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Acculturation strategy and language experience in expert ESL speakers: An exploratory study

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Abstract

Acculturation and language proficiency have been found to be inter-related both from the perspective of second language acquisition (Schumann, 1978, 1986) and socio-psychological adaptation in cross-cultural contacts (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). However, the predictions as to the effect of a particular strategy on success differ, with assimilation believed to create most favourable conditions for SLA and integration for general well-being. The present study explores acculturation patterns in three expert users of English as a second language, recent Polish immigrants to the UK, in relation to their language experience. The qualitative data were collected with the use of a questionnaire and analysed with respect to language experience and socio-affective factors. The analysis aimed at better understanding of the relationship between language learning in a formal context and language use in a natural setting on the one hand and the relationship between language expertise and acculturation strategy choice on the other. The results show that in spite of individual differences, expert language users tend to adopt an assimilation rather than integration acculturation strategy. This may suggest that attitudes are related to expertise in English as a second language in a more conservative way than advocated by cross-cultural approaches.

Keywords: acculturation, SLA, language attitudes, language shock, culture shock, expert learners, Polish immigrants to the UK

The globalised reality brings a new understanding of cross-cultural contacts and communication. With English as a language of international communication, teachers and learners across Europe change their priorities and attitudes towards English, which is increasingly viewed as culturally unspecified. The perspective adopted by proponents of a *Lingua Franca* approach (Jenkins, 2000, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2005) seems to make it possible to use English as a tool for expressing every speaker's native culture through the medium of a different language. A major argument for L1 induced modification of English comes from the observation that Europeans are more likely to communicate with other non-native speakers than native speakers of English (Seidlhofer, 2005). However, in a Polish context this does not need to be the case, with the enlargement of the European Union in May 2004 creating conditions for an increased likelihood of direct contact with the target culture not only for those Poles who decided to seek employment in the UK or Ireland, but also for their relatives and friends from Poland. Thus, it is not only a scientific curiosity, but also a practical necessity to explore the effect of immersion and learn from the experience of Polish learners who have had the opportunity to test the effectiveness of formal instruction in English as a foreign language for communication in a natural language environment. In particular, the observation of the most successful, expert language learners may provide further insights into the nature of the intricate relationship between identity, culture and the development of second language proficiency. This paper hopes to contribute to the discussion of both expert language learner characteristics and immigrant language development by exploring the views and attitudes of three educated Polish speakers who moved to the UK to continue their studies in 2005 and have subsequently decided to set up their homes in this country. There are two major reasons for undertaking this study: firstly, the study aims to extend the understanding of the nature of a complex relationship between language and culture experience and the acculturation strategy adopted by expert English as a second language (ESL) speakers; secondly, given an increased likelihood of direct contact with native speakers of English in the Polish context, the study hopes to provide independent evidence that can be used in further discussion of teaching and learning priorities in Polish schools. Although the three case studies presented here do not provide enough data for generalizations, the study hopes to contribute to a growing body of research in the field of immigrant language experience and its implications for language instruction.

Acculturation

The situation in which an individual brought up in a certain culture (and language or languages) comes in direct contact with a different culture (and

language) creates conditions for acculturation, originally defined as comprehending "the phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149 as cited in Berry, 1997, p. 14). As an element of culture, language has been predicted to be particularly sensitive to cross-cultural experience, with researchers agreeing that language fluency acts as one of the main factors predicting sociocultural adaptation (Ward, 1996; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Not surprisingly, then, the pattern of acculturation has been postulated to function as a predictor of success in second language acquisition. In the model proposed by Schumann (1978, 1986), acculturation, defined as "social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group," is claimed to be "a major causal variable in SLA" (Schumann, 1986, p. 379). The variable comprises social and affective factors based on social psychology research; in a more recent formulation, a framework for acculturation research (Berry, 1997, p. 15) includes group (situational) and individual (personal) variables, with moderating factors active prior to acculturation and occurring during acculturation. Thus, acculturation comprises a number of factors whose values contribute to the process of adaptation, that is, "changes that take place in individuals or groups in response to environmental demands" (Berry, 1997, p. 15), viewed as a long-term outcome of culture and language contact.

Traditionally associated with immigration, acculturation involves patterns of adaptation chosen by members of a non-dominant group; these patterns have been generalized on the basis of bi-polar answers to two major questions about cultural maintenance on the one hand, and contact and participation on the other (Berry, 1997). A positive attitude towards cultural maintenance and a negative one towards contact and participation within the dominant culture and/or language group leads to Separation of a non-dominant group member/s; a reverse situation, that is, a negative attitude towards maintenance of the native culture and positive toward the dominant culture, results in the strategy of Assimilation. In the case of two 'minuses' a group or a person faces Marginalisation, and can be said not to feel they belong to either community; finally, if a group or a person values both their own original culture and the culture of the majority community, conditions are met for Integration. The results of much of the psychological research show that it is this final strategy that is most helpful in reaching long term health and well-being (see Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001 and Ward et al., 2001, pp. 91-92 for a review).

With respect to the dominant community language proficiency, however, the effect of acculturation strategy may differ. Evaluating the predictive power of three strategies: assimilation, preservation and adaptation (corresponding to Assimilation, Separation and Integration in Berry, 1997), Schumann (1986) assumes that it is the assimilation strategy that is the best predictor of success. The adaptation strategy, corresponding to Integration ("the group adapts to the life style and values of the [target language] TL, but maintains its own life style and values for intragroup use" [Schuman, 1986, p. 381]) is claimed to have a varied effect due to a different degree of language contact with the target language community. As it is the amount of interaction with native speakers that is claimed to have a decisive impact on SLA, adopting the values and life-style of the target language group seems to guarantee success. This view has been supported by two types of research: firstly, extensive research in the acquisition of English pronunciation (e.g., Bongaerts, van Summeren, Planken, & Schils, 1997; Flege, 1988; Flege, Bohn, & Jang, 1997; Flege & Lui 2001; Flege, Schiru, & MacKay, 2003) shows that language experience and the amount of native speaker input may determine the acquisition of the target sound system in children as well as in adults. Secondly, socio-phonetic studies of ethnic group affiliation provide ample evidence for the relationship between language and group identity (e.g., Gatbonton & Trofimovich, 2008; Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Segalovitz, 2011; Sachdev & Giles, 2004).

Expert Language Users

The conditions for ultimate attainment (e.g., Moyer, 1999), features of a good language learner (e.g., Rubin, 1975), especially from the perspective of learning strategies and learning styles (e.g., Anderson, 1991) or personality factors (Biedroń, 2011) have been in the centre of attention in SLA studies over the years. Interestingly, however, there seems to have been a shift in the direction of interest, and after a long period of exploring the causes of problems in language learning, there has been a growing interest in such cases when learners reach high proficiency levels, sometimes against all odds, as in the case of near-native pronunciation of adult speakers (Binghader, 2010; Bongaerts, Planken, & Schills, 1995; Bongaerts et al., 1997; Ioup, Boustagi, El Tigi, & Moselle, 1994). Although a negative effect of age predicted by the Critical Period Hypothesis has been supported by many studies, especially with respect to L2 phonology, a combination of individual learner characteristics, affective variables and language experience ('input enhancement' in Ioup, 1995) may lead to ultimate attainment. With success defined in terms of reaching a native-like level of proficiency, however, it is difficult to operationalise the concept of a good language

learner or ultimate attainment with respect to a holistic language profile of a second language user in a natural context. Arguably, although language testing can provide information as to the level of linguistic competence, testing communicative and pragmatic competence needed for everyday life verges on the impossible. However, the observation of a dominant target-language community and learning how highly successful SLA speakers function within this community in comparison to other members of their non-dominant, L1 community, provides grounds for selecting individual learners who function as expert language users.

The concept of expertise in language learning can be defined with respect to both independent measures and socially-based evaluation; for instance, in her quantitative analysis of the beliefs of two expert language learners, Mercer (2010) used the criterion of high proficiency and recognition of the expertise level in a particular socio-cultural context (conditions for being awarded the English department 'Excellence Award' at an Austrian University; p. 59). While a university setting provides clearly defined social conditions, the term *expert language user* will be extended in this paper to selected members of a Polish non-dominant community in a university town in the UK on the basis of their linguistic function in a target community. The estimate of language proficiency in these speakers is based on their position within the community: They hold at least an MA from a British tertiary level institution and do not work doing manual labour (in fact they either study or work for the university).

The Study

The general aim of the study is to explore the attitudes and beliefs of highly successful ESL Polish speakers whose language learning experience includes formal learning before they decided to move to the UK and intensive interaction in a naturalistic setting once they took up employment and studies in the English environment. More specifically, the study concentrates on language experience and acculturation strategy in those members of a Polish speech community in Britain who are believed to have achieved the status of language experts within the non-dominant (Polish) group by means of their educational and occupational advancement in the dominant (British) group.

Participants

The study was carried out among Polish-born and Polish-educated immigrants to the UK. They hold at least a BA level diploma from Poland and at the time of the study were either working towards their MA or PhD or just completed these degrees as a result of their continuing education in the UK.

All participants had been living in the UK for at least 5 years before the recording. The educational profile was selected because of the interest in the learning experience of those young immigrants whose motivation for staying in the UK seems to extend beyond sojourn; moreover, as the study is concerned with the profile of expert ESL users, it was necessary to select the individuals who could be assigned this role on the basis of their social status in both communities, the non-dominant and dominant ones.

The participants were approached through a network of Polish university and school friends in Poland and the UK; the three participants whose experience and attitudes are explored here live in the same part of Britain, the North East, in relatively small towns. Although they have a connection through the same university, they do not study or work together. Their life stories bear a number of similarities: They were born in 1983 and came to the UK in 2005, they took up studies and after a certain period of time decided on permanent residence in the host country. Before coming, all the participants experienced formal training in English – as the length and intensity of this training varies, it will be further described in the findings section. As already mentioned, at the time of the study all participants studied and/or worked for a British university, which requires everyday usage of English in a natural setting.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected with the use of an open-format questionnaire (see Appendix), with the questions first read and then answered by participants. The format of a questionnaire rather than a structured interview was selected to minimize the interlocutor effect and avoid speech accommodation: As the researcher is Polish and the questionnaire/interview was conducted in English, the effect of the nationality of an interviewer might have had an effect on the results (Dowd, Zuengler, & Berkowitz, 1990). The answers to the questionnaire were recorded with the permission of the participants; the recordings were then transcribed and analysed. The data were coded for answers to key questions regarding language experience and acculturation strategy.

Language experience was analysed on the basis of questions No. 2-3, 6-9. The acculturation strategy was operationalised in terms of the beliefs and attitudes towards L1 and its culture (Q No. 5, 12-19) and the proportion of involvement in the target language and culture (Q No. 10, 21). Additionally, affective factors of language and culture shock were considered on the basis of questions No. 6-9 and 20-21. The interpretation of the data follows Schumann (1986) and Berry (1997) with respect to acculturation; language experience is analysed for language learning as well as acculturation strategy.

Findings

This section presents major findings based on the analysis of the questionnaire data. The three aspects: language experience, acculturation strategy and affective factors, are first introduced and then discussed for each participant.

Language experience. All three participants came to the UK after an extensive formal education in English, with two of them – Maja and Pete – completing three years of English major tertiary level education, and Miriam having the experience of English major at a high school level. However, for all of them communicating in English in a specific local context proved challenging. Their beliefs with respect to most helpful elements of language experience point to the importance of natural interaction where, as one of the participants puts it “*you have to react.*” As the participants interacted with speakers using local accents, understanding the accent was another major challenge and a helpful language experience.

Maja. Maja considers herself a speaker of Polish as her first language, with English coming second. She started learning English at high school, at the age of 15, but later on decided to take up English as her major and graduated from an English teacher training college in Poland. Before she decided to stay in Britain, she had come to the UK for a summer in 2004 to work as an au-pair and believes that it was a useful language experience. However, when she came to live in the northeast of England she realized she used what she refers to as “*book*” English, very “*RP and formal.*” Looking back on her language experience she reflects:

I lacked this fluency and this natural flow and now it has improved so much, after a couple of months it started to become easy to understand people and then after a couple of years you sort of get to pick up the local vocabulary, accent and it is just easier to speak, to listen and to be understood. And it is important because many people when we came, couldn't understand us because our accents were so strong and we were using words that they found quite strange, so I would say now [my English] has improved a lot.

In developing English skills while in the UK, she found interaction with local people most useful, she stresses full immersion as the most important factor and says: “*interaction is most helpful, day in day out, sometimes embarrassing, but you have to react, so it was the most useful thing.*”

Although English is a dominant language in her daily life now, Maja believes she uses around 60 per cent English and 40 percent Polish. Her contin-

ued Polish experience comes mainly from using it at home (she has a Polish boyfriend); however, besides using Polish in communication in the home environment and when she meets Polish friends, Maja reads Polish books and watches Polish television, so she believes her English and Polish language inputs to be fairly balanced, with Polish still strong in her everyday experience and English the language in which she works, studies and communicates with the outside world.

Miriam. For Miriam Polish is her first language, although she declares using English in all contexts (her boyfriend is English, so she uses English at home) and mentions the Internet communicator talks with her family in Poland as the only occasions when she would use Polish now. Her English education started very early, at the age of 8 or 9, at school and during private classes, and continued in an English-major high school, but Miriam says she was not the best student then and did not spend much time studying English. However, she was very much interested in the media and movies, so a lot of her input English came from authentic sources. Her English improved during her stay in the UK, she believes she is more fluent, more confident now, with English words coming first and occasional problems with Polish equivalents when they are needed. She finds interaction, everyday use of English at work, as well as watching the English TV and reading in English very useful.

In contrast to English, the Polish input is minimal in the case of Miriam – she mentions watching Polish films on DVD occasionally, but even here she adds that she prefers Polish directors of more European than strictly Polish interests, such as Polański or Kieślowski. Other than films, she declares no Polish input through the media or books.

Pete. Unlike the two previous speakers, Pete declares English to be his first language now and explains that he feels this way because this is the language he uses most often, thinks in it and works using it; he uses his second language – Polish, only in emails and the Internet communicator-based contacts with his family in Poland. He started learning English very early – around 6 or 7, with school classes accompanied by private tuition and a lot authentic English input. Describing his attitude to English learning in Poland, he says: “*I have always exposed myself to English as much as I could and I definitely found that useful.*” He had 3 years of university English education before coming to the UK and assesses his English on arrival as good. However, he feels there was a difference between individual skills, with reading and writing much stronger than speaking and listening, which he feels improved a lot with eve-

ryday exposure and interaction in English. He stresses the difference between learning and acquisition and says:

I didn't feel like I was learning English. . . . I think it must have been more like acquisition, I didn't record new vocabulary, I must have picked up a lot of slang, everyday expressions, fixed expressions from friends, people I work with . . . being exposed and thinking in English – that's the basic thing that people don't take into account but thinking in English helps a lot.

Another aspect of language input that Pete stresses is exposure to different accents; reflecting on initial challenges in the UK, he talks about problems with understanding local people in a pub where he worked as a waiter. This was a frustrating experience, as with the fast tempo of work there was no time to negotiate the meanings and local customers were often not patient enough to repeat when he did not understand them. In the long run, however, he says exposure to the accents helped a lot and he concludes by saying: "*When I arrived [all four skills] were good, now they are very good, but there is always room for improvement.*"

Acculturation strategy. The degree to which speakers value the non-dominant group culture versus that of a dominant group has been accepted as a key factor in defining the adopted acculturation strategy (Berry, 1997). In connection with predictions for SLA, acculturation strategy is treated as one of social factors, with distance, dominance, enclosure, cohesiveness, size, congruence, attitude and intended length of residence in the target language area as additional aspects (Schumann, 1986). As the approach adopted in this research is based on personal decisions and the personal approach to the perception of group characteristics, some of the social factors will be mentioned in connection with acculturation strategy. The ones which seem to be shared by the three participants include a low level of distance and enclosure, small cohesiveness, relatively small size of the group, positive attitude and intended permanent residence. The question of congruence and dominance between the cultures is more difficult to assess on the basis of the data, however, participants' beliefs seem to suggest a relatively high degree of dominance of the target culture and small congruence between the cultures.

Maja. When Maja says:

I can take some things that I like in the English culture and I can at the same time stick to the things I like in the Polish culture, so it's a mixture, but I would still describe myself as a Polish person,

there seems to be a clear indication that she has adopted an Integration acculturation strategy. This is further strengthened by her relatively tight links with Poland – she declares following Polish news and watching Polish television. At the same time, however, she stresses the need to integrate, with Polish traditions and customs worth keeping but not at all costs. Her beliefs are further illustrated on the basis of her in-group observation and experience:

There is also a question of keeping their own little gangs and groups and not willing to communicate, integrate with the local community and this is the danger, because you know, I know people who have been here as long as me, so 5-6 years and they don't speak English, they still need help, they are not willing to try, they criticize not only the society but also the system, the benefit system, although many of them use it – many of them get council houses and other benefits, so you know, it is dangerous. So it is important to know who you are but also because we are here it is important to go out and see and check who the people you live with are as well so that's that.

She is convinced about the need to preserve the Polish language in immigrant children, as it is not only a part of cultural heritage but has the potential of being beneficial for children who speak both English and Polish (“*there is research showing that bilingual children are more intelligent than monolingual ones*”). However, she stresses that Polish needs to be seen as the additional language, with English more important. She believes proficiency in English decides about success in the dominant group and explains that the negative opinions on the attitude of the dominant group towards the Polish group tend to be spread by those who are not able to communicate and blame the dominant community for not understanding what they want.

At the same time she praises Polish upbringing and Polish values, saying that in contrast to the British who are “*welfare state children and they can't be bothered, that's their favourite expression*” she comes from the culture that values hard-work and achieving success. In fact, she believes that her Polish background helped her a lot in the UK, and she clearly values her Polish experience. At the same time, however, she notices how she has changed and how her experience makes her appreciate certain elements of the British culture. When she and her Polish boyfriend go to Poland (for a week each year) they like meeting family and friends but “*there are things that we don't like as well, because we've been here for so long, our personalities have changed and our attitudes have changed, so you could see these differences between cultures and attitudes.*”

The above data support the conclusion that Maja tends to choose Integration rather than Assimilation strategy. It is important to notice, however, that it is language competence in English that she regards to be crucial for

success in her chosen country of residence. Being able to speak English means that she feels it doesn't really matter that she is of Polish origin, she is not ashamed of it, but does not take a special pride in it, either. As this attitude brings her closer to Assimilation, the overall pattern can be described as Integration with an assimilatory tendency.

Miriam. The positive attitude towards the two cultures is shared by Miriam; however, in her case the interests and involvement in the life of the Polish community both in Poland and in the UK and the degree to which she identifies herself as a Pole seem to be much weaker. In fact she mentions changes in her involvement over the last months, but she attributes them to a recent economic turmoil and the relevance of the decisions taken in the UK for her own position. Her national and cultural identity seems to be in the process of change, as she confesses being confused about her nationality or the need to preserve Polish language and customs. Apart from occasional contacts with her family in Poland and yearly visits, she does not have many contacts with the Polish people or the language. She feels that her origins should not really matter, so although when asked, she will say she is Polish, this is not how she defines herself or wants to be defined. She is aware of many stereotypes of Polish people, but stresses the positive elements, such as the opinion that Poles are hard-working, punctual, motivated and ambitious. Her experience in Britain makes her believe that she needs to put more effort into getting a good job not because she is Polish, but not a native speaker of English. Reaching native-like proficiency in English seems the most important goal and in the process of language transition, the cultural transition seems to follow. Thus, Miriam seems to be closer to Assimilation than Integration at the moment.

Pete. The opinions voiced by Pete leave no doubt that he has chosen the assimilation strategy. It seems a conscious decision, based on his earlier interests in the English language and British culture. Even before coming to the UK he says he never really fully identified with the Polish culture, and having to choose between the two nationalities, he would probably say British now. Pete does not follow the news about Poland, nor does he think he "*would be interested in developing relationships with Polish people here in the UK.*" He does visit Poland every year, but treats it like a holiday, goes to different places in the country, and tries to enjoy himself. With respect to Polish customs and traditions, he recognizes the need in his family, especially the grandmother, who he knows would like him to stick to some, but he himself does not feel it is really important. Nor is it important for him to be recognized as a Pole – in fact he admits that he probably hides it rather than manifests it. However, he

goes on to say that having a Polish name means that regardless of his personal merits and language skills, on paper, when applying for a job, it may affect his chances in the economic downturn. This does not stop him from regarding himself highly qualified, fully prepared to compete both in terms of professional and language skills. The assimilation tendency seems to be evident when Pete describes himself as not being very foreign in Britain, but feeling at the same time fully true to himself.

Affective factors. The affective factors (Schumann, 1986) include language and culture shock, motivation and ego-permeability. While the last two aspects have not been addressed directly in the questionnaire, it seems evident from the description of the participants' profile as language learners that they are highly motivated (it will not be attempted to define the type of motivation here) and gifted learners of English. The reported degree of language and culture shock, however, varies and provides further insights into the process of adaptation on the one hand and the development of language expertise on the other.

Maja. When talking about her initial experience in the UK, Maja tells a story describing the language shock she experienced when faced with the specific accent in the area where she decided to study. One of her English friends said she could not speak English and she insisted she could. But then when she started working in a call centre, she realized what he had meant – she found it very difficult to understand the callers, who would be impatient and negative. In one case, a caller said he didn't believe she could help him and wanted to speak to someone else – being a very ambitious person, she recalls this experience as particularly negative, but also very useful, as it helped her realize how important it was to integrate with the local community.

Language experience seems to have been more stressful than culture experience, at least at the beginning of Maja's stay, as she came with a group of Polish students on the basis of previous arrangements for employment and housing made through a work agency in Poland. Social life, entertainment meant mainly staying with Polish friends then, but this was the time when she was not sure she would want to stay so she would concentrate on working a lot, earning and saving as much money as she could. This was a shared feeling among the group for the first few months; however, some difficulties which she describes are related to changing the country, such as not knowing where to shop, how to buy insurance, where to pay the bills, how to get a TV license, knowing "*what is expected of you as a citizen.*" Talking about her experience, Maja proves to be very reflective and fully aware of the stages she went through:

It is all connected with acculturation, everybody goes through this process. At first they are excited but also anxious, then they are overwhelmed but in a positive way, and then they go into the phase when they start to question and they are negative towards the language and culture and this is difficult – that's the phase when many people go back to Poland or wherever they are from. And in the end they become integrated and they accept what they have.

It is in this context that Maja mentions the major cultural difference which was difficult for her – the experience that English people avoided confrontation at all costs, that their being always very polite meant not telling you what they really thought. It was overcoming this difference between the two cultures that she believes to have been a major difficulty. Thus, language and culture shock provide Maja with the experience that she is fully aware of and can use to her advantage in becoming an expert user of the second language and in becoming adapted to the dominant group. Her attitudes and beliefs in relation to language and culture shock further support the claim that she is closer to Integration than Assimilation in her choice of the acculturation strategy.

Miriam. Unlike Maja, Miriam avoids talking about difficulties she may have experienced. From the very beginning of her stay in the UK, she studied full time, pursuing her major interests in media and public relations. The transfer to the UK as a student seems to have made her transition relatively unproblematic. In connection with the initial experience, she mentions being away from her family as the main challenge, with no major difficulty in any other area. She says she is not shy, has no problems socializing with non-Polish-speaking people, and the international contacts she has made during her studies make her feel comfortable in the international setting. In the British environment, however, she is very much aware of the negative effect that her not being a native speaker of English has on the prospects of getting a good job in her field. It is in this context that she expresses a certain degree of language anxiety when she says: "*it may be more stressful knowing that you might not know certain expressions or you might make a mistake in writing which would be unprofessional and I would not like to come across as such a person.*"

However, it is the difficulty that seems to have accumulated with time, when her position and expectations changed. The degree of language or culture shock that she experienced seem to be relatively low overall, and the increased anxiety level connected with the need to satisfy the highest expectations and goals she sets for herself seem to correspond to Assimilation rather than Integration.

Pete. Transferring to the UK to continue his studies helped Pete overcome potential difficulties as far as social life or everyday routine is concerned. Talking about challenges, he mentions the food – he believes many people complain about it in the UK, and it took him some time before he “*found [his] way around it.*” The most important challenge, however, was the language. Being a highly proficient speaker of English on coming to the UK, Pete seems to have experienced a high level of anxiety when he was confronted with the local accent he could not understand. The language shock he experienced working as a waiter with local customers, impatient and negative when he did not understand them made him feel “*low,*” he says his self-esteem then was low. However, the initial difficulty seems to have strengthened his desire to achieve native-like competence in all skills, and he repeatedly mentions an exposure to different accents as a major linguistic advantage of a natural environment in the UK. The degree of language and culture shock he experiences now can be estimated as very low, with both the language and culture being highly enjoyed.

Discussion: The Language Profile of Expert ESL Users

Language skills in English prove to be essential for all expert ESL users reported above. The formal learning they had before coming to the UK provided the basis for further language development and it seems evident that having a sufficient level of proficiency in English to take up studies in the UK affected their experience and lowered the degree of language and culture shock on arrival. However, the awareness of being able to communicate in English before coming clearly raised expectations and may have resulted in a relatively strong negative reaction to communicative difficulties in the local community. The major challenge mentioned by Maja and Pete in connection with their early experience at work is the language: Knowing that they had come with the background of a three-year English major at the tertiary level, it is not difficult to imagine the effect of what they described as ‘communication-based negative reaction’ on their self-esteem. In both cases, the environment outside work helped – initially it was the Polish environment, then studies with Maja and the university employment with Pete. With language experience, the exposure to different accents and natural English speech, they became confident in their language skills. Interestingly, it is only Miriam who voices her language anxiety: Although she is at a very high proficiency level, she believes that her success in her profession may be determined by achieving a full native-speaker proficiency in English and she seems to doubt whether that is possible to attain. The attention paid to the language, a deep conviction that English is the key to success in the UK, is shared by all three partici-

pants; however, the difference in their experience results in a different degree of language and culture shock they experienced. With the background of English-based studies, Maja and Pete experience a higher degree of anxiety at the beginning of their stay due to their higher expectations, while Miriam pursues other interests and continues her media studies, not expecting to be fully proficient in English on arrival. After a period of 6 years, the expectations of all participants seem to shift towards enjoying their expert position; having gone through a period of low self-esteem and anxiety at an early stage, Maja and Pete seem better prepared for dealing with the challenge of full adaptation to the dominant group than Miriam. However, as her anxiety is connected with the prospects of successful competition in a job market, and refers to potential problems with reaching a full native-speaker competence, she can be still regarded an expert SLA user.

The acculturation strategies adopted by the speakers differ to some extent; the criteria based on Berry (1997) motivate the conclusion that Assimilation strategy dominates in the case of Pete and Miriam, with Maja closer to Integration. It is this strategy that has been found to be most positive in terms of personal well-being in the psychological and socio-psychological studies (Ward et al., 2001), that is, cultivating cultural affinity and having a strong sense of belonging to the culture of origin is believed to help maintain a truly balanced life in a new culture. However, Assimilation strategy has been predicted by Schumann (1986) to create optimal conditions for the acquisition of the target language. With a dynamic nature of the strategies and their close affinity in terms of a positive approach towards the target language and culture, Schumann's claim requires more in-depth studies to be verified. When individual elements of the model are investigated, results show a positive effect of a smaller distance from the dominant group and a higher proportion of English interaction on target-like production of selected elements of the sound system (Waniek-Klimczak, 2005, 2009). The observations made in the present study seem to suggest that both Assimilation and Integration may be chosen as acculturation strategies in the case of expert ESL users. At this stage of the study it is not possible to discuss the linguistic advantages of one strategy over the other; while further studies are needed to investigate this issue, it would be extremely interesting to explore the dynamism of the relationship between acculturation strategy, language development and general well-being in an immigrant setting.

Conclusion

The context of immigration creates special conditions on the acquisition of the second language, with the effect of language shock mediating culture

shock. Although very limited in scope, the data presented in this paper strongly suggest the need for the connection between the two. The three expert ESL users discussed here valued their language training and experience in so much as it provided the basis for further development in the course of direct interaction with the native speakers, exposure to different accents and styles of speech. However, they felt that exposure to authentic, culturally specified materials, British films and music that they found interesting was more useful than formal training they had received. Their experience suggests that it is the exposure to culturally-bound, community specific use of English and natural interaction that are needed for success in SLA.

The attitudes and beliefs towards learning the language expressed by the expert ESL users discussed in this study suggest that the ability to communicate effectively in direct interaction with the native speakers of the language hinges on the exposure to natural language, different accents and different styles of speech. Problems with communication experienced by learners with many years of intensive training in English seem to suggest a need for more varied input in the process of formal language instruction, with focus on fluency and self-confidence in language usage. On the one hand then, conclusions that can be drawn on the basis of the above observations lead in the direction of a 'pre-English-as-a-Lingua-Franca-era', with the exposure to native varieties of English, the elements of culture, the use of language in specific situations regarded a priority. On the other hand, however, it needs to be stressed that language development in the context of immigration may be enhanced not only by the positive attitude towards the target culture, but also the culture of origin, with confidence in speech and fluency mentioned by all three participants as key elements they needed to develop in the UK. Consequently, the views of the participants can be interpreted as pointing towards exposure to native-speaker accents and natural speech as crucial, with self-confidence and fluency the most important aims in language teaching and learning.

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Appendix

Language Attitude Survey

1. Where and when were you born?
2. What was your first language?
3. What is your first language now? Second language? What other languages do you speak?
4. When did you come to the UK?
5. How would you describe yourself with respect to nationality now?
6. How much English did you know when you came? Did you have any English classes before coming to the UK? For how long? Did you have any other language experience that you found useful?
7. How would you assess your language skills in English on arrival to the UK? And now?
8. How did you learn English while in the UK? What did you find most useful and helpful?
9. How much English do you speak in everyday life now? How much English/Polish do you speak in the following situations:
 - a. at home?
 - b. at work?
 - c. with friends?
 - d. at church?
10. Are you a member of a Polish club or association? Would you join one if it was available close to your place of residence?
11. Do you subscribe to any Polish newspapers or magazines? Do you enjoy reading Polish newspapers/magazines? How often do you do it?
12. Do you follow the news about Poland? Where do you get most of the Polish news from?
13. What other sources of Polish do you have? Books/films/radio?
14. How often do you go to Poland? Do you like it there?
15. Do you think that it is important to preserve Polish language and customs while living in the UK?
16. Do you think that children born to Polish parents in the UK or brought to the UK for permanent/longer residence should speak Polish? Can their bilingual situation affect their success in this country? In what way? In your experience, do you think that Polish is going to be an advantage or a disadvantage for such a child?
17. How important is it for you to be recognized as a person of Polish origin?
18. Would you like to see more Polish newspapers, radio stations or TV channels in Polish and schools of Polish?
19. Are you aware of any stereotypes of Polish people in the UK? What has been your experience of being a Pole in this country? Do you think that your nationality affected your experience?
20. What was the most important challenge for you on coming to the UK? What degree of difficulty did you experience in the following areas:
 - a. work
 - b. everyday life routine
 - c. social life
 - d. entertainment