The subject for this case study is Noriko, a Japanese housewife in her fifties, with a long and interesting history of both learning English as a student of EFL (living in her own country and studying as a subject in school) and ESL (living in the target language country).

When she was growing up, no one in her family spoke English or any other language besides Japanese. Beyond a brief spell as an adult where she halfheartedly tried learning Spanish about a month, she’s had no experience with a foreign language other than English. Until the age of 12 she had absolutely zero exposure to foreign language.

Noriko’s first encounter studying English came upon her entrance to junior high school (JHS). In Japan, English is required each year of both junior high school and high school (HS) for a total of 6 years compulsory study. The classes for both JHS and HS are of the most traditional manner and combined with the norms and practices typical of the Japanese educational system. The classes were centered around reading and writing; speaking was emphasized much less. The teacher spoke and the students listened and copied down information. The main goal was passing written tests. The teachers were all
non-native English speakers for the whole six years, and often did not have a
great command of the language themselves. In fact the only exposure she had
to native speaker pronunciation the entire way through was in high school,
where they would go to an old style “language lab” and listen to an LP of native
speaker conversation one hour a week. Although she had a sizable vocabulary
and command of the basic rules of grammar, at the time she graduated high
school, Noriko was completely unable to communicate in English.

In looking at Noriko’s EFL study up to the age of 18, it is not hard to
imagine why she could not effectively communicate. Noriko was at a disad-
vantage in several areas. First of all, the traditional classroom she experienced
with one non-native English speaker teaching and 30-40 students could not
create the skills necessary for even rudimentary effectual communication.
Ellis, citing Gremmo, Holec, and Riley (1978), points out that just the partici-
pation of the teacher in classroom discourse distorts the interaction to such a
degree that learners cannot begin to even learn the basics needed to construct
their own competence. (Ellis 1988, 95) In analyzing the traditional classroom
and its shortcomings, Ellis targets many faulty types of practices and ques-
tion asking, and in particular focuses on the over-reliance on “display” ques-
tions — questions that require the learner to demonstrate his knowledge of
something — rather than on naturalistic native-speaker discourse. (Ellis 1988,
97) Quoting Sinclair and Brazil (1982, 58) he states that as a result of the
overuse of display questions “pupils have a very restricted range of verbal func-
tions to perform. They rarely initiate and never follow-up. Most of their verbal
activity is response, and normally confined strictly to the terms of the initiation.
(Ellis 1988, 97) Lightbown and Spada also criticize the wide use of display
questions in classroom teaching. In their estimation, display questions are one
of the more significant differences between classroom English and “real” life,
since the teacher already knows the answer when he/she asks the question;
Furthermore, they note that researchers found that teachers often only give the student a fraction of a second to answer before moving on to another student or answering the question themselves. (Lightbown and Spada 1999, 12)

In addition, Ellis notes that when the teacher is “listening” to two pupils engage in a certain task, the teacher invariably intervenes and acts as a kind of ‘master of ceremonies’ and monitors all the students’ words, meanings, and utterances, thus depriving them of the chance to negotiate through the task and thus build their skills. (Ellis 1998, 118-19) When these display questions are given and students attempt to answer them, the only feedback they are generally exposed to is what Lightbown and Spada call “recasts.” They define a recast as the teacher reformulating part or all of a student’s utterance minus the error. (Lightbown and Spada, 104) They highlight two important points in their discussion: First, in the four classes they observed, recasts were the most frequent form of feedback and secondly, student uptake was least likely to occur after recasts rather than other types of feedback, such as elicitation or clarification questions. (Lightbown and Spada, 105-6)

The fact that Noriko’s teachers were all non-native English speakers who themselves often had a poor command of the language had to be a factor in her lack of progress. Littlewood points out that if learners are involved in formal instruction, some errors will be a direct result of misunderstanding caused by faulty teaching or materials. (Littlewood 1984, 32) From what I have seen first-hand in Japan, I would contend that serious deficiencies in both teachers and teaching methods, and a scarcity of quality learning materials are rife, and once again particularly in the time period Noriko attended secondary school. Noriko must certainly have developed a lot of errors due to the effects of incorrect teaching. Littlewood goes on to cite a study by Jack Richards (1971) suggesting that teachers often overemphasize the present continuous, causing students to actually overuse it at the expense of the simple present. (Littlewood, 32)
Interestingly, it has been my experience in Japan, that Japanese teachers do just the opposite; they overemphasize the simple present at the expense of the present continuous, staying in line with the common Japanese usage of that tense. Therefore, I encounter so many students making errors such as “I go to a movie tonight” instead of “I’m going to a movie tonight” due to faulty teaching. With those types of errors being reinforced year after year, students like Noriko run the risk of incorrect usage becoming “fossilized” or in other words becoming permanent features of their speech. (Littlewood, 34) Noriko no doubt developed errors because of incorrect teaching and materials and as the years went on, had to unlearn them, and even now some of them may be fossilized.

Lightbown and Spada compiled a list of characteristics from second language teaching classrooms which hinder the progress of acquiring language; Noriko was subjected to most of them, and in fact, some of them were magnified in their significance due to the rigid, inflexible, and teacher-centered nature of the Japanese educational system. In brief, among the more significant factors from that list relevant to Noriko’s secondary education are: 1) linguistic items are learned and practiced in isolation, one item at a time. (Lightbown and Spada, 94) Being taught in this manner, students have no real chance to put the pieces together so to speak, and synthesize all the grammar and language they are learning into a uniform system of communicating. 2) Students experience a rather limited range of discourse types; it is typically teacher asks a question/student answers/teacher evaluates response. The written language they encounter is selected for its grammatical points, not content. (Lightbown and Spada, 94) Indeed, not only is this type of limited unnatural discourse the primary exposure students receive but, as mentioned earlier, students often do not even have the chance to respond without the teacher intervening or passing them over. 3) Students often feel great pressure to speak or write the second language correctly from the very beginning. (Lightbown and Spada, 94) This facet holds
especially salient in Japan, where the fear of being wrong is strongly ingrained in students even from the elementary school years. Japanese language students tend to be tense, unrelaxed, and very reticent to speak out for fear of losing face for being incorrect, or even worse, speaking in an awkward way and embarrassing themselves.

Due to the nature of the traditional classroom to which she was exposed, through the age of eighteen, Noriko had little or no chance for any active participation in meaningful discourse, and so was unable to build the skills needed to negotiate meanings and acquire the ability to communicate in English.

Noriko’s next chapter of studying English came during her two years at University where she was an English major; this was the first time she had ever been exposed to a native speaker of English, whether in or out the classroom. Her contact with native-English speakers remained only inside the classroom during class hours. The classes at University were an improvement over secondary school in that there was some genuine discourse taking place, and she did make some progress, but still it was a large group setting and mainly in the traditional mold. She could read and write reasonably well, and had a fairly large vocabulary but it was still very difficult for her to produce language — to actually speak and express herself.

After graduating Noriko quit studying English and soon got married. She raised three children and when those children had become adolescents, she wanted to find some hobbies and fun ways to spend her free time. So after a nearly 20 year absence she joined an English conversation school’s group class. There were 10 more experienced students, a native-speaking teacher, and they met once a week for 90 minutes. She felt she was the lowest level speaker in the class, so for a few months she went through what Ellis calls a “silent period.” (Ellis 1997, 20) She didn’t speak much at all, just taking in everything and soaking up what she could about conversational English. During that time she
studied at home by herself by reading kids books and newspapers published expressly for EFL learners, and also listened to daily radio broadcasts. After some time she did start to slowly open up, but since there were 10 members there still was not a great deal of opportunity for speaking, but she did comment that over the roughly one year that she attended those classes, she had improved her listening and ability to understand.

The huge leap from only being able to communicate on a rudimentary level to interacting in English with a high degree of proficiency came as a result of living in the USA for nearly 5 and a half years. Her husband was transferred to California for work, and Noriko and her three children accompanied him. It was Noriko’s first ever true interaction with native speakers outside a classroom. The beginning months were very hard for her; she couldn’t negotiate the basic tasks of everyday life in English; for example, supermarket checkers would speak with her but she couldn’t comprehend them. Her description of these early months indicate she was suffering what Ellis calls “state anxiety,” a situation specific anxiety associated with attempts to learn the L2 and communicate in it. (Ellis 1995, 480) He further notes research showing that as speaking and listening ability improved, the level of anxiety went down. (Ellis, 480) That finding is very much in line with Noriko’s description of events in the interview. She was very homesick and frustrated and often cried and contemplated telling her husband she wanted to return to Japan. But she was a wife and mother and had huge responsibilities to her family; being a wife and mother in her culture was in fact a duty of the highest importance; to not succeed would be the ultimate failure and loss of face. So she remained determined and in the end succeeded.

Noriko shares a great number of similarities with the one of the subjects of Norton Pierce’s research, a Czech woman named Martina. Norton Pierce would likely argue that Noriko’s will to succeed, like Martina’s, was a result
of her social identity as a mother and primary caretaker of the family. (Norton-Pierce 1995, 21) In her writing, Norton Pierce contends that “language is not conceived of as a neutral medium of communication but is understood with reference to its social meaning” (Norton Pierce, 13) and uses her case studies of immigrant women to Canada, one of which is Martina, to support it. There are parallels between the two women; the following points are paraphrased from the aforementioned Norton-Pierce paper: Noriko, like Martina, was an immigrant, a mother, a language learner, and a wife. Noriko’s investment in English was largely structured by an identity as the matriarch and caregiver of the family; although her husband was present and earned the money, ALL other responsibilities related to taking care of the house, children, and any and all domestic needs fell on Noriko. Like Martina, she often felt intimidated and even inferior in many situations involving interacting with native speakers, even when people were being friendly and non-threatening, and she never became totally comfortable speaking. (Norton Pierce, 21) She noted in her interview how her American neighbors had given her family a welcome party soon after they arrived, and even though people were kind, she felt so intimidated when they spoke amongst each other due to her lack of understanding and speaking ability. Still, because of her social identity and the powerful need to succeed in caring for her family, she overcame these formidable challenges and not only became competent in English, but came to truly enjoy living in the USA.

Social identity, however, is certainly not the only major factor in Noriko’s ESL success story. Schumann (1988) identifies and elaborates on several acculturation factors that are directly linked to one’s level of 2L acquisition. He states that “any learner can be placed on a continuum that ranges from social and psychological distance to social and psychological proximity with speakers of the target language, and that the learner will acquire the second language only to the degree that he/she acculturates.” (Schumann 1988, 1) Although Schumann’s
work is focused on the macro level, many of his principles can be applied as salient factors in Noriko’s case.

Schumann starts his discussion with social factors. He defines enclosure as “the degree to which the 2LL group and the TL group share the same churches, schools, clubs, recreational facilities…” and so on. Noriko lived in a regular American suburban area; she was not entrenched in an ethnic enclave with lots of Japanese speakers, stores, and the like. Her neighbors were Americans, her children attended American public schools, and she shopped at American style malls and supermarkets. Her level of enclosure was quite low, so interaction between her and the TL group was rather high, so acquisition could take place. Another important social factor Schumann discusses is attitude; in short if the 2LL group has a positive attitude toward the TL group, then learning and acquisition are highly likely to take place. (Schumann 1988, 3) For the most part, Japanese have a favorable attitude towards Americans and American culture, and the political relationship between the two countries is quite strong. Therefore, Noriko had very positive and enthusiastic feelings towards America and in turn, learning English, and these contributed greatly to her progress.

Affective variables are also of high significance. Schumann identifies two types of motivation orientations for 2L learners, integrative and instrumental motivation. A person with integrative motivation wants to learn the 2L in order to meet, talk with, and learn about the speakers of the TL whom he/she values and admires. A learner with instrumental motivation wants to learn the language for utilitarian reasons. (Schumann 188, 4) Noriko had strong motivation in both types. She needed English to take care of her family and conduct the daily business of living and maintaining a hearth. She also wanted to integrate, socialize, and become part of American cultural life. Noriko pointed out in her interview that learning English just as English was not the most important thing for her, but rather meeting the local people, making friends, and having meaningful
interaction was far more significant. Therefore, she was powerfully motivated and thus highly likely to succeed.

What learning factors contributed to her successful acquisition of English? When she arrived in the USA she was exposed to two things she lacked as a secondary student in the traditional class setting: genuine interaction and meaningful feedback. The social interactionist premise that “verbal interaction is of crucial importance for language learning as it helps to make the ‘facts’ of the L2 salient to the learner” (Ellis 1995, 244) certainly appears to apply to Noriko.

Social interactionists assert that interaction affords the learner the opportunity to talk in meaningful situations, and that this output serves to foster L2 acquisition in two important ways: 1) through the building of skills that are consciously learned and then automated through practice and 2) Ellis, citing Swain (1985), puts forth that by producing comprehensible output the learner uses their linguistic resources in a meaningful way; thus, when they fail in any particular communication they are pushed into making more precise, understandable, and coherent output and in turn develop and internalize their skills. (Ellis 1995, 40) It is also important to note that Swain’s claim (#2 above) is that “production will aid acquisition only when the learner is pushed.” (Ellis, 40) Ellis further elaborates that indirect feedback is crucial to this acquisition process. (Ellis, 41)

Noriko most definitely was pushed upon arriving in America and had to confront a barrage of interactions necessary for both utilitarian purposes and personal and social ones, which provided large amounts of indirect feedback to facilitate her L2 acquisition. In almost every communication she made, there was indirect feedback of all types; one of the most important and facilitative of these is clarification requests. Ellis cites a study by Pica, Holliday, Lewis, and Morgenthaler, (1989) which found that learners were very likely to produce output modifications to clarification requests, because clarification requests are
'open’ questions that leave it up to the learner how to resolve the comprehension problem. (Ellis, 41) Ellis also cites a study by Nobuyoshi and himself (1993) which showed “two out of three experimental learners improved the accuracy of their past tense as a result of requests for clarification and maintained the improvement one week later.” Noriko most certainly had to constantly reach into her arsenal of linguistic abilities and communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, to function in daily life in the USA. On a daily basis she negotiated meanings, produced coherent output, used verbal and non-verbal skills, responded to all types of feedback, engaged in meaningful discourse, and socialized with American friends and neighbors. These actions and activities were the ways and means in which she truly acquired a high level of English speaking ability.

In analyzing Noriko’s interview, in my estimation, the single most valuable thing for her to work on in the future is producing greater fluency; her speech is sometimes choppy and she often stops and starts. The reason for this problem is that she’s trying to come up with the perfect word or phrase and avoid any kind of mistake at all costs. At the current stage of her language learning, she should sacrifice a little accuracy for the sake of developing smooth, flowing speech. She has a firm grip of the important basics and she has a lot of experience; she could be a much smoother and polished speaker by not thinking so much about each utterance. I even told her in the interview that she should think less. She’s very much like what Krashen might call a “monitor over-user.” (Krashen, 19) She constantly checks her output with her conscious knowledge of the 2L and so she too often speaks hesitantly, stops and starts a lot in mid-sentence, and is just choppy. (Krashen, 19) Of course like all 2L learners she could improve in various other areas, but at this stage of her ability level and experience, I feel fluency is her most important need, and she should make a conscious effort to speak more freely.
References


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