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The Effect of External Factors in SLA in a
Naturalistic and Instructional Environment

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Resumen

La adquisición de una segunda lengua es un fenómeno que está creciendo exponencialmente debido al proceso de globalización que el mundo ha experimentado y que exige nuevas competencias lingüísticas para convivir y trabajar en entornos pluriculturales. Este trabajo pretende explicar cómo se produce la adquisición de una segunda lengua y cómo los factores externos afectan positiva o negativamente en un entorno natural y en un entorno instruccional. Para ello, se va a utilizar la herramienta del Council of Europe conocida como *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*, ya que sirve para ayudar a los estudiantes de un idioma a explicar sus experiencias desde una perspectiva émica. Esta herramienta ha servido para narrar tres experiencias que el autor de este trabajo vivió mientras aprendía español e inglés en España. Partiendo de dicha metodología, se explicará cómo los factores externos interfirieron en su particular adquisición de la lengua, englobándolo todo ello en el marco teórico descrito por las principales autoridades académicas en la materia.

Palabras clave: *Adquisición, Segunda Lengua, factores externos, entorno natural, entorno instruccional.*

Abstract

The acquisition of a second language is a phenomenon that is growing exponentially due to the globalization process that the world has experienced, and that requires new linguistic skills to live and work in multicultural environments. This dissertation aims to describe a personal experience of acquiring Spanish as a second language and how external factors can affect positively or negatively in a natural environment and in an instructional environment. For this, *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* of the European Council will be used, a tool to help students of a foreign language to explain their experiences from an autobiographical perspective. This tool has served to narrate three experiences that the author of this work lived while learning Spanish and English in Spain. Drawing on this methodology, it will be explained how external factors interfered in their particular acquisition of the language, encompassing all of this within the theoretical framework described by the main academic authorities on the subject.

Key words: *Second Language Acquisition, external factors, natural environment, instructional environment.*

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1. Introduction

Today, we are living in a globalized world. Thanks to great strides in technology, people can get to know what is happening in the rest of the world immediately. The same happens with learning languages. As Charlemagne once said, "*to speak another language is to have another soul*" (Shwayder, 2021). Therefore, learning a new language is a common thing nowadays. The purposes behind learning a language may vary. Some people learn languages to have more job opportunities in a process that has been called instrumental learning (Hong & Ganapathy, 2017) while others learn a language for social implications with the target culture (integrative learning) (Hong & Ganapathy, 2017). Both purposes are not exclusive, that is, they can complement each other when language learning takes place.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is normally influenced by different factors, both outside of and inside the learner's mind, which can influence the process of assimilating the new language. This dissertation will first examine social and sociocultural factors that can affect the learner such as the social interaction (Saville-Troike, 2012), which involves the use of the target language to fulfil the communicative purposes with its social members. This way it is possible to see how the new culture integrates or rejects the learner, and how these factors can benefit or detract the learner's acquisition of the second language. This is possible thanks to *the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* which was designed by the European Council as a tool to encourage language learners to learn from their own reflection on their international encounters. Secondly, this dissertation will critically review previous theories that prove that the external factors mentioned previously influence second language acquisition. Among others, Schumann´s Acculturation Model (Schumann, 1978), Krashen´s Monitor Model (Krashen, 1978) and the Affective Filter Hypothesis or Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962) will be analysed. The *Autobiography on Intercultural Encounters* will be used to analyse the learner's individual differences which can have an impact on the learning on language acquisition. These are, among others, the age of the learner which is based on the Critical Period Hypothesis, suggesting that language acquisition is ideal at an early age and that learning a second language becomes more difficult after puberty (Birdsong, 1999). Motivation can be also one determining factor to assess how far a learner can advance in learning a language (Saville-Troike, 2006), along with anxiety and language

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anxiety as another influential factor, to finally assess whether it is negative or positive for language learning (Ellis, 2008). In closing, I will reflect on the importance of formal instruction in Second Language Acquisition and how the size of the class group is an important factor that can influence positively or negatively the individual's academic achievement and the language learning process.

2. Aim and rationale

The author of this dissertation has always been intrigued by the process of learning a language. He has always seen learning a second language as a complex process affected by a number of different factors. For this reason, the main objective of this dissertation is to carry out an analysis of how external factors such as social and cultural aspects affect language acquisition through three different experiences taken up as an example of the language learning process. The analysis of theories such as Schumann's Acculturation Model (Schumann, 1978), Krashen's Monitor Model (Krashen, 1978), and Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962) are essential to explain how the factors described in this author's biography (age, motivation, and anxiety) affected his own language acquisition process crucially. This analysis is going to be specifically focused on a naturalistic environment, nevertheless there is going to be a mention to the instructional background too. For this reason, *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* is a tool that has been used to carry out the analysis, since it is designed to encourage people to learn from their own intercultural encounters. It offers a 20-question format related to experience description, which can be used as a guide to narrate a life experience in a detailed way.

3. The *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* Project as a tool

Nowadays, we are living in a globalized world where physical barriers are blurred and access to new cultures is commonly seen as a normal thing. Therefore, learning about new languages and cultures does not need to happen in a language's original country. Rather, languages can be learned by surfing on the Internet or simply watching television. Thus, tools that help and encourage us to be multicultural are useful. The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE) is a project related to the Education

Department, which at the same time is part of Directorate Democratic Participation, within the Directorate General of Democracy ("DGII") which belongs to the Council of Europe. This tool was designed to encourage people to learn from intercultural encounters, either *vis-à-vis* or through any media platforms such as television or the Internet. It uses two separate tools: Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE) or Images of others: An Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media (AIEVM). These tools are also available in several languages including English and French (Council of Europe, 2020).

Given that there are two tools, this dissertation will only focus on the first one: the AIE. At the same time, it comes in two versions; a Standard version, which is for the use of adults, and a version for Younger Learners, for the use of children between 10 and 12 years old, who may be aided by an adult in the reading, writing or thinking of the encounter. Therefore, this tool aims to raise awareness about the existence of other cultures that may be near us or distant in a time and place. The AIE is based on a series of questions about an important experience or experiences. The questions are based on the encounter and try to ask us how we reacted to the encounter and how the other part reacted. These questions are designed to guide the learner's drawing of his or her own conclusions for future experiences. It is not mandatory to answer all the questions. Therefore, it is not a questionnaire. The main goal of the questions elicit reflection on the learner's intercultural experience. This experience can be aided by a facilitator who can be their age, the age of the learner or older.

As mentioned earlier for the children's version, learners are aided by an adult, but in the adult version, the questionnaire is accompanied by Notes for Facilitators. There is also a version of feedback if needed. This type of aid is optional and it has to be agreed between the learner and the facilitator that: it can be something private and for the self-assessment of the learner, an experience that serves as an assessment of intercultural learning by both parts or a group discussion in a classroom. The autobiography can be used either way; formally, in the classroom, or informally, at a time and place which are the learner's own choice.

The main goal of this tool is to encourage the development of skills and intercultural competence. Within this broad concept we can include Attitudes and feelings, such as: acknowledging the identities of others, respecting the other's culture and questioning what is taken for granted normally, being empathic, tolerating ambiguity, behaviour: adapting our behaviour to every situation, being able to find other

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ways of communication; being critical and lastly taking action, with meaning to be involved in making things different and better. It as well serves as guidance to help the learners think critically about an intercultural encounter. The rationale behind the Autobiography is the lasting effect that a "rare" experience can have on someone, a tool to help people think of their own experiences, especially the "rarest" ones, and the effects can have on a person cannot always be positive, rather negative due to the experience.

This tool is validated by the Council of Europe to create a Europe based on shared values to promote tolerance for cultural and linguistic diversity. As a multiple-language learner, the author of this job has chosen this tool (approved by CoE) to do a critical analysis of his own experience with different languages and cultures. On the one hand, there is going to be an explanation of his experience with the Spanish culture and language and how he plunged into the learning of English from this particular context, from the age of 8 until now. Then, later on, the same tool will be used to also describe his experience with English when he travelled to the United Kingdom.

4. From the author's perspective: a life experience in Spain as an EFL student of the Arabic world

This section is divided into three parts: i) first experience, which explains his early years in Spain and how he dealt with a new culture, language and social environment, ii) a second experience set when he was in Secondary School and the difficulties he faced in class and outside of it and iii) a third and last experience, related to his Erasmus programme in the United Kingdom.

4.1. Experience 1: From a home country to a host country. Two languages learner

It has to be taken into consideration that before this experience, the author of this dissertation had already been to Spain several times. He comes from Western Sahara, a former colony of Spain. During his early childhood he used to live in the Refugee Camp of my home town in Algeria. There he heard about a holiday programme called *Vacaciones en Paz* (Holidays in Peace) which was organized by a Spanish humanitarian association that collaborate to help people from Western Sahara (Sáhara Occidental, 2021). This summer programme is oriented to children who live in the refugee camps.

They are given a chance to spend the months of July and August in Spain, hosted by Spanish families. The aim is to make children able to spend summers away from the hot temperatures of the desert as well as raise awareness about the political situation of the country. One of the requirements of this program was to be a child from 7 to 12 years old. However, a small number of children were able to stay at their destinations after this experience to start studying abroad, like in this case. The author's parents were already in Spain, so they asked his host family to keep him for one year while they were settling in the country. Therefore, this first experience starts from the moment when he joined his Spanish host family to the time when he went back to live with his biological family.

When the Spanish family decided to host him, he was 11. He had a basic knowledge of the Spanish language because he spent the previous summers in one of the Canary Islands (Spain). In addition to this, he used to have Spanish as a subject in the refugee camp. Once the academic year started, he was enrolled in a Secondary School, starting classes immediately with native speakers. On his first days, his anxiety was so high that he used to spend the classes crying with his head turned down towards the desk. When the teachers noticed this, they seemed a bit surprised about this kind of behaviour. Once, the High School's principal arranged a meeting with his host family to let them know about the situation, so they explained to him that he was experiencing a drastic change in his life, from living in a refugee camp to do it with a family whose language and culture was new for him.

It must be noticed that before that he used to spend only the summer time with his host family. So, he went from living with the family for only two months to live with them for a longer time. Therefore, he was able to observe more cultural differences since the period of coexistence was longer, as the examples that follow.

One of these differences was the new culture in which he was living. This is related to Ruth Benedict's affirmation: "*the crucial differences which distinguish human societies and human beings are not biological. They are cultural*" (Benedict, 2020). One of these cultural differences was religion. He came from a very religious Islamic background. By contrast, his host family did not give a special relevance to religion. They believed in God, but they were not practitioners. However, he came from an environment where he had to pray five times a day, go to the mosque every Friday, and avoid eating any food that would contain pork or wine. Festivities were very different as well. The family he was living with followed local celebrations. An example of this

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would be the well-known *Romería de los Dolores*. It is on the 15th of September and it is one of the biggest festivities on the island. Additionally, there were other Christian festivities such as Christmas and New Year's Eve. However, he was only used to his own religious celebrations. Among these, we must highlight *Eid Al-Fitr*, which is a celebration that takes place once Ramadan is finished, and *Eid Al-Adha*, another festivity where a lamb is sacrificed. A second feature that he found very different from the place he came from was the behaviour and relationships among people. That is, the way people used to treat each other. He came from an environment controlled by religion that dictates all the relationships. In his opinion, the way old and young generations treated each other in Spain looked too horizontal, since he was used to a place in where children are not allowed to look at elder people in their eyes. However, he felt there was a higher respect for children in Spain: all family members were treated the same way without giving relevance to the age or the role they had. This different conception of the family made him feel inhibited, since he could not apply the same social relations, he was used to. He was afraid to be taken wrong by any the person. Therefore, acquiring the language was constrained by his anxiety.

Another difference to highlight is related to languages. Spanish and Arabic are two very different languages in several aspects, such as the alphabet. The Arabic alphabet, however, comes from the family of the Semitic languages (Kh, 2021) which at the same time come from the Aramaic (Diringer, 2021). Spanish is written from left to right, whereas Arabic is written from right to left. Although he was familiar with the Spanish language and its alphabet before, he had difficulties adapting to the new language and its alphabet. Additionally, he also was afraid of being mocked either in class or outside due to his low level of Spanish.

From an academic perspective, his environment for learning Spanish could have been improved according to him. He attended classes with native speakers, and he was treated and evaluated as a native from the beginning. He could not follow the classes properly. His anxiety reached a point in which he was not paying attention to the teachers. Therefore, he had no motivation for learning the language because he could not follow the classes. The teachers tried to help him by talking to him and saying that everything was going to be okay, but this did not work. His classmates were not of big help and he felt that the environment in class was not warm towards students with limited language competence. It was during that period of time and in that particular emotional environment where he had his first contact with English. As mentioned

above, in his opinion the academic environment was not the best for learning a language, especially when there are no basic notions of the language to be acquired. Although the contents of the English subject were simple, he did not manage to learn them.

4.2. Experience 2: A new town. Different rhythms in learning Spanish and English learning

This second experience happened during the Secondary School as well. It starts when this author went to live with his parents to a new town until his last year of Secondary School. This time he was living with his parents so his exposure to the Spanish language was very different to the previous one, as he always spoke Arabic at home. Additionally, he was learning English in class. So, he had to speak Arabic at home, Spanish for social purposes and English for his English lessons. Despite the fact that he had to switch from one language to another, he managed to improve his Spanish and preserve Arabic, while he was progressing significantly in English. From the author's perspective and regarding to what he lived, this experience will be reported by referring to three stages:

First, this author was enrolled in a Secondary School once living with his parents. This High School is located in one of the most multicultural neighbourhoods in the neighbourhood (Velasco, 2021). That is, most of the students at the school were immigrants. This environment made him feel more comfortable and less alienated. His class was full of immigrants and its level was adapted to their needs. Even though there were many students with different levels of Spanish, everybody could follow the classes comfortably. The number of students in the class was 25. Due to the multicultural environment, and the fact that he felt contents of the subjects more accessible, he felt more motivated too. Therefore, he worked harder to get better results. This way, his competence in Spanish improved remarkably and he started to learn some English vocabulary, such as colours, days of the week and months of the year. However, due to economic reasons he moved to another house in a neighbourhood, very far from his current Secondary School. Consequently, his parents decided to enrol him in a school that was nearer to where he lived at that moment. This idea of changing from one place to another made him scared. He had already found his comfort zone in the previous school, and then he had to leave that for another place that was completely new for him.

He had to make new friends again. Once he was in this new High School, he noticed the drastic change in the level. This time the academic level was higher again and he had to work harder to get good results or at least to pass the subjects roughly. In addition to his efforts to pass, his academic environment was not ideal. There were 30 students in his class and very few immigrants among them, and furthermore they all used to have issues among them constantly. During the lessons, he felt inhibited and due to the tension among the students he could not participate in class. As a result of the environment his results suffered a significant decrease, his English acquisition suffered as well, and consequently he started failing exams on this subject. He felt his English level was stuck.

In a second stage and despite the circumstances he managed to pass the course. In the following year, the High School decided to organize a group of support for students who had certain difficulties with the language, such as him. In addition, the number of students in those classes was small: 15. Thus, there was a big difference between classes of 15 students and classes of 25 students, having all the same academic level at that moment. At that time his new classmates were very helpful and because of the fact that his new academic environment was better, his anxiety in class decreased and his motivation to keep learning and having good grades increased during the 2nd and 3rd years of the Secondary Education. This way, he was more participative in class. Consequently, his competence in Spanish increased positively again and also his competence in English. English became one of his favourite subjects and he realized that with the right environment he could make less effort to keep improving his second language.

Finally, in the third stage, when he was in 4th year of Secondary Education, the number of students in the class was 25 again. He could notice the difference. He barely knew anyone in his class, and he had to adapt to the new environment again. However, it took him less time to do it. The beginning was hard for him and, as a result, he started to fail his exams that year. He was 16 at that time. Even though he passed, the environment in the class was not the best according to his perception: there were only 6 immigrants in class, including him, what made him feel bad since they were too few for him. In addition to that, he suffered from what he perceived as a certain degree of racism by some individuals, which affected his personality and made it change completely. In the previous 2nd and 3rd years he was very sociable and friendly, what made him acquire Spanish quickly. However, after that episode he started to be more

shut-in making him to avoid any kind of interaction, especially in class. He lost confidence in himself and his use of Spanish. His English language competence, by contrast, did not suffer any damage during this year surprisingly. This is due to the fact that he found it very interesting, and he did not perceive it as an effort.

4.3. Experience 3: Normalizing English as an SLA student

While the previous experiences were more focused on this author's acquisition of Spanish, this experience focuses entirely on his acquisition of English. Before starting with the experience, it has to be said that this author started learning English from the 1st year of the Secondary School. During that time, he used to have English as a subject for several hours a week as it also happened later during the rest of the High school period. Then, once at university, he started to study all his subjects in English. The exposure to English was higher compared to the previous years and his knowledge of the language improved considerably. In his 4th year of university, he decided to go abroad to study English for a year. Here is when this experience starts.

The European Erasmus programme has been functioning since the late 1980s. Its main goal is to allow students from the European Union to study in other states that are members of the European Union (Erasmus Program, 2020). Therefore, thanks to this program he was able to have a closer experience regarding acquiring the English language in an English-speaking country: he decided to go to Sheffield in the United Kingdom. Once in Sheffield, he had to adapt to the new place where he perceived some slight cultural differences (especially meal schedules) and in the academic environment (since students had to pay high wages to join English universities).

First, he had new difficulties with the language. Although he arrived there with what he considered a good level of English, he still struggled to understand the locals. An example of this happened during his first day in Sheffield when he went to buy food in a shop. The shop assistant asked him "Do you want a bag?" At first, he could not understand him, therefore he asked politely to repeat slower. He asked again, but he still could not understand what the shop assistant was saying. Finally, he pointed to the bag to make himself understood. After this experience, he realized that he had to improve his language a lot. Therefore, he started to mingle with English people or people who would communicate with him in English. That would increase his level of exposure to

English. It has to be highlighted that Sheffield, and especially the North of England is characterized by having a very strong accent, so it is hard for foreigners to understand it. Second, from a cultural perspective, several aspects were different from Spain. In Spain, people look normally a bit more sociable, whereas in Sheffield people looked shut-in, according to the author. They looked only sociable and easy going with people they knew well. He felt inhibited by this behaviour, and it even changed his character. Once back in Spain he was more reserved than he used to be. Another different feature was the mealtimes. In England, people usually have a heavy breakfast, then a light lunch, and finally a heavier dinner. By contrast, in Spain, people take a light breakfast, then a heavy lunch, and finally a very light dinner. This affected him because he was living with English people. In this aspect as well, he had to adapt to the target culture.

A third episode is related to the importance that some British people give to punctuality, while Spaniards are more comprehensive with it in some specific contexts. For example, the author used to arrive 5 minutes late at the university lectures every morning. During the first week, the professor said nothing but after the professor noticed he was interrupting the class every morning, she sent him an email to ask not to come late to class again. Consequently, he had to re-adjust this habit and get earlier to his lectures.

Finally, he observed some slight differences from an academic point of view. In Spain he was used to attend 2-hour lectures with around 30-40 other students, in which the lecturer explains the theory that he/she has previously planned for that day and at the end of the class, he/she allows the students to ask questions or make comments related to the topic of that day. By contrast, in Sheffield the lectures he attended were classes of 12 students. The length of the classes was similar to those in Spain, 2 hours. The classes were mainly attended by other Erasmus students, so most of them had a similar English level. He felt he was invited to participate actively in the class, maybe because the lecture was basically designed for foreign students. The lecturer started to explain the theory during the first hour of the class and in the second hour they did activities: they were divided into small groups and they had to practice different topics. Finally, they had to exchange what they had done with the rest of the class. This academic environment made him feel more comfortable and that affected him positively, making his marks to improve considerably.

5. A biographical analysis: External factors in SLA in a Naturalistic and Instrumental Environment

This part of the dissertation specifically focuses on the theoretical explanations of the experiences described earlier. First, I will start with an explanation of what learning a language means and what the factors involved are. The process of learning a new language is called Second Language Acquisition (SLA). There are several factors to take into consideration while learning a second language. These can be divided into internal and external factors. The former are those aspects that occur in the mind of the learner, while the latter are the factors that are in his external surrounding. Therefore, these are in his/her environment and can interfere in his/her process of learning a language positively or negatively. This part of the essay is going to focus precisely on the external factors that interfere in a learner's language acquisition. Additionally, these factors are going to be explained in two different environments: on one hand there is a natural environment, which means that the learner acquires the language without the intervention of any formal instruction, and on the other, there is the instructional or instrumental environment, in which language learning takes place in class. What follows summarizes the author's experiences and his process of learning Spanish and English languages reinforce the studies of the main authors on the subject of SLA.

5.1. Acculturation, instructional environment and SLA during childhood and youth age

The first language acquisition experience in a naturalistic environment relates to Schumann's Acculturation Model (1986). Schumann refers to acculturation as "the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language (TL) group." (Schumann, 1968, p. 379). An earlier definition, that of Redfield et al. (1936, p. 149-152), also stresses the role of language and culture in acculturation processes:

> Acculturation explains the phenomena which occur 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.

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This process of acculturation takes into account two variables: the social factors and pyschological factors. The social variables "affect the way a second language learning group (SLL group) acquires the language of a particular target language group (TL group) (Schumann, 1968, p. 396), while the psychological variables concerne to an individual's response to his / her conditions for learning a language (Zakir, 2016, p. 81). The focus is going to be on the following social variables: the Intergrative Pattern, Cultural congruence and the Intended lenghth of residence (Ellis, 2008). And from the psychological perspective: language shock, culture shock and motivation (Ellis, 2008).

It should be borne in mind that, although the social variables are made to be studied from a group's perspective, this work is going to use them to study one individual´s experience. From the point of view of the Integrative pattern, the individual may assimilate the new culture, which means that he/she is giving up on his/her values to adopt the ones of the target language. Therefore, this enhances their language acquisition. However, the individual may choose to preserve his/ her values and reject those of the target language, and as a result it makes language acquisition more difficult. Lastly, the individual may choose to adapt to his or her new target culture, that is, they adopt the new values of the target culture, while preserving his/her values (Schumann, 1986). In this experience, this author went through a process of assimilation. While he was living with his host family, he gave up his values and lifestyle to experience the target language's lifestyle. This is because he lived with a family whose values and lifestyle are the ones of the target language's culture. The second pattern that is worth mentioning in the social variables is the cultural congruence. The individual´s culture may be different or similar to that of the target language´s group (Ellis, 2008). In this case, the cultural congruence is very different in several aspects, such as religion. This led to a cultural shock as we are going to mention later. And, lastly, in order to highlight the social variables, we have got the Intended Length of Residence. The longer the length of residence is, the less it will take to acquire a second language. In this case, the length of residence was undetermined. This author wanted to have a new life in Spain. Therefore, the length of the residence was expected to be long, and as a result, this was favourable for his second language acquisition.

The psychological variables, as Ellis (2008, p. 327) describes them, are the following:

The extent to which individual learners become members of the target-language group and, therefore, achieve contact with them. […] concerns the extent to which individual learners are comfortable with the learning task and constitutes, therefore, a personal rather than group dimension.

These psychological variables include language shock, culture shock and motivation, among others. Stengal (1939) describes language shock as the fear of appearing comical when communicating in a second language. Consequently, the learner shows insecurity towards language learning. In this case study, the author had notions of the language; however, he was not exposed to relevant language input to later use it either in class or in his social life. He always had the insecurity and the fear of being mocked in his mind. Therefore, he showed a lack of motivation which later interrupted language learning. On the other hand, culture shock can be defined as the anxiety caused by the disorientation a second language learner goes through when he/she is in contact with the target culture (Schumann, 1986). This disorientation is caused by the increase in effort required to adapt to a new environment in comparison to his native environment. The mechanisms designed for problem-solving do not work in the new environment. Therefore, the individual feels stress, anxiety, and fear. Consequently, this may provoke the individual to reject himself or herself, or his / her culture, and as a result, he/she may not make enough effort to integrate into the target culture. This can be applied to this case study. This author came from a very different cultural background. Regarding religion, he moved from an environment where he prayed five times a day, eating pork was not allowed, and alcoholic drinks were not allowed either, to an environment not ruled by the Islamic religion. This meant that he did not have role models to follow, since the family he was living with was either catholic or atheist. As a consequence, he felt that the routine of praying five times a day for example was harder to be done in his new environment. Therefore, he felt the best choice to fit into his new environment was to assimilate the culture of the host country. Accordingly, he gave up his native culture's habits of praying and not eating pork. This decision was made because he felt the need to be integrated into the new target culture, which meant rejecting his native culture or leaving it aside. Sometimes this could also interfere negatively with his language acquisition, as he did use his original culture to compare it with the target culture all the time. In the psychological variables, Schumann also includes motivation. Motivation is involved in the learner's process of acquisition.

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It can be divided into two orientations for second language learning. It can be either integrative motivation or instrumental motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). A learner with integrative motivation towards the target language is a learner who wants to know about its culture and values, and perhaps become a member of this culture one day. Instrumental motivation is the one used for utilitarian reasons such as getting a new job. Integrative motivation is said to be favourable for language learning as the individual is interested in several aspects of the target language and wants to be a member of the target language community (Schumann, 1986). In this case, this author was living in a different environment; therefore, his motivation towards the target language was more integrative than instrumental, as he sought to fit into the new target language group.

In addition to Schumann's Acculturation Theory, other SLA theories have also highlighted the role of age in second and foreign language learning. The Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) states that, in general terms, a critical period can be defined as the period of time during which certain skills are learned with certain ease, and sometimes without external intervention (Hummel, 2014). This could be applied to Second Language Acquisition. Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts (1959) are the first to relate the critical period with language acquisition, by stating that the critical period ends at around the age of nine years old due to the fact that the brain completes its plasticity at that age (Hummel, 2014). Eric Lenneberg (1967, p. 176) as well suggests that:

> Automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear [after puberty], and foreign languages have to be taught and learned through a conscious and labored effort. Foreign accents cannot be overcome easily after puberty.

In contrast to Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts, Lenneberg extends the critical period's ending to around the age of 13 or puberty, based on his neurological and clinical evidence (Hummel, 2014). Bringing this theoretical framework into this author's own experience and according to Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts' suggestion, this author was no longer in a critical period to learn the second language because he moved to the host country at the age of 11. However, according to Lenneberg, he was still in his critical period because Lenneberg set its end at the age of 13, and the plasticity of his brain had not yet finished, therefore, it would have been easier for him to acquire the language in a naturalistic way. However, there is no proof

that learning a language was easy for him or that he could do it uncounsosly. This does not mean that his brain was already developed. It is simply related to the fact that there were other factors that influenced more the language acquisition process, as those mentioned previously.

In an instructional environment, the so-called classroom learning, is understood as a modification of the target language (Gass & Selinker, 2008). However, in this case, the modification was not made because teachers were used to have native students in class. Therefore, the teachers kept teaching at a native level which can be compared to Von Worde (2003), who reported that some students felt that they were taught and treated as natives which could lead to anxiety and frustration (III, 2011). This can explain why this author reached levels of frustration to which he responded by hiding his head and crying on the desk. Additionally, the environment in class was not adequate, since he could not raise his hand or follow the teachers' class without being afraid of being mocked. He had his first classes of English in this type of environment. Due to this and the absence of help by the teacher, English language acquisition did not take place either.

By contrast, the second experience, from the perspective of Schumann's (1986) Acculturation Model, and more specifically focusing on the integration pattern, the individual moved from a process of assimilation to a process of adaptation regarding the natural environment. He was living with his own biological family. Therefore, he started to practice his religion again as well as to speak his native language at home. However, he was still going through a cultural clash.

Leaving aside the natural environment and focusing on the instructional one, the first stage of the second experience is related to Vygotsky's (1978, p. 86) sociocultural theory as well, and more specifically to The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky defines it as it follows:

> The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

According to Vygotsky, there is a distance between the learner's capability on solving problems independently and the problem-solving once helped by an instructor or capable peers. Therefore, the individual must go through a maturation process with

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assistance to change those functions' embryonic stats into a more mature one. Another important feature of ZPD is that the learners work collectively to achieve their goals as Vygotsky (1987, p. 90) states:

> An essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that can operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and cooperation with his peers.

In this case study, the individual, from an instructional point of view, is in a class full of immigrants. They all share certain language difficulties. Therefore, there is a gap between their capability independently and the assistance of the teacher. Consequently, in order to progress, the teachers made groups of 5 to work together in every class. In these groups, the language competence level of the students was heterogeneous, as there were students who were more advanced than others and others that needed help. The teachers used to formulate the groups depending on the level of the students to balance the capabilities of the groups. The purpose of this was that more advanced students could interact with less advanced students. As a result, students who were less advanced, at the end of each term improved considerably and their marks were higher as was the case of this author. The outcome of this method was an improving in language acquisition and that could be seen in his results, he passed all the subjects except two. However, after he changed his High School, the differences could be seen in his results, since he was failing most of the subjects and language acquisition was not taking place properly, nor Spanish or English.

Regarding formal instructed learning, the class size was also very relevant. In the second stage of this experience, this author was in a class of an average of 15 students, during the second and third years of secondary education. The American Federation of Teachers (2003) suggests that small class size is effective whenever the number of students in a class is between 15 and 19 (Berliner & Biddle, 2014). Additionally, the small size classes increase the student`'s achievements in the class as well as the satisfaction of the teachers and the parents (Berliner & Biddle, 2014). The fact that the number of students is smaller makes them feel less inhibition; thus, they will feel less anxiety and, as a result, their motivation for learning is likely to increase. Consequently, they are more interactive with other students, and second language learning can take

place easily (Ellis, 2008). From the teache's point of view, it also has its positive side. Teachers have the chance to get to know their students better and improve their teaching practices, which is also positive for the students' academic achievement (Berliner & J. Biddle, 2014). These theories can be applied to this case study too. At the end of the first stage of this experience, this author did not get better results. However, when he was in a small size class teachers could deal better with his language learning needs and used different strategies to allow him to follow the classes; such as talking slowly and repeating often. As a result, his academic achievement improved during those two years. Small class size affected his language acquisition in a positive way too. He was very fluent in Spanish and he did not have those many writing mistakes. His English was not that good, but signs of improvement could be seen in the marks he got in this subject.

The third stage of the experience, by contrast, is related to Krashen's Monitor Model (1978) more specifically, to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. According to Krashen (1982, p. 31):

> The Affective Filter hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters. Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective Filter even if they understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device.

To summarise, Krashen explains here that there are two conditions necessary for acquisition to take place: a comprehensible input and a low or weak Affective Filter (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Focusing more on Affective Filter, Krashen sees affect as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence. Consequently, if the filter is up, it is stopping the input from going through, thus acquisition is not going to take place (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

In relation to this stage of the second experience, Krashen's Affective Filter can help understand why this author suffered from bullying in class as well as on a class trip he made with his classmates. The first time he was bullied was in the classroom. He had discrepancies with his classmates towards his religion. This affected his self-confidence

towards his religion and culture, as well as his language skills. Additionally, his motivation for learning the language decreased. Consequently, his confidence in class was reduced. The second time he was bullied was on a school trip to Andalucía, where they stayed for a week. Once in Andalucía, his friends and class mates decided to be apart from him as his culture was different and his religion was different. They did not want him to be with them in a room, as he prayed five times a day and he did not drink alcohol. This affected his language acquisition too in the sense that he had no opportunities to interact and to be exposed to comprehensible input, which is an indication that the affective filter was up and input could not become intake.

5.2. A conscious naturalistic approach in adulthood

In contrast with the previous experiences, the third experience focuses on English acquisition rather than Spanish acquisition and addresses aspects of language, culture and academic literacy development.

Schumann's Acculturation model (1968) is relevant again, especially to understand language shock. However, in this experience the language shock is slightly different from the first experience. Here, this author suffered a language shock in the beginning with the shop assistant, as well as when interacting with locals, since their accent was strong and their English was similar to Received Pronunciation. Nevertheless, in this experience, in comparison to the first experience, he tried to overcome the language shock using different techniques, such as asking the shop assistant to repeat again, as well as for the negotiation of the meaning of input in the interaction. Therefore, he had previous experience with language acquisition and how to deal with anxiety and exposure to the target language. Consequently, such previous experience was positive. The fact that he knew how to overcome these situations increased his motivation to learn English as a foreign language and engage in conversations with native people. It must be noticed that his motivation at the beginning of this experience was instrumental rather than integrative, motivated by the interest in getting a job. However, as time passed, his motivation became integrative, which resulted in him becoming more fluent in the language.

Vygotsky's (1985) Sociocultural Theory and the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development can also explain what follows, which took place in a naturalistic context, where this author interacted. To improve his English, he decided that his environment

should be an only English-speaking environment. He lived with English people and tried to deal with natives or people whose level of English was high. Here is where the concept of ZPD explains the improvement in the author's language competence. Thanks to the interaction and constant exposure to the language he could improve his language skills.

From a cultural point of view, this experience also recalls Schumann's Acculturation Model (1978). In this case study, this author experienced a cultural shock, which made it difficult to adapt to the new culture. As a response to this culture shock, the individual decided to take an adaptational perspective. He decided to adopt the target culture which favoured his language acquisition. An instance of this is the fact that he started to join his classes on time and that he had to adapt to the mealtimes of the target culture. The fact that he adapted to the new culture is related to age as well. He was 22 years old at the time, as a consequence he was more mature and adaptation was the best option for him to acquire the target language, favouring his anxiety and motivation for learning the language.

From an academic point of view, in this experience, the classes were reduced and there was a maximum of 15 students in each classroom. Additionally, he found the lectures a bit more dynamic since they were adapted to Erasmus students, there was an hour of theory and later on, the class would be divided into small groups to exchange ideas and present them to the rest of the class. The outcomes of this small group can be mainly positive for second language acquisition. Amongst these benefits, the speech acts can increase. When the students work in a group, more interaction takes place giving the individual more chances to practice and improve their speech and develop his/her competence in the language. Additionally, anxiety can be reduced since students in the group feel less anxiety than for instance talking in front of a whole class or a teacher. Motivation increases because in small groups the students will more relaxed and have an encouraging attitude towards the other members of the group. Social integration can take place here also since the students get to know each other when doing the activity. The author also made some friends in this group work experience. And finally, there is also more joy because humans enjoy interacting with others.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this dissertation was to point out the relevance of the external factors involved in processes of Second Language Acquisition in a natural environment as well as in an instructional environment, through the biographical experiences of the author. This has been possible thanks to a tool that the Council of Europe has developed for language learners to narrate their language process experience: *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*.

From the two first experiences, it can be concluded that language acquisition was not always successful because of the cultural and language shock experienced when the author became acculturated in the target language group. Although a naturalistic environment is suitable for learning a second language, such as living with a native family and being exposed to the language 24/7, he could not acquire the language properly. His environment was not appropriate for acquisition to take place either, since the number of students in class was too high and the class level was higher than the level he had. As a result, his motivation for learning the language (both Spanish and English) decreased and his anxiety increased. However, in his second experience the naturalistic environment was supportive because it provided him with exposure to Spanish both socially and educationally in class, while he kept on using Arabic at home. This reduced his level of anxiety, and although the exposure to the language was not 24/7, he did improve his competence in Spanish. From an academic point of view, this experience also helped him improve his competence in English too, since the class group was smaller and that helped the students to work with the language better. Nevertheless, during his last year in High School he was bullied by some classmates, so the author's learning became affected by his environment and as a consequence his affordances were fewer.

Finally, in his last experience, despite cultural and language clashes, Schumann's Acculturation model could take place in what to English acquisition refers, due to the immersive language exposure and the similarities between British and Spanish cultures which are not as huge as the cultural differences between Spanish and Arabic. Another important factor that makes this experience a positive acquisition of the language is the interaction with natives. It can be related to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and ZPD, where he interacts in English either with native people or with people who have a higher level of English than him. And, finally, academically this experience fitted enough for

language acquisition to take place since there were small groups of students and the teachers made the lectures more dynamic for Erasmus students.

7. Annex: *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* **tool**

Who I am
(Optional)

How would you define yourself?
Think about things that are especially important to you in how you think about yourself and how you like others to see you.*

*Here are some elements you may wish to include if you find them to be an important part of your identity: your name, age, gender, nationality, ethnic group, country, region or community where you live or come from, religion, languages, etc. Or you could include being a son/daughter, brother / sister, school student, member of a sports team, member of any other type of club, etc.

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Name
Encounter title and / or number
Today's date

The encounter

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Title
Give the encounter a name which says something about it...

....
....

Description
What happened when you met this person / these people?

....
....
....

Time
When did it happen?

....
....
....
....

Location
Where did it happen? What were you doing there?

....
....

Was it... (please tick one or more)
☐ ☐ study –
☐ ☐ leisure –
☐ ☐ on holiday –
☐ ☐ at work –
☐ ☐ at school –
☐ ☐ other –
....
....

Name
Encounter title and / or number
Today's date

Importance

Why have you chosen this experience?

....

....

Was it because… (please tick one or more)
❏ ❏ It made me think about something I had not thought about
before ❏ ❏ It was the first time I had had this kind of experience….
❏ ❏ It was the most recent experience of that kind

....

....

❏ ❏ It surprised me
❏ ❏ It disappointed me
❏ ❏ It pleased me
❏ ❏ It angered me
❏ ❏ It changed me

....

....

Add any other reactions in your own words and say what you think caused your
reaction…

....

....

What else?

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

Today's date

Name   Encounter title and / or number

2

The other person or people

Who else was involved?

....

....

Give the name of the person or people if you know…

....

....

Write something about them…
What was the first thing you noticed about them? What did they look like? What clothes were they wearing?

....

....

....

Were they were male/female, or older/younger than you, or did they belong to a different nationality or religion or region, or any other thing you think is important about them?

....

....

....

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Today's date

Name

Encounter title and / or number

What else?

....

....

....

....

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3

Your feelings

Describe how you felt <u>at the time</u> by completing these sentences?

My feelings or emotions at the time were…

………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………

My thoughts at the time were…

………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………

What I did at the time was…
(for example did you pretend you had not noticed something that was strange? Did you change the subject of the conversation which had become embarrassing? Did you ask questions about what you found strange?)…

………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………

What else?

………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………

Today's date

Encounter title and / or number

Name

4

The other person's feelings

Imagine yourself in their position…

How do you think the other people felt in the situation at the time? This can be difficult but try and imagine what they felt at the time. Happy or upset/stressed, or what? How did you know?

What do you think they were thinking when all this happened? Do you think they found it strange, or interesting, or what?

Choose one or more of these or add your own and say why you have chosen it.

For them it was an everyday experience / an unusual experience / a surprising experience / a shocking experience / because…

....

....

....

....

....

....

Choose one or more of the options below and complete the sentence or add your own ideas.

The other people involved in the experience appeared to have the following feelings - surprise / shock / delight / no special feelings /…

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Name

Encounter title and / or number

Today's date

The other person's feelings

4

I noticed this because of what they did / said and / or how they looked, for example they… (say what you noticed)

....
....
....
....
....
....

I am not sure because they seemed to hide their feelings…

....
....
....
....
....
....
....

What else?

....
....
....
....
....
....

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Ethical Statement

This material is the authors' own original work and, which has not been previously published else-where and all the opinions expressed in it are the product of the author's own personal opinion.

Sabout Ahmed Abdeslam