

Need for Change in Language Teaching in Uzbekistan: Recognising the Importance of Analysing Learner's Background

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Abstract:

In Uzbekistan, the rising demand for English language proficiency reflects its importance in enhancing social status, expanding professional networks, and accessing a wealth of resources. This trend has led to the rapid growth of private language education institutions, which aim to fulfill the needs of eager learners. However, a significant oversight in these institutions is the focus on cognitive processes and strategies, often at the expense of understanding the learners' backgrounds and the non-cognitive factors influencing their education. This article highlights the absence of comprehensive needs analyses in both private and public schools, which hampers the effectiveness of language instruction. It argues that language learning is not merely a cognitive endeavor but a complex interplay of psychological, social, and cultural elements. By exploring how learners' identities and social contexts shape their language acquisition journeys, this study underscores the necessity for educators to consider these aspects before delivering formal instruction. The findings suggest that a more holistic approach to English language education—one that integrates learners' unique experiences and needs—can significantly enhance the learning process and outcomes, fostering a more effective and engaging educational environment in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: identity, performance, affective-filter, I+1, input, motivation, background, status, prestige, investment;

INTRODUCTION

The English language learners come from diverse backgrounds with unique cultural experiences and personal motivations in Uzbekistan that is a multi-cultural and multi-national country where people from various social classes coexist. By ignoring non-cognitive factors in learning, educators

risk undermining the effectiveness of their teaching and failing to fully engage their students. By understanding how these factors shape learners' experiences, educators can create more inclusive and effective teaching strategies. Ultimately, embracing this comprehensive perspective will not only enhance language acquisition but also empower students to navigate the complexities of a globalized society with confidence. Before creating a language course, data collection process should take place to cater for special needs of the learners. The collected information should highlight all the essential facts of learners' background including but not limited to social factors which encompass learner's age, gender, family, economic status that shape the identity of the learners which ultimately measures the level of success in mastering a second language (Grenfell and Harris, 2013, p. 121).

Learners' success, motivation, and engagement can be profoundly impacted by the level of support they get from their community such as parents, teachers and peers. As learners more interact with local people who speak the foreign language or the native speakers of the language to be learned they can refine their language skills more effectively. This process is called social interaction. Social interaction plays a crucial role in personal growth, motivation, engagement, and language learning. Studies have demonstrated that interacting with others in a second language, be it native speakers or online communities, significantly benefits language acquisition. This positive impact stems from the promotion of effective communication, deeper cultural understanding, and increased motivation. Mackey (2007) stated that learners who actively participate in social interactions with native speakers demonstrate faster progress and higher levels of proficiency. This highlights the importance of creating opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful social interactions, such as language exchange programs, online forums, and immersion experiences. It is also suggested by Teacher's Corner (n. d.) that learning teams should be formed by the language instructor to facilitate interaction and engagement among students especially when their numbers are high. Thereby, students can share different roles within their groups and work on various projects together. Furthermore, creating online communities of practice can motivate learners to interact with one another and learn the language in a competitive environment. To illustrate, working for over a year at a private school specialized in IT, I have effectively integrated the technologies to foster collaborative learning among my students. I created online communities of practice on Telegram which is widely used throughout Uzbekistan. Thereby, my students exchanged information, gave feedback to one another, practiced online listening and reading tasks together. However, negotiating social interactions is not easy in different cultural contexts. Learners might potentially face difficulties in building such interactions because of their gender, religious, economic background and social norms in their community. As an instructor, I always face difficulties while grouping my learners as sometimes female learners do not want to work with male students in one team or vice versa. It is also highlighted by Creswell (2009) that cultural norms or differences can potentially affect the way teachers manage their classrooms and suggests teachers to be flexible. Thus, managing multi-cultural classroom can be very stressful for teachers since even non-verbal communication varies in different cultures that might arise misinterpretation or misunderstanding in the classroom. From the light of the abovementioned statements, teacher should be aware of students' cultural or religious background while grouping or assigning communicative tasks (Byram, 1997).

According to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, learner's emotional state cannot only facilitate but also hinder language learning. Learners with high affective filter can experience negative emotions such as anxiety, stress, lack of motivation that can be triggered by the classroom environment. Additionally, learner's background can relate the target language with either negative or positive experiences. It has been mentioned by Waller et al. (2017) that there is often a gap between identity theory and practice, with many teachers lacking the knowledge and skills to effectively integrate identity into their teaching. Waller et al. (2017) suggests teachers to choose a

more holistic approach to language teaching that takes into account learners' cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. A good example for how affective filter works in learners can be a female student I taught in 2023 at private school who did not even want to learn English as she had been criticized by her former instructor for the way she pronounced English words among her classmates who made fun of her for a long time afterwards. I accepted the fact that she would not speak and join speaking activities unless she feels confident to perform in front of her peers. She would send her voice-recordings privately while other did that in an online group for the class.

One more mistake made by some instructors is that, loading learners with high volume of input. Walking by the streets of Tashkent in Uzbekistan, advertisements like “IELTS band 7 in three months”, “Intensive Language Course” can frequently be noticed that hook people to learn the language. Nevertheless, these courses often assign students extensive information which is impossible for majority’s mental digestion. A learner can be asked to learn thirty to fifty new words per day which makes language learning process daunting. This affects learner’s emotional and mental state negatively and making them give up soon. It is undeniable that language instructors are often employed by the private learning centers according to their score in either IELTS or Multi-level exams based on CEFR standards neglecting their pedagogical skillset or experience. Exposing learners to the language input that is beyond their current level of comprehension is known as Krashen’s “I+1”, Comprehensive input Hypothesis.

There are some other factors that affect language learning process either negatively or positively should also be considered. One relevant factor can be a learner’s social, cultural and personal identity. One of the prominent scholars in applied linguistics Kramsch (1998) illustrates language learning is not only merely the acquisition of linguistic skills but also a transformative journey that profoundly shapes an individual's identity (p. 1). It is intriguing that learning a second language can contribute to a person’s including but not limited to higher social status. In the given example a language or a prestige dialect is upgrading the individual’s social identity. That expectation of higher social status or wider opportunities within a society can drive people highly motivated to master a foreign language. Various languages are valued differently in many countries though. According to statistics provided by Test Prep Insight website, in the USA more students tend to learn Spanish compared to the ones learning other languages whereas students speaking Russian have more employment opportunities in Uzbekistan. Another way through which social identity fosters motivation in learners is that individuals can be motivated to learn languages associated with social groups they wish to belong to, using language as a tool for social integration and acceptance (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). As for personal identity, if a learner’s goals and future plans align with the target language, this intensifies the learning process and the learner feels optimistic about the language. American linguist Labov (1972) describes language as “one of the most powerful tools that we have for constructing our identities, and we use it in a variety of ways to signal our membership in social groups, to express our attitudes and beliefs, and to create a sense of who we are.” (p. 207). However, a learner’s cultural beliefs or value system might strengthen affective filter and learners might not be willing to negotiate their identity while learning a foreign language.

From the light of the abovementioned points, teachers should not only take learners’ cognitive abilities into consideration but also investigate their backgrounds which can only be gained by needs analysis. In Uzbekistan, it is a common phenomenon in both majority of language centers and schools to consider only the age or the language proficiency level of the learners without collecting relevant data about socio-cultural as well as contextual factors and language-specific needs. Ignorant about relevant details about a learner, any teacher or a language instructor might fail to create educational environment to meet learner needs.

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