

**AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:
FAMILY AS AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING COMMUNITY**

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ABSTRACT

In the world of applied linguistics, there is a growing interest among researchers in studying second language acquisition (SLA) as an ecological phenomenon, meaning the focus of SLA studies has shifted from the language classroom to other social contexts beyond the classroom. This ecological approach provides researchers with a whole new perspective in understanding language learning beyond the classroom that offers an insight into the way how a community can promote language learning among its members and become a learning system. Adopting Palfreyman's ecological approach to language learning, this paper is aimed at exploring a family functioning as an English language learning community in an EFL context. To reach the aforementioned objective, online interviews were employed in the study with four participants, who are members of a Vietnamese family. The findings provided an analytical description of the chosen family as a demonstration showing how Palfreyman's theories work in practice, focusing on the autonomous role of each family member in contributing and receiving learning resources. Despite some miscommunications due to the age difference, the interviewed family is overall an excellent example of a family functioning as a learning community, which can serve as a role model for other families in the same EFL context to promote better English language learning. The study offers interesting implications in the area of SLA: EFL learners should be aware of their language learning opportunities and take advantage of available resources for the sake of a mutually supportive environment for English learning in the family.

Key words: second language acquisition; student autonomy; language learning community; learning outside the classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the world of applied linguistics, there is now a growing interest among researchers in studying second language acquisition (SLA) as an ecological phenomenon, meaning the focus of SLA studies has shifted from the language classroom to other social contexts beyond the classroom (Menezes, 2011, p.60). This ecological approach provides researchers with a whole new perspective in understanding language learning beyond the classroom that offers an insight into the way a group or a community can promote language learning among its members and become a learning system (Palfreyman, 2014, p. 184). Adopting Palfreyman's ecological approach to language learning, this paper explores a family functioning as an English language learning community in an EFL context. The first part of the paper introduces some theoretical concepts related to ecological perspective while the second part reports the procedure of data collection. The final part provides an analytical description of the chosen family as a demonstration showing how the earlier discussed theories work in practice, focusing on the autonomous (or non-autonomous) role of each family member in contributing and receiving learning resources. The paper also aims to raise the awareness of EFL learners about language learning opportunities, urging them to take advantage of available resources for the sake of a mutually supportive environment for English learning in the family.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language learning resources

The first key concept discussed in the paper is learning resources, which are affordances available to learners and can be used to assist their learning (Palfreyman, 2014, p. 177). According to Palfreyman's (2006) categorization, there are two types of learning resources that language learners may make use of namely material resources (e.g. a dictionary or a textbook) and social resources (e.g. taking to a native speaker or a supportive sibling). Palfreyman (2014, p. 178) then classifies learning resources into two different kinds enabling resources (e.g. textbooks or people) and learning resources (e.g. knowledge or encouragement) with the former type helping learners gain access to the latter, which can make direct contribution to learning. The availability of these resources, however, does not necessarily means that they will contribute to learners' language learning because there are a variety of factors that can affect the interaction of learners with learning resources such as personal feelings and social or

cultural ideas. Therefore, discursive resource is the third type in Palfreyman's (2014) classification of learning resources, which refers to the ideas exchanged within a social group or community through their discourse.

2.2 Ecologies of language learning

The process of learning does not exist in isolation but in its interaction with the world, hence Palfreyman (2014) sees language learning as a system in which teachers, learners and other participants interplay. From an ecological perspective, enabling resources, learning resources and discursive resources are provided and exchanged among learners and others in a specific context. In other words, it is the interdependence or interconnection among different elements of the same ecosystem. Additionally, the learning ecology consists of various sub-learning environments, or learning communities that interact with each other in order to form "mutually reinforcing" language learning of an individual learner (Visser, 2001, as cited in Palfreyman, 2014, p. 181). Such out-of-the-classroom learning communities can include families, online forums, language clubs and other social groups.

2.3 Learner autonomy

As claimed by Benson (2008, p. 18), autonomy is "an attribute of the socially constituted individual" hence "individuals must strive to lead autonomous lives and society must strive to respect the freedoms that such lives require". From an ecological perspective, Palfreyman (2014, p. 183) considers learner autonomy as the ability to consciously and deliberately use the available interacting resources for the purpose of learning, or in other word, "an autonomous learner is aware of and understands the resources available to her". As an autonomous learner, s/he detects the relevant learning resources that can be found in her/his context, uses them effectively and actively looks for new resources when needed. Moreover, identity plays an important role in learner autonomy because any autonomous learner will have an ideal L2 self that s/he is striving towards (Dornyei, as cited in Ushioda, 2011).

2.4 Social networks

According to Palfreyman's (2011) social network theory, every

individual lives within relationship networks through which resources are transferred between people hence stimulate or constrain their activities. Similarly, a language learner has a range of social networks that facilitate her/his learning, including advice network with people s/he asks for guidance, trust network with people s/he confides in when in difficulty, and communication network with those who can give s/he explanations on what s/he is learning (Palfreyman, 2011, p. 19). Investigating learners' social networks along with their internal relationship, therefore, can offer researchers an overall view of the way in which language learners interact with the target language, especially outside the classroom (Palfreyman, 2011, p. 33)

2.5 Family as a learning community

As mentioned earlier, a group or a community can support interdependent autonomy and become a learning system or a sub-learning environment. In Palfreyman's (2011) research, he interviews some students from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and their family members and realizes that those families function as learning communities since each family member has a particular role in supporting other members' language learning. For instance, one family member provides learning resources to another member and then receives other resources from someone else, which occurs in an on-going exchange in order to foster individual autonomy.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The participants of this research project are four people from the Nguyen family (pseudonym) in Vietnam. The father Mr Nguyen is a neurosurgeon who can communicate well in English, both verbally and in written form as he corresponds regularly with neurosurgeons in other countries and travels overseas to attend international conference for three or four times a year. The mother Mrs Nguyen is an oncologist who also needs to travel abroad for work but she is always accompanied by her colleagues who can interpret for her. Therefore, her communicative skill is not very good while she can comprehend complex medical research written in English. Their elder daughter Chi, who scores 8.0 in the IELTS, is now studying finance at university. Her young sister Le is a high school student, who plans to study abroad next year after her graduation.

3.2 Data collection

A one-hour group interview via Skype is conducted to collect the information from the Nguyen family. Interview is the most suitable choice for the project because an interview can help gain a better understanding of the subject matter from the participants' point (Kvale, 1996). Interviewing in groups can also stimulate discussion when the participants can listen to and comment on each other's contributions. Besides, the interview is carried out in their mother tongue (i.e. Vietnamese) to avoid misunderstandings.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

All the data collected from the instruments are discussed in detail to provide an analytical description of the Nguyen family.

4.1 Siblings' support

As the elder sibling, Chi is assigned by her parents to assist Le with her English language learning. When they were younger, Chi's responsibility was simply to help her younger sister do English homework but now they are both interested in watching American series (i.e. The Big Bang Theory) so the two sisters watch the series together to learn English spoken idioms and expressions. As there is no Vietnamese subtitle, Le often asks Chi to explain the meaning of an unfamiliar slang or a joke she cannot understand. If they both do not know the answer, they may consult the dictionary or search for an explanation on the Internet. Interestingly, Chi and Le like to copy the expressions of the characters from the series and sometimes they talk to each other in English, using those expressions to joke around (e.g. "Later, loser!" or "Shot gun!")

Using an enabling resource (i.e. the series), the Nguyen sisters gain access to the learning resources of American vocabulary. They can be considered as each other's social resources when they communicate in English, giving each other the chance to practice the newly acquired language items. As an advanced learner, Chi provides Le with assistance and plays the role of the core member of the family learning community.

Overall, Chi and Le appear to possess the qualities of autonomous language learners. They intentionally watch the series to improve their English with a specific goal (i.e. to learn American slangs) and always seek

for explanation to acquire new knowledge. This is a typical characteristic of adolescent learners because they tend to actively pursue learning opportunities beyond the classroom when they develop an interest with the subject (Barron, 2006 p. 193). Both Chi and Le show a passionate commitment to English language learning (i.e. they have followed the series for over 7 years now), perhaps because each of them has an ideal L2 self that they are striving towards. Le plans to study overseas next year so she wants to “fit in” by using the local slangs and expressions, while Chi learns those expressions to “flirt” because she has always dreamt of having an American boyfriend.

However, conflicts do happen sometimes. When they speak English to each other, Chi occasionally corrects Le’s pronunciation mistakes (i.e. missing ending sounds), which Le describes as “annoying” and “killing the joy”. Teenagers like Le have “a pronounced search for identity and a need for self-esteem” (Harmer, 2015), which makes them find it difficult to accept such a negative comment, even from her close sibling.

4.2 Parents’ support

As supportive parents, Mr and Mrs Nguyen are social resources for their children’s English learning. Palfreyman (2011) claims that: “parents are seen as setting the tone of the family environment, and are key to learners’ trust networks”. According to Mr. Nguyen, “talking to English native speakers is the best way to improve English speaking skills”. His belief or his discursive resource has led to his providing the two girls some opportunities to speak English with native speakers: he sometimes invites Australian or Canadian colleagues to his house for dinner and last year he arranged a vacation in Singapore for the whole family. In this case, the social resources (i.e. talking to native speakers) result from the discursive resources (i.e. Mr. Nguyen’s ideas and beliefs). Similarly, Mrs. Nguyen often encourages the daughters with her words: “Sometimes Le felt stressed with her study at school, I am not good enough (at English) to help her with the homework but I told her that English learning is a life-long process so you need to be patient, you cannot rush it”.

It is worth noting that inverse socialization does happen in the Nguyen family when Chi is the core member that offers help to not only her younger sister but also her parents. Mr and Mrs Nguyen are extremely proud of Chi’s academic achievement, especially her 8.0 in IELTS so they often count on her English language expertise. For instance, Mr Nguyen frequently consults

Chi about his word choice (i.e. “kind regards” or “sincerely yours”) when composing emails to an American professor. Additionally, when foreign guests come to their house and Mrs Nguyen struggles to understand them, Chi helps her mother by repeating or simplifying the questions.

Nevertheless, Mr and Mrs Nguyen confess that they may be insensitive when making a comparison between their two daughters (e.g. “You should be more like your sister”), which can accidentally lower Le’s self-esteem and hurt her feelings. Le also admits that those words make her feel demotivated sometimes. In this situation, the discursive resources do not support but pose a threat to language learning process. As mentioned above, teenagers can become vulnerable to negative comments from others due to the distinctive feature of their age.

5. IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

This paper sheds light upon the English language learning beyond the classroom of a family in an EFL context. In this household, every member has his/her own roles in supporting others’ learning by providing or receiving learning resources. Despite some miscommunications due to the age difference, the Nguyen family is an excellent example of a family functioning as a learning community, which can serve as a role model for other families in the same EFL context in order to promote better English language learning for everyone.

This research also suggests that EFL learners should be aware of their language learning opportunities and take advantage of available resources for the sake of a mutually supportive environment for English learning in the family. Autonomous learning or “the intentional use of interacting resources toward learning goals” (Palfreyman, 2014) should be encouraged at home through practices in the families, in which different members with various competencies take part in such daily activities as watching movies, reading books or making conversations. EFL educators can also benefit from the ecology metaphor when tracking students learning in non-school environment with a view to spotting potential opportunities to guide their learning.

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