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Elena Shvidko

Utah State University

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Second language socialization in English programs: two cases

Elena Shvidko[1]

Purdue University, the USA

Abstract

Second language learning is a complex and dynamic process, which includes not only learners' cognitive development, but also their socialization into the local community. From this perspective, context plays a crucial role in socialization and language learning. Similarly, learning environments of language programs may have a powerful influence on the success in L2 acquisition. Based on the experiences of two ESL students enrolled in an intensive English program that enforced an English-only policy, this article discusses the social aspect of institutional policies and the effect they may have on learners' language socialization. The author argues that program administrators need to carefully consider the role of contextual factors when analyzing learners' social and linguistic behavior, so they can better understand how to maximize learners' enculturation and language development.

Keywords: L2 socialization, L2 acquisition, ESL, case study,

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[1] Purdue University. **Email:** elenashvidko@gmail.com

Background

Several years ago, when I started my journey as a graduate student in the United States, I had an emotionally painful experience in the first course of my TESOL graduate study. Because I was the only non-native speaker in that class, coming directly from an intensive English program, my classmates did not seem to take my presence seriously, and when I tried to express my opinion during group activities, they would talk over me. I felt hurt, unhappy, and unconfident. I stopped participating in class, which most likely made my classmates think I was incompetent and incapable of contributing to collaborative course projects. Eventually, I dropped the class feeling very negatively about myself.

Later on, when I was working on my graduate research project (part of my master's degree in TESOL), I once again encountered this concept of "fitting in" and becoming a legitimate member of a community. For my research, I interviewed several students, who shared with me their experiences of socialization into the school environment while trying to balance their learning goals, needs for cultural bonding with compatriots, and peer pressure. While the purpose of the research for my thesis was quite different from the topic I address in this paper[2], I will draw on the experiences of two of my participants[3], as I believe they illustrate different dimensions of language socialization—the focus of the current paper.

Introduction

Context plays a crucial role in second language acquisition[4]. Indeed, environments consist of multiple ideologies, social and cultural identities, discourse patterns, and stances, which inevitably influence language learning. Therefore, to study language acquisition, we should consider learners' participation in social interaction with other members of their learning environment—both in instructional contexts and in naturalistic settings.

Social Context in Language Learning

The role of social environment in second language acquisition has been highlighted by many researchers. Duff (2010a), for example, stresses the role of cultural knowledge—the knowledge of local practices, values, expectations, and ideologies—shared by experts (i.e. old-timers) and acquired by novice members (i.e. newcomers). This cultural knowledge becomes accessible to newcomers as they take an active part in local interactional practices, such as social activities, speech events, and cultural routines. Thus, as rightly stated by Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen, "The learning of language, cultural meanings, and social behavior is experienced by the language learner as a single, continuous… process" (2008, p. 157).

During this process, the development of linguistic and cultural competences facilitate each other. On the one hand, language is *a tool* for receiving access to resources available in a

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[2] My research was not related to language socialization, but some of the experiences that the participants shared with me can be analyzed from the perspective of second language socialization (which I attempted to do in this paper).

[3] In my original study, I conducted interviews with six students, but for the purpose of this paper, I chose two participants, whose quite different experiences illustrate successful and unsuccessful socialization.

[4] The terms "second language acquisition" and "second language learning" are used interchangeably in this paper (Ellis, 1994)

particular community, which open doors to the learners' membership and legitimacy in the community (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). On the other hand, language is *a result* of the increasing access to the resources of the community—as learners develop an appropriate level of social and cultural competency enabling them to successfully function in the community, their language knowledge becomes more sophisticated.

Socialization and Language Learning in Academic Contexts

Academic contexts in which languages are learned are often complex and multidimensional—even within the same community learners may have quite divergent experiences. For example, Morita (2004) demonstrated how engagement in class activities for her participant—a Japanese woman studying in a Canadian university—depended on the social character of the different classes that she was attending. In one course, the instructor acknowledged her silent behavior, which allowed her to consider herself as a legitimate, albeit silent, member of the group. In another course, however, she felt ignored, powerless, and marginalized due to the behavior of experienced classmates and the teacher. Yet, in the third course, she experienced alienation due to the interplay of many contextual factors, including the content of the course and the lack of connection with other classmates. This study demonstrated that a social organization of each language classroom is unique; therefore, the classroom environment, including "social, cultural, historical, curricular, pedagogical, interactional, and interpersonal" elements (Morita, 2004, p. 596) cannot be disentangled from learners' socialization.

Willett (1995) came to a similar conclusion in her longitudinal ethnographic study on second language socialization of first graders in a mainstream classroom in the United States. The study examined how classroom's sociocultural ecology shaped interactions of three ESL children with one another, the teacher, other students, and bilingual aides. Through these interactions they became competent members of the classroom and demonstrated successful language development. Willett argued, however, that the routines and strategies used in the classroom were context-specific; therefore, the study could have had different results in another setting. The study showed that while examining language learning, "we must first ask what meaning routines and strategies have in the local culture and how they enable learners to construct positive identities and relations and manage competing agendas" (Willett, 1995, p. 499), as they are all consequential for learners' integration into the local community.

Peers may also have an impact on learners' socialization and language development—both positive and negative. Kobayashi (2003) examined in- out-of-class interactions of undergraduate Japanese students in a Canadian university, who were socializing into the practices related to preparing and delivering presentations and collaborative learning. Through their positive mutual support during their meetings and rehearsals the participants were able to prepare and deliver an effective presentation. Hsieh's (2007) participant, on the other hand, demonstrated resistance to integrate into the classroom community because of the unwelcoming behavior of her peers. She felt that her native-speaking classmates viewed her as incompetent and unintelligent; this caused her to isolate and perceive herself as a useless and deficient person during all class activities.

Likewise, teachers may not always facilitate students' socialization. For example, they may wrongly assume that novices have already acquired linguistic and cultural practices required in a particular academic environment. Therefore, they may not provide learners with transparent directions and explicit instruction on particular aspects of classroom culture or tasks. Seror (2008) examined writing experiences of five undergraduate Japanese students in regular content courses in a Canadian university. He found that the students were dissatisfied with teachers' feedback and found it incomprehensible, unclear, and generally unhelpful. Zappa-Hollman (2007) had similar results in the study on oral presentations: teachers offered limited and rather unspecific feedback on students' performances, despite the students' investment into the assignments. In both studies the teachers provided ineffective conditions for students' academic socialization.

Similar to other academic contexts, language programs—along with their ideologies, policies, and social interactions—have a powerful influence on learners' socialization processes and second language development. Unfortunately, some English-learning institutions may implement policies enforced in ways that undermine language learning and socialization (Rivers, 2011). One such policy is "English-only" implemented in some language programs (Author, Evans, & Hartshorn, 2015; McMillan & Rivers 2011). The positive and negative effects of institutional English-only policies on students' language development have widely been discussed in the literature (Grant 1999; McMillan & Rivers 2011; Rivers 2011). However, research on the social aspect of these policies is fundamentally missing; therefore, not much is known about how English-only environments influence learners' language socialization processes—their integration into the local academic community. To address this issue, this paper describes socialization experiences of two ESL learners enrolled in an intensive English program (IEP).

Method

Context

Taking the case-study approach, this research draws on data collected as part of a larger project that explored students' language use in intensive English programs (Author et al., 2015). The study was conducted in one IEP—the English Language Center (ELC)— affiliated with a large university in the southwestern part of the U.S. The curriculum of the school consists of two programs: the Foundations English Program and the Academic English Program. The Foundations Program has the goal of helping students gain Basic Interpersonal Communications Skills (BICS), whereas the Academic Program focuses specifically on helping students develop and achieve Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and enter institutions of higher education in the United States (Cummins, 1979). Each of these programs, Foundations and Academic, are divided into multiple levels. These levels are labeled A, B and C. A corresponds to the level of lowest English proficiency, B to intermediate proficiency, and C to advanced proficiency in each program. Additionally, there are two preparatory levels in the ELC curriculum: Foundations Prep and General Academic Prep.

Since its inception, the ELC has dealt with the issue of creating an efficient English-speaking environment. A number of strategies have been implemented to force students to speak only English inside the ELC building. The majority of these strategies utilized punishing consequences for those students who used their native languages. These have included the following: losing the privilege to use the computer lab, being assigned to erase pencil marks from library books, and losing class participation points. At the time of the study, the program endorsed an English-only policy, which prohibited the use of students' L1s both in and outside the classroom. The reasoning behind the implementation of the policy was the idea that by being fully immersed in an English-speaking environment students would develop their language skills faster and more effectively. The policy included administrative consequences for those students who used their L1 in school—reducing class participation points, which could potentially affect a student's final grade.

At the time of this study, the ELC continued to endorse an English-only environment; however, the rule was not enforced systematically. More specifically, students were expected to use English in all areas in the building except for the gym at lunchtime, but because of the lack of clear guidelines from the school administration, teachers did not always know how to effectively motivate students to use English, and many students freely spoke their L1. As no specific instructions were provided, some teachers continued taking off points for L1 use, others reminded students to speak English, and yet others simply ignored the issue.

Participants

Jinny[5]

Jinny came to the United States from South Korea in order to improve her English and subsequently apply to an American university. My first encounter with her was in my beginning-level writing class. At the time of the interview, she was in her second semester in the program and placed in the Academic Preparation class (intermediate proficiency level). She considered the English-speaking environment in school beneficial for her primary goal to improve her English as fast as possible, so she could apply to college. In addition, the thought the policy helped her develop friendships with students from other countries, which matched her sociable personality. In fact, during the interview, Jinny described herself in the following terms: "I have kind of a bright personality. I just want to do something fun, happy, that's why I always do something with other people."

Adriana

Adriana, a female student from Brazil, was enrolled in the first level of the academic track (low advanced proficiency level), and was her second semester in the program at the time of the study. She was preparing for the GRE in order to apply to a graduate program, so the very beginning of the first semester she set a firm goal to follow the policy and speak English with other Brazilian students. However, Adriana soon realized that they were not going to accommodate her goals and refused to speak English with her; moreover, they made jokes about her English mistakes. Their unwelcoming behavior made Adriana feel embarrassed and confused. To make her stress even worse, each time she spoke Portuguese

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[5] Pseudonyms are used for both students whose experiences are described in this paper.

with other students, she felt guilty for not following the school policy. She also realized that using much Portuguese was hindering her English-learning goals. As a result, Adriana decided to avoid interaction with other Portuguese speakers in school.

Data Collection

The research aim of this study is exploratory by nature, as it attempts to provide a better understanding of learners' socialization experiences in a language program that imposed the English-Only policy. In order to collect descriptive data revealing participants' experiences and opinions, the study was conducted within a qualitative framework. Indeed, numbers and statistical analysis cannot reveal what is on learners' minds, neither can they let their voices to be heard. Therefore, qualitative methods seemed to best fit the purpose of this study.

The data for both cases analyzed in this study were collected through informal observations of both participants' behavior and formal interviews with them. The combination of these methods was employed in order to gather rich and descriptive data and ensure triangulation. According to Patton (1990), by utilizing multiple instruments of data collection, the researcher "can build on the strengths of each type of data collection by minimizing the weaknesses of any single approach" (p. 245). Some of the collected data might be repetitive, but it speaks to the trustworthiness of the data and the integrity of the findings discovered in this research (Evans, 2001).

Both participants were students of mine (although in different classes), which allowed me to observe their behavior in the classroom: participation and interaction with their classmates. My informal observations were further elaborated on by formal interviews. These interviews were conducted to examine their attitudes toward the English-only environment as well as let Jinny and Adriana share their socialization experiences in the program. Both interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded. Although the same protocol was used, each interview was unique in terms of its structure and follow-up questions asked to each participant. In addition to the recordings, I also took notes during the interviews that reflected some of my impressions and thoughts that emerged in the discussions.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis for the study was guided by the model described by Marshall and Rossman (1995): organizing the data, generating categories, themes, and patterns, testing emergent hypotheses, searching for alternative explanations, and writing the report. My informal observations generated several categories, which were further divided into specific themes and patterns. The interviews were transcribed as accurately as possible. In order "to protect the confidentiality of the subject[s]" (Kvale, 1996, p. 172), the names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms. When analyzing the interview transcripts, new coding categories were identified, and the initial categories were further refined. Thus, by implementing both deductive and inductive approaches, several categories were modified (i.e., combined, specified), and new categories were added. After all coding categories were identified, the segments from the interviews pertaining to these categories were sorted out and analyzed based on the research aim of the study.

Findings

The data showed that the learning environment in the IEP played a crucial role in the participants' socialization as well as their perception of their language development. Both participants were determined to follow the English-only policy and interact with all students in the target language, including those of the same L1 background. As the interviews demonstrated, both participants had a strong sense of responsibility, so they decided to adhere to the English-only rule, also because they committed to do so (when enrolling at the ELC, students have to sign an agreement stating that they will speak only English in the school building). The outcomes of this decision, however, were different. Both cases are described below.

Impact on Socialization

From the very beginning of her study in the program, Jinny decided to avoid interaction with Korean students not only because she was determined to follow the English-only policy, but also because she believed that speaking Korean would slow down her L2 learning. She admitted, however, that her behavior was not typical for Koreans, who usually grouped together and spoke Korean, and she even called herself "a weird Korean." Jinny was aware of the fact that other Korean students in school did not approve of her behavior, that is, her interacting mostly with students from other countries rather than developing friendships with Koreans. This, however, did not seem to sadden or bother her; she wanted to enrich her knowledge about other cultures and enjoy her experience in the multicultural environment of the school. She explained, "It's not a big deal not to have many Korean friends. Even if I don't have Korean friends, I have other friends!" Indeed, despite her limited interaction with other Korean students, Jinny developed friendships with students from other countries. By obeying the language policy and increasing her networks, Jinny was able to participate in various activities with other students, such as cooking ethnic food, going to a salsa club, and playing board games.

Adriana, on the other hand, had a less successful socialization experience. Similar to Jinny, she intended to follow the policy and use English in all her interactions in school, including students from Brazil. As mentioned earlier, she enrolled in the program to prepare for the GRE, so she believed that the policy would help her achieve her goals, as she would speak English as much as possible. Adriana tried to do it with other Portuguese speakers in school; however, every time she approached Brazilian students in English, they replied in Portuguese. Adriana admitted, with regret in her voice, "I tried a couple of weeks, and then I gave up." She explained that it was not worthwhile for her to continue speaking in Portuguese with other Brazilians due to the difficulty that such type of communication produced: "They were speaking Portuguese, and I had to think in English and translate. Oh, I was very confused!" Being accepted to "the social circle" of her Brazilian peers meant playing by their rules, that is, speaking Portuguese. The choice was not easy to make because the situation placed two important factors—her language-learning goals and the cultural value of friendships with people from the same country—at odds with one another. Adriana chose not to assimilate with the group of Brazilian students. However, different from Jinny's experience, the lack of socializing with students from the same L1 background did not

increase Adriana's interaction with other students in the program. To the contrary, because Brazilian students resisted to accommodate Adriana's goal to speak English and made jokes about her attempts to use English and her mistakes, Adriana isolated herself from the rest of the students in the program.

As these experiences showed, learners are active agents in their language learning experiences. They do not passively reproduce or internalize the sociolinguistic routines and cultural practices of the community, but, instead, they negotiate their identities and adapt actively and thoughtfully. Their willingness to assimilate with the members of the community and their desire to understand the beliefs, practices, and values accepted in the community determine the degree of "language use, acquisition, and, ultimately, socialization" (Vickers 2007, p. 637). It should be noted, however, that learners may also exercise their agency by choosing *not* to socialize into the target community and resist developing the behavior typical for the more experienced members.

Students' Perception of Their Language Development

Jinny believed that she was able to develop better linguistic competence through her integration into the social community of the school. As mentioned earlier, she was determined to follow the English-only policy, which gave her the opportunity to developed friendships with students from other countries, and she soon noticed that she became more confident in using English. As she put it, "To me, I always speak English, so I improved a lot, faster than other people." It should be noted, however, that by deciding to follow the English-only policy Jinny had to give up her relationships with other Korean students in the program, for whom having harmony with the group was more important than being "an English-learning machine" (Park, 1998, p. 67). However, while she did not socialize to the Korean-speaking community in school, she also did not seem to make an attempt to become a legitimate member of this community. Instead, from day one, she decided to become friends with students from other countries. She explained: "I don't care! I came here to improve my English, not Korean! My Korean is pretty good, I don't have to practice it!"

Adriana, on the other hand, had a less successful experience. Her socialization into the larger school community was strongly affected by the unwelcoming behavior of her Portuguese-speaking peers. And this, from Adriana's perspective, deteriorated her language development. She said, "Usually when the classes are over, I just go to the SASC (Self Access Study Center) and read or do my homework." This isolation resulted in her relatively slow progress in English. With great emotion she expressed her disappointment in herself: "I know if I only spoke English all these seven months here [in school], my English would have improved more. I know this and I feel bad! I feel bad because I should have improved my English!"

Discussion

The experiences of both participants in this study were fundamentally different. Jinny was not included in the Korean-speaking circle, but her socialization into the larger school environment was successful. She was able to fulfill the expectations of the school administration and teachers—to use English while in the school building, which helped her

improve her English skills through various interactions with other students. As evidenced from Adriana's experience, her L1-speaking peers in school were not accommodating and supportive either, and similar to Jinny, Adriana chose not to socialize into their group in order to follow the policy and achieve her language goals. However, because of the fear of making mistakes resulted from her negative experiences with Brazilian peers, Adriana avoided interacting with other students in school. In other words, the negative experience with the members of one community (Portuguese-speaking peers) had a harmful impact on the effectiveness of Adriana's assimilation with the members of other community (other learners in the program).

Thus, the environment had a different impact on the participants' socialization processes. In Jinny's socialization experience, the context of the school was accommodating, as all she wanted was to gain a multicultural experience. Because she succeeded in this goal and because the other context—the Korean-speaking context—was not desirable for her, her socialization success was not saddened by the fact that she never became close friends with any of the Korean students in school.   For Adriana, the multicultural school environment could have been as effective as it was for Jinny if she did not have a negative experience with other Portuguese-speaking students, which only exacerbated her lack of confidence. The community of Brazilian students, in which Adriana hoped to find support, turned out to be unwelcoming and resisting and caused Adriana's marginal position in the larger community of the school.

As seen from these examples, learners' success in socialization as well as their perception of language development can be influenced by contextual factors. Therefore, second language acquisition research must seriously consider the context, including the policies of the institutions, in which learning takes place. As Morita (2004) noticed, "A decontextualized account—for instance, a survey research that inquires about the classroom behavior of a certain group of learners (e.g., Japanese students, female students, etc.) without considering actual classroom contexts—would not reveal the situated nature of participation" (p. 596). Thus, when studying learners' language development in a classroom setting, the researcher must be aware of the "socially constructed nature of classroom interaction" (Morita, 2004, p. 598).

Furthermore, learning environments may also activate students' previous experiences—both social and academic—that will affect their socialization. Unfortunately, mainstream research on second language acquisition tends to ignore the fact that when entering a new community learners "already possess a repertoire of linguistic, discursive, and cultural traditions, community affiliations, and perspectives" (Duff and Kobayashi, 2010, p. 79). Therefore, their willingness to integrate into the local social environment or their resistance to do so may be determined to some extent by their prior experience.

Although the study was conducted in a particular language-learning institution, the results can be applicable to other teaching and learning environments. The main outcome that program administrators should keep in mind is that language policies implemented in their institutions have potential consequences for learners' social and academic experiences. Surely, program administrators who implement English-only policies may have the learners'

best interest in mind. But as the results of this study demonstrated, these policies could undermine rather than maximize students' language development for some learners.

Despite the informative results, the study is not without its limitations. First, while the study implemented informal observations of participants' behavior in the classroom, more formal and systematic observations—both in-class and outside the classroom—would have provided additional data helping to glean a further understanding of participants' socializing experiences in this learning institution. In other words, I only had a chance to observe my participants' interaction with their peers in class, but I could have certainly obtained more helpful data if I had observed their behavior between the classes, during lunchtime, in the computer lab and SASC, and when the classes were over. Second, as socialization is a complex and oftentimes not a linear and straightforward process, one semester of investigation might have not been enough for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

To conclude, second language learning is inseparable from its social environment, whether it is a natural setting or an academic context. In this environment, "novices learn to function competently with members of a society by organizing and reorganizing sociocultural information that is conveyed through the form and content of the actions of others" (Matsumura, 2001, p. 636). Therefore, research on second language acquisition should acknowledge "an interactional cultural milieu through which language [learning] is accomplished" (Poole, 1992, p. 610), so we can better understand how to provide "opportunities for meaningful enculturation" (Duff, 2010b, p. 181), and so we can "open up wonderful new possibilities" that will positively "transform participants and their interlocutors" as well as "society and mainstream practices themselves, especially in highly heterogeneous communities" (Duff, 2003, p. 11).

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