A Case Study of Two Taiwanese Second Language Learners in the United States

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This study focuses on the two Taiwanese students who have had prior experiences studying in the U.S. The case studies examine how motivations, learning styles and strategies, cultural influences, identities, and education systems have influenced their English learning. An interpretative approach was selected because oral history case studies provide opportunities to explore the participants' views in relation to the research questions on this topic and allows them to emerge from the participants' discourse, thus facilitating an understanding of their experience. By exploring one's ideas of learning, one could tell the differences of individual learner and one's exclusive ideas of learning. The results also indicate the importance of cultural influences as factors amongst international and home learner groups. A cross cultural perspective is increasingly important. By studying other cultures, we are in a better position to reflect on and critically appreciate our own culture. Teachers cannot assume that all students use the same learning styles, but we can better support students by finding their ways of learning. Teachers could support their students to find their learning strategies that suit their own learning styles and to motivate them to adjust better into the learning environment. With relevant knowledge of their students' learning styles, teachers may consider whether and how to adjust their methods of teaching that motivate.

Keywords: learner motivations, learning styles, learning strategies

Introduction

In this study, it is important to understand students' learning styles and strategies: this is an important element to improve student learning. Teachers need to learn how students approach their learning, and whether and how different groups of learners may adopt different learning styles and strategies. With relevant knowledge of their students' learning styles, teachers may consider whether and how to adjust their methods of teaching. A cross cultural perspective is increasingly important. By studying other cultures, we are in a better position to reflect on and critically appreciate our own culture. Teachers cannot assume that all students use the same learning styles, but we can better support students by finding their ways of learning.

Review of Literature

By raising awareness of learning styles and strategies, not only will one become more prepared for learning, but also more analytical in the process (Reid, 1998). This will help a second language learner to become more aware of one's strategies in order to improve one's learning, also, to maintain one's language

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abilities by constantly examine one's learning.

Learning styles refer to a person's general approach to learning and problem-solving (Reid, 1998). There are visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic learning styles. It is subconscious, and it is generally relating to one's personality. Research has shown that many successful learners are aware of their preferences for learning styles, which are the ones, which they found to be the most comfortable and easy to use. Also, those successful learners often have varied preferences. It is suggested that learning styles could be changed with experimentation and practice (Reid, 1998).

Learning strategies, in contrast to learning styles, are specific techniques used to facilitate one's learning. A student who has strongly visual learning style tends to use the strategies of taking notes and outlining, whereas an auditory learner tends to use the strategies of recording lectures and listening to them after class ends. Learners who have an analytic learning style often like to use strategies that involve breaking material down into small pieces, whereas global learners prefer strategies that help them grasp the main idea quickly without attending to details.

When the learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style, these strategies become conscious and purposeful for learning. Skilled teachers could help students identify an awareness of learning strategies which allows them to extend skills by using a higher range of appropriate strategies.

Likewise, a student who has not identified one's learning strategies could affect one's learning abilities. Researcher suggests that ineffective learners are inactive learners and that their apparent inability to learn is, in fact; due to their not having an appropriate repertoire of learning strategies.

Despite many potential barriers to implementing knowledge of individual learning styles in the general classroom setting, raising student awareness of learning styles and strategies has proven to enlighten learning. By identifying one's learning styles and strategies, students could comprehend how learning processes occur, what choices they have in these processes, and how they can identify their learning strengths and weaknesses (Reid, 1998).

Research Design

This study is conducted by qualitative approach of a case study. An interpretative approach was selected because oral history case studies provide opportunities to explore the participants' views in relation to the research questions on this topic and allows them to emerge from the participants' discourse, thus facilitating an understanding of their experience. By exploring one's ideas of learning, one could tell the differences of individual learner and one's exclusive ideas of learning.

Participants

The participants in this study were comprised of two Taiwanese students, Mike and Katty. They both came to the United States to study for several years (more than five years) at elementary and high schools and returned to Taiwan. Mike came to the United States to attend first grade in elementary school and went back to Taiwan during the 4th grade. Katty came to the United States to attend the 7th grade and went back to Taiwan after she finished senior high school in the United States. They had had different perspectives toward English learning. They also had different views toward cultures, identities, education, and language learning. This study will examine the case studies of Mike and Katty to recognize how motivations, learning styles and strategies, cultural influences, identities, and education systems have influenced their English learning.

Data Collection

I interviewed each of the two participants ten times. Each interview, averaged about two hours in length, and was conducted in Chinese and English. All interviews took place between April and July, 2012. During these interviews, I collected background information on these learners. The two informants had to fill out the Questionnaire which identified and defined their own learning styles and strategies and the results were compared with information from the interviews. Each interview was tape recorded, transcribed, and later translated into English in its entirety. Notes were made immediately after the interviews and also during transcription and appended to the transcripts.

The information was then subjected to inductive analysis, in which the themes and categories emerge from the data rather than being imposed on them prior to collection. An emergent and iterative approach was therefore used in the data collection and analysis stages, in an attempt to go over deeper into participants' experiences.

Results

Case Study 1

Mike received his early education in the United States from age seven to ten (Grade 1 to Grade 4), and went back to Taiwan to study in the fifth grade of elementary school. He did not have English skills before he came to the United States, thus, he had some difficulties in communication when he attended elementary school in America. He attended an ESL class for one month. He learned English from sitting through all the classes. He learned from the teacher's lectures and conversation between his classmates. But, he has English environment out side of classes to practice his English. For example, he speaks English to his friends, went to the church, and went to museums occasionally.

L2 acquisition in the United States. The first thing to adjust to a new culture that Mike encountered in the United States was the language barrier. He relied on his teacher's body language for three months. He did not comprehend what other people spoke in the class. By being an observant in the classroom for three months, Mike started to catch the meaning of the words and to produce some language after three months. Mike notes:

I was not taught to learn English, I remember that day, when I went to school, I started to catch the word, and all of a sudden, I know what the word means, I suddenly know what my peers were saying, and what the teacher was saying, before that, I couldn't understand anything in the classroom, I relied on body language for three months.

Research has shown that the natural way of leaning, meaning that learning was not taught by anybody, but learn naturally is called the Natural Approach. Learners did not say anything during this "silent period" until they feel ready to do so. They were learning by observing what other people say and trying to connect the meaning to the words. The teacher became the source of language learning and she brought a variety of interesting and stimulating activities into the classroom.

For a period of time, he was left alone in the class. He felt no one wanted to talk to him and he was always left at side in the classroom. He did not communicate with other people because he did not speak their language. He realized the differences between him and other students, but he tried to overcome them by improving his English and reducing his accent when he speaks. Mike said,

I don't want to be any different from other people, if you can't speak the language, you are different; if you speak with a strong accent, you are different; if you can't understand what the teacher said, and you are different. They would look at you as a foreigner.

He realized that he had to speak the language that other students speak. He imitated some English language from the cartoon characters, such as Smurfs, Transformers, and GIJOES. He tried to reduce his accent, because he interpreted that people would consider him as a foreigner and might not want to associate with him. He wanted to speak the language that everybody speaks, and he wanted to be like everyone else. His strong motivation to learn English comes from that he wanted to adapt into the new culture and speak their language fluently, and he did not want to be any different.

He read plenty of novels in order to improve his English knowledge. He read novels such as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Pride and Prejudice* in the 4th grade. He often accompanied his father to work after school. He often picked up some tossed away books from where his dad worked and he read the novels by himself. He went to the museums and libraries on the weekends; and he said that he could learn more vocabulary outside the classroom.

Maintain English: Mike's strategies. After his dad finished his degree, he decided to take his family home to Taiwan. Mike's parents paid attention to help him maintain his English skills in Taiwan. Since his 6th grade, his dad asked him to write English essays for *China Post* (a local English newspaper) where he responded to Readers' submissions every week until he went to junior high school. His father also hired an English tutor for him to practice English two hours a week. Mike also listened to ICRT (24 hour English radio program), four to five hours a day, whenever he had time. He watched CNN news started from junior high school. He went to English Church for two years, and he often searched English web pages. He watched American baseball games and listened to English in the morning everyday. He said, "I always try to keep myself in an English learning environment".

When Mike returned to Taiwan, he encountered problems with certain subject in school, such as math. This resulted in poor grades in his achievement test. The test driven education emphasized the grammar translation method as opposed to English conversation. He had to study hard in English in order to make up for the subjects that he was not good at. The way teacher measured the students' proficiency affected the way how students learn. In order to gain higher grades to go to a better college, Mike learned the structural English by practicing the exercise, memorizing a lot of sentences and vocabulary from the text book. Although he never used that English in real life situations, but he had to memorize the sentences in order to pass the tests. He practiced English by translating the sentences from English to Chinese. In the class, while other students were doing the exercise, he kept reading in English by himself in the class. He also enjoyed reading English novels himself other than reading the English textbooks outside of the classroom to maintain his English ability.

English was his major in college because he felt confident in his English skills. His English skills made him marketable when looking for employment positions in either country. He worked as a part-time English teacher while he was in school, and English instructor while he served in the army, he also helped establish English website. He is studying master's degree in TESOL in New York, and he will teach English in local college after he goes back to Taiwan.

Different education systems. While Mike was in the United States, he enjoyed going to schools and doing all kinds of schoolwork. He always participated actively in the class and he performed exceptionally well on all the subjects. He also participated in the school band after class. He found out that the American teacher would always encourage him to do things that he wanted to learn, and he enjoyed the learning process. He felt excited that he could do everything and it encouraged him to make efforts to achieve his goals. The teacher would give the students advice but they will not restrict their thinking.

After he went back to Taiwan, the situation was different than what he expected in the United States. He did not like the way the teacher taught in the class. He did not like the way the teacher disciplined the students. Mike did not like to go to class because he suggested that the Chinese teacher did not value students' opinions and did not interact with the students while American teachers would value more about personal opinions and interactions between teacher and student. For example, in English class, the Chinese teacher would ask the students to give the answers that according to the book, but the American teacher would not ask the student to refer to the book, but they also wanted to hear the students' opinions about the story; the American teachers valued individual ideas and creativity.

After Mike went back to Taiwan, the only hope was to pass the exam in order to go to college. Because of his personality, he would not touch the subjects that he thinks he is not good at, so he just focuses on studying English. When he was in the United States, he had a dream of being a pilot, but after he went back to Taiwan he found that he could not be a pilot because he did not do well on the test and if he could not pass the test, he could not go to the college. The different educational systems have changed Mike from an optimistic goal getter to a pessimistic follower. Mike confessed that he enjoyed his life very much when he studied in America, he felt passionate about learning different things. But he lost his passion after he went back to Taiwan, when all the tests were piled up in front of him, and the only goal is to pass exams. English became the only subject that he still interested in, other than that, he would rather escape from the harsh language learning environment.

Case Study 2

Katty came to the United States at the age of 12 and left the United States at the age of 18. She attended the junior and the senior high schools in the United States for six years. She came to the United States to study when her father got her job transferred to the United States. She did not learn how to speak English before she came here and she attended ESL classes as long as three years. When she was in the class, she had the most difficulties understanding what the teacher said and she failed to do any of the assignment. She did not interact with any other students in the class because she was so afraid to reach out and make friends with everybody. She was embarrassed to ask questions for fear that other people might think her questions were so elementary. She especially felt shy to talk to English speakers because that makes her felt inferior to other people who speak English fluently. She almost did not interact with any Americans and avoid adjusting into the American culture. Due to this uncomfortableness that she had with the American culture, she always stayed within the Chinese community.

Second language acquisition in the United States. Katty went to the ESL class as long as three years, and she confessed that she did not have much improvement throughout the class. She always sits through the class and almost never reviewed what she learned. She did not participate and she never posed a question in the class. She did not speak in the class and she did most of paper work, such as the grammar exercises. The teacher volunteered to tutor her English everyday one hour before the class in order to help her pass the English test.

The mainly input of her English learning was mainly from observing the classes. She especially paid attention to how people pronounced English. She was especially conscious of her pronunciation. She hoped that by reducing her foreign accent could improve her English communication skills. Although she had limited English vocabularies, the American accent could make her pronunciation sounds better. She suggested,

People like to talk with people who have better speaking skill; it is easier to communicate with people who speak your native language.

Thus, accent reduction became the major thing that she cared about. She joked that although she had American English accent when she speaks the language; however, she did not have well-matched vocabulary to sustain her English speaking skills.

Maintain English in Taiwan: Katty's strategies. After she went back to Taiwan, she found that she had better English skills than other Taiwanese students. She had confidence in speaking English to other Taiwanese people. Her family had higher expectations on her English speaking skills because she had been in the United States for six years. Thus, she studied English especially hard in Taiwan to make up for her English deficiency. She did not want to lose face because all her relatives knew that she had studied in the United States for six years. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), Intrinsic Motivation is found upon innate needs for competence and self-determination. Katty realized that the years when she was staying in the United States did not assist her English speaking skills. She also had strong self-esteem that she had to speak English better than those Taiwanese students who had never studied in the United States. Those factors have made her determined to learn English hard.

She did not give any chance to keep herself in an English learning environment. Most of the time, she listened to English programs as her recreation. Although she did not have as much chance as she was to practice English everyday, the main source for her to practice was to read and write English essays from school. She had better English skills than ever before, thus she chose English as her major in college. Based on her English skills, she also had got some part time jobs while she was studying in college. The on the job English training also help her to improve her English skills. Katty notes,

I learned English while I was in college, I worked as a part-time English teacher, and I speak English 3 to 5 hours a day. I also tutored English to young children. I had to learn English before I taught. My English was improved while I was teaching. I was trained to be an English receptionist at her English department. I did research project with American professor for three years. I would talk to the professor if there is something I am interested in and also the professor would ask my opinions regarding living in the United States.

Katty's learning style changed from a passive learner to an active participant in Taiwan. She had more enthusiasm to study English because she had gained more confidence from her language learning experiences.

Different teaching styles. When Katty was in the States, she did not like to participate in the class. The major reason was that she did not speak the language as well as other people speak in the class. She preferred to be taught alone, rather than in a group. She did not want to speak in the class for fear of making any mistakes in the class. She was encouraged to speak in the class, but she always sat quietly, and did not interact with other people in the class. The teacher would use a variety of ways to encourage students to explore their ideas and exchange their opinions, but this does not suit Katty's style. She notes,

If I don't speak in the class, the teacher would think that I don't work hard enough, I just did all the schoolwork that speaking is not required in the class, such as math.

In Chinese classroom teachers, for instance, find class "participation" discourteous. Individualism, sometimes labeled "creativity", which is prized highly by the U.S. educational system, contravenes the harmony and collective wisdom so highly valued by Asian educators (Reid, 1998). Katty came from the culture where the Confucianism and teachers' authority are highly valued in the society. She was taught to obey the

rule that never ask questions until the teacher ask you to do so. In contrast to American classroom, self-expressions and independent thinking are highly motivated in the classroom. Thus, students interrupt the teachers' conversations are regarded as a manner of participation in the class. Thus, the different evaluation of East and West classroom participation often confused Katty while she was in the American classroom. She found that the value of a "well-behaved" and "reserved" student was considered to be "not intelligent" or "not participative" in the class in the United States.

In addition, the evaluation of students' academic achievement was more flexible as Katty described in the United States. She revealed that there is one American teacher who volunteered to tutor her pass the Regent exam. However, she failed the exam; the school committee decided to allow her to pass a school wide exam to graduate. The teacher who tutored her also encouraged her to attend other school wide competitions because she found Katty had talents in other subjects, such as math. She had been motivated by the teacher to develop her strengths and talents, not just refined to language ability.

In Chinese classroom, students' individual differences were not valued in a large classroom setting. The education system was followed by a series of administration work, such as the scheduled examinations. The evaluation was by the test results of the entire semester. This large classroom setting has prevented her from speaking in the class. Katty felt more comforted in the traditional classroom where the harmony and conformity of a large group were valued.

Discussion

Motivation

From the two stories, the two informants have been intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to learn English as their second language. According to self-determination theory, there are two types of motivation, one based on intrinsic interest in the activity and the other based on rewards extrinsic to the activity itself. These types of motivation lie among a continuum of self-determination. Intrinsic motivation generally refers to motivation to engage in an activity because that activity is enjoyable and satisfying to do. In contrast to intrinsic motivated behaviors, extrinsically motivated behaviors are those actions carried out to achieve some instrumental end, such as earning a reward or avoiding a punishment. Both informants have turned the extrinsic motivations to the intrinsic motivations. For example, Mike was motivated to speak English since he determined to be no different than any other English speakers. Katty did not want to lose face in front of her family who set high expectations on her for being in the States for six years.

If a teacher could find out the motivations for each student to learn a language, learning could become more interesting.

Maintaining L2: Learning Styles and Strategies

Many researchers have asserted that successful language development for any student depends partially on appropriate use of learning strategies that fit the individual's learning style. From the description of the case study, the first informant, Mike, seemed to employ several learning strategies, such as memorizing sentence structures, imitating the sounds of cartoon characters, translating, interacting with English speakers, etc. However, the second informant seemed to utilize fewer strategies, such as listening to English program, practicing with grammar exercises, etc. There were no strategies that are better than the other, but there are strategies that are more effective for individual learners. The strategies that Mike employed do not necessarily apply to Katty because their learning styles might be different.

Two informants have completed the surveys that indicate that their learning styles are different. According to the results of the survey, Mike's learning styles were kinesthetic, tactile and individual. He could learn best by gaining experience from daily practice. He could remember things well by participating in activities, field trips, and role-playing in the classroom. For example, an audio tape combined with an activity will help him understand the material. In addition, he could also learn best when he has opportunity to do "hand-on" experiences with materials. That is, working on experiments in a laboratory, handling and building models, and touching and working with materials provided him with the most successful learning situations. Further more, writing notes or instructions could also help him remember information and physical involvement in class-relate activities when he understands new information. Finally, he could think well when he studies alone, and he remembers information he learns by himself. From the analysis, we could tell that Mike could learn well since his strategies did match his learning styles. For example, he enjoys putting himself in language learning environment, such as learning about the cultures from the out door activities, socializing with American friends, watching TV that had American programs, etc. He preferred to work alone from my observation for the whole semester. Whenever we had a research project, he suggested that it would be more convenient and more efficient if he could do research alone by himself.

The major learning style preference for Katty is auditory. She learns best from hearing words spoken and from oral explanation. She could remember information well by reading aloud or by moving her lips as she reads, especially when she is learning new material. She would benefit from making tapes to listen to, by teaching other students, and by conversing with her teacher. Katty has less learning styles than Mike does and her learning style focus mainly on the listening skill. From my interview with Katty, the only thing that Katty cared about was pronunciation and accent. She tried to imitate American accent from English programs. She did not pay much attention to the language itself, such as structures, vocabulary, and other language skills, such as reading and writing. From my observation, she spoke fairly fluently, and she communicated well with uncomplicated words with American English accent. It had shown that the strategies that she used to acquire her accent had matched her style. Comparably, Mike had strategically improved his English skills from all aspects than Katty who focused mainly on speaking skill. Roberta Vann and Roberta Abraham (1990) suggested that unsuccessful learners did not necessarily use fewer language learning strategies than their more successful peers; rather, they simply employed strategies in a haphazard fashion, inadequately relating the task at hand and their own learning style preferences.

Teachers could help students to find out their learning styles and the strategies that are suitable for the students to learn by doing the surveys. Strategies could be consciously adjusted to one's learning styles. In addition, the strategies could also be adjusted relevant to the task at hand.

Conclusion

Students who have had prior experiences studying in the U.S had more dynamic learning styles than students who received education in East Asia. Due to the different educational systems, teachers in America value a more student-centered classroom than teachers in East Asia where a teacher-centered and test-based classroom is esteemed. In addition to language learning environment, teachers could encourage students to find out their motivations to learn a language. By creating a pleasant atmosphere, developing a good relationship with students, making the classes interesting, and encouraging students to formulate their own learning strategies, teaching would become more effective.

Understanding one's learning styles could facilitate learning. Employ Strategies that are suitable to one's learning styles could become more efficient to one's learning. Besides, due to the different education systems, teachers should not impose any disciplines to students who had experienced a different educational system to prevent students from frustrations. These students should be evaluated on a different basis until they had been well adjusted. Teachers should keep close contacts with parents of such students. Good parent-teacher communication and collaboration could dramatically facilitate transitions of these students into new environments.

Limitation

Due to the limited time and space, the boundary of this study just focused on the two Taiwanese language learners who had experienced the education in the U.S. The data collection was limited to the oral interviews since the lack of the previous educational documents such as students' portfolio, transcripts, observations in the classrooms, quantitative data, and interviews with the previous teachers, etc.

Further Study

There is currently a belief that language, identity, and culture are inextricably related, and that language loss has a great influence on children's or adults' changing identities. The two apparently similar language learners in this study differed significantly in their fundamental approaches to problem solving underscores the insights provided by microanalysis of learner behavior on varied tasks. Future case studies will facilitate researchers to verify critical assumptions about second language learning in cross-cultural education systems.

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Appendix

Interview Questions for Students:

Chinese leaning culture vs. Western learning culture:

1. What Chinese learning culture has meant to you?
2. What is the teacher's role and teacher and student relationship compared to Western culture?
3. What are the differences between Chinese and Western students' reactions in the classroom? Speak up, lose face
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages about Chinese learning styles? (Exams, text bound, teacher-centered, inductive, memorization)
5. Do you prefer to work in group or alone by yourself? What are the differences?

Language shift and language loss:

6. How do you acquire English skills? When you go back to Taiwan, did you find it hard to practice English? Why?
7. Why does shift occur, how does it occur, and what happens to the language skills?
8. Did you have contacts with Native American friends after you went back to Taiwan? How often do you contact them? (the lack of linguistic community)

Loss and maintenance:

9. What your parents' point of views about bilingual education? Do your parents speak L2 (English) at home? If so, do you think it's enough for the L1/L2 to develop/maintain? (interruptions/motivations)
10. Do you feel a loss of identity while maintaining L2?
11. What so good about learning L2 in cultural perspective?
12. If L2 be learned at an earlier age, will L1 aid or impede children's academic performance or social development? Do you think that the longer exposure to L2, the more possibility that one will lose one's L1? So, should L2 be learned at an earlier age?
13. What characteristics you have to a maintain L2? P.13 (socioeconomic ladder, L1 identity, the length of residence)
14. What are your parents' roles in maintaining your L2? What type of encouragement parents give to you to speak L2?

Interview Questions for Teachers:

1. Self-Introduction (teaching experience, education, lived overseas)
2. What is your belief?
3. What is the teacher's role and the relationship between you and your students in your classroom?
4. What are the differences between international and native American students' classroom participation in the classroom? (Speak up, quiet)
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages about your teaching styles in relation to your students' teaching styles? (Exams, text bound, teacher-centered, inductive, memorization)
6. What the challenges are when you teach?
7. What would you do differently if you could change something in your teaching?
8. What are the strategies you would use?
9. How the students are doing in classroom tasks? (Individual, group)
10. How do you assess your students?