

Interviews with an ESL Learner

Case Study

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December 14, 2006

Introduction

This paper will discuss the steps and strategies associated with the learning of a language. The basis of the discussion is a series of six interviews with a person who is currently involved in this pursuit. The paper will contain: a summary of the interviews, a discussion of the relevant theories and how they apply, what I as an interviewer learned from the experience and how this will affect my ESL teaching. Also the paper will include the interview journal. For each interview I have incorporated a summary and my reflections.

Summary

The interview subject was a Columbian immigrant in his mid-20's name Carlos. He has been living outside of Columbia for six years; the last two in Canada. Outside of school he works. At the time of the interviews he was in level five of the Intensive English program at George Brown College. His goals are to become a nurse and to integrate into Canadian society. Although he finds many similarities between Canadian and Columbian culture, he prefers the directness of Canadians. The fact that he is comfortable in North America means that he is in the "recovery phase" phase of culture shock. Carlos is very proficient in reading but has difficulty in writing; however he is very motivated to improve. He was anxious to get extra help with his writing and grammar. The type of error correction preferred by Carlos is immediate correction or re-casting. He also uses this method to negotiate meaning when communications break down. He thinks that the most important thing to do is practice, whether it's with students or preferably with native speakers.

How the Sociolinguistic Theories Apply to the Learner

I would say that he is a good example of Krashen's monitor model. He definitely uses a monitor. He used the interviews as a source of "i+1" input. He believes that you learn the rules in the classroom and use the language outside the classroom. He is also an example of how an extroverted person excels in speaking but has trouble with writing. His speaking ability is very good but his writing needs work. He demonstrates how the native language (Spanish in this case) affects the learning of the second language. He applies social, metacognitive and cognitive learning strategies.

Carlos's personality definitely influences his learning. He is highly motivated and a risk-taker. This is shown by his willingness to participate in the study. Since he has been in a North American for a few years there is little evidence of culture shock.

What I have learned from the Interviews

I have learned a new appreciation for the learning theories. I initially had the attitude that while the theories were interesting I didn't see how they would apply in "real life". After going through the interviews I was shocked to see that they were very reflective of natural situations. I also see the benefits of various methods. This even applies to some of the so-called traditional methods. I intend to try and keep up with the current theories during my teaching career.

I would like to mention two areas of study. The first is Krashen. When I was studying Krashen's theories I thought the concepts were too rigid. I think language acquisition occurs everywhere, even when you are learning its rules. However I have seen through my observations that there are affective filters and people do employ a monitor. I have also seen that there is benefit to providing a challenge to the learner. It's where the "i+1" level is that is difficult to find. I think one can only determine that through experience. So I now have adopted parts of his theories.

The other is the affect of culture on language learning. The area of sociolinguistics contains a lot of self-evident ideas. Again, I found through my observations what a critical part of second language learning this is. I now see the critical importance of introducing culture into learning. It leaves me wondering what fills the void in places where they teach English as an International Language. Culture is part of a language.

Based upon what I have learned from the interviews and my studies, I intend to try and make the learning experience in my classrooms as engaging as possible. I intend to vary how I present the material in order to accommodate the various learning styles. I am confident that doing these things will benefit my students in their language learning.

Journals

Interview 1

Summary

In this session, general background information was gathered, along with the student's perception of social differences between his country of origin and Canada

The name of my ESL learner is Carlos. He is in his twenties and speaks Spanish. At the time of the interviews he was in level five of the George Brown College Intensive English Program. During the course of the interviews he successfully graduated to level 6. Although Carlos has been in Canada for just under 2 years, he has been living outside his native country of Columbia for six years. Prior to coming to Canada, he had been living in a Spanish community in Florida. While he was there he had no opportunity to learn English. He left for Canada because he had a chance to learn English and to study at a university. During the interview Carlos mentioned that he preferred Canada because of its multilingual nature.

Carlos's goal is to become a nurse. Therefore he is taking English to communicate in his studies. He finds writing as the most difficult aspect of learning English. Being a Spanish speaker he has great difficulty with punctuation use, particularly the comma. He himself recognizes that this is a direct influence of his learning of the Spanish language. He stated that the Spanish language uses the comma much more extensively than English does. For example in Spanish a comma is always used before the equivalent of because. According to Carlos, English is more direct than Spanish. He stated that in Spanish you "beat around the bush". He prefers the Canadian directness. In order to improve his grammar he is reading a lot more. He also is trying use correct grammar when he is speaking.

Reflection

My first encounter with Carlos was through the tutoring sessions. He seems fairly proficient when it came to speaking. During the first tutorial session I asked the group I was working with if they would be interested. Carlos was enthusiastic about participating. So much so, I asked the group to think about it. Looking back I think I was slightly overwhelmed by the response. The following week, Carlos was again at tutoring. Since he was still very interested in taking part in the study, we set up times for the interviews.

I have to say from a speaking perspective, I was impressed with Carlos. If I had met him on the street I would have said that his accent was present but he was still understandable. From a grammar perspective, he seemed to have a very good grasp of idioms. He used idioms at the appropriate time in a conversation and in the correct form. After talking with him I felt confident in choosing him to help with my study.

For the most part when he is speaking, Carlos doesn't hesitate. However, when he was considering some of the questions, there was an additional pause indicating that he was employing a monitor to verify his speech. This is consistent with his statement that he tries to use correct grammar when he is speaking.

Interview 2

Summary

This interview was concerned with sociolinguistic differences between English and his native language and culture (Columbian Spanish).

In general in Spanish, you are more formal when you greet strangers. In fact, the greeting changes the closer the relationship is. For example, you kiss a lady relative hello but you just shake hands with strangers. Also there is a form of the personal pronoun that is used for people that you have a closer relationship with. Other general greeting rules are that you address older people more formally and you much more informal with children. There are no rules for addressing people of various professions. The two countries are quite similar in their approaches to greetings. The only difference being that English has a simpler language structure for greetings. In fact the same social norms apply in both countries. In Columbia to refuse an invitation you would call and apologize.

Carlos has been invited to a Canadian home for supper. The main difference he noticed was that t Canadians tend to arrive on time while Columbians arrive late (20-30 min.). With respect to meals he found that fast food is more common in Canada. He also thinks that the food in North America is greasier. In Columbia more grains and salads are consumed. Also the lunch meal in Columbia consists of soup and juice. He feels that North Americans eat faster and are more impolite at meals. For example, it is common in North America for people to eat with their mouths open. This is impolite in Columbia.

In the area of dating Carlos states that in Columbia the man pays for everything, while in Canada it's 50/50. He likes the North American way but he still tries to contribute more than the woman when he

goes on a date. He feels that when it come to marriage in Canada the woman is more important than the man. In Columbia, it's common for a man to hit his wife and that the police don't get involved with domestic disputes. While he says in Canada men and women are more equal at work he prefers the mother to stay at home with the children. Although he understands that some women may work because of their financial state, he feels that it's better to have the mother take care of kids rather than working. In that way the kids are not with strangers.

Carlos feels that for famous people to be a good role model they should be helping people. In Columbia a role model for people his age is Sharika. She came from a poor background. She helps kids. In Canada he thinks Mariel Casey (a singer from Quebec) is a good role model. She is also a person who helps people.

In Columbia you cannot talk about religion, politics or same sex marriage. It's impolite to use bad words. Also burping, belching and bringing up disgusting topics at meals are not tolerated. As is sneezing and not apologizing is not a good thing to do. Finally, a very impolite act is to not greet people when you arrive at any social get-together. He feels that Spanish people touch more than North Americans do. Also Spanish people stand closer and use their hands more.

In North America he has experienced that it's impolite to ask lady her age. In Canada discussing discrimination is frowned upon. Also, he has found out that some people don't like to be asked what country they come from. He had a bad experience when he asked a classmate where they were from. The classmate said it was more polite to say "what is your background".

Reflection

This interview reveals a lot about Carlos's background culturally. In general he finds a lot of similarities between attitudes in Canada and Columbia. Where there are differences he tends to support the North American view as seen in his views on relationships. The only exception is references around eating habits where he finds some North American practices distasteful.

The similarities between the two cultures assist him in avoiding sociolinguistic failures. This is shown by how much alike the acts of greeting and refusal are. Where there are differences I would not expect him to have problems due to his long exposure to North American culture. In areas such as space he has adapted to the North American practice.

Can we derive any insight in his motivation from this interview? Possibly we can. The fact that he is comfortable in North America, means that he is in "recovery phase" or the "at-ease-at-last" phase of culture shock. This may indicate that he might be developing intrinsic motivation.

Interview 3

Summary

This interview concerns itself analyzing the strategic competence of the learner and the strategies he employs.

When Carlos determines that someone doesn't understand him he employs the following strategies. If he knows the word he will write it out for the person. If he doesn't know the word he will try to find a synonym. Additionally he will attempt to speak slower. This is same strategy he employs when he doesn't understand someone. He asks them to spell the word and asks for a synonym. When he has to speak for a few minutes the aspect he is most worried about is pronunciation. This is because he's worried people won't understand him. However he says he's not nervous about speaking in front of people.

The hardest aspect of writing for him is the use of prepositions and articles. This shows the influence of his native language (Spanish uses prepositions in a completely different way than English does).

Speaking and listening are the hardest things to learn in a new language because you have to depend on another person. The most suitable technique that a teacher can use to help him learn speaking or writing is to have him working with a partner. The most suitable way to help learn listening or reading is for him to be working on his own.

He would like the teacher to correct all grammar mistakes right away because he wants to get the correct information as soon as possible. He has no problem about other people hearing the correction of the errors.

Carlos believes that a language program should be built using building blocks. He believes that the current stage of the process should be based upon the previous stage. He would use similar methods that he has seen in his studies. If he were teaching me Spanish he would test my knowledge. He would teach me the parts of speech, and sentences. He would use the newspaper and fairy tales (because they contain simple language). He would try and keep the program flexible. He would use group work and

have me give presentations. He would try to keep the lessons fun and the environment comfortable. Most importantly he would not allow the speaking of the native language.

He believes there are both positives and negatives with having teachers speaking the way they speak. On the positive side you are able to understand the teacher. On the negative side it's not the natural way of speaking. The other people he has found speaking in that slower, more exaggerated tone were people that were having problems with contractions.

He thinks the best way to learn vocabulary is by writing, using the dictionary and reading. He also thinks the only way to improve is through practice.

Reflection

A lot of what Carlos said in this interview could have been predicted. It seems quite common for learners to want to be corrected right away. Also to have the teacher, who they see as the ultimate authority, correcting them. However an interesting dichotomy is shown when he reveals that if he was produced a language curriculum he would be incorporating such student centred activities such as group work.

The fact that Carlos states that his difficulty is in writing is consistent with what the literature shows. I would characterize Carlos as an outgoing extrovert. His strength is in speaking. Again this agrees with the literature. From this evidence it would suggest that Carlos uses a social learning strategy. But does he use other strategies as well. He monitors his own speech as well as others. He is systematic and organized. That would mean that he also makes use of the metacognitive and cognitive learning strategies. I think there may be additional strategies that he uses. I don't he is unique in his approach to language learning. I feel that any student would employ any methods that they believe is effective.

Interview 4

Summary

Carlos first took English classes in high school in 1999 He was 20 years old. The course was very basic. He remembers that the various forms of the verb "to be" were taught. He also remembers that only grammar and writing were taught. They also listened to tapes. The classes were given every Saturday by native Columbians.

When Carlos first started speaking English he was very nervous. He was afraid that his pronunciation wasn't good enough. His reaction was to speak very little in the beginning. Gradually as he gained confidence he spoke more. He believes that you learn languages by using them. He likes learning the language in a native language setting. He thinks that the environment dictates that you speak English. You begin learning English by going out and trying it. He believes that you learn the rules in the classroom. He also believes that natural settings such as work are where you use the language. He states that how you feel has a large affect on language learning. He stress that it's important not to be shy about using English. He ties it back to confidence. He feels that many of his classmates are not motivated because they lack confidence. He also comments that shy people are better in grammar. He also mentioned that learning is problematic if the students get bored. He mentioned that he had a difficult time with a listening activity. The topic was anthropology. The listening passage was over 7 minutes in length. He felt that the context and vocabulary were very technical and that the topic was boring. Hence he had problems in doing the activity.

Carlos now thinks about grammar rules when he is speaking English. He stresses that he will accept corrections about his grammar from teachers. He is not comfortable with people other than teachers correcting him. However he says that he will accept pronunciation corrections from anyone. His rationale behind this is that there are rules in grammar and he only has confidence in teachers to know these rules. He wants like many other students corrections of errors to be made as soon as they occur, even in group settings. However he is ok with the teacher collecting the errors and listing them later.

The feature of English grammar that he finds the hardest to learn and use is phrasal verbs. The reason for this being that the construct is difficult to understand. The feature of English grammar that he finds easy to learn and use is conditionals because it's very similar to Spanish.

Reflection

This interview gives us more background into Carlos's English language studies. It appears that initially he was taught using the Audio-Lingual method. From the description it's apparent that the best he could have achieved in that course was a BICS level of language proficiency. It is also obvious that he believes and demonstrates Krashen's acquisition-learning hypothesis. When he came out with the statement that you learn the rules in the classroom but you use the language in the natural setting I was suspicious that he had been prompted by someone. However I am convinced that it was a genuine opinion. In this interview he again expresses the relationship between the outgoing personality and

proficiency in speaking. This is backed up by his statements about confidence and speaking. He again reveals his use of a monitor and his feelings on error correction. The most insightful part of the interview was when he talked about the listening activity he had. His description provided interesting anecdotal evidence about feelings and language learning.

Interview 5

Summary

Carlos doesn't think he is a good language learner. He says he is "lazy" to do extra practice of English outside of school. He says that it is lower on his list of priorities. He says that a good learner studies more. They try to find ways of doing extra English practice outside of class. Having said that, he contradicted himself by stating that he practices speaking and listening English every day. He also said that he reads the paper as well. He feels that making mistakes in English is something that can be avoided. He feels that the correcting mistakes not the mistake itself is useful in language learning therefore he wants to receive error correction immediately. He doesn't enjoy doing grammar exercises because grammar is difficult. He understands the concepts but has difficulty putting the concepts into practice. He is not sure that having above average intelligence helps a person learn a second language. He feels that they still need help learning rules. He agrees that it's important to get your message across, even if you make errors because you need to be understood. He still feels that you try to correct the errors and improve your English. From his point of view he thinks self-confidence and self-esteem are important characteristics in learning a second language. If you are self-confident you are not shy to speak to other people or to engage in a conversation. Other personality characteristics that make learning a second language easier are such things as being outgoing, sociable and extroverted. He feels that motivation is very important in second language learning. Since he sees himself becoming part of Canadian culture he has integrative motivation.

Reflection

This interview showed me some interesting things about Carlos. When he said that he felt that he wasn't a good learner of English I was a bit surprised. I am interpreting his response as "I'm not as good as I should be" which indicates very high expectations on his part to learning a language. He doesn't realize he is practicing his more than he thinks outside of the classroom. Since he has fairly good speaking skills he is using his English in situations where he wouldn't have earlier in his second language

development. Since he is at George Brown every day he has more opportunity to practice his language speaking skills. I mean he has to buy something to eat at some point during the day.

He again showed his preferences for error correction. It is interesting that he seems to have a low tolerance for mistakes. The good news is that he believes that every instance of a mistake is an opportunity to improve his English.

With respect to grammar exercises I am not surprised at his answer. My opinion about grammar before I came to George Brown was that it was very difficult to communicate the concepts. Now that I have studied the teaching of grammar, I can see that there are very engaging ways of presenting the subject. The fact that he feels it's difficult to put some of the concepts into practice possibly shows that he is using an interlanguage with other students that contains less complex grammatical structures.

With respect to the personality attributes, it is obvious that Carlos put more importance to factors that improve speaking. From the literature, we know factors such as self confidence, being an extrovert and having an outgoing personality all contribute to improved speaking proficiency in language learning. It is fascinating that he would choose those characteristics that correspond to an area in which he shows ability.

As for motivation, it's not much of a stretch to predict that Carlos would have an intrinsic motivation. He has been away from Columbia for almost six years. He is obviously looking for a place to fit in. While his short term goal is to gain access to a nursing program, he genuinely seems to be looking to integrate into Canadian society.

Interview 6

Summary

If Carlos had to choose either to be fluent in speaking English or to be correct, he would choose being fluent. The reasoning being that if you are fluent you tend to have a larger vocabulary. When he started learning English he had problems with because/why and the different tenses of verb. He attributes these mistakes to him using Spanish structures. This was corrected through studying and asking people around him to correct his English. Presently he is having trouble with punctuation in English. This also can be traced back to using the rules from Spanish.

Carlos feels that it's very important for ESL learners to interact with native speakers while they are studying English because they (native speakers) are supposed to speak English well. However, his experience with Canadians who are native speakers of English is that nobody speaks English well. He has a problem with this in that he feels it does influence his pronunciation. He feels that his teacher provides good material, specifically good examples of people speaking English. This has a positive effect on his language learning. His opinion of the English language is that it's difficult.

From his perspective an ideal program for learning English should stress practicality. It should role playing exercises that reflect common situations. To reflect the real world it should demonstrate spontaneity. He suggests that students not be given warnings about upcoming tests. The classroom rule that only permits English in the classroom should be strictly enforced. He suggests using methods similar to the idea of an infraction jar. That is, if a student speaks his native language he must put an amount into a container on the teacher's desk. This would reinforce to the students that only English is permitted in the classroom.

Carlos indicates that he has received benefits from participating in these interviews. It has forced him to think more carefully when organizing the sentences he wants to communicate. He also found the interview challenging. He feels the interviews benefit the TESL students conducting them as well. They get to see the class from the students' point of view. This should make it easier to connect with the students.

Carlos's advice to me: "Don't allow the student to speak their native language or to use translators. Always try to interact with students. Always walk around. Make the lessons fun".

Reflection

Before this meeting I wasn't expecting to have any more surprises. I was mistaken. I would have predicted that Carlos would choose correctness over fluency. He chose fluency because of the implication that if you are fluent you have an extensive vocabulary. This is a perspective I hadn't considered. Reflecting upon his statement, it suggests an aura of competence that is associated with fluency in a language. That is quite an ego boost to a native speaker. It's probably a good thing that he brought me back to ground when he said "no one speaks English well". It was timely that they were discussing the benefits of students interacting with native speakers. The consensus agreed with what was discussed in class that basic interpersonal conversational skills (BICS) was possible using interaction between non native speakers but in order to achieve cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) a

student needs to interrelate with native speakers. While academics look for a more scientific proof on this, Carlos has provided us with a piece of anecdotal evidence. He seems to prefer native speakers to non native speakers. I am not sure I share this view. I think more definitive proof needs to be gathered through an extensive study.

It is interesting to see what Carlos would put into his lessons. The idea of more roles playing is an idea worth pursuing. I like the idea of modelling natural situations. This would definitely provide a vehicle to get more cultural information into the classroom. It has the additional benefit of being able to prevent possible sociolinguistic failure occurring outside the class. You can model potential problem situation in the classroom and indicate to students where problems occurred. You could then provide the correct behaviour.

Even in his advice, Carlos sticks to the notion that student need to be immersed in the second language. Perhaps it's a subconscious idea that language proficiency can be obtained through osmosis. I think he has found that practice has improved his speaking and he wants to get a much practice as possible.

I think Carlos is enjoying his time at George Brown. Despite his preference for teacher centred error correction, I believe he actually prefers a communicative approach. This comes out with his suggestions of using more role playing in the classroom and to interact with students. I hope to take his suggestions to heart especially the ones to keep the lessons interesting and hopefully fun.