‘Visiting locals’ houses’ and ‘English without noticing’: the nature and potential of informal language development

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The title of this paper reflects two connected aspects of the language learning aspirations of international students at the start of a 12-month masters programme in a British university. Visiting locals’ houses reflects social aspects of language learning, which includes sustained interaction with British social networks, and the culture learning implicit in this multi-faceted experience. English without noticing captures a more cognitive framing of expected language learning: here the student envisions an English language immersion experience which will result in more effective language use as a result of less demanding conscious processing.

The focus on language development in this paper is one strand of a broader study, Socialisation and Learning in Applied Linguistics (SAIL), by a grant from the pedagogical fund of the Language Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). The aim of this research study is to understand social and informal learning practices and processes from socialisation (Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen 2003) and identity (Wenger 1998) perspectives. Informal learning includes:

- involvement in learning groups with classmates,
- participation in computer-mediated communication environments,
- attending optional seminars and workshops, and
- discussions with tutors and other members of the academic community.

Language development of these advanced (IELTS 7 or equivalent) learners is a major part of this informal learning, both in terms of the expectations of the students themselves, and of the host programme and institution: Rea-Dickins et al (2007) found that language development was a major issue, both in terms of learning achievement and difficulty, for both students and tutors in such contexts. Previous studies have found that language skills shape other learning experiences in such programmes (Morita 2000; 2004), and also that such advanced learners progress in variable ways and at variable rates (Larsen Freeman 2006).

This study is informed by three linked theoretical perspectives. First, language learning is explored as a language socialisation process which involves engagement with cultural and social issues as well as language forms (Watson-Gegeo and Neilsen 2003; Shi 2006). Second, the language learning process is one of identity formation as a learning trajectory which is shaped by previous experience, perceptions of the learning environment, and interactions with significant others (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004; Rea-Dickins et al 2007). Third, our understanding of the wider social environment which is particularly salient in constructing learning experiences, is informed by Wenger’s notion of communities of practice (1998) and Ranson’s learning society (1998).

In this paper we analyse the language and identity development of two learners – Chi and Lin – using data from their written assignments, interviews, ejournals, and narrative workshops. The emphasis in the analysis is on self report data. There are two reasons for this: first the participants are successful English learners, who have become English teachers, and TESOL/Applied Linguistics postgraduate students, and so can comment analytically and insightfully on their language development. Second, the analysis examines language development in the context of socialisation in a new community of practice, so perceptions and constructions of learning processes and achievements are particularly important.

Chi is a learner whose sense of self is characterised by a strong sense of achievement. All her interactions with significant others – parents, teachers, tutors and peers in the current programme – reinforce the view that she is a successful learner. As a teacher she reflects this positive perspective on learning, always seeing potential to be developed, rather than deficits to be countered. Her sense of community is strong: she notes that she learns through communication both where she is the listener, and where she is the explainer. Her positive expectations of language development are reflected in the comments of tutors, a case of a self-sustaining virtuous cycle of expectation, effort and achievement.

Lin’s experience of learning is one characterised by struggle. She recounts an ambition to be a successful English user and teacher, and a constant engagement with obstacles to realise this. Her view of her English reflects an awareness of shortcomings, and also a determination not to be identified by these. This means attributing problems to external factors, such as her learning experience in school and unavoidable L1 interference. She has come to avoid interactions in learning groups, resorting to struggle in isolation to meet the assignment requirements of her programme. For her, community is not the metaphor for support and motivation that it is for Chi: rather it is still a vision, a constant guiding a trajectory characterised by both struggle and self-belief.

The final section of this paper addresses methodological issues which have arisen in this study. These relate to strategies for linking data to theory; for aggregating case studies in developing language socialisation theory; and for drawing together self-report data and actual linguistic data from spoken and written language use.
References


