

A Case Study of Reflecting the Communicative Competence of Migrant Workers on EFL learners in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Many migrant workers go to Taiwan to find jobs in order to support their families in their native countries. Not only do they suffer from living far away from home, they also encounter the challenge of having to adjust to a new linguistic and cultural environment. In this study, the author attempts to realize how Indonesian caregivers perform their communicative skills while working in Taiwan. She will begin by exploring the theories of second language acquisition within the target culture; she then illustrate the second language learning experiences of three women who are all from Indonesia. The author will indicate the similarities and differences of their language performance; focusing especially upon the factors of the relative success or failure of their communication efforts. She will follow this with one particular case to describe the importance of language learning closely link to the social context, and conclude with an overview of the comparison and contrast of second language learning within and outside the target culture. Although Taiwanese students are not situated in the target language background, hopefully, inspiring from the migrant workers' Chinese learning outcome, English teachers can effectively help their students improve their English competency.

KEY WORDS: second language acquisition, oral communicative skills, motivation, migrant workers, EFL learners.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the statistics dated on September, 2019 provided by the Ministry of Labor, there were around 714,300 migrant workers from Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippine, and Thailand offering their labors in Taiwan. The workplaces they are mainly engaged include factories, construction sites, and as domestic workers in family households. The jobs for them to do in the household are taking care of children, looking after senior people, and doing the housework. The number of laboring on domestic senior caring is around 258,000. It takes 36% of the entire laboring. Owing to the elder's sickness and was in the respiration treatment room in the hospital, the author had the opportunity to get acquaintance with three female migrant workers from Indonesia. There were many young women doing the caring job for certain patients in the hospital. Whenever the author visited the elder, those women smiled at her friendly. She supposed that they were the patients' family. Later on, she was told that they were migrant workers who were hired by the patients' family. In order to save the expenses, many household would employ the migrant workers to take care of their chronic disease family. The author went to the hospital every day and gradually they knew one another well and could have a pleasant conversation. It was amazing that some of them could communicate with the author in Chinese well. The author was impressed by their language capacity and inspired her to know how they learned their second language -- Chinese. What approaches did they used to acquire it? How did they overcome the difficulty in not being understood? Did all of them have the similar performance in verbal communication? By contrast with Taiwanese students struggling with the difficulty in conversing with people verbally after several years on English learning, why could those migrant workers possess such a good oral skill? It seemed that they did not have difficulties in communicating with their employers and nurses. For the purpose of realizing the experience of learning foreign/ second language, Chinese, and intending to reflect its effects on Taiwanese EFL learners, the author requested three women and obtained their permission to interview them with using their pseudonym. The author will use the narrative style to interweave these three Indonesian women's story. Hopefully, inspiring from the migrant workers' Chinese learning experiences, English teachers can effectively help their students improve their English competency.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies indicate that younger learners may have certain advantages over older learners in new language learning (Ellis, 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 2008; Lenneberg, 1967; Mayberry & Lock, 2003; Ozfidan & Burlbaw, 2019). Their belief is connected to the theory of Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) which suggests that a period of time, between birth and somewhere around the age when a child enters puberty, exists in which learning a second language can be accomplished more rapidly and easily than times falling outside of this period. However, beyond to the critical period hypothesis, many researchers claim that specific factors may interfere with learners' performance to learn a new language. For example, in their study, Lightbown and Spada (2008) stated that language learning depends on learners' characteristics and the environment. Their findings suggested that older learners have a higher level of problem solving and metalinguistics abilities than younger learners. Likewise, Smith & Strong (2009) also pointed out that, because of being highly motivated to learn to fulfill a particular need or demand, adult language learners would make themselves better than younger learners.

In this study, the researcher attempts to realize how language learners can effectively acquire the language other than their own native one. Meniado (2019) examined how a group of migrant workers acquired their second language. In the study, it reveals that immersion and actual use of the target language in authentic communicative situations can make language acquisition easier. It implies that second language learners learn the best when they are immersed in the target language and given substantial opportunities to use it in meaningful contexts. In the study, Samifanni (2020) also indicated that the language teaching is most effective and productive when the learners are actively engaged in authentic tasks that are conducted in a natural and spontaneous manner to enable learners to gain a total psycho-socio-cultural-linguistic experience. In addition, in their study, Kartal and Sarigul (2017) showed that the combination of the corpora, an electronic compilation of authentic texts and the concordance, has encouraged language teachers and learners to reach natural authentic language occurring. Other than immersing in the target language environment with authentic tasks, many studies emphasize the importance of motivation, a factor which can facilitate the language learners on language acquisition. Li (2009) said that learning motivation is a strong internal drive for language learning and believed that "the stronger learning motivation is, the more passion learners have for learning, the more lasting the learning activity will be, the more difficulties can be overcome" (58). In their study, Khan and Takkac (2021) indicate that the main motivation factors for new immigrants learning English as a second language acquisition is the desire for career and economic enhancement. Meniado (2019) also responded that lack of interest to progress further due to perceived non-necessity of the second language at work can make the whole process slower. In order to achieve successful and effective language learning, language teachers and learners require taking various aspects into consideration. In this study, the researcher intends to investigate how three Indonesian caregivers acquire their second language ability, and what inspiration can be perceived on Taiwanese EFL learners. Two research questions are as follows.

Research questions

- How do three Indonesian caregivers perform their communicative skills in Taiwan?
- What kind of language learning strategies can possibly inspire EFL learners?

III. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of investigating the foreign/second language competency employed by non-native speakers, the author interviewed three female migrant workers. The language used in the interview was both Chinese and English. The author conducted the interview at the hospital while the participants were available.

Participants: Three women from Indonesia were as domestic workers in family households. They were designated to take care of senior people who were hospitalized in the hospital for a while. This study would use their pseudonym to protect their privacy.

Interviewing: In order to better realize those participants' background and their language competency, the author conducted one-to-one interviewing. All the interviewing work was preceded in the hospital so that it would not interfere with their routine work of looking after those senior people. In the interview, each person had her own story and different level of language performance. It will be described respectively in the next section. The first woman, Arlin, was a friendly and polite person who said hello to the author at the very beginning when the author stepped into the respiration room and talked to her initially. When Arlin was interviewed, she was feeding her caring recipient who was a quiet male around eighty years old. The second person, Aira, was a nineteen-year-old girl who took care of an old lady. She said that her employer was going to transfer the old lady to another hospital in different city because this lady had five sons who shared the

expenses. Four of them lived in another city and were busy with their business and wanted to transfer their senior to the hospital close to them. Aira would go with the old lady. When the author was conducting the interview by the bed, the old lady tried to pull off the respiration pipe. Therefore, the interview would stop once in a while, and Aira could pay more attention to the patient. The third woman, Ring, whose caring recipient was a male and was placed next to Arlin's, always smiled at the author with few oral words. When she was interviewed, Ring was busy with patting the back of her paralyzed caring recipient.

Lettering: In addition to conducting the interview at the hospital, one of the participants, Aira, would send text messages to the author once in a while. She was the only person who could speak English and was fond of conversing in English as well. She indicated that she had been to Malaysia before and had learned English from her previous employer. When she found that the author could speak English, she would like to take the chance to practice it. That was why she would send messages when she was free. In this, she could review her writing skills. Furthermore, she preferred speaking English while interviewing. Three participants had something in common with one another. Their educational background was all junior high graduates. When they were in Indonesia, they could not speak any foreign languages. They learned Mandarin Chinese in Indonesia when they were about to Taiwan, but the period of language learning was different. One was three months, another was four, and the other was five months. Their teachers were all Chinese who lived in Indonesia and the agent would pay for them. They indicated that they did not learn a lot when they were in their country. In addition, they could not read and write Chinese characters during their staying in Taiwan. Therefore, they could not read the survey questions which were written in Chinese. When they were asked, "Is it important for you to find a job if you can speak the target language?", they all agreed at it. They indicated that they liked Taiwan because they could get good pay and the people were nice to them. Thus, they implied that they would apply for coming back again when the residential period was due. They were all satisfied with their current job – looking after the senior people. When they were asked what languages they used when they talked with their friends in Taiwan. They all answered, Indonesian. It meant that their friends were from Indonesia mainly. They also said that there were many different dialects in Indonesia. Although their dialects might be different, they still preferred to use them. When they had a conversation with one another in the respiration treatment room, they never spoke in Mandarin.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Individual features

Arlin : She was a very friendly woman. She looked younger than her real age. She was multilingual who could speak three different languages other than her native language. The three languages were Arabic, Malaysian, and Mandarin. Because the author focused on her Mandarin learning experience, she did not ask her how she learned the other two languages and what competency she had since she left those countries. She had ever been to Taiwan for two years before and this was her second time and she had been there for eleven months. However, she claimed that she would come back again. Her Mandarin was quite good. When the author interviewed her, she could understand her well. She said that she had learned most Mandarin from her employer's children. She thought it was a really good way to learn a new language.

Ring : She had been in Taiwan for one year. However, it was hard for the author to communicate with her while conducting the interview. The author could not understand her and the frequent used term she employed was "I don't know" in Chinese. The author tried to paraphrase the words, but she still could not comprehend them. She kept asking Arlin for help. Arlin needed to explain them in Indonesian and then interpreted Ring's answers to the author. Fortunately, the author had a good interpreter to help her complete the interview. Why couldn't Ring perform Mandarin well since she had been in Taiwan for one year. By contrast, Aira was in the target country for one and a half years and could speak fluent and meaningful expressions. Ring said that she had fewer chances to speak Mandarin with her employer. The caring recipient she took care of could not talk and seemed in paralyzed. Therefore, she had fewer chances to utilize the oral communication. In addition, she had spent most of her time staying in the hospital to take care of the same person once she arrived in Taiwan a year ago. When her employer came to visit the senior, they seldom talked but watched the television together. However, Ring said that she could speak Malaysian when she worked in Malaysia. Why could she speak that language more fluently? She replied that it was because both Malaysian and Indonesian languages were quite similar. Moreover, Ring would chat with her friends freely in her mother tongue. Under this circumstance, her Mandarin had limited progress.

Aira : At the beginning, the author did not know that Aira could speak English. When the caregiver implied that she could speak English, the author was surprised and interested in discovering her language learning experience. When the author was going to interview her, she asked Aira which language was easier for her to

talk. She chose English. Therefore, the author had to translate the Chinese version survey questions into English so as to interview her. Why could she speak English? She said that she went to Singapore to make money when she was only fifteen years old. It was her first time to go overseas. She stayed there for two and a half years. During this period of time, she looked after four children for her employer. Before she went to Singapore, she only knew few English words at school in Indonesia. She could not speak and write in English at that time. However, when she was interviewed, she could understand the questions well. In addition, she also could read and write English. She said that she felt Chinese was more difficult than English. That's why she could not read and write Chinese since she had been in Taiwan for one and a half years. The author was curious about her encounters and gave her follow-up questions and an appreciation letter. She answered those questions in a written form by herself and sent the author an English message, too. There were some syntactic errors and misspelling in her message but the content was comprehensible. She indicated that she wanted to go to school to get a better education one day, but she could not afford it. She also mentioned that English was very important in the world. She thought that if people could speak English, they would possess a powerful position. In this, it quite echoes to Anil's (2015) point that English is considered as a tool and a passport to settle in a good job in India. Some messages were quoted as follows.

I also want to get more study but in my country not enough money. If now I get more study I must spend more and more money... I work in Taiwan and get money for my next life because I need nice life... I like to speak with English because is so easy for me and English is very import and at the world who can speak English can be Queen of the world and smart, so I like so much English.

When she was asked how she learned English in Singapore? She said that she learned it by watching her employer's children doing their homework. Except doing the housework, she had to bring the children to school. Therefore, she had many chances to practice her English with them. When she was in Taiwan, she would speak Mandarin, Taiwanese, and English with her employer. Thus, she could maintain her English competency while she was learning another different foreign language. In addition, she had a Taiwanese boyfriend. She spoke Mandarin with her boyfriend mostly. Thus, she could make a good progress in her language learning.

Differences in individual experiences: It shows that three participants had shared some similar situations, such as they were all multilingual speakers and had been to many different countries as migrant workers. However, they demonstrated several different indications. The age range for three ladies was different: one is 19, another is 26, and the other one is 27. Two of them were single and one was married. They had been to different countries to be the caregivers before they came to Taiwan. Arlin had been to Arabia and Malaysia before, so she could speak Arabic and Malaysian. Ring had been to Malaysia and she could speak Malaysian as well. Aira had been to Singapore, so she could speak English. Among these three women, Aira was the youngest one. When she was fifteen, she went to Singapore to work. She had a very special language learning experience. She was also the person who showed her great interest in the author's research and liked to talk to her actively. Arlin was eighteen when she first went overseas to work; she was twenty three years old, when Ring first went overseas.

When they were asked, "When you cannot communicate with people in Taiwan, what will you do?" Arlin and Aira replied that they would ask their friends to interpret for them. While the same question for Ring, she could not understand it, so the author paraphrased her question and explained it to her. However, Ring still could not get it. At this moment, Arlin, being an interpreter, gave her an immediate help. Aira told me that she was lucky because her Taiwanese employer could speak English. So, when she could not express her meaning in Mandarin, she would speak English. In addition, she was the only interviewee who could speak Taiwanese, a language/dialect used by many Taiwanese people. While interview was in progress, she would appear few oral communication problems sometimes. It seems that she might encounter the challenge of multi-lingual abilities confusion. When the author asked them how often and what means they used to contact with their family in their home country, Arlin said that she would make a phone call once a month, Ring and Aira would make a phone call and write letters to their family monthly. The reasons for returning back again if the residential period was due were different. Arlin claimed that the job assigned was easier to conduct and Taiwanese people were nice. Ring said that she had to make money and, comparing with other countries, she could get a better pay. Aira indicated in detail that she did not want to stay at her home country; otherwise, her mother would ask her to get married. She thought she was too young to marry. In addition, she preferred being independent and made money by herself.

Reflections on Taiwanese EFL learners inspired by three ladies' second language performance Three ladies from Indonesia helped certain families take care of their sick family members in the hospital in Taiwan. Although their job was similar; however, individual Chinese development was quite different. Based on their abilities on second/foreign language performance, it may inspire EFL learners in Taiwan in their English learning motivation. In this, the author would shape three ladies' experiences and project three dos and three don'ts onto Taiwanese EFL learners. In the following, three dos will be stated first, and followed by three don'ts

Being open-minded foreign language learners: Learners' characteristics will affect their language learning performance. For example, Arlin was a very friendly person and would say hello to people actively. Her easy-going characteristics would help her obtain more language practice opportunity. Moreover, when Ring needed language interpretation, she would provide immediate help. Thus, she could gain more chances to extend her verbal practice to various topics. The more she practised, the better she advanced her language skills. In addition, making friends with locals was one advantage language learners could do. Aira had a Taiwanese boyfriend. It helped her reinforce her language proficiency positively.

Strong motivation on learning: Based on three women's case, it indicates that learning second or foreign language at a young age can be more effective. When she was fifteen, Aira learned her first foreign language – English. Two and a half years later, she learned another language and its dialect – Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese. However, she still maintained the ability of English usage. In addition to the age factor, the motivation and duration of staying in the target environment are two important factors for the language learners to sustain their language competency too. Aira believed that 'good English equals good life and good future'. It facilitated her to keep moving forward whenever she had a chance to practice her English.

Being multilingual learners : Three ladies had a magnificent phenomenon in common. That is, they all possessed two to three foreign language competency other than their own mother tongue. Among them, Ring's Mandarin performance is not as good as the other two women because of her limited oral practice chance. Arlin and Aira can speak three foreign languages. Their Mandarin oral expression was good. Was it because that they had a prior experience in learning foreign languages? So, when they had to learn one more foreign language – Mandarin, they could deal with it easier and better. Is it easier for the multilingual speakers to learn a new language than the monolingual speakers do? It can be another issue for further investigation.

In order to possess better foreign language skills, language learners had better facilitate themselves to take opportunities of practicing the language. The idiom, practice makes perfect, is really a timeless rule. Three ladies were situated in the target culture and Mandarin Chinese was like their second language. They had more opportunities to employ it. Relatively, being EFL learners, they may have rare chances to practice English in their daily life. However, if they have strong motivation, they still can use it since more and more foreign visitors or workers are interested in visiting or working in Taiwan. Furthermore, if they are ambitious enough, like three ladies, they can learn more than one foreign language as well. Although three ladies could speak more than one language, one of them had communicative problems in Chinese. In this, EFL learners might assume her experiences to three language learning taboos which show as follows.

Don't be alone and quiet : Being language learners, they need to take opportunities to converse with native speakers once in a while. Opposite to the mother tongue kept in the long-term memory zone of the brain and used naturally, foreign languages will be loss if they do not be used frequently. Therefore, being a language learner, he/she had better not be alone and keep silent. Conversely, they need to find chances to talk when they are allowed. It was a shame that Ring could not speak Chinese since she had been in Taiwan for a year. The senior person she took care of could not talk, so she missed a chance to practice the language. When her employer was there, they did not make many conversations but watched TV quietly. In this, how could she make any progress on Chinese speaking skills?

Avoid sticking with people from the same language background : It is natural for international students to stick together with people who share the same language and cultural backgrounds when they just arrive at the target culture. It makes them feel secure and comfortable. However, if sticking becomes a normal fashion, it will be hard for them to separate from one another. Afterward, it will become even harder for them to involve themselves in the target language learning. Moreover, the native speakers may not try to close to the international students because they cannot understand those people speaking in their own native language. Thus, the international students may lose their chance to practice the target language.

Don't rely on partners for interpreting : Three ladies had been in Taiwan for a while and their age were similar. However, their language performance was quite different. Aira and Arlin could communicate with people more fluently and appropriately in Mandarin expressions than Ring could. They were in Taiwan over one and a half years and Ring was there for one year. Then, why was their language performance different? The main reason was that Ring had less chance to speak Mandarin. In addition, there were many caregivers from Indonesia who might affect her language improvement. The author found that she would ask her friends to help her solve the language problems and interpret the necessary information for her. Once she got used to relying on her friends, her progress in language learning and acquisition would be limited and slow down. It shows that her integrated motivation was not strong enough to make her get involved in the target culture. For the purpose of being skillful foreign language learners, staying in the target culture is a good means that can provide the language learners more opportunities to practice the language. However, if the learners have less motivation on improving language or prefer sticking with people from the same linguistic background, their progress on language learning will become limited. Likewise, for those EFL learners in Taiwan, although they are situated in the monolingual environment, they still can take the chance to practice English since more and more foreign people would like to visit or work in Taiwan. If they will approach to those foreign people actively, they can earn chances to practice English.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Being EFL (English as a foreign language) and CFL/CSL (Chinese as a foreign/second language) learners, three ladies not only had to overcome the problems from the different cultural backgrounds, they also had to know how to do their job appropriately and how to lessen their homesick. The most difficult aspect was that they had to learn as much the target language -- Chinese as they could in order to well communicate with Taiwanese people. It revealed that two of them could speak Chinese well and would like to socialize with Taiwanese people actively. It implies that they had motivation to adjust their life in the target culture. However, the lady who had difficulties in comprehending Chinese would rely on her companions deeply. In this, it might make her life inconvenient because of problematic verbal communication. With the demonstration of different language competency performed by three ladies, it may inspire English teachers to think how to work with Taiwanese students on English learning effectively. It is an advantage for language learners to be in the target culture physically so that they can have more genuine opportunities to practice the target language. However, it pointed out that one lady could not speak Chinese although she had been in Taiwan for a year. At this point, it shows that the motivation is the key factor. More and more foreigners would like to visit or stay in Taiwan. Being EFL learners, students can take the opportunities to practice their English with the foreign visitors since they have learned English for years. With the open-minded characteristics and strong motivation, it can help language learners make more progress. In this study, the sample size is not enough to generalize the results in all parts of second/foreign language learning environment. In order to gain better insight into the language learning effects, teachers/researchers can establish authentic English tasks for students to work on with foreign people situated in Taiwan and examine its results. More and more foreign people are coming to Taiwan to visit or work. In order to conduct a smooth and understanding communication with one another, Taiwanese EFL students had better make more efforts on advancing their English competency.

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