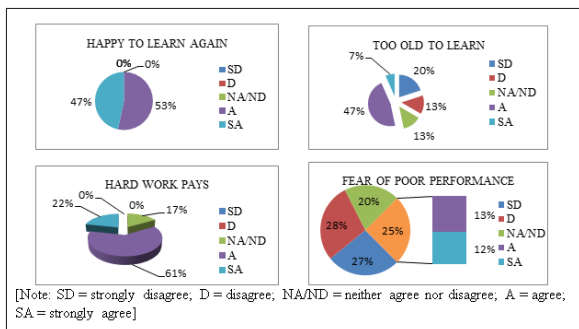


Figure 1: Learners' self-perceptions

One aspect was encouraging that all the professionals were happy to get the English language learning opportunity again. Nonetheless 47% respondents agreed that they were too old to learn English again. At this juncture, we may recall Krashen's critical period hypothesis (CPH) to help the learners. One heartening finding was that 62% of the respondents agreed on the value of hard work. Responses on these four statements place a very realistic scenario of the mental state of the concerned professionals after a considerable time working for an organization.

Category 2 of the survey items investigated the necessity of English language skills in the professional life of those respondents and 67% agreed that speaking is the most necessary language skill (Fig. 2). However, from language teaching-learning perspective, listening should come together with speaking. In response to the very next statement 70% of them agreed that they need to communicate with foreigners, donors, visitors and government officials and no disagreement was expressed. In the residential in-service language training 73% of the respondents stated their enthusiasm about learning foreign language and culture. However, we need to look into the FGD discussion to point out clearly whether this enthusiasm is instrumental or integrative.

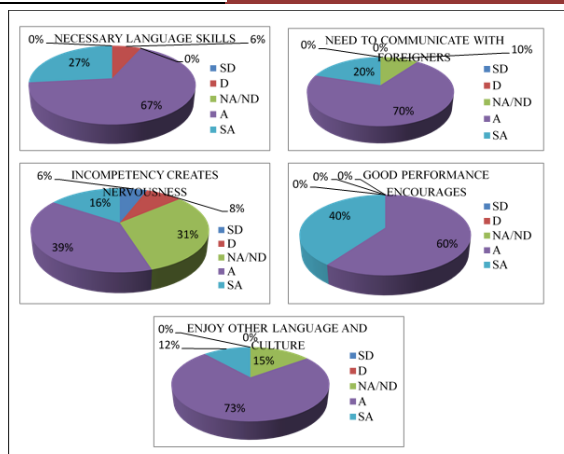


Figure 2: Need of English in development sector

Category 3 investigated the instructor's role in motivating mid-career professionals (Fig. 3). Research literatures on language studies inform that motivation comes from within and without, naming them as integrative and instrumental motivation. Respondents in this section placed great importance to the role of the instructor's regular feedback as they could influence the learners greatly in learning English. Regarding the openness among learners in receiving teachers' feedback 53% respondents agreed. This again approved by respondents strong disagreement for the questions asking them, whether they have the avoidance tendency against feedback. Sixty percent of the respondents denied any such tendency. FGD discussions revealed that the learners were anxious and less proactive at the beginning of the ESP course, but they gradually recovered from that situation with the help of the teachers' modern teaching methodologies and learner-friendly behaviour.

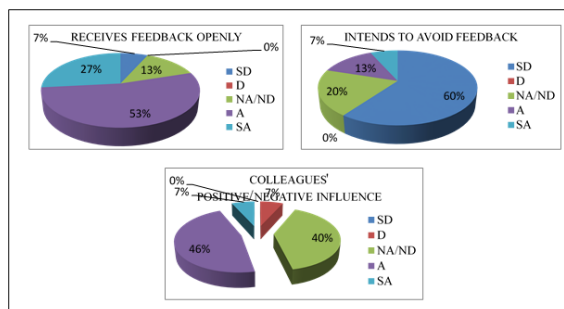


Figure 3: Motivation and feedback

The respondents graded the next five statements on their learning strategy-related

preferences and the findings were presented as pie charts (Fig. 4). In support of the teaching-learning activity inside the ESP classroom, 48% of the respondents agreed that their preference was for pair and group activity. Though 15% of the respondents remained neutral, there was no disagreement on this issue. In response to the second statement 61% of the respondents preferred naturalistic setting for the practice of speaking and writing. This issue proves the importance of role-play, open discussion forum, debates on ongoing socio-political issues to facilitate learner involvement. Next two statements were placed to let the respondents choose between the socio-political and professional issues as their favoured topic of speaking and writing. Thirty-two per cent of the respondents agreed that they liked to write and speak on socio-political issues whereas 41% of them remained neutral. This showed that many of the respondents are not decided upon their preferences. On the other hand 58% respondents agreed that they preferred their job-related issues. As the managers were very competent, it was very logical that they felt very comfortable in explaining the programme components and their field operation in English. The last statement of the section was about the scope of English use in their profession and 40% of them agreed that they could use English in the professional setting. Managers, who moved gradually towards the upper-level jobs, got more opportunity to use the language, whereas language need and use for lower and middle tier of managers was very limited.

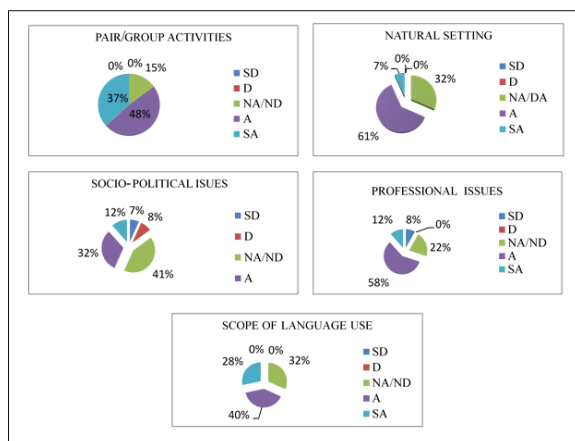


Figure 4: Learning strategies

Figure 5 presents the issues which are directly connected with the learners' English language skills and their professional growth. As possibility of professional growth accelerates any human activity, this issue was deeply connected with the motivational factors of any language learner. In response to the statement regarding any possible connection between English skills and professional growth 20% of the respondents strongly agreed and 67% of the respondents agreed and none of them disagreed. Various other research findings also go with this trend in the context of Bangladesh. In response to the statement regarding the connection between better English skills and promotion in the job 53% of the respondents agreed, but 40% of them remained neutral. Though none of them disagreed about the issue, many respondents' neutral position revealed the uncertainty regarding any connection between the language skills and professional growth because language and communication skills were only small part of the overall competence of any mid-level NGO employee. Again 37% of the respondents agreed that language skills would increase their employability even beyond the existing job whereas 32% did not either agree or disagree with the statement and around 18% respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents agreed that good language skills would increase the probability of going abroad to work with the organization's development programmes. In response to the next statement 58% agreed about the precedence of English proficient colleagues' foreign engagement in the same organization. The last statement in this category revealed the uncertainty of the non-governmental jobs in Bangladesh. Twenty-five percent of the respondents strongly agreed and 60% of them agreed on the issue of remaining competitive not only in current job, but also for the job opportunities available in other national and international organizations.

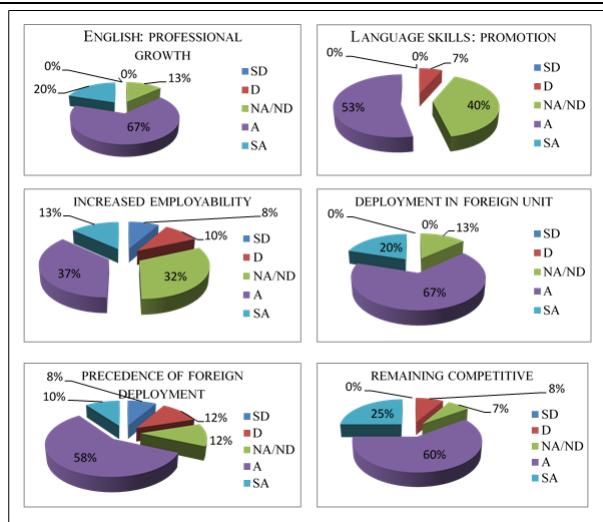


Figure 5: Possibility of professional growth

Findings from FGDs During the FGD discussions, the professionals were first asked about their motivation in joining the ESP course. All agreed that they were selected through a screening by the university authority before their enrollment into the course. These learners expressed their hope thus: “Hope, to speak English well.” All the discussants took the English training as “effective for both practical and service life” and they expressed English language consciousness thus: “global language, needed to sustain as a global citizen.” Again job related uncertainties made them to think about remaining “competitive in job sectors” both in and out of the organization. Professionals who have children expressed their intention thus: “want to help my children to learn English.” One of the respondents put his self-perceptions as a language learner thus: “Enjoying the class. Though I was mediocre as a student, I was always interested about English. [I am] trying to do everything to develop myself.” Another put his thought as follows: “At first, fear was in mind; hesitation worked; now teachers made things easier.” FGD disclosed some of the learners’ self-perceptions on their English language skills during the student-life which gradually diminished during these long years of monolingual Bangla job environment and social context. This sense might be called the “lost L2 self” and they fought to regain that competence back at a challenging stage of life.

Though the learners expressed their hesitation and reservation at the beginning of the course, with the passing of time, the learners started to practise speaking even in their faltering and inaccurate English being encouraged by their teachers and pressurized by the peers. They were actually following all the strategies to make their latent, passive knowledge and skills active to meet the demand of communication. These professionals also expressed their satisfaction over the online writing sessions where they could respond in both synchronous and asynchronous way. The facilitator used to start a discussion by posting any argumentative topic during the session. Learners could put their arguments and counter argue with their colleagues’ viewpoints both synchronously and asynchronously, during their leisure time. They agreed that online writing sessions provided support for various learning strategies. Group debates, discussions, picture presentation, elicitation, and assignment writing all helped them in their development. Firstly, it helped them to shake off their hesitation and reduce their anxiety driving for Dörnyei’s “ought-to L2 self”. One thing was clear from both qualitative and quantitative data that this learners were far away from their “ideal L2 self”. However, their journey during the course was towards “ought-to L2 self”. Throughout the journey, learners’ dominant motivational traits were instrumental as the professionals did most of the things to secure their job, a better future, and also to remain competitive for other related jobs.

Most of the discussants in the FGD told about their new habit of reading English national dailies on a regular basis during the residential ESP course. All of them expressed their felicity in reading English newspaper which served them doubly, through informing and educating. Second most favoured and best enjoyed activity of the professionals was watching foreign movies with English subtitles. Watching short movie clips and various documentaries on development programmes took place in the classroom setting with specific language learning outcome. In addition to that, the learners could also watch movies during the evening in internet-facilitated computer lab. While watching movies they received

the inter-cultural knowledge along with the English language input. Besides movies, the learners also watched English news channels, English talk shows and TedTalks in YouTube on a regular basis. Though performed mainly out of regular class, the aforesaid activities helped the learners to find and adapt to the individualized learning strategies.

FGD discussants conveyed that visitors frequently visited their programmes which might be short but intense and, often, decisive in one's career. FGD discussions revealed that respondents who were comparatively better equipped with the language skills were more positively thinking about the increased opportunity of employment. According to them, to be deployed in foreign programmes good managerial competency was a must but not enough; good English language skills, inter-personal communication skills and inter-cultural awareness used to come to the fore front before foreign deployment.

Major findings The researcher identified some important findings and listed those below as bullet statements.

- Professionals attending the ESP course were mainly driven by various extrinsic or instrumental factors ranging from job security to helping the children at home.
- Though the learners were a bit concerned about their age in learning English again, they felt highly motivated to keep secure existing job and to remain fit for future opportunities.
- Professionals used to learn and practice language following various strategies. Well-equipped modern classroom and various out of class activities helped them to use strategies of individual preference to develop their cognitive, affective and strategic competence.
- Instructors' modern, eclectic teaching-learning methodologies and regular feedback motivated the learners in the ESP course greatly.

- Professionals were aware of the need for English language skills and inter-cultural competence to remain competitive in their job sector.
- They used to practice the new vocabulary, formulaic expressions and culture specific issues both in formal and informal setting.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the received data under the motivational framework and learning strategies, this study investigated the diverse motivational issues of development professionals and found those to be strongly leaned towards instrumental motivation. This dominance of instrumental motivation in the findings showed professionals' concern about job security and growth, anxiety about face-losing among colleagues, fascination to work in foreign programmes and an urge to help own children in their study of English. Respondents' learning strategies also showed varied preferences, but each one benefitted to some extent by the strategies they followed. Respondents clearly expressed that though they felt competent in terms of the programme operations, having years of experience; they were still under the challenge of learning the nearly-forgotten English language skills again with the adaptation challenge in different linguistic and socio-cultural settings. The study thus provided new insights on the motivational aspects and the language learning strategies followed by mid-career NGO professionals in the context of Bangladesh.

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