

Motivating Second and Third Language Learning in Native Communities

Literature Review

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Abstract

The success of proper attainment of a second or third language is dependent on external and internal factors. Native language, culture, motivation and confidence all play a role. In some of the smaller communities/villages in Greenland language education is failing, because the students are not interested in learning different languages. Many of them will never leave their local community, and may not see a reason to. In the available literature on the subject of language acquisition I have tried to work towards an answer to the question: “how can we motivate these young people to take an interest in the rest of the world by way of learning a different language?”

My mother was born and raised in Greenland. Her father was Greenlandic and her mother was Danish. She was the second of two children and was born in 1958. When she turned six she started school, as was and still is the norm. All her classes were taught in Danish, because Greenland was part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Her three years older sister was taught in Greenlandic, an indication of how fast language policy could change. My mother never properly learned her native tongue. Not until many years later, having re-educated as a primary school teacher, did an opportunity to learn her native language present itself. She is now a teacher of Danish and English, and moved to the small settlement of Niaqornaarsuk in the summer of 2012. The settlement had 300 inhabitants in 2010 (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niaqornaarsuk>), of which very few speak another language than Greenlandic. Teaching the children Danish and English has been a struggle because they show little inclination towards learning either. Few of these settlers will ever leave Greenland, decreasing the need to learn a second or a third language.

Greenlandic is an Eskimo-Aleut language spoken by the approximately 57,000 people living in Greenland and Denmark. Of the three main dialects¹, West Greenlandic has been the sole official language of Greenland since it gained autonomous status in 2009 and is spoken by the majority of the Greenlandic people. Before its autonomy, Danish and West Greenlandic were the two official languages of Greenland (<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/greenlandic.htm>).

The Greenlandic people migrated across the Smith Sound from Baffin and Ellesmere Islands, which is reflected in the way their language has evolved and the closeness to the languages spoken by the natives of Canada (Leonard, 2013).

¹ West Greenlandic, East Greenlandic, and North Greenlandic.

Many indigenous languages are a part of their surroundings in a way that most Western languages are not. Nature plays a central role in these languages, which is evident by how descriptive Greenlandic is. There are many words in Greenlandic for snow for example, because the kind of snow - size, density, the way it falls, all affects how people interact with it. Different types of snow affects the hunt differently, and knowing that can make the difference between bringing home food and going to bed hungry (Leonard, 2013).

“Many indigenous people speak of a subtle link between language, the senses and the landscape, reckoning that this bond takes us back to the very foundations of language[...]There is no doubt that in this corner of the Arctic, the words share the rhythm and lilt of the local soundscape. Language seems to lie at the deep structure of the sensory landscape and for many indigenous people around the world is more than a detached and abstract set of grammatical and syntactic rules.” (Leonard, 2013 p.159)

In an attempt to learn the language of the Polar Eskimos of Northeastern Greenland, Stephen Pax Leonard spent a year living in the settlement that numbered just seventy people – a group consisting almost exclusively of hunters. He emphasizes the importance of submerging yourself in the language in order to learn it properly by living in a community where it is spoken. Baohua Yu and Huizhong Shen (2010) add that motivation and a certain amount of linguistic confidence also plays a large role in the success of learning a language. They connect learning of a language with learning about the culture that goes with it. Feeling included in the culture of a country affects how a person feels, which is clear in the film *Lost in Translation* (2003). In the film, Bill Murray plays a has-been actor who is in Japan to shoot a commercial. He feels isolated in a culture so different from his own. Meeting a young woman played by Scarlett

Johansson, someone from his own culture; despite their differences they become friends and brave the strangeness of Tokyo together. Johansson's character became the person that Murrey's character felt comfortable with, and thereby more inclined to interact with the "strange" culture he found himself in. Similarly, Yu and Shen (2010, p.74) found that "Individuals with intensive integrative motivation would have regular contact or communication with members of L2² group through using L2, which could ultimately improve their cross-cultural adaptation". They go on to explain, "Linguistic confidence in L2 was found to be a critical predictor of both socio-cultural and academic adaptation. Previous research documented that increased linguistic confidence in L2 was associated with increased identification with the L2 group and increased psychological adaptation" (Yu and Shen 2010, p.78). The Chinese international students, who were the subjects investigated in this paper that socialized more with their Australian counterparts, had improved their English skills more than the students that mainly stayed ensconced in their own culture at the end of their stay.

Learning a second and/or a third language can be a way to integrate into an increasingly global society, and on top of that there are certain intellectual advantages to learning languages. In an article that investigated the "Bilingual, Second, Language Acquisition, and the Education of Chicano Language Minority Students" (Garcia, YEAR) research was uncovered that found "work with French/English bilingual and English monolinguals suggested that the intellectual experience of acquiring two languages contributed to advantageous mental flexibility, superior concept formation, and a generally diversified set of mental abilities" (Peal and Lambert, 1962, p.97). The distinction between learning a second language and acquiring it

² Yu and Shen use this abbreviation for second language, and L3 for third language.

naturally by growing up bilingual is expressed, and here Garcia also ties in the importance of acknowledging and understanding the subject's surrounding environment (1993).

For all the advantages to being bilingual, further language acquisition is not necessarily one of them. Ironically, studies have shown that bilingual students “do not necessarily achieve the same levels of English proficiency through schooling as their monolingual peers” (Spellerberg, 2011, pp. 155-156). In a study conducted with Danish and Greenlandic mono- and bilingual students, there were clear discrepancies in English proficiency based on the students L1. The students whose first language was Danish outperformed the students whose first language was Greenlandic when it came to English proficiency. A hypothesis for this discrepancy was the typological differences between Danish and English, and Greenlandic and English. Danish is typologically more similar to English than Greenlandic is (Spellerberg, 2011).

Another of the variables that affected a positive language outcome was the attitude towards learning situations. To embody the right “cultural and linguistic attributes” (Creese, Takhi & Blackledge, 2014, p.938) might then prove to be the most efficient way to reach students when it comes to language acquisition. In that case the question of authenticity becomes influential. The language teacher must appear competent with the language they teach at more than just a linguistic level. The “native” speaker is emphasized as the personification of authenticity in this respect, if they are confident in that role. Otherwise their credibility suffers (Creese, Takhi & Blackledge, 2014).

The language teacher must impress on their students their authenticity, and one way to do that is by sharing their lifestory (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Stories have always played a large role in humanity and are one of the building blocks of culture. From folk tales to fairy tales

to dating profiles we use stories to recount the human experience on a personal level. So it makes sense that stories have been found to be beneficial in language acquisition. The stories we tell create a bond between us and motivate us to learn. Learn more about each other, our backgrounds, our culture, and our language. When the practice of storytelling is introduced into a highly diversified setting it creates the need for a common language, otherwise how else do we share our stories? But it is important not to trivialize this story sharing by treating it as yet another educational tool, which calls authenticity into question once more (Nicholas, Rossiter & Abbott, 2011).

The cultural aspect also needs to play a role in the method of language teaching. Students from different cultures may attain knowledge in different ways, and that has to translate into the way they are taught. It is not enough to simply translate tests and other teaching materials from one language to another (Allison and Vining, 1999). This is one aspect where the Internet might make language education easier.

The Internet continues to play a larger and larger role in all aspects of our lives, and that includes in a learning environment. The Internet has gone from being a place where we would go to get information to a place where we go to connect and interact with other people (Sanchez-Villalon, Ortega & Sanchez-Villalon, 2010). Just as hobbyist can be brought together across country divides (Crofts, 2012), the same is true of language students.

While the majority of the literature concerning language acquisition is to be found in the fields of Linguistics, Communication, Anthropology, and Sociology, there is another aspect that affects the acquisition of languages other than your native tongue. If we consider the different arenas where people from different cultures interact, trade holds a prominent position.

For the most part, gone are the days of self-sufficient communities that could isolate themselves from the world at large and not suffer the consequences. In an age where shopping online allows people to receive goods from across the world by the click of a button, the necessity for a common language increases (Lazear, 1999). At least in people from the smaller language groups. “In a multicultural society, individuals suffer when they cannot deal with differently cultured individuals” (Lazear, 1999, p.113).

How we acquire languages is affected by both external and internal factors. The external factors would include your native tongue, your culture, and your need to interact with “differently cultured individuals”. The internal factors are your motivation to learn a language, and your confidence in speaking the language you are trying to learn, as well as how much you interact with the culture that goes with that language. There is not much individuals can do about the external factors, since we are all born into a certain culture and language. To properly learn a new language it is essential to emerge yourself in the language and the culture where it resides. At the same time you must be open to that experience and motivated to interact with native people. If that is not possible, the Internet offers an attractive alternative.

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