

**THE SOCIAL AND AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS
OF EARLY SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A CASE STUDY**

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated the social and affective dimensions in the process of second language acquisition. It intended to find out how the social-psychological variables figure in the acquisition of a second language by a young learner and what strategies were employed to lower the learner's affective filter and language anxiety. The subject of this study, Loloy, was a six-year-old boy who was already fluent in his first language and was just learning English as a second language. A total of around 30 hours worth of close interaction and about three years of observation comprise the data of this paper. A set of questionnaires and interview were also answered by the subject, his parents and his teachers. The results of his tests and writings on his notebooks were also examined. The data reveal that the even though the subject had the necessary aptitude to acquire and learn a second language, he was shy and lacked confidence in using English. He would be made to participate in the activities only when he felt relaxed, when the teacher's voice was calm and friendly, and classmates' attention was not focused on him. This study validates the tenet that motivation is key to achieving fluency and to learning linguistic structures even outside classroom training. It is suggested that the support of the family, friends, and teachers in building the learner's confidence cannot be underestimated. Thus, the significance of the role of the home and classroom in providing a friendly environment for the learner and in the enhancement of the child's perception of himself and his self-efficacy was deemed crucial in the early acquisition of a second language.

Keywords: Motivation, Affective Filter, Language Anxiety, Second Language Acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

In this modern era of dynamic information technology, the need to communicate clearly and effectively, thus unambiguously, has become imperative. Effective communication, however, goes beyond mere grammatical and writing competencies. It entails the ability to express feelings and thoughts in appropriate ways at an appropriate time and the ability to make compensation strategies in cases where there is communication breakdown. In Canale's and Swain's terms, these last two are referred to as sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence, respectively (cited in Orillos 2008).

Where do children acquire these competencies? How should they achieve them?

Despite felt recognition of the advantages of communicative teaching strategies in achieving fluency and, eventually, accuracy in communication, classroom settings in the Philippines, where

English is taught as a second language, still reveal a teacher-centered and curriculum-controlled pedagogy. Although we acknowledge that learners should be at the core of all our pedagogical efforts, a closer look at classroom situations of our public or state schools would show that the learners are pushed to the margins. Instead, the deadlines on topic coverage and scores for achievement tests control the actions and decisions of most of the public school teachers. Here in the Philippines where the number of classrooms, the student-teacher ratio, the availability of quality textbooks and even qualified teachers are major issues, “one size fits all” approach has become the trend (Walter and Dekker 2011).

Being an instructor of English in a state university for about ten years gives me, I believe, the leverage to state that majority (roughly about 90 percent) of my students do not possess sociolinguistic and strategic competencies necessary to engage in modern-day discourse. What they have are limited to grammatical competence and a low degree of textual (discourse) competence. No matter how I explore various strategies and methods, they do little to elicit oral peer as well as student-teacher interaction. Although they may do well in written tests, their oral participation is limited to prepared speeches and oral reports. Assessments on levels and causes of language anxiety conducted in our university reveal that the shyness and lack of confidence and willingness to participate stem mostly from fear to be ridiculed, fear to be corrected by the teacher, and lack of knowledge and skills to engage in oral interaction in English.

Another crucial question we must face now is when and from where must learners gather confidence and boost their motivation. What social institutions are responsible for these processes?

These concerns can cause frustration on our part as university instructors because we are aware that language ability has been proven to be an important predictor of educational success. So we become wary of producing graduates who do not possess the basic communication competencies necessary to achieve gainful employment and are not ready to perform even work-related communication tasks.

The main thesis of this case study is that SLA is not only a cognitive phenomenon but an emotional undertaking as well. As such, the affective variables, and not only aptitude, must be taken into consideration in the whole process of learning English as a second language here in our country; and that strengthening of attitude towards learning English, self perception and motivation of the learners must start at an early age.

It is for this purpose that I conduct this case study. I wanted to get a closer look at how the social and emotional variables affect the process of acquiring English as second language at an early stage of language development.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

To prove the assumptions underlying the conduct of this research, this case study attempts to investigate the social and affective domains as variables in second language acquisition. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) To what extent does the affective-psychological disposition of the learner facilitate or debilitate language acquisition and learning?
- (2) What causes the learner’s inhibitions, shyness and language anxiety?
- (3) What teacher strategies are helpful in lowering the affective filter of the learner?

1.2 Significance of the Study

This paper is deemed significant because the bulk of research studies on SLA here in the country focus on mature learners and employ mostly surveys and assessment. Another edge of a case study is that for most research on motivation and other social-psychological variables affecting SLA, self report questionnaires are usually utilized. However, learner's self perception may not necessarily be reflected in their actual performances. Thus, to provide a more holistic picture of the complexity of SLA, an in-depth analysis on learner's processes, and not only on teachers' discourse (their strategies and methods), is necessary and more promising.

A case study is significant because not only teachers and policy makers can glean from findings and be reminded of the importance of prioritizing the learners as emotional and social beings but also the parents and peers who need to see their vital role in the success of acquisition and learning. Marjorie (2004) emphasizes the extent and nature of the critical reflections offered by case studies in determining the basis of sound methodological and pedagogical approaches to second language instruction. Lastly, this paper deals with a subject from a rural area. Most of the studies conducted in the Philippines explore learners from private schools in an urban setting which can carry a whole different set of cultural beliefs and practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 On attitude: motivation, affective filter and personality

According to Titone (1990), "attitude toward a **language** as the object of study are not inborn, but derived from social factors, mediated by states of the interacting organism, which together condition dispositional sets of a cognitive-affective nature toward given cultures and their information transmission systems." Because learners are born into a social world, they develop and grow up as social beings. They are first exposed to networks of relationships and begin to learn how to use a language. So to study how the young learners acquire a second language is to study closely also the social-affective variables in order to take into consideration their feelings, their desires and even their fears.

Gardner and Lambert (cited in Orillos 2008) advanced the idea that learner's feelings, their preferences, attitudes and personality are related to overall success. This is supported by the Acculturation Model espoused by Schumann (also cited in Orillos 2008) which proposed that affective factors, e.g. ego permeability and motivation, are important predictors of success in SLA. Unlike adult learners, young learners have the tendency to be *more flexible* and *less rigid*, thus, more *permeable* or open. Although children and adults are believed to have similar cognitive capacity to still learn a language other than their L1, children are deemed more open and receptive to input, thus more creative.

Cook (cited in Tengku Sepora & Sepideh, 2012) proposes that the three main factors that influence language acquisition and learning are age, personality and motivation; and **motivation** is the most significant in SLA. He suggests that motivation is fuelled by the learners' communicative needs and personality or attitude. In Gardner and Lambert's terms, the two types are *integrative* and *instrumental*. Motivation is fuelled by the need to be a part of the community speaking the target language and experience its culture (integrative); the other is the need for a gainful employment or for more pragmatic purposes (instrumental). In Ryan and Deci's terms, *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* are the other types of motivation. Those who are intrinsically motivated feel as such because they find the activity itself rewarding while those extrinsically motivated are after achieving targets such as teacher admiration, parents' and peer's approval, and better grades (Orillos, 2008).

While Schumann believes that ego permeability is more flexible among children, Krashen stresses the point that even young learners are affected by the social-psychological variables. Another major model that deals with learners' feelings and their crucial effect to the entire language acquisition process is Krashen's Monitor Model and its five attendant hypotheses (Zafar 2009). For the purpose of this study, I shall discuss briefly the Affective Filter Hypothesis. This hypothesis recognises that the three personal variables (motivation, self-confidence and anxiety) impact on L2 learner's success/failure. It posits that the input cannot become an intake and will not be a part of the learner's steady/stabilized state if the affective filter is high. The fear or anxiety sort of hijacks the input which cannot proceed to the steady state of the learner; and if it does proceed, it is delayed by the filter. The acquired system which is already present (made capable by the LAD), cannot be activated if comprehensible input is hijacked or shielded by the fear and anxiety. All these result in lack of confidence, low self-esteem and motivation on the part of the learner.

The study of Li, D. and Li, H. (2013) focuses on self esteem. Self-esteem is probably the most pervasive aspect of any human behavior. By self-esteem, we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself; it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitude that the individual holds towards himself. It is a subjective experience which the individual conveys to others. It could be easily claimed that no successful cognitive or affective activity can be carried out without some degree of self-esteem.

In addition, Malinowski (cited in Li and Li 2013) noted that all human beings have a need to define oneself and finding acceptance in expressing that self in relation to valued others. **Personality** development universally involves the growth of a person's concept of self, acceptance of self, and reflection of self as seen in the interaction between self and others.

Lastly, another affective factor that has influence in the success of a learner's acquisition process is **shyness**. The dissertation of Hsiang-Ning Rebecca Chu (2008) made an observation that Chinese community, as in most Asian culture, favors self restraint unlike western and urban cultures where shyness is considered a hindrance to success and satisfaction. This dissertation investigated the correlation between shy and non-shy attitudes to motivation and willingness to communicate. It was found out that the non-shy exhibited more willingness to communicate. What this implies is that the non-shy learners have more chances of improving and learning a second language because their willingness to communicate in a foreign language inside and outside of the classroom provides them more opportunities to improve their linguistic as well as sociolinguistic competence.

2.2 On early second language acquisition

Research studies results are in agreement that key aspects of personality and communication ability are developed early in life (Susikaran 2013). Age is accepted as a predictor of success in learning a second or foreign language. Nejadansari and Nasrollahzadeh (2011) found out that age is one of the most crucial factors affecting 'learnability' of linguistic and sociolinguistic structures. They suggest that the younger the learners are the more receptive and less inhibited they are to input. These studies on young learners and the effects of age in the success in SLA is significant in this paper because I wanted to point out that the efforts and strategies of teachers in primary education are vital factors in shaping their communicative competence early on, particularly sociolinguistic competence which is elusive among learners (at least based on my ten years of teaching experience in college). We should not underestimate the young learners' capacity and not wait until college level for them to be prepared for functional language use.

This contention on the effect of age in SLA is primarily based on Krashen's Critical Period Hypothesis, which was originally discussed in the late 1960s by Eric Lenneberg (Orillos 2008). Krashen advances that irrespective of whether native-speaker proficiency is achieved, children are more likely to reach higher levels of attainment in both pronunciation and grammar than adults.

For Djigunovic (2012), young learners refer to pre-schoolers (three to six years old). He observed that studies on young learners are still an under-researched area. His findings showed a better and positive outlook on learning English, high self-confidence and more enjoyment of English classes for young learners that learned under more favourable conditions, appropriately-trained teachers, intensive teaching, small group, and better family support. What this means is that, given the appropriate learning conditions, children can have positive emotional disposition at an early age which can also result in more chances of achieving fluency and linguistic ability.

2.3 On family and classroom influence

This part is included in this section to show how these two institutions, family and school, influence the acquisition and learning of a second or more languages, how the interaction of family and classroom moderates motivation, and how parental and teachers' behaviors can influence their learning habits and emotional disposition.

Three relevant papers are briefly discussed in this section. First is the study of MacLeod, et al. (2013) entitled "Simultaneous Bilingual Language Acquisition: The Role of Parental Input on Receptive Vocabulary Development." The findings reveal that the language exposure in the family has a huge effect on receptive vocabulary development of the children. The parents' efforts to expose their children to communication situations where the target language is used is vital in the acquisition of words and meanings and eventually, reading comprehension.

This is supported by Krashen's article, "We Acquire Vocabulary and Spelling by Reading: Additional Evidence for the Input Hypothesis" (1989). This paper reviews research on the language acquisition of spelling and vocabulary that further supports the Input Hypothesis for language acquisition and demonstrates the role of reading in spelling and vocabulary development. While the classroom may be a source of input, non-tutored settings are just as promising in providing linguistic input especially that they are usually less threatening.

Another study was conducted by Frank (2009) entitled "Motivation in learning a second language: Exploring the contributions of family and classroom processes." It is a cross sectional study which involved students, teachers, and parents. Different questionnaires were utilized to comprehensively gather data on how the home and family influence the motivation of the children to learn. This study emphasizes that the family and home are crucial in motivating learners to acquire a second or more languages. What students gather from the classrooms must be reinforced at home, and vice versa.

Lastly, the study of Tulung (2008), which focuses on the importance of teacher-talk, reiterates the role of a TL or FL teacher as equally crucial. This study reveals that communicative tasks promote or facilitate second language learning and attention to linguistic form and fluency. The non-native teachers who were well-trained and had smaller class size were able to employ communicative task-generated oral discourse in a second language. Activities such as jigsaw and decision making tasks generated a lot of interaction among learners and between teachers and learners. In addition, the teacher and students reported similar, positive perceptions and attitudes with regard to the use of communicative tasks, and there was anecdotal and observed evidence that the communicative tasks might facilitate lexical learning in this setting.

This classroom-based research is relevant to this case study because I wanted to point out that if teachers indeed are very crucial in engaging the students in oral discourse for fluency and

linguistic competence, what must they do in order to motivate students especially the shy ones to participate and increase willingness to communicate during oral interaction activities?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Subject

The subject of this paper is a six-year old boy named Loloy (not his real name). His parents were both language teachers and his older sister, who is an honor student, was also studying in the same elementary school. The subject was chosen for analyzing second language acquisition processes because he was deemed fluent in his first language- Visaya- and is just starting to learn English as a second language.

Unlike his sister, Loloy was never exposed early to speaking English at home or with friends. When he was born, the Visayan language (the Cebuano variety) was the language of conversation at home because relatives and household helpers (all Cebuano speakers) came to live with them. All the adult members of the household did not speak “motherese” so Loloy did not experience “baby talk.”

3.2 Data Collection

To ensure that the data will not only come from the self-report of the learner, I devised questionnaires and follow-up interviews to solicit opinions and observations from parents and teachers. Also, I prepared flash cards for a linguistic test I devised and checklist containing categories such as family, colors, fruits, shapes, animals and the like. Apart from his occasional visits to the faculty room and presence during get-together/catch up meetings between her mother’s friends and colleagues, I was able to record observations of my interaction with Loloy.

Most of our recorded sessions occurred during lunch break. This was about the time he would finish his classes in school and would drop by the speech laboratory managed by his mother. Since the language laboratory was adjacent to the faculty room, they would also drop by the office to use the lavatory. This gave me the chance to observe how he would interact with the people around.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The bulk of language anxiety or motivation researches here in the Philippines are focused on adult learners. While there is a belief that young learners’ affective filter, which covers variables like anxiety level, self-esteem and motivation, are relatively lower than that of the adult learners. It is undeniable that these variables have major effects also in the process of early second language acquisition and learning. In the case of a six-year-old learner, Loloy, his apparent shyness and lack of confidence contribute much to the lack of willingness to communicate in English. There is no question as to his language aptitude because results of his written exams and my interaction with him during our sessions proved that he has achieved a level of linguistic competence. This answers the first objective of this study: to determine the extent to which the affective-psychological disposition of the learner facilitate or debilitate language acquisition and learning.

His family and teachers could attest, based on my interviews, that Loloy had very little participation most of the time when it comes to oral interaction. He would refuse to participate and would only smile or grin when asked by the teacher. This smile according to the mother is the same smile he would put on when faced in a frightening experience or when being reprimanded. When I asked him this question, he simply said, “maulaw man gud ko” (*I’m shy*).

In terms of family influence, further interviews from the parents reveal that unlike his elder sister, Loloy was not used to speaking English. The parents would talk to the sister in English and

they would still have enough time to read to her and watch cartoons or TV shows in English together. During Loloy's time, relatives (grandmother, uncle, aunt, and two working students) were staying with them. The parents said that they felt awkward talking to him in English with all the Visayan-speaking family members around who now would watch TV shows in Tagalog most of the time and speak in Visayan only.

Although Loloy would still watch a lot of cartoons in English with his sister, the time to read books was lessened because of the internet connection at home; he would spend a lot of time playing games. The parents also admitted that with hectic schedules in the university, the reading time with the kids was reduced. The only time he would sit down to read was when he would join his sister studying her lessons or preparing for exams.

When asked why Loloy, unlike the sister, was so inhibited to talk and perform when teased by his parents' friends and colleagues, the mother said that Loloy might be influenced growing up by the 'monitoring' or corrections he would hear from his parents when CJ would commit mistakes in her exams or performances. A keen listener at home, he probably absorbed the fear every time they would reprimand the sister when she committed errors in her exams and activities. This situation made him hesitant to speak in English for fear of being scolded by his parents.

Being a typical conservative Filipino family in a province, the parents would always remind Loloy and his sister to behave well in public, to lower their voice when speaking with others, to sit properly, and so on. This explains why according to his chaperone who peeks to observe him from a glass window, he would only sit properly and observe his classmates running about the room and would not talk much with anybody. But when asked by his parents what the activities were during the day, he could recount all the tasks and would even perform them at home.

In a classroom setting, there was one instance that proves that indeed anxiety or fear could debilitate learning. I was wondering what happened to his score in a test I took a picture of. It was obvious that he knew the answers because in other similar activities he got them right. The mother explained that when he asked Loloy about it, he said that he rattled because the teacher was shouting to some students who were unruly during the test. She said this perhaps affected his listening concentration as the items of the test were dictated to the students. When I asked Loloy about it, he said he did not like that teacher (a substitute to the full-time teacher) and added, "maldita man s'ya ug musyagit." Rough translation to this would be: *She's not nice and she shouts.*

In terms of Loloy's linguistic development, the activities we had during our sessions using digital flash cards in tablets showed that he has acquired more lexical items compared to learners his age I came across with like my nephews and nieces. In terms of typological universals like perceptual categories (Orillos 2008: 156-158), for instance, he knows almost all colors except beige (for him it was white), fuchsia pink (it was simply red), and teal (it was blue). For basic category names like animals, he was able to answer all almost items except those he had not encountered in books he read like antelope and monitor lizard. For fruit names, his answers were in Visaya except for apple and orange. For cognitive categories, Loloy was already able to inflect the nouns to plural forms by adding *S* and negate by adding *not*. For kinship terms, he knew the basics: *mother, father, sister, cousin, aunt, and uncle*. But he did not know *grandmother*; he would call her *nanay*.

When I asked her mother how he acquired those words, she said it was mostly from listening and watching his sister study her lessons especially during quizzes. Then his mother showed me videos of Loloy delivering a story-telling piece and the salutatory speech of his ate which he memorized from listening to her during practice.

The discussion leads to a very important question of assessment tools on the part of the teacher. If Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance is to be held true, and that competence is checked through performance, the teacher must be able to devise activities that will

motivate the learners to engage in oral discourse using English as the target language in order to test and assess the learners' real level of competence. Otherwise, the grades of the learners would be affected as the performance may be clouded not by the cognitive/linguistic aptitude but by the social-psychological factors.

Those with high motivation and self esteem and higher willingness to communicate are those with high oral and reading proficiency (Kneil 2012). These factors- motivation, self-esteem and willingness to communicate, are not entirely personal disposition. They are shaped by the family (home) and the teachers (classroom).

Krashen's and Lenneberg's position on the affective filter as embedded in the Monitor Theory is proven true in this study.

5. CONCLUSION

My central argument in this paper has been that the affective factors must be taken into consideration in the whole process of second language acquisition and learning. Though this may sound like "that's common sense," the reality for most of public or state schools in the Philippines is that we tend to focus on the product and not the process. We are more concerned with shaping the aptitude (the intellectual/cognitive variables) more than the attitude (the social-affective variables). We are overtaken by other educational concerns central to any third world country: large classes, lack of classrooms, of well-trained teachers, of appropriate instructional materials and poverty in general; in so doing we neglect to put the learners at the core of the SLA process.

In light of this, I conclude that the social-affective factors are not just imagined concerns but are as real as they are crucial in the acquisition of a second or a foreign language. Those with high motivation and self esteem and higher willingness to communicate are those with high oral and reading proficiency (Kneil 2012). These factors- motivation, self-esteem and willingness to communicate, are not entirely personal disposition. They are shaped by the family (home) and the teachers (classroom).

5.1 *Recommendations: A look into the future*

Although SLA does not necessarily entail language pedagogy (Gass and Selinker 2008), it has been intertwined in the field of teaching because of the implications. The findings of this case study have implications on the following stakeholders:

For teachers cum researchers. Stewart argues (as cited in Ellis 2010) that what is needed is 'teachers' research', i.e. research done by teachers for teachers. It is recommended that teachers conduct research embedded in the realities of classroom practice so that language teaching methodologies are firmly based on research studies that understand how the variables of language learning and acquisition interact with one another. More case and experimental studies that go beyond self-report questionnaire, surveys and assessment are needed to provide teachers as well as curriculum developers and planners a more holistic picture of the complex process of second language acquisition. I do not underestimate the implications of these research studies but if our studies are meant to provide intervention measures, they should be able to cut the problem early on from the roots, to resort to 'prevention is better than cure' approach. Thus, the need for early second language acquisition research.

For curriculum developers and educational planners. Stakeholders especially curriculum developers and planners need to base policies and decisions on researches on language learning and acquisition and in-depth investigations such as case studies to guide and point our educational system to the right and more promising direction. School administrators must be involved in creating a more nurturing and supportive environment: rather than curriculum-centered, it should be

learner-centered. Case studies like this hopefully can shed light on planning pre-school curriculum, student-teacher ratio and instructional materials development.

For family and peers: Parents, other family members and friends must remember that relation between family and school has been recognized as a variable of success in SLA. Feelings of fear or confidence start at home. So the role they portray in maintaining or developing motivation and in instilling to the learners how they should value themselves highly is very crucial. Lastly, it is recommended that the family ensure the learners' early language exposure for them to build their confidence and develop positive attitude towards the target language.

For English language teachers. In view of this study, I make the following recommendations: Ensure that the student feels like he or she belongs and is a valued part of the classroom by making your classroom a nurturing environment, a place where students are not afraid to speak. Employ task-based learning as a way to encourage students to speak English in a more non-threatening environment. Be careful when correcting the learners' errors. Prepare varied and appropriate instructional materials and assessment tools to test the competence of both the shy and non-shy members of the class. Lastly, wear that smile, though exhausted you may be. Loloy likes his teacher because of her smile. Ellis (2010) encourages reflection that is necessary in teacher development. Through research, teachers are able to invite themselves to look closely and be reminded of the complexities that go with the whole language acquisition and learning process. Through this, teachers may find better ways in how to conduct their teaching and to resort to sound methodological and pedagogical approaches.

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