An Analysis of a Successful Language Learner

(Some Affective and Sociocultural Variables Connected to Chieko Higashi's Acquisition of the English Language)

Hope Reader

A dream : One day, an English teacher walks into her classroom and starts speaking English at normal speed. To her amazement, all of the students can understand what she is saying. There is no need to explain an expression or to write words on the blackboard. While the teacher is trying to figure out what has happened to her students, they start to communicate freely with her. The students' spoken English may not be perfect, but they are succeeding in their attempt to express their opinions and thoughts. The English teacher thinks for a moment that she is not in the real world and awakens from the dream. Most English teachers would be overjoyed if the situation described in the dream were to actually occur. Occasionally, however, a small dream comes true in the real world.

As a lecturer at Kagoshima Prefectural College, it is my responsibility to teach English to the English majors at this school. The small dream just referred to is about one of the students I had at this school, Chieko Higashi. During classes, she stood out because of her above average listening, speaking, and pronunciation skills. Outside of class, I found I could speak to her as to a friend. Her ability to carry on a natural conversation in English impressed me the most. As I became better acquainted with her, my curiosity increased. How had she been able to attain this level of proficiency in a foreign country? To find an answer to this question, I decided to conduct a series of interviews with her.

Since my particular interest lies in the area of personality factors and sociocultural variables associated with second language acquisition, I wanted to find connections between the data from the interviews and some of these variables.

My main goal in this paper is to present more evidence in support of some of the theories which state that certain variables do indeed promote the successful acquisition of a second language. Having said this, I must make a few remarks regarding the content of this paper.

Nothing new is stated in this paper ; nevertheless, the relevance of compiling evidence to support theories cannot be disregarded. Only through continual investigation can answers be found to the process of second language acquisition.

This is not a research paper. This paper is an analysis of how one student is acquiring

a language. Some research findings are presented, but the backbone of this paper is analysis and interpretation.

Since the student in question is learning a language in a foreign country, some readers may take issue with the fact that phrases such as second language acquisition and second language learning are used. Major theorists in the field of second language acquisition, H.Douglas Brown (1987) for one, use these expressions to refer to a variety of language learning situations. I take the liberty to use such terms in this paper since a precedent has been established.

Before the examination of the data from the interviews proceeds, let us acquaint ourselves with Miss Chieko Higashi. She is nineteen years old and has lived in Kagoshima prefecture all her life. There are five people in her family (including herself) : 1) her father, a high school teacher, 2) her mother, a homemaker, 3) her older brother, and 4) her younger sister. Miss Higashi describes herself as a serious person who enjoys thinking deeply on various issues and spending time alone.

She graduated from Kagoshima Prefectural College in March 1993. While she was a student at the junior college, Miss Higashi worked part-time as an assistant at an English conversation school. During her free time, Miss Higashi enjoyed doing various activities such as studying English, spending time with friends, and listening to music.

Her educational background pertaining to the study of English can be characterized as both typical and atypical. Miss Higashi spent eight years studying English, learning primarily reading and writing skills in junior high school and high school. In the tenth grade, she spent one month in the state of Oregon on a homestay program. After entering Kagoshima Prefectural College, Miss Higashi had more opportunities to interact with native speakers, which she felt helped improve her speaking skills.

Personality factors do influence, to some degree, a person's capacity to learn a language. Brown (1987) discusses the major personality factors associated with second language acquisition. A few of these factors that have bearing on the information from the interviews will be presented.

"Risk-taking" is a term used to refer to the willingness to take risks in the language learning situation. The person who has no fear of making mistakes or getting embarrassed while trying to communicate in the second language is a "risk-taker." This personality trait can lead to the successful acquisition of a second language if the risks taken are "careful" ones (Brown, 1987, pp. 104-105).

Motivation, is another, much discussed personality factor. Brown (1987) defines motivation as "an inner drive, emotion, or desire that moves one to a particular action"

(p. 114). He cites the now famous study done on the relationship between motivation and second language acquisition by Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert. They used the terms "instrumental" and "integrative" to establish the two kinds of motivation associated with second language acquisition. "Instrumental" motivation refers to learning a language for specific purposes such as passing a test or getting a job. "Integrative" motivation refers to learning a language to assimilate with a culture. The research done by Gardner and Lambert showed that "integrative" motivation promoted second language acquisition. Other studies have shown, however, that "instrumental" motivation is correlated with successful language acquisition. Brown (1987) believes that both types of motivation can facilitate the acquisition of a second language and that the learner may possess both types of motivation at the time the language is being learned (pp. 115-116).

The data from the interviews suggest that Chieko Higashi may be a risk-taker. The very fact that she agreed to do the interviews shows her willingness to take risks. Miss Higashi has a strong drive to learn English and in order to further her progress, she tries to speak English every chance she gets. Since Miss Higashi believes voicing opinions is important in American culture, she also tries to state her opinions whenever she can. Miss Higashi comes across as a person who is undaunted by mistakes when she communicates in English.

High motivation is another personality trait Miss Higashi may possess. When she was asked about the methods she used to study English, Miss Higashi came up with an impressive list of activities : 1) watching English conversation programs on the educational channel; 2) studying textbooks; 3) writing down new words and looking them up in the dictionary; 4) watching American news programs; 5) listening to tapes of movie dialogues ; and 6) watching and listening to native speakers closely to improve her pronunciation.

There are reasons why Miss Higashi spends so much time studying English. Her dream for the future is to get a job as an interpreter or a translator and to live in the United States. When asked why she wanted to live in the United States, Miss Higashi stated she liked American culture, especially the freedom an individual has to be his or her own person. She makes a conscientious effort to learn English because she is "instrumentally" and "integratively" motivated to do so.

A language learner must, to some extent, learn the culture of the language being learned (Brown, 1987, p. 124). Sociocultural variables are used to explain the process of culture-learning. Before a discussion of a few of these variables takes place, important

concepts must be defined.

In order to understand what the learning of culture means, a clear definition of the term culture has to be established. Culture influences thoughts and actions and therefore is "the learned, socially acquired traditions and life-styles of the members of a society, including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (i. e., behaving)" (Harris, 1983, p. 5). Perceptions and consequently world views will be affected by culture since it permeates a person's external and internal world.

Condon (1973) uses the phrase "selective form of consciousness" when defining the term perception. Since reality is interpreted through perception, which is, in turn, influenced by culture, misunderstandings between members of cultures often occur (p. 13). This situation can be explained by the fact that people have differing world views, which are influenced by perceptions. For example, two characteristics of the American world view are that positive changes can be made and that the environment can be controlled (p. 20). Members of other cultures who do not hold the same world view are likely to have trouble understanding the American conception of the world.

Perceptions and world views shape stereotypes, which is one variable that affects culture-learning. Brown (1987) defines stereotypes as "a category that singles out an individual as sharing assumed characteristics on the basis of his or her group membership" (p. 125). In other words, stereotypes are preconceived notions about how members of a particular culture will behave. The danger of stereotyping is that a false picture of a culture can be created. The language learner should be informed about cultural differences and be accepting of these differences. Maintaining false stereotypes will not aid the acquisition of a second language (pp. 125-126).

Stereotypes are connected to another sociocultural variable, attitudes. Second language learning will be fostered if a culture is viewed in a positive light (Brown, 1987, p. 127).

Miss Higashi may be able to recognize differences in the American and the Japanese world views. It was previously stated that she spent one month in the United States. Miss Higashi's conception of the American world view stems mainly from her experiences there. Some of the characteristics of the American world view she observed are that 1) life is viewed positively ; 2) positive changes in life can always be made ; and 3) individualism is important. On the other hand, the Japanese world view has the following characteristics : 1) life is not always viewed so positively ; 2) improvement of life by making changes is not always possible ; and 3) conformity is important. Although Miss Higashi paints a darker picture of the Japanese world view, she is not unaware of the disadvantages

and advantages of such views. For example, the disadvantage of the American world view is that the present moment is stressed, while the future is ignored. The advantage of the Japanese world view is that having a plan for the future is important. Miss Higashi's interpretation of these world views may not necessarily be accurate, but she is making an effort to understand the differences between the two cultures and this is significant.

Miss Higashi admits she had some stereotypical views about the Americans before she went to the United States. Americans were cheerful, kind, and trusting of each other in her eyes. After her stay in the United States, Miss Higashi revised some of the notions she had previously held about the Americans. She recognized that Americans do have personal and societal problems and they are not so trusting of each other. This data can be interpreted to mean that Miss Higashi is willing to learn about what Americans are really like.

In general, Miss Higashi has very positive attitudes towards American culture. These positive attitudes developed out of the kind treatment she received while in the United States and the observations she made about her host family. Miss Higashi enjoyed doing various activities with her host family such as playing sports, shopping, and interacting with them in English. She did mention a few positive observations she made about her host parents: 1) The host parents appeared to be very open and understanding with their children; 2) the host father occasionally helped the host mother; and 3) the host parents had a generally positive outlook on life. Miss Higashi also had the opportunity to visit with other host families and to learn about American culture at a study center for the homestay students. Her reactions to these situations were positive as well.

The information on world views, stereotypes, and attitudes gives some insights into Chieko Higashi as a second language learner. Her open-mindedness towards American culture, her willingness to learn about American culture, and her positive attitudes put Miss Higashi in a better position to learn English. Her above average ability in English has no doubt been enhanced by such factors.

A certain measure of acculturation is necessary if a language is to be learned successfully. Acculturation is "the process of becoming adapted to a new culture" (Brown, 1987, p. 128). A language learner must not only get acquainted with a new culture, but also learn a different way of communicating in the language being learned. The acculturation model proposed by Brown (1987) has four stages: 1) The first stage is a period of initial fascination with a new culture; 2) the second stage is a period where culture shock is experienced-the differences between two cultures create psychological stress within the language learner; 3) the third stage is a period where psychological stress

is slowly overcome. During this stage, however, periods of stress and anxiety still occur; and 4) the fourth stage is a period where most problems associated with being in a new culture are finally overcome and "adaptation or assimilation into the new culture" is possible (p. 129).

The language learning situation will affect the degree of acculturation. When the language is being learned in the target culture, acculturation can occur at the optimal level. In the foreign language learning situation, the level of acculturation will depend on the circumstances and the reasons related to the learning of the language (Brown, 1987, p. 136).

According to Brown (1987), the highest level of competency in a language can be attained during the third stage of the acculturation process. This stage offers the "optimal cognitive and affective tension to produce the necessary pressure to acquire the language" (p. 135). A language cannot be successfully learned before reaching this stage or after proceeding through it (p. 135).

Acton et al. (1986) stress the cognitive and psychological changes a person goes through in their acculturation model. They discuss theories in the areas of cognitive development, affect, and personality and role development that fit their model. One of the theories they mention in the area of personality and role development will be discussed since it has direct bearing on the data from the interviews. (Acton et al.'s acculturation model will not be presented here.)

One of the theorists Acton et al. (1986) mention in the area of personality and role development is Alexander Guiora. His basic idea is that "developing a second-language identity" is akin to acquiring another personality (Valdes, 1986, p. 26). "If the second language learner has strong self-esteem in his or her first language," then adding on a "second-language identity" becomes easier (p. 28). The learner will still be strongly attached to a "first-language identity" during the first stages of acculturation and in the final stages the learner will acquire a "second-language identity" (p. 28).

The theories proposed by Brown (1987) and Acton et al. (1986) help to explain the process of adapting to a new culture, but these theoretical constructs are as yet unproven. The stages and definitions put forth in Brown's acculturation model are quite arbitrary. Whether a language learner will in fact go through these stages or experience the same feelings associated with these stages is questionable.

The data from the interviews suggest that Miss Higashi may have reached some level of acculturation here in Japan. Her desire to adapt to American culture can be established by the fact that Miss Higashi is "integratively" motivated to learn the English

language. She wants to communicate with Americans and to eventually live in the United States. Miss Higashi is learning about American culture here through some of the methods she uses to study English, for example, watching American programs. Furthermore, she has contact with native speakers on a regular basis (the American teacher at the conversation school and her American boyfriend). Through these contacts, she is learning about American culture as well.

The case that Miss Higashi has achieved some level of acculturation is further strengthened by the fact that she spent time in the United States. Miss Higashi has stated that while in Oregon, she sought every opportunity to communicate in English with the people there. By the end of her stay, Miss Higashi was able to communicate in English with her host parents. She states her host mother taught her about American customs. Miss Higashi also made observations about new and strange practices. For example, casual dating practices and the public display of affection surprised her. All of this information supports the notion that Miss Higashi adapted to American culture by direct observation and communication with American people.

In her brief stay in the United States, Miss Higashi may have experienced a few of the stages of acculturation mentioned by Brown (1987). Stage one (fascination with the new surroundings): Miss Higashi was very excited about being in the United States and was eager for many new experiences. Stage two (culture shock): Miss Higashi was psychologically stressed by two factors. When she arrived in the United States, Miss Higashi could not communicate with her host parents. Often, gestures and sometimes even the dictionary were used to get a point across. Also, since her host parents had no children her age, Miss Higashi felt sad and lonely. She recalls complaining to other students in the homestay program about the anxiety she felt. Stage three (the beginning of recovery from culture shock): Miss Higashi states she eventually stopped complaining about her situation and adjusted to her new life there. The experiences in the first two stages occurred within the first week of her stay and the third stage was reached by the second week.

While information on her stay in the United States and her efforts to learn English here in Japan gives some clues, what stage of acculturation Miss Higashi has actually reached is difficult to assess. The data may be insufficient for a full assessment and the theoretical construct too incomplete. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume some degree of acculturation has taken place.

Guiora's theory on "second-language identity" was mentioned earlier. His theory is that to become adapted to a new culture, a language learner must take on a personality

that fits the new culture. In her attempt to learn English, has Miss Higashi taken on a "second-language identity?" She believes many Japanese have a shy personality and don't express their opinions openly, while on the other hand, many Americans have a bolder personality and openly express their opinions. Miss Higashi realized, in order to communicate with Americans, she would have to change her behavior. When she speaks English, Miss Higashi tries to become bolder and to openly express her thoughts. She admits that sometimes being aggressive is easier when she is speaking English. From my own observation, Miss Higashi does seem to make a conscientious effort to change her behavior when she is speaking English. There are some indications, then, that a switch from a "first-language identity" to a "second-language identity" has taken place.

Now that the analysis of the interview data has been completed, a few, if tentative, conclusions regarding Miss Higashi as a second language learner can be reached. Although Chieko Higashi's acquisition of English is an ongoing process and is far from perfect, she is a successful language learner. The research on personality factors and sociocultural variables pinpoints some of the characteristics of a successful language learner. Miss Higashi possesses some of these characteristics: 1) a willingness to take risks, 2) high motivation, 3) an open-minded view of cultural differences, and 4) adaptability to American culture. If Miss Higashi continues in her active pursuit of learning English and American culture, she is quite likely to progress further in her ability to communicate in the English language.

Theoretical constructs such as personality factors and sociocultural variables may give an incomplete picture of what influences the language learning process, yet these theories have explanatory power. The influences that shape Chieko Higashi's language learning process can be partially explained by these theories. As such, personality factors and sociocultural variables are valuable tools in the analysis of second language acquisition.

REFERENCES

Acton, W.R., & Walker de Felix, T. M. (1986). Acculturation and mind. In J. M. Valdes (Ed.), *Culture Bound* (pp. 20-29). Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Brown, H. D. (1987). *Principles of language learning and teaching.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ : Prentice-Hall.

Condon, E. C. (1973). *Introduction of culture and general problems of cultural interference in communication. Introduction to cross-cultural communication. No. 1.* New Jersey : Rutgers University Press.

Harris, M. (1983). *Cultural anthropology.* New York : Harper & Row.

Higashi, C. (Interviewed Subject). (1992). (Tape Recordings of Conversations). Kagoshima Prefectural College.