

# Learning Contexts that Affect Second Language Acquisition

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## Abstract:

This paper focuses on how international students improve their language proficiency by interacting with the local community when they enter the host country. In other words, what factors influence learners' motivation when learning a second language. Although there have been many studies on study abroad and second language acquisition (SLA), none of them have specifically considered the sociolinguistic impact of the target country on SLA. Given this gap, the research question that will be posed in this paper is to find the factors that influence language learners' oral and communicative competence during their study in the host country. Therefore, this paper will consider the extent to which learners' oral competence improves after study abroad (SA) with their daily interactions with the local culture, and the results indicate that the impact on learners' motivation to learn a second language is categorized into four areas. Its findings bridge the gap in this area.

**Keywords:** Second language acquisition; Intercultural context; Study abroad

## 1. Introduction

An in-depth study of the language proficiency of international students abroad cannot be done by looking at the surface of their language fluency alone, but what needs to be done is to incorporate the extra-linguistic factors that learners experience along the way. Examining learners' behaviors and attitudes in study abroad environments and linking them to language development shows that learners' language proficiency does not improve upon arrival in the host country simply because they are surrounded by the current language. A „social network“ is formed when learners establish an informal environment with their current environment [1]. Several studies have shown that when learners are immersed in the target language, it is of great value for second language acquisition, where the growth of oral proficiency is more prominent [2]. Moreover, it has been shown that frequent contact with native speakers of the target language can provide a significant degree of sociolinguistic and cultural knowledge from the current country [3]. However, there are many studies on study abroad and second language acquisition (SLA) that do not specifically take into account the sociolinguistic impact of the target country on SLA, thus failing to provide insights into the nature of the learners' linguistic origins [4].

Therefore, this article focuses on bringing a fill in the gap in this field by examining the influences in learning a foreign language. The main research question posed in this

study is what personal factors influence oral and communicative competence during language learners' learning process in the host country? (Personal factors refer to contact with and attitudes towards the host culture.)

## 2. Literature Review

Research has shown that learners' social interactions and motivation to learn the language, as well as their attitudes towards it, determine their success in acquiring the language [5]. However, the language learning experiences of learners from different regions vary greatly because different languages and different social backgrounds can greatly influence the learners' second language learning experiences [6].

Scholars has shown that the possibility achieve success in SLA of international students after studying abroad is inextricably linked to their ability to establish a relationship with the local culture. When it comes to cultural adaptation, Lysgaard's „culture shock“ theory is widely applied by scholars. The theory of culture shock is widely used to refer to the process of adapt a new environment when people enter a new culture, which can often be exciting or stressful due to differences in language or lifestyle. The U-curve model gives an explanation of this process by describing four stages that people face when entering a new culture, which are „honeymoon“, „culture shock“, „adjustment“ and „acclimatization“ [7]. The U-curve model has been widely used by scholars to study the emotional transformation of cross-cultural individuals during this

process, which ranges from initial anticipation of the new environment, through incomprehension of the local culture, to strategic adjustment to the cultural differences.

Based on the above theory of culture shock, scholars have conducted further research on the process of acculturation of international students abroad. In a study by Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, it was pointed out that when international students are faced with cross-cultural problems, the psychological difficulties they encounter often come from the second language [8]. More scholars have also pointed out that language proficiency deficits and varying degrees of cultural insights can cause psychological as well as emotional stress for language learners [9].

However, for international students, the different stages of acculturation can have an impact on their interactions with the environment, and Bennett stated that to become acculturated to a new culture one first needs to understand the thinking of the group [10]. As a result, a model of acculturation was proposed with six stages. The model is divided into two parts, the first being the principle of ethnocentrism and the other being ethno-relativism. Firstly, in this stage of the ethnocentric principle, learners will (a) be in a state of isolation and express denial of the culture; then they will (b) gradually recognize the cultural differences they are currently facing, but remain resistant to the target country's culture; and finally, when learners realize that their former culture cannot support the current culture, they will come to the stage of (c) narrowing down the cultural differences. This stage. The next three are defined as national relativism, in which the learner will begin to (d) recognize the existence of cultural differences; thus begin to have an open mind towards the host culture, and thus (e) adapt to the target country's culture and gradually (f) accept the differences between the cultures. Thus, L2 learning can be facilitated to a great extent when learners are open to other very different cultures and linguistic patterns and are not limited by their own cultural and linguistic experiences [10].

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

The study centered on the factors that influence SLA learners' oral communication ability. The authors invited Chinese university students studying in the UK, all from the University of Warwick, who are undertaking SLA in English as the target language. The reason to invite Chinese international students to do the interview is that they are a typical group that faces SLA since their first language is not a language widely spoken internationally, so that their experiences in SLA could reveal what international students think about. Most importantly, the consistency of

the participants from the same background could ensure the reliability of the result. Since people's cultural background and language proficiency has big differences.

First of all, in order to find qualified participants for this study, a questionnaire was customized for potential participants to examine whether they met the criteria for participation in the program. This questionnaire was written based on the criteria proposed by Huebner [11]. These were (1) the person's willingness to become a participant in the program, (2) an IELTS speaking test score of 6-7 (upper intermediate level), (3) learning English as a second language, (4) availability of communication with the local sociolinguistic and cultural, and (5) motivation to learn English. Finally five students who met all of these criteria were selected as participants in the study.

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This essay is divided into two parts, which is using mixed method. The first part uses the quantitative method to test the extent to which the participants' speaking levels have increased. The second part uses the qualitative method to examine what factors the participants have experienced during their time in the UK that have had an impact on their level of speaking.

In the first part, the participants' current level of speaking English will be assessed through a simulated IELTS speaking test. The scoring criteria and speaking test questions are strictly based on the official IELTS content. Participants will be provided with a separate, quiet space and an examiner who has experience in running IELTS speaking tests, and will not be disturbed by other people during the whole process.

For the second part, the research applies narrative inquiry and analysis, which focus on participants' experiences in second language acquisition when they study abroad [12]. This paper develops interview questions for the participants that will center on their interaction with the local society and culture and whether their level of speaking has improved. Each of the five participants taking no more than 20 minutes face-to-face interview.

In order to protect their privacy, the research applies anonymized form, their name will be shown as A, B, C, D, and E. The following is the interview question for the study:

*What stages did you go through in this process of learning a second language in the UK from the early stages to the present?*

Finally this paper will analyze the overall discussion based on the information provided by the participants and then combined with the research questions.

## 4. Result

### 4.1 Part 1: English speaking skill

The first stage begin by examining the extent to which the current five participants' speaking proficiency had

improved. After the simulated IELTS speaking test interviews it was found that all of them showed significant improvement in their speaking scores. The following table 1. shows the before and after comparisons of the IELTS speaking scores of each of the five participants.

**Table 1. Comparison of participants' IELTS speaking scores before SA and after SA**

Participant	Speaking score before SA	Current speaking score
A	6	6.5
B	6	7
C	6	6.5
D	6.5	7
E	6.5	7

### 4.2 Part 2: The stages go through in the process of SLA

When the participants were asked about the whole process they went through while learning English in the UK, they told a lot of stories about local experiences that had influenced them in their second language learning. These influences can be categorized as (a) cultural differences, (b) local people's personalities and lifestyles, (c) specific events or opportunities, and (d) new perceptions of the country.

#### 4.2.1 Cultural differences

The results of the interviews demonstrate that all participants compare the culture of their current country with that of their own and find many differences. One participant stated that in daily communication British people use English with a strong focus on polite phrases, which made her feel the difference in British culture. Participant A said that

*„British people are very polite in their daily communication, they often use ‚thank you‘, ‚please‘ or ‚sorry‘ as the part of the conversation. When I first came to the UK I wasn't able to get used to this and would always forget these polite phrases when talking to them, but it wasn't long before I started to consciously hang on to these words as well. „*

There were also participants who stated that the locals in the British culture have a different way of thinking than him, which is simple and direct. Participant C said that *„I think British people's think really differently from us, they simplify a lot of things. For example, I was under the impression that the word ‚bull‘ was the correct word to refer to a cow gendered male, whereas they would just use ‚male cow‘. Since that I realized a simple and direct approach can also solve problems. My way of thinking*

*has gradually begun to approach theirs, reducing a lot of unnecessary burdens for me.“*

#### 4.2.2 Local people's personalities and lifestyles

The participants have mentioned the personality and lifestyle of the British people had an impact on their SLA. Most of the participants stated that the British are spontaneous and this is not only reflected in their personality but also pervades their lifestyle. Participant C said:

*„I was actually a bit shocked after knowing about the general lifestyle of British university students. They would often attend activities such as parties. However, their social life does not affect their academic performance. This has changed my stereotype of „students with good grades must not have fun“. I admire their ability to strike a balance between having fun and learning. Because of their influence, I am gradually trying to make my life more colorful while doing my job well. „*

Not only that, Participant E stated that middle-aged and older people have a very relaxed lifestyle:

*„I find that middle-aged and older people in the UK are very spontaneous, they start their day in a restaurant in the morning with a beer and chatting, it's probably part of their culture.“*

He went on to add:

*„I think it's because they have this sense of spontaneity in themselves that creates a very welcoming personality for the most part. Sometimes when I go shopping the sales clerks will initiate a conversation with me or compliment me. It's the friendliness they exude that makes me more willing to discuss things with them. This series of experiences has also improved my English speaking skills.“*

#### 4.2.3 Specific events or opportunities

In the interviews participants said a lot about some of the opportunities that influenced their current level of

speaking ability, and it was because of this context that these experiences were created. A participant said that the encouragement he received from the locals in terms of English proficiency gave him a great deal of confidence to speak English. Participant D recalled that

*„Actually before I came to study abroad I never had the courage to talk to native English speakers because I was afraid that I would not speak native enough and it would cause some embarrassment. But when I came here I realized that the locals here are very inclusive of your language skills, and I was often told that I look like I don't speak English but I actually speak it very well. These experiences gave me a big breakthrough in speaking English. If it wasn't for their encouragement I may never have taken the initiative to take this step.“*

Participant E mentioned that the atmosphere and the way of learning in the UK inspired her to study independently, and that the professors' teaching style allowed her to find herself in the learning process.

*„When I first arrived in the UK in my first year of university I was pleasantly surprised by the atmosphere of learning here. In class, professors naturally integrate with students to discuss topics, and they play a very approachable role. I really like this mode of learning. In the past, teachers in China were very strict in pushing the students to learn and lost the opportunity to let the students think on their own. Compared to before, the current relaxed atmosphere allows me to face my studies with a positive attitude.“*

#### 4.2.4 New perceptions of the country

When the participants mentioned their reflections after going through the process, most of them demonstrated positive feedback. Although in the previous stage they all experienced resistance and disbelief towards British culture, for them at the present time this has instead been an opportunity for growth. Participant B and Participant C spoke of these in their interviews as follows:

*„Actually when I first came to the UK I felt that it was not what I would call a well developed country in all aspects compared to my hometown, as in the frequent strikes on trains and buses that made it very inconvenient to get around, as well as the food was not good. But this could also be the reason why I'm too attached to my past living environment. I used to compare my own country to the UK, but now that I'm getting used to these things I don't make comparisons that don't matter. I think each place's has its advantages, just for example the British culture has made me more spontaneous, which has greatly improved my happiness in life.“*

*„I really didn't like this place before. He was so different for me and it took me a long time to accept the change.*

*Once upon a time I always thought the bad weather in the UK was the biggest thing that got me down, along with a whole host of other things. But as I've since learned how the locals solve their problems, all this difficulty has slowly faded away. For example, people in the UK will often take Vitamin D to supplement the physical and mental effects of missing sunlight. I think this place has changed me, turning me into a more inclusive and broad-minded person.“*

## 5. Discussion

The research data show that the success of integration into social networks influences learners' progress in learning a second language. In addition, the four factors mentioned above: (a) cultural differences, (b) local people's personalities and lifestyles, (c) specific events or opportunities, and (d) new perceptions of the country, were widely mentioned by the learners. As mentioned earlier, interaction with native speakers in different socio-cultural contexts can contribute to the improvement of second language proficiency. In other words, there is a channel between motivation and language acquisition in the UK and that is interaction in social networks.

Upon arrival abroad, all learners went through the six stages of total or partial acculturation proposed by Bennett [10]. Throughout the learning process, all learners demonstrated acculturation at a later stage, when learners recognized that there were indeed differences between the two cultures. Learners' progress in learning a second language in different cultures varies from person to person, depending on their different experiences, personalities, and ability to deal with difficulties at that time. If learners refuse to interact socially with the host culture in such situations, it will be difficult for them to improve their language learning. Therefore, whether or not learners are concerned about social-cultural interactions is a combination of factors. In the case of Chinese international students studying in the UK, their awareness of culture plays an important role here.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research in this paper indicates that there are six factors that affect international students' speaking proficiency when learning a language in a host country, which are closely related to the local society and culture. The study also indicates that prolonged learning in a British environment gives learners the opportunity to create, nurture and maintain interaction with the target culture. This experience enables learners to recognize cultural differences, reduce their negative impact on them, and ultimately accept them, which creates motivation to

learn and provides opportunities for learners to understand and interact with each other.

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