Theorizing Motivation for EFL Writing Classrooms at Tertiary Level: A Postcolonial Intervention

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ABSTRACT

It has long been observed by the teachers of writing in Bangladesh that students are reluctant to think and perform actively in EFL writing classrooms. This behavior is generally explained with reference to the notions of integrative vs. instrumental and intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation. In this article, we argue that cognitive behavior of students in EFL writing classrooms cannot be understood by solely employing the intrinsic/extrinsic or instrumental/integrative models for at least two specific reasons: First, these models for analyzing motivation deal with immediate psychological responses of learners; second, the learners of post-colonial countries experienced extreme socio-political-economic-historical violence that shapes their cognitive and psychological landscape. Recognition of politico-historical context in EFL writing classrooms can add a new dimension to understanding learners’ behavior and motivation. In this paper, we will try to explore an implication of colonial intervention for the motivation of students in EFL writing classrooms by engaging some ideas of postcolonial theories. Drawing on Freire’s (1970) notion of ‘conscientization’ and Hirano’s (2009) idea of ‘identity reconstruction’, we would also make an attempt to reconfigure learners’ motivation in post-colonial context.

Keywords: Motivation, postcolonialism, EFL writing classroom, overdetermination, identity reconstruction

Introduction

Motivation of learners is generally addressed in the ELT discipline through using the notions of instrumental motivation,
integrative motivation, global motivation, situational motivation, or task motivation (Ellis, 1985, p.117). Integrative motivation is defined as a category of motivation that emerges from the desire of learners to assimilate with the culture of the target language. By contrast, instrumental motivation serves functional purposes in which a learner targets to improve professional or academic career by learning a language. Situational motivation is linked with the classroom environment; global motivation is related to the central purpose of learning; and task motivation connects with the activities and works performed in the classroom.

Ur (1996), in her classic textbook *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory*, documents two categories of motivation: ‘extrinsic’ and ‘intrinsic’. Extrinsic motivation is a consequence of external incentive and intrinsic motivation is a psychological energy that compels learners to learn a language since they admire the political and cultural background of the target language. The theories of motivation as mentioned in the Ellis’s (1985) and Ur’s (1996) texts are ahistorical (Norton, 2013, p. 50). These models, indirectly, if not directly, seems to claim to offer the interpretation of the psyche of learners around the world irrespective of their spatio-temporal context.

In this paper, we argue that traditional motivational models cannot capture the dynamics of motivation of the students of a geographic space that experienced colonization and oppression. Following Altbach (1971, p. 237), we further contend that an analysis of the psyche of the post-coloniali students cannot bypass the background of colonial educational system:

The educational systems of most developing countries, on almost all levels, remain rooted in the administrative structures of the former colonial rulers. The colonial power may not be the direct cause of this situation, but the fact that the structure and organization of the schools reflect a foreign model necessarily has an impact on the nature of the education provided.
Therefore, colonial experience is paramount in understanding learners’ lack of motivation, for colonization as a particular political and economic system carries the power to shape minds of the colonized (Nandy, 1983). In this article, we consider writing class as a place for exercising, enhancing and accelerating cognitive growth and thinking skills. Further, writing class is seen as a micro-space for intellectual production and epistemological movement of a society. Since the activity of writing is linked to intellectual growth and independent thinking, it is subject to colonial repression that negated the liberty and freedom in colonies (Guha, 1997, p. 165).

**Background of the Study**

**Purpose of a Writing Classroom**

Writing and knowledge production are intricately connected. According to Gage (1994), writing/rhetoric is a technology of knowing the unknown. In particular, “Rhetoric aims at knowledge, or makes it available. Rather than producing persuasion without reference to truth, rhetoric aims at producing mutual understandings and therefore becomes the basis for inquiry into sharable truths” (1994, p. 204). Thus, in Gage’s view the objective of writing is to generate knowledge rather than to assemble preconceived ideas.

There are three central concepts in classical rhetoric: dialectic, enthymeme and stasis. Aristotle’s dialectic, a classical theory of rhetoric, is based on the notion of discovery and invention. According to Aristotle, there is no rigid rule of arguing or making propositions. This concept contradicts the eristic view of rhetoric which believes that there are technical devices to reach conclusions. In Aristotelian dialectic, audience of a composition plays a significant role. In this case, the rhetor/writer is engaged in the discovery of knowledge by
considering the existing knowledge of the audience. In other words, the writer would invent new propositions and principles rather than informing the audience what they already know.

Gage (1994) maintains that Aristotle’s concept of dialectic is important in the teaching-learning of composing/writing process for the following reasons. First, knowledge can be produced while speaking or writing; second, knowledge evolves through the interaction between contradictory ideas/concepts (as in pre-writing stage of composition). Thus, creation of knowledge is a conscious dialectic action of human mind: In the process of knowledge creation, ideas interact with each other and the writer/rhetor interacts with the audience. This view of knowledge creation and rhetoric/writing is shared by Plato as well. According to Plato, “the rhetor’s object not be to force his knowledge onto a passive other, since by that means he cannot come to know, but that mutual “lovers of knowledge” can through dialectic arrive at knowledge neither alone could possess” (Gage, 1994, p. 207).

*Enthymeme*, another term used by Aristotle, refers to the process of reaching conclusion to an argument. It includes both dialectic principles and the “spirit of inquiry” (Gage, 1994, p. 208; see Clark, 2003, pp. 71-93). Enthymememe functions at two levels: formal structural level and theoretical level that lead to inquiry, discovery, and invention. *Stasis*, a third theory of rhetoric proposed by Aristotle, assumes that the rhetorician or a writer needs to have clear understanding of the ‘questions’ that she is going to answer or address (Gage, 1994, p. 209). To put it another way, recognition of questions would lead to creation or invention.

*EFL Writing Classrooms in Bangladesh*

EFL writing classrooms of Bangladesh can hardly involve students in the creation of knowledge as imagined by the
classical rhetorical theories. There is a shared observation among the teachers of EFL writing at undergraduate level in Bangladesh that learners suffer from a lack of motivation in writing classroom (Saha, this issue; Sinha, 2011-2012; Chowdhury & Islam, 2011; Huda & Kamal, 2011; Rahman, 2007-08). They tend to handle any writing task through memorization and reproduction of cliché ideas (Raquib, 2016). The practice of original and independent thinking is absent among learners. As a result, an EFL writing classroom turns into a place to communicate some preconceived ideas and effort is generally made to learn how to write correct sentences.

Majority of the private universities in Bangladesh offer EFL writing courses where learners are expected to enhance their thinking skills through writing. However, learners appear to be reluctant to engage in original and independent thinking and demonstrate a chronic “intellectual laziness” (Fanon, 1961, p. 120). In this article, through the lens of postcolonial theories, we will try to discover an implication of colonial history for learners’ amotivation in EFL writing classrooms. It is to note that we do not consider learners’ lack of enthusiasm as a static condition; rather, we resist Orientalist categorization of learners’ as ‘active’, ‘inactive’, ‘dependent’, or ‘independent’ (see Saha, 2014; Shahidullah, 2001-2002). We strongly believe that learners’ behavior is dynamic (Norton, 2013) and can be changed through pedagogic intervention (Hirano, 2009).

Analytical Framework

Motivation in EFL Writing Classrooms: An Overdetermination

At the outset, we would like to clarify that we consider the lack of motivation in EFL writing classrooms as an overdetermination. Overdetermination, in Althusserian sense, references to the notion that an effect or a consequence is not engendered from a single cause; an effect is the combination of multiple, contradictory, or non-contradictory causes (see
Althusser & Balibar, 1970, pp. 315-316; Althusser, 1969). The idea of overdetermination rules out the simple and linear cause-effect relationship (i.e. determination) in understanding reality. Whereas the notion of determination searches for one single cause of an effect/reality, overdetermination seeks multiple causes (see Honderich, 1995, pp. 811-812; Payne & Barbera, 2010, pp. 23-26; Blackburn, 1994, pp. 102-103). We reckon that colonial history is one of the causes that influence learner behavior in EFL writing classroom.

The issue of colonial history is hitherto unaddressed in the mainstream theories of motivation. Poststructuralist critics such as Norton (2013) holds that the traditional concept of “motivation presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learners” (p. 50) and ignores their “complex social history” (p. 50). In 2006, a whole issue of Critical Inquiry in Language Studies (volume 3, issue 2-3, published by Routledge) was dedicated to analyze postcolonialism and TESOL where the authors dealt with diverse topics that ensued from center-periphery relationships (see, for instance, Lin & Luke, 2006; Tolman, 2006; Shin, 2006; Motha, 2006). However, a gap still exists pertaining to colonialism and learner motivation in EFL writing class. In this paper, we would make an attempt to fill out this gap by examining the colonized subjects and the possibilities of a radical transformation.

**Epistemological Positioning**

We do not intend to establish a scientifically verifiable correlation between colonial intervention and learners’ motivation in EFL writing classroom, for the objective of this article is not to produce a ‘truth’ of positivist-empiricist tradition (Richards, 2003, pp. 34-38). The purpose of this paper is to incorporate colonial history in the discourse of EFL learners’ motivation. This article is ‘critical’ in nature which
looks at the interactions of ideology, power, and subjectivity; it is an “engagement with political critiques of social relations” (Pennycook, 2001, p. 4). While it might be empirically impossible to prove that learners’ lack of motivation in original/independent thinking in EFL writing classrooms is the outcome of colonization, it is possible to figure out how colonial ideology and power affected subjectivity/agency or psychology of the colonized spaces and draw its implication for learners’ behavior.

**Colonial Experience and Motivation in EFL Writing**

From a wide range of postcolonial theories, we picked up the ideas of Paulo Freire and Albert Memmi because their analysis of colonized mind is related to pedagogy and thinking skills. Freire unravels the outcome of subjugation, oppression, and colonization—the outcome is a lethargic mind devoid of critical thinking skills. Memmi, likewise, detects colonization as a force that snatched away the intellectual agency of the colonized. EFL writing classrooms of post-colonial countries might find an answer to intellectual laziness or amotivation of students from the analysis of Freire and Memmi.

**Freire’s Concept of Dehumanization**

In order to draw the implication of colonization for learners’ motivation in EFL writing classrooms, we would like to begin with Freire’s analysis of subjected or subjugated mind. In his revolutionary book on education *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) introduces the concept ‘humanization’ and ‘dehumanization’ (p. 27) to analyze the psychology of subjected/subjugated mind. According to Freire, dehumanization refers to the distortion (Freire, 1970, p. 28, italics in original) of humanity which can be understood as an obstacle to become a human as a consequence of the extreme oppression. In his discussion on the condition of the oppressed
or dehumanized, Freire points out that oppressed people are “castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 33, our emphasis).

This particular analysis of the psyche of oppressed people carries a valuable reference to writing classrooms. In EFL writing classrooms, students rarely think that they would construct knowledge or they have any responsibility to generate knowledge (see Saha, this issue). They seem to solely depend upon the writings and views of others and happily reproduce the ideas (Raquib, 2016). Their writing reveals an intellectually castrated condition—an incapability to produce new ideas and formulate original concepts.

At this point, one question logically evolves: How was the castrated condition created? A historical perspective indexes toward the following two elements that affected creative capability of learners: One is dehumanization (Freire, 1970) and the other is the existing education system in Bangladesh, a residual of colonization (Barua, 2007). In Freire’s view, the oppressors are responsible for castrating the oppressed (Freire, 1970, pp. 32-33). Following Freire (1970, p. 32), we contend that colonial system by negating socio-economic-political freedom of the individuals in the colonies castrated and dehumanized the colonized. The process of castration eventually removed the creative capabilities of the students in a writing class. To quote Freire (1970, pp. 32-33):

The conflict lies…between following prescriptions or having choice; between being spectators or actors…between speaking out or being silent…This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed which their education must take into account.

The second analysis of castration is germane to the existing education system of Bangladesh. In the education system of Bangladesh, creativity and original thinking is rarely encouraged. Barua (2007) observes that British colonial education system promoted rote learning and discouraged
original thinking to prepare learners for market economy. Barua (2007, pp. 63-64) maintains: “Such education fostered dependency rather than self-reliance…The British colonial past remained a major influence in the educational curriculum of the national system”.

Though the education system of Bangladesh is currently emphasizing Srijonshil Poddhoti (literally ‘Creative Method’, based on Bloom’s Taxonomy), teaching method and testing system do not encourage creativity (Iqbal, 2016; Amin, 2016; Bangla Tribune Report, 2016). The popular guide books in the market still dominate the mind of the students (Saha, 2013). Students memorize essays and paragraphs that are necessary for the exams from guide books even after the introduction of Srijonshil Poddhoti. Further, memory centered education fails to create an active and creative habit of mind (original thinking capability) that requires regular practice of analysis and synthesis of ideas (Emig, 1994). Thus, intellectual habit of mind is not formed and consequently students suffer in EFL writing classrooms.

**Albert Memmi and Psychology of the Colonized**

In order to engage with the ideas of Memmi on colonized psychology, we would like to begin with a quotation:

> The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community. Colonization usurps any free role in either war or peace, every decision contributing to his destiny and that of the world, and all cultural and social responsibility (Memmi, 1965, p. 91).

This quotation from Memmi is a psychological historiography that suggests two very important conditions about the consequences of colonization. First, colonized people are forced to abandon agency or any active role in the construction of their destiny; second, colonization displaces the colonized from social, cultural and political spaces. Colonized
people are denied any role or responsibility in history. Does this past have any meaningful consequences in the EFL writing class? Does it have any implications for the moment when students remain inactive as they are instructed to discover new ideas in the classroom?

To address these questions, let us take a look at ancient history to see how political repression influences creativity and thinking. In Greece and Rome, learners’ motivation in original thinking and knowledge production was affected by the state’s attitudes toward people’s voice (Gage, 1994). In Greek democracy the outcome of public debate directly influenced socioeconomic policy. As a result, orators were concerned with original investigation and invention. By contrast, Roman rhetorical education, at one point, centralized its focus on formal style or technicalities of composition (or students’ composition), because original invention did not have any implication for the socio-economic policy of the state. Put differently, socioeconomic policy became the product of a top-down process in which some powerful people formulated policy for the state. This political change in Rome indicates a repressive society that discouraged common people in significant decision making process. Only pro-elite rhetoric had been admired by the state.

Therefore, in Rome, rhetorical training or teaching of composition simply became a matter of teaching ornamentations or formal devices. People became disinterested in composition or original investigation since their voice/creation/findings would have been ignored (for a discussion on ‘voice’ in writing, see Bowden, 2003, pp. 285-303). In post-colonial countries, we see that people’s voices are rarely reflected when dams are created (Roy, 2005, pp. 1-9), treaties are signed with world organizations (Muhammad, 2008, pp. 72-96), and neoliberal state policies are formulated (Muhammad, 2015; Drong, 2006), leading to massive
proletarization and environmental degradation. Memmi rightly remarks: “It is true that discouraged citizens of free countries [once colonized] tell themselves that they have no voice in the nation’s affairs, that their actions are useless, that their voice is not heard” (Memmi, 1965, p. 92). If the voices of the learners are constantly rejected in the real world, it is not unlikely that they will suffer from a lack of motivation in original thinking and writing in the classroom, since “their voice is not heard”.

**Reconfiguring Learner Behavior in EFL Writing Classroom**

In this section, we deal with the process of psychological change of the learners. The effort to motivate students by reminding them about material gain or cultural benefit in a writing class, as we indicated at the beginning of the article, seems to be an ahistorical and decontextualized approach. The motive of material gain in terms of money and career cannot create independent mind. There can be different approaches to initiate change in the students’ mind. In this paper, we consider two ideas to transform learners’ minds: Freire’s concept of ‘conscientization’ (Freire, 1970, p. 20) and Hirano’s concept of ‘identity reconstruction’ (Hirano, 2009). The process of ‘conscientization’ and ‘identity reconstruction’ recognizes learners’ past/history and develops creative agency.

**Conscientization**

Freire’s idea of ‘conscientization’ can help students become active in the writing classroom. According to Freire (1970, p.20), conscientization is a historical process of constructing responsible and self-affirmative subjects. This definition of conscientization contains three important ingredients: critical consciousness, self-affirmation, and subject. Critical consciousness, in the context of a writing classroom that endeavors to promote cognitive growth, needs to create
Consciousness about the fact that students do not need to uncritically accept each and every idea of an author.

Consciousness should be generated about psychological and historical condition of the students. To be specific, students should first realize that they have become the passive consumers of knowledge produced by others. They should start to believe that they are active subjects who can perform actions independently. They also need to believe that they can produce knowledge and original concepts through writing. Emig (1994) contends that language is a tool to formulate objects and concepts. By extension, writing is a mode of learning since writing helps us analyze and synthesize ideas. According to Emig, writing ensures cognitive growth by involving both left and right hemisphere of the brain; people can create metaphors and express sophisticated and complex ideas through writing. Emig’s analysis of creative aspects of writing has to be clearly communicated to the students so that students actively work to formulate new concepts.

Another idea that emerges from Freire’s notion of conscientization is ‘self-affirmation’. In the writing of the students, ‘self’ is not reflected since students tend to memorize and reproduce ideas from different sources (Raquib, 2016). It is necessary to inform students that writing is also a process of self-searching, self-affirmation, and self-expression. In the context of writing, by self-affirmation we mean learning to think and to express ideas independently. The process of self-affirmation consequently gives agency to the students. The writer becomes an agent, not objects who are simply acted upon (Freire, 1970, p. 20).

The concept of conscientization also involves ‘reflection’ and ‘critical discovery’ (Freire, 1970, p. 33). Freire’s notion of reflection and critical discovery directly relate to the individual struggle in real life and emancipation from oppressive social
structure. These two concepts actually set the objective of writing: Writing is a process of ‘reflecting’ on lived experiences to transform oneself as an agent from an object and a process of ‘critical discovery’ to unravel the details of oppression in the society. In this connection, Freire (1970, p. 36) maintains: “One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge men’s consciousness”.

However, only ‘moments of perception’ (Freire, 1970, p. 36) can liberate human beings which can be achieved through writing. In addition, writing helps to unveil reality (Smith, 1977) and writing is a process of ‘critical intervention’ (Freire, 1970, p.17) in reality to transform the world. Though the meaning of oppression and critical discovery can vary from person to person, there might be some universal and general forms of oppression in the world that range from economic and political to spiritual and cultural. In Freire’s words:

Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (1970, p. 36).

In an EFL writing class, sometimes teachers become the oppressors when they cannot display any trust on the ability of the students. Attitudes of teachers seem to affect the intellectual production, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (see Mercer & Williams, 2014) of the students. Sometimes teachers demotivate students by saying that students cannot think, write, and are incapable of learning (Saha, this issue). This attitude of teachers generates inferiority complex among learners. Sometimes, students internalize the negative notions expressed by the teachers (see Khan & Rahaman, 2017). This is a process of identity construction in which students accept an imposed notion of imperfect self. In Freire’s (1970, p. 49) words:
Self-deprecation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their unfitness.

In order to cognitively activate students, teachers of writing first need to trust the ability of the students (Freire, 1970, p. 53). Teachers also need to rely on the creative and reflective power of the learners.

**Identity Reconstruction**

Hirano’s (2009) idea of ‘learning difficulty and learner identity’ can be used to motivate students by considering their past/historical experience of learning. Hirano shows that learners’ identity constructed by past experiences can have negative effects on learning a language. In her longitudinal research, Hirano discovers that her student Junior faced difficulty in learning English due to his identity as a ‘poor learner’. Junior, Hirano’s student, used to think that he was a poor learner; consequently, he developed a low self-esteem and formed a habit of easily giving up learning. In addition, he could not acknowledge that he was learning anything at all.

Hirano mentions that Junior’s identity as a ‘poor learner’ was constructed by his school in which teachers demotivated him and did not help him learn anything. In order to reconstruct Junior’s identity, Hirano worked with him for one year. In particular, she played the role of a mediator and counselor of Junior to build his self-esteem and confidence. She asked Junior to maintain a dairy and to write reflective comments about his learning experiences. Junior started to write the linguistic items that he was learning and thus he began to see that he was improving. After working for one year, Junior’s identity as a poor learner was replaced by an identity of a confident language learner. Hirano mentions that teachers
should seriously analyze the past experiences of the learners to motivate them. To extend Hirano’s argument we would like to add that in EFL writing classroom teachers should try to understand the past writing experiences of the students while encouraging them to produce original ideas through writing. Besides, learners’ identities as poor writers need to be replaced by confident and independent writers through regular counseling.

Conclusion

In this article, we have made an attempt to complement the traditional motivation theories by adding the postcolonial-historical element. We contend that there is a macro-political dimension of learners’ motivation in EFL writing classroom. The learners of post-colonial countries carry the remnants of colonization passed on to them through colonial education system that promoted dependency and intellectual lethargy. In addition, constant negation of ‘voice’ and denial of agency in real life can further contribute to generating intellectual laziness among learners in EFL writing classrooms. Nevertheless, we hold that the solutions to motivational problems explicated in this paper—that is, ‘conscientization’ and ‘identity reconstruction’—may be readily used by the teachers to change learner behavior in post-colonial countries.

References


Endnote

The hyphenated ‘post-colonial’ is a temporal marker of separation from the colonizers whereas unhyphenated ‘postcolonial’ references to the analytic framework of postcolonial studies (for details, see Gandhi, 1998).