

# ESL IN THE EYES OF A MIDDLE-EASTERNER: A CRITICAL REPORT ON SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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## *ABSTRACT*

*This report is based on an ethnographic project which attempts to find out how someone learns a second language from a participant's point of view. The participant was a male international student who studied in Adelaide, South Australia with a continuous experience of learning English as a second language for twelve consecutive years in his country. Using a self-designed questionnaire which is based on Spolky's model of second language learning (1989, as cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 8), information about the participant's language use, learning and behaviour was gathered through a 45-minute face-to-face interview. While participation is voluntary, the confidentiality of the participant and any information provided by the participant is highly respected. The results showed that the participant's learning experience seemed to accord with the contemporary notions of second language acquisition in relation to pronunciation, learning setting, motivation, teaching approach, and other cognitive or affective factors.*

**Keywords:** *Second Language Learning, Motivation, Attitude*

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

This report will be presented in three sections. First, it will give an overview of the participant's facts pertaining to his experience with learning English as a second language. In the second part of this

report, the participant's experience will be examined and discussed in comparison to the research and theories in second language acquisition. The last section of this report will be to suggest some points concluded from the whole description and discussion.

## **1. Participant's experience with learning another language**

The participant in this project, IBM, was a 39 year old Saudi man. He was born and grew up in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia where he is currently working as an English teacher. As with all other people in Saudi Arabia, IBM speaks Arabic as a mother tongue.

Regarding the status of English language, the participant explains that English is used as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia. While it is considered important by many people, the Saudi people rarely speak it in daily or public conversations. However, the Saudi government has paid attention to the matters of English teaching and learning. In the educational context, the Saudi regulation to list English as one of the obligatory subjects in public schools from intermediate level (12-15 year olds) to secondary level (15-18 year olds) reflects the country's policy towards the global spread of English.

IBM started learning English at the age of nine in a private school where English was taught from elementary level (6-12 year olds). After finishing his secondary school, the participant continued to learn English to tertiary level. While IBM has had experience of learning English in a school setting for 12 years, he

has not been to any English speaking country and hardly had contact with native speakers during his school days. Along this line, he admitted that his English pronunciation was poor as a learner because he was not exposed to the authentic English speaking environment.

As it is increasingly evident that English language has been a priority in the Saudi global market, IBM has learnt English for a professional purpose. He goes on to explain that a job seeker with English fluency in his country has more chance in winning a vacancy than those who can not demonstrate an English ability.

However, the participant suggested that his learning experience in the school context did not support his learning goals as the focus of English instruction was on form (grammar) rather than on use (communication). Furthermore, he felt reluctant to participate in classroom activities as the teacher often corrected student's mistakes in a negative way. The only lesson that he considered great was when he had a visiting teacher from another private school who presented a short story about a lost boy. Instead of reading and translating the story in a grammatical way, the teacher turned the story into an interactive situation where students could ask and give opinions. Another interesting thing about the lesson

was the use of pictures to help students understand the sequences of the story easily.

As an EFL learner, IBM found it easier to master analytical skills (reading and writing) than interactive skills (listening and speaking) as there was more time to respond to written texts than to oral communication. He began to feel confident to use his English at the age of 21 when he started doing fieldwork in a hospital where English was widely used. In this situation, the participant often had conversations with the hospital employees to improve his listening and speaking skills and at the same time met many native speakers of English from whom he was able to learn much in a variety of contexts.

However, IBM often felt anxious when faced with a situation where he had to perform in English in front of many people. As an example, IBM talked about his experience in giving an English academic presentation to his class. At that time, he was feeling nervous as he was struggling to find the right words to express his ideas in the presence of his university classmates and lecturer.

## **B. CRITICAL DISCUSSION AND COMPARISON WITH THE SCHOLARSHIP ON SLA**

The following paragraphs will explain how the participant's circumstances could be compared with the theories and issues on second language acquisition:

### **a. Age and social context**

To start with, I would like discuss how the participant's age and social context pertaining to his learning English as a second language influence his language acquisition. As mentioned earlier, IBM started learning English as a foreign language at the age of nine in a formal school setting where there was no authentic exposure to the target language and he had poor pronunciation of English in comparison to a native speaker. In line with Spolky's model, one explanation of IBM's facts would be age-related. Despite the controversy among researchers on the influence of age on SLA (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 24), research shows that there is a critical period for native-like pronunciation in second language learning (Yule, 2006, pp. 163-164). Relatedly, Myer-Scotton (2006) arguably states that "by the age of 9 to 12, the ability to acquire a second language with native-like

ability has fallen off considerably”. Referring to some studies of second language learners, this researcher goes on to say that only younger children achieve native-like pronunciations in their second language compared to their older counterparts (pp. 341-345). The participant’s fact shows that although he has learnt English for many years, his English accent has not resembled a native speaker.

Another important aspect about IBM’s facts is the social context factor. As the participant lives in a country where English is considered as a foreign language, he explains that the English language plays a minor role in the community and is merely taught in schools. This is consistent with what Ellis (1994, p. 12) and Yule (2006, pp. 162-163) describe as ‘foreign language learning’ in which they suggest that the status of the target language determines how it is used and learnt by the local people. With regard to IBM’s case in which he has had little or no exposure to authentic English language and native speakers, it could be inferred that he has not learnt English in a natural setting.

#### **b. Motivation and attitude**

In Spolky’s view, of particular importance for the study of second language acquisition are the motivation

and attitude of the learners towards the target language. According to Gardner and Lambert (1972) people learn a language for two types of motivation: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation refers to the driving force to learn a language for personal pleasure, for example learning Spanish to be able to integrate into the Spanish culture and people. Instrumental motivation has to do with the impulse to acquire a language for practical purposes such as getting a job or passing a test (as cited in Brown, 2007, pp. 171-172). As far as the participant’s fact is concerned, the instrumental motivation applies to his experience as his motive for learning English is to be able to get a job easier.

In addition to motivation, Nunan and Lamb (1996) maintain that learners’ attitudes towards the learning situation and roles have an important effect on learning outcomes (as cited in Erlenawati, 2002). As IBM has learnt English for his communicative needs, he describes the teacher’s negative correction and grammatical approach in his English class as being far from his expectations as well as disrupting his language progress. As a learner, the participant expects a class to be interactive, attractive and less corrective as described in his example of the ‘lost boy’ lesson which he took part in. This is consistent with Horwitz’s research

(1987) which shows that when a language class fails to meet learner expectations, this may result in learner's dissatisfaction and low achievement in language learning (as cited in Erlenawati, 2004, p. 325). Along this line, it is worth-noting that teachers should not correct students' mistakes in a judgmental way as this may affect their self-confidence and deter them from class participation in the future (Lenters, 2004; as cited in Cohen & Cowen, 2008, p. 340).

### **c. Personality and capabilities**

The other personal characteristics around learning a second language which Spolky outlines in his framework are personality and capabilities which include the discussions of intelligence, self-esteem, willingness to communicate, and language anxiety. Individual differences among learners in these cognitive and affective areas explain differences in learning outcomes.

One factor that makes up a profile of a successful second language learner is intelligence. While there is ample evidence to suggest that intelligence is positively correlated with language acquisition success especially in formal school contexts (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 25), these findings seem to be in agreement with the participant's language learning behaviour in which he finds it easier to

master analytical skills (reading and writing) than interactive skills (speaking and listening). When the learning context is formal and involves highly complex cognitive processing operations, intelligence seems to have a significant effect on language learning.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the extent to which a language learner believes themselves to be competent and confident in using the target language plays a significant affective role in language acquisition especially in determining his/her willingness to communicate (Brown, 2007, p. 157). With regard to IBM's experience, the "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998; as cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 27) has been demonstrated confidently by the participant as part of his efforts to successfully acquire a second language. IBM has benefited greatly from practising his English with many people in a way it has improved his listening and speaking skills.

However, as is the case with many foreign language learners, IBM has also had the experience of developing language anxiety. The participant illustrates how he feels anxious about his English when presenting an academic topic to his class. In this situation, IBM might suffer from

what researchers (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991) identify as ‘communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation, and test anxiety’. While IBM’s communication apprehension seems to result from his inability to express his thoughts in a sufficient way, his fear of negative social evaluation and test anxiety might stem from his need to make a positive impression on the class members and lecturer (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 162).

### C. CONCLUSION

From the descriptions and discussions above, it could be concluded that some of the specific situations reported here in relation to the participant’s experience such as:

- age of learning time
- socio-cultural environment
- learning contexts
- teacher methodology
- personal motivation
- learner characteristics

seem to support the views existing in the scholarly literature on second language acquisition such as:

- critical period for native-like pronunciation

- second language and foreign language learning
- natural and school setting
- grammar translation method and communicative approach
- integrative and instrumental motivation
- cognitive and affective factors

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*Sekilas tentang penulis* : Ariatna, M.A. adalah dosen pada Jurusan Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris FBS Unimed.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed in line with Spolky's model of second language learning. It attempts to explore how someone learns English as a second/foreign language from a participant's point of view.

#### I. PERSONAL & GEOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

1. Could you please tell me about your name, age and occupation?

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2. Where were you born and what is your nationality?

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3. What language do you speak as your mother tongue?

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#### II. AGE & SOCIAL CONTEXT

4. What is the status of English language in your country? How do people perceive English? How widely is English used in your society?

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5. What is the status of English in schools? obligatory or elective subject ? From and to what school level is it taught?

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6. In what school level and at what age were you when you started learning English? And how long have you learnt it for?

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7. In which English speaking countries have you been? How long did you stay?

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8. How well would you rate your pronunciation in comparison to a native speaker? Why?

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### **III. MOTIVATION & ATTITUDE**

9. Why did you study English? Personal purpose or academic/professional purpose?

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10. Please describe how English was taught by your teacher. Was the focus on form (grammar), use (communication), or a combination of both? How did it support your learning goals?

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**IV. PERSONALITY &  
CAPABILITIES**

11. How often did your teacher correct student's mistakes in your English class? How did it affect your motivation to learn?

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12. Please tell me about a great English lesson that you took part in. What made it so special ?

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13. What English skills did you find easier to master? Interactive skills (speaking and listening) or analytical skills (reading and writing)? Why?

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14. At what age did you feel confident to use English? Why?

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15. How often did you talk to people to practice your English? To what extent did it improve your English?

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16. Have you been in a situation where you felt anxious about using your English in the presence of a person or many people? Could you give an example?

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