

Extroversion, Motivation and Language Learning: A Study of a Successful Language Learner

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Abstract

*Learning a new language has always been a tough task for students learning the language for **academic** purposes, or for social interactions in daily life. Students make a lot of effort to understand the language of the place they are living in to avoid alienation from the society. They use different strategies to improve their L2. These strategies include affective strategies, such as dealing with anxiety, encouraging oneself and rewarding. Getting into constant contact with native speakers is also one of the most essential ways learners use to develop their language fluency. (Green, Oxford 264).*

Keywords: *Language Learning, Extroversion, academic*

I. Introduction

It's common knowledge to state that language is mainly used for communication. People coming as immigrants to English speaking countries face the challenge of acquiring a new language, and the process is harder as people grow older. Parents arriving to the United States, for instance, find it really hard to acquire English and use it in their social interactions. Children acquire the language easier and faster than their parents. Some researchers argue that there is a critical period in one's age after which it becomes really difficult to acquire a language after it. This adds to the difficulties that parents face, especially when they see their children making a better progress than them in language learning (Lightbown and Spada 22).

This study examines the progress of a successful language learner who had to learn the language as a parent. He had a daughter who made a better progress, but his personality and the strategies he used helped him overcome frustration and to improve his language skills. I gathered data through an interview with him.

The subject of this study is a 36-year old native speaker of Arabic named Hayder. He arrived to the United States having no English education. He works as a barber, so he likes to engage in conversations with his clients

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during work. He said that was not possible and it was even stressful for him because he had to call a friend sometimes in order to know what the client really wants for his haircut.

Hayder arrived in the United States with very minimal communication ability in English. He couldn't speak on his own while shopping or working, and he had to depend on his friends to translate and talk for him many times. His work and general daily life increased his willingness to learn English to communicate. He is an extremely outgoing and friendly person. He was so eager to be able to speak English and know more about the American people. He said that he tried to speak many times with Americans, and when he couldn't make sense of it, he will reply by saying "I don't understand," though he said that didn't work because he still couldn't figure out what the other person was trying to say. He said that was frustrating for him at first, but he kept using the same strategy.

When asked to highlight his best strategy to improve his language skills, he mentioned motivation. Hayder was faced with the unenviable task of witnessing his daughter's fascinating language skills, while he struggled to reach the same level as his daughter. He said that he even watched YouTube videos with her, when she was assigned by her school to watch a video at home. He was so impressed by his daughter's English fluency, as she began to speak in a native-like English. She was 5 years old when they arrived to the United States and she began to acquire her English through interactions with native speakers of English at school. Hayder was excited to see his daughter developing a native-like English, but he said he also felt the pressure of having to learn it quickly and the frustration of having constant difficulty with the language. When asked how he dealt with that pressure, he said his perseverance was the key to get through it. He had to study with his daughter sometimes to try to learn the language like her. Hayder had to study the simple present tense or past tense with his daughter. He also did exercises for pronouns. He said he encountered some difficulty with these, and he barely remembers anything about them in previous studies.

Hayder decided to study English in Ozarks Technical Community College. He had to take a test to assign him to a certain level. The test was a set of pictures with words, and he had to match the right word with the right picture. He recalls that he couldn't match words like house, ball or pen with the right pictures, so he was assigned to the beginner's level.

Motivation seems to play an essential role in Hayder's language learning. In his OTC class, he had a guy who kept making fun of Hayder every time Hayder tried to say something in class. Hayder was frustrated by that behavior that kept happening for weeks. Finally, he said he decided to try to say something in English to that guy who was annoying him. Hayder asked his wife how to say 'this is not funny!' in English, then the next day in class when the same person tried to mock Hayder's English, Hayder said "I turned my face to him and said, this is not funny, and the guy was shocked by my reply and teacher was laughing". This is one example of how Hayder's motivation to learn English played an important role in his language development.

Self-efficacy is considered to be a significant trait in language learning. It refers to the learner's belief that they are capable of achieving a certain level of performance or achievement. Hayder is definitely the type of learner with high self-efficacy. He told me that he always believed in himself and his ability to improve in English. He

recalls that when people ask him if he is having difficulty learning the language, he would reply by only saying “ no difficult. “ (Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons 665)

Hayder’s outgoing personality helped him in his language learning. He is never afraid of making mistakes while communicating in English, and he appreciates corrections by native speakers or by more fluent people. He told me that one day he was sitting in a chair and he tried to tell a standing person to sit beside him in an empty chair. Hayder said “ sit down “ to the person, and he says that person looked at him with a weird look but didn’t reply to him. Hayder asked his OTC teacher the very next day about it. He said he told his teacher that “ yesterday I tell a person sit down “. Even though it’s grammatically incorrect, the teacher easily knew what he was referring to and explained to him to say “ have a seat “ instead.

During OTC classes breaks, Hayder always went to his teachers and tried to speak to them. He says it was difficult at the beginning, but gradually he was able to understand his teachers. When asked why he wouldn’t communicate with his peers in class, he said he wanted to communicate with native speakers of English to listen to their language and get their feedback on his language.

During his work as a barber, Hayder tried many times to start conversations with American clients. He said that it took time before he could really engage in a conversation or even know what the client wanted for a haircut, but he said he never stopped doing it even when it didn’t work for him. He tried to apply the information he learned in classes when communicating with clients. Hayder’s utterances lack grammatical correctness, but they still make sense to the listener. He uttered sentences like “ I tell him what haircut “ or “ I talk like teacher. “ Hayder’s pronunciation is good, but clearly not native-like. On the other hand, Hayder does not focus a lot on grammar. He uses the language mainly to communicate. After finishing the interview, I decided to go to OTC with Hayder and see his interactions in class. In one instance, he was asking the teacher about the way to pronounce certain words and one of the students tried to answer aloud. Hayder looked at him and said “ are you teacher? “, it was Interesting because it wasn’t grammatically correct, but yet it showed Hayder’s commitment to learning correct English from his teachers. When I asked him why he replied in that manner, he said it’s because that was the same person who tries to make fun of Hayder’s language in class. It didn’t seem to bother him that he makes mistakes while communicating with people, but he seems more interested in getting his intentions delivered in at least a clear language to the listener.

Through examining Hayder’s speaking and writing, I found an interesting aspect of his grammar. He referred to tenses the following way.

Present simple : I go to the mall.

Past simple : I go to the mall yesterday.

Future : I go to the mall tomorrow.

These sentences show that Hayder lacks a clear tense system for verbs, but he compensates for that by using the words ‘ yesterday ‘ or ‘ tomorrow. ‘ This is one of the instances where it is clear that Hayder is focusing more on the message he is trying to deliver through meaning than on grammatical structures.

Another significant point about Hayder's grammatical competence was elicited through the interview and through examining his writing. It is the difficulty in recognizing the difference between 'P' and 'B'.

Teacher : When do you like to sleep?

Hayder : I like to sleep late.

When I asked Hayder about the difference between the two sounds, he said he finds difficulty in differentiating between them due to the lack of the sound 'P' in Arabic. The sound 'P' is used in some Arabic dialects, but not as often as it is used in English. This is an area where Hayder's L1 is interfering in his L2 learning.

Hayder's motivation led him to practice specific methods to develop his language. The way he applied those strategies is associated with goal setting. For instance, he assigned himself the goal of acquiring as much vocabulary as he could and use the words in social interactions. It looked to be a challenging goal, but Hayder said he was determined to try it. He used stickers all over his house to remind him of all the words he learned. The setting of challenging goals is believed to be associated with successful language learners. (Tremblay and Gardner 508).

Even if Hayder faces a situation of communication break-down, he always seems to convey the meaning later. This is due to his perseverance and determination on communicating with native speakers of English. Here is an example of that :

Me : Do you talk with your clients when you make their haircut?

Hayder : You mean people?

Me : Yes, the people that come to your shop.

Hayder : Yes, I talk to people about everything. Before, I call friend to help me, but no more.

In this case, Hayder used guessing as a strategy to know that the word ' clients ' here refers to the people visiting him at his shop, and he made the guess from the word ' haircut. '

When asked about his favorite strategy when faced with miscommunication, Hayder said he used to say ' I don't understand ' before, but now he says ' pardon. ' This shows a development of Hayder's sociolinguistic competence. He says he uses the word ' please ' a lot in order to avoid making an unintentionally inappropriate remark in English. He attaches the word ' please ' whenever he is asking a question, making a request or even making statements :

1. Close the door, please.

2. When do you close, please?

3. I have to go, please.

These are examples of the formulaic utterances, which are memorized from native speakers of English. I noticed other examples of formulaic utterances throughout the interview with Hayder, such as ' That's great! ' or ' something like that. ' (Krashen 93).

Hayder's discourse competence improved a lot due to his personality. His motivation and extroversion led him to listen to native speakers of English and to try to imitate them. In one part of the interview, he was telling me when he first began to grasp meaning in class:

“ I am listening in class, and the teacher telling story. I try to understand, and then I was understand! I almost cry because it was first time that I understand the story. ”

I was impressed and moved by the way Hayder was able to tell this story. He said he almost cried out of happiness when he finally began to understand the stories which were told by OTC teachers in class. His narrative was very informative, despite the fact that it had grammatical mistakes. It was more like a dramatic narrative which was told in a good manner by Hayder.

Hayder's conversational skills are outstanding, given his new experience with the language. I witnessed a conversation between him and other two friends, one was a native speaker of Arabic, while the other was a native speaker of English:

Hayder : When I go out I...

NS of Arabic : He will drive to the place...

Hayder : No, let me talk.

NS of Arabic : ok

Hayder : When I go out, I usually drive because too far, place is too far.

NS of English : Yeah! I understand you.

This is a moment where Hayder's friend wanted to interrupt and help in the conversation, but Hayder took issue with that. Hayder wanted to take part in the conversation without help and insisted on it. He was able to converse with the native speaker of English without serious problems. This shows Hayder's motivation and outgoing personality. That led him to even refuse the help of an Arabic native in the conversation, because that would limit his interaction with native speakers of English. His character is not inhibited, in the sense that he is ready to make mistakes if they lead to a better communication, even if he had to appear foolish. The strong drive to communicate is the essential characteristic that leads to Hayder's successful attempts. He tried to guess the meaning from the surrounding words, and when that worked, he will do all he can to get his message across, even when he had to make mistakes in grammar. When he is successful in his attempt, he becomes even more motivated to acquire the language and communicate more. (Rubin 47).

After finishing the interview and examining Hayder's use of the language, I can say that he is a successful second language learner. He possesses the qualities of a successful language learner, and he uses the right strategies to be successful. His extroverted personality earns him friends easily, which helps him a lot when those friends are native speakers of English. His motivation to speak the language outweighs his fears of making mistakes in the language, which is essential in constantly developing the language skills. His openness to corrections also plays a part in his language learning. He is usually the person who initiates conversations with native speakers. This opens

up opportunities for him to learn more English. In class, he is one of the students who regularly participate, just for the sake of participation and receiving feedback. When I asked one of his teachers about him, she said that Hayder “ is one of the best students in her class, “ although his grammar is not that good still. He has developed strong relations with his teachers because he speaks to them whenever there is a break, or whenever he sees them outside of class. He says that sometimes resulted in him standing in front of his teachers trying so hard to utter words, but they were patient with him and offered him help when they could.

Another element of Hayder’s success is his language awareness. He is constantly aware of English when it is spoken around him. Even while conducting the interview, Hayder was listening carefully and trying to imitate some of the words I used. He seems to like hearing the language, even when it didn’t make sense to him. He kept listening carefully trying to guess the meaning from the context or from other words. I didn’t have problems understanding Hayder’s points, although he lacked correct grammar most of the time.

Hayder’s focus on the meaning of his utterances seems to be the core of his success. He develops meaning of words and expressions through his interactions with native speakers. He imitates what they say and pays attention to when they say it. He focuses on getting his message across using the various strategies of language learning. He seems to prioritize meaning over grammatical structure. Given the amount of time he has been studying English, which is now two years, he has developed the language significantly well. Also given the fact that Hayder only started to learn English here in the U.S, it seems the right judgment to say that he has been a successful second language learner. Hayder adapted to the American culture quickly and set himself the goal of immersing himself in social contact. He never shied away from contact with native speakers, because he knew that he needs contact with them to listen to their language and learn from them. His personality was essential in acquiring the language through social interactions. His motivation was also a very significant part of this learning process. He persevered to reach the level of communication he wanted, and he still wants to achieve more fluency.

Hayder has the potential to be more fluent in the language because he is strict and determined when it comes to goal setting. At first, he set himself the goal of being able to communicate with native speakers of English. It proved difficult for him, but he eventually achieved it through hard work and with the help of staying motivated. If he set the goal higher now, he may be able to address the grammatical structures he often got wrong. Even though, his faulty grammar shouldn’t overshadow the progress he made in the English language as a whole. His ability to get his message across is a great success for a language learner at his age, especially when given the fact that he witnessed his daughter making a better progress than him. Language learning success should account for all the different circumstances surrounding the learner. Hayder’s circumstances, like his age and his previous education, combined with his personality traits helped him become a successful English language learner. It’s true that there is a lot of progress to be made in grammar, but there is also significant progress that has been done in language use for social interactions. Hayder can communicate with native speakers of English, and he also has the strategies to compensate for any miscommunication that could happen. He said he would never avoid a conversation due to the fear of making a mistake. Hayder’s view of mistakes is the view of a fully motivated learner. He sees mistakes as a

way of learning and developing his English language skills. On the whole, motivation and extroversion were the two most significant traits that paved the way for Hayder's successful English learning.

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