

Factors Influencing Language Learning: Experiences from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

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Abstract

As globalization permeates all areas of the society, educational institutes embark on the challenge of providing effective language learning. Although various studies have been conducted on this particular topic, perceptions from diverse learners remain scarce and limited. Available studies often represent the ideas of a particular race, nation, or ethnic group. This study, hence, explored the perceptions of language learners from varied cultural backgrounds to provide a better representation of the multi-cultural environment that characterizes most societies nowadays. Specifically, it endeavored to find out the varied factors that influence language learning. Result showed five important factors as technology, environment, support system, cultural background, and profession to be most influencing among learners in their quest to learn a second or foreign language.

Keywords: *teaching languages, learning languages, diversity in language education, teaching methods*

1. Introduction

The impact of language on rationalizing and reproducing one's culture was projected as early as the 20th century by Sapir and Whorf (Otto, 2013). Both Sapir and Whorf developed a theory stating that language determines our rational and perception of the world (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2002). The different types of cultures have been distinguished by the rational way language is being used. Thus, it is very difficult to identify the meaning of language in seclusion of culture. For any person to appreciate culture, one has to understand the language in which that culture is expressed. Similarly, one has to understand the environment in which that language is used.

Acquiring another language which is not one's mother tongue is learning a second or a foreign language. The language is taught in the school and not generally used in the society where the students belong. BBC, on its website, has enclosed links citing hundreds of reasons to learn foreign language. Some of these reasons include travelling, working and doing business, personal satisfaction, and entertainments (BBC, 2017). On the other hand, Morris (2017) in her article "Why study a foreign language?" has shed light on the following areas:

1. Business: People who want to be effective in the highly competitive business field and be able to operate in a multicultural context must acquire linguistic abilities of extra languages especially the dominant languages in the fields of interest.
2. Security: After the ominous attack of 11 September on the world trade center, there is a need for speakers of other languages to interpret the huge amount of data collected by security forces. The availability of experts of different languages will enhance the national securities of the countries.

3. Culture: Learning a second language is a key to understanding the culture in which that language is spoken. It helps people to open up themselves and enjoy the cultural diversity of the societies.
4. Diversity: Knowing different languages gives leverage for people in management to deal with the diverse staff in places where the diversities are increasing vertically and horizontally like North Carolina in the USA.
5. Education: Learning foreign language helps improve brain ability of thinking, invention, ability to question facts, acquiring depth and height in intellectual levels. Moreover, students with foreign language skills fair better than other students in the exams of literacy and numeracy.
6. Increasing profession prospects: Since the world is becoming more and more connected, knowing a foreign language enhances the opportunities of the people in the workplaces to communicate with their counterparts in different countries and thus transcending all types of boundaries.

Since language and culture are inseparably interwoven, learners belonging to different cultural backgrounds face different levels of difficulties in their schools (Sawir, 2005; Ehrman, 1996). In the United States of America, the government is facing big challenges in educational field due to wide diversity of people in the society. The problem of diversity is putting extra demands on the shoulders of educators to bridge the gap between the children of the natives and the children of the immigrants. In this country, studies showed that students from cultures different from the main culture achieve lower than their American native friends in most academic aspects (Terry & Irving, 2010).

In Thailand, as it is in the rest of the country, English language is asserting its dominance in all fields of communications and interactions. Thai government has clearly realized the importance of the English language, therefore, it has mandated the teaching of English language as a complete subject in its schools (Wiriyachitra, 2002). Despite the effort, however, the quality of instruction and the level of acquisition of English language is still unsatisfactory (Phothongsunan, 2014). Juhana (2012) has listed barriers for mastering English language. Accordingly, personality type, like being introvert, tends to make a person reluctant to speak English. This is to avoid embarrassment which may arise from mispronouncing words in English. Being nervous or having low self-esteem is another reason. All these reasons tend to demotivate learners to put enough efforts and serious attempts to learn the English language. This makes a real challenge for foreign teachers who are working in Thai schools to be successful in making Thai students master the English language as the students seem to exemplify such behaviors and personality types. This study is intended to look into factors that affect language learning as maybe experienced by diverse language learners. By taking into consideration various perspectives and experiences of various people from different countries, this study will shed light to the difficulties and struggles of millions of language learners around the world.

2. Research Methodology

The current study utilized a mixed research methods to explore the different experiences and opinions of the respondents regarding the different factors that affects language learning. A mixed method of conducting research includes the use of elements of qualitative and quantitative

research approaches to increase the “breadth” and “depth” for purposes of better understanding and corroboration (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). The tool includes the language learning autobiography of thirty respondents from diverse cultural background that includes American, Japanese, Indian, Finnish, British, South Korean, Filipino, Guinean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Thai, Turkish, Romanian, Chinese, African, Canadian, and French.

A week following the start of the course, the students were tasked to write their language learning biography. They were required to write a minimum of 2 pages paper, single spaced. In this study, the qualitative analysis was conducted by coding the words, phrases, and sentences which reflect various factors that affect language learning in the respondents’ essays. Thereafter, the information gathered were analyzed, grouped into categories, and labeled accordingly. The quantitative analysis, on the other hand, was utilized by counting the frequency and computing the percentages of responses according to categories. Such method according to Mertens (2010) can be classified as mixed method for both the quantitative and the qualitative data are concurrently collected and analyzed.

3. Analysis and discussion

After the coding process, five significant categories of factors affecting language learning emerged: technology, environment, support system, cultural background, and profession.

a. Environment

About 80% of the students stated that the environment played a crucial role in their language learning journey. In countries where the target language acts as an official language or used as a medium of instruction in educational institutions like Philippines and India, learning the target language comes as natural as breathing due to early exposure. Several students report learning the target language as early as pre-school years, while a few have no clue as to when in their childhood years they have started learning their second language. Such experiences have been viewed as influential in the mastery of the target language. It has also tremendously enabled many learners achieve better comprehension in the advance level of their language learning as compared to those who have started in the latter years of their education. To these groups of students, learning their second language came natural as they have been encouraged to speak with their peers, classmates and teachers in the target language. This is further facilitated by school regulations that impose strict implementation of speaking in the target language inside and outside the school premises. Similarly, the use of bilingual medium of instruction, likewise, provided another avenue where the students get to practice and enhance their language skills. These experiences allowed many students to develop their confidence in the target language even at an early age. The experience also motivated them to speak with native speakers with less anxiety and fear as may be expected of other language learners.

Vygotsky (1962), a Russian teacher and psychologist, examined how social environments influence the learning process. He suggested that learning takes place through the interactions that students have with their peers, teachers, and other experts. Consequently, teachers can

create a learning environment that maximizes the learner's ability to interact with each other through discussion, collaboration, and feedback. The instructor plays the important role of facilitator, creating the positive environment where directed and guided interactions and instructions can occur. Many other educational theorists adopted Vygotsky's social process ideas and proposed strategies that foster deeper knowledge construction, facilitate Socratic student discussions, and build active learning communities through small group based instruction. In short, social learning theories help us to understand how people learn in social contexts.

b. Multimedia and technology

Students in the 21st century use multi-media and other forms of technology to learn a second or foreign language. This is evident as 77% of the respondents noted how technology such as TV, radio, and internet has played an important role in accelerating their language acquisition. For them technology provides a huge amount of instructional and valuable information to learn language innovatively. For instance, when students need information as proper way of pronouncing or understanding the meaning of certain words, they can easily search it from the large amount and different kinds of information stored on the internet. Also, most of the respondents claim to have improved their English language skills by watching movies in English, looking forward to particular dramas, soap operas including cartoon programs in the early stages of their language learning. Others posit online self-study as the easiest, the most effective, and the most practical strategy to improve understanding of the target language. Now, students even exploit applications on their mobile devices to learn increase their vocabulary and improve their grammar structure. Several mobile applications have also been created to address problems associated with fluency and accent. This result corroborates the findings of a study which claims improvement in the English language skills of learners through online learning (Zhang, Gao, Ring, & Zhang, 2007). This goes to show that the ever increasing globalization has caused a huge increase in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the educational sector which in turn has tremendously transformed the way of learning, training and teaching. The extensive use of the various digital technologies along with other suitable forms of learning materials has created an interactive, learner-centered, open and flexible environment of online learning. The usefulness of online learning as an effective mode of teaching and learning has not only caught the attention of language educators and practitioners, but has also expanded their views on how to create student-oriented and open-ended learning environments (Jabeen & Thomas, 2015).

c. A good support system

About 63% of the students identified support system as a vital factor in language learning. In general, they have identified family and peer support as significant factors that act as their source of inspiration and motivation.

Family support

The respondents perceived that learning a language is so much easier when we learn it from our parents and other family members. Several good practices have been identified in the essays of the students that indicate positive support from family members as the students struggle to learn a target language. These practices include:

- watching movies and TV programs in the target language with family;
- parents modeling the target language to their children;
- family trips in countries where the target language is used;
- exposing children to nursery rhymes in the target language;
- family members listen to or sing children songs in the target language; and
- family members (mother, father, or aunt) as first language teachers to their children.

These findings validate a study by Xuesong (2006) which reports on parental involvement in Chinese students' language learning. The study employed interpretative enquiry into the students' English-learning experiences and confirms that parents and other family members are closely involved in the progress of the students as competent English learners. Two types of parental involvement were identified. In one part, they are directly involved as language learning advisors, language learning coercers, and language learning nurturers. Moreover, they are also indirectly participating as language learning advocates, language learning facilitators, and language teachers' collaborators. In a similar study, Peacock (2009) investigated the attributions of 505 university students and 40 EFL teachers in Hong Kong. They were asked as to what factor they attribute student success and failure. The result confirms the importance of family support as students perceived this factor significant in their language learning success.

Peer support

Most respondents noted that peer group support contributes to learning another language through a variety of activities which enables learners to practice their language skills. This is especially advantageous in countries where the target language is not used and where most exposure to the target language is reserved to language or educational institutions. Activities that include daily conversations, writing emails, chatting online, and hanging out with peers where the target language is used provided the needed practice for learners to attain fluency. This finding confirms earlier studies of the importance of peers in language learning as may be observed in peer-peer collaborative dialogues (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002) or the peer-to-peer sharing that occurs in the use of technologies (Godwin-Jones, 2005). Griffiths, Houston and Lazenbatt (1995) concluded that peers do learn from each other through varied form of activities like traditional proctor model, innovative learning cells discussion seminars, private study groups, counseling, peer-assessment schemes, collaborative project or laboratory work, projects in different sized (cascading) groups, workplace mentoring and community activities. Peer support has also been linked to the issue of language learning anxiety which provides greater challenge to many language learners (Huang, Eslami, & Hu, 2010).

The process on how peer support actually helps language learners has been well documented by Kobayashi (2003). In the study, activities of three students were observed prior to conducting a presentation. Pre-presentation activities such as negotiating, sharing experiences, collaborative dialogue, rehearsing and peer-coaching were noted vital in the students' achievement of assigned task. The study also revealed that not only are the spoken tasks relevant to the development of the students' presentation, but written tasks likewise helped enhance their overall language skills for their presentation. Furthermore, it was also noted in the study the significant role of L1 in the accomplishments of the various pre-presentation activities. As it turns out, L1 facilitates the interaction and learning of the students. Despite many studies favoring peer learning, however, there are also studies that cite possible risks especially when learners are unfamiliar with the appropriate means of peer learning (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2014). Those that are often conducted informally and without any expert supervision may lead to inability of the learners to acquire necessary skills needed for their language learning development.

d. Cultural background

About 40% of the respondents of the study believe that cultural background can affect language learning. Where the learners are brought up in a more "introverted" society, their learning tends to slow down because they lack the confidence to practice with the target language. For instance, many respondents claim that when they were in their native countries, they are too shy to speak with foreigners. However after travelling and meeting diverse people on their journey and experiencing the need to express themselves in English, they realized that such opportunities enabled them to improve their language skills. On the contrary, respondents whose culture are more "extroverted" experience a growing passion and interest in learning the target language. This enabled them to practice the target language even among their family members or their friends in their neighborhood. Several respondents, for instance, noted that their mothers have been supportive of their learning French or English language education and had allowed them to speak the language among their relatives. Others have taken a more conscientious approach by allowing their children to speak the target language outside the home but maintained a more traditional perspective by imposing the use of the first language at home. This affirms the study by Zhang, Ollila and Harvey (1998) that cultural background is an essential aspect of personal identity that interacts with the education one receives in a certain society. Culture, hence, is a primary determining factor for knowledge construction and that learning maybe facilitated or hindered by our cultural lens as we interact with others and follow the rules, skills, and abilities shaped by our culture (Vygotsky, 1962).

e. Professional background

As most of the respondents are themselves language teachers, they are consistent in saying that they learned to speak English because of their profession (50%). As foreign teachers in Thailand, they are expected to use English language as a medium of instruction to deliver their lessons in business management, statistics, biology, etc. Similarly, they also consider the atmosphere in their workplace another factor that enhances their language skills. For instance, where their co-

workers are supportive and active learners of the target language, they are motivated to speak in the target language among them. And since most of the respondents are working in international schools or companies, diversity in the workplace demanded the need to adopt a *lingua franca* such as English that will facilitate effective communication. They also think speaking with their students in the target language enhances their listening skills as most students are coming from different backgrounds and has different accents when speaking in English.

Others whose profession is not into teaching likewise confirms this outcome saying that although they are not English teachers, their previous jobs as managers, engineers, reporters, etc. required them to learn at least a certain level of English proficiency as many reports or documents may be written in English. In addition, customers are often of multi-cultural background and that English is often the most convenient way of communicating with them.

Others assert that requirements for an English proficiency score from standardized tests such as TOEIC, IELTS, TOEFL, etc. during job applications in most profession acted as motivation to learn the English language formally as higher scores from these examinations often yields greater chances of being hired in foreign companies in their native countries and overseas.

Conclusion

Factors that include technology, environment, support system, cultural background, and profession are presented in this study as affecting language learning – be it a second language or a foreign language. These various factors may facilitate a students' progress in language learning or it can also serve as a serious impediment in attaining language proficiency. Hence, it is crucial that learners contemplate on these factors when they hope to embark on a journey towards learning any language. School administrators may consider them for teacher training and seminars to equip necessary skills for their teachers. Educators may also explore these areas to improve and modify their teaching methods and strategies. Lastly, parents should consider these factors into account when making decisions regarding their children's language education.

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