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How Does She Learn English? A Case of a Successful Blind Language Learner

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Abstract

This study reports on a case study of a blind EFL learner. The purpose of the study was to explore a detailed situated data to examine to what extent it is feasible to be a successful language learner despite being visually impaired and lacking some learning resources. Interview data and the narratives of this EFL learner have revealed that her success was mainly based on her agentic interaction with the environment and learning context, her high motivation and strategic behavior, and her sustained efforts. The findings provide further insight into the role of the learner in exerting control over contextual resources that frame learning and on how different factors interact with each other in the language learning process in the construction of learner identity and the strategies used by learners.

Keywords: agency; contextual resources; identity, learning resources; learning context; strategic behavior

Introduction

Cognitive science has long been interested in understanding the individual differences in cognition and how it affects language learning in individuals. It views the human mind as an active information processor in that different factors (e.g., age, sex, motivation, anxiety, language aptitude, learning strategies) explain different levels of learning. The study of cognitive development prompted by this view led to research, which attempted to find the learning strategies mostly used by language learners. As a result, learner strategies in

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language learning has been an application of insights derived from this trend in research into instruction in language with the hope of accelerating and improving language learning. In addition, the research on learner strategies resulted in research initiated by Rubin (1975) and Niaman, Frohich, Stern, and Todesco (1975), with the goal of documenting the strategies of good and successful language learners. Studies on good language learners have revealed that successful language learners make use of some learning strategies that facilitate their learning process (Takeuchi, 2003). These learners sustain their learning with high motivation and a strong belief in what works in learning (Gao, 2006; Yang, 1999; Wenden, 1998, 2002). However, some researchers believe that a given learning

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strategy is neither good nor bad (i.e., it is neutral) until it is considered in the context of its use (Ehrtman, Leaver, and Oxford (2003).

The second trend in L2 acquisition research has been influenced by sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 1997; Lantolf and Beckett, 2009). Since then, researchers interested in language acquisition have begun to situate their investigations within the sociocultural theory (e.g., Van Lier, 1996; Lantolf, 1997; Nassaji& Swain, 2000). One position taken by sociocultural theory is that higher-order cognitive functions are mediated (Lantolf, 2000). This highlights the importance of context in shaping language learning. Three types of contextual resources that mediate language learning have been identified: discursive resources, material resources, and social resources (discursive resources are contextual learning discourses referring to the values, attitudes, and beliefs attached to learning a foreign language) (Gao, 2010). The availability and accessibility of these resources aid learners in adopting a different route in the learning process compared to the time when these resources are not available or accessible and, as a result, leads to different cultural practices in particular situations in which learning occurs (Gao, 2010). In keeping with this socially situated line of SLA research, this gives equal importance to both individual learners and the context of learning. In this view, learning is seen as a function of an interaction between a person and the social environment (Carter and Sealey, 2000; Dornyei, 2009). The importance of this view is that it considers humans as agents capable of influencing their context, rather than just reacting to it (Mercer, 2011). As Carter and Sealey (2000) assert, too much emphasis on structures denies actors as powerful agents capable of acting, and too much emphasis on agency ignores the constraints acting on us. In addition, Norton and Toohey (2001) discuss

the limitations of the previous studies on good language learners in that the studies have focused on mental processes of learners in interaction with the input and linguistic forms and have not considered the social context of learners and their social practices in the contexts in which they learn a language. Therefore, this view allows researchers to regard learners' strategy use, motivational patterns, language learning beliefs, and other variables as the result of continual interaction between learner agency and context of learning. Given this situated and dynamic approach to learning (e.g., Lave and Wenger, 1991), as opposed to the individualistic and static concept of learning, it is believed that interaction between context and individual learner shapes all aspects of learning. Therefore, learning has been seen as a process that takes place not simply in an individual, but in which contextual conditions (e.g., material and social resources) interact with learner agency, which shapes the kind of beliefs, motivations, and strategies that learners adopt for their language learning (Palfreyman, 2006). In this point of view, the interplay between the self-reflective agent and the fluid and complex web of social relations and contextual conditions lead to the construction of learner identity, learner autonomy, and learner's strategic behavior (Gao,2010; Ushioda, 2007). In the process, individual learners make an attempt to achieve an 'ideal self', which motivates them to sustain their effort to master higher levels of linguistic competence (Ushioda and Dornye 2009).

Thus, as a result of these developments in SLA and the growing body of research on language learners' individuality, this study, by taking a case study approach, tries to explore how individual learners by exerting their agency can interact with the context in which they learn a language.

Method

In the process of language learning, some learners with various contextual constraints and some physical disabilities have achieved remarkable success in learning a foreign language (e.g., Gao, 2010). This qualitative case study focused on a blind EFL learner who, despite her physical disability and lack of some material resources, has made real success in achieving her aims in learning the English language. Her strategic interaction with the context of learning resulted in more opportunities for learning and making use of social and interactional resources available for her. This strategic effort compensated for numerous learning constraints that she has encountered during the learning process. A case study research approach taken by this study provides a more in-depth understanding of how different factors interact with each other in language learning, leading to rich, personal, and contextualized data (Duff, 2008; Mercer, 2011).

Research questions:

1. What are Fariba's problems in learning English?
2. How does she exert her agency in dealing with her problems and classroom interactions?
3. What are her learning beliefs, motivational patterns, and learning strategies in learning English?

The participant

Fariba (pseudonym), the case study participant, is a blind Iranian female EFL learner. She started learning English at school. The English books of school are written in a Brail form for blind learners, but she herself has learned how to read and write a kind of 'short writing' for English, which is specifically designed for blind language learners. After finishing school education, because she was so interested in learning the English language, she decided to participate in English classes held in the English language institute. In that English institute, she has attended English classes where her classmates were sighted people. Also, she did not have any access to the Brail form of the English books taught at that school. She has learned English just by listening to the tapes or CDs of the course books and attending English classes in order to be able to have interaction with other students and the teacher. Interestingly, she has become a top student each term, and now she is in an advanced level participating in TOEFL courses at that English institute.

Procedure

Fariba has been a top student in a language institute during the years of her study. She was a student of one of the researchers for just one term. When she was asked to participate in this case study, she wholeheartedly agreed to provide any information regarding the process of her learning English. She asked the researcher to conduct interviews at her home because of her physical disability to be present in other places, and in this way, she felt more at ease. A series of 12 in-depth informal interviews in Persian was conducted over a seven-month period and was supplemented by four written narratives by the case study participant. Each interview was conducted weekly and lasted between 50-70 minutes. Before and after the interviews, the researchers had informal contacts with her.

Analysis

All of the interviews were fully transcribed, and the analysis was done line by line. The data were organized in a manner to produce patterns and categories which could be put together in common themes, which occurred

in the data (Erikson, 2004). The data were categorized according to Fariba's problems in learning English, language learning beliefs, motivational patterns, and strategic learning behavior. Then, the interpretation was made on the basis of the interplay between contextual and learning conditions and Fariba's agency in managing her learning process.

Results and Discussion

The most prominent factor emerging from the data was the numerous problems and difficulties (mainly because she is blind) that Fariba has encountered in her language learning process. However, her high motivation in learning English led her to use effective strategies and techniques to overcome the contextual constraints and her physical disability in language learning.

Fariba's problems

Fariba's main problem in learning English was the lack of access to English coursebooks taught in a language school. She was studying English with learners who were not visually impaired, and her material resources were just the CDs accompanied by the course books and the teachers' voice in the classroom. She noted:

> *"Because I didn't have a book I relied on listening. I had to listen in order to learn and because of that my listening was very good compared to others in the class…. If I had a book in a Brail form, I would not have experienced any problem…".*

Related to this problem was the reading lessons taught in the classroom, she added:

> *"Reading was so challenging for me because most of the students in the class didn't have a good pronunciation and when they were reading the text, they mispronounced some of the words*

and in some cases the meaning became different… I didn't have the texts and they didn't read it in a good way… I even didn't have a dictionary to check the words…".

At the time of exams, the same problem was present for her, as Fariba was badgering:

> *"In exams, most of the time I had a problem. If the person reading the questions or reading texts for me had a good pronunciation, I could answer the questions, if not I had to ask for the spelling of the mispronounced words and sometimes s/he couldn't even spell the correct form of the alphabet… for example instead of 'a' s/he said 'e' or 'I'. At that situation I preferred not to continue and ignore the reading and writing parts of the exam…".*

After school, she decided to learn English at English school, but because her classmates were not blind learners, she was rather an odd member of the classroom, and socializing with them was difficult for her:

> *"The beginning was difficult both for me and for other learners because among them was someone whose writing was with Brail… and this made a lot of noise in the class…. At that time, I didn't have any equipment to record the voice of the teacher so I had to write down any word coming out of the teacher's mouth…"*

Since listening was the only resource available for her, she had a problem in the spelling of the new words:

> *"I could hear the words, but didn't know how to write them…".*

It is immediately apparent just from a few statements quoted from Fariba's statements that she has learned English in a context where material resources were scarce, and her visual impairment doubled the difficulty of learning a foreign language. In this situation,

she did not give up and sustained her learning efforts since, as she stated, she loved the English language.

Learning strategies

A more general definition of strategy given by Griffith (2008, p:) is "Activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning". According to him, the activities can be mental, like visualizing relationships, or physical, like writing notes. The analysis of data related to strategies that Fariba used in her learning English revealed that most of the strategies were similar to the strategies used by good or successful language learners (e.g., Rubin, 1975; Niaman et al., 1975; Takeuchi, 2003). Fariba can be considered as a good and successful language learner since she has been a top student each term in the language institute. However, some of the strategies she used differed from the strategies reported to be used by good language learners, and this can be accounted for by the fact that Fariba's context of learning differed from other learners in that she could not see the material taught to her. As Gao (2010) discusses, language learners' strategy use is the result of continual interaction between the learner agency and the context of learning.

Like good language learners, her metacognitive strategies consisted of: maximizing opportunities to use the language, practicing regularly, learning intensively, having a concrete need/plan for learning, attention to form and meaning, and so on. She also used strategies related to a specific skill area (listening, speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary):

> "In speaking and writing activities I preferred to use the words I didn't know. I always asked my teachers the equivalent form of Persian words in English to use in my writing or speaking

> instead of using the words I knew. In this way, I could learn 10 or 20 new words each session…".

To practice English at home individually, she is used to talking to herself. This self-talk serves to help her to understand her areas of difficulty and maintain perspective on language learning:

> "I always talk to myself in English… when I want to do something or before talking to someone I try to talk in my mind in English before talking in Persian by other family members… and if I don't know a word in English, I write it down and then ask my friends or teachers…. I also repeat the words which I think I will forget….".

The use of rehearsal as a cognitive tool helped her to manage some of her learning difficulties. In addition, she used to be an active participant in her classes, and she wanted to come to the class prepared:

> "Because I didn't have a book, for reviewing the lessons I used to go earlier to the English school and asked my friends to read the parts that were not included in the CD of the book… when they were reading I tried to memorize and keep them in my mind…".

Since the classroom was one of the main resources for learning English, she made an attempt to use each and every opportunity to learn English:

> " In class I used every opportunity to ask my questions from the teacher. Sometimes in order to know how synonym words are used in different ways in English I intentionally used incorrectly in a sentence to get help from the teacher…. In pair works I tried to speak and work as much as possible and if my partner was lazy, I made her to speak….".

As she noted, for vocabulary learning, she used a mental strategy which was so effective for her in learning them:

>*"I memorize the words with their spelling form…my mind is like a paper and I write the spelling of the new words on it…. Then I write the meaning in front of it. If there is any synonym or antonym for that word, I write it in front of it in my mind… If I just hear the new word but I don' know the spelling I forget it soon…"*

This unique strategy might be the result of not having access to any dictionary, which could help her to overcome her problem in learning new words. Evidently, Faribas' strategy use would be regarded as an interplay between her agency and the context of her learning.

Fariba's sense of agency and ideal self

As Bown (2009) asserted, effective self-regulatory learners, are aware of themselves as active agents and are capable of exerting their agency by using different strategies to shape and construct their learning experience. A language learner who believes in his/her role in language learning development will have a strong impact on his/her agency (Mercer, 2011). Despite her learning difficulties, Fariba believes that this is 'she' who can exert influence on what goes around her:

>*"I think I myself should start to do something. If I say I'm blind and I have lots of problems… I can't do what I want… I wanted to learn English so I tried to learn it… if I WANT my family want as well and help me…".*

According to Bandura, (1995) 'self-efficacy' is an individual's beliefs about their capabilities to produce the desired outcome, and these beliefs lead to human agency (Bandura, 2001). Unless individuals believe in

their capabilities, they cannot go on in the face of difficulties (Bown, 2009).

>*"I don't really believe in aptitude or something like that. I think If somebody want, he/she can do it. What is important is he/she. I'm like that person… I try to struggle with difficulties… the more you try the more you get…".*

It appears that her accounts of learning efforts emerge from the interaction between her agency and contextual conditions (Gao, 2010). In addition, becoming an 'ideal-self' shapes her motivation in sustaining her efforts in language learning (Ushioda and Dornyie, 2009). This L2 self is evident from her narratives:

>*"Although the quality of my story tapes was not good, I tried to memorize the stories and go to the class prepared… I didn't like others to consider me as an incompetent learner…"*

>*"Now I'm an advanced EFL learner but I don't want to stop…I want to continue learning English in university…"*

At the end of her high school education, she got the top average among all the high school students of Zanjan (the city where she lives). She also was a top student each term in English institute:

>*"When I start to do something, I try to be perfect and do my best…In speaking and writing classes I tried to be correct in terms of pronunciation and grammar…Even in running classes, I become the first…"*

This sense of ideal self shaped and reshaped her motivation and beliefs in the process of language learning.

3.4. Motivation to learn and Language learning beliefs

Motivation is defined as "what moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, and to persist in action" (Ushioda,

2008, p:19). In the realm of education and language learning, cognitive theories of learner motivation characterize extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Research in this area suggests that intrinsic motivation leads to a more effective kind of learning. As Ushioda (2008) mentioned, good language learners are those who try to develop strategies to self-regulate their motivation. The capacity of a learner in developing motivational self-regulation depends on the degree to which the learner considers him/herself as an agent capable of constructing the thoughts, beliefs, goals, and expectations that shape his/her motivation (McCombs, 1994). This sense of agency helps learners to control their thoughts and motivation which leads to better performance and further effort. In this view, learner-regulated (rather than teacher-regulated) motivation should be driven by learners' own personal needs, goals and interests leading learners to make informed choices and to establish goals in the process of their learning. In this manner, they feel more responsibility for their own learning (Ushioda, 1996). The emerging data from the narratives and interviews about Faribas' motivational patterns revealed that her motivation emanated from herself:

> *"I love English language and this motivates me to learn it… I don't know why I love this language…maybe it's something instinct… I really like to learn it and speak in English like my native language… I just like to learn English language; I don't know why… it makes a lot of difference … I know English and it helps me to make sense of things written or spoken in this language…"*

A shift of focus from cognitive accounts in language learning to social processes resulted in the growth of interest in the social dimension of motivation. Vygotskian sociocultural theory identifies this socially constructed nature of motivation, in that higher-order cognitive functions are internalized from social interaction with more competent others (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, current insights emphasize the importance of motivation as something coming from within the learner as the main component in learning and consider social participation and interaction as factors that promote motivation. This issue is evident from Fariba's statements about her English learning in language institute compared to Ziba's, her own sister (who is also blind):

> *"In case of Ziba, her classmates didn't help her… she also didn't try to rightly socialize with them and get the needed help from them …even though she really wanted to learn English she gave up and didn't continue…"*

As Fariba stated repeatedly, she had the same problem, and it was so difficult and challenging for her to socialize with other learners, but she tried to use some strategies to deal with the problem:

> *" Motivation is the first condition…it was so difficult for me too but I tried to make friends with them and ask them to help me in any way they could…"*

However, the same friendly condition was not present for her in one of her classes at high school level:

> *"In the first year of high school education, our classmates (who were not blind) made complaints about our way of writing with …………..that made noise in the class and asked the principal to send us to other school…this really frustrated and disappointed us…"*

It is apparent that motivation is something, which is socially distributed and created within cultural systems of activities involving the mediation of others (Ruedo and Moll, 1994). As Ushioda (2008, p. 25) emphasizes,

" …good language learning is never simply in the hands of the motivated learner since much will depend on the surrounding social practices. Good language learning and motivation are in this sense socially constructed or constrained, rather than simply influenced, positively or negatively, by the social context".

Language learning beliefs can emerge from the conception of learners about what language is and how it can be learned (Benson and Lor, 1999), or it can emerge from learners' beliefs in their ability in language learning, which is related to particular context in which they are learning (Tanaka, 2004). As Rubin (1975) indicates, the beliefs of learners are important because learners hold their beliefs to be true, and these beliefs then guide how they interpret their experiences and their behavior. These beliefs shape the way learners approach learning task and affect both the process and the product of learning in that learners employ different strategies in the process of learning language, so, Fariba believes:

> *"I think vocabulary is the most important component of the language. I tried to expand my knowledge of English vocabulary in any possible way… I know a lot of English words… everyone calls me LONGWOMAN…"*

She did not have any access to written (Brail) English materials, and her main resource for study was listening materials:

> *"Language learning is not just listening. Speaking and writing are also important… I myself learned how to write things in English (i.e., the short writing of blind people in English) …"*

These statements reveal that Fariba's beliefs are constructed in her everyday practices and shaped according to the social

contexts available for learning and using the language.

Social resources

According to Benson (2001, cited in Palfreyman, 2006), resources in the area of language education mostly refer to material resources such as dictionaries, grammar books, equipments, and etc. In addition, social resources in learning include people around the learner like teachers, classmates, friends, family members, and so on. These social resources are accessible through social network, which is a system of relationship between individuals that interact with each other (Palfreyman, 2006). As stated by Gaith et al. (2007) classroom climate is a kind of social climate and refers to teaching style, teacher-student relationships, and cooperation in the classroom. This social climate plays a crucial role in learners' linguistic and psychological achievement, which is so important in the context of learning a foreign language.

To overcome her problem with access to material resources, Fariba made an extra effort to utilize social resources around her. In the beginning, it was so difficult for her to socialize with her classmates. However, she could successfully manage to foster her relationship with teachers and other learners within a social network in order to gain support from them for her language learning:

> *"It was the first day of the term. Nobody knew me, so I put my ------------on the desk to let others know I have a problem… sometimes I introduced myself to my new classmates and ask them to help me during the term if it was possible for them…"*

In one of her narratives, Fariba described how she made a friend with a girl who made fun of her and disturbed Fariba in English class

by making a lot of noise. However, Fariba could handle the situation successfully:

> *"I called Hasti (the girl who made fun of me) and showed her how I write with------------I told her: this is like your pen. I write in this way… maybe you come to English class for fun but I come here with difficulty… why don't YOU help me and sit beside me … I learn by listening to the teacher. If you make a lot of noise, I cannot learn anything…"*

It took half of the term for her to make friends with Hasti and from then on, Hasti helped her a lot in the class.

Fariba knew that the classroom was her main resource for learning; therefore, she made full use of the opportunity:

> *"I didn't have a book…I came to English class earlier and left the class late so I had time to ask my friends to help me with the course materials… At the time of the class I didn't think about anything…I concentrated fully on what teacher said…I attended to each and every word uttered by the teacher…"*

As Norton and Toohey (2001) discuss, good language learners, are capable of exercising their agency in finding more opportunities to participate in social practices in the context they learn a language. The practices of Fariba aided her to participate more actively in the classroom. In pair work activities, she tried to choose an active partner to provide a better learning opportunity. In addition, she believed in the leading and supporting role of the teacher in the classroom. Teachers were the main source of information for her, and she tried to solve her English problems by asking questions from the teachers. In addition, for the course books to which she did not have any access, she asked her friends to read the book for her by recording their voices.

According to Palfreyman (2006) social networks can have a converse effect in that learners' developing English skills represent a potential learning resource for other learners, and as a result, learners' identity changes in their community. Fariba developed her skills in the English language in a way that she acted as a source for other learners:

> *"In pair works, most of my classmates wanted to be my partner because I worked hard with them…"*

Among her relatives, she is the only competent English learner who can help other members in improving their English:

> *"At the time of exams our home become full of students who want to ask their English questions and problems from me… they ask me to teach them their school book…they consider me as a good English teacher…"*

Fariba's increased English proficiency contributed to her prestige and role-fulfillment within and beyond the home, and this improved her status in her family and the community (Palfreyman, 2006).

Conclusion

It appears from this study that Fariba, as a blind language learner, has faced many difficulties in the language learning process and achieved success in learning a foreign language. While she has lived in a context with limited learning resources, her strong will and constant effort played a crucial role in her success. Her belief in her capabilities and her sense of agency increased her incentive to act decisively and make the most efficient use of available resources. This sense of agency helped her to regulate her motivation, which emanated from herself. Utilizing social resources as the main resource in learning, she has created experiences, which provided her with input and interaction necessary for language learning.

Most of the strategies used by Fariba were similar to strategies used by good language

learners. Some of the strategies she used were different from successful language learners. The difference could be explained with regard to the interaction with environmental and temporal factors or conditions that Fariba has encountered in the learning process (Dornyei, 2009). Therefore, it is possible to examine strategic learning both in terms of learners' self-regulation in their learning process (a model proposed by Dornyei, 2005) and in terms of cognitive and behavioral strategies they employ, since learners use environmental control strategies for the purpose of situational and emotional control (Rose, 2012).

The results of this study underscore the significance of social support. Faribas' efforts to regulate her learning were enhanced by the support of other learners and teachers. This emphasizes the importance of the classroom as an instructional climate, which impacts students learning outcomes, in that learners' capacity to regulate their learning could be mediated through processes of social-interactive support and social regulation (Bown,2009). Her efforts in creating a social network, which supported her language learning, provide insights on how such social networks play an important role for learners in the language learning process and how teachers' support and attention to individual learners would generate motivation and encouragement in language learners.

The findings of the present study could also be interpreted in the light of chaos/complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008) in which language learning is characterized as a non-linear, dynamic, and complex process that many factors interact with each other. In this system, there is no cause and effect relationship, and instead of separating the individual variables involved, this theory acknowledges the dynamic complexity that

exists in learning a foreign language. Complexity theory also recognizes context as an essential feature in which the individual and the context of learning are interconnected. In her study, Mercer (2011) attempted to provide a full understanding of the nature of language learner agency by considering it as a complex dynamic system. This study revealed that learners' agency is not a single, monolithic factor but is a complex system consisting a number of constituent components, each of which can be considered as a dynamic complex system. This highlights the importance of considering a combination of factors that lead to success in language learning.

Cotterall (2008, p. 119) rightly asserted that:

If we accept that our learners will inevitably be diverse and that the contexts in which they learn and use the language will exert a powerful influence, then we must also accept that it is futile to try and develop a teaching approach which will suit all learners, or indeed to promote a unique profile of *the* good language learner. We need to pay more attention to individual learners and their unique motivations, experiences, and stories.

Fariba's stories provide an impressive example for those learners who consider language learning as an unachievable arena. Studies like this one will continue to expand teachers' and researchers' understanding of how second language learners exercise their agency to interact with their environment to develop language learning strategies, motivations, and beliefs based on their unique context.

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