INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Fall 2007

Number 2 in a Series of Monographs
Addressing Critical Issues in the Education of
English Language Learners

Funded in part by the Federation of
North Texas Area Universities

A project of the Bilingual/ESL Committee of the
Federation of North Texas Area Universities

Phap Dam, Ph.D.
Texas Woman's University
Series Editor

Melinda T. Cowart, Ed.D.
Texas Woman's University
Managing Editor

Factors Affecting English Language Learners' Acquisition of English: Implications for English Language Institutes

Emily Chou
Chihlee Institute of Technology, Taiwan

Introduction

Since 1998 the number of international students who are non-English native speakers choosing to study in the United States has declined (Institute of International Education, 2004). This decline in enrollment is significant because in the past international students have brought in over $13 billion dollars to the American economy through money spent on tuition, living expenses, and related cost. According to a survey by the Institute of International Education in 2004, nearly 75% of all international students reported that the money they spent in the United States was from personal and family sources or other sources outside of the United States. With statistics like these, educators and policymakers are seeking to find the best ways to reach international students and recruit more of them to study in the United States. In order to find the best ways to reach these international students and recruit them, it is important to ascertain their needs as a means for finding ways to help them meet language proficiency requirements in the United States.

Most post-high school international students who are English language learners (ELLs) come to the United States primarily to continue their academic studies at a college, university or technical institute. Some students may specifically focus on improving their

English communication skills. Regardless of the reason these ELLs come to the United States, one main obstacle they face is that of language proficiency. Since language proficiency is such a key factor for these international students' adjustment to life in the United States, a question arises about how language institutes and their instructors might help ELLs improve their English skills. One way to answer this question is to investigate ELLs' perspectives about language learning in order to help these international students improve their English skills. Gaining these international students' perspectives about learning English would add insight to the current understanding of the needs of English language learners, since they are the ones subjectively experiencing the learning process. By focusing on students' perspectives, this study attempts to discover how ELLs think and feel about their experience of language learning. Through analyzing factors that contribute to language learning experience, the director and the instructors in the language institutes will better understand the needs of ELLs and be better equipped to ensure that all these international students learn English effectively.

The research literature related to language learning has focused on a variety of factors affecting English language learning (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Horwitz, 1988; Oxford, 1990). The first area of this study has focused on learners' motivation. A number of studies have identified the important role that motivation plays in learning a second language (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985; Dornyei, 1990; Ely, 1986; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Motivated learners learn more because they seek input, interaction, and instruction. When motivated learners encounter input in the target language, they tend to pay attention to it and actively process it.

A second area of research has targeted the beliefs that the language learners hold about learning a second language (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Second language learners may believe that one's aptitude or the difficulty of the language contributes to or hampers their learning of the language (Horwitz, 1987).

A third area of research has examined the learning strategies that the language learners use while learning a second language. Successful language learners use more learning strategies than poor language learners (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Oxford, 1990).

A fourth area of research has suggested that learning environment, both at home and in school, plays a significant role for children's literacy development (Diamond & Moore, 1990; Teale, 1986; Heath, 1983; Rasinski & Padak, 1996). This same view has been applied to adult English language learners. The role of the home learning environment, the classroom learning environment, and even the social setting outside the classroom learning environment have been found to be contributing factors to ELLs' language learning progress.

A fifth area of research has shown that language acquisition occurs more easily when the linguistic distance between the first language and the target language is less (Chomsky, 1986; Flynn & Martohardjono, 1995; White, 1989). Linguistic distance refers to the differences in the meaning, the structure, and the use of words between the first language and the target language. For instance, English is linguistically closer to Western European languages, such as French and German, than it is to East Asian languages, such as Korean and Japanese. It would be expected that Western European students have less learning burden than students from East Asia.

Collectively, research related to English language learning suggests a variety of factors may contribute to language learning. For instance, a learner's motivation and beliefs about language learning may affect his/her choice of learning strategies and ultimately affect his/her language proficiency. The fact that existing research has attempted to isolate factors, such as motivation, beliefs, or learning strategies, ignores the complexity of the language learning process. While much is known about how each factor contributes individually to the students' language learning, little is known about the relationships among the factors. Thus studies that explore the relationship among factors are needed in order to identify how ELLs can learn effectively.

The purpose of this study is to survey the importance of various factors related to language learning from the perspective of ELLs and to determine the relationships among these factors which affect ELLs' language learning and their language proficiency. Specifically, what do ELLs perceive to be the important factors contributing to their language learning and what are the relationships among the factors affecting ELLs' language learning and their language proficiency?

This study was conducted at English language institutes in the United States, because these English language institutes are often the first phase for international students to receive academic experience in the United States. An English language institute may be either college/university-affiliated or may operate as an independent, private program. Usually these language institutes offer intensive English programs for international students to improve their English skills within a relatively short period of time. These intensive English programs are usually about four hours or more per day of class time, five days a week.

Sample size for the study was determined by recommended statistical sampling and length of questionnaire size. It was recommended that sample size be four to ten times the number of items on the questionnaire (Cattell, 1978; Gorsuch, 1983; Tanaka, 1987). Accordingly, this study required 172 to 430 respondents to accommodate the 43 items in the questionnaire. In order to obtain enough respondents for this study, the researcher sent an invitation letter via email to all 273 English language institutes on the American Association of Intensive English Programs list. The language institutes that were willing to participate in this study received a package which included a letter explaining the purpose of this study and copies of the self-developed questionnaire. Also, the directors of the language institutes who were willing to participate would use the appropriate school letterhead to return the agreement letter to the researcher.

The international students from those language institutes were invited to complete a questionnaire. Following the completion and return of the questionnaires, only the respondents who reported their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score were included in this study. This was necessary since the TOEFL score was used as the dependent variable to identify ELLs' language proficiency. The researcher included the responses from respondents whose levels of English competency were in the middle or above at language institutes instead of the lower level to assure comprehension of the questionnaire. The respondent's TOEFL score and his/her level of English competency formed the basis of choosing questionnaires valid to this research project.

The design of the questionnaire instrument was critical for discovering what ELLs perceived as important aspects of learning English. With this purpose in mind, the researcher examined several existing questionnaires from past research, but could not

find an appropriate one for the purpose of this study. The existing research was focused on one single language learning factor individually, and does not consider the complexity of the language learning process. Questionnaires that were reviewed but found not to be appropriate for the study included "*Support vs: Challenge in Classroom Interaction*," "*The Attitude/Motivation Test Battery*," "*Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)*," "*College and University Classroom Environment Inventory* (CUCEI)" and "*Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL).*"

After reviewing the existing questionnaires, the researcher believed that there was a need to develop a questionnaire which considered the complexity of the language learning process. The questionnaire for this study contained two sections. Section I covered demographic information, including age, gender, personal background, and English proficiency of the respondents (TOEFL score). Section II consisted of 43 statements about various factors related to language learning. All statements in the questionnaire requested the respondents to indicate on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) their thoughts about the language they were currently learning, in this case English.

Pilot testing is important for establishing content validity by assurance that the items are really measuring what they are intended to measure (Creswell, 2003). In regards to selecting groups to determine content validity of a given instrument, Dillman (1978) suggested that a survey should be examined by three types of people: colleagues, people who might use the data, and persons drawn from the same group as the study population. Accordingly, the researcher developed a draft questionnaire which was carefully reviewed by three experts, dissertation committee members, and students from the sample group. Recommendations from the various field review sources were included in the revision

of the final questionnaire instrument. Once the initial draft questionnaire was completed, a four-phase validation process was completed as follows.

The first phase was giving the first draft of the questionnaire to ten English language learners who were studying at an English language institute. This pilot study was conducted to check the clarity of the questions and instructions on the questionnaire. There were two questions at the end of the questionnaire: 1) Is it difficult or easy to understand this questionnaire? 2) How long did it take you to finish this questionnaire? The comments from ten students indicated that the questionnaire was easy to read and understand, and took five to ten minutes to complete. Based on the feedback, revisions were made and some questions were added to each of the five factors in order to get more detailed information from the respondents.

The second phase of the validation process was to give the second draft of the questionnaire to the researcher's dissertation committee members to review. Some suggestions were provided by the committee members, such as avoiding using a conditional clause in the wording of the questions. After the questionnaire was reviewed in-depth by the committee members, the questions were revised a third time.

The third phase of the validation process was to request an independent review from three experts in the field of second language acquisition to refine and clarify the statements in the questionnaire. After editing the questions for proper word choice and clarification for the true intent of the items according to the three experts' feedback, the researcher refined the statements and arranged them in random order to account for any order effects.

The fourth phase of the validation process was to give the fourth draft of the questionnaire to the researcher's dissertation

committee members for final review before sending out to English language institutes. On the final questionnaire, six statements focused on ELLs' motivations to learn a language. Eleven statements focused on respondents' beliefs about learning a language, and eight statements addressed students' learning strategies. There are twelve statements that covered students' learning environments, and lastly, six statements were related to the linguistic distance between the students' first language and English.

The researcher collected the data in the late summer and early fall of 2006. Data from each language institute willing to participate were collected in two phases. In the first phase, the researcher wrote an invitation letter to all 273 language institutes via email from the American Association of Intensive English Program list. Of the 273 language institutes, 25 language institutes responded to the email saying that they were interested in this study and the director of each language institute would need to review the questionnaire before initiating the study. Five language institutes were dropped because of the time required to answer the questionnaire. Thus, the remaining 20 institutes comprised the majority of the study. They represent fourteen states: Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Washington, and Utah.

In the second phase, each of these 20 language institutes was sent via the post office a package of questionnaires with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study. Individual questionnaire instruments were identified with a numeric code so that the respondents were anonymous and could not be identified. Each language institute administered the questionnaires with its own staff, placed them in the self-addressed, stamped envelopes provided by the researcher, and mailed them back to the researcher

within two weeks. The administration of the questionnaire was very flexible depending on the situation at each language institute. Some language institutes distributed the questionnaire in the computer lab or in the conversation class. Other language institutes administered the questionnaire in controlled settings such as a class session or at the testing place. In any case, answering the questionnaire was voluntary.

One thousand copies of the questionnaire were distributed to 20 English language institutes from June 2006 to September 2006. Six hundred and thirty students answered the questionnaire. Among them, 74 respondents' responses were discarded because the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score was unidentifiable or the questionnaire was incomplete, thus yielding 606 viable questionnaires. So, the response rate for this present study was 60.6%.

Results

What do ELLs perceive to be the important factors contributing to their language learning? To explore ELLs' perceptions of important factors contributing to their language learning, data were analyzed and were shown in Table 1. Mean score was 4.27 for beliefs about language learning, 4.24 for the learning environment subscale, 3.97 for learning strategies, 3.48 for motivation about language learning, and 3.06 for linguistic distance. That means that the respondents had the greatest importance ratings for beliefs about language learning scale, followed by the learning environment subscale, learning strategies, motivation about language learning, and linguistic distance. Accordingly, ELLs perceived that their beliefs about language

learning were the most important factor contributing to their language learning.

Table 1
Average Scores for Five Factors

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Beliefs about Language Learning	606	4.27	0.54	1.17	5
Learning Environment	606	4.24	0.53	1.0	5
Learning Strategies	606	3.97	0.47	1.43	5
Motivation about Language Learning	606	3.48	0.65	1.20	5
Linguistic Distance	606	3.06	0.83	1.0	5

What are the relationships between these factors and ELLs' language proficiency? The results of the multiple regression, using the five factors as predictor variables and ELLs' language proficiency as a criterion variable, were that two of the five factors, learning strategies and linguistic distance, contributed significantly to the prediction of ELLs' language proficiency (See Table 2). That is, learning strategies was the most important effect on ELLs' language proficiency (Beta = .166), and linguistic distance was the second most important effect on ELLs' language proficiency, but it is negative (Beta = -.106).

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analyses of Learning Environment, Learning Strategies, Motivation, Beliefs, and Linguistic Distance on ELLs' Language Proficiency

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2	
	Unstand-ardized B	Beta β	Unstand-ardized B	Beta β
Age	.770	.116**	.648	.098*
Learning Environment			.09	.001
Learning Strategies			12.77	.166**
Motivation			-4.63	-.085
Beliefs			1.20	.018
Linguistic Distance			-4.57	-.106**
R^2	.020		.060	
F	6.245**		5.498**	
N	606		606	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

ELLs' language proficiency was mediated by the relationships among their learning strategies and linguistic distance between their first language and English. In other words, controlling for the other subscales, as rating the importance on learning strategies increased a unit, TOEFL scores increased 12.77 points ($B = 12.77$, $p < .01$). Controlling for the other subscales, as rating the importance on linguistic distance increased, TOEFL scores

decreased ($B = -4.57$, $p < .01$). Accordingly, ELLs' language proficiency could be predicted from their learning strategies and linguistic distance between their first language and English. In other words, the relationships between ELLs' language proficiency and their learning strategies as well as their linguistic distance were strong.

Implications

Exploring ELLs' perspectives yielded information that can be utilized by English language institute teachers, and that can further our understanding of the complexity of the language learning process. Selected recommendations are provided below.

Recommendations for directors at English language institutes

Based on the findings in this study, some implications for the directors at English language institutes are suggested. First, the ELLs' living environment for language learning in the United States is a critical factor. It is important to have an appropriate living environment for ELLs in order to apply the language that they have learned in their daily lives. An example would be for them to live with native speakers in a dormitory to practice the language rather than living by themselves in an apartment with the friends who speak the same native language. ELLs would then have opportunities to interact directly with people who know how the language works and how it can be used (Wong Fillmore, 1991) to build linguistic proficiency.

Second, language institute directors may want to provide opportunities for students to communicate with native speakers as a criterion for program quality. An example of a program design includes inviting graduate students majoring in English as a second

language into the classroom to pair up with advanced students at English language institutes in conversation and writing classes. As for the beginning and intermediate students, they can learn from the more advanced students of students of English language institutes. Accordingly, all the students at English language institutes have opportunities to interact with the people who are more competent in English. In this learning process, ELLs receive help from students proficient in English and make strides during their learning process (Vygotsky, 1978).

The findings in this study concerning learners' beliefs about language learning and ELLs' learning strategies in their learning environment provide directors at English language institutes in the United States with more knowledge about language learning from the perspective of English language learners. Such knowledge empowers them to make better decisions regarding the curriculum design as well as creating a meaningful learning environment for English language learners.

Recommendations for the teachers at English language institutes

Based on the findings in this study, some pedagogical implications for the teachers at English language institutes are suggested. First, it is important to make students aware of their own learning process and all the learning strategies actually available to them. In order for students to learn to use learning strategies, teachers should emphasize two areas. The first area focuses on teaching learning strategies that accelerate ELLs' language learning, such as how to make the connection between the new concepts with the things that learners already know. The second area focuses on assisting students to explore the strategies proven to be beneficial but used infrequently. These strategies

include practicing English by making use of new language input as well as by constantly writing and speaking the language.

Second, it is necessary that teachers enrich the learning environment in the classroom by offering more opportunities for students to learn, use, and practice English. Moreover, activities which allow students to practice English outside the classroom help them to develop communicative competence. It is important to note that most of the respondents did not speak English at home and therefore required additional chances to enhance their pragmatic communicative competence.

Finally, English language learners need to be better informed about the availability of English materials and given easy access to such materials outside classroom contact hours. This study and others (e.g., Green & Oxford, 1995) have found that more proficient learners contact other sources outside the classroom for improving their language skills, such as watching TV and films in the target language, listening to the radio in the target language, and reading materials in the target language. Therefore, providing ELLs with easy access to authentic input in English via various means, both in and especially outside the classroom, can lead to increased motivation and more positive attitudes towards language learning.

References

Cattell, R. B. (1978). *Scientific use of factor analysis in behavioral and life sciences*. New York: Plenum.

Chomsky, N. (1986). *Knowledge of language: Its nature, origins, and use*. New York: Praeger.

Clément, R., & Kruidenier, B.G. (1985). Aptitude, attitude and motivation in second language proficiency: A test of

Clément's model. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 4*, 21-38.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). Research design: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crookes, G., & Schmidt, R.W. (1991). Motivation: Reopening the research agenda. *Language Learning, 41*(4), 469-512.

Diamond, B. J., & Moore, M. A. (1990). *Multicultural literacy: Mirroring the reality of the classroom.* New York: Longman.

Dillman, Don A. (1978). *Mail and telephone surveys: The total design method.* New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Dörnyei, Z. (1990). Conceptualizing motivation in foreign-language learning. *Language Learning, 40* (1), 45-78.

Ely, C.M. (1986). Language learning motivation: A descriptive and causal analysis. *Modern Language Journal, 70*(1), 28-34.

Flynn, S., & Martohardjono, G. (1995). Toward theory-driven language pedagogy. In F. R. Eckman, D. Highland, P. W. Lee, J. Mileham, & R. R. Weber. (Eds.), *Second language acquisition theory and pedagogy* (pp. 45-60). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Gardner, R., & Lambert, W. (1972). *Attitudes and motivations in second language learning.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Green, J. M., & Oxford, R. (1995). A closer look at learning strategies, L2 proficiency, and gender. *TESOL Quarterly, 29*(2), 261-297.

Gorsuch, R. L. (1983). *Factor analysis* (2nd ed.). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Horwitz, E. K. (1987). Survey student beliefs about language learning. In A.L. Wenden, & J. Rubin. (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice- Hall.

Horwitz, E. K., 1988. The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *Modern Language Journal, 72*, 283-294.

Institute of International Education. (2004). *Open doors 2004: International students in the U.S.* New York: Institute of International Education.

Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know.* New York: Newbury House.

Rasinski, T., & Padak, N. (1996). *Holistic reading strategies: Teaching children who find reading difficult.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice.

Rubin, J. (1975). What the "good language learner" can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly, 9*(1), 41-51.

Scarcella, R. C., & Oxford, R. L. (1992). *The tapestry of language learning.* Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Stern, H. H. (1975). What can we learn from the good language learner? *Canada Modern Language Review, 31*(4), 304-318.

Tanaka, S. T. (1987). "How big is big enough?" Sample size and goodness of fit in structural equation models with latent variables. *Child Development, 58*, 134-146.

Teale, W. H. (1986). Home background and young children's literacy development. In W.H. Teale & E. Sulzby (Eds.), *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp.

Tremblay, P. F., & Gardner, R. C. (1995). Expanding the motivation construct in language learning. *The Modern Language Journal, 79*, 505-520.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* London: Harvard University Press.

White, L. (1989). *Universal grammar and second language acquisition.* Amsterdam, PA: John Benjamins.

Wong Fillmore, L. (1991). Second language learning in children: A model of language learning in social context. In E. Bialystock (Ed.), *Language processing in bilingual children* (pp. 49-69). New York: Cambridge University Press.