AN UNSUCCESSFUL EFL LEARNER?

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The purpose of the present study is to introduce the unique case of a Hungarian college student who experiences lack of success in her English language studies and to reveal the factors that may contribute to her apparent underachievement. Prior to the analysis the student was labelled as unsuccessful in her EFL studies both by herself and the teacher. The participant's lack of success was determined on the basis of her overall English language development, her test results, her participation in classroom activities and her communicative competence. Data analysis heavily relies on five data sources: the analyses of the student's homework assignments and previous tests, a language learning history composition, a language learning diary and a semi-structured, in-depth interview. In the analysis of the obtained data Ellis' 5-category description of 'the good language learner' will be used. Having gained a deeper insight into the present student's foreign language learning environment, language learning attitude, motivation, beliefs and her preferences towards certain teaching styles, the paper concludes that the student is more likely to correspond to the description of the 'good language learner' and her apparent lack of success can be attributed to several external factors. Was she given the individual attention, patience and the tailor-made practice she needs, she would, by no means, show significant advancement in her English language studies.

Keywords: EFL, tertiary education, the 'good language learner'

Learning a foreign language is influenced by the interrelation of external (e.g., the social setting) and internal factors (e.g., learning strategies, language transfer). Students in the same foreign language learning context indicate individual variations in their language aptitude, motivations, their approaches to the learning situation, their rates of learning, their language learning strategies or their performance (Dörnyei, 2005). Learning a foreign language is considered to be a complex process in which several further elements interact with each other. The following repertory of elements is by no means complete, but may give a hint at the multi-faceted nature of investigation that one can approach the issue with. Researchers so far have focused their attention and research efforts to finding out what role age, personality, language aptitude, motivation, learning style, teaching style, learning strategy, language anxiety and the classroom setting play in acquiring a foreign language (Dörnyei, & Skehan, 2003). To determine the extent to which either of these factors contributes to the learning process is beyond applied linguists' present knowledge. Each of these factors may play

a significant role in the acquisition of a foreign language, but none of them on their own seems to be a decisive factor in determining success.

A researcher may start the investigation from the age element, but empirical findings fail to prove unquestionably that adults are not able to reach proficiency in a foreign language. In motivation research applied linguists claim that integrative motivation greatly contributes to the learning process, still, they do not claim it to be essential. Language aptitude tests have been compiled to determine a learner's future success in a foreign language, however, it is also suggested that poor performance may well be compensated for in other fields.

Theoretical background

A major way of investigating success or on the contrary, lack of success in learning a foreign language is by means of exploring the characteristics of the 'good language learner'. While researching what characterises good and poor language learners applied linguists have arrived at producing a large body of literature dealing with learning strategies. Nunan (1991) defines learning strategies as "the mental processes which learners employ to learn and use the target language" (p. 168). Learning strategies are differentiated from learning styles which is defined as "any individual's preferred ways of going about learning" (Nunan, 1991:168). Stern (1975) compiled a list of ten language learning strategies that good language learners possess and contrasted it with the list composed for poor language learners.

Rubin (1975:42) identified seven strategies and also claimed that "good language learning is said to depend on at least three variables: aptitude, motivation, and opportunity". Further theoretical works include R. Ellis' (1985) three-part categorisation of learning strategies under the following headings: hypothesis formation, hypothesis testing, and automatisation. G. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) group strategies into listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar strategies. Willing (1989) differentiates between 'strategies for managing the learning process and strategies for managing information'.

Having such a wide variety of taxonomies applicable to the investigation of learning strategies and the 'good language learner', researchers may need to tackle an important issue raised by Nunan (1991) who claims that a major problem for learning strategy theorists has been the development of a coherent taxonomy of learning strategy types. Most researchers have developed their own lists, and there is now a plethora of these in the literature, which makes it difficult to compare research findings and suggestions for pedagogy (Nunan, 1991:168).

On the grounds of the analyses of several experts' works and empirical research Ellis (1994) identifies five major aspects of successful language learning which are as follows:

(1) a concern for language form,
(2) a concern for communication (functional practice),
(3) an active task approach,
(4) an awareness of the learning process,
(5) a capacity to use strategies flexibly in accordance with task requirements (p. 546).

In the data analysis of the present participant the above categorisation will be followed because it suits the case and the context. On the basis of the rationale and the theoretical background the paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1 Is the participant an unsuccessful language learner?
2 What features and beliefs characterise the participant?
3 What characteristics does this language learner share with the good language learner as described by Ellis (1994)?

Method

The participant and her school environment

The subject of the present case study is a 35-year-old female college student of the Budapest Business School who started learning English at the age of 30. Apart from her native Hungarian she speaks German (L2) at a proficiency level. In her teenage years she learnt Russian and French for a while, but she was not motivated enough to get engaged with these two languages. English is considered to be the third language that she seems to display commitment to. She attends the third-year of the German language business course of the Budapest Business School, Faculty of Commerce, Catering and Tourism. Studying at this course means that all but her English language classes are conducted in German. This latter fact implies that the influence of L2 cannot be excluded.

Students of this course are required to pay high fees for their education which factor often results in a fundamentally different, usually more critical and negative attitude to their teachers and subjects, and results in a peculiar interpretation of the rules regarding class attendance. From the latter respect, however, the participant of the present case study rather adopts a traditional approach to learning, she rarely misses classes and is devoted to acquiring new knowledge. Nevertheless, she has high expectations towards the school which she regularly criticises. She openly voices her opinion regarding the curriculum of the subjects, the teaching style and education in general. English classes are not an exception, still, she finds the English language learning environment stress-free, relaxed and informal.

She synchronises her business school studies with attending the University of Physical Education where she is about to complete her studies as a horse-riding trainer. She lives alone and supports herself financially. She makes a living by teaching horse-riding privately and dealing in buying and selling horses. She attended a secondary school specialising in musical studies and plays the bugle. The participant thus claims that her hearing is better than average.

At the time of the research the participant is finishing her English language studies at school but has been found to show a firm commitment to continue her English language studies and to prepare for a B2 level English language business exam with a private teacher of English. She will need to resort to attending private lessons for the college does not cater for any more language classes in the final, fourth year of her studies.

The reason why the participant has been selected to act as subject of the present study is a complex one. The author thinks that there are several factors which make the participant unique (e.g., her age, being a late starter of English, her success in German but her perceived lack of success in English) and which are therefore worth investigating. The author is certain that finding an answer to the perceived problems will be beneficial not only for herself but for the participant and her future English language development as well.

The participant's present English language proficiency

The author of the present paper has taught the participant for 3 years, which means approximately 540 hours of teaching. The participant's aim is to pass an intermediate (B2 level) business English language exam so that she can fulfil the requirement set by the Budapest Business School of obtaining a degree at the end of her studies. The author, who is an experienced language examiner and a member of the Common European Framework (CEF) harmonisation team of the Budapest Business School Language Examination Centre, claims that the participant has definitely reached level B1 and is approaching level B2.

The participant performs better in writing, reading and translation tasks. She is underperforming in her oral skills but has been found to be making good progress in listening skills in the past term.

Instruments

Data were collected from five data sources. First, the student was asked to produce a written account of her language learning history in her native language. The composition was aided by guidelines given by the researcher (e.g., in your language learning history write about the following points: motivation, demotivation, significant events, experience in using English, outstanding successes and failures, your progress).

Secondly, the student was encouraged to keep a language learning diary. Some remarks found in the diary will supplement the interpretation of the findings as it revealed interesting points which did not come up so clearly during the interview.

Thirdly, the author examined tests and compositions written by the student during previous terms. The aim was to find out how the student progressed and to compare her results in tasks that she openly declared to be her favourites and believed to perform better in them.

The analysis of all these data determined the questions of the qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interview schedule which served as the basis for a fifty-two minute interview. The interview questions focused on obtaining biodata information, eliciting more detailed information about the participant's language learning circumstances with respect to both languages, English and German, queried her about her attitude to language learning tasks and aimed at gaining an insight into the participant's personality traits. It was the interview that yielded the richest data of the analysis.

Results and discussion

Hereby data analysis is divided into two major sections: firstly, data contributing to a better understanding of the participant's characteristics and foreign language learning beliefs will be shown, while in the second part the data will be matched and analysed according to Ellis' (1994) description of the 'good language learner'.

The participant's English language learning history and motivation to learn English

The participant of the present study started to learn English at the age of 30. She commented on the reasons for starting so late as follows (the author's translation throughout):

Quote 1:

Interviewer (I):	What do you mean by saying that you heard the first English word at an intensive language course that you attended at the age of 30?
Participant (P):	...until the age of 30 I hadn't had any contacts with the English language. At school I had been selected into a class in which I had learnt German and until that age I had lived in the country where we hadn't even had a computer.
I:	What about pop songs?
P:	I'm not keen on this type of music, I'm not interested in it.
I:	Hadn't it come up at secondary school to learn English? You know, learning English is so tempting for some people.
P:	No, German had been a much more interesting thing for me 'cause I had known I would need it for my work.

The participant has been found to be instrumentally motivated to learn English:

Quote 2:

I: Why did you decide to take up learning English at the age of 30?

P: 'cause I want to see the world, and with the German I am restricted to Europe. I'd like to travel further, and also because I don't think I'll be able to learn German any better.
…
… And that was the time when I had my first contacts with the computer and I realised that it was impossible without English. My first meaningful experience occurred when my brother – as a punishment – set all the menus on the computer in English, saying 'here you are, start learning', that was a strong motivation.

The participant describes her ambition to reach a language competence level in English which will enable her to read books in original English, not just on a graded reader level. Her greatest aim is to pass an advanced level exam and to speak English as well as she speaks German.

The participant's personality and beliefs

When asked about how she would describe herself, the participant listed the following adjectives: extrovert, moody, perfectionist. It seems that her moodiness, her own personal problems and occasional disinterest towards 'life as such' significantly influence her attitude to the learning situation. It is interesting, though, that she would rather be present in class and behave like a sleepy, miserable child than stay at home. The following quotes are taken from her language learning diary:

Quote 3: "Today's lesson was good, because as long as the lesson lasted I was not bothered by my own problems which I have a lot now."

Quote 4: "I haven't slept for about a week 'cause the inspiration to my thesis comes at night. That's why I was not too alert during the lesson. However hard I tried I was not able to concentrate."

Quote 5: "I didn't pay much attention to the lesson today. I was distracted by other things. I wasn't in the mood of doing anything today."

In the interview she accounted for her moodiness by explaining that she had been experiencing a very difficult period of her life for some months due to some personal problems and the hardships she encountered in writing her thesis paper.

She maintains that the traditional teacher-student relationship is more fruitful for her. She likes to be told what to do in class and to be led and directed by the teacher. She performs better if she needs to accommodate herself to the requirements of a 'superior'. The following quote describes her concept of the desired teacher-student relationship:

Quote 6:

I: Now [what is] the perfect language teacher [like]?

P: …should have a good sense of humour, and should posses a dictator-like personality, who makes us work a lot and does not give up, even if we have given up, (s)he does not …

I: But what about the atmosphere? A dictator may not …

P: I don't go to English classes to have a good time, but to learn English, so I don't mind it if the atmosphere is a bit tense.

I: … full of anxiety? Or you would not feel anxious in any circumstances …

P: If I feel anxious it makes me perform better, so it has a positive effect on me, I could stand if whips or any other instruments were used …

She is also a pursuer of excellence which is underpinned by her continuous effort to speak grammatically correct sentences with perfect pronunciation. English pronunciation causes a continuous headache for her, which regularly leads to not uttering a word or sentence until she is able to produce it in an error-free way. She is admittedly slower than her peers which results in long silences on her part. The issue of pronunciation has been found to be the only instance where she demonstrates anxiety. She is not capable of coming to terms with her German-like pronunciation and she is so much annoyed and inhibited by that fact that she would rather avoid speaking. The following quote aims to explain her view on that issue:

Quote 7: "I had to talk about my thesis, and compared to Wednesday's performance it was gorgeous. I was able to say sensible sentences. It all happened at the beginning of the lesson and the fact that the others were not there yet, facilitated me a lot. I have serious complexes because of my horrible pronunciation."

The participant and her school environment

Due to the fact that the participant is 10-14 years older than her peers and has a different family and financial background she faces different challenges of life compared to those of her classmates, yet at school she sits in the same rows and is required to behave like the majority of the students. Nevertheless, she declares that she is affected neither positively nor negatively by that. Let us quote her on how she manages to cope with that aspect:

Quote 8:

I: How do you feel in your college group? Doesn't it disturb you that you are a bit older than the others?

P: At the beginning when I started school I felt as if I was my own grandmother; this is a kind of study tour for me: I study the next generation, and it entertains me. In the meantime I have made some friends as well, but it is neither positive nor negative.

The participant's class has been studying business English for three years. Studying ESP does not facilitate the acquisition process which is highlighted by the participant's opinion taken from her interview:

Quote 9:

I: Does it influence your English studies in any way that you have to learn business English?

P: Well, I hate it more than learning general English.

I: And is hatred always there? Does that mean that you hate learning English?

P: No, it only refers to business English. I don't mind learning general English, but I find business English a bit unspontaneous and artificial.

The teacher seeks to follow the communicative approach, combining teaching the subject matter with role-plays, pairwork, groupwork and case study tasks. The group started out with seventeen students three years ago, but the class shrank into a six-member group by the end of the last, i.e., the sixth term of their English studies. The latter fact is important to consider in the overall interpretation of the case. Firstly, it means that the majority of the students have already passed the exam and can be considered to be more successful than the participant of the study. Secondly, due to the small class size the participant has made significant progress in the past term.

Let us now turn to the 'good language learner' description (1994) and compare the data with Ellis' taxonomy.

Ellis' categorisation of the good language learner

In this section of the paper the obtained data will be analysed on the basis of Rod Ellis' categorisation (1994) depicting the characteristics of the good language learner. Ellis compiled his grouping by reviewing studies written by Lennon (1989), Naiman et al. (1978), Reiss (1983), Reiss (1985), Rubin (1975), Rubin (1981).

A concern for language form

Good language learners have been found to show an attention to form and to monitor one's own and other's speech as key strategies. When the participant of the present study was asked to rate tasks according to her preference and also provide an explanation for her likes and dislikes, she picked up translation and word formation exercises as the ones she favoured and found the most useful to aid her in the acquisition process. She seems to possess an analytic, form-focused approach which is emphasized by her enthusiasm to solve tests and translate sentences especially into English. Thereby, from this aspect, the participant acts as a good language learner who is highly interested in understanding "the technical know-how about how to tackle a language" (Stern, 1975:313).

Quote 10:

I: [What types of exercises do you prefer and find useful?] Tests?

P: Yes, they are good.

Quote 11:

I: Translating texts into English?

P: We do little of that, we should do more of them, it would be very useful, it requires a lot of energy. I need this task, it would be very useful for me.

The following extract from her language learning diary aims to shed light on what standpoint she takes regarding word formation exercises:

Quote 12: "My favourite task, word formation, has come back. I can't do it on an impulse, I need rules! I don't know enough words in English and knowing the rules would enable me to form new words. I should take the dictionary and sit down to learn words beyond measure, otherwise I won't be able to step any further."

A concern for communication (functional practice)

The participant shows motivation to understand acts of communication and attendance to meaning. However, she does not find the school environment appropriate to engage her in meaningful conversations which would make her practise real language. Consequently, she is obsessed with the idea that only a native-like environment could provide her with the opportunity to learn the subtleties of the language. She can be described to be someone who would very much like to comprehend real-life, naturally occurring conversations and also be able to produce such nuances in English. She believes that it is this type of knowledge that would make her a proficient user of the language. This view is expressed by the following quotation from her interview:

Quote 13: "It would be nice to have homework tasks in which we would have to translate sentences. Not grammatical sentences specifically, but commonplace things, things that an Englishman would say."

An active task approach

Good language learners show an active involvement in language learning and appreciate teachers who are systematic, logical, and clear, but prefer to treat them as informants rather than to rely on them (Pickett, 1978 quoted in Ellis, 1994). Stern (1975) describes the poor language learner as somebody who leans too heavily on the teacher and whose attitude may appear passive, detached, or resistant.

From the above aspect the participant has been found to correspond to the latter description to a great extent as she notoriously mentions her desire to involve a teacher or a 'knowledgeable assistant' who could help her in the learning process, someone who could continuously correct her mistakes, repeat the words with difficult pronunciation in the right way and as many times as she needs and altogether could direct her in the complex system of the language and out of her difficulties. Her resistance to tackle tasks when she cannot obtain continuous attention from an 'expert' is evident from the fact that she rejects working in a group or with a pair because her mistakes are not corrected in these instances and for her it seems foolish to speak to someone who speaks English on the same or even lower level. The following two quotes aim to support her passive attitude in that context:

Quote 14: "[pairwork]… that's what I hate most, it doesn't make sense for me from the point of view of my development, it is useless. If a native English speaker were sitting here and were my pair, of course, I would be happy to talk to him. But what's the use of talking to someone who doesn't speak the language either?"

Quote 15: " …with my brother what we normally do is this: I read out a given text and he tells me how I should pronounce the word."

The participant has been found to lack the commitment to exploit all the available language learning opportunities. Her firm beliefs regarding the inadequacy of the present language learning situation influence her future plan to study with a private teacher in the future. In her opinion one-to-one teaching will facilitate her language acquisition to a greater extent.

An awareness of the learning process

"Good language learners also make use of metacognitive knowledge to help them assess their needs, evaluate progress, and give direction to their learning. Such awareness gives learners control over their learning" (Ellis, 1994:550).

The participant can be labelled as successful from the above aspect, as she is aware of her strengths and weaknesses in the acquisition process and displays a firm commitment to pursuing a learning style that suits her. As a matter of fact she has been found to be so much aware of the adequate way that suits her that she is occasionally inclined to disapprove of the language

learning environment that the college and her instructor's teaching style offer her. In the interview she elaborated lengthily on the effectiveness of the circumstances in which she had acquired the basis of her L2 knowledge – first through intensive language courses, then working and living in a native-like environment – which enabled her to be a proficient user of the German language. Her convincing successes in German established her belief in the exclusive acceptance of the previously mentioned two forms of acquiring a foreign language. Her conviction implies that she finds it difficult to adapt to the restricted, fairly artificial language learning environment which provides her with a mere three language classes a week. Four quotes highlight her thoughts on the topic:

Quote 16: "I learnt the basics of German in an intensive language course but I learnt the language really well when I was dropped into a native environment."

Quote 17: "… I think continuous study is very important, when I have to prepare with something day by day."

Quote 18: "During the intensive English language course I attended we learnt new material in the morning and did our homework in the afternoon. That was good, it was highly useful for me."

Quote 19: "I have also thought about how much better it would be if the college started with a term when we learn English only and our studies could also be finished with a language learning term. This intensive way has already worked in my case."

The data suggest that the participant's beliefs hinder her in discovering new techniques, adapting to different learning situations, nevertheless, she is fully aware of what learning environment facilitates her progress.

A capacity to use strategies flexibly in accordance with task requirements

Good language learners adopt "a flexible and appropriate use of learning strategies" (Ellis, 1994:550). Chamot (2001), on the basis of investigating previous studies, arrived at summarising the strategies that good language learners possess:

> These studies identified the good language learner as one who is an active learner, monitors language production, practises communicating in the language, makes use of prior linguistic knowledge, uses various memorisation techniques, and asks questions for clarification (Chamot, 2001:29).

The obtained data suggest that the participant makes use of certain learning strategies. On the basis of Chamot's quotation, the participant has been found to show reluctance in being active in certain tasks which stance is emphasised by her unwillingness to participate in communication tasks with her peers and altogether in a negative approach to seizing all the opportunities to practise the language. She shows reluctance to speak English even with the teacher if she does not find the topic to her taste. However, regarding her strategy use she matches the descriptions of the good language learner in her alertness and interest in solving language problems, in her lack of inhibitions – except for her anxiety in pronunciation –, in displaying an analytical stance and in showing an interest in the system

of rules. She constantly monitors herself and her peers, looks for meaning and sees the language in context.

Unfortunately, the available data have not been found to be sufficient to reveal further details of the participant's strategy use. Exploring this issue in more detail would require a further round of the data collection process, the administration of a questionnaire or a think-aloud protocol or a stimulated recall interview.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present case study was to reveal the factors that may contribute to the lack of success of an English language learner who is also a late starter of the language. After the author has gained a deeper insight into the participant's language learning history and special stance in her approach to acquiring a foreign language, the participant has been found to be someone who corresponds to the description of the good language learner provided by Ellis (1994) to a great extent. Her lack of success can be attributed to the mismatched teaching style (cf. Ehrman, 1996), subject matter and learning environment. The results of the data analysis imply that the participant will be able to make remarkable progress in English if she is taught as an individual student and is given the patience, attention and relevant practice that she requires. This may better facilitate her learning process and result in faster progress.

The unfavourable factors that constrain her in her present development – fulfilling tasks with a peer having the same language competence, studying business-related topics she is not interested in, being taught by a teacher who fails to apply dictator-like teaching methods – may be compensated for in a more suitable learning environment, e.g. with a private teacher who is able to handle the participant's negative affective behaviours by devoting more attention, encouragement and patience to her. The author feels that the classroom setting in the present case does not make it possible to maintain an individual teaching style appropriate for the participant.

The investigation of this case shed light on a student's language learning process from another aspect – from outside the classroom. It was a highly interesting experience and a one worth devoting effort to. The case has confirmed that providing individual attention and assistance to students is an essential part of a teaching profession.

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