THE DIFFICULTIES OF LEARNING ENGLISH AS PERCEIVED BY A GROUP OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigated the challenges of learning English encountered by a group of international students while learning in an intensive English program at a large Midwestern American University. One tenet underpinning this study is that social learning plays a crucial role in L2 learning because it enables learners to be actively engaged in the language learning process. Twenty students (9 graduate and 11 undergraduate), were chosen randomly from the intensive English program to take part in this study. Their ages ranged between 19-26 years, and they came from different countries, including Saudi Arabia, China, Pakistan, India, Jordan, Ghana, Nigeria and Algeria. The study used information gathered by means of the qualitative research method of interviewing. The findings of the study showed that social interaction is one of the major difficulties confronting international students learning English. Also, the results of students' interviews revealed some difficulties in terms of oral production, comprehension, pronunciation and using the correct lexicon.*

KEYWORDS: Language, Learning, Education, English, International Student

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring the cultural aspects of the target language is considered an essential part of second and foreign language learning. One approach to addressing L2 acquisition is to frame it as acquiring social discourses or what is known recently as *intercultural competence*. It has been reported by many researchers of second language acquisition that social factors have a key role in facilitating L2 learning and developing learners' communicative competence and other language skills (Knuston, 2006; Thanasouls, 2001).

Social constructivists argue that culture and context are essential factors in understanding what happens in the target society and then allowing one to construct knowledge based on this understanding. This argument relies on the developmental theories of Vygotsky, Bruner and Bandura. Vygotsky (1978) claims that languages can be developed from social interactions that usually have two distinct forms: *Interpersonal* and *Intrapersonal*. The interpersonal form includes a set of social behaviors that occur as a result of people's oral or written interaction. Intrapersonal, on the other hand, refers to the second stage of language learning in which language becomes internalized as thoughts and *inner speech*.

Bandura (1977) states that learning occurs through the observation of others' behaviors and modeling. He explains human behavior in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral and environmental influences. In this regard, he says, "Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action." (Bandura, 1977, p. 22).

Bruner proposes that every human being possesses a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) that helps him/her use language for communication. However, this competence is purely cultural and people need to interact in order to exercise this capacity for communicating ideas with others. According to Bruner, language allows a complex cultural interaction among individuals. In this sense, he says, "One of the most crucial ways in which a culture provides aid in intellectual growth is through a dialogue between the more experienced and the less experienced." (Bruner, 1971, p. 20).

It can be extrapolated from the aforementioned theories that there is a general consensus among researchers that teaching a second/foreign language could be a kind of *enculturation* where a learner can acquire new cultural modes, experiences and views**.** In other words, teaching the culture of the target language is not only considered a single faceted task for L2 learners but also a set of intricate ones. As a result, many techniques and strategies are suggested and proposed to cope with these difficulties.

The major goal of this paper is to point out the main challenges of learning English as perceived by a group of international students while learning in an intensive English program at a Midwestern American University. Moreover, it aims at suggesting some social learning strategies that might facilitate the acquisition of L2. For this purpose, this section focuses on the following three areas: difficulties of learning L2 for international students, social discourse and social learning strategies of L2.

Difficulties of Learning L2 for International Students

The major difficulties that confront international students while studying in English speaking countries can be categorized into two groups: academic and non-academic demands. In this paper, academic needs are referred to the most basic and essential English language skills and sub skills that promote and facilitate the full transition of students into the college academic mainstream and promote academic success. They include nearly all the elements of academic literacy: reading, writing, listening, speaking and critical thinking skills.

Many research studies in the field have revealed that some EFL/ESL instructional programs in countries which do not speak English failed to provide students with the necessary skills that help them analyze, interpret and synthesize information. Students sometimes find a difficulty adapting their own preferred learning styles to those adopted by their teachers (Burke &Smith, 1996). Additionally, it was found that students who came from countries where English is not a medium of instruction have difficulty in oral production, comprehension, pronunciation, and using the correct lexis (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

Non- academic demands usually refer to variables such as adjustment, motivation and perception, community involvement, acquiring knowledge in certain fields and culturally-based ways for getting information and demonstrating knowledge (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987). Some research in the field has shown that most newly arrived international students have problems pertaining to these variables such as managing one's own studies and using the library resources and other university facilities. For instance, they have difficulty accessing books, journals, and resources in their disciplines and other interest areas (Bruke & Smith, 1996; Burns, 1991; Fotovatian, 1996; Sawri, 2005).

The main reasons behind these difficulties can be summarized as follows: primarily, students' previous learning experience in L2 has an impact on how they cope with the academic

requirements of universities. Students may not have been exposed to enough English conversation inside the classroom where teaching was devoted only to grammar. In addition, students may lack sufficient knowledge of cultural aspects of the target language (Sawri, 2005).

Social Discourse

The aforesaid difficulties can be addressed by framing language as the acquisition of social discourses. It was reported by many researchers of second language acquisition that social factors have an essential role in facilitating L2 learning and developing learners' communicative competence and other language skills (Knuston, 2006; Kramsch, 1993; Thanasouls, 2001).

In this regard, Gee (2005) suggested that a language is composed of a set of dynamic *Discourses*, rather than fixed rules. Gee (2004a) introduced the notion of *Discourse* with a capital 'D' to refer to the actual language use in a given social context and to recognize the interrelationship between social relations, social identities and social contexts. He states:

> …a socially accepted association among ways of using a language,
> other symbolic expression, and artifact, of thinking, feelings, believing,
> valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a
> socially meaningful group or "social network (Gee, 1996, p131).

He also refers to discourse with a lower case 'd' when he talks about verbal interactions. According to Gee, there is an infinite number of discourses which represents all walks of life. He contends that discourses can represent subcultures that exist in a society and under each discourse people find certain sets of beliefs, feelings, styles or ways of thinking. Based on his theory of sociolinguistics, second-language proficiency depends on a learner's exposure to different social discourses. According to Gee, the exposure to different social settings facilitates the proficiency and encourages the engagement in similar social interactions.

Additionally, Gee distinguishes between *primary* and *secondary* discourses. He argues that primary discourses are acquired in the family environment during childhood while secondary discourses are acquired in society. In this sense, he believes that learning a new discourse involves learning various forms of the language for different usages and different ways of behaving and believing. Moreover, he described newcomers to a community as 'authentic beginners' as opposed to the 'old timers'. Authentic beginners constantly feel the pressure of doing and saying the right thing because they are not familiar with the use of social interactions or the various types of discourse of that community.

Drawing on this perspective, *secondary discourse* is considered to be one of the most problematic areas for international students because it relies on the student's ability to go beyond the superficial and casual interactions, such as ' hello ', 'see you', and 'have a good day'. It refers to different types of discourse that newcomers (like international students) can acquire through constant exposure to spoken English and interaction with native speakers of the language. Thus, it is essential that international students expand their utterances to include more advanced ones. A good example of this discourse is to learn conversations that are culturally loaded such as jokes or to engage in conversations about societal issues.

Apart from enhancing communicative competence, other researchers argue that effective communication is more than a matter of language proficiency. They propose that *cultural*

competence leads to understanding and mutual respect towards different cultures. Moreover, they state that cultural competence helps learners effectively communicate, understand and interact with people from different cultures. In addition, they believe that cultural competence raises students' awareness about other cultures and provides them with various worldviews. Therefore, they link learning L2 to *socialization* (Thanasouls, 20001).

According to Johnson (2005), socialization refers to learning about a particular culture in order to help individuals be familiar with the values, tradition and norms of that community. It enables them to shape their behaviors to match the culture of the host community. In this way, language can be viewed not only as a way of acquiring some syntactic structures but also as a process of learning cultural elements (Johnson, 2005; Thanasouls, 2001).

Based on this process, it can be seen that learning a language includes the process of practical use that would lead to critical thinking and cultural solutions**.** These perspectives show that learning L2 is a multi-faceted process that requires emphasis on both thinking about and solving cultural issues. These issues sometimes cause certain literacy problems due to the culturally different learning styles and traditions. More specifically, they allow due attention to the cultural construction of both students and lecturers; that is, they have learned socially acceptable ways of using language, interacting with others, and being within their culture (Kramsch, 1993).

Identification of Social Language Learning Strategies

There is a general agreement among second language researchers that teachers of second/foreign language should be prepared adequately and equipped with essential strategies and techniques. Accordingly, they attempt to explore some effective social interactional strategies to help L2 learners acquire the social dimension of the target language as well as other language skills (Alptekin, 2002; Barnett, 1994: Blez, 2002; Gee, 2004a; Hartmann, 2000; Liwa, 2006; Ryan & Carroll, 2005).

 To help the newly arrived international students' adapt to their new community, Sawri (2005) suggested that teachers at universities should develop what is called "cultural awareness" by showing students disjunctions between various epistemological traditions**.** Second, teachers have to bridge the academic gap for students of non- English background by ensuring that both their teaching methods and their learning styles are complementary. Third, it is important that teachers establish achievable goals and continually track their students' progress towards these learning goals. If these goals are perceived by students to be inappropriate, they may hinder learning. Finally, teachers must provide opportunities for students to access relevant resources in the L1 to maximize the value of learning.

Another strategy suggested by Liaw (2006) to foster EFL students' intercultural competence involves asking L2 learners to read articles on topics related to their own culture and communicate their responses with speakers of another culture. He used an e-forum to help learners exchange their views with speakers of the target language. In addition, two e-referencing tools were available in the system while students were reading and writing. The students' e-forum entries demonstrated four types of intercultural competences: (A) interest in knowing other people's ways of life and introducing one's own culture to others, (B) ability to change perspective, (C) knowledge about one's own and others' cultures for intercultural communication, and (D) knowledge about intercultural communication processes.

Alptekin (2002) proposed that the conventional model for teaching communicative competence appears to be invalid in accounting for learning and using an international language in cross cultural settings. He believes that a new pedagogic model is urgently needed to accommodate the case of English as a means of international and intercultural communication. This model should be based on some criteria. First, successful bilinguals with intercultural insight and knowledge should serve pedagogic models in English as an international language rather than the monolingual native speaker. Second, instructional material should involve local and interactional contexts that are familiar and relevant to language learners' lives. Third, instructional materials and activities should have suitable discourse samples pertaining to native speaker interactions as well as nonnative speaker interactions.

Hartmann (2000) examined the influence of the way task properties, setting, the roles of teachers and learners, and the structure of interpersonal exchanges in asynchronous e-mail projects influence intercultural learning. Results indicated that these tasks play an influential role in promoting intercultural learning in the design and management of task structure. However, the study does not attempt to trace a possible increase in intercultural awareness because it is difficult to measure such development in the relatively short time span of an e-mail project.

The Study

This study uses information gathered by means of the qualitative research method of interviewing. The aim of the interviews was to investigate the major difficulties that confront international students while studying in English speaking countries. The total number of interviewees was 20 students (9 graduate and 11 undergraduate), chosen randomly from the intensive English program which is administered by one of the oldest and largest public educational institutions in the United States. Their ages ranged between 19-26 years, and they came from different countries including Saudi Arabia, China, Pakistan, India, Jordan, Ghana, Nigeria and Algeria. All of the interviews were conducted sometime between August 2012 and February 2013.

The main reason behind choosing interviewing as the method for collecting data in this study is that interviewing is considered one of the most effective tools for obtaining, understanding and describing both the meaning of particular themes and the story of people's experiences. Moreover, it helps researchers obtain in-depth information on the topic. For this purpose, a 10 question unstructured interview was conducted. With the use of these 10 open ended questions, I strove to elicit as much information as possible within the domain of specific topics from the interviewees. These topics include the difficulties of learning English, the importance of social interaction and the commonly-used strategies for teaching English as a foreign language.

The results of this study were interpreted and analyzed in the light of Gee's Theory of Sociolinguistics. In fact, this theory addresses many essential issues that relate closely to learning a second language and its culture. Moreover, it is a good tool used to investigate the various types of discourse and the social practices that highlight the interrelationship between a language and a social context. Additionally, it explains the struggle of L2 learners while they are trying to adapt to a new community.

The Interviews

From all of the interviews conducted, it can be seen that one of the major difficulties confronting international students learning English is the topic of social interaction. They believe that it is essential for international students to interact with the surrounding environment in order to improve their oral English and learn about the culture of the new community. According to them, they rarely have enough chances to mingle with native speakers and practice the spoken language outside the classroom. As a result, they avoid initiating a conversation so that they are not misjudged or misunderstood by local people.

This finding supports Gee's sociolinguistic assumptions about second language learning, especially discourse. Gee believes that there are many types of discourse, including forms of lifestyle or subcultures people either adopt or belong to. This suggests that discourse is a social language and this language can be expressed by certain patterns of vocabulary and phrasing. That is to say, the interviewees of this study are familiar with certain formal and academic discourse rather than face-to-face interaction or culturally loaded conversations. This can be attributed to the learners' previous educational experience either at high-school or university level. Thus, these students acquired certain learning styles that shaped their interaction practices.

One of the interviewees mentioned that when she arrived to USA several months ago, she was eager and willing to learn English language, but was later overwhelmed when she found little encouragement from both teachers and her native peers. She said:

> Oh, yes, I was eager and happy to learn English because I'm going to continue my
> study in an English Speaking Country." Pausing slightly, she continued, "When I arrived
> here, I found something new… people are impatient and don't like to help
> non-native speakers of the language.

She goes on by saying that she sometimes feels frustrated, disappointed and stressed out because she is unable to express herself when taking part in classroom discussions, therefore feeling marginalized and isolated. She said that she hardly shares ideas with her classmates or even maintains a constructive conversation. According to her, international students need sufficient time to adapt to the new environment and to be accustomed to the native accent and culture of the target language.

Again with reference to Gee (2001a), discourses cannot be learned solely through formal instruction. A strong component of socialization and meaningful interaction must be present as well. Therefore, second language learners should be exposed to real-life situations in which various types of social interactions are used. This helps them acquire this important part of the language. Based on this assumption, discourses are important because they provide people with the acceptable social context and desirable behaviors. In each discourse there are common identities, beliefs, attitudes, ways of thinking and feelings that distinguish the people of specific discourse from others. This makes the people who belong to a specific discourse recognize people as insiders or outsiders. Discourse is reflected in the identities of its members. In short, most newcomers in any community feel stress because they are and have a feeling that they are strangers and should behave appropriately. Another interviewee

raised the same point. He said that it is difficult to understand the surrounding environment unless one interacts with the local community. Thus, understanding the culture and the society are key factors to gain competence in English language.

In general, most of the interviewees contend that international students should not blame the local community for their failure to be a part of the new community. Students have to take a big part of the responsibility because they are always busy with their studies and their families and have no time to make new friends or engage actively in the community. Two of the interviewees mentioned that they rarely talked to, dine out or sit with some friends in a coffee shop; they just talk to their advisors. They state that they don't need English only for academic purposes but also for socialization. Thus, they are concerned with their limited phrases or vocabulary items that relate to interaction. Many interviewees attributed their inability to interact or having an active role in discussions to their limited knowledge about some types of discourses. They believe that learning L2 is not only limited to acquiring a plethora of grammatical rules but also includes learning some discourses that match the various types of conversations people usually engage in.

Some of the interviewees, on the other hand, said that they face a number of problems that relate to using the basic language skills particularly writing and reading comprehension. I learned from them that they faced some difficulties in writing research papers or completely understanding things that relate to literacy such as writing, reading, listening and speaking. An interviewee, for instance, mentioned that he confronted many difficulties while he was writing his research papers. He said that he relied heavily on the assistance of tutors who work at the University Writing Center. Not only do those tutors correct their grammatical mistakes but they sometimes change the whole idea because they were ambiguous and contained the wrong choice of words. When I asked the interviewee about the main reasons behind these difficulties he replied that he sometimes switched involuntarily to an L1 mindset while he was writing. He believes that this may be due to the interference between L1 and L2. This conclusion supports the finding of previous research that students who come from countries where English is not a medium of instruction have difficulties in terms of oral production, comprehension, pronunciation and using the correct lexicon (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

CONCLUSION

It can be obviously seen that many previous studies in the field of second/foreign language learning highlighted the importance of incorporating the cultural aspects of the language in all instructional programs and in ESL/EFL curriculum. As mentioned earlier the neglect of teaching the culture of the target language hinders the learners' performance and makes them reluctant in using this language. A number of researchers noticed that most international students have certain problems with using English in both academic and non- academic situations. They stated that the majority of L2 learners were not able to express themselves through writing and produce academic papers. Moreover, a large number of them find many difficulties in terms of interacting with L1 speakers and understanding the hidden messages and the clues signals as L1 speakers do. As a result, some studies suggested interaction strategies to help new international students integrate with the surrounding environment while others focused on some societal and cultural processes that help international students overcome the difficulties of the social dimension of the language.

I think this issue is intriguing and worth researching to discover new ideas, perspectives about social interaction and the theories which pertain to it. I noticed that the more we read about social learning theories and the approaches that rooted in them, the more we can explore new ideas. Based on the previously mentioned ideas, I think it is necessary for language learning programs to devise their approaches and strategies for teaching English as a foreign language to meet the emerging needs of students. The textbooks of teaching English as a foreign second language in most developing countries are either boring or outdated. There is a big gap between what exists inside these books and the ever growing needs of students and the real world. The school system in most of developing countries needs to be reformed or changed. Among these reforms, I suggest holding teachers to high standards in order to improve their performance academically and technically in the field of second/foreign language learning.

IMPLICATIONS

The review of related literature in this paper contains a number of fruitful ideas that allow attention to focus on the following implications 1) teachers should encourage students to play an active role in the learning process; 2) instructional materials should be based on multiple strategy approach such as 'reciprocal teaching' ; 3) teachers can make a good use of social technological tools to teach the culture of the target language; 4) future as well as current teachers should be trained well and exposed to the latest findings of research in the field of second language acquisition ; 5) teaching the culture of the target language as well as the social interaction should be highlighted in classroom activities; 6) University teachers should bridge the gap between their preferable teaching styles and students learning styles.

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