



How A Learner Learns and Acquires English as A Foreign Language: A Case Study

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Introduction

It is acknowledged that children acquire their first language (L1) with seemingly little trouble, and in some cases with astonishing speed and quality. Many theories have been suggested by different scholars on how they obtain their L1 (e.g., Brown, 2007; Hyams, 2012; Lust, 2006). Many researchers have studied characteristics of an adult's success in acquiring their second or foreign language with the same speed and quality as children. Some successes of how adults acquire and learn an additional language are shown in early research conducted by Gardner and Lambert (1972), Stern (1975) and Rubin (1975), while more recent studies by Griffiths (2008), Ortega, (2013) and Ellis, (2015) have explored this in more depth. In this report, the authors investigated all aspects of communicative competence, based on the proposed model revision of Celce-Murcia (2008), including linguistic, discourse, strategic, social cultural, formulaic, and interactional competence.

This report is comprised of two parts, each of which discusses the following: the first part describes the background of this report, the participant's cultural and language learning background, and the rationale for conducting this case study. The second part presents an investigation of the sample learner data and a discussion and analysis of the learner's strengths and weaknesses based on samples of spoken and written data. Lastly, the authors present future recommendations by devising short- and medium-term outcomes and outlining a programme of study.

Methodology

The Participant

The learner is a forty-one-year-old PhD student at a UK university, and was previously a lecturer in an Indonesian University. He was born in 1976 to a mother and father who speak a local language (Javanese). Since he was a small child, he has been exposed to a bilingual neighborhood where Javanese and Indonesian are spoken at home, school, and work.

He has been learning English since he was an 11-year-old high-school student. However, he did not use English as a communication language, as the English learned at school was only for reading and writing. Also, the English teachers' methodology focused only on grammar, and answering grammar and reading questions for school examinations. Then, at the age of 18 he went to university in Indonesia, majoring in English and learning it for three years. He used English more often at the university, because he met teachers and friends who could be asked to practice English.

Learning English interested him for several reasons. Firstly, at school he found English interesting and liked to learn it. Now however, he perceives that English is more than an interest, in fact it is a necessity for his studies and work. At work, he was frequently asked to accompany students on visits to other countries such as Singapore and Japan, where they would use English to communicate. In his current studies, he needs English to complete papers and write his thesis. Therefore, English is now highly important in his life.

To do all tasks well, either at work or at school he needs to be capable of using both written and spoken English. Nonetheless, from the four skills of English (speaking, listening, reading and writing), he finds speaking the most challenging skill to master. Although he has been in Belfast in the UK for six months, it is still difficult for him to speak in English to his supervisors, especially when explaining his research. Also, he finds that his supervisors sometimes cannot fully understand what he writes. In summary, his English pronunciation is not clear enough when he talks, and in writing there may be some errors or features of written English that he misses.

Procedure

Based on the above problems, the authors intend to use spoken and written data to examine all communicative competences of the participant's English and his English level to find his main problems in using English. Written data collection came from two writing tasks taken from IELTS academic and general tests (the tasks were taken from an IELTS practice test book) to find his strengths and weaknesses, and were followed by a recommendation to solve or improve his writing ability. The first writing prompt, from task one on the general IELTS exam, was given to the student to gauge his ability to write about daily contexts. The second task is an argumentative essay, chosen because he has problems in writing up research, and the argumentative essay most closely reflects the types of essay frequently written in universities, and is therefore an appropriate test to gauge his ability in argumentation (Wingate, 2012). This writing test could also demonstrate the learner's awareness of other English elements such as grammar, vocabulary, and coherence. The authors used the IELTS band descriptors to evaluate his language skills.

Other data collected were spoken, namely an interview and monologue task which lasted for 5 minutes altogether. The questions of the interview and monologue task were also taken from an IELTS practice test book. Moreover, this data was also marked based on the IELTS speaking band descriptors which are freely available on the internet and was analysed to understand the participant's communicative competences in speaking English.

Finding and Discussion

In order to examine all of the participant's English communicative competences, the authors analyzed the data based on Celce-Murcia's (2008) communicative competences. Six communicative competences were analyzed: linguistic, formulaic, social cultural, discourse, interactional, and strategic competence.

Spoken Data

Through conducting a five-minute interview, the authors established that the participant's English

speaking level is likely intermediate. This is supported by the participant's IELTS speaking test taken a year ago, when he earned a band of 6.5. The participant's spoken data also showed his strengths and weaknesses in the interview, which are analysed according to the six communicative competences, based on the model proposed by Celce-Murcia (2008).

Overall, the participant's English speaking is intelligible. That is to say, the authors could understand most of the points made during the interview. In the interview, the English linguistic competence analysis –including phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactic competences, and his lexical knowledge of “both content words (e.g., nouns, and adjectives) and function words (e.g., pronouns, determiners, prepositions and verbal auxiliaries)” (Celce-Murcia, 2008, p. 47)– was found to be good.

The first error that the authors found regarding a syntactical error is shown in the following sentence; “em... it would be better if we have company”. The sentence should read, “it would be better if we had company”, because it includes or is categorized as conditional sentence type 2 which has a syntactical formulation (subject+ would+ verb/helping verb *be*, if +subject +verb/helping verb). According to Heim and Kratzer (1998), the conditional type 2 is used when the speaker intends to express outcomes that are completely unrealistic or will not seemingly occur in the future. Another frequent error made by the participant during the interview is the use of determiners. For example; *faculty* is supposed to be *the faculty* and *last experience*, *the last experience*. Moreover, there are also grammatical inflection errors. The participant seems confused when faced with grammatical inflections, i.e. whether or not the word should be changed into a plural or remain singular, or whether or not he needs to use the second or first form of a verb. For example, *for hospital*, it should be *a hospital or hospitals*; *hospital visit* is supposed to be *a hospital visit or hospital visits*; *Science activity*, should be *a Science activity or Science activities*; and *competition* should be *competitions* with suffix- s because it comes *a lot* (Azar, 2003). The other participant weakness regarding linguistic competence is the phonology, or pronunciation. Though his phonological ability in producing both segmental (vowels, consonants, syllable types) and supra-segmental (stress, intonation, and rhythm) sounds is intelligible, a crucial error is frequently made, which is the pronunciation of the *v* sound in words like *travel* and *very*. The sound is heard like an *f* sound, which leads somewhat to misunderstanding. This may happen due to L1 interference or the nonexistence of the sound in the L1 (Patrick et al., 2013).

Second, formulaic competence—according to Pawley and Syder (1983), Nattiger and DeCarrico (1992), and Pawley (1992) –includes routine expressions and chunks, collocations, idioms, and lexical frames (e.g., *see you tomorrow*). For this competence, the participant appears skillful, using appropriate collocations of the verb-object *spend time* and the idiom *what is going on*, and pragmatically using them in the proper contexts.

Third, socio-cultural competence is the ability, according to Canale (1983), to ensure utterances are understood and produced appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts, depending on contextual factors such as the purpose of the interaction, the status of the participants, and conventions or norms of interaction. Utterance appropriateness refers to both appropriateness of form and appropriateness of meaning. Certain communicative functions (such as asking for help, invitation, expressing regret, asking for permission, etc.) or attitudes (such as politeness) are likely seen as somewhat appropriate with respect to a culture or a situation. Here, the authors perceive that the participant's socio-cultural competence as adequate for meaningful conversation, as the participant can understand and respond well to the authors' question in line 30, where the participant asks the authors for permission, indicating that they are aware of the sense of politeness of English. Therefore, the authors could say that the participant has a good socio-cultural competence in English.

The fourth element is discourse competence, which Celce-Murcia (2008) states as indicating choice, order, arrangement of word, structures, and utterances to achieve a unified spoken language. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) portray some sub-areas of discourse competence. The four most crucial regarding the current model are:

- Cohesion and deixis: the use of reference (e.g. personal pronoun; *he, she, they* etc.), conjunction

(*addictive*, e.g. *moreover*; *and*; *causative*, e.g. *hence*, *therefore*; *temporal*, e.g. *next*, *then*; *adversative*, e.g. *however*, *rather*, *but*), ellipsis and substitution; ellipsis is “the predicator is presupposed to simplified from the preceding clause” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 143).

- Coherence: expressing purpose or intent through appropriate content schemata, managing old and new information, and maintaining temporal continuity and other organizational schemata through conventionally recognized means.
- Generic structure: formal schemata that allow the user to identify an oral discourse segment as a conversation, narrative, interview, service encounter, report, lecture, sermon, etc.

The participant in the interview shows his discourse competence. Based on the spoken data from the interview, the participant seems to lack a variety of cohesive devices. During the conversation and monologue, he only uses the cohesion device *and* to connect the sentences. However, though he repeats *and* many times, the author does not lose track of the points that the participant tries to convey.

The next competence is interactional competence. Based on the current model of Celce-Murcia (2008, pp. 48-49), interactional competence has at least three sub-areas:

- Actional competence: awareness of how to perform common speech acts and sets of speech acts in the target language, which entails interactions such as international and information exchanges, expression of opinion and feelings, problems (blaming, complaining, apologizing, etc.), future scenarios (goals, hopes, promises and predictions, etc.).
- Conversational competence: this refers to the turn-taking system in a conversation (Sachs et al., 1974). It may, however, be related to other dialogic genres such as how to open and close conversation, establish and change topics in conversations, get, hold and relinquish the floor, how to interrupt, etc.
- Non-verbal competence: this includes kinesics or body language, backchannel, non-verbal turn-taking signals, gestures, eye contact, etc. Also relevant is the competence of the use of space by interlocutors, haptic behaviour (touching) and non-linguistic utterances with interactional import (e.g. *Uh-oh*, *huh?*, *Aaaa!*), and the role of silence and pauses.

Based on the features of interactional competence, the authors could deduce the participant's interactional competence as effective throughout the interview. He uses eye contact when talking to the authors, expressing his opinion using expression *it would be better*, and showing his feeling by using words like *love*.

The last competence to be identified based on the spoken data is strategic. During the interview, the participant demonstrated strategic competence when he was not really sure about what the authors asked. The interviewer (IN) asked “Where would you like to travel to in the future?”, and the participant looked confused and unsure, before saying “em...em...about?” with risen intonation. Next, the authors made the question clearer by saying “maybe in the future you would like to travel somewhere that you have dreamed about.” Afterward, the participant could understand and respond to the question appropriately. This type of strategic competence is called interacting (Celcia-Murcia et al., 1995), and it appears for clarification that entails meaning negotiation.

Written Data

From the two writing tasks taken from the IELTS general and academic tests, the authors found some strengths and weaknesses of the participant in relation to the competences of Celce-Murcia's 2008 model. Overall, the participant fulfils task achievement well by addressing all key tasks. In the general English writing task, the participant shows his interactional competence by being able to open and close the writing task (Sachs et al., 1974). Besides this, the participant used routine chunks such as *I hope this letter finds you well* and *Thank you very much for your help and see you in the next two weeks*. The use of

routine chunks is considered as formulaic competence that is spontaneously used by the participant (Wood, 2002). It seems to be a general pattern for adults to use chunks in learning L2. In Yorlino's (1989) longitudinal studies based on written work, he examined how adult learners do not make comprehensive use of prefabricated formulaic language, and do not appear to use it to advance their language development. They instead appear to use it more as a production strategy to minimize attention and effort in spontaneous communication. Moreover, in writing task one, the participant made some grammar errors, but these did not significantly affect the delivery of the message of the letter. That is to say, the letter is overall clear in terms of its points and meanings.

In writing task two, the participant used effective writing strategies. For instance, he uses various devices (e.g., *however*, *moreover*, *therefore*, and *in sum*) to make the writing cohesive and coherent. Alarcon and Morales (2011) suggest that cohesion refers to linguistic features, which help make a sequence of a text in sentences, while coherence refers to the overall sense and meaning that the text imparts. These strategies are included within discourse competence. Writing task two is an academic-style writing in which the participant is required to use academic words or vocabulary, not conversational vocabulary such as in writing task one. Besides this, vocabulary that he used was slightly less varied and there was some word repetition. For writing task two, the participant seems to lack some academic vocabulary. Indeed, when writing up his research, the participant was asked by his supervisor to improve his academic writing ability.

Summary of the Analysis

From the spoken and written data, the participant could be considered a good language learner regarding his overall communication skills. He applied all strategies in speaking and writing based on Celce-Murcia's (2008) model of communicative competences. However, he is deemed a poor learner in terms of linguistic competence, especially in pronouncing the consonant sound of *v* for example, as can be seen in the interview transcript. His failure in pronouncing the *v* sound could cause misunderstanding or incomprehensibility in a conversation (Chomsky & Halle, 1968), and may be because there is interference from the phonological sound of his L1, the Indonesian language, where there is no voiced sound (where vocal cords vibrate) like the English *v*. Moreover, a phenomenon occurred during this case study in which it was revealed that the participant apparently could not use articles *the* and *a* in the speaking, even omitting them in the conversation frequently. He could, however, use them properly in written communication as evidenced by the two written tasks. This is presumably because the participant did not have enough time to self-correct while speaking, while in writing tasks he could use the articles *the* and *a* properly, as he had more time to think and correct his mistakes.

Future Recommendations

The authors believe there are two key areas that the participant needs to improve, namely his pronunciation of the *v* sound, and the range of his academic vocabulary. The latter is important as the participant is a doctoral student at a university in an English-speaking country where he needs to use English to communicate with others, complete research projects, write journal entries, and undertake other scientific projects that need adequate academic writing ability. In addition, the participant's negative feelings about his speaking and writing skills is in line with the errors that he made during the interview and the writing tasks. The authors identified frequent mistakes in pronouncing the *v* sound and repeated the same words in writing, presumably lacking sufficient vocabulary. Therefore, the authors have tried to devise learning outcomes with an outlined programme of study or strategy training that could be helpful in addressing these problems.

As the participant has two main problems (difficulties in pronunciation and a lack of range of academic vocabulary), the authors recommend a programme called integrating pronunciation with vocabulary skills. The programme is inspired by Sweeting (2016), who underscored the importance of integrating

pronunciation with learning vocabulary. Thus, the authors decided to establish an integrated programme to improve the participant's pronunciation and vocabulary at the same time. In the integrated learning program, the authors provided the learner with some recommended strategies related to the student's issue. First, the learner will use the word card strategy, where he writes a foreign word on one side of a small card, and its L1 translation on the other (Nation, 2001). The learner then works through a set of cards and aims to recall their meaning, thus learning a large number of words successfully in a short time. Nonetheless, this strategy has the weakness of decontextualized form, i.e. there is no context to help the learner understand a word's meaning and use. It does however help students learn the written form of the word, concept of the word, and make connections between word form and meaning. Additionally, the authors suggest that the learner not only write the meaning of the word, but also practice using the word in its proper context. The authors also plan to integrate this strategy by adding phonetic symbols on the other side of the card to indicate how to pronounce the word, so the learner can learn the correct pronunciation.

The other recommended strategy is minimal pairs. Conventionally, the minimal pair strategy targets a phonemic contrast by pairing a sound that is produced in error by a learner with its corresponding substitute. Avery and Ehrlich (1995) define minimal pairs as words which have different meaning based on the basic alteration of only one sound. In other words, minimal pairs involve a couple of words pronounced similarly, but for a single phonemic distinction, for example, *Very-Ferry*, *Vocal-Football*, and *Valley-France*. This focus of strategy would significantly benefit the participant, who has difficulty in pronouncing the single phonemic *v* sound.

Conclusion

To conduct a case study into how a learner learns and acquires English as a foreign language, several stages were required. First, the authors uncovered the learner's learning language background through an interview. Second, two types of data (spoken and written) were collected. To obtain the spoken data, the authors set some questions taken from an IELTS test and recorded the answers. The authors collected written data taken from a letter and an argumentative writing task. Afterwards, the data was analyzed in terms of six communicative competences based on a proposed model by Celce-Murcia (2008). From the data analysis, the authors found that the participant could be considered a good learner regarding his overall communicative skills. However, he appeared to fail mostly in linguistic competence, specifically relating to the range of vocabulary in the two writing tasks, and the pronunciation of the *v* sound. In order to solve the learner's main problems, the authors devised a learning programme which featured some independent learning strategies to help the participant overcome his two main areas of difficulty.

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