The Influence Factors of Second Language Acquisition: A Case Study

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Abstract: The purposes of this study were to explore second-language acquisition theory and the factors in language acquisition that most influenced a non-English speaker who studied in a U.S. setting. Qualitative data collected from an interview, classroom observations, documents, and the researcher's field notes provided information on how the participant strengthened her English ability. The findings indicated that affective factors such as motivation, willingness to communication, and language learning strategies deeply influence language learning. This study also provides an insight into the key role a teacher plays in a classroom of diverse students to help those who are nonnative speakers of English.

1. Introduction

Given that English is the primary language of the global community, those who speak it as a first language have a decided advantage over others in the international marketplace. This phenomenon ensures that a growing number of international students will study abroad, expecting to gain a competitive advantage at home and on the world stage [1].

An essential need to learn English has drawn many international students to the United States, where increasing numbers are enrolled at universities to pursue academic degrees, attend language schools, or local schools to improve their language competence in an English–language environment. No matter whether they are willing or are forced to do so by family, these students struggle with their studies while trying to adjust to an unfamiliar culture and an English-speaking environment [2, 3].

Liu noted that when international students in general, particularly Asian students, initially arrive for study in the US, they encounter a multitude of difficulties in adapting to the culture [4]. Far from home, they must settle into a totally unfamiliar environment with limited English language proficiency; they experience difficulty isolation and a weakened sense of self-worth, transitioning to a new life and culture after separation from familiar environment [5, 6]. They not just encounter cultural transformation and life adjustment, but also, they have to overcome the barrier of English as a second language (ESL) in a foreign, English-speaking country.

Many studies on second-language acquisition and learning have shown that language learning involves many dimensions, conditions, and variables that influence learning performance. Most of these studies are solely focused on a single or two factors, such as motivation, social interaction, learner's personality, and so on. Few researchers have explored factors that had the potential to account for much of L2 learning, assuming multiple perspectives from which to investigate a single case of language leaning and its success. The reality is that the success of language learning there are

many different factors combination and support. It has internal factors that bring about language learning, and has the factors of outside the networks. Therefore, it is necessary of determining what factors influence language learners to learn a second language and elements that drive language learners to pursue success in learning a second language will help teachers identify a language learner's interests and motivations, therefore enhancing their performance.

The purposes of this study were to explore (1) the factors in theory of second-language learning through literature overview, and then (2) find out some factors (3) to provide a substantial and rich description of the multiple factors most influence language learning: A single case of a non-English speaker analysis. This study also provides insight into a teacher's role if having a diverse student's in the classroom.

2. Literature Review

Greater understanding of second-language acquisition can improve the ability of teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to serve culturally and linguistically diverse students in the classroom [7]. Furthermore, awareness of the second-language learning process and language-learning factors is essential if teachers are to guide their students successfully. To understand this process, one must have an adequate understanding of the nature of second language.

A second language is any language that is not the individual's native or first language [8], including (a) the language of extensive communication encountered in the local area or community (e.g., at the workplace or in the media) and (b) completely different foreign languages that do not have immediate local uses or speakers. Any discussion of language learning necessitates an understanding of the terms *acquisition* and *learning*, which some researchers contend have distinct meanings. In his hypothesis of second-language acquisition, proposed a principled difference between formal, conscious learning and informal, unconscious acquisition in the field of second-language study[9]. He emphasized that *language acquisition* means using language for real communication. It is a natural and unconscious process to develop linguistic ability; however, defined *language learning* as knowing about a language, or the knowledge of a language taught formally[10].

Second-language acquisition (SLA) as defined by Ellis is the means in or outside the classroom environment by which an individual or a group of people learn a language other than their native language. Meanwhile, Mitchell and Myles were drawn to various kinds of learning, whether formal and systematic (as in classroom learning) or informal and unstructured (when a new language is picked up in the community); therefore, they viewed these terms as synonyms and used them interchangeably in their research on second-language learning (SLL).

Important theories concerning second-language learning focus on the learning process and factors that influence it. Scholars pointed out that it also refers to factors influence a language learner to acquire the second language[11,12]. Gardner and MacIntyre placed the most important language learner traits into two groups: the cognitive and the affective.[13,14] Other than the cognitive factors of inherent intelligence, language aptitude, and language-learning strategies, some affective (emotional) factors, including language attitude and motivation as well as language anxiety and willingness to communicate, all significant influences on SLL success. Theses scholars believe that an individual who is motivated to achieve a certain goal will exert a substantial amount of effort in achieving that particular goal and that this motivated individual will experience a great sense of gratification through the activities he or she performs in accomplishing that goal. In Gardner and Macintyre's view, motivation can be defined by three main elements: "desire to achieve a goal, effort extended this direction and satisfaction with the task".

In this study, I followed Mitchell and Myles' view that the term second-language learning is the

same as second-language acquisition. This study shows how a language learner developed English-language skills in an entirely English environment as well as what factors that influence her learning process and achievement.

The following research questions guided the study:

1) What are some factors that influence the language learner in her or his experience of language learning?

2) What types of motivational factors exert the greatest influence on second-language learning?

3. Method

3.1 The Study

In this study, I employed qualitative approach and featured a case study illustrating the background of a nonnative speaker of English, the circumstances, and the affective transition in her language learning process. I selected the case study method because it takes the form of stories infused with personal experiences and thoughts. Gardner noted that case studies are useful in examining "a person such as a student, a teacher, a principal; a program; a group such as a class, a school, a community; a specific policy; and so on"[15]. She pointed out that a case study has bounds and cited limits to the number of people, the amount of time, and the collection of data that the researcher is studying. Merriam further addressed detail about using a case study approach if the researcher has a particular interest in the process instead of the outcome of the study: The importance of the study lies in the discovery, not in the confirmation of a preselected agenda (1998).

Stake noted that interesting cases in education and social service have been focused on "people and programs" [16]. As the researcher, my goal was to develop a detailed narrative and analysis of the case: one that included multiple sources and provided the thoughtful perspectives of a nonnative speaker of English about her language-learning experience in a U.S. environment, specifically how she struggled, what multiple factors influence her and how she eventually improved her English ability. Synthesizing the points of view noted above, I believe that case study has allowed me to explore my interests and to provide an accurate and descriptive account of what the participants do.

3.2 The Participant

Nancy (pseudonym), the participant, was a student from country culturally different from the US. She was a Taiwanese female, who had moved to the US with her mother and had enrolled in a U.S. high school in Kent, Ohio. Back home, she had studied in a regular school system in an ordinary classroom with mostly native speakers. Her mother, an acquaintance of mine, was a graduate student who had studied at a university in Kent, Ohio; I mentioned to her that I was undertaking research related to second-language acquisition for nonnative speakers of English and was looking for research participants. She agreed to allow her daughter to take part in this project.

When I first met Nancy, she had just come to the US for the first time; hence, her English skills were not good despite having had studied English in private language schools since her elementary school years. She had also studied academic English throughout her four years in junior to senior high school in Taiwan.

3.3 Data collection and Procedure

This study took one-semester, including data collection. Data were collected through multiple sources. They comprised interviews, classroom observations, participating observation in the field, field notes, documentary, and interview protocol. Employing audio recorder and transcript the

records completed data collection and management. I interviewed the participant, the school counselor, and the teachers who taught her American History, and American Literature. I obtained Nancy's consent and contacted the teachers for their permissions of observing their classes. They are America History class and American Literature class.

Data collection techniques included two open-ended interviews with Nancy both at beginning and end of semester, two classroom observations in two separate classes. In the first interview at the beginning, I asked Nancy to share her things encountered and her feelings I initiated the interviews to each teacher with an informal conversation. Nancy's documentary records of learning performance were collected as well. The interview to Nancy was in Chinese mandarin, transcribed it from Mandarin Chinese to English to complete data collection and management.

With reference to the classroom observations, I did not attempt to play a particular role in the classroom. Instead, I focused on Nancy's teachers' reflection upon her and whether or not she interacted with them and her peers in classes. In the final step, I interviewed Nancy at the end of semester and asked her to look back at her journey as a language learner learning English. After each interview with Nancy, I asked Nancy to verify that her answers had been accurately reflected severing as a way of member check to ensure my understanding of her response to my interview questions.

Ianalyzed the data based on second language theories including factors influence, using a narrative approach involving in two phases. First, when I applied the coding process to the transcript, I identified seven categories that constituted one or more themes. To facilitate the sorting process, I developed seven captions: (a) feelings about living in the US, (b) culture shock, (c) language acquisition from outside of social interaction, (d) language acquisition, (e) factors for language development. During this stage, data coding helped me to develop and construct questions for the interview as well as search for and discover emerging themes and ideas, such as the emerging theme, (f) ineffective teaching techniques. The second phase comprised field notes of class observations in which I described Nancy's responses in classes.

4. Results

The findings show Nancy's feelings living in America, her culture adjustment, what factors have influenced her on English language acquisition, and ineffective teaching techniques for study in classes. I present it narratively.

During the semester, Nancy gradually raised questions, added her own ideas to the class discussion, modified her classmates' answers, and eventually grew confident enough to answer questions posed by teachers. Moreover, all of these teachers gave me positive responses about Nancy's improvement in English speaking, listening, and reading even though the American History and ESL teachers had no exact scores to indicate Nancy's learning performance quantitatively.

As for the counselor's response to me, he said that at the beginning of the semester, Nancy was able only to use a few single words, but two months into the semester, Nancy could speak full sentences fluently and understand meaning when he conversed with her.

The classroom observations were the way of showing Nancy's learning attitude. Two observations took place in American History and American Literature classes. The first in American History class, where Nancy's engagement in the classroom was negligible because she just sat there and did not participate in class. She seemed helpless, immersed in a strange world in which she did not belong. I sat in the back of the classroom and watched Nancy; I saw she had no way out. During a group activity in American History class, I wrote in my field notes:

"Nancy is very silent. She does not present her opinions in the group. She is on her own and plays with her notebook and does not pay attention in class."

By the time of the second observation in American Literature class, Nancy was able to join the class and respond to teachers a little; however, classroom study did not help Nancy improve her language skills. In my field notes in American Literature, I wrote:

Nancy is still taking a test, but all of the American students have finished it [the assignment]. The teacher is teaching another topic to the whole class. After Nancy finished her test, then the teacher explained the directions to her. Nancy's pace is slow and cannot catch up with the whole class, but her learning attitude is good and she is polite.

In terms of the interview, Nancy expressed her intrinsic feelings about being there, how she felt her language learning experience in the US and bad experience in her teachers' instruction.

(a) Feelings about living in the US,

Nancy felt she was frustrated in school life. She said that because she could not express her thoughts in English in the classrooms, teachers were contemptuous, particularly in the American history and math classes. Likewise, her classmates did not want to interact with her because they did not regard her as a member of their group, even though a Taiwanese classmate had come to the US one semester earlier than Nancy. They laughed at her poor English.

(b) Culture shock,

Nancy also told me she had experienced very strong culture shock; she was embarrassed by her U.S. classmates' strange attitudes toward her. For example, her classmates said, "Hello, Nancy!" with a nice smile to her in the hall, but when she responded to them with a smile as well, they were cold. She said to me, "Why do my classmates shift their facial expressions so quickly? They just said 'Hello' to me!"

(c) Language acquisition from social interaction

When I asked her about the improvement of her English-language learning through school interaction, she immediately responded to me that she had certainly improved her spoken English by speaking with her U.S. classmates every day. She said that she joined her classmates' activities very often and spoke to them in English. She told me: "By speaking English to my classmates, I practiced my English speaking and listening a lot. Thus, I gradually became fluent in my spoken English." Nancy also told me that the friendship and psychological support she enjoyed from a couple of school friends helped her overcome her struggle in language learning. This is consistent with Spolsky's social context and interaction.

The second interview was at the end of the semester. I asked Nancy looked back her journey as a language learner of English what she had any changes if she had, and whether or not any particular motivations actually influenced her to strengthen her desire to learn English, she affirmed that this was so.

(d) Motivation for language acquisition

Despite the damage to her self-esteem and the emotional pain caused by people who surrounded Nancy constantly, she was not self-abased at all. Instead she said, "I was stimulated, my desire further increased, and I devoted myself to SLL." Consequently, she imitated everything her classmates did, such as clothing style, English pronunciation and accent, and so on. Nancy intended to attract her classmates' notice; she practiced English intently with her partner in order to regain her self-esteem before her teachers and classmates. She said that was really a deep, internal motivation for her to improve her language learning, which was not her initial expectation; but she had endured too many slights from people at school.

(e) Ineffective teaching techniques

This study also emerged a significant factor of role of the teacher in the language-learning process. In terms of ineffective teaching techniques, a new finding emerged from coding of the data, used by her teachers, Nancy said that group study, watching movies, and writing answers to questions on paper and submitting them to teachers immediately were nightmares for her. Nancy said：

I almost hated history class because I could not understand what teacher said in the classroom; moreover, the history teacher seemed to ignore my existence. He required me to complete the same tasks as other American students in class, such as watch a movie and answer questions and then turn it in immediately. [She yelled.] No one wants to help me! How can I make it to discuss in a group with my poor English skills? I just came to the US!

Overall, the findings of the study show that the experiences of a nonnative speaker of English in

the US were negative at first. The participant encountered many difficulties, not only because of cultural differences but also because of the sadness she experienced as a result of teachers' and peers' indifference until she made friends with her classmates, friends outside of school and interact with them.

5. Discussion

Second-language learning is a motive force-oriented process, and the learner is the processor [13]. Various factors and conditions influence language learners' success with SLL. It also involves the principle of intrinsic motivation, and "a more marked degree of emotional involvement, either within one's own self or as a learner relates socially to others" [9]. In this study, an intrinsic force drove Nancy competition and made her stand at the same level with high self-esteem before her classmates. Doing so motivated her desire and potential to improve her language ability, which corresponds to the literature reviewed earlier. For example, Gardner and MacIntyre identified the motivated individual as those who want to achieve a special goal and fling themselves into considerable effort in order to achieve it [14]. Gass and Selinker have noted that the process of language learning is deeply affected by internal and external variables [13].I believe Nancy's case involved more intrinsic than the extrinsic variables.

Drawing from the results of her experiences, Nancy gained an understanding of the culture and language-learning process. Nancy's case she encountered great difficulties in her English leaning, and social interaction with her classmates' in-outside class. Besides, it was an irony that Nancy was ignored by her American history teacher in his class as Brown stressed that "all second language learners need to be treated with affective t loving care".

The whole process and interview with Nancy show readers the experiences of a L2 learner who faced the reality of an unfamiliar culture and English-speaking environment as well as an affective transition from sadness to high spirits. What Nancy experienced was a journey of motivation. Social interaction and support are significant to language learners, so conversing with native English speakers accelerates improvement in the language. This supports the claim that interaction may function as a "priming device", which allows learners tofocus attention on areas that they are working on [16].

Ellis defined *social identity* as an individual's sense of "belonging" to a certain group of people; that group is determined by the members' ethnicity, language, or by some other shared social context. When Nancy was accepted by her classmates, she felt she had become a part of the group. This study also emerged a significant factor of role of the teacher in the language-learning process.

Teachers are the key for students who are diverse and study in their classrooms. Reed and Railsback stated mainstream teachers that "In classrooms with language diverse populations, teachers must ensure that their curriculum and teaching strategies reflect an alignment with the language English Language Proficiency Standards". In addition, notably, culture also plays an important role in students' learning. Mainstream teachers have to be required to sensitively multicultural awareness. According to the findings, I strongly suggesting that at least in the U.S. school or classroom, what is generally regarded as sound principles of instructional design and good instructional strategies will support the learning of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. In Nancy's case, it seems that the American History and Math teachers lacked intercultural competency and empathy. These two teachers may not have paid full attention to the international student in their classroom, and because of the language barrier they treated Nancy differently.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the theory of second-language learning through literature review, and then provide a substantial story of what factors tied to most influence language learning for a non-English speaker. Approaching this topic as a language teacher educator, I strongly want to explore the theory

and principles of SLA. Although L2 research had long been biased toward investigations into internal aspects of language acquisition (e.g., morpho-syntactic features, cognitive systems) in decontextualized settings, it is necessary to take multiple theoretical and methodological approaches to language learning when we consider that it is a complex process in which both internal and environmental factors are involved. Thus, this study, which overview existed literature, and explored one non-native English speaking student in L2 learning from multiple perspective, suggests that we have a broader outlook of the nature of human language and that study the totality of what the language learner can mean. In doing so, we would be able to have a more complete understanding of the nature of language and language learning based on a more comprehensive consideration.

In this study I verified that factors influence a language learner' achievement, which conforms to existing literature. I have also come to realize that single factor is not sufficient to influence one's language learning. Other than affective factors, particularly intrinsic motivation, interaction in social context, and teachers, all involve in the key points for language learners. Thus, I sincerely appeal to all teachers, including language teachers, to reflect whether or not they have been caring with students and therefore whether they have been ready and qualified to deal with them.

This study also provides insight into a teacher's role in having diverse student's classroom. Teachers, no matter mainstream teachers or language teachers, should keep this in mind and remind themselves of their deep commitment to students. When following a calling, teachers must determine whether or not they have shown caring toward learners and have raised their motivation in order to foster a comfortable learning environment in which they are willing to learn, and it also reminds practitioners of the important role of culture in second-language learning. Teachers must cultivate their knowledge of the literature on multiculturalism and awareness. As educational practitioners, teachers must reflect upon these issues and concerns regularly.

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