



## Exploring Factors in Improving a Learner's English Language in the Society

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this case study focuses on the development of a learner in learning English as a foreign language. The research article is consisted of four parts. The first part is introduction that focuses on history of background languages knowledge of the participant's. The second part is including the methods of conducting research in which data was collected and analyzed through qualitative design by having semi-structured interview. The participant was chosen by convenience sampling. The third part is the result that concentrates on four main issues: (1) language learning history that talks about the participant family, school, and encouragement of the language learning. (2) Learning style and personality of the participant that contains which kinds of learning styles and personalities she may have. (3) Oral skills assessment that tests oral skills and states in which parts of the language she may have problems in oral communication. (4) Written skills assessment clarifies the mistakes and errors she has made in her writing. The last part is discussion and teacher implication that suggests teaching different methods and approaches to solve the English language problems in speaking and writing.

**Keywords:** *Learning Style; Written Assessment; Personality; Oral Skill; Teaching Implication*

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to study one person learning to find out her language learning history, learning styles and personality, oral skills assessment, and written skills assessment as well as to find the weakness and strengths, and seek ways, methods, strategies, to teach such kinds of students in schools and universities to improve their learning capacity.

To do this case study, I chose a girl named X, a senior student in English Department of Language and Literature Faculty of Kabul Education University. She is a competent students in her class in has a good knowledge of English. She has got the first position in her class and is very best-liked. She is talking very fluently like a native speaker because she spends most of her life time in Pakistan where its formal language is English. She started learning in primary school in English language in Pakistan. Since

she wants to be a university instructor in English department, she is very motivated to improve not only her language and knowledge and skills, but also her academic knowledge.

During studying in Afghanistan, X faced some psychological and social challenges such as while X stated study in Afghanistan, she was made fun of by her classmates because she used more English words in Dari language as well as the school lacked audio visual materials and well-equipped classes that faced X with lots of problems because she was being taught with modern teaching materials and equipment while in Afghanistan she was being taught with ordinary materials like blackboard, paper, notebook.

### ***Methods***

X as a participant was chosen in terms of convenience sampling. Creswell (2008) stated that “In convenience sampling the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available to be studied” and also “The sample can provide useful information for answering questions and hypotheses” (P.155). The data was collected based on semi structure interview. “Semi-closed-ended questions in a survey. This type of question has all the advantages of open-and closed-ended questions. The technique is to ask a closed-ended question and then ask for additional responses in an open-ended question.” (Cited in Creswell, 2005). In the interview there 13 questions to be asked to X. While she was answering I was noting down what she was explaining and sometimes I made new questions from her answers.

Regarding learning styles and personality a questionnaire was given to X to answer them. In terms of the criteria provided I checked X’s answers and found out her learning styles.

In terms of oral skills assessment, I gave X two pictures to look at it first and explain what she sees in the pictures for two minutes. While she was explaining the pictures, I recorded her voice digitally. After that I transcribed her explanation based on vocabulary and grammar, pronunciation.

To evaluate X’s written skill, the data has been collected in an ethnographic approach that she has produced for already-existing class assignment. This assignment was for senior class first semester for translation subject and the teacher asked X to translate this text from Dari into English. And the teacher was grading X based on the content. I got a copy of the first draft one of her assignment. This assignment is composed of 210 words and then I made four copies of it that will be included in the appendix. The first copy was left unmarked, the second copy was checked for grammar and vocabulary, the third copy was checked for content and organization and the last copy was given feedback for X’s assignment.

### ***Results***

#### **1. Language Learning History**

X is the third daughter of her family. She has three sisters and two brothers. She was born in an educated family in Pakistan and grew up there and she was back to Afghanistan at the age of 12. Her father is originally Pashton but he is talking Dari very well as native speaker because he was born in Kabul and grew up there. He was graduated from language and literature faculty and he knows English, Germany, and Dutch languages and he studied in one of the German universities, he is an author as his father was an author too.

X’s mother’s native language is Dari and she was graduated from the faculty of psychology and currently she is a female principle in one of the school of Kabul city. X’s father and mother learned English at public schools in Kabul and they registered X in one of the private schools in Pakistan. X’s

parents helped her in her lessons of all subjects which were being taught in English language. Her family all the time encouraged her to learning in schools and at home, but they never let her to go to private courses and other private educational centers in Pakistan and Afghanistan. X's parents especially her father, loves their daughters a lot and he is very kind with them, help and support X not only in education but also in every part of her life. Her parents all the time listen to her opinion and supported her opinion.

X was fluent in both languages Dari and Urdu as well as Pashto. Since X's mother tongue is Dari she spoke Dari while she was at home communicating with her family members. She talked Urdu language with the people of that community outside home because X was born in Pakistan where the residences were speaking Urdu. She has so strong ability in all four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) of this language because she was born and grew up in Pakistan. She adds that Urdu looks as her first language because she used Urdu more than Dari and English languages while she was outside home like in playground, with neighbors, at school, with friends, and sometimes at home specialty with her sisters but not with her parents. X's parents talked with her in Dari language. When she was a child her mother helped her more in learning Dari language because her mother is Tajik and she learned Dari more from her mother. X can speak Pashto very fluently as well, she started learning Pashto at home from childhood. Since her father is Pashtoon and her father's relatives encouraged her to speak Pashto as much as possible with them and with her father. Her listening in Pashto is very good, she can read well, but she has some problem in writing of Pashto language.

Before joining the English Medium School X's parents and her two elder sisters helped her in learning Urdu and English language, especially in memorizing of the letters and words. Her sisters most of the time asked her to repeat the words and letters for practice and encouraged her in learn English. Because of her sisters' encouragement she felt enthusiastic to learn English language soon. Before going to school she was admitted directly to nursery not to Montessori (Private school that uses a special teaching method for early childhood) class because she had some basic knowledge in Urdu and English alphabet, numbers, and knows some basics of mathematics. After nursery period, she joined school at the age of three.

In addition, X teacher at school expressed their willingness for X's learning and aptitude regarding learning English. According to X, one of her teachers said that X was a talented and brilliant student in her class and she got first position in class among other Afghan and Pakistani students. "Most to the time my teachers appreciated me especially my English teacher and always gave me the chance to participate in cores songs in English as well as in a number of activities such as role plays, shows, and giving speech in some ceremonies like Mother's Day, Teachers Day, and so on". X said. Also according to X's explanation, her English language proficiency was very good and her reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills were excellent at that time. She continued studying in English Medium School up to eight grades where.

Regarding her learning of others languages, she says that she had a trouble time in learning of Dari language because when she was in Pakistan she studied all subjects in English and she never used too much Dari and Pashto in School, but she only talked Dari at home and no Pashto. When she came back to Afghanistan, she joined Afghani school she had problem with reading and writing of Dari Language. In Pashto language she had problem with some fluency in speaking, writing and listening but she is good in reading. Due to these problems when she got the third position in class. For example, when the teacher asked her to write some difficult words in Dari, she should not write correctly and the same problem in reading skill.

In terms of social and psychological factors, and according to Schumann (1976), there is an anxiety for students about being laughed or misunderstood when they use the new language. In Afghanistan X got language shock because when she was explaining the lesson or talking with her

classmates, she was made fun of by her classmates but she ignored them and continued learning. She decided not to be impressed by her classmates and kept her self-confidence. On the other hand, the school in which she was studying in Pakistan was very modern and well equipped with audio-visual and chairs while in Afghanistan the school in which she was studying was not well equipped, the chairs and tables were old, broken, also the number of students was very large and she was not given opportunities for practices.

X was 12 years old when she returned to Afghanistan and continued studying grade nine. She was interested in English subject because she was started English when she was a little child. One of her wishes was to become an English language teacher in one of the universities in Afghanistan. When she completed her high school in Kabul and she took entrance exam and was admitted to Said Jamaluddin Teacher's Training Collage (TTC) while she wanted to be admitted in Kabul Education University. But her father persuaded her to go TTC and see if you like it, continue, if not leave it, and get preparation for the next entrance exam next year. When she joined the Teacher Training Collage she passed the placement test for English department. Since X majored in English she was motivated to continue education because she loved English very much.

X is now a senior student in English department of Kabul Education University. While she was in TTC, she found some of her Dari teachers as best as well as her English instructors. Apart from father, her fiancé also helped and encourage her to learn more and work hard. X thinks that sometimes she speaks English like a native speaker but her pronunciation and accent is like Pakistani people, that sometime hurts her and she is working to change her accent and pronunciation like American and she has more opportunities to improve her English and change her accent and pronunciation because she has access to an American library and American teachers. When she thinks about her future to work as an English instructor in English department one of the university of Afghanistan, all the time motivate her to read, listen and learn more English than ever.

According to X's opinion, the best way for learning a language is to learn by nature, society and in childhood very soon than adult because she gives example of her own when she was at the age of three and started to learn English. She also says that the base of her learning English was put in childhood. Finally she concluded that one can learn a language in childhood up to ten years old better than puberty and old age.

## 2. Learning Styles and Personality

Lihtbown and Spada (2006) said, "We have all heard people say that they cannot learn something until they have seen it. Such learners would fall into the group called 'visual' learner." (p. 59). They also added, "Other people, who may be called 'aural' learners, seem to learn best 'by ear'." (p. 59). Finally, they mentioned "Kinaesthetic learners, physical action such as miming or role-play seems to help the learning process." (p. 59). Regarding the personality Lightbown and Spada (2006) stated "a number of personality characteristics have been proposed as likely to affect second language learning." (p. 59). According to the questionnaire given to X, her learning style is visual and auditory. This assessment was done based on VAK Test.

This questionnaire is composed of 30 questions about three learning styles and personality. In this questionnaire, there is a guide sheet that puts X on the right track to the questions completely and attentively. In the guide sheet there are four columns, the first column names the activities, the second column there are some visual questions, the third column explain some auditory questions, and the fourth column states the kinesthetic and tactile questions. The first column describes the activities to be considered for choosing good or suitable answers. For example: spell, talk, concentrate, meet someone again, contact people on business, read, do something new at work, put something together, and need help with a computer application. The second column shows a number of questions to help X to answer the

question correctly. The third column sets forth a number of questions regarding auditory style for X to understand how to choose the answer and the last column brings a number of example questions about kinesthetic and tactile style.

The questions were multiple choices, asking X to choose one option from each question. Circle or tick the answer the most represent her behavior. In X case 13 answers of her were related to the visual, 13 other answers were related to Auditory and 4 answers were related to kinesthetic learning styles.

In terms of the report of questionnaire, X's learning styles is visual and auditory. Since X started learning English at the age of three years old in native speakers environment, her English proficiency is high and she is very fluent and look like a native speakers. Also she studied all subject in English except Islamic and Urdu language subject.

Considering X's characteristic and learning styles as visual and auditory, the following strategies might be helpful for her to study and teach English in the future. For visual style she can use picture, diagrams, displays, handout, charts and the activities (watching movies and answers the questions, look at the pictures and explain what is missing in them) for each lesson. Also she can use the phrases such as "show me" look at this it will be better to perform a new task after the instruction or watching someone else do it first (Chislett and Chapman, 2005). For auditory style she can transfer the information through listening. She will use phrase is such as "tell me" "let's talk it over" it is good for her to be given spoken instruction over the telephone and she can remember the words and the songs that she hear (Chislett and Chapman, 2005). If X apply the above mentioned teaching and study strategies, she will do will in her studying and teaching.

### 3. Oral Skills Assessment

This data has been collected through digital recording of X's interview. First I distributed two photos to her to look at it and explain what she is seeing in them and then I recorded her voice. Then I started to transcribe her two minute explanation. I transcribe exactly what she said. I give feedback about grammar and vocabulary on one copy of her transcribed paper in which I specified her mistakes. On her another copy of her transcribed paper I identified her pronunciation mistakes and I left one copy blank which shows the original transcribed paper.

X did her task successfully because she could explain the pictures in details as I want. She talked very clearly, honestly, confidently, and patiently with good pronunciation and accent.

X's intelligibility was very good because what she said I understood her very well. First she took the first picture and looks at it attentively and explains within the allotted time the second picture the same as the first picture. She could recognize different aspects and things of a supermarket and expressed her point of view regarding them.

According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), there are six stages questions "a sequence in the acquisition of questions by learners of English from a variety of first language backgrounds". (P.86). the first stage "Single words, formulate, or sentence fragments" (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 86). According to this X's there is no example in this stage. The second stage "Declarative word order, no intonation, no fronting" (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 86). Also there is no example of X's oral test in this stage. The third stage "Fronting: do-fronting; wh-fronting, no inversion; other fronting" there are no example in MX's oral test for this stage. (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 86). The fourth stage "Inversion in wh + copula; 'yes/no' questions with other auxiliaries" (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 86). In X's oral test there is no questions with auxiliaries or yes/no question. The fifth stage is "If English user subject-auxiliary inversion, it may also permit inversion with full verbs" (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 86). In this stage X didn't use any WH-questions with auxiliary with main verbs. And the sixth stage is

“complex questions” (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 86). Also Mariyam hasn’t used any tag question, negative question, but she used embedded question in line three as “some food materials I don’t know what are the bottles may be they are milk or something else” of oral test. Based on the above stages I found that X is in stage two because all her explanations in oral test is declarative word order, there are no any types of questions.

Therefore, she has same problem with verb usage like “had/has” she used to had instead of has in this sentence “She had her purse in the cart”, but this is not a big problem of X in her oral test because it is common in oral language that people make, also in other sentence “She also had bought something maybe bread or milk or something else”. In this sentence she should have told “She also has bought”.

She has problem with the usage of “S” for third person singular. She hasn’t used “S” with “She” in this sentence “She want to buy something for her”, also in other sentence “She want to buy something”. She has problem with pronoun redundancy. For example, “And she, I think she enters now right now, and she want to buy something for her, so now she is just going forward and she want to buy something of course” and also in another example of X’s “because there are some thing in her cart and also her purse, a and the next woman aa, she is standing with her cart and her baby is in the cart and she also had both something may be bread or milk or something else”

I can see the problem of the usage “s” with uncountable noun. For example, “and this women her hairs are long”, “she is wearing a hat and her hairs are short”. In addition, although X is not a native speaker, her general proficiency level of English is so high.

About negation Lightbown and Spada, (2006) mentioned “Second language learners from different first language background behave somewhat differently within those stages.” (p.85). according to X’s oral test she has two of her negative sentences that belongs to all stages because in every stage, it is possible to use this phrase. In stage three it has been mentioned “Learners begin to place that negative element after auxiliary verbs like ‘are’, ‘is’, and ‘can’”. X in her oral test in line 14 mentioned “maybe not maybe”. In her sentence X has made a redundancy.

Regarding the pronunciation, X’s made two mistakes as in the following sentences: “there are also some (eggs)” pronounces “æ” /ægz/ while it is pronounced /egz/, also “there are many things in these (cupboard)” she pronounces /kab. əd/ while it is pronounced /kʌb.əd/. Since she was living in Pakistan from childhood up to the age of 12, she has the accent and pronunciation of Pakistani people; she mentioned in her language learning history interview that she knows her accent is Pakistani but she wants to change it to American accent or pronunciation.

The errors made by X were actually silly mistakes that is to say, she knows those mistakes but she made due to paying less attention to grammar to look more fluent because her English proficiency is high in terms of her second language learning background.

#### 4. Written Skills Assessment

From grammatical and vocabulary point of view X’s assignment has some problem with word choice; for example, “Humankind” instead of “Mankind”, this is a actually minor problem because the meaning is understood is common among students. “Their” instead of “others” this is also a minor problem because there pronunciation is similar and students make it while explaining something. Instead of “life style” X has used “living style” this is minor as well, since there are very close in meaning and the students sometimes make these silly mistakes. Also problem with verb tense; for example, “translate it” instead of “translated it” this is considered a major problem, the reason is that X translated the story in the past but she used translate it, it meaning now she wants to translate it. Problem with extra usage of the words; for example, “but”, “a”, “is”, “or” this is also minor problem because students are habitual to

using these conjunctions and articles, they come automatically in their writing as well as in speaking. Problem with the verb change usages. For example, “change” instead of “changed/changing”. That occurred three times in the written assignment. This is a major problem because misunderstanding occurs for the readers, i.e. change means to take place from time to time while changed means something which took place in the past. And changing means something is in the process to change.

According to the content and organization’s point of view X’s assignment has lots of problem; most of sentences in the paragraph are vague and questionable; for example, “Generally speaking this story was very different. However, it is something that foreigners are familiar with and maybe it is something common there but it’s unusual in our culture” this sentence doesn’t make sense because in the first sentences “Generally speaking this story was very different” X problems is the word different she hasn’t use a more specific word. While in the second sentence “However it is something that foreigners are familiar with and maybe it is something common there but it’s unusual in our culture” the main problem is with pronoun “it” it will be more clear if she uses a noun (or phrase) instead of a pronoun. Also the reasons haven’t been mentioned in the following sentence that why she got shock “I got shocked when I read that story and translate it. Because in my views it is against humankind”. The reason why it is against humankind is not so clear but the reason why she got shocked is clear.

In another sentence she hasn’t mentioned that why the message of the story is for foreigners “So in one sentence the message of the story for foreigners could be about trust that they should not trust anyone” X was given task to translate the message of the story from the Dari to English but she may not have gotten the message or may not have found the respective words to use to carry the message. In addition, the following sentence is not clear “for our culture I think the message is change because our culture is change, our people are change and our living style is change” in this sentence she got the concept but she hasn’t organized it properly. And finally the following sentence should come at the beginning as a topic sentence “In the same way I can say that the message of the story for us is to be loyal and faithful with everyone especially with our partners” because it is the message and the other sentences can support it. Based on the X’s assignment paper I found the above mentioned problems to be considered.

After assessment of X’s assignment paper I can say that in spite of problems and mistakes in vocabulary and grammar, as well as in content and organization, she could express the message of the story she had read. When I read her assignment paper I understood what she meant by the message of the story. Her general proficiency level is middle. X’s specific language problems are organization and redundancies. “Many errors can be explained better in terms of learners’ developing knowledge of the structure of the target language rather than an attempt to transfer patterns of their first language” (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p.79). Also “Some of the errors are remarkable similar to those made by young first language learners for example, the use of a regular-ed past tense ending on an irregular verb” (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p.79). X’s errors are identified as developmental errors according to Lightbown and Spada (2006), some researchers argued that if we allow learners much freedom to make mistakes and not correct them; this will lead to fossilization of errors and will become the habit of them. X’s making errors in second language are the results of not receiving feedback by her teachers, who were the advocates of communicative approach which says “it is better to encourage learners to develop fluency before accuracy” (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p.140). While she was learning English language in childhood in schools. So she has the habit of making errors while speaking and writing.

### ***Discussion and Teacher Implication***

In terms of the data collected about X’s language learning history, learning styles and personality, oral skills assessment, and written skills assessment, X’s strengths are: (1) her English language

proficiency is very high because she started learning English from childhood in native speakers environment, (2) her knowledge of vocabulary is very good because she studied all subjects in English at school, (3) her fluency is also very well because she speaks like a native speaker, (4) her pronunciation is also good. X's weakness in English language are: (1) the problem in writing is, (a) with content and organization, (b) the sentences are not lined logically, (c) problems with coherence, (2) problems in grammar, (a) redundancies, (b) tense, (c) wrong usage of vocabulary, (d) wrong usage of possessives and not using of articles on the sentences, (3) in oral communication she has problems, (a) verb usage, (b) usage of "s" for third person singular, (c) usage of "s" with uncountable nouns.

Taking all the problems in to account about X, I suggest some kinds of activities to meet the problems mentioned above as the following: In writing, she should read and practice the book "Writing for College" "page 004-014" to solve her problem regarding writing process, "Page 097-108" "Developing strong paragraph" to develop information on coherence and "Page 112-122" "Mastering the collage essay" to improve information about content and organization.

To develop X's vocabulary and grammar knowledge, she should read and practice the information given in the book "The Practice of English Language Teaching". In grammar she can read the chapter 13 of the book "Page 210-227" to improve the practice of her grammar. Also in vocabulary, she can read chapter 14 "page 229-246" to develop vocabulary building skills.

Since X learning style is auditor and visual, the teacher should set those kinds of activities to meet her problem and interest her to do the activity effectively. For example, using, pictures, movies, gestures, graphs, body language, role plays, charts, flash cards, communicative exercise and radio cassette and so on.

X has intrinsic motivation because she hopes to be a good English language instructor in the future. But in order to make it more motive learner I can give her some extrinsic motivation by appreciating her using "well done", "Bravo", "Good job", "Excellent", "Good", "Very good" and so on. Also apart from these things, to improve X's personality I can create a friendly atmosphere in class and allow nobody to make fun of her in class while she is speaking.

As X has problems in grammar and vocabulary, so I suggest the form-based activities is the best to solve X problem regarding the grammar and vocabulary. And also I and suggesting content-based activities for X to improve her information on the content and organization in writing. These were my suggestion to X to strengthen her weaknesses and be not only a good learner of language but also a good instructor of English in the future.

## ***Conclusion***

As a conclusion it is necessary for every teacher to know about his/ her learner properly and apply teaching methods and approaches based on the learner's need. All students do not learn language in the same ways because they have various learning styles and personalities. A teacher should apply various methods in teaching because students are learning language in different ways and in different perspective in order to improve her/ his language learning skills. They are different in learning such as, visual, auditory and movable or kinesthetic learners. Based on these learning styles, it is responsibility of teachers to provide their teaching materials and methods on the student's need and willing.



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