

# Difficulties in language acquisition among the students in Middle East: causal factors and coping strategies

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## Abstract:

Learning a second language is essential in today's scenario as most of the countries are moving toward bilingual approach. Most of the countries have adopted English as their second language and it is so with the countries of Middle East. This study aims at identifying difficulties during second language acquisition and to provide suggestions for overcoming difficulties during language acquisition.

**Key words:** English, language, second language acquisition, Middle East

**Paper Type:** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Since the evolution of mankind, some kind of tools has been applied to communicate the information one has to others such as from sign languages to modern written languages. Due to scientific advancement day by day from uncivilized society to today's modern society learning of others' languages apart from learning one's own language gained attention, as people moved from different places to other countries. As people moved from one part of the world to the other parts of the world for political, economical, scientific reasons, they needed one common language. English became international language of communication, as British ruled most parts of the world and today English has become indispensable with one's life. To be active in the scientific and rapidly changing world scenario, English has become must. As most of the works are written in English and most of the resources are available mostly in English, English has attained prominent position among other languages.

People of Middle East countries speak many languages such as Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, etc. So for these people exposure to English is not abundant, hence they put fewer efforts to learn English. They generally seek employment inside and outside of their countries. People from different countries go to Middle East countries for employment. But they don't speak their language, instead they speak English. So in order to have better

communication between the native people and migrated people one common language is essential. That language is English, as it is considered to be international connecting language.

Learning of second language will be easy when people understand the nuances in the language. Many studies have focussed on various aspects of English language learning. This study is focussed on what are all the difficulties exist and how can these difficulties be overcome in the context of Middle East countries. Hence, the objectives of the study are a) To identify difficulties during second language acquisition and b) To provide suggestions for overcoming difficulties during language acquisition.

### **Literature review**

Since, second language acquisition is a non-uniformed and unpredictable phenomenon, multi-interdisciplinary approach is needed to unearth the complexities involved in the language acquisition. English plays a vital role in education. English is used for international communication. When it comes to learning of any language, four major skills such as reading writing, listening and speaking are paramount. The general linguistic theory explains about how languages work and how language is related to the human social situation in which it operates. Catford, (1965) states language as a type of patterned behaviour.

Beauvois (1994) studied the attitudes and motivation of French language course students toward computer assisted classroom discussion and found that students had shown positive attitudes and motivation in the use of computer assisted classroom discussion.

Beene (1998) approached this problem with multiple interdisciplinary way namely psycho linguistic perspective, sociolinguistic perspective and neurolinguistic perspective.

There are a lot of variables that influence language acquisition negatively. These variables include age, gender, gender, formal instruction given at schools, motivation, language learning aptitude and amount of native language usage at school as well as at home.

### **Age of the students**

It is claimed that there are some critical period exists for human speech learning (Piske, MacKay, and Flege, 2001). The earlier one starts learning a second language, the better he/she succeeds learning it. Shuman (1971) classified the reasons for the teaching of English to start at an early stage namely physical, psychological and sociological reasons. The physical reason adopts the belief of the child's ability to mimic sounds and learn a foreign language more readily and easily. The psychological reason is that children have fewer inhibitions regarding second language learning and making mistakes. The sociological reason is that children have more positive attitudes to foreign people and foreign cultures.

### **Gender of the students**

There is a mixture of findings in the previous research. Some researchers reported that the performance of men folk in learning English is better than their women counterparts (Ludwig, 1983). Some researchers

reported the reverse that female participants learn faster than their male counterparts (Bacon and Finnemann,1992). Some researchers reported that there was no significant difference between male and female participant's English learning.

### **Cultural background**

To understand the behaviour of people, it is important to understand their culture, as culture is root for everything people do or perform. Though, there are differences amongst people of Middle East countries, they have many common historical and cultural backgrounds (Ellis, 1994). Latu (1994), argues that students, whose parents are well educated and be able to use English as medium of communication at home, are more successful than students who have no exposure to English at home. Shyness has greater negative impact on students' capacity for learning English. Those who are outgoing and have no feeling of shy to speak English are likely to learn English than those who are shy to speak.

### **Language and religion**

While observing about people and religion, Ellis (1994) argue that Arabic language to people who speak Arabic has significant influence over the people as they believe that the language preserves Arab culture and Arabic is believed to be instrument of Islam. People of these countries follow Quran and embrace Islam, these people speak Arabic since, Quran is written in Arabic. "It is the national language of the countries of the Fertile Crescent- Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria- and countries of the Arabian Peninsula- Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait- and some countries of North Africa- Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt and Sudan, and even of non-Arab countries like the Republic of Chad" (Ellis, 1994, p.56).

English and Arabic differ in origin and in linguistic characteristics. Some of the linguistic aspects which differ in these languages are morphology, syntax and phonology. These difference act as problem in acquisition of English language for people of Middle East as the English belongs to the Indo-European languages while the Arabic is a Semitic language (Ellis, 1994).

### **Research methodology**

#### **Research design**

This study is descriptive in nature. It attempts to identify factors that hinder learning of English and coping strategies to be considered to overcome those factors. The secondary data were collected from various journals, books, and other online resources.

#### **Significance of the study**

This study will help the stakeholders of English in Middle East such as government, teachers, students and parents on the macro level, as this study unearths the factors that hinder the learning of English language.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The following coping strategies to overcome problems inherit in second language acquisition can be applied in learning English as second language.

This paper tried to unearth the common factors that are considered to have negative influence over English language acquisition. The factors are age, gender, cultural background, religion and language of the region or country. These common factors should be understood before embarking on to teaching the language to the students.

The application of technology in language classrooms including the use of film, radio, television, language labs with audio/video tapes, computers, and interactive video will motivate the students and will help remove the fear found in students with respect to English language (Cunningham, 1998). The use of multimedia, the Internet and various forms of distance learning are wide spread. Interest in using these tools to support language learning is on the rise, both from the perspective of a language educator and that of a language learner (Liu, Moore, Graham, and Lee, 2002). The start of the course for second language acquisition should begin at the very young age of the students, as students at young age are very receptive. The strategy with respect to imparting second language to students according to their gender may help the student in easy acquisition of English. Teachers can be trained accordingly to impart the skills needed to teach English such that the students learn easily with enthusiasm.

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