

# ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE AT COLLEGE LEVEL – AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

*English has a universal appeal and in India, English is associated with modernity and progress sometimes with the ideology of its cultural values. The economic value of English is very high in India as even a layman uses English words in his/her 'native' communication. The second language acquisition happens for learners at various domains like home, education, religion, society domains. It is noticed that even English illiterates give importance to English and want their children to learn English for their 'bright' future. Presently, many families use English as first language in home domain. Second language acquisition and learning is gaining momentum in all the educational institutions. More than a language English is considered as a tool and a passport to settle in a good job. In academic settings, teachers should motivate students to learn, engage their attention, present an intellectual and linguistic challenge and allow them to develop language as effectively as possible.*

*Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Second Language Learners, Competency, Performance, Accuracy.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

English subject is a foundation subject in all the Universities and Colleges in Tamil Nadu. English is taught in the first and second year as a subject along with soft skills as a paper. English provided at college level is oriented towards academic and professional communication competence. English is taught for 45 to 50 minutes every day as per curriculum. The aims of teaching English at college level are

- (a) To promote awareness and improve the knowledge of English among students
- (b) To equip students with good communication skills
- (c) To improve the employability skills of students by instilling good language skill.

English is widely used in Tamil Nadu. Though Tamil is the native language, in the present scenario, English is being given much importance in all the strata of life. Presently, many families use English as first language in home domain. Second language acquisition and learning is gaining momentum in all the Educational Institutions.

### **1. Literature Review**

Early studies showed that young age of exposure to the target language at a young age would relate to better performance on phonology and syntax (Birdsong & Molis

2001). Lennerberg (1967) observed that the acquisition of language fully succeeds at a normal path only if learners are exposed to the linguistic input (usually speech) before puberty. He thus proposed the survival of a critical period during which the human specific faculty of language would develop if it were generated by appropriate stimuli. Lenneberg (1967) claimed that language acquisition is related to 'Critical period effects'. Many researchers (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson 2003; Long 1990; Pulvermuller & Schumann 1994) have focused that second language acquisition is not the effect of ages, but the result of biological maturation. The amount of exposure, motivation, attitude and the second language input may lead the learners to acquire second language in a non-biological way (Birdsong 2004, 2006). Birdsong (2004) claimed that a physically determined critical period should check native like attainment in all learners who have passed a certain age. Chomsky (1981,2000) proposed that there exists a universal grammar, constraining the possible form of human languages. A result of this proposal is that infants should acquire language by the means of a dedicated innate Language Acquisition Device (LAD).

Second language acquisition is a developing field, opening up many avenues to research how languages are

acquired and learnt (Doughty & Long 2003) including interlanguage pragmatics, approaches in applied linguistics, and generative approaches (White 2003). Second language acquisition makes researchers to delve into the issues including the effects of age, mother tongue influence, language transfer and first language attrition.

Chomsky (1965) determined that there were two proportions of language. One was language performance and another one was language competence. Performance deals with a particular language by paying attention to what a person utters, and competence is a deep language knowledge that must be analyzed through careful thinking. Competence is applicable to any principle of language learning. Chomsky stated that children's language acquisition is determined innately. A child is born with a blue print of language rules called the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Smith & Miller (1966) with their research further enhanced these studies by defining LAD as the ability to know the difference between a speech sound and other sounds, formation of words, phrases, or sentences into patterns to communicate with others. Cummins (1989) identified four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, but added that a learner could develop the cognitive competence of a language through reasoning and thinking. Cummins branded two acronyms: BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) which is the ability to perform basic conversation in day to day interaction and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency), which is the academic language rules used in schools. Cummins (1989) thought that a student could learn a second language better if he knows his first language and can easily transfer his ideas to the second language through the first language knowledge. Later studies have also proved that the impact of socio-economic status or the intellectual nourishment of the home, help students to develop their second language.

Age is considered to be an important factor in second language acquisition. Most people think that young learners learn language easily and quickly, but researchers have different viewpoints on this issue (Scovel 1969; Krashen 1973; Lamendella 1977; Flege, Yeni-Komshian & Lin 1999). In the process of lateralization of the brain and its

relation to the second language acquisition of adults and children, it is important to analyze the hypothesis which is called the "critical period hypothesis". More studies have been done on arguing the critical period hypothesis in first language acquisition, but not in second language acquisition. Some studies have proved that adult learners do better in syntax and morphology (Singleton 1995) and young learners are better in pronunciation (Johnson & Newport 1989; Long 1990b).

Many researchers have given various definitions of the critical period. Marinova- Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) define that critical period of learning a language is easier and more successful before puberty. Learner's language acquiring ability is reduced after puberty. Loup's (2005) defined critical period as 'abrupt closure' which means that learners' ability to learn a language is getting stopped after the critical period. Learning is a lifelong process and language learning is divided into two types: permanent learning process and temporary learning process. Most of the researchers use puberty as a yardstick to evaluate the abilities of a learner on learning a language.

### **2. Second Language Acquisition Among College Students**

Several studies have emphasized the necessity to learn the L2 as early as possible but with a mission of using the language for communication rather than using only for the examination purpose. College students use English language in different domains for different situations. In the present scenario, India has different perspective for English language, as many consider English as their mother tongue. English is nativized in the Indian environment. People, especially college students, in rural areas have fear towards English as they consider English as a subject and not as a language for communication. Motivation and necessity play an important role in learning English at college level.

Motivation and self-confidence are personality traits which would help students in acquiring a language successfully. They are helpful to develop oneself on the language acquiring process. Self-confidence is a powerful motivation process in acquiring a language especially a second language. The respondents were given enough motivation to come out with

their own willing risk taking abilities while acquiring the second language. The respondents were motivated for the purpose of acquiring the language which would help them to achieve the eventual competency. Motivation was very moderate among the college respondents. The researcher found that the motivational level was not static among the respondents and kept on changing over time according to the need of the respondents. The motivation is of two types: extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. Extrinsic motivation is goal achievement oriented. A learner learns a language in order to get a job, or to get a degree, this mode of motivation is extrinsic motivation. The researcher found that motivation was not only the factor of acquiring a language but exposure to the language would make the learners to learn the language. 75% of the college respondents were entangled in this extrinsic motivational process. Intrinsic motivation is for the learners who learn the language for joy, satisfaction and sense of accomplishment. The 'poor' acquiring of English language was totally attributed to the lack of opportunity to use the language. The researcher found that successful respondents were motivated and enhanced their own acquisition consciously through activities both inside and outside the classroom.

### 3. Research Questions

The main objective of the research is to examine the reasons for second language acquisition at the college level. It tries to explore the various factors that are responsible for the acquisition of English. While exploring this objective, the study addresses the following questions:

1. Does exposure to English make students speak English well?
2. Is speaking English gaining momentum?

The study aims to provide information about English language acquisition by adults in Tamil Nadu.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The research design has quantitative approach, as the data are in the form of questionnaires which served as a basis for further investigation and discussion. This kind of approach is appropriate for the study of language acquisition.

#### 3.2 Research Participants

One hundred college respondents of II year B.A. Degree were selected from a women's institution from

Kanchipuram District. All the respondents had enough exposure to their mother tongue and English on a daily basis, in their lives. Nevertheless, there was variation in the amount and type of exposure to English. Kanchipuram was a fully rural area half a decade ago, and the vast development in industries made this place to be acclaimed as a semi-urban area. This District is surrounded by villages and developed panchayat areas. The College was selected keeping the background of the respondents' family, learning methodology and their exposure to English. The researcher personally visited the college and sought permission from the principal for data collection. A few professors from the Institution helped the researcher to select the respondents for doing the research work. The researcher was given enough freedom to meet the respondents freely, especially without the presence of their own teachers.

#### 3.3 Data Collection Process

The analysis by quantitative methods can address questions related to how English is acquired by non-native speakers and in what ways English acquiring manifests itself in the specific context. English is widely used by every set of people; hence, any student respondent from any part of India is a possible respondent for this study.

#### 3.4 Questionnaire Framework for College Students

College students were given a questionnaire that comprised 39 questions that focused on the societal relevance of acquiring English as a second language. The questionnaire helped to understand students' connection with the society in acquiring English as a second language at the college level and the difficulty in using and understanding English as a second language. The questionnaire helped the researcher to comprehend students' use of English on the societal front. It also helped to understand their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and examined their interest towards English.

##### 3.4.1 Quantitative Analysis of the Questionnaire

The respondents were asked to answer accurately each question. All the respondents were given the questionnaire and their answers were taken for evaluation. All the students were exposed to English during the English class hours every day for 50 minutes. The respondents were differed in their

Amount of Experience (AOE) with English. Totally, 39 questions were collected to identify participants' language processing. It also helped to understand their aptitude, motivation, their beliefs towards the English language.

The questionnaire has been divided into two main parts. Part one aimed at assessing the general background of the respondents, the cognitive, formal operational and societal process and part two aimed at assessing their interest towards English language, the acquiring process of English and the exposure to English as a second language from the societal point of view.

### 3.4.1.1 Part One: Language Acquiring Process

The investigation of the respondents' background gave the researcher a better understanding of their acquiring behavior and their use of English as a second language.

The questionnaire investigated the following:

1. Students educational background and linguistic background
2. The cognitive and perceptual processing in the acquiring process
3. The formal operational processing
4. The metacognitive information processing

The first part of the questionnaire focused on the cognitive relevance of the respondents.

- Students' Background (Q1-4)

The investigation of the students' background concentrated on four different but related areas. The first section was aimed at establishing the general background of the students. The college that was chosen for the study was women's college. So, the respondents were women in the age from 17-18 years. The hundred respondents were from II year Arts stream (History and Economics). All the respondents stated that they were more fluent in Tamil and a little fluent in English.

- Cognitive and Perceptual Processing (Q5-9)

This section (Table 1) is to examine the cognitive and perceptual processing of college students while using English in various domains.

The writing ability of students was developed, involving the long term memory where all the related information was

Q.No	Evaluated Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Do not know
5	Correct others speech mentally	23%	25%	27%	15%	10%
6	Good level of using memory	22%	63%	10%		5%
7	Memorize dialogues, stories or sentences	78%	22%			
8	Repeat and practice to master the language	10%	46%	12%	22%	10%
9	Guess English words' meaning with the aid of the first language	26%	65%			9%

**Table 1. Evaluation and Classification of Perceptual Questions (in percentage)**

stored. It is a complex cognitive process that would make students understand their rhetorical problems, idea-generation, goal-setting, organizing, reviewing, evaluating and revising skills. The cognitive process of the respondents was made evident when they observed and listened to how others used English in the classroom. The perceptual processing would happen when they hear and imitate how others use English, especially teachers. Good memory including Long term memory and Short term memory would help the respondents to structure a self-monitoring and self-corrective strategy in acquiring English language. The cognitive and perceptual processing questions proved that students had developed their communicative skills through memorizing, reviewing, and revising.

Q.No	Evaluated Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Do not know
10	Visit college library frequently	2%	5%	80%	13%	
11	Encouraged to do extra reading.	10%	40%	50%		
12	Professors use text books exclusively without additional materials			75%	12%	13%
13	Take part in English activities and programmes	1%	4%	80%	13%	2%
14	Professors guidelines in stress, intonation, pauses etc.,	56%	20%	10%	5%	9%
15	Study English because I like it	10%	10%	79%		1%

**Table 2. Evaluation and Classification of Operational Questions (in percentage)**

- Formal Operational Processing (Q 10-15)

This section (Table 2) examines the respondents' formal understanding of English and their operational opportunities to use English inside and outside the classroom.

Respondents visit to the library was marked low and this shows their interest and appreciation for reading books. Professors encouraged them to select, connect and explain information for a better understanding of English, but their lack of interest and negative attitude towards learning English eclipsed their development of acquiring English. The participation of the respondents in various English activities or programmes was less as their social interaction was constrained and as such the amount of English exposure was limited. The respondents studied English out of compulsion; as it has been prescribed as a subject at the College level. If the respondents could connect new information to information previously learned, their conversational, debatable, and simulations skills could be developed gradually.

- Societal Information Processing (Q 16-26)

Society plays an important role as a language processor for College Students. This section (Table 3) examines the dependency of the respondents on the society through various devices and opportunities.

Respondents' notion on learning English from exposure and society was evident. Respondents knew that the amount of exposure and fluency would help them to clinch popularity and acceptance in the college. The use of internet proves that their societal preference was limited; their interest to watch English programmes was limited and they had less opportunity to use English in home domain. English had played a significant role in cementing a place among friends and professors. Societal interference was low to the respondents as they were not confident to travel anywhere in the world. Use of gadgets was appreciative but transliteration and code-mixing was high in the societal processing of English language.

### 3.4.1.2. Part Two: Assessing Students' use of English in Social Setting (Q 27 – 39)

In this section exposure, aptitude, motivation, learning difficulty and societal relevance in learning are

Q.No	Evaluated Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Do not know
16	Listen to English news	2%	1%	80%	15%	2%
17	Watch English programmes	30%	30%	20%	20%	
18	Use internet frequently	25%	20%	53%		2%
19	Use of mobile phone for sending messages in a transliterate language	98%				2%
20.	Use of dictionary frequently	2%	5%	85%	6%	2%
21.	Go to other colleges to participate in English-related competitions	1%	1%	90%	8%	
22	Do not worry about the grammatical mistakes when I communicate in English with strangers	26%	30%	40%		2%
23	The best way to learn English is to learn it practically	80%	5%	13%		2%
24.	I have confidence to travel anywhere because I can manage speaking in English	2%	2%	94%	2%	2%
25.	English language will help people to recognize me and that helps me to expand my friends circle.	85%	5%	5%	4%	1%
26.	My English competency will make my professors to motivate me to participate in various competition	80%	8%	10%		2%

**Table 3. Evaluation and Classification of Societal Information Questions (in percentage)**

investigated. Exposure to language through listening, learning or reading influences one's choice of language. Exposure to various languages through diverse sources and the amount of exposure determines the extent of using a language. The amount of exposure in college and the amount of language exposure through various societal sources are the main focus of this section (Table 4). Exposure to English through different modes and the frequency of exposure to English in various ways is discussed here.

The study revealed that learners' beliefs on acquiring seem to exist independently of one's positive ability to acquire the

Q.No	Evaluated Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Do not know
27	I have a special ability for acquiring English	2%	1%	60%	35%	3%
28	Students who have good exposure to English are good at acquiring English	94%	6%			
29	When students know many languages, it becomes easier for them to acquire English easily.	36%	41%	20%		3%
30	It is important to feel at ease in the classroom while acquiring English	98%		2%		
31	Acquiring English language is different from learning other academic subjects	85%	10%	3%		2%
32	It is important to be corrected by teachers so that one can learn from mistakes	45%	30%	20%	5%	
33	English language will motivate me to find a good job	95%		5%		
34	English is a difficult language to speak	63%	20%	15%		2%
35	Regular practice of English will make acquiring easy.	98%	2%			
36	Active while participating in pair work and small group activities	75%	10%	15%		
37	Tasks create opportunity to have a good rapport with fellow students	86%	10%	4%		
38	Tasks help to improve self-confidence to speak in English	88%	10%	2%		
39	Acquired many new words and sentence structure by performing various tasks	85%	10%	10%		

**Table 4. Evaluation and Classification of Students use of English in Social Setting (in percentage)**

language. The study showed that the respondents acquired many new things while performing in group activities. Involvement of tasks in the teaching process had created a positive approach from the respondents. Learners with high expectations of success could be involved to develop and acquire with interest and eagerness whereas learners with less expectation of success could not be involved and would give up more easily in the process of acquiring.

### 3.4.2. Findings from the Questionnaire

The functional practising and inferencing help students to gain good exposure to the language for communication. Their inferencing, and guessing meanings of new items, help them in practical usage. If students mime the sounds, it would help them to develop the sound system of the language. Watching English news channel on TV would help them to develop their communicative skills as well as get insights into the pragmatic inferences. Monitoring others help them to eradicate mistakes at all levels and develop to generate their own acquiring strategy. Use of dictionary should be encouraged among students in the classroom.

The results suggest that respondents' attitudes towards English may influence them to acquire L2 with utmost interest. In this experiment it was found that having a negative attitude diminished the acquiring potentiality. Negative attitude happened with the respondents who had no opportunities or contact with people to use English. This study revealed that social factors can affect the acquiring process of English in college. The personal domain of the respondents has proved that students' use of English is limited as they did not use English with their friends or with their relatives at home. Their interest towards English is high as they were not afraid to talk to strangers in English. Visual media plays an important role in making respondents acquire English. The respondents were influenced by media and they acquire English though in a tailor made structure pattern. There is a positive sign for the student to acquire English from entertainment domain.

The vast majority of the respondents felt that good English can be acquired only through a formal classroom environment and they also strongly believed that having a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in class would make them enhance their performance in learning English as a second language. In the acquisition of the various skills, the respondents felt that speaking was considered to be very important and the next one was writing, followed by listening and reading. Integrative development happens because of students' own interest and instrumental motivation develops the language skills for better career prosperity.

The second section is to find out the respondents' societal exposure to English at College level. English language is the

most important language in India due to globalization. Teaching English at graduate level happened ignoring the basic aims and objective of communication. Teaching and learning process appears to be inadequate at the tertiary level. Students learn English for nearly 14 years, unfortunately they do not practice it as a tool for communication. Professors are seldom aware of their students' abilities. Passing in English subject is considered to be important for the students and they memorize a set of questions and answers from the text to get pass marks in the examination.

The role of English is vibrant when students go for placement on campus. Till then they do not focus on basic language skills. Students from vernacular medium feel the heat and considered English as a difficult language to communicate. The respondents have good education domain in college, but when it comes to exposure to English in college, the response is not satisfactory. When students are introvert, the hindrance of using or exposing to English is self-restricted. Though the responses proved that students have good exposure through their professors, ironically, students have not taken any initiative to utilize the opportunities to learn English from them non-academically. College students' motivation is high for acquiring the language but the difficulty in acquiring the language makes them out of spirit.

#### 4. Implications

Self-motivation and self-learning are important for the College students to develop a second language. Self-analysis and interest towards the language make them to improve their communicative skills tremendously. Students should understand their interest, involvement in learning and beliefs about learning. The beliefs that learners have about the nature of acquiring and about their own abilities also influence the acquiring which actually takes place in the day today life. If a student believes that language ability is innate rather than the result of hard work, he/she may easily give up. Beliefs do change the mind of the learners and influence them for the benefit of acquiring. Students should try to inculcate the following notions on acquiring the language: avoid ambiguity, language acquiring is the same as other subjects, vocabulary is important, focus on

memorization, ready to take risks, learning from mistakes.

#### 5. Recommendations

Learners should have good learning environments and their belief on learning the second language should be motivated positively. Effective teaching methods like using tasks, games, activities etc., in the classroom will promote lateral and optimal thinking of learners. Teacher should not compartmentalize the classroom as introverts or extroverts as both the set of learners have their own strengths and weaknesses, as a teacher she/he should analyze the learning capacity of learners while using an innovative teaching method in the second language classroom.

#### Conclusion

College students have to undergo the language transition where they have to face affective factors like acculturation, ego, personality, and emotion, beliefs about learning, attitudes and motivation in oneself and from surroundings in the process of acquiring English. At the end of the survey respondents felt that English played a very important role when it came to career prospects. When respondents started to think in their mother tongue and tried to express thus thoughts in English they faced difficulties in bridging the gap between the thought and expression. Imagination helps to develop creative minds. Creativity helps learners to use language relevantly and instantly. In colleges, days are gone where students are being trained on soft skills to make their English communication perfect. In the present scenario, students in semi-urban and sometimes in urban areas are successfully placed in MNC companies despite their little English knowledge. Once placed in a good post, they develop the language out of exposure and observation.

The research shows the depth and importance of affective factors in second language acquisition. The teaching methods and teachers behavior towards the learners can provide a good teaching environment and the learners' belief, attitude and aptitude and their learning methods can promote optimal thinking. The research has shown that various factors like motivation, socializing, emotion, interest, basic knowledge towards the language, exposure have considerable influence in acquiring a second language at College level. Students with outgoing personalities are

usually better language learners, even though introverts also have certain strengths.

The study has shown that for students who indulge in activities outside the college, the acquiring opportunities seemed significantly higher than others. Socializing creates more authentic and functional linguistic affordances. Language acquisition experiences are realized in a social environment and in this environment there are linguistic sources, learner interests and needs which are determined for future action.

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