

## English Second Language learning from childhood to Adolescence: a narrative case study of an international Saudi student in the United State

Hatim Abdulhadi Masoudi<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

*Language is essential because it enables humans to express their needs and motivations to one another. It's crucial to a child's development since it's the means by which they learn to communicate with others and enrich themselves intellectually. The purpose of this second language narrative study is to discover individually a second language learner's experience in terms of learning or acquiring the second language. This qualitative analysis was developed into twenty interview questions, which encompassed a participant's preferred learning styles and methods. The findings of the study realized that the way the participant learned a second language at an early age depended entirely on particular methods which may delay language learning progress. In addition, the study recommended, it is crucial to address the issue of avoiding first language interference. The results of the study furthermore brought attention to the internal and external factors that can determine the success level in the acquisition of the language.*

### **Introduction**

Language is an important part of life since it helps people tell each other what they want and why. In other words, language is a way for people to contact each other, it helps them talk to and express their feelings and desires. Language is an important part of a child's life as they connect with each other, share experiences, and get smarter through language, especially as they learn and improve their language skills and knowledge (Chanifa et al., 2020).

There is no doubt that learning any language go through different phases and mechanisms. There is a tremendous difference between the first and second language in terms of acquiring and learning them. The first language for example is obtained by going through various stages such as played speech sounds, phoneme constructions,

---

<sup>1</sup> Taibah University, hmasoudi@taibahu.edu.sa

vocabulary spur, and language production stage (Morse and Cangelosi, 2017).

Several professionals maintain that youngsters can acquire the linguistic competence of a native speaker if they start studying the language before the age of ten. That's why kids need to start learning a second language as soon as possible; it increases their chances of becoming fluent (McLaughlin, 2013). Yet, studying a language different from one's native tongue can help one become a better communicator in all aspects of life. Learning a new language can open doors to greater employment and cultural understanding. Adolescence is seen as a particularly malleable and difficult age in the development of social identity and conception of self, making it even more potentially problematic for multilingual and multiethnic English learners. This is despite the benefits of knowing a foreign language in today's society, such as increasing economic competitiveness on the external surface, improving global communications, and maintaining and managing the political and security interests of a country (Ghasemi and Hashemi, 2011; Thi-Huyen, Xuan-Lam, & Thanh Tu, 2021).

On the other hand, the second language runs through several junctures such as the receptive "silent period", early production, speech emergence, intermediate language proficiency stage, and advanced language proficiency stage (Yang, 2008; Creapeau & Hansen, 2022). That contrast in learning and acquiring L1 and L2 makes obvious differences in learners' outcome performance.

Second language learners sometimes struggle and find it challenging in learning the language although they spend too much time and effort learning their target language. This difficulty leads learners to look for a suitable approach which helps them master their second language. Several research has been conducted in the second language acquisition field to investigate an appropriate method and path for people to master and learn their second language.

Narrative research is one of those studies as it examines learners' experience in dealing with a second/ foreign language. Such a study seems to be uncommon in the Arabic community since there is a lack of sufficient related literature. Thus, the important question here is, what is a narrative study and what is the reason behind conducting a narrative study in the second language acquisition field?

As defined by Barkhuizen and Wette's (2008), in his study which mentioned that the term narrative research is simply identical to the meaning of the word (narrative) which means "stories of experience". The study furthermore defined narrative research as any systematic inquiry that emphasises people's stories. The reason for conducting narrative research as pointed out in the study by Clandini & Connelly

(1986), is that narrative research provides a reliable link in the education and the learning process as it addresses the human experience and lays the sufficient background for becoming a teacher. Based on that, narrative research actually helps people who learn and teach languages by looking deeply into how teaching and learning languages fit into their lives (Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chick, 2014). In which, it helps to contribute to second language education “Teachers” by sharing learners' success and failure experiences.

The purpose of this study is to discover individually a second language learner experience in terms of learning / acquiring the second language. The study is aimed to investigate the most important internal/external factors in determining the success and failure of the participant in learning the English language. The study moreover looks at relating the results of the interview to what has been discussed within second language acquisition theories and hypotheses.

## Methodology

### Instrument

Twenty interview questions were created by the researcher based on the purpose of the narrative study. The twenty questions were classified into different categories such as

1. General / Academic Background Information in Saudi Arabia.
2. General/ Academic Background Information in the US.
3. learning style and Strategies for improving the participant’s English Language proficiency.
4. Challenges.
5. Success and Failures.

The twenty questions were created regarding the participant’s SLA journey. The following table is shown an example of the questions that were used in the interview.

The table below provides the questions that were used in the interview.

1.	Tell me please, how did you get exposed to the English Language?
2.	From your experience, what do you remember about your SLA journey in Saudi Arabia?

3.	Can you describe the classroom atmosphere when you were learning the English language in Saudi Arabia?
4.	What was the reason for studying the language again overseas?
5.	What are the challenges that you encountered in your SLA journey?
6.	What is the difference between learning English in SA and the US?
7.	How did you practice the language outside the classroom in the US community?
8.	What strategy did you follow in order to learn the Language?
9.	What techniques did you follow in studying after classes?
10.	How many hours per day did you spend in learning the language?
11.	Did teachers or other people give you some tips in order to help you acquire the language?
12.	How did you work to improve your pronunciation?
13.	Do you like to work with your classmates during or after the class if you don't understand a text or point?
14.	What are the challenges that you encountered in your SLA journey?
15.	Do you think grammar classes were helpful to improve your English language?`
16.	Do you remember the struggles that you have when you were learning the language?
17.	What helped you to succeed in SLA?
18.	Did you work under any anxiety or stress?
19.	What kinds of errors did you usually make when you were practicing the language?
20.	Do you feel that your level of proficiency is still improving?

#### Participant's L2 Learning History

The participant was named Faisal by the researcher, and his age is 31 years old. The Participant first language is Arabic, and he comes from the western side of Saudi Arabia. The participant exposed to the English language at the age of 13 by a mandatory course at the junior high Saudi public school. He works at the Saudi military as an Information Technologist. The participant came from a country which is treated and considered English as a foreign language. The participant is currently studying at the southwest community college with a specific major; Information Technology.

#### Data Collection

The interview was conducted at Panera Bread Coffee which located on Germantown Parkway, Cordova, Tennessee, US. The meeting was held on January 19, 2020, at 7:00 pm and recorded using the iPhone recorder application. The interviewee knew that the interview would be recorded. However, the iPhone was put in place not in his sightseen in order to let him become more comfortable. One thing should be noted is that the interview was conducted in the Arabic language upon to the interviewee's request. The interviewee desired to have the freedom to express himself without any language difficulty. Finally, the interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The participant was asked a question, and a full space was given to him to talk and express his L2 learning experience.

### Results

From the data collected, twenty questions were asked, and the participant answered them briefly and comfortably. The participant's exposure to the English language was in the middle school at the age of 13 years old. He mentioned that his experience at that time was very disappointing since he spent six years learning the language without any benefit. The participant then described how the class used to look like during his study the language at that time. He said most students were not interested in studying the language as well as the atmosphere of the class was not cooperative for studying. The class was overload of students which were more than 30 students in the room. Also, the participant criticized the methods which were used during that time. He assumed that the methods were used depending totally on the memorization and repetition. He replied that the students used to depend on their teachers to learn the language. The teacher used to lead the class alone and feed the students the information and repeat the new vocabulary to them and asked them to pronounce them and memorize the meaning without any practice. He finished this part by saying I finished the six years of studying the English language with a lack of information and vocabulary.

Then the interviewee was moved to another point which was the experience of learning the language in the US. He graduated from high school, and he has been working in a job for six years. His work provided with some scholarship programs for those who completed more than five years on the job to complete their study overseas. He realized how important to join the program and complete his education in order to improve his job position. He decided to apply and travel to the US to complete his degree. Based on his experience of learning the English language in Saudi Arabia, he arrived with the fear of the English language.

In the US, he started learning the language in the classroom, but one of his teachers advice was very appreciated and valued. The teacher encouraged him to get deeper into the English language and try to surround himself with English native speakers. The teacher told him that learning a second language does not just depend on the school material; you have to study and practice the language outside the classroom. He decided to move and live with an English speaker homestay family and avoid meeting with Arabic students and friends. He surrounded himself with English speaker friends even if their first language is not English. That was the strategies and technique he did. Therefore, He used to study the language twelve hours a day either at the school or outside the classroom. The Participant also followed his teacher advice which is; as much as you listen to the language as much as you can speak faster and as much as you read as much as you can write. He used to listen to English conversation and news all the time, and he mentioned that now the most active skill he has is speaking skill. He used to apply different ways to improve his pronunciation. One of them is to communicate with native speakers and asked them to correct his pronunciation once he made an error.

In this part, the participant mentioned the challenges he had during his study the English in the US. First of all, the cultural differences especially since he came from a closed community to an open one. He was scared of communicating with native speakers for the first time since he is not familiar with their culture. Therefore, the other challenge is keeping himself away from his mother tongue language all the time to practice as much English as he can. Regarding the challenges faced, the participant claimed that he has to study the language for one year, and after that, he should do the English Proficiency test and score up to 5.5 as an overall score to start the bachelor's degree. That was one of the most difficult tasks he faced since he just arrived with almost no knowledge of the language and only had a limited time to pass the test.

One of the most important personal characteristics that let the participant succeed in his second language acquisition is the fear of

failure. He was concerned to fail and go back to the country with no degree. He did not want to show any weakness in his job. On another hand, shyness personality let the participant struggle with Language. The participant has a reticent and shy personality which affected him and kept him away from practising the language. Therefore, thinking about to achieve the IELTS/TOEFL test struggle him while learning the language. He felt that he is under stress and pressure all the time. This point affected him because he used to ask the teacher whether that lesson would help him in the English proficiency test or not. If the lesson does not relate to the test, he would ignore it and not consider it. He discovered that practice is one of the most important elements for him to acquire the language and found the English Grammar classes did not improve his language without practising the rules. Also, the transfer from the first language to the second language caused him to make many errors when he was learning the language.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this part, the participant results were compared to all theories and hypothesis in the second language acquisition field and see how these stories relate to the recent and previous research studies. That means, after discovering the participant's success and failure in learning the second language, the participant's success, and failures have been connected with the results of other studies in second language acquisition.

### **Critical Period Hypothesis**

The participant started being exposed to the language at the age of 13 years old which means that the participant passed Chomsky's theory of critical period hypothesis. In the case of Chomsky's theory, at a young age, there is a high possibility for an individual to be knowledgeable in the first or second language, but only when provided with necessary support (Chomsky, Ruybregts & Riemsdijk, 1982). In support of Chomsky's sentiments, Haladewicz-Grzelak (2008) provides that where an individual is not exposed to the language at the early stage, there is the possibility for problems in grasping the language at a later stage, which will result in grammatical errors when communicating. Nowadays, it seems that Saudi Arabian policy maker understood the importance of this period and decided to let the students exposed to the language at an early age. The students started to expose to the foreign language at the age of six.

### **Behaviourism Theory**

Based on the research findings, it is evident that the teaching process of the English Language in Saudi Arabia in the past is based on

memorization and repetition. The research findings showed that the teachers relied extensively on Grammar-Translation Method (GTM). In this method, as provided by Shawana, Iqbal and Mustaneer (2017), the students are taught grammar and the focus of the teacher is on deductive approach where memorization is a necessity. Also, Zhou and Niu (2015) study identified the GTM by assessing the difficulty in texts, especially at the early stages of learning. In a typical exercise, during the early stages of learning, students find it difficult to understand complicated English words, and the approach provides that they translate such words to their mother tongues and vice versa. With this in place, the learners are required to memorize the English words taught. It is worth noting that the aim of the research conducted is not to criticize any method or offer the opinion on the teaching method that is better than the other. However, sticking with only one teaching method would not help the learners to practice and understand the knowledge of the language quickly and efficiently.

#### Implicit vs. Explicit

The findings of the study showed that the participant realized that grammar classes were not effective, and it was doing little to improve learning English as a second language. The participant realized that studying the grammar rules in the classroom seems a forfeiture of time. So, the participant's point of view entirely agrees with Krashen's (1987) learning Acquisition Hypothesis (Schutz, R. 2005). This hypothesis stated a very important path in learning a second language. The learning path advocated in the hypothesis implies that L2 competence level will be obtained naturally as in the case of the child that has implicitly understood L1 (Latifi, Ketabi & Mohammadi 2013). Further, Krashen explores the nature of competence level that one can easily accumulate with no sense of awareness (Schutz, 2017). For example, if we asked a native speaker of an English language to judge a grammatical rule of an utterance, they would evaluate and know unconsciously whether it is correct or not. However; not all of them can explain the rules and give the reasons behind the correctness or incorrectness (Latifi, Ketabi & Mohammadi 2013).

#### Motivation

This point is very important since the participant mentioned it many times in the interview. Motivation is one of the most important factors that should learners have to start learning the language. According to Basco & Han (2016), motivation is the drive or need of the student in learning a second language and implementing strategies to sustain such urge in achieving the learning goals. Also, the participant mentioned a significant point where he noted that at the beginning of learning the language, there was no motivation offered. The English course was mandatory in his public school, and all the children were



less motivated in the classroom. From the situation in the classroom, it was evident that children need to be motivated as a way of successfully learning the language. Therefore, the participant then mentioned how the transformation happened and, he had high motivation when he moved to the US. He decided to learn the language to develop his job position, increase his salary and develop his knowledge at work. This type of motivation called Extrinsic Motivation and as defined by Legault (2016), it implies that the attainment of any given outcome is contingent to the performance within the learning institution. Moreover, the participant used both indirect and direct contacts when he was practising the language. Direct contact is when the learner contacts to the language directly such as by talking to native speakers while indirect contact when the learner contact to the language indirectly such as via media. Different from the result of Csizer & Kormos (2009), the participant found that direct interaction is more influenced to improve his behaviour motivation.

#### Strategy and technique

In the case of strategy and technique to be employed, the findings of this study suggested that there is a need for determining strategies to be used in improving English proficiency. In explaining learning strategy, Brown (2000) claimed that there is a need to implement instantaneous techniques that will be used on solving problems associated with learning English as a second language. Based on the defined learning strategy, each student is tasked with their own style and strategy in learning the language, but the teachers play an important role in determining the universal strategy to be used. The findings of the study showed that the participant developed a plan to improve his pronunciation by talking with the native English homestay family and asked them to correct his pronunciation when he makes errors. Another strategy he followed is through working with the classmates at the end of classes in what is referred to as group discussions on the issues that they do not fully understand.

#### Affective Filter Hypothesis

The study noted that anxiety was one of the most factors that negatively influenced the performance level and the learning process. The participant noted that he was always under stress due the requirements of the English Proficiency Test. It was challenging to the participant as the participant was required to score high marks at a short period. He said I would improve my English much better if did not spend much time thinking about the test. As such, it leads us to Krishan's Affective Filter Hypothesis which is implied that there are correlations between anxiety and performance. As provided by Du (2009), the test anxiety that faces the students is attributed to the

psychological condition in which an individual might experience a form of distress when sitting for examinations. This can be attributed to the fear of failure or reporting low academic performances.

#### First Language Interference

Finally, it is important to address the issue of avoiding first language interference, and the participant highlighted the internal and external factors that can determine the success level in the acquisition of the language. He mentioned that the avoid using his mother-tongue language as much as he can consider one of the most useful circumstances for him to succeed in acquiring the second language. He did not only avoid using the language verbally. However, He did not even think about his first language in order to not transfer from the first language to the second language. He found the first language interference influenced his second language negatively and many errors occurred. So, after he avoided doing that he found his English has been improved.

#### **Limitations**

In spite of the great value of this research, but it had only one participant been limited to the research. If the number of participants were higher, there would be a high opportunity for the results to be more accurate. Furthermore, taking into consideration applying an Aptitude or IQ test in further study to recognize the cognitive ability of the participants would support the researcher to overgeneralize the results.

#### **Acknowledgments:**

It was a pleasure to express all gratitude to both the Deanship of Scientific Research and the Faculty of Arts and humanities at Taibah University, Madinah, Saudi Arabia for funding and supporting the present study.

#### **Bibliography**

Barkhuizen, G., Benson, P., Chik, A. (2014). Narrative Inquiry in Language Teaching and Learning Research. New York: Routledge.

- Basco, L. & Han, S. (2016). Self-esteem, motivation, and anxiety of Korean University Students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 7, 6
- Brown, D. H. (2000). *Principles of language learning & teaching*. (4th ed.). New York: Longman.
- Chanifa, A. M., Redjeki, E. S., & Dayati, U. (2020, December). Benefits of Teaching Foreign Language for Early Childhood. In 6th International Conference on Education and Technology (ICET 2020) (pp. 112-115). Atlantis Press.
- Chomsky, N., Ruybregts, R., & Riemsdijk, H. C. (1982). Noam Chomsky on the generative enterprise: A discussion with Riny Ruybregts and Henk van Riemsdijk. Dordrecht, Holland [u.a.: Foris Publ.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (January 01, 1986). Rhythms in teaching: The narrative study of teachers' personal practical knowledge of classrooms. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2, 4, 377-387.
- Creapeau, L. J. G., & Hansen, K. E. (2022). Sandy Shores Care Center: A Long-Term Care Staffing Crisis. *International Journal of Instructional Cases*, 6. <http://www.ijicases.com/search/sandy-shores-case>
- Csizer, K & Kormos, J. 2008. *Modelling the Role of Inter-Cultural-Contact in the Motivation of learning English as a Foreign Language*. Oxford University. The United Kingdom.
- Du, X. (July 21, 2009). The Affective Filter in Second Language Teaching. *Asian Social Science*, 5, 8.)
- Ghasemi, B., & Hashemi, M. (2011). Foreign language learning during childhood. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 28, 872-876.
- Haladewicz-Grzelak, M. (January 01, 2008). An Epistemological Study of Chomsky's Transformational Grammar. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 38, 2, 211-246.
- Latifi, M., Ketabi, S. & Mohammadi, E. (2013). The comprehension hypothesis today: An interview with Stephen Krashen. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 10, 2: 221 – 33
- Legault, L. (2016). Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation. *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*.
- McLaughlin, B. (2013). *Second language acquisition in childhood: Volume 2: School-age Children*. Psychology Press.
- Morse, A. F., & Cangelosi, A. (2017). Why are there developmental stages in language learning? A developmental robotics model of language development. *Cognitive Science*, 41, 32-51.
- Schutz, R. (2005). Stephen Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition. *Language Learning*, 28, 2, 221 – 282
- Schutz, R. (2017). "Stephen Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition." *English Made in Brazil* <<http://www.sk.com.br/sk-krash.html>>. Online.
- Shawana, F., Iqbal, M. & Mustaneer, A. (2017). *Integration of Grammar Translation Method with Communicative Approach: A Research Synthesis*. London: Routledge.
- Thi-Huyen, N., Xuan-Lam, P., & Thanh Tu, N. T. (2021). The Impact of Design Thinking on Problem Solving and Teamwork Mindset in A Flipped

- Classroom. Eurasian Journal of Educational Research (EJER), 96, 30-50.  
<https://ejer.com.tr/manuscript/index.php/journal/article/view/540/47>
- Yang, H. (2008). On teaching strategies in second language acquisition. Online Submission, 5(1), 61-67.
- Zhou, G. & Niu, X. (2015). Approaches to language teaching and learning. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 6, 4: 798 – 802