

SUCCESS WITH ENGLISH: THREE WHO ACHIEVED IT AND WHAT WORKED FOR THEM

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Abstract

Good language learner studies show that attending to form is associated with successful learning. This paper reports interviews with three university English majors who had been the best students in a talk show program and got a score band of 7 or beyond in IELTS. The interviewees regarded text memorization and imitation as the most effective methods of learning English. They had been initially forced to use these methods but gradually came to appreciate them. The practice enabled them to attend to and learn collocations and sequences, to borrow these sequences for productive use, to improve pronunciation, and to develop the habit of attending to details of language in the context of language input. The paper concludes that such practice enhances noticing and rehearsal and hence facilitates second language acquisition.

Keywords: memorization, imitation, SLA, learning method.

Introduction

Good language learner studies form an important part of second language acquisition research. Through observations, interviews, questionnaire surveys and other methods, researchers try to identify successful learners and the learning strategies they use, with the belief that second language teaching can improve if these strategies can be introduced to all learners. There have been questions about the reliability of using learners' verbal reports, and one particular problem with this body of research is that we are unable to tell whether the strategies identified are the cause or result of success. Nevertheless, as Ellis (1994) points out, such research does provide good insights into the kinds of behavior associated with successful language learning.

One kind of behavior researchers have identified is "paying attention to the formal properties of the target language" (Ellis, 1994, pp. 546-49). Studies (e.g., Reiss, 1985; Rubin, 1975) consistently show that "attending to form" and "monitoring one's own and others' speech" are important strategies. Stevick (1989) interviewed seven successful learners who differed markedly in their learning strategies, but he claimed that it

is possible to find an “overall pattern,” and most of the seven paid close attention to how the target language is used.

Recognition of the importance of attending to form is in keeping with current developments in second language acquisition research. Putting together such SLA theories as the Output Hypothesis (Swain and Lapkin, 1995), Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), and Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990; Schmidt, 2001), one can see a general picture of acquisition: the need for interaction leads learners to notice the gap between the input and their own resources, and to use the noticed usage in subsequent output. Since a usage integrates form, function and context, it is clear that attending to form in the course of meaning exchange is conducive to such noticing and borrowing.

The literature, however, leaves two issues unresolved:

1. Failure to notice. Under the pressure of real time communication, learners have to direct most of their attentional resources to the content of the communication, rather than to form (Van Patten, 1996). As a result, they often have to settle for coarse-grained comprehension and expression of content and function, with no spare resources for noticing the “gaps” in pronunciation, intonation, collocation, diction and syntax.
2. Failure to rehearse. Robinson (1995, p. 318), claims that rehearsal of the noticed form in short-term memory can lead to “subsequent encoding in long-term memory.” However, even if the learners have noticed the gaps, they are often forced to empty their working memories for the next wave of incoming input; as a result, they abandon the noticed new forms rather than turning them into linguistic knowledge.

The current literature, including good language learner studies, is short on discussion of what makes effective rehearsal and what facilitates noticing.

One group of successful learners who have not been focused on, however, are native-like speakers who participate in several talk show programs in Arses language institute. Most of English major students attach much importance to these programs, so they receive much attention. Such speaking programs include prepared and impromptu speeches, followed by answering questions from the other members of the panel, the show include both prepared and spontaneous speeches and exchanges. The researcher ran one of these talk show programs and got familiar with this group of students in the program. The best students in talk show class are to be selected to teach in other English classes in Arses language institute. These students are language learners with unusual motivation and degrees of aptitude. However, they are certainly

successful learners (with a score band of 7 or beyond in IELTS), and examining their experience will give us insight into behaviors that- at least for this learners- result in effective language learning.

No research has been conducted on how these learners have learned their English in a context where English is a foreign language, and little is known about how they “attend to form.” Some researchers (Parry, 1998; Ting, 1998) have documented the use of text memorization by EFL students as an important method of English literacy acquisition and associated this traditional literacy practice with learning achievement, but it remains unclear how much this practice is adopted by those students in the talk show class, who are among the highest achievers. This paper reports interviews with three such students. The central focus of these interviews was their own understanding of the reasons for their success in English learning.

Participants and setting

Three students were interviewed for this study. W got the score band of 7.5 in IELTS held in 2008, H got 7, and Z got the score band of 7.5 in IELTS held in 2007. When they took the examination, they were studying as third-year undergraduate English majors at Mazandaran University. Moreover, they all graduated from Iran language institute, which helped them to be more active and confident than their classmates in university classes. Two of the three students were female, one male. They were aged 21–23 at the time of the interviews (one of them having graduated).

The interviews were held separately over a period of several weeks. Since the researcher knew the students well and had informally learned about their ways of learning English (Ding, 2005), the interviews started with asking them to recall their English learning experience and talk about what they saw as the most helpful practice. They were asked to give examples and further explanations. The interviews were conducted in Persian.

After the interviews, the three students were given the notes and asked to make additions and corrections. One of them (H) felt that perhaps she had talked too much about her natural gifts; she made some changes to the interview notes.

In order to verify the students' verbal reports, the researcher also interviewed two current students from the same talk show class, and also collected and analyzed written work done by two of the three candidates: the English weblogs by W and H. He also gathered passages and articles written by other students in talk show class. These texts were relevant because they focused on the students' experiences of English learning.

Recollection: "What worked for me best was learning texts by heart"

All the three students saw themselves as having a "better feel for English" than many other students, and they attributed such success to the practice of text memorization and imitation during their middle school years. They shared similar recollections and opinions.

3.1. Middle school years: "It was hard in the beginning"

All three claimed that the time period in which they made greatest progress in English was their middle school years (age 13–18), and one (H) added that progress was especially rapid during her junior middle school. During those years, they claimed, they benefited from reciting lessons, imitating tapes, and holding in-class discussions and extracurricular activities. In the beginning, however, text memorization and imitation was very hard.

Reciting lessons and imitating tapes

All three students had clear memories of learning texts by heart when they started to learn English. Z and W said this was their "major study method."

At the beginning levels in the institute, the teacher wanted them to complete all the exercises and memorize the text part of every unit in the textbooks. She (usually "she") also required that while trying to memorize the text, they listen to the reading of the text by a native speaker recorded on the cassette, imitate it and learn to recite the text with an intonation that was exactly the same as that of the voice recorded on the tape. With short passages, they had to memorize two every day. For each unit, they had to listen to it 30–50 times. After the classes, the teacher would check the homework assigned the previous day; she would ask some pupils to go to her office to recite the lessons in front of her. They had to recite the text verbatim and in the same intonation patterns as they had heard on the tape. The teacher would criticize them if they failed to do so. As a result, they felt they were under great pressure. Z recalled:

The teacher was very committed and spent a lot of time helping us. If I couldn't recite the text well, she would talk to my parents and ask them to urge me to work hard.

Such practice continued into their upper intermediate level. They had to recite every passage of every textbook even though some passages could be several pages long. They still had to follow the voice on the tape, and since the teacher was familiar with the tape, she would immediately correct the students if they made any mistake in intonation. Reciting in class was not the only way to put pressure on the students. There were also frequent tests and exams, which contained many questions involving sentence patterns, collocations and phrases. Unless one had

memorized passages verbatim, one would not be able to answer these questions (Z).

It should be pointed out that not all the students would follow the teachers' advice as to imitating the intonation patterns on the tape. The two current students interviewed by the researcher both found the assignment too hard. One of them said:

The teacher does ask us to recite all the lessons and to imitate the tape. I do have to recite all the lessons, but I don't like to imitate the tape. After we failed to imitate it several times, the teacher could not do anything and had to give up.

According to these two students, only a few students in the class imitated the tape; most of them resisted because they did not want to be "the teacher's pets." These remarks contradict the claim of the three students under study that most students worked hard to imitate the tape. It is clear, however, that the students are divided as to whether they should follow the teacher's words to the letter and that imitating tapes is not mandatory in the syllabus.

Holding in-class discussions and extracurricular activities

While learning texts by heart was an important homework item, much time in class was spent on discussing the lessons. At intermediate levels, students had a lot of opportunities to speak and interact (H). At upper intermediate level, the teacher still encouraged students to speak up although she would immediately correct any errors students made (Z). Z said, "these discussions led us to put to use the text material we had memorized . . . so that what had been memorized became our own language."

The students did not have many extracurricular activities, but the few they had such as speech and drama performances played an important part in their learning. H recalled the experience of imitating a dialogue from the movie *Gone with the Wind* and winning the first prize in a contest in her class; the experience interested her in English speech and drama performance and encouraged her to pay close attention to the prosodic features of spoken English.

University years: "I learn more outside the class than inside"

After these students entered university, interest in English drove them to devote much time and energy to learning outside the class. They tried hard to improve their English by watching English movies and television series. Because undergraduates in their university were not allowed to watch TV or DVDs in dormitory rooms, all the three often commuted for over one hour and went back home to watch a particular English movie at night and commuted back to school early next morning.

It is worth noting that these students watched movies in a way and for a purpose that are both different from those of others. W wrote in an article on her experience of learning English:

Most students watch movies for the plot, but this does not serve the purpose. ... You may watch a lot of movies, but once you find a movie you like, you should repeatedly watch it until you really have everything in it at your tongue's end.

According to W, what makes movie watching helpful to one's English is imitating and memorizing the lines so that he or she can naturally utter these lines. When W was writing her BA thesis, she interviewed by e-mail eight other participants in the talk show class she had attended and asked them what they did to improve their English. In response, they mentioned listening to English songs, reading well-known English speeches aloud, and making friends with native speaker teachers and students. With regard to these various activities, however, the most note-worthy point was that all eight regarded watching English movies and television series as one of the most effective ways of improving their English. They saw themselves as "super fans" or "filmoholics," but their purpose was not just to enjoy the stories; rather, their goal was to enjoy the language, imitate it and memorize it. They had collected hundreds of VCDs and DVDs, but usually those without Chinese subtitles. For the movies they liked, they "could watch more than ten times"; one person said he would even get up and turn on DVDs at midnight to check the lines he could not recall very well. As a result of being such "filmoholics," they had memorized the lines in many movies, including their intonation patterns. Some of them said that when they speak English, lines from movies often naturally pop out, making others think of their English as natural and fluent (W).

Looking back: "we learned our English through recitation"

In answer to the question of how to learn English effectively, the three students all emphasized text memorization and imitation.

It took a long time for Z and W to appreciate the practice of text memorization; in contrast, H never found reciting texts "too difficult." Z recalled that he had found learning English very difficult in the beginning, and that the teacher exerted great pressure on him by having his parents urge him to work. When he looked back now, however, he found learning texts by heart to have benefited him most. Several times he exchanged views with his classmates in the institute after they had entered university, and

All of us agreed that the greatest benefit from our study in Iran language institute was that we had memorized some material. As a result, we can speak and write a little more accurately [than students

from other institutes], we have a little better feel for the language, we are a little more like native speakers, and there are collocations we can use but others cannot. We learned our English through recitation.

At the time of the interview, Z already knew that upon graduation, he would work with an international company as an interpreter. He said that when he went for the job interview, he saw the training of interpreters there. According to him,

The trainers there also wanted others to learn by heart the translations of special terms. Besides memorizing their translations, there is no other way of learning how to translate those idioms like "birds of a feather."

W also recalled that in the beginning she and her classmates were unwilling to learn any text by heart but were forced to do so, and that they only found it very helpful later. She wrote:

On my path to English [in middle school years], I memorized all the lessons in three sets of textbooks. For me, such memorization did not lead to blind copying; on the contrary, it was a method that greatly benefited me.

W held that learning texts by heart should still be an important part of English learning in the university. A classmate of hers came from the countryside and had not had much English when she first entered university, but she made great progress and by the third year, her presentations in class were not different from those made by the best students in the class. W said:

The method [this classmate] used was nothing but listening, reciting and imitating with her tape player, and she did it from morning till night. There could be no other method.

The benefits of text memorization: "I like to pick up the way it is said and used"

The three students talked at length about how they had actually benefited from the practice of text memorization and imitation.

1. The practice enabled them to attend to and learn many collocations and sequences, especially the function words, inflectors and other minute features of language that are contained in these collocations and sequences but tend to be ignored by learners when they engage in listening and reading. As Z reported, through reciting those lessons, he gained mastery of many collocations, phrases, sentence patterns and other language points. He got by during his university years only by relying on the knowledge of the collocations and phrases he had acquired in the institute. "Such knowledge can be acquired only through recitation," he said.

2. The practice enabled them to “borrow for writing and speech” (W), i.e., borrow the collocations and sequences for productive uses. W said that she was still using many of the sentences she had recited in the language institute. For instance, while other students used “Family is very important,” she borrowed a sentence pattern she had learned from Book Three of American Headway (a popular set of textbooks in Iran): “nothing can be compared with the importance of family.” This made a better sentence, she said.
3. W also held that imitation helps one hear his or her own voice because it “forces one to listen carefully.” This enabled them to improve their pronunciation. According to W’s observation, it was relatively easy to correct the pronunciation of those university students who had been too shy to speak in the language institute; this was so because they could have been careful listeners even though they themselves did not speak. In contrast, it was relatively hard to correct the pronunciation of those who had been talkative but picked up incorrect pronunciation in the language institute. She knew some students who were good in all aspects but pronunciation; they could understand others perfectly but could not imitate well and could “never hear themselves.”
4. It may also be ventured that the practice of text memorization and imitation can help develop a habit of attending to details of language. All three claimed that as a result of such practice, they had developed a relatively good feel for English, which in turn made it easier for them to learn “new things,” including “little things,” in the language. H reported that she liked to pay attention to any new, unusual usage and intonation; even “the use of a single word” could catch her ear. Whenever she hears some new usage or intonation pattern, she would “repeat after it,” not just to understand it, but more importantly “to pick up the way it is said and used” so that she herself could use it. She said, “the key to success lies in paying attention to these things.” H could not explain how she had picked up the habit of attending to the “use of a single word.” She even believed in some natural gift and joked by saying that her talent in imitating English “could be hereditary because my mom likes to imitate different dialects.” For the other two interviewees, however, it is clear this trait was developed much later. Neither Z nor W believed they had had any “aptitude.” They claimed that they were “not smarter than others” and “had no gifts as to have an easy time in learning everything”; they looked talented at language only because of their hard work. Z reported that he found it extremely difficult when he started to learn English. He recalled:

There were many things others could do but I could not do, so the pressure was very heavy. ... I did not belong to those who were good at

imitation . . . so I was slow in the beginning. With the same tape, I had to listen to it many more times than others before I could follow it. But maybe because I had listened much more than others, I gradually developed some feel for the language. ... There began to be things that I could do but others couldn't do.

Learning became easy only after hard work. The habit of learning things "others couldn't do" is important in that it drives learning forward as long as the learner is in the context of language input and language use, even in the absence of formal instruction.

Discussion

1. Text memorization and imitation are methods many successful English learners extensively use and regard as effective. In a collection (21st Century, 2005) of essays contributed by 23 winners of China's nationwide English speaking competitions over a period of ten years, about half of them write about their experience of learning English, and nine of them mention text memorization and imitation, with details that are almost identical to those reported by H, Z and W. Many write about the hard time they had listening to tapes, emulating the pronunciation and intonation, and learning texts by heart. One student, for example, claims, "From Junior One to Senior One, I spent four years learning texts by heart, every text in my textbooks" (21st Century, 2005: 218). Even in the pronunciation class during his freshman year, he and his classmates had to spend half a semester imitating how a native-like teacher read a short passage, phoneme after phoneme and then sentence after sentence. He writes:

This was the most stupid method in the world but, towards the end of the semester, proved amazingly effective - even the staunchest opponents had to admit this. (p. 223)

The methods of Iranian learners are not very different from those used by the seven successful language learners in Stevick's study (Stevick, 1989). Many of these seven learners have had some experience of learning in the country of the target language, and some already had good command of one or several other foreign languages. Even so, however, five of them used methods such as reading aloud, learning by heart, and imitating tapes and speech. One of them, an L1-English learner of Chinese, was often asked to memorize texts, and as a result, as he himself put it, "I feel that I just have countless patterns sort of swimming around in my head" (Stevick, 1989: 30). These experiences and those of the Iranian students have demonstrated in a concrete manner what good language learner studies see as paying attention to the formal properties of the target language.

Successful learners are often seen as having exceptional aptitudes, but in this study, the three students themselves did not always feel this way. Their success came from years of practice in imitation, memorization and communication, which was usually first forced upon them by their teacher, but later came to be driven by motivation arising from initial success, teacher praise and personal interest.

2. The learning experience of the English-speaking competition winners sheds light on a number of theoretical issues. It testifies to a dual nature view of language (Skehan, 1998), i.e., the view of the knowledge of language as being both analytical and formulaic. When the learners are learning formulaic sequences (as opposed to grammar rules and isolated vocabulary items) through text memorization and imitation, they are simply taking advantage of the formulaicity of language, features linguist may overlook (see Wray, 2002).

The learning experience of these students may also enrich our understanding of second language acquisition, which attaches much importance to noticing in the course of interaction and to using the noticed features in subsequent output. The current literature does not answer the questions as to how learners can overcome the failure to notice and to rehearse, but the practice of text memorization and imitation may suggest the answers.

First, the practice can enhance noticing. It takes place when learners have withdrawn from communication, and the freedom from real time pressure allows them to attend to the use of intonation, function words, inflectors and other minute features that tend to be ignored by those preoccupied with content understanding and expression. In addition, the learners do not attend to these features in isolation; rather, they attend to them as embedded in formulaic sequences, with context and function.

Second, with repeated practice, text memorization and imitation can also enhance rehearsal. The initially noticed new feature becomes familiar and is transferred from the working memory to the long-term memory, retrievable when need arises. If second language performance can be seen as competition between various cues and "rules" in exerting different pressures and leading the learner to produce a certain form (MacWinney, 2001), the repeated practice enables the forms memorized through auditory encoding to win out eventually in the competition against the forms produced through analogy; it makes the performance correct and idiomatic.

Passion for the language leads to noticing and rehearsal, which in turn lead to acquisition. Good language learners are superior to other learners in the two aspects of noticing and rehearsal.

3. Pedagogically, this study shows that text memorization and imitation have a legitimate place in second language education. Language teaching should ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence (Ellis, 2005). It should go beyond structural analysis and vocabulary learning and go beyond listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Much of what is worth learning and borrowing lies in what has been comprehended. While listening and reading, learners should be encouraged to attend to, imitate, memorize, and learn to use the collocations and sequences in the input that will markedly improve the quality of their output.

4. Finally, this study also reminds us that learning a foreign language is hard work. The three learners were unique not only in that they had studied in one of the best language institutes in Iran, but also in that they were among a small minority of English learners in Iran who had successfully endured tremendous hardship. It would be unrealistic to expect all learners to be sent to good institutes and made as dedicated as these three learners, but it is important that administrators, teachers and students be aware of the amount of work involved if they aim at high achievement. On the part of the teacher, it is also important to interest the students in the learning, encourage them to meet the challenge of hardship, and correctly direct their efforts and motivation.

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