



IDENTITY, MOTIVATION, AND INVESTMENT IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF TWO ADOLESCENT ENGLISH LEARNERS

Shoxalilova Sarvinoz Xakim qizi

*Intern-teacher of the Department of Teaching English as a Second Language,
Uzbekistan State World Languages University*

Abstract. The paper examines two adolescent English language learners whose language learning trajectories differed considerably despite achieving high levels of proficiency. Drawing on theories of identity, motivation, investment, self-efficacy, and acculturation, the study analyzes how personal characteristics and social environments shaped second language acquisition. The findings suggest that successful language learning may emerge through multiple pathways, including self-directed immersion and socially mediated interaction. Pedagogical implications for English language teaching are discussed.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Identity, Motivation, Investment, English Language Learning, Case Study

1. Introduction

Individual differences have long occupied a central position in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. While some learners achieve advanced proficiency primarily through classroom instruction, others succeed through immersion, self-study, or social interaction. Understanding why learners experience different outcomes remains an important concern for researchers and practitioners. This study compares two adolescent learners and explores how identity, motivation, and investment influenced their language development.


Research Questions:

1. How did identity influence the learners' language development?
2. How did motivation and investment contribute to their success?
3. What pedagogical implications can be drawn from the comparison of the two learners?

Part 1. Learner profile


Learner 1:

Student A is a 17-year-old English language learner who studies at the last grade of a local school. Her purpose for learning the English is communicating with native speakers on near-native level. She is from a middle class family. She has grown up in monolingual family which lead to her monolingualism too. She only spoke Uzbek before having English classes. Student A started to learn English when she went to school, and she received formal instruction there. When she turned 13, she started attending extra courses at one of the learning centers in her city. However, she was not consistently attending extra classes. She had gone there for several months, stopped for around half a year, and then continued again. The interesting part about it is that she always came back with better knowledge. For example,



Student A stopped going to the pre-intermediate level and came back as an upper-intermediate. The reason for that is that she was good at self-study. She was more productive when she isolated herself and immersed herself in an English-language atmosphere. She decided to take IELTS at the age of 15 just to know her proficiency level and ended up scoring 8.0 (listening 8, reading 8, writing 6.5, speaking 9) in her first attempt. Although she used to be a shy and reserved student who struggles to speak in front of people, she aced her speaking test by achieving a near-native level on speaking. This is because she used to speak to herself 4-5 hours a day and record it on her phone for over 2 years. Her current level is a result of consistent self-studying and immersion in an English atmosphere through the virtual world. Nevertheless, the most important factor is her talent. She is left-handed, and she has a near-native level in the German language too, which she achieved in two years after taking IELTS. Opler (1989, as cited in Ioup et al., 1994) found that “language learning talent is considered to be an innate, inherited trait, associated with inherited characteristics belonging to the Geschwind cluster such as lefthandedness, twinning, and allergies, among others” (p. 92). Student A’s lefthandedness along with her investment and motivation played an important role in her success in language learning.

Learner 2:



Student B is also a 17-year-old English language learner, but he comes from a different background. He studies at the 10th grade of high school in the USA and he is a sociable person unlike Student A. He studies the English in order to apply for top universities in the USA. Student B also comes from middle class family. He was born in Tashkent and used to live there for 15 years. However, two years ago his father won the Green Card Lottery and moved to the United States with his family. Initially, Student B started learning French as a foreign language at local school in Tashkent. His language learning process both in Russian and in French was totally based on a traditional method. He used to study it through forms. His language skills in French plateaued on the start of pre-intermediate level because of the poor methodology of his teachers. When he moved to the USA at the age of 15 he had to learn English. Although he started receiving formal instruction at school in the USA, his learning process went by acquisition. He used to listen to American people a lot and tried to produce similar speech. As he is an extroverted person, he often hangs out with his friends. When Student B came back to Tashkent in summer holidays, he shared his language learning journey with us and he said that from the second week of his arrival to the USA, he started to say basic phrases and engage in simple conversations. Student B has a high level of self-confidence so he does not worry about making mistakes. He managed to achieve near-native level in terms of speaking in a year. His current level is a result of willingness to communicate and acculturation. According to Schmidt (1983), “if communicative needs are greater and psychological and social distance less, much greater control of the grammatical structures of the target language can be acquired without formal instruction” (p. 139).



Identity

Student A

Student A's natural talent, coupled with her personal traits and motivations, has contributed to her remarkable success in reaching proficiency in English and German. There are several reasons why she wanted to learn different languages, especially English. Firstly, she feels like another person every time she speaks a foreign language. Iacozza et al., (2017, as cited in Ortigosa-Beltrán et al., 2022) emphasized that "...using a foreign language works as an intermediary or buffer that softens the impact of the emotional distress inherent to strong affective information" (p. 2). Student A was bullied a lot by her female classmates for her unattractive appearance and voice. Using a foreign language lessened the emotional impact of strong feelings that arose from personal stories of trauma. That is also the main reason why she always isolated herself. Her imagined identity is a girl who is loved by everyone. Student A knew that if she did well in class, her peers would come to ask for her assistance. She has never done well in science classes, but tend to show remarkable results in language learning. Therefore, she decided to pick up a language as a tool to impress others.


Student B

Student B has always been a talkative boy and this fact has sometimes negatively affected to his studies in Tashkent. All his teachers at the local school used traditional teaching methods that led to Student B's poor performances in class. As Student B is a tall and strong boy, he was a leader of his class. He has always been on the center of attention beyond the classroom, almost all of his classmates wanted to spend time with him. This can be explained by the fact that Student B is an only child in his family. The reason why he failed in his Russian and French classes is that in traditional teaching a teacher is always in the center. On the other hand, Student B's outgoing nature has allowed him to immerse himself in English-speaking environments and engage in conversations with native speakers. His classes in the USA are student-oriented and it creates a comfortable environment for Student B. His identity as a leader of his group contributed to self-efficacy in the USA. Norton and Toohey (2011) argue that "a strong sense of self-efficacy enhances people's achievement behavior by helping them to approach threatening situations with confidence, to maintain a task rather than self-diagnostic focus during task involvement, and to heighten and sustain effort in the face of failure" (p. 120). His imagined identity is a young adult who studies at university with excellent marks and who drives a sport car.

Motivation and Investment


Student A

Student A's motivation in language learning has always been intrinsic. Her motivation is built on pleasing others around her, especially, her parents. She wants to impress her classmates by her success and live up to expectations of her parents by entering a university. Every time when she receives special recognition from her peers she feels sense of accomplishment. This fact positively affected her productive skills such as speaking. When she realized that she has a natural talent for language learning she decided to learn another



two languages, i.e., German and French. According to Dörnyei (1998) “the guiding principle in attribution theory is the assumption that the way humans explain their own past successes and failures will significantly affect their future achievement behavior” (p. 120). Attribution theory in education is a psychological theory that examines how individuals attribute causes to their own successes and failures, as well as those of others. Student A repeated her success in English in other languages and reached the same proficiency level. Student A's investment in her language learning, particularly her willingness to speak to herself for hours each day and record her speech, shows her determination to improve her speaking skills. This determination is derived from the fact that her parents really want her to enter local universities. Student A's parents did not receive higher education so if Student A enters a university it would be historical success.


Student B



Student B's motivation plays a significant role in his language learning success. Student B has been at the center of attention of both his peers and classmates since his arrival as he is the only student from Central Asia in his class in the USA. His motivation in learning of English is 1) to live up to the expectations of his American peers and teachers; 2) to be accepted by top universities; 3) making a big money by working in logistics company of the USA. After finishing the school, he wants to further his studies in BA in Economics. He knows that he could take his academic and leadership skills to the next level by being able to communicate in English. Clement (1994, as cited in Dörnyei, 1998) argued that “...in contexts where different language communities live together, the quality and quantity of the contact between the members will be a major motivational factor, determining future desire for intercultural communication and the extent of identification with the L2 group” (p. 123). Student B's American classmates have the similar identity as he so contact between them has been on a high level. Unlike Student A, Student B's investment in language learning is less time-consuming and lies in being engaged to conversations. From the point of Student B, if he would be able to speak fluently and in academic level it would be easier to acquire other aspects of language. The hours spent at school were not enough for Student B to learn English faster so he used to walk around a school a lot and listen to conversations of random people. He also started attending boxing trainings in his school not to be strong but to have a chance to communicate more. Student B did not even keep a notebook to take notes until he reached an intermediate level on his speaking.

Part 2. Instructional Considerations

In the case of Student A, her teacher must take control of group dynamics. Student A should be taught in a class where Suggestopedia is used along with Communicate Language Teaching. According to Seyhan (2000, as cited in Darici, 2022) “...the key to suggestopedia is creating a safe environment where students are unconditionally supported and not afraid to take risks while the teacher displays an authoritarian attitude” (p. 68). Since Student A escapes from being engaged in conversations, it is useless to ask or force her to be active in




group discussions. It must be reached step by step. For a start, teachers may involve Student A in pair work in class and beyond the classroom. One such activity is proposed by Penny Ur in her book “Penny Ur's 100 Teaching Tips.” In this activity, students are asked to talk to each other in order to find out at least three things that they may have in common. Teachers may utilize this exercise to build pairs and then assign project work to students to do after classes. As a project work they can do a “Rankings” activity. Pairs may do surveys among people to find out the best restaurants in their city or to find out the best movies ever. Student A’s partner should support her in these surveys and they both should try to make a good presentation showing the results of the survey. If Student A’s pair wins, it may create a willingness to work again in pairs or in small groups.

Student B is doing well in classes, as he has been able to speak in English in a short amount of time. Nevertheless, in order to enhance his other language skills, especially his receptive skills along with his writing skills, his teachers should also incorporate Task-based Language Teaching. As Student B has wandering attention inherent to his leader identity, asking him to do a task in funny setting may help to tackle this problem step by step. One such activity would be practicing fast-writing. This activity is adapted from the book “Learning teaching” by Jane Scrivener. According to it, a teacher gives a particular topic to the class and asks them to write a text within a particular amount of time. The text may contain any words that comes to student’s minds. They may even use hesitation words (i.e., um, ahh, umm, rubbish, etc.). Students should not stop writing whatever happens and they are entitled to make mistakes. When time is over a teacher collects all written works and reads them out loud to the class. This may burst the class into laughter and encourage students to write again.

Two aspects of language to acquire


Both learners have reached a native-like level in terms of speaking, but there is room for improvement in their other skills. Syntax and morphology are two important aspects that must be taught. My learners are teenagers and they will become young adults after 3–4 months. The research conducted by DeKeyser (2010) showed that “no adults reached a native level of competence in L2 morphosyntax unless they had been able to rely on explicit, analytic, problem solving capacities” (p. 518). So if my learners were provided with explicit tasks, it would be much easier to understand the rules of syntax. In the case of *Student A* peer feedback or peer reviewing might be a good way of teaching syntax. A teacher should explain a new structure (i.e., compound sentences) and ask students to write examples for it. At the end, students may exchange their sentences and give written feedback on each other’s work. It fits Student A’s identity, as she does not have to communicate with her classmates. In the next peer review activity, a teacher may ask students to give oral feedback on each other’s work instead of written feedback. *Student B* should be taught syntax in a more dynamic group setting with explicit instructions. According to VanPatten and Cadierno (1993), “learners who receive instruction that attempts to alter input processing receive a double bonus: better processing of input and knowledge that is apparently also available for production” (p. 54).



Morphology is another topic that my students will study as multiple errors still exist in their writing (i.e. order of letters and punctuation). For example, *Student A* tends to write some words without hyphens that actually require hyphens. When teaching morphology and other aspects of language to Student A, teachers should not criticize her for mistakes. Le et.al., (2023) found that “introverted learners may exhibit heightened vulnerability to criticism, favoring individualized over potentially overwhelming group feedback” (p. 1). As mentioned above, Student A’s introverted personality is derived from the fact she sees herself as unattractive and this is a part of her actual identity. However, her imagined identity, who is loved by everyone, may help her teachers to teach morphology. If Student A’s teachers praises her for small achievements (i.e. using correct prefixes) she will feel caring attitude which leads to her bigger success. *Student B* often changes the order of similar vowel sounds or writes them as they are pronounced. The reason for that is he was not provided with written context and evaluation regularly. As he acts like the leader of his class, it may be nonsense to force him to learn challenging and boring rules of morphology. One effective way to teach morphology to Student B would be assigning him the role of assistant teacher for 1-2 classes. With that way, Student B can act in the class according to his identity. He may check the students’ works or explain the rules of word formation.

References

- Darici, N. (2022). Suggestopedia: an effective way to teach and learn a foreign language. *ScienceRise*, (3), 67-72. <https://doi.org/10.21303/2313-8416.2022.002565>
- Darvin, R., Norton B. (2023). Investment and motivation in language learning: What's the difference? *Language Teaching*. 56(1):29-40. doi:10.1017/S0261444821000057
- DeKeyser, R. (2000). The robustness of critical period effects in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 22(4), 499-533. doi:10.1017/S0272263100004022
- Dornyei, Z. (1998) Motivation in Second and Foreign Language Learning. *Language Teaching*, 31, 117-135. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S026144480001315X>
- Iacoza, S., Costa, A., and Duñabeitia, J. A. (2017). What do your eyes reveal about your foreign language? Reading emotional sentences in a native and foreign language. *PLoS One*
- Ioup, G., Boustagui, E., El Tigi, M., & Moselle, M. (1994). Reexamining the Critical Period Hypothesis: A Case Study of Successful Adult SLA in a Naturalistic Environment. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 16(1), 73-98. doi:10.1017/S0272263100012596
- Le, T & Nguyen, T & Phuong, Yen & Huynh-Thi, A & Nguyen, T & Pham, T. (2023). Unlocking the Secrets of Introverted Students: A Mix of Methods to Comprehend Their English Language Learning Strategies. *Multicultural Education*. 9. 1-12. 10.5281/zenodo.8003449.



Masoud,A., Masoud, H. (2011). *Humour: A Pedagogical Tool for Language Learners*. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 30. 2093-2098. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.407>

Norton, B., Toohey K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language Teaching*. 44(4), 412-446. doi:10.1017/S0261444811000309

Schmidt, R. (1983). Interaction, acculturation, and the acquisition of communicative competence: A case study of an adult. *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition*, 137–174.

Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning Teaching. A Guidebook for English Language Teachers*. Macmillan Education.

Ur, P. (2016). *Penny Ur's 100 Teaching Tips: Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers Pocket Editions*. (Thornbury S, ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; doi:10.1017/9781009086455

VanPatten, B., & Cadierno, T. (1993). Input Processing and Second Language Acquisition: A Role for Instruction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 77, 45-57.