A reflective account of my own learner biography: my strengths and weaknesses as a language learner

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Summary
This paper focuses in the most important aspects of my experience in learning English as a foreign language. Every student has their own strengths that ease learning, which in my case were motivation and learning strategies; and weaknesses such as anxiety. It is also explained how motivation led to the development of learning strategies that helped overcome my weaknesses ending in successful learning.

Introduction

Mitchell and Myles (2004) argue that in recent decades researchers have not arrived at a unified or comprehensive view as to how second languages are learnt. August and Hakuta (1997) state that researchers have looked at second language acquisition from a number of perspectives, each of which have provided unique insights, but the relationship among the various perspectives in often unclear. Ellis (1985) explores some of the aspects of SLA which are influenced by individual learners; factors such as age, learning style, aptitude, motivation and personality and how different they are in the route of the SLA. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992, in Mitchell and Myles, 2004) enlist in two main groups the main characteristics of

these individual differences. On one hand; the cognitive: intelligence, language aptitude and language learning strategies; and on the other the affective: language attitudes, motivation and language anxiety; and willingness to communicate. Mitchell and Myles (2004) mention that social psychologists have discussed that the differences in learning outcomes might be due to individual differences among learners. Taking into account that every learner acquires or learns the language in different ways, I will try to describe the process of my own learning experience in this paper.

I will start with a description of the situational school context for English classes in the city where I grew up. Then, I will explicate the reasons and motivation that led me to take English classes additional to the compulsory classes offered in public schools. Later, I will try to explain the characteristics related to my individual learning and the strengths such as motivation and learning strategies I followed in order to pursue my goal. I will also try to describe my weaknesses such as anxiety that somehow ended in demotivation.

English before studying English

Public schools in Mexico did not use to offer English classes for Elementary education. As a child, the exposure to English was null and due to the geographical context of the city where I was living in; very little contact with the language reached the context in which I developed myself. English was a luxury item that was not available for everyone; private schools that offered English classes were an option. Public schools' curriculum has been managed by the federal level Secretary of Public Education and English as a subject was not considered part of the curricula in elementary schools.

The first encounter with the formal, planned and systematic language was in secondary school. English was included as a compulsory subject in the curriculum and was offered three hours a week for the three school years. These classes were far from being productive, or leading to a significant learning or acquisition of the language. In my current teacher view, many aspects could be mentioned in the inefficacy of these classes: instruction was usually given in Spanish and evaluation was mostly done by using grammar-based exams as well as student's behavior during the school year and not necessarily on achievement. It was never focused on creating competent users of the language; large classes, lack of students' motivation, teachers' low proficiency in English, lack of methodology or adequate materials, etc.

High school English classes conditions showed notorious differences from junior high school. Communication was enhanced in many of the classes (at least in the ones I was part of), information was recycled from the very basics and previous knowledge was not taken into account (perhaps because it was very little). Teachers seemed to be more prepared, technology made the difference; classes included laboratories where listening and pronunciation were practiced; television and video players were other teaching aids. Conditions in the classroom were different from prior experiences, group work and pair work were included with more frequency in the class and oral skills were given a little more importance. Classes followed an integral four basic skills approach. At the end of high school, in spite of the differences in methodology, my knowledge was scarce in order to say that a student could be a competent user of the language. Hymes (1972) defined communicative competence not only as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations.

By the end of high school, I decided to take up English classes in a private school. Private English schools were expensive because of the conditions they offered to their prospects: small groups (12 maximum), prepared teachers, a more personalized attention, and more opportunities for speaking.

The cumulative knowledge secondary school and high school had provided me with was enough to start. Through a written placement test and an oral interview I was placed in level one out of fourteen levels.

Motivation: My strength

The program of the school consisted of fourteen levels that I decided to take in everyday classes of one hour and thirty minutes. Being placed in a level one out of fourteen reduced my enthusiasm but did not stop me. I was self-motivated to learn English. Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008, p. 55) state that "motivation gives the first force to start the second or foreign language learning and later the leading force to sustain the long and often tiresome learning process". According to Gardner (1985, p. 10) motivation is "the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity". A language student with a high level of motivation, high self-confidence, and lower anxiety will be more likely to be successful in language acquisition.

Ellis (1997) points out that there are various types of motivation: *Instrumental*, which pushes the student to learn a language in order to obtain something from the learning; *integrative* motivation which impulses the student to learn a language because the student is interested in the culture of the country of the language learned; *resultative* motivation that is produced when the students experience a feeling of achievement and motivates the student to go on; and *intrinsic* motivation which, according to Dörnyei (2001, p. 27), "deals with behavior performed for its own sake in order to experience pleasure or satisfaction" whilst extrinsic motivation deals with "performing behavior as a means to an end".

My desire to learn a second language was based on intrinsic motivation; a desire to learn something I simply liked it, not promises of a better job or exams to pass, no near trips to an English speaking country or not even an American acquaintance. A research done by Koestner and McClelland (1990) on intrinsic motivation has led to the conclusion that intrinsic motivation will be greatest under conditions that foster feelings of challenge, competence, and self-determination.

Among the motivating circumstances that I can account for were, firstly, the status that studying English at an expensive and well-known language school gave me; a certain degree of extrinsic motivation; secondly a feeling of pride of myself that I was doing something useful with my time. Thirdly, the school I chose also played a big role in my motivation. They offered a great learning environment and made me feel eager to go to class every day. At this point motivation could be defined as merely intrinsic as stated by Dörney (2001) previously mentioned in this paper.

Motivation at the beginning started at a very high point and it dropped when things became difficult regarding intrinsic motivational and external factors at the end of the fourth month. A feeling of tiredness of the same routine along with external issues (job, family, and money) were the main factors that led me to decide not to continue studying by the end of the fifth level (fifth month).

Anxiety: My weakness

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) state that there are 3 components to foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation and test anxiety. Anxiety in the classroom was a very important issue to consider in my decision of leaving English classes; an overwhelming feeling of shyness and shame in class. I was ashamed and afraid of mispronouncing words resulting in low participation.

According to Dörnyei (2001, p. 23) "people with low sense of self-efficacy in a given domain perceive difficult tasks as personal threats". He goes on explaining that these "people easily lose faith in their capabilities and are likely to give up"; anxiety in the classroom was usually sparked by error correction by the teacher; being laughed at when saying something incorrect was the most important factor that led me to the decision of giving up; I felt that I was not really learning. Bailey (1983, in Ellis, 1985) proposed a model of how a learner's self-image in comparison with other L2 learners can either impair or enhance Second Language Acquisition. This model explains that unsuccessful self-image ignites anxiety of two kinds: debilitating and facilitating. The model explicates that facilitating anxiety makes the learner find ways to become more competitive and to enhance learning leading to a successful self-image and as a consequence, learning. Somehow this model explains what happened to me in a critical moment of my learning. Of course, anxiety cannot be only addressed to the environment, the methodology or the teacher but to my own personality.

Going back to the track of learning

My decision of going back to study was merely external, my enthusiasm had disappeared at some point of my learning. A combination of external and internal factors influenced my motivation both intrinsic and extrinsic. Motivation had become instrumental due to the fact that I had decided to become an English teacher. I had found a purpose for learning the language which at the beginning of the course I had not established as such. The combination of these two types of motivation persuaded me to go further. Dörnyei (2001, p. 16) states that "motivation does not remain constant during the course of months or years". He also explains that "motivation is characterized by regular appraisal and balancing of the various internal and external influences to which the individual is exposed". Motivation had moved from intrinsic to instrumental once again on the sixth level and external factors were not an issue anymore.

Motivation was raised by social motivational factors; two events that made me gain confidence. The first one was a short conversation with a native speaker who was looking for help in order to do a bank transaction; being the only person who knew some English, I decided to help the teller. This was the first interaction with a real speaker of English; my nervousness was raised to the top. Feeling insecure and scared to the point of having shaky legs; however, the transaction was done. The second event was when I understood some of what people said in American movies without having to read the subtitles in Spanish and without making mental translations into Spanish. Although listening was the hardest skill to

acquire, for me it was the main indicator that I was indeed learning; my perceived ability to accomplish a task gave me a strong feeling of self-confidence. Dörnyei (2001, p. 23) points out that "self-efficacy enhances people's achievement behavior by helping them to approach threatening situations with confidence". Motivation was influenced by my self-perception. Although I had no notions of my self-efficacy and I was not confident about my learning, I faced the experience with enthusiasm. This experience worked as an aid to develop a plan of action to learn faster and to take advantage of every opportunity I could encounter.

Learning strategies

My desire to learn the language, and the available time I had, allowed me to develop my own learning strategies. On one hand, Oxford (1990, p. 8) defines language learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations", on the other hand, Ellis (1997, p. 76) defines learning strategies as "particular approaches or techniques that learners employ to try to learn a second language". Strategies were based on the need I had for learning the language, I was not consciously aware that the procedures taken to learn would work but I felt that what I was doing helped me gain knowledge.

Among the strategies I adopted to learn faster were the following:

- Extra classes offered at school; two extra hours once a week were given for free to any student who was willing to attend,
- weekly American TV movies as an aid to improve listening skills. A piece of masking tape on the screen covered the subtitles in Spanish in order not to let me read and to try to listen and understand,
- reviewing student books from prior levels. Erasing the exercises already answered in order to redo them, so that prior information could be reviewed,
- forcing myself to think how something in Spanish could have been said in English and vice versa. If I could say it, I would write it; if not, I would ask a teacher,
- creating a dictionary with every new word encountered during the day, or vocabulary needed to express something; later on I would look them up in a dictionary,
- answering exercises before they were assigned for homework which gave me the opportunity to encounter new language structures and vocabulary,
- writing in my own words every grammar rule I had seen in class for studying purposes,

- writing a journal; my experiences along the day were collected in a notebook which later I would read in order to identify mistakes,

These strategies I used were a great motivating tool that gave me confidence and strength, what I considered an advantage over other students. Knowledge was increasing and it was remaining. The geographical context in which I developed did not offer many opportunities for exposure in addition to the classes. Input was provided mainly by classes but they offered very few opportunities for output. Ellis (1985, p.165) states that "the process involved in using L2 knowledge consists of production, reception and communication strategies". Although knowledge was increasing, it could not be used in a natural setting; exposure to the language was only in the language classroom context and there were not opportunities for output in real situations. Most of the knowledge acquired was through the conscious study. Ellis (1985, p. 6) defines "acquisition as a term used to refer to picking up a second language through exposure" and learning as "a term used to refer to the conscious study of a second language". Based on this definition exposure to language in my situational context was merely focused in form. Most teachers in Mexico are Mexican speakers of the English language, that is; it was easier for me to understand teachers' and classmates' accent, pronunciation and fluency. Saville- Troike (2006, p. 161) state that "many learners report that they find it easier to understand L2 utterances produced by speakers of their own L1 than by native speakers of the L2"; in short, I was being trained to understand speakers "*IN*" the classroom.

Conclusion

Many aspects should be taken into account when speaking about being a successful learner but we have to differentiate that a successful learner is not a successful user of the language. Individual attitudes and aptitudes also play an important role in successfully learning a language.

In spite of not having found the recipe to learn a second language successfully, I can state that, in my case, three important aspects helped me learn the language: *MOTIVATION* which, regardless of having fluctuated all along the way, accompanied me during all the journey; *LEARNING STRATEGIES* that I found as the tools that eased the process; and finally, the *TIME* allocated for learning simply because I would not have been able to developed my strategies even with my greatest motivation.

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