

Learner Analysis: Individual and Contextual Factors That Influence Second Language Acquisition (Christopher DE LOZIER)

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There are many factors that affect students' rates of success at acquiring a second language. This paper analyzes four successful Latino English language learners' experiential stories for evidence of how the individual factors of age, personality, motivation, learning style and strategy, also known as learner differences, and contextual factors of setting, community attitude toward the L2 and opportunities for L2 input and output influenced their experience learning English. All four of these English language learners eventually acquired English to near fluent levels. It is this paper's conclusion that individual and contextual factors played a very large role in their success and that teachers should pay very close attention to these and other individual and contextual factors that underlie their own students' success or failure.

キーワード : individual differences, contextual factors, second language acquisition

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I Introduction

While most people would say the earlier a student begins learning a second language the better, there is much more to acquiring a second language than just the age at which you begin, and there are many other factors besides age that influence language learners' rates of success. Indeed, some factors can be of such weight as to predispose a second language learner to almost guaranteed success or certain failure. In this paper, I will examine four experiential short stories, drawn from the collection of stories in "How I Learned English," compiled and edited by Tom Miller (2007), for clues as to how the varying individual factors of age, personality, motivation and learning style, and contextual factors of setting, community attitudes toward the L2, and opportunities for L2 input and output influence the second language learning process.

The experiential short stories are from four accomplished Latino English language learners: José Bajandas (2007), Gabriel Rozman (2007), Nando Parrado (2007) and Roberto Quesada (2007). José Bajandas, from Puerto Rico, is a retired U.S. Army major. During his primary and secondary schooling, José enjoyed studying English in an instructional setting in his native Puerto Rico. Upon graduation, the lack of job prospects in Puerto Rico compelled him to join the U.S. Army. Thereafter, he spent a majority of second language acquisition time in the USA. Gabriel Rozman is a president of a multinational tech company. He was born and raised in Uruguay, and moved to America with scant knowledge of English to attend university at the age of 20. Nando Parrado, also from Uruguay, is a businessman, television personality and survivor of the infamous 1972 charter airplane crash in the Andes. Nando grew up in Uruguay and found himself intrigued by the "fantastic pictures of... and language [English] spoken by the people of faraway places" (p. 83) that he encountered at a young age within the pages of National Geographic magazine. He began studying English in primary school in an immersion type program. At the age of 16, he was chosen for an international exchange program to America, where he was able to study English in a natural acquisition setting. Roberto Quesada is an author and counselor for the Honduran Mission to the United Nations. Growing up in Honduras, Roberto harbored much resentment toward the English language as he was influenced greatly by his father's anti-capitalist and anti-American sentiments. As a sometime visitor and resident of America, Roberto's feelings toward English began to

change as he gradually acquired it in the natural acquisition setting of New York City. In the following sections we will look deeper into each of these Latino English language learners' stories to find further insight into the factors that influence the acquisition of English as a second language.

II Individual Factors

1. Age

The age at which a learner begins the process of learning a language plays a very important role in second language acquisition (SLA). Mark Patkowski (1980) for example, found a very strong 'earlier is better' relationship between the age at which SLA begins and syntactic proficiency. Similarly, with regard to accent and pronunciation, Asher and Garcia (1969) found the same relationship. But rather than interpret these findings as absolutes, one might be better off looking at them as 'rules of thumb'. While Gabriel Rozman (2007), who began his study of English in earnest after the age of twenty, does still exhibit a distinct Uruguayan accent (see Uruguay XXI, 2010), he seems to have acquired a near native level of syntactic ability, in both his speaking and writing. This phenomena, where people begin the process of language learning long after the hypothesized critical period, but still reach high levels of proficiency could be explained in part by motivation, but the ability to take advantage of their age plays a significant role as well (Oyama, 1976). Gabriel Rozman for example, mentions that he "designed a strategy" where he would ask his English-speaking customers questions to find out surreptitiously what they were looking for (p. 10). This demonstrates one critical advantage older students have over early learners - the ability to take advantage of their own metacognition.

2. Personality

Intuitively thinking, the type of personality a learner possesses would seem to have some affect on their second language learning. It is widely assumed for example that a person with an uninhibited, outgoing or talkative personality would be more inclined to learn a language than would a quiet, shy or reserved person. There is some research that supports these intuitive notions (Guiora et al., 1972; Robinson et al., 1994; MacIntyre, 1995) but there are others that just as easily show inverse relationships (Wong Fillmore, 1979). Lightbown and Spada (2013) point out that the relationship between personality and SLA is actually

quite difficult to demonstrate with empirical studies. Anecdotally however, three of the four subjects in this paper clearly give the impression as having the types of personalities that contribute to a willingness to communicate and that are conducive to learning a language. For example, José Bajandas' (2007) personality exemplifies the gregariousness, strength and confidence that are associated with being an officer in the American military. He explicitly mentions that he socialized daily with his American classmates at the officers' club. Nando Parrado (2007) demonstrates curiosity and adventurousness when he speaks of reading National Geographic, *Twenty-Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Adventures of Marco Polo*. His eventual career choice of TV personality too indicates an extroversion that Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) show is advantageous to acquiring a second language. Roberto Quesada (2007) also shows no reticence when he talks of approaching a man he didn't know to have a conversation. His mention of whiskey "inspiring a wonderful mute conversation" (p. 248) is explored by Guiora et al.'s (1972) research into the effects that alcohol has on second language performance. Individually, these personality traits could certainly be read as anecdotal, but taken in the aggregate they support established research into the effects personality has on second language acquisition.

3. Motivation

In all four subjects' cases, either instrumental or integrative motivation, or some combination of the two, played a very big role in their ultimate successful acquisition of the English language. With regard to SLA, instrumental motivation is the motivation to learn a language for immediate and practical goals such as fulfilling a requirement for a job or getting a raise. Integrative motivation, on the other hand, is the motivation to learn a language for personal growth and cultural enrichment (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Only one of the four subjects makes any explicit mention of the immediate necessity to learn English. Roberto Quesada (2007) writes that when he was asked to translate a biography of Gloria Estefan, something he felt incapable of doing, he decided he would take on the challenge - because he "needed the money", and that some needs were so pressing they compelled him to speak English (p.250). Both are clear cases of instrumental motivation. In the cases of Gabriel Rozman (2007), José Bajandas (2007) and Nando Parrado (2007), it is implicit in their stories that instrumental motivation almost certainly played some role as well in their acquisition of English as all three went to America for educational purposes and would have certainly been under some pressure to perform in the classroom and on tests.

In all cases however, their stories about learning English lead one to the conclusion that

integrative motivation was behind a great deal of their success. Gabriel Rozman (2007), for example, speaks of being “able to enjoy Mississippi” (p.11) and Nando Parrado (2007) credits English with his ability to travel without restrictions, communicate with people all over the world and make new friends (p. 85). If these positive thoughts and recollections had occurred anytime earlier in their lives, and they almost certainly did during mid-acquisition, they probably served as the kind of retrospective motivation that Dörnyei (2001) included in his three-phase process oriented model of motivation and drove them to continue learning.

4. Learning Styles and Strategies

Whether they are aware of the fact or not, adult language learners have an advantage over younger ones because they have the ability to manipulate the acquisition settings to a more preferred way of “absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.83). Reid (1995) investigated the ways these conditions, differentiated between learners, affect the learning process. All of the subjects, in their own ways, employed metacognitive strategies that enabled them to study English more effectively. Gabriel Rozman (2007) used requests for clarification to elicit modified input from his customers as a means of negotiating the meaning of products he had never heard of. This modified input is what Long (1983) was referring to with his idea of making input comprehensible with modified interaction. José Bajandas (2007) lists reading English books, magazines and newspapers daily and, employing a more analytical style that he may have preferred as a military officer, correcting other investigators’ reports for completeness, format and grammar, among the various methods he used to improve his English. Also, Roberto Quesada (2007), possibly taking advantage of a preference for an audio-visual style of learning, states that he loved Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* movie and used it to “adapt [his] tongue to Shakespeare’s English” (p. 249).

III Contextual Factors

1. Setting

The setting in which English language acquisition occurs has a profound effect on how much and how fast a student can and will acquire the language. An instructional setting is typically seen as an ESL or EFL classroom where language is studied through either a structured or communicative approach. These classrooms can either be situated in the

learner's home country or in the country of the target language. Explicit grammar instruction, corrective feedback and, depending on age, metalinguistic reflection are features generally associated with an instructional setting. By contrast, a natural acquisition setting is seen as either inside a classroom where the L1 is the dominant language, like a classroom in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, or Saginaw, Michigan for example, or any place outside of the classroom where the L1 is spoken organically, like an English speaking workplace in Chicago, Illinois or on the streets of New York City. Greater variety and opportunities for L1 input are associated with a natural acquisition setting but explicit grammar instruction, corrective feedback and metalinguistic reflection are encountered to a much lesser extent (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Schumann (1986) also links the natural setting to his acculturation model, where SLA is dependent on the process of adapting to a new culture.

Lightbown and Spada (2013) cautiously suggest that learning 'on the street' is the best way to learn a language, with the understanding that this belief may just be based on the fact that it seems that most successful language learners did actually learn 'on the street'. To be sure, every one of this paper's subjects did spend the majority of their time learning English in a natural setting and did indeed succeed. But some also spent a great deal of time in instructional settings as well, and in fact, identify that as a contributing factor in their success. José Bajandas (2007) credits his time learning English in elementary school and his teacher in Mayagüez for helping him succeed in English. Nando Parrado (2007) says too that he was in school and at "six or seven... was already learning English" (p. 84). It is impossible to measure the relative contribution this time spent in an instructional setting had on these learners' successes but it can not be discounted either.

Roberto Quesada's (2007) experience however was quite different from the others. He makes no mention of his early education and alludes to not having acquired any English in any instructional setting. He makes a great case for the natural setting by detailing all of the experiences and places he considered his school: friends, bars, visits to cultural centers, and goes on by saying "My great English classroom has been, and continues to be, life in New York City" (p. 250). He even makes reference to the existence of Krashen's (1985) and others' interlanguage in his natural setting when he talks of communicating in "Spanglish" (p. 250).

2. Community Attitudes Toward the L2

Language does not exist within a social vacuum. Societal factors such as the relative power relationships between minority and majority groups and those communities' attitudes toward each other should never be ignored when examining variables that affect success in second

language acquisition. While some minority communities or individuals within them may not harbor any strong resentment toward the L2, others may. Gatbonton et al. (2005) for example, found that ethnic group affiliation has a significant impact on pronunciation accuracy. Greer (2000) and Tomita (2011) found that ethnic group affiliation had a negative effect on Japanese learners' syntactic and pronunciation performance as well.

In their stories, both Gabriel Rozman (2007) and Nando Parrado (2007) demonstrate a personal sense of positivity and enthusiasm toward the L2 by giving the impression that they looked forward to life in America and that learning English would open doors to new experiences and opportunities, both personally and professionally. They make no mention of any community tension between their native community and the community in which they would soon be studying. José Bajandas (2007) credits his motivation to learn English and success in acquiring it to the memory of his father, trying his best to speak English with the American military personnel stationed near his home in Puerto Rico.

By contrast however, Roberto Quesada (2007) actually reveals an early contempt for English and a reluctance to speak it. He attributes this contempt for the L2 precisely for ethnic reasons. He states that he was strongly influenced by his father's leftist sentiments and that he held a very negative view toward English, as it was the language of the United States and of capitalism. Replicating what Gatbonton et al. (2005) showed, he states explicitly that he subscribed to the belief that "the patriot should speak foreign languages badly" (p. 247).

3. Opportunities for L2 Input

Krashen (1982) states that exposure to comprehensible L2 input is essential to successful second language acquisition. He uses an *i+1* model to describe L2 learning as a process where learners acquire language as it is gradually introduced at comprehensible levels (*i*) and levels just above comprehension (*+1*). Long (1983) presses Krashen's comprehensible input model further by arguing that modification is often necessary for input to be made comprehensible to learners. Long argues that interaction between speakers as they negotiate for meaning is the mechanism by which input becomes comprehensible and provides opportunities for L2 acquisition.

Given that all four of our subjects spent so much time learning in natural acquisition settings, and that these natural settings offer greater variety and opportunities for L1 input and interaction, it should be inferred that they received a great deal and variety of natural and comprehensible L2 input. All of the subjects discuss in some detail the many

opportunities they had to receive L2 input. Nando Parrado (2007) says, “I learned words, slang and behavior that was completely strange to me” (p. 85) and the others spoke of reading English newspapers, magazines and books. Somewhat departing from characteristic expectations of the natural setting, Gabriel Rozman (2007) implies that he received corrective feedback and possibly opportunity for metalinguistic instruction when he mentions that his boss started teaching him some English. Roberto Quesada (2007) explicitly says so, saying that it sometimes embarrassed him but he learned from it (Agudo, 2013). Roberto’s case seems to be unique of the others in that, given his circle of acquaintances and that he often frequented New York’s Lower East Side, his L2 input was probably especially rich in the interlanguage common among the New York Latino community.

4. Opportunities for L2 Output

Swain (1985) argues that input alone is insufficient for successful L2 acquisition and that output is also essential; when learners are pressed to produce comprehensible output for the benefit of mutual understanding they are afforded greater opportunity for L2 learning. Not all second language learners are afforded the same opportunities for input and output in natural acquisition settings (Lightbown and Spada, 2013). Many immigrants for example are too busy with work to study or are cloistered in areas where the L1 is spoken exclusively as a subcultural lingua franca. In seeking out opportunities for and engaging in interaction that provides opportunity for output, learner motivation and personality can be seen to play a role as well. Three of the four subjects in Miller (2007) make clear reference to their enthusiasm for interaction within the L2. Nando Parrado (2007) speaks of his confidence and the chances he had to speak with a lot of different people when he was living in Saginaw, Michigan and José Bajandas (2007) says explicitly that in Chicago he was required to speak English daily and given his career as a U.S. military officer would probably have developed a style of L2 output that can only come from giving orders. Gabriel Rozman (2007) uses his workplace as an example of the setting in which he studied English, and thus mentions his many opportunities for a retail transaction type of L2 output. A more creative construct of L2 output that goes beyond speaking is the idea of thinking in English. Nando Parrado (2007) refers to Anderson’s (1995) and DeKeyser’s (2001) notion of ‘skill learning’ and the automatization of his English ability when he says he even “thinks in English now” (p. 85).

IV Conclusion

The experiential stories of four Latino English speakers and their journeys toward fluency shed remarkable light on the many varying factors that affect second language learning. The individual factors of age, personality, motivation and preferred learning styles and contextual factors of setting, community attitudes toward the L2, and opportunities for L2 input and output all played significant roles in the successful acquisition of English by these four language learners. In all four of these cases, factors that positively affected second language acquisition were pointed out. In one case however, ethnic identity was shown to have the possibility of negatively affecting acquisition. It should be noted then that the individual and contextual factors that have such a profoundly positive effect on second language acquisition could just as well have a profoundly negative impact on different learners in different situations. Therefore teachers, administrators and curriculum planners should give more careful consideration to their students' individual differences and the contexts in which they study when they try to understand the underlying reasons for their students' success or failure at acquiring English as a second language.

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