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# Difficulties in Learning English As a Second Or Foreign Language

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DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND  
OR FOREIGN LANGUAGE

by

James B. Wold

A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

### Difficulties in Learning English as a Second or Foreign Language

In this research project, the author explored the experience of one adult female immigrant to the United States and her difficulties in learning English as a second language (ESL) and identified several compounding reasons for her lack of expected progress. The research was accomplished by way of personal observation and interviews, which allowed the learner the opportunity to tell her own story in the phenomenological case study. There are many challenges that face foreign language (FL) learners and the learner struggled with notable difficulties. The findings showed that the learner, whose first and second languages were nonalphabetical, had never been taught the sound/letter rules system of English, and this fundamental deficit played a pivotal role in her poor classroom attendance, wavering motivation to learn and practice English, and ultimately, in her lack of progress. Implications included the need for basic sound/letter training to be implemented in basic ESL programs, especially for nonalphabetic first language learners.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively in English is essential for immigrants to the United States as they learn to function and communicate in an unfamiliar culture and language. However, it may be very difficult for some immigrants to learn and use English, and they may show very little progress over time. While it is unlikely that every learner of English as a second language (ESL) enjoys the luxury of learning in ideal and perfect learning situations, immigrant ESL learners are still reasonably able to attain high levels of English proficiency and should at least be able to make modest progress.

#### Statement of the Problem

Not everyone who comes to this country learns English rapidly or makes effective progress in English ability, and that lack of progress can have a negative effect on the quality of life of the immigrant and can be a barrier to success for the learner. The resulting social marginalization might be particularly frustrating for a woman learner, and she may feel increasingly marginalized from the culture she seeks to join. That frustration can compound the effects and causes of the perceived failure to progress. In turn, that sense of failure can lead to shame and embarrassment and further inhibit the learner's practical and natural acquisition of the new language, and thus, negatively affect her immigration and socialization experience.

However, a learner who experiences difficulty and slow progress may not be aware of the causes or problems behind the lack of progress or how to resolve them. Instructors and directors of ESL programs might be unaware of the reasons for or resolutions to the difficulties a learner experiences. It is crucial that ESL instructors and program directors help adult learners, who do not make expected progress, to determine the most likely reasons for their predicament and make recommendations, and if necessary, implement accommodations to help them overcome barriers to learning.

### Background of the Problem

Since effective language learning involves a variety of skills, practices and abilities, problems could be based in any of a number of areas, or there may be a combination of reasons for the lack of necessary and expected progress (Shank, 2001; Schwarz, 2003). It is important for ESL instructors and program directors to attain as complete a picture as possible of the learner's language learning profile in order to help determine the possible and likely causes for the learner's lack of expected progress, not only to address the reasons, but also for the sake of the learner's self-image, confidence, and motivation to continue the language learning process (Shank; Comstock & Kamara, 2003).

Examples from the literature provided a basis for review of various skills and affective factors in the study of ESL and likely causes were identified for the learning differences and problems experienced by certain types of learners. Much of the literature on barriers to learning language involve language learning disability (LLD), both in students who learn English and in students who learn other foreign languages,

but very little information is available from the learners themselves about the difficulties they experience or their language learning experience in general.

Since there are so many factors involved in learning and language study, it would seem beneficial to attain a more complete picture of the background, disposition, practice, and experience of a learner who has had notable difficulty in learning ESL and in showing noticeable progress. This author described, examined, and evaluated various aspects of one learner's ESL learning experience.

#### Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the project was to explore and describe the experience of one adult female immigrant to the U.S. and her difficulties in learning English as a second language. Information gathered from the available research provided a foundation for understanding and helped to suggest a variety of possible reasons for the difficulties she experienced. Interviews with her provided testimony and insight in the qualitative inquiry. Observations from the viewpoint of this researcher, an experienced EFL teacher, adult educator, and trusted person, provided background and suggestions for consideration and focus. Insights gathered from interviews with the learner should help to inform ESL instructors of adult learners about the real experience and reaction of one type of learner and one unique learning experience, but one that can provide insight to the kinds of problems that many ESL learners might experience when they come to the U.S. as immigrants.

Also, the findings from this case study may demonstrate whether certain types of learners should receive special or remedial training in any aspects of ESL in order to

learn more efficiently. Specifically, certain learners whose first language and the way they learned it have absolutely nothing in common with English, and it may be more problematic than has been generally thought. For example, the Taiwanese/Chinese learner of ESL may benefit from an extremely basic reteaching of English letter/sound correlations and rules. This remains an area for further research.

### Chapter Summary

The author explored and described one U.S. immigrant woman's English learning experience from her perspective by way of interviews and observation. In this way, the learner was able to express her experience and the effects of her difficulties. The collected data are authentic and valid as it provided the genuine experience of one learner. The contribution and relevance of the findings to the field demonstrate the weight of her true experience and the flavor of her true expression. It is hoped that others like her will benefit from the telling of her story and that ESL teaching methodology will grow from it as well. This author provided recommendations to ESL instructors and program directors to help learners in similar situations, such as remedial training in phonemic coding to help rebuild the learning foundation in order to help the learner make new progress where progress had been painfully slow. If that remedial training is effective, the practice can be encouraged in the field for students with similar problems.

In Chapter 2, the Review of Literature, the available current literature is presented and discussed briefly. In Chapter 3, Methods, the goals and procedures of the explorative research design and phenomenological inquiry are detailed.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of the project was to explore and describe the experience of one adult female immigrant to the United States and her difficulties in learning English as a second language. Information gathered from the available research provided a foundation for understanding and helped to suggest a variety of reasons for the difficulties she experienced. Interviews with her provided testimony and insight into this phenomenological inquiry. Insights gathered can inform English as second language (ESL) instructors of adult learners about the needs of learners who do not progress at expected rates.

#### Background

The ability to communicate effectively in English is essential for immigrants to the U.S. who wish to be integrated into society. However, some immigrants may have a very difficult time learning and using English and may show very little progress over time (Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1996; Schwarz & Terrill, 2000). Except for those who might be able to insulate themselves in tightly knit, self-sustaining ethnic communities, immigrants must learn to function and communicate in an unfamiliar culture and language.

While it is unlikely that the majority of ESL learners enjoy the luxury of learning in ideal and perfect learning situations, most adult ESL learners are able to

attain high levels of English proficiency (White & Genesee, 1996; Birdsong, 1992; Bongaerts, Planken, & Schils, 1995; Ioup, Boustagui, Tigi, & Moselle, 1994; Juffs & Harrington, 1995; all cited in Bialystock, 1997). However, not everyone who immigrates to the U.S. reaches a high level of proficiency, and many are not able to make what might be considered expected progress. While the causes of the lack of success in the target language can be hard to identify, the effects of such weaknesses can be notable. In the case of immigrants, difficulties in learning the new language can pose risks to success in more fundamental endeavors that affect the happiness and even the livelihoods of individuals and families (Comstock & Kamara, 2003; Shank, 2001).

It is crucial that ESL instructors of adult learners, who do not make expected progress, determine the most likely reasons for the learners' predicament and make recommendations and, if necessary, provide accommodations to help them overcome the barriers to learning (Comstock & Kamara, 2003; Schwarz, 2003). Since effective language learning involves a variety of skills, abilities, practices, and resources, there may be a combination of reasons for the lack of necessary and expected progress (Schwarz & Terrill, 2000). It is important to determine the possible and likely causes for the lack of expected progress in such a learner, not only for the purpose of addressing possible problems, but also for the sake of the learner's self-image, confidence and motivation to continue the language learning process.

### Second Language Acquisition

Ellis (1997) defined second language (L2) acquisition as "the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside of a

classroom” (p. 3). The language studied is referred to as the target language, and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the study of this learning process. English as a second language is learned in a country where English is spoken naturally, while English as a foreign language (EFL) is learned in countries where English is not spoken as an official language. Foreign language (FL) refers to any non-native language learned anywhere it is not spoken naturally. For the purposes of this review, the adjectives, target, foreign, and second language are practically interchangeable but are specific in certain research examples cited. In addition, results from research in one area are transferable to another, and ESL is the ultimate focus.

#### *SLA and the Adult ESL Learner*

Learning a second language can be influenced by a variety of individual differences including: (a) personality, attitudes, and motivation (Ellis, 1997; Lalonde & Gardner, 1984, as cited in Downey & Snyder, 2000); (b) language aptitude (Ellis, 1997; Carroll, 1985, as cited in Downey & Snyder); (c) anxiety (von Worde, 1998; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, as cited in Downey & Snyder); and (d) social and psychological issues (Burling, 1981, as cited in Downey & Snyder). Since it is known that adult learners bring a reservoir of life and educational experience to the classroom (Knowles, 1980, as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), even though this may be an assumption, it follows that these learners might also bring complex psychology and multi-layered personalities to the learning of the new language, both in the classroom and in the natural environment.

Personality can influence the extent to which the learner participates in learning and practicing the target language (Ellis, 1997) and can profoundly affect the

social aspects of learning and practice. For example, since language is a social phenomenon, anxiety and the fear of risk can severely inhibit a learner from very important social elements of language learning and practice (Crookall & Oxford, 1991, as cited in von Worde, 1998). The combined frustration, that is, the expectation to be able to make progress combined with the lack of expected progress, can have a negative effect on the quality of life of the immigrant ESL learner. The result can be a barrier to success for the learner, and the learner can easily feel increasingly marginalized from the culture she seeks to join.

Such social marginalization and associated lack of access to natural language practice opportunities might be particularly frustrating for a woman (Burton, 1993; Nyikos, 1990; Hart & Cumming, 1997; all cited in Wang, 1999) and that frustration can compound the effects and causes of the perceived failure to progress. That sense of failure can lead to shame and embarrassment and further inhibit the practical and natural acquisition of the new language. The successful learner needs more than what is inside her; she needs the willing participation of another person (Peirce, 1995, as cited in Wang).

### *Interaction*

Interaction is critical to the process of learning a second language. According to Ellis (1999, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003), interaction contributes to second language acquisition when individuals communicate, especially when they negotiate meaning in order to prevent communication breakdown.

Moss and Ross-Feldman (2003) pointed out that research on interaction is conducted within the framework of the Interactive Hypothesis, in which it is stated that

conversational interaction “facilitates acquisition because it connects input; internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and output in productive ways” (Long, 1996, as quoted in Moss & Ross-Feldman, p. 2). It is this dynamic process of interaction that provides learners the opportunity to grasp the difference between their own use of the language and correct use (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman). It is the real-world practice that provides learners with the opportunity to receive understandable input and feedback (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994; all cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman) and to make changes in their own linguistic output (Swain, 1995, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman).

### *Motivation*

Learning a second language is clearly a challenge that requires much motivation, and for an adult immigrant, the challenges of learning the target language take on crucial meaning. For example, failure, weaknesses, and difficulties in learning the new language can have negative effects on: (a) employment and academic pursuits; (b) social interactions and personal relationships; and (c) self-esteem (Comstock & Kamara, 2003; Schwarz, 2003). According to Moss and Ross-Feldman (2003), research on improving learner motivation suggests that social factors such as learning environment, group dynamics, and even a partner’s motivation, affect a learner’s attitude, effort, classroom behavior and successful language acquisition (Dsrnyei, 2002b, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman).

Clearly, motivation is a critical factor in adult ESL learning. Dsrnyei (2002a, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003) identified motivation as “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity [and] how hard they are

going to pursue it,” (p. 75). Ellis (1997) observed that motivation involves the attitudes and affective states that influence the degree of effort that learners make to learn a second language, and that it may vary dynamically depending on the context or task of the language activity. While Ellis recognized four complementary types of motivation, studies by Gardner (1985) and Masgoret and Gardner (2003, both cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman) supported the theory that one particular type of motivation promotes successful acquisition of the second language regardless of age. That is, *integrative* motivation, learning the language in order to identify with and become a part of the community that speaks the language. Ellis contrasted the integrative motivations of those who are interested in the people and culture of the target language with those who might be even more successful in learning ESL despite being less integratively motivated or are motivated by a desire to stand up to and overcome the people of the target language.

Another type of motivation is *resultative*, an energy that comes from the experience of success in the language learning process that creates the drive to continue (Ellis, 1997). Perhaps the primary type of motivation for most successful ESL learners, *instrumental* motivation drives learners to succeed in order to improve their life, or to meet their needs or goals in life. Examples of this kind of motivation include learning English to pass an examination, such as that for U.S. citizenship, or to get a better job or to be accepted in a school or education program, or to talk to their children’s teachers (Morris, 2001; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; both cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003). The fourth type of motivation is *intrinsic*, which reflects “the arousal and maintenance of curiosity” in learning activities themselves by learners (Ellis). Intrinsically motivated

learners simply enjoy the process of second language learning and thrive in the environment of the second language classroom as well as in the target language learning environment.

### *Aptitude*

While youthful enthusiasm, adventurousness, and *a gift for languages* or *an ear for language* are immeasurably valuable, there are many influences that contribute to successful language learning or conversely, create a barrier to it. The concept of language aptitude, a natural ability for learning an L2, includes, as credited to John Carroll by Ellis (1997):

1. Phonemic coding ability, i.e. the ability to identify the sounds of a foreign language so that they can be remembered later. This ability is also seen as related to the ability to handle sound-symbol relationships (for example, to identify the sound which “th” stands for).
2. Grammatical sensitivity, i.e. the ability to recognize the grammatical function of words in sentences (for example, the subject and object of a sentence).
3. Inductive language learning ability, i.e. the ability to identify patterns of correspondence and relations between form and meaning (for example, to recognize that in English “to” can denote direction and “at” location).
4. Rote learning ability, i.e. the ability to form and remember associations between stimuli. This is believed to be important in vocabulary learning. (p. 74)

If these abilities combine to represent an aptitude for successful learning, then the absence of these abilities might represent a basis for a language learning deficit.

### Hindrances and Barriers

While much of the discussion on differences, difficulties, and other hindrances to learning ESL in the literature is generated in the context of learning disabilities (LD), and more specifically, language learning disabilities (LLD), which will be addressed

later in this review, the effects of the lack of progress can be critical and there can be many reasons for the lack of progress outside of the possible presence of LD. According to Schwarz and Terrill (2000), other reasons for the lack of expected progress include,

1. limited academic skills in the native language due to limited previous education;
2. the lack of effective study habits;
3. interference of a learner's native language, particularly if the learner is used to a non-Roman alphabet;
4. mismatch between the instructors teaching style and the learner's expectations of how the class will be conducted;
5. stress or trauma that refugees or other immigrants have experienced, causing symptoms such as difficulty in concentration and memory dysfunction;
6. sociocultural factors such as age, physical health, social identity;
7. external problems with work, health and family;
8. sporadic classroom attendance, and
9. lack of practice outside the classroom. (pp. 3-4)

If any of these can cause a lack of progress, it becomes apparent that many of these problems can overlap and that a combination of them might spell certain failure. For example, external challenges related to family, work, and social identity might combine to limit a learner's classroom attendance and outside practice opportunities; or, if a learner has poor or limited study skills that had never had the chance to develop, he or she might also lack effective study habits by virtue of never having learned them.

### *Anxiety*

Anxiety on the part of the learner can create a notable barrier to L2 acquisition. Krashen, (1985a, 1985b, as cited in von Worde, 1998), one of the most recognized experts on SLA, held that "anxiety inhibits the learner's ability to process incoming language and short-circuits the process of acquisition" (p. 31). According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, as cited in von Worde), language anxiety can interfere with the

acquisition, retention, and production of the new language while Crookall and Oxford (1991, as cited in von Worde) suggested that language anxiety may cause problems with self-esteem, self-confidence and risk-taking ability and “ultimately hampers proficiency in the second language” (p. 33). At least some of this language anxiety may be generated by instructors and teaching methods (Young, 1991, as cited in von Worde), which suggests that the teaching-style/learning-expectation mismatch mentioned above can create more than just a contradiction of preferences in classroom methods.

#### *Adult Disadvantage*

Since it is known that adults tend to bring a fear of failure and embarrassment to the classroom and learning, it should come as no surprise that many adult ESL learners struggle with the fear of the social shame of speaking poorly or incorrectly (Peirce, 1995, as cited in Ellis, 1997) and might often, even in the classroom, avoid speaking and opportunities for practice unless they are critically motivated to participate in the communicative activity. Another quality of adult learners that bears qualification is cognitive ability. While adults require a slower instructional pace than children (Schaie & Willis, 1978, as cited in Lueers, 1983), this is because of a slowing in information processing capability which is likely related to depth of processing. In a 25 year longitudinal study, Schaie (1982, as cited in Lueers, 1983) established that there was no significant decline in performance over time of a number of different mental abilities.

As for the popular belief that adults are at a relative disadvantage to children in second language or ESL study, there is support for both the positive and the negative viewpoints. However, the theory of a critical or sensitive period for optimal acquisition of a second language, as put forth by Johnson and Newport (1989, as cited in Bialystok

1997; Wang 1999), was effectively refuted by both Bialystok and Wang. The critical period theory might be more accurately defined as a belief that has become a generally accepted assumption; that children are more successful than adults in learning a second language and that children are better second language learners due to a critical period of language learning. This belief was proven false by Bialystok and Wang (1998, as cited in Wang). Both researchers confirmed that any advantage that might be enjoyed by younger L2 learners has more to do with the immigrant learner's age of arrival, the nature of the learner's mother language or dominant language, and the time spent in learning the target language.

Colombo (1982, as quoted in Bialystok, 1997) pointed out, "a problem frequently encountered in the critical period literature is the lax specification of what biobehavioral pattern, or portion thereof, is affected by the critical stimulation" (p. 120). Bialystok countered the popularly accepted belief with the hypothesis and conducted two studies to prove that,

language learners will find it difficult to master a structure that was not a defining feature of the first language and relatively easy to master a structure shared across the two languages. These differences may be exacerbated for older learners, but there should be no age differences in the ability to learn structures that are shared across the two languages. (p. 126)

While it may appear that children are more successful language learners than adults, the two Bialystok studies have helped to establish that it is not because of a critical period or maturational limits but because of stylistic differences in learning at different stages in life. Bialystok showed that age differences in second language acquisition ability to be inconsistent and sometimes to the advantage of older learners. More than youth alone,

first language acquisition experience and favorable (e.g., social, educational, experiential) conditions contribute to successful second language acquisition.

### Role of the First Language

There are a wide variety of challenges that face the second language learner, even in the best of learning situations. The most basic of these is first language interference or negative transfer, the psycholinguistic tendency to rely on familiar forms of expression when the intent is to develop a new form, that of the second language. This was defined by Ellis (1997) as “the influence that the learner’s L1 (first language) exerts over the acquisition of an L2 (second language)” (p. 51).

Since FL learning is the learning of language, skills in the native language provide the foundation for FL learning (Ganschow, Sparks, & Javorsky, 1998). Therefore, if a learner experiences relatively high difficulty in learning ESL, this difficulty is likely due to weaknesses in the learner’s native language learning experience. If a learner’s first language learning experience is *incomplete*, in that, it did not include the development of some or many of the skills necessary for effective language learning, it follows that the learner will have difficulty in learning a second or foreign language since the necessary skills are undeveloped or underdeveloped. These types of difficulties can be especially pronounced if the tools necessary for the learning of the second or FL are not necessary or do not exist in the learning of the first language.

The predictable challenge of interference is compounded when the ESL learner comes from a language background that does not use phonemic coding such as an alphabetic/spelling, or phonological/orthographic rule system that governs sounds and their representation by letters and letter sets or sequences in English words (Henry, 1988,

as cited in Ganschow et al., 1998). Krug, Shafer, Dardick, Magalis, and Parente (2002)<sup>16</sup> supported the importance of phonological/orthographic skills in FL learning and found that students have difficulty learning a FL when they cannot learn word/sound paired associations quickly. The authors suggested that the difficulty students have in the formation of word/sound associations limited their ability to encode and decode word/sound pairs and pointed to a breakdown in the initial stages of FL learning.

Learning English as a second language poses specific challenges for students whose first language bears little similarity to English in sound, appearance, and phonological/orthographic structure, and these learners might be at a disadvantage in their study of ESL. Since second language learning skills are closely related to the skills used in learning the first language, learners whose first language learning skills do not match those which would be useful in ESL learning can be expected to experience relative difficulty in learning English. More specifically, ESL learners whose first language is not alphabetical and who did not learn their first language in an alphabetically coded manner will have particular difficulty in learning English (Ganschow et al., 1998; Holm & Dodd, 1996; Krug et al., 2002).

In learning ESL, learners draw on the skills they used to learn their first language (Coady, 1979, as cited in Holm & Dodd, 1996). English is an alphabetic language with phonological (i.e., letter/sound) and orthographic (i.e., letter/spelling) rules that do not exist in nonalphabetic languages, so ESL learners whose first language was nonalphabetic and who learned their native language without the need for phonological and orthographic rules might have a much lower *phonological awareness* than ESL learners who learned their first language with an alphabetic system or whose first

language is alphabetic. As cited in Holm and Dodd, Campbell and Butterworth (1985) established that phonological awareness is an important skill for the processing of unknown words in English.

Other authors (Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Mann, 1986; Read, Zhang, Nie, & Ding, 1986; all cited in Holm & Dodd, 1996) have shown that phonological awareness is developed *only* through acquisition of an alphabetic orthography and that people with specific reading disability in English usually show deficits in phonological processing. Since phonological awareness develops in relation to orthography, according to Huang and Hanley, (1995) and Read, et al. (1986; both cited in Holm & Dodd), it follows that phonological awareness that is derived from one orthography might affect the acquisition of a second language of a different orthography.

### *Uniquely Chinese Challenge*

In a study worth detailing here, Holm and Dodd (1996) determined that first language literacy skills are transferable to learning ESL, especially with regard to the learning of new or unfamiliar words. Also, they established that students whose first language was nonalphabetic were likely to have difficulty in learning new or unfamiliar English words. Holm and Dodd compared the literacy skills of ESL learners from different orthographic backgrounds and assessed their phonological awareness to determine how it affected literacy acquisition in ESL.

In this study, Holm and Dodd (1996) sought to determine how first language literacy skills transferred to learning English as a second language, especially with regard to the learning of new or unfamiliar words and to establish whether students whose first language was nonalphabetic were likely to have difficulty in learning new or

unfamiliar words. The authors compared the literacy skills of ESL learners from different orthographic backgrounds and assessed their phonological awareness to determine how it affected literacy acquisition in English.

Holm and Dodd (1996) hypothesized that nonalphabetic first language learners of ESL would have limited phonological awareness, and this would restrict them to visual processing of nonwords that require phonological processing and create difficulties for them. At the same time, they hypothesized that alphabetic learners of nonalphabetic languages have some phonological awareness, and that they would use this in the processing of nonwords.

Holm and Dodd (1996) selected four groups of 10 ESL learners ( $N = 40$ ) based on their first language literacy acquisition process. Each group consisted of 5 male and 5 female participants, all of whom were students at the University of Queensland and had completed at least 1 year of university study. In addition, the participants had no learning difficulties in their first language. The four groups were selected to represent four different orthographies. Two groups were native Chinese speakers who learned their first languages differently from one another. The students from Hong Kong learned logographic Chinese by a *look and say* process (Huang & Hanley, 1995; Leong, 1973; both cited in Holm & Dodd) that they could apply to the learning of English words, which they began to study in primary school. In contrast, students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) learned Chinese through an alphabetic system known as pinyin.

The third group consisted of Vietnamese students whose first language learning included the use of an alphabet, although its sounds and their representations, like

pinyin, do not directly correlate to English phonology (Holm & Dodd, 1996). Ten Australian students completed the sample, and English was their first language.

As reported by Holm and Dodd (1996), the highly literate students were tested individually in one 90 minute session to assess phonological awareness, reading, and the spelling of real and nonwords. In the same order, they were given three phonological processing tasks that included: (a) phoneme segmentation, Spoonerisms, and rhyme judgment tasks; (b) four reading tasks that included auditory/visual word matching, nonword matching, nonword and real word reading; and (c) two spelling tasks that involved real words and nonwords. The Hong Kong group represented a distinctly separate cluster with all of the other participants in the last cluster.

Holm and Dodd's (1996) results showed that the Chinese students from China did much better at learning new alphabetic words than did the Chinese students from Hong Kong. That was due, in large part, to the fact that the Hong Kong Chinese students did not learn Chinese with the help of an alphabetic spelling or pronunciation guide. When they were confronted with a new word in English, these students had a much more difficult time than those who learned their first language with the assistance of an alphabetic system of pronunciation.

Holm and Dodd (1996) found that the Hong Kong students, whose first language literacy was nonalphabetic, had limited phonological awareness in comparison to the students with alphabetic first language literacy. Although there were no differences found between the groups on real word processing, the students from Hong Kong had more difficulty in processing nonwords because of their poor phonological awareness.

Their performance was inferior to that of the other three groups, and they had much greater difficulty across all tasks and groups of tasks. They had no phonological awareness to transfer to the learning of new or unfamiliar words, especially nonwords. The Chinese students, who had learned Chinese via pinyin, were able to transfer the phonological awareness it provided to the learning of English. Holm and Dodd's findings supported those from previous studies (Campbell & Butterworth, 1985; Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Marsh, Friedman, Desberg, & Saterdahl, 1981; Read, 1986; Treiman, 1983; all cited in Holm & Dodd) that phonological awareness is crucial to the ESL learner in the processing and learning of new words.

Holm and Dodd (1996) found that nonalphabetic first language learners of ESL had limited phonological awareness, and this restricted them to visual processing of nonwords that required phonological processing and created difficulties for them. At the same time, they found that the alphabetic learners of nonalphabetic languages had some phonological awareness, and that they would use this in the processing of nonwords.

The implications from the Holm and Dodd (1996) study suggest the possible need for intervention and specific instruction in order to develop phonological awareness so that learners could have access to a phonological strategy when they attempt to learn new words. The suggestion would seem to imply that poor phonological awareness can be mitigated, and that there is a gap between the proven benefit of teaching phonological awareness, its absence, and the necessity of effectively introducing it as a standard ESL curriculum for ESL students who lack in that area.

*FL Learning Difficulties Examined*

Two colleague-researchers, in particular, Ganschow and Sparks, have demonstrated the relationship between phonological/orthographic or phonemic coding and FL learning difficulty. In their review of nearly two dozen studies, mostly from their own previous research, Ganschow, Sparks, and Javorsky (1998) examined: (a) native language skill and FL aptitude differences, (b) FL grades, (c) students' self-perceptions, (d) teachers' perceptions, and (e) parents' perceptions of FL learning, (f) FL proficiency, and (g) factor analyses in order to determine the relationship between native language skill and FL aptitude.

The findings from the Ganschow et al. (1998) study supported the belief that students who showed FL learning problems would also exhibit native language learning *differences* that affected their learning of a foreign language, and that problems with one language skill such as phonology/orthography were likely to impact negatively on both the native language and the FL. Further, they speculated that good FL learners had significantly stronger native oral and written language skills and FL aptitude (e.g., as measured by the Modern Language Aptitude Test [MLAT], Carroll & Sapon, 1959, as cited in Ganschow et al.), and that the majority of FL underachievers would have the most difficulty with phonological/orthographic aspects of FL learning (Ganschow et al., 1998).

The Ganschow et al. (1998) analysis included a variety of FL learners. Participants in studies on native language skill and FL aptitude differences consisted of high school students, including: (a) first-year high school FL learners (Sparks et al., 1992a, as cited in Ganschow et al.); (b) students with and without LD who were

enrolled in FL courses (Sparks, et al., 1992b, as cited in Ganschow et al.); and (c) postsecondary students (Ganschow et al., 1991, as cited in Ganschow et al.). In addition, the studies on students,' teachers,' and parents' perceptions included 373 college students (Ganschow & Sparks, 1991, as cited in Ganschow et al.). One study on anxiety and FL learning included 36 college FL learners (Ganschow et al., 1994, as cited in Ganschow et al.), and was replicated with 154 postsecondary students (Ganschow & Sparks, 1996, as cited in Ganschow et al.). Two studies of foreign language proficiency involved the same two groups of 60 and 36 high school students who were completing their second year of FL study (Sparks et al., 1997, as cited in Ganschow et al.). Three factor analysis studies involved: (a) one with 80 high and low risk FL learners, and students with identified LD (Ganschow, Sparks, Patton, & Javorsky, 1992, as cited in Ganschow et al.), (b) one with 154 ninth and tenth grade females and 100 co-ed ninth grade students (Sparks et al., 1995, as cited in Ganschow et al.); and (c) another with 96 students (Sparks & Ganschow, in press, as cited in Ganschow et al.).

As cited in Ganschow et al. (1998), Pimsleur (1968) and Pimsleur, Sundland, and McIntyre (1964) suggested that different levels of ability to process sounds and sound/symbol units was often the cause of differences in FL learning that could not be attributed to low motivation or intelligence. Dinklage (1971, as cited in Ganschow et al.) concluded that otherwise high achieving students at Harvard University who failed FL requirements, showed learning weaknesses in: (a) reading and spelling, (b) letter/symbol reversals, (c) sound and syllable discrimination in the FL, and (d) in verbal memory.

Ganschow et al. (1998) showed that students who demonstrated FL learning problems also exhibited native language learning differences that affected their learning of a foreign language, and that problems with one language skill such as phonology/orthography were likely to impact negatively on both the native language and the FL. Further, they established that good FL learners had significantly stronger native oral and written language skills and FL aptitude, as measured by the MLAT (Carroll & Sapon, 1959, as cited in Ganschow et al., 1998), and that the majority of FL underachievers would have the most difficulty with the phonological/orthographic aspects of FL learning.

In this meta-analysis, Ganschow et al. (1998) found that large numbers of students *without* learning disabilities (LD) exhibited FL learning difficulties and that attitude and motivation problems were not the *cause* of FL learning problems but were the *result* of such problems (Ganschow & Sparks, 1995, 1996; Ganschow et al., 1994; Ganschow et al., 1991; Sparks & Ganschow, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1996; Ganschow, Sparks, Javorsky, Pohlman, & Patton, 1992a, 1992b; all cited in Ganschow et al.). The findings from the Ganschow et al. (1998) meta-analysis supported the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) theory developed by Sparks and Ganschow (Sparks, 1995; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991, 1993a, 1995a; all cited in Sparks, Philips, Ganschow & Javorsky, 1999), specifically, that good FL learners showed stronger native oral and written language skills and FL aptitude than poorer FL learners and that basic native language skills and FL aptitude are important for success in FL learning (Ganschow et al., 1998).

The Ganschow et al. (1998) meta-analysis produced a number of implications in regard to three areas. First, in regard to the diagnosis of FL learning problems, they recommended that to determine the existence of FL learning problems, diagnosticians should establish whether a student has a documented history of difficulty with native language learning and current difficulties, as well as a verifiable record of failure in, or inordinate struggle with native language learning. In addition, they should look for overt or subtle difficulties with native language learning in the phonological/orthographic, syntactic, and/or semantic components and low FL aptitude on the MLAT (Carroll & Sapon, 1959, as cited in Ganschow et al., 1998), when this determination is made.

Second, in regard to FL instruction for students with FL learning problems, the Ganschow et al. (1998) findings supported the conclusion that direct teaching of the phonological/orthographic and grammatical rule system is essential to help poor FL learners. Third, Ganschow et al. (1998) recommended that school policies include a continuum of interventions to help students. Such interventions might include: (a) in-class accommodations, such as untimed tests; (b) slowed pacing of verbal instructions; and (c) paired oral and visual cues to relate content. Additional interventions recommended by the authors include tutorial support and an entirely separate course on the structure of the learner's native language.

### Language Learning Disability

In the available literature language learning differences, difficulties, and language learning disability (LLD) are discussed in the context of ESL and FL study. Some of the researchers seem to have an agenda toward the promotion of the diagnosis

of LLD, and some seem to want to deny its diagnosis. In either case, it is generally acknowledged that there is no effective and consistent instrument for the diagnosis of LLD (Shank, 2001; Schwarz, 2003). The case for LLD diagnosis seems to be designed to open the way for services and accommodations that require or are supported by government or bureaucratic funding. Most LLD authors refer to a sample population that is unique and not representative of the whole U.S. population, but findings and conclusions are generalizable to the target population, and even to the broader ESL population, and arguably, to the entire adult learning population, especially where findings point to the benefits of teaching to multiple intelligences. Most authors provide a small handful of resources or tips and suggest that research in this field is still quite limited.

Comstock and Kamara (2002) reported that LLD are often unrecognized in adults, even by those who have them. Many individuals with LLD do a remarkable job as they compensate for these disabilities, but can suffer frustration, misunderstandings, and other communication breakdowns. The characteristics and severity of LLD vary and can influence many areas of life, including: (a) self-esteem, (b) personal relations, (c) social interactions, and (d) employment, as well as (e) educational pursuits. The majority of attention has been directed toward childhood LLD, but the underlying problems are likely to stay with the individual throughout adulthood.

Comstock and Kamara (2002) pointed to specific areas of life that are influenced by LLD and specific skill breakdowns that are caused by LLD. For example, not only are problems in reading, writing, and spelling symptomatic of

LLD, so are distinct weaknesses related to attention, listening, memory, and organization, as well as mathematics and meaning. Comstock and Kamara provided some examples of the kinds of challenges that adults with LLD face, not only in learning, but in life situations and relationships. Also, they provided strategies, resources, and tips for adults with LLD. Many adults with LLD can benefit from awareness, guidance, and resources that are available, and there are a number of national organizations that can help explain disability laws and accommodations both in the classroom and the workplace and guide adults with LLD toward other support resources. The outlook and recommendations provided by Comstock and Kamara pointed to the improved state of diagnosis over the past decade and to a future wherein electromagnetic images of the brain further knowledge of brain function and learning as well as perceptions of learners and learning differences.

Shank (2001) pointed out that approximately 5-10% of the general population of the U.S. lives with some form of LD and that number increases to 40-80% within the adult education community. Since adult ESL students make up 40-50% of the total adult education population, the greater challenge is to identify, document, and address LLD in ESL learners, and it is generally acceptable that LLD is greater among ESL learners than in native English speakers. Still, there are currently no adequate measures to identify and quantify the ESL/LLD effected learners. Also, resources, or the lack thereof, is a prohibiting factor, and cultural resistance plays a large and incalculable role.

Shank (2001) suggested a number of possible causes for LD, most of which are linked to some neurochemical disturbance due to physiological problems such as:

(a) birth defects, (b) health issues, or (c) physical trauma. Shank cautioned that there can be many different reasons for a learner's lack of progress, and educators should take care to not immediately label a student as LD. Although some might find relief in such a diagnosis, others might find it to be personally devastating. The challenges of immigration and native language interference alone can represent notable cognitive dissonance, and teachers should not underestimate their impact if they hurry to the conclusion of the presence of ESL/LLD.

In what is perhaps the primary rationale for establishing the existence of and diagnosing the presence of ESL/LLD, Shank (2001) concluded that these ESL/LLD learners should be screened and documented so they can have access to the services, support, and special accommodations that are available to them. At the same time, educators should focus on teacher training so that teachers can become better equipped to identify LD in students and implement techniques to help them succeed.

Schwarz and Terrill (2000) recognized the possibility that adult ESL learners' difficulties with being able to sustain employment and show progress on ESL assessments could be related to learning disabilities and they confirmed the problematic nature of identification and assessment of ESL learners with LD.

Schwarz and Terrill suggested the need for alternative and additional assessment strategies, especially since typical diagnostic instruments are normed on younger, native English speakers and are not suitable for adult ESL learners.

In lieu of standard assessments, Schwarz and Terrill (2000) offered alternative evaluation methods that included learner interviews and portfolio collection which might provide a more complete picture of a learner's performance over time.

Schwarz and Terrill indicated that, often, LD can be covered up and compensated for in an individual's native language, but surface in the learning and practice of a second language since contextual strategies may not be available in the target language. Still, they emphasized, as did Shank (2001), that the benefits of identifying adults as LD should be weighed against the potential stigma of the label, and they urged the consideration of other reasons for limited progress in English.

### *Getting Through*

To help learners with LLD and their instructors, Schwarz and Terrill (2000) suggested a number of instructional methods and materials gleaned from previous research (Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1996; Baca & Cervantes, 1991; Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Riviere, 1996, as cited in Schwarz & Terrill, 2000) that rely on structured and predictable activities and reinforce previous teaching and incorporate a multisensory approach. Along with the recommendation for intensified efforts such as funding for research and teacher training, the authors indicated that assistive technology, and computers specifically, have proven effective in helping adult ESL learners with LLD. Many researchers, including Christison and Kennedy (1999), Comstock and Kamara (2003), Downey and Snyder (2000), and Schwarz and Terrill (2000) point to the need to teach to learners' strengths and to multiple intelligences.

Downey and Snyder (2000) reported great success in the Foreign Language Modification Program, which began in 1990 at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The then-typical accommodation of substituting culture-related courses for FL courses for students who had been diagnosed with LLD; scored in the 10th percentile or below on the MLAT (Carroll & Sapon, 1959, as cited in Downey and Snyder);

and, had made serious effort to learn a FL at the college level. Shortly after initiation of the program, a modified Latin class was added as an accommodation for students with LD and later Spanish and Italian were added.

Downey and Snyder (2000) found that students with LLD could: (a) acquire FL skills, (b) achieve at levels that match their peers in regular FL classes, and (c) satisfy university FL requirements by participation in the modified FL classes with proper instruction and accommodation. The researchers established that most students with LLD can acquire FL proficiency in classes modified to meet their needs. The use of accommodations, such as extensive pretest preparation, extra time for tests and quizzes, a smaller amount of content, smaller class sizes and a low pressure, safe classroom environment helped students perform better and develop greater confidence.

The instructors in the program were carefully selected and combined visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning techniques and anxiety minimizing techniques (Downey & Snyder, 2000). They developed creative materials for use in the classroom while their focus was on building the skills and confidence levels of students, who were not called on in these highly structured classes but responded voluntarily in verbal exercises.

Downey and Snyder (2000) suggested that the most important aspect of instruction was the “explicit and direct teaching of phonology and orthography of the new sound-symbol system” (p. 90) and emphasized that the reasonable accommodations of the modified classes genuinely allowed students with LLD equal access to education and the opportunity to be evaluated on their abilities and not on

their disabilities. Christison and Kennedy (1999) recommended the effectiveness of incorporating Multiple Intelligence (MI; Gardner, 1983, as cited in Christison & Kennedy) theory in the adult ESL classroom to address multiple ways of learning and knowing (Christison, 1999b, as cited in Christison & Kennedy). While it does not explicitly target adults with LLD, application of MI theory is an aim to help students “develop a better understanding and appreciation of their own strengths and learning preferences” (p. 2) and can help transfer some of the control of the learning experience and the demonstration of that learning from the teacher to the students (Christison & Kennedy, 1999).

### Chapter Summary

While differences, difficulties, and disability in second language learning are varied and challenging to both learners and instructors, these problems take on a greater level of severity for immigrants who learn ESL, whose livelihood, social identity, and sense of community are threatened by often subtle and obscure language learning disadvantages (Comstock & Kamara, 2003; Schwarz, 2003). Adult ESL instructors and program directors should explore reasons for students’ lack of expected progress and apply useful adjustments, accommodations, and teaching techniques to help ensure the success of a wider variety of learners, based on learning strengths and styles that have proven essential to successful second language learning and for ESL learners in particular.

In Chapter 3, Methods, the specific goals and procedures of the explorative research design and phenomenological inquiry are detailed.

## Chapter 3

### METHOD

The purpose of the project was to explore and describe the experience of one adult female immigrant to the United States and her difficulties in learning English, first as a foreign language in her native Taiwan, then in the U.S. as a second language, or more accurately, as a third language, in the environment where it is spoken naturally. Information gathered from the available literature provided a foundation for understanding and helped to suggest a variety of reasons for the difficulties she has experienced. Interviews with her provided testimony and insight in this qualitative study.

#### Target Audience

Those who would be interested in this project and its application would be ESL instructors and program directors. It is anticipated that the findings can inform ESL instructors of adult learners about the lived experience of a unique type of learner with unique challenges. Also, it may be possible to identify the reasons for the lack of progress in some students and provide recommendations for improvement and resolution.

#### Goals

In this qualitative study, the author explored, analyzed, and described the English language learning experience of one woman immigrant to the U.S. as

perceived by the learner. This researcher will attempt to develop an in-depth understanding of the individual's learning experience as an immigrant and the culturally overlapping experience that Rosaldo (1989 as cited in Lim & Wieling, 2004, p. 148) referred to as the "cultural borderlands" as well as the role that her personality plays in the learning equation and what it means to her (Merriam, 2002).

An associated objective was to illustrate as accurately as possible the complex social, emotional, and psychological fabric that makes up the whole of her experience and, thereby, illuminate for the reader and interested parties the collective difficulty she has experienced in learning English and the results of the lack of progress in her language ability. If "the limit of my language means the limit of my world" (Wittgenstein, 2001, as quoted in Curzon, 2005, p. 105), it was this researcher's ambition to provide a rich and holistic description of the learner's thoughts, feelings, desires and motivations as she relates her experiences in trying to learn English as a second and very foreign language and how that experience influences her sense of "place" or lack thereof, in the new culture (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004, p. 388).

Ideally, the purpose of phenomenological inquiry is to emphasize the authenticity of the individual's experience (Merriam, 2002) without immediate concerns of generalizability. This researcher strived to honor the authenticity of the qualitative research design and the learner's experience and took great care to prevent or restrict personal biases inherent in this type of case study (Merriam, 1998).

## Procedures

The procedures used in the implementation of the phenomenological inquiry were based on Groenewald's (2004) illustrated design. The interview was the primary method of data collection, and the interviewee's responses were the primary unit of analysis. The interview questions were designed and ordered carefully to avoid leading the interviewee to any beliefs or conclusions. The interview process was recorded with an audio recorder with permission of the interviewee, and the interviewee's confidentiality, voluntary status, and right to stop at any time were explained and protected. These and other protections were interpreted from Bailey (1996, as cited in Groenewald) and drafted into an informed consent agreement between interviewer and interviewee. The interview setting and time were chosen to maintain an environment free from noise and interruptions (Groenewald).

The interviewer kept observational and methodological notes in order to properly conduct the interview and gather as much information and data as were available, including nuance, mood, and perceivable emotions of the interviewee. As well, the interviewer kept theoretical notes and analytical memos in order to derive and capture meaning from the interview. After listening to the recorded interview a number of times in order to immerse himself in the words and thoughts of the interviewee, the interviewer conducted a follow-up interview in order to clarify, check for validity, or further draw out the interviewee's insights, opinions, and experiences (Groenewald, 2004; Merriam, 1998).

## Chapter Summary

The findings from this qualitative case study provided insight into one woman's experience of learning ESL as an immigrant to the U.S. The richness of the learner's experience helped to shed light on the kinds of difficulties that some ESL learners might experience and can inform ESL instructors and program directors as to why some learners have difficulties and how these difficulties can be addressed. The data collected in the interview process provided direct access to the learner's thoughts and feelings about the experience and the potential for a rich and holistic portrayal of the lived experience as well as a deeper understanding of her experience.

In Chapter 4, the Results of the phenomenological case study are presented. In Chapter 5, the Discussion, the findings are interpreted, the research questions are answered, and the study is summarized.

## Chapter 4

### RESULTS

The primary goal of this case study was to examine and describe the experience of one Taiwanese-Chinese woman immigrant to the United States in order to uncover and understand the reason or reasons for her limited progress in English language ability. This author wanted to explore this learner's experience and impressions of her experience in the hope that a descriptive telling of her story might assist the understanding of the needs of learners like her and guide adult educators and teachers of English as a second language (ESL) to better respond to the needs of similarly challenged learners. It was this author's intent that the telling of much of the participant's story in her own words would add depth and texture to the case study and inspire a greater understanding, on the part of the reader, for the participant and her experience.

#### Formal Interview

The primary method of data collection was the interview. Due to the luxury of having regular access to the participant, the majority of the detailed background information came from a series of informal interviews in the participant's native language and personal observation by the researcher author. Similarly, this author was at liberty to request clarifications and elaboration on the one formal, taped, and transcribed interview. The formal interview was conducted in English, and its inclusion here is useful in showing the learner's use of English vocabulary, tense, and

sentence structure, and in helping to establish patterns in her life and learning experience. Its more significant usefulness is, in the phenomenological tradition, to help the author depict the learner's feelings and impressions about her experience, in her own words.

Prior to the interview, the participant was given a description of the interview's research purpose and subject matter, the researcher's intent to share the results, as well as assurances that she could stop the interview at any time and that her name and identity would not be shared without her permission. Also, she was given the freedom to choose the time, place, and to appoint environmental comforts to encourage her frank participation and prevention from interruption.

As the interview began, the participant was clearly enthusiastic about sharing her experience and grew more and more animated throughout, both in facial and vocal expression. She seemed quite glad to share her story. In order to reflect the participant's actual usage and pronunciation, many mistakes are transcribed as they were spoken, and words are spelled out to approximate the way in which the learner said them. The participant is interchangeably referred to as the learner.

### Participant Introduction

The participant in this case study was a Taiwanese-Chinese woman who emigrated to the U.S. in 1998 from Taiwan. She came to this country, not due to poverty or persecution or personal desire, but for the benefit of her husband and 10 year old daughter. Her daughter had established an almost irreconcilable disposition

toward the unforgiving Taiwan educational system, one that the participant had struggled with herself, and her husband had grown restless on the Beautiful Isle.

Ching was born in 1960, although she does not know the exact date. It was probably about mid-April, and even its lunar date, which was more closely followed by the Taiwanese, went unrecorded by her mother. Ching had two older brothers and two older sisters and was followed by a younger brother. She grew up in Chang-hua, a city in central Taiwan with a decidedly country flavor. Ching's father had come to Taiwan from Shantou in the Chinese province of Guangdong, via Hong Kong, in search of fortune. He married a Taiwanese wife, learned to speak the Taiwanese language, and raised Taiwanese children. He never found fortune in business, and Ching thought that he should have tried for a life as a bureaucrat or scholar as he was more a man of words than deals, and he had such beautiful handwriting and calligraphy.

#### Early Education and First Languages

Ching's first language was Taiwanese. It was the language of home, business, the market, the streets, and the people. It was not written in daily life. It is an animated, gesture rich, decibel enriched, tonal language, and one that, to the uninitiated, sounds discordant and dissonant, especially as spoken by hustling people on bustling streets. Since it was not a written language, at least not in its practical modern application, Ching, like all other Taiwanese children of her time, learned her first language exclusively in its spoken form.

Going to school meant learning, technically, her second language, Mandarin Chinese, the official language of the ruling Chinese Nationalist administration. Taught by Chinese people whom she and her classmates could not understand, the language of her elementary school teachers was unintelligible to them. Having arrived in Taiwan from various regions of China with the Nationalists, these teachers and their various pronunciation patterns were extremely difficult for the Taiwanese students to understand. Surely, they were scholars, but they were not necessarily good teachers, and for Ching and her schoolmates, their pronunciation was indiscernible. Chinese was, to them at that time, a completely foreign language. It was not, however, taught as a foreign language, a methodology that those who have never had a second language forced on them might take for granted, one that those who have, might relish.

Researcher: Can you tell me a little about yourself, please?

Learner: I come from Taiwan. U.S., I just few time going to the school, not all the time. Yeah, since I'm, 1998, in the United State, that time I went to Front Range College, but that time my English so bad, I can't know everybody say something, I don't know. And teacher say something, I don't know. Yeah, that time I'm so fear, I feel bad . . . because English for me is second language, not Chinese, easy for me, so . . . I don't know . . . I just feel bad.

Comment: The participant knows the main topic is English language learning, and she goes right to the topic herself.

Researcher: What was your first language?

Learner: Chinese, Taiwanese.

Researcher: Is Chinese and Taiwanese the same?

Learner: No, it's different.

Researcher: Which one is your first language?

Learner: Taiwanese

Researcher: What's your second language?

Learner: Chinese

Researcher: Did you learn to read and write in Chinese and Taiwanese?

Learner: No, we, I never read and write in Taiwanese.

Researcher: Never?

Learner: Never. I only speak it to my family. That's it.

Researcher: So you first learned Taiwanese at home?

Learner: And neighborhood, everybody said Taiwanese. Nobody can speak Chinese.

Researcher: So your first home language was Taiwanese, and when did you begin learning Chinese?

Learner: I think its. . . middle school, maybe four year, uh, fourth grade or fifth grade start, uh, Chinese.

Comment: Later clarification determined that she misspoke. She meant to say that she began learning English in *elementary* school, a word she did not know.

Researcher: So how old were you when you began to study Chinese?

Learner: Nine or. . . nine or ten, yeah.

Researcher: Can you describe that learning experience? Tell me how you learned Chinese in school.

Learner: Oh, it's so bad for me, because that time my teacher she/he or she, because we have two teacher, they from China and they not a real Chinese. So the *proncnction* not good for me, I think its not only me, everybody, because we don't know, he say the Chinese *pronsl*, not good. So I don't know, I can't understand what they say, no. That's very important for me, because I don't know. So that time I just oh, my god. . . .

Researcher: How long did that continue this way?

Learner: It's a long time, I think until I going to middle school, the teacher's good, but. . . she is very good. . . but, because before, at middle school, I'm not good.

Primary school was half-days and opened the door to Chinese language study, mostly with short stories or proverbs from which phrases were memorized. Among themselves, the students would speak Taiwanese, but by middle school, it was strictly

forbidden in the classroom. Only Chinese was allowed, but it was a language none of them had mastered, except for the children of the teachers themselves.

Ching had always envied the children of teachers for two simple reasons. One, the first impression of one of these classmates was that she had an apple every day for a snack. That alone was reason enough, but Ching envied them mostly because when they went home after school, there was someone there to direct them to their studies and help them too. She did not like feeling dumb and unable to comprehend what was being taught in the classroom and she knew that learning was a gift. That might help to explain why, when given the chance in the higher grades to participate in music and arts, she gladly pushed herself to keep up and perform her best.

Her effort, enthusiasm, and whatever talent she had were rewarded with frequent appointments to competitions and performances. Paradoxically, this often took her away from the classroom and the language learning foundation she had yet to establish. It wasn't until middle school that she began to really learn Chinese, especially in written form, at the stern hands of teacher, Hsiao Kui-hsiang. She had only begun to really learn, but by that time she felt it was too late to catch up. Any progress she made was due to the *effective teaching* of this particularly fearsome teacher, who motivated her students to memorize for tests in the ancient tradition, the threat of corporal punishment. Misbehavior, failure to pay attention, or even an incorrectly written word would bring a crack from her bamboo switch down on the hand. Ching feared her completely, but knew she was a good person at heart and appreciated and responded to the pressure.

Also, it was in middle school that Ching and her peers were exposed to English language instruction. Her first English teacher was a nice woman from India, who apparently was so nice that she lacked the strength, or *effective teaching* that the Chinese teachers employed to ensure full attention and participation. She simply read to the students from books, grammar and otherwise, and failed to make it interesting to them and to teach the letters and sounds of English.

Researcher: Tell me your first good learning experience. When was that first good learning experience in Chinese?

Learner: Middle school, she's very good but before. . . I. . . elementary school, I'm not good, but middle school the teachers so good, but I can't start, touch. . . .

Researcher: Can't catch up?

Learner: No. Because first language I'm not learning good. . . so I can't catch in the middle school. But I want learning more, study more. Maybe I can't go . . . forward, yeah, I can't, so I just stopped here.

Researcher: In middle school?

Learner: Yeah.

Researcher: Hard to catch up. . . because you had a difficult beginning?

Learner: Yeah, because we are different. We don't have a second teacher teaching you, you have a problem learning. We don't have that kind of teacher, no, never, ever. [If] you don't understand, that's yourself, in Taiwan, just like that, nobody teach you, you from yourself.

Comment: By second teacher, she meant a specialist in teaching second language.

Researcher: Did you graduate high school?

Learner: No.

Researcher: What age did you leave school?

Learner: Ninth grade. . . about eight half, because I going to high school just one year half, so I think its eight-half.

Researcher: How old were you at that time, when you left school?

Learner: Seventeen-half, almost eighteen. . . eighteen, yeah.

Researcher: When did you then begin to study English?

Learner: In high school we have a little bit English, but, I'm not interest in English, so I don't know, I just go away, I don't learning more English, I don't like it, so. . . I don't know. But start, really starting, I can say, was I been in United State.

Comment: Confirmed later, she meant that she didn't attend her high school English classes, a participation/attendance theme that recurs.

Researcher: Tell me about your first English teacher, please.

Learner: She's from. . . I'm not really remember.

Researcher: What do you remember?

Learner: She's from India. She's nice, but. . . she's very nice I just remember, but she's English, I'm not very. . . for me. . . not very. . . she's person is very good, for teaching, I think so, not good for me, ok, I don't know. Because if you're English teacher you need to have more power, different, I think, that's my opinion. I don't know.

Researcher: How long did you study English in high school?

Learner: High school? No. Middle school. High school, no, no. I not catch the class.

Researcher: In middle school, how long did you study English?

Learner: Three years. We have class 3 years but we are dumb.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Learner: I don't know. Nobody discover the English is interesting, we just read, read, learning just, like a book, not life. That's not good. English. . . if you. . . because second language, you need more interesting. That's very different, not life. But interesting for you, you can learning more, teaching you more.

Comment: Learner's voice grew in animated optimism at this thought.

High school was not compulsory in Taiwan at the time, and Ching went to school at night, partly because she was needed at home in the daytime and also because night school tuition was cheaper than day school tuition, which was roughly the equivalent of 1 month's salary. She was fortunate to have the opportunity, nonetheless, and she would reflect on this many times as she grew into adulthood, always wanting to return to her studies, even and especially if, she could start again from the very basic.

Education was important, but it was not always the first priority, perhaps because there was not much money in it. By the time she was old enough, family economics dictated that she get up early and go to the nearby market to sell bean curd, both dried and fresh, and bean sprouts before doing the housework and taking care of her younger brother and whatever other errands that might have been assigned her on any given day. Unfortunately for Ching, high school would also have to take a back seat to family financial need. Ching left school and home at the age of 17 to join a classmate who had gone to work in a bookstore in the capitol city of Taipei, for her aunt, a strict and inflexibly stern boss, for room and board.

#### Adult Life and Learning

In less than a month, she found a paying job as a receiving and dispatch assistant in a textile company. This was the beginning of the Taiwan economic boom as foreign investment fueled success for many, many people. For Ching, this feeling of success was exhilarating, and she could hardly wait to share her newfound success with her family. She was so thrilled that she could help her family financially, and in so doing, show them her value as a member of the family, she immediately sent home her entire first month's salary of NT4500, approximately \$112.50, without a thought for her own needs. It was only after the money was long gone that she realized she had not kept a single dollar for herself. She continued to send money home monthly and worked a variety of jobs in which she sold everything from leather handbags to real estate over the next 6-7 years. Ching's success in these very social job functions is attributable to her optimistic, friendly, and purposeful nature; she had always built

good relationships and had a reputation for solving problems quickly, efficiently, and decisively.

All this time, and through various levels of success and personal wealth, Ching dreamed of continuing her education and completing high school. Education is a highly respected theme in the Confucian-Chinese culture, and her self-image and social status had been built around the private knowledge that something was missing in her make-up. She liked to study a wide variety of subjects from gardening and nutrition to pottery and yoga, but she had never developed the desire or the need to study English. That was about to change.

### Sacrifice and Challenge

The decision was made to move from Taiwan to the U.S. It was a move that would most benefit her daughter and her husband. Ching did not fit the mold of a typical Chinese or Taiwanese immigrant to the U.S., if there is such a thing. She did not suffer from poverty or persecution in her home country, nor did she dream of coming to the U.S. as so many people from around the world had throughout modern history. In fact, Ching had had the means and previous opportunities to come to the U.S., but she loved her native Taiwan. The Island of Treasures holds a bounty of richness that, despite the throngs of humanity, industry, and development at every turn, impresses visitors and inspires passionate patriotism in its own people.

Ching's coming to U.S. was more a selfless act of cooperation, a lifestyle adventure that would primarily serve to expand her daughter's educational opportunities. With just 2 months of private English lessons, she was off to the U.S.

Within 6 months, Ching's small family was busy with life, and she was set in a homemaker and support role. A quaint home had been purchased, a pair of dogs added to the mix, two stray cats moved in, and her first snowfalls were a matter of record. Photographs sent back to family and friends in Taiwan were celebrated for their novelty as much as for the joy of sharing Ching's new experiences and immediate settling into her new life.

Despite an artful use of her own first and second languages, Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese, she had little interest in, and questionable aptitude for, other languages. She often said that English could not *recognize* her, an interesting description as it reflects a part of her identity that is unseen and unheard, due to this language barrier. Her lack of confidence and proficiency in English forced her to either depend on her husband or daughter for assistance or struggle through communication events on her own at a severe handicap. In contrast, her daughter enjoyed the benefits of being immersed in English at school, and her fluency seemed to improve daily as a result.

Not surprisingly, the early stages of Ching's life in the U.S. involved the slow mastery of survival tasks such as finding her way around, negotiating traffic customs, knowing money values, and understanding supermarkets, gas stations and other retail stores in the U.S. Regardless of how she had perceived herself as a learner before arriving in this country, her learning began immediately and never stopped as long as she lived in the U.S. What few personal and linguistic successes she experienced, those gained through interaction were the most exhilarating and pleasing for her.

## Adult ESL

Ching quickly began to crave more than just a support lifestyle. A chance meeting quickly produced a job opportunity in a Japanese restaurant that provided a much needed social outlet. Rapidly she became a customer and management favorite. Predictably, over the course of three different jobs and despite working closely with other Chinese speaking coworkers, the work environment provided the best opportunities for real language learning and practice. Some of these contacts provided access to English language classes, some in the basements of churches, others in community learning centers.

Researcher: Did your first English teacher teach you the sounds of English?

Learner: Nooo.

Researcher: What about the letters?

Learner: Noooo.

Researcher: No sounds and no letters, how did they begin teaching you?

Learner: Like book. So boring for us, nobody like it. Because we don't know, some day we need to use the English or not, yeah, we don't know.

Researcher: Did you study English after high school?

Learner: No.

Researcher: Did you first study English, before you came here?

Learner: I have a special teacher teaching me. . . grammar, but I'm not good for that.

Researcher: How long did you study English before you came to this country?

Learner: Two months.

Researcher: At that time did you also learn the sounds and letters of English?

Learner: I learned sounds, letters little bit, but I forgot every day.

Researcher: Since you've been in the United States. . . how long has it been?

Learner: Almost 7. . . 8 years.

Researcher: In these almost 8 years, have you been attending English classes?

Learner: Yes, I do. First time I been the United States, since 1998, I went to Front Range College. That time I have 2 months English class. I can say, that time English, I can't understand everybody say something, teacher teaching something. I don't know. I just dumb!

Researcher: Ok, you felt dumb because you couldn't understand?

Learner: Yeah. But I want understand what is it, what they say something. . . what kind of class, we just English conversation and the teacher just brings one book, for the story we just read a story but I can't read it. I don't know.

Researcher: Two month class? Did you continue?

Learner: Uh-huh. No, I quit

Researcher: What about the next class you took?

Learner: Next, I think. . . after 6 months later.

Researcher: What can you tell me about that class?

Learner: That class, not from the book, but the teacher, she just took some news from the newspaper or some magazine and she. . . she just teach us every car, color, just easy one for the English. So that time's more comfortable for me.

Researcher: In either of these two classes, did anybody especially teach you the sounds and letters?

Learner: That time, no, no. I can say, that time maybe, teacher, because we're from lots of country, not only me from Taiwan, lots of people from China, Mexico, Korea, Japanese. . . so, the teacher, she don't know we're the level, what kind of level, so she just grab the book, news, no, the story book, try everybody, and. . . if you can't read it, you just quit, quit yourself, not the teacher for you quit. Just like that.

Researcher: How long did you study with that teacher?

Learner: Two months

Researcher: Can you tell me about your next English class?

Learner: The next class, the teacher's. . . is very good, is for the volunteer, she's like that. She just teach us from magazine. . . and newspaper. . . and. . . I. . . I don't know, I forgot.

Researcher: How long did you attend that class?

Learner: Not long. . . one month-half, I just quit.

Researcher: Do you remember why you quit that class?

Learner: Because my English not good, I can't read, I can't writing, so I quit.

Researcher: And the second one, do you remember why you quit that class?

Learner: Just the same, first one. I can't read, I can't writing, so I quit.

Researcher: And the third one, do you remember why you quit that?

Learner: Same, I just can't write, I can't read, but I like it. I know this teacher's good. I know they. . . because I know I had lots of teacher from Taiwan. Here, the teacher need more patient, they have more patient. In Taiwan, no, they just go, go, go. It's different. They don't care you know or you understand or not understand. They don't care. For my age, that time the teachers different. Now, I don't know.

Researcher: Do you think that the teachers you've had in America are more patient than the teachers you've had in Taiwan?

Learner: Uh-huh. Yeah.

Researcher: Can you remember the next English class you took?

Learner: Now.

Researcher: So right now is the next one?

Learner: Yeah.

Researcher: Tell me about that one.

Learner: Oh, this teacher's very good. You want me say the name?  
[Omitted]. She is very good. She's not in the Colorado. She's from. . . the last part come the Colorado and teaching us the second language. She's very . . . she's very good, she. . . she very patient, and we, we're class from the Lao, Chinese people, Taiwan people, and Mexican people, we. . . we're levels different but teacher, she's very good for me, she's just patient teaching everybody and find, we need what kind the teaching for us. And I like it. She choice from the story, love story, or interesting story for us, and sometimes inside, the story inside, the words, we don't know, and she say, its OK, you can learn later. So we just going. . . and don't worry like that. So that's very comfortable for us because we're not young people. You know. So if you push lot or push hard we quit. That's very different for the young people. Young people need push. We're just need learning useful and interesting. That's very important for us. I think it's different, I don't know.

Comment: Again, she meant the instructor studied and specialized in teaching English as a *second* language (ESL). Also, by quit, she meant the students can stop reading whenever they want to stop reading for whatever reason and there isn't pressure to know every word in order to participate, and there is no need for embarrassment for opting out.

Researcher: These very good teachers you've had; you said they were patient and also that it was a very comfortable class for you. Is that very important?

Learner: Yeah. That's very important, yeah.

Researcher: Why? Do you feel very nervous in English class?

Learner: Yeah, because if you don't know writing and reading, you just dumb.

Researcher: You feel dumb?

Yeah. If a teacher call you, read this part, and you can't, that's very hard for us.

Researcher: So are you more interested in learning English now than you were before?

Learner: I'm not very interesting, but I need, because I live in United States, I need learning some English. And. . . if I go out I need speak English, that's my life for now.

Even if the learner's participation had been more regular, it might have been difficult to make significant progress via twice weekly English classes that were put together with small numbers of adults with widely varying levels of English ability and mostly itinerant teachers. The participant was not critical of the system, the classes, or the instructors. She enjoyed the social outlet, but recurring attendance issues point to a participation problem. Still, some of these issues might have been indicative of program failures, or the lack of structured program opportunities, or other barriers to participation such as "lack of voice" (Hall & Donaldson, 1997, as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 58) and the way a woman feels about her self-confidence and her ability to express herself.

### Motivation

Of all the possible reasons for her inability to achieve fluency in English, the wavering motivation might have been the most basic factor. Ching had never found an interest in English, nor was she particularly interested in relocating from Taiwan to the U.S. She had had previous opportunities to immigrate but preferred her native

home. “Taiwan has everything” she was prone to say, though she enjoyed travel immensely. She would inevitably follow that proclamation with an animated story about the days when apples were an import commodity, and expensive, too, in contrast to modern day abundance and agricultural development.

Perhaps her attachment to the Island of Treasure was her downfall in the English learning challenge. While she was motivated by a need for social interaction, she admittedly found little about the people and culture of the U.S. that truly interested her. She was, of course, steeped in the deep cultural tradition of thousands of years of rich, cultural history, and born on an island famous for its hospitable people. It would take quite a lot to impress a loyal Taiwanese who had ridden the economic miracle of the island from the simple countryside of her youth to the bustling modernity of one of the Four Asian Dragons. As far as she was concerned, everything the U.S. had, Taiwan had as well, and more, since her family was there.

In Taiwan, Ching was a highly valued friend, sister, daughter, aunt, and niece. She was a trusted confidant and counsel and had often been the cornerstone of her family, solving problems, smoothing rough spots, challenging expectations and spurring communication among family members in times of celebration and success, failure and strife. She felt, and was, important to many people. She never replaced that in the U.S., except for providing the sunshine her smile brought to a few colleagues and work acquaintances.

Blue skies are magnificent, but the mere existence of a populated, physical environment does not a culture make. It was often a comparison for Ching; everything good, bad, special, or unique that she saw or experienced in U.S. was

flattened against any parallel she could find with Taiwan. It seemed as though her motivation to learn English paled in comparison with her longing for the joys of home and desire to simply appreciate and celebrate her beloved Taiwan. For Ching, a highly social and outgoing person, the social sacrifices she was forced to make were very painful and these challenges compounded her difficulty in adjusting to life in a new country and in finding fulfillment in a very individualistic society. More than a lack of motivation, her inability to effectively communicate in English severely limited her ability to engage herself in the social environment of suburban America.

Researcher: When you go out, do you look forward to talking to people or are you afraid to talk to people?

Learner: I afraid talk to people, but I very happy I from. . . um, ok, that time's 1998, I just first time been the United States, I don't know how to speak English and I went to the McDonalds. And, morning, lots of old people, they just talking, and they just say "hi" for me, and for me its very comfortable like that, and I just smile. . . and they just ask me "where you come from?" I just say I come from Taiwan. . . and we just little bit of conversation, for the English. So I think I'm very like McDonalds; the morning, lots of old people they just relax, take the breakfast, drink coffee, and talk the news and somebody else, I don't know. That's first time for me, English for me, I think its go out is easy, you just go some store, restaurant, or Home Depot.

Researcher: Tell me about that.

Learner: First time I call the Home Depot, not call "Home Depot," I call the "Home People."

Researcher: Why did you call it that?

Learner: I don't know. Because that time I don't know English. So for me it's "Home People."

Researcher: What kind of people did you meet at Home Depot?

Learner: OK, the Home Depot is very good for me because if I go in, I need something. I just say, call anybody, "I need a help." And they're very happy to help me. First time we need fix my house everything we need find in Home Depot. And I very easy find it. My English so bad but they very happy help me, and I use my body language and show them I need what is it, what is it, and they just very quick help me. And if you can't understand, you just

“what is it?” They teaching you what you. . . is this product. That’s very, for me is happy in the United States, Home Depot and McDonalds.

Researcher: What do you mean by body language? Are you pointing?

Learner: Yeah, pointing or show something. . . like that.

Researcher: Are you afraid to make mistakes in English?

Learner: Yeah, everywhere.

Researcher: Tell me more about that. How does that effect you?

Learner: OK, If I going to store and buy something, but I can’t spell right and they don’t know what is it. Ok, how about the nickel? OK, I buy the jewelry. But I can’t say “nickel?” So they “what is that?”

Researcher: You’re pointing at your neck, do you mean “necklace”?

Learner: Yeah, but I spell wrong, but I use my body language (pointing at neckline). “I want this one” and they show me, how about this?

Researcher: So you’re pretty good at solving some of those problems, but you’re not satisfied with your English ability, and you don’t like to make mistakes?

Learner: So, if, for me, if not right English I can’t say. . . I just stop.

Her love of gardening gave her a happy outlet for frustration and the lack of social exchange and eventually led her to productive interactions. One of her more charming slips in her new language was in referring to the home improvement store Home Depot as Home People. Not knowing the word, *depot*, she more immediately lit on the idea of the similar sounding word, *people*, as she thought of the people at the store who always helped her find what she was looking for, despite her poor English and lack of confidence in speaking it.

After reaching eventual familiarity with frequently visited supermarkets and shops, she grew comfortable with the kind of stores where customer assistance was most readily forthcoming. These interactions in the target language were safe and provided practical learning; even if she could not retain what she had heard for as

long as it took to drive home, the value was in the interaction. It had always been that way for Ching. Nothing was ever as important as the interaction, the acceptance, the sharing, the connection. She desired more social interaction but still did not have the English language skills for her limited English interaction to be consistently fulfilling.

For Ching, the longer she lived in the U.S., the more Taiwanese and Chinese speaking people she met. Her favorite socializing was when she could get together with Taiwanese and Chinese speaking friends, eat home style Taiwanese and Chinese foods and carry on in the manner they would were they at home, reveling in a *hot and noisy* atmosphere, the Chinese description of a lively environment. Regardless of the noise level, these *students* did not speak English. One reminder to speak the local language would be immediately followed by silence, which was then followed by a chorus of laughter, followed by a happy return to the language of choice. In contrast, these animated conversationalists were typically struck mute at the start of any English class.

While cheerful socializing was not difficult for someone as cheery as she, who could make a dreary day on the job fun for everyone, it was limited in its power to build good English skills entirely on its own. Ching craved effective study and, on occasion, would reach for one of several English conversation guides, but they were written in Chinese and were ineffective. Ching would probably have enjoyed English language activities specifically generated for her level of ability, but rarely encountered such activities, in or outside of class.

Researcher: What's the easiest thing about learning English? What's easiest to learn?

Learner: Easy to learn? Watch movie. . . .

Researcher: Do you like to watch English movies?

Learner: Yeah.

Researcher: Are you able to learn something from them?

Learner: Because sometimes I heard the word and I just check my dictionary. And I, oh, what do you mean?

Researcher: Can you remember a favorite English language movie?

Learner: *Pretty Woman*. . . James Bond, yeah.

Researcher: What's the hardest to learn?

Learner: News. Yeah, because every day's different news so different words, not the movie, same. And singing. I like it but I don't know how.

Researcher: Do you have English language music that you can sing with?

Learner: Yeah, before. . . not now.

Researcher: Do you have any friends who only speak English.

Learner: No.

The absence of friends at a similar level and practice of English might have been a factor in the learner's weak interest level. A more significant presence and availability of friends at a similar level and ability of English language skill as the learner, who did not primarily speak the learner's native language, might have provided a regular practice opportunity and a social outlet at the same time.

### Social Interaction

For all second language learners, target language interaction is critical to the process of learning a second language. The world of work was a very important vehicle for Ching's English language improvement. It was clear to her that she experienced her most steady and significant stretch of improvement in English in the 3 years she worked at an import and export wholesale outlet store. There she interacted with coworkers and customers in English and enjoyed doing so. The stakes were not so high that she feared

making mistakes, and the majority of coworkers and clientele were also immigrants, which helped to alleviate the anxiety of speaking in English. She again became a customer favorite and highly valued coworker, and marked only one bad experience due to language.

Researcher: Do you work?

Learner: Yes, I do.

Researcher: What kind of job do you have? Do you talk with people in English at work?

Learner: Yes, I do. Ok, my company's from California and I work in the Colorado, some supermarket. . . in the some supermarket.

Researcher: Do you speak to people in English at work every day?

Learner: Yes.

Researcher: All day or part of the day? How much?

Learner: Part of the day.

Researcher: How did your English improve the most?

Learner: For me, I just from the work. Because, I, at home, I speak Chinese often, every day.

Researcher: Why does the work environment help your English?

Learner: I don't know. You just learning, you just, somebody say something different in English, just ok, listen, because you are work, you need learning some from your job, English, that's very important. I think my English from my job. I don't know. . . .

Researcher: Have you ever had any difficulties with people because your English was not good enough?

Learner: Oh. . . I think, no, but, I can say, once. I work in the market store, the manager I think he don't like the Asian people.

Researcher: What happened?

Learner: I don't know, he is big manager, but, I think normal people, if we say good morning, we need to say good morning, everybody good morning. But he don't want to talk to the Asian people, he never talk to me, say good morning. Never, ever. So I don't know what happened to him. I don't know.

Researcher: Have you had any other bad experiences because of English?

Learner: No. Never.

Researcher: Are you talking to people all day long in English?

Learner: Because my work is different. We're is personal work, so have some problem, or they have some question, they ask you something, so we're not talking a lot, no. I just do my job. Just like that.

Unlike her previous job, this one provided a diminished opportunity to build interactions and relationships, and the learner suffered as a result. Not only did she miss out on relationship building but also on crucial language practice opportunities.

### Comfort Zone

The tendency to reach for the familiar and fall back on Chinese or Taiwanese at every possible chance was at least a hindrance but might also have reflected the desire to operate on a level of expertise. Ching had always been able to swiftly and aggressively tackle work, business, and financial tasks with decisiveness and expertise but in her new life in the U.S., her lack of skill in English undermined that expertise in many ways while any opportunity to converse in Chinese or Taiwanese served to reaffirm that decisive and highly competent level of performance. In these situations she sought to operate as an expert rather than as a novice. In the world of work, it had always been her practice to race to a high level of capability, even to decision maker status as fast as possible, so when English proficiency, or lack of it, became an issue, she sought to work as much as possible with Chinese speaking colleagues and superiors. That way, the most critical, business related decisions could still be handled with expertise even as she enjoyed in her customer encounters a much more casual, if *amateur* level of communication. Although superficial, these

relationships and exchanges satisfied a social need in her, the ability to quickly show her personality and willingness to smile, and enjoy the smile in return, as well as the opportunity to function in her own language and display her competence satisfied several needs. She stayed at that job for 3 years and kept in touch with those coworkers afterward.

At a later job that provided plenty of responsibility, but little interaction in any language, Ching's private embarrassment for her relatively slow improvement in English came to a head one day after a manager, mistakenly, chastised her for using the company telephone. As a supervisor for an independent vendor that made fresh food products inside a small number of local supermarkets, sometimes, she worked the counter and, other times, roamed between stores, training chefs and assessing local trends and needs.

One day, the local supermarket manager assumed she was on a personal call and scolded her for using the telephone. Had he known her identity or even her role, he would have known that it was quite normal and acceptable, as well as contractual, for her to order supplies via the store telephone. If he had known her caring, giving, and responsible personality, he would have prayed for a dozen more colleagues just like her. Ching was dumbfounded, first by the misunderstanding and then by her own lack of confidence in English and resultant inability to respond. She wanted to speak up and tell him just what she was doing and why he should be more specific if he had complaints about her work or her crew. Unfortunately, all she could do was stand there, silent, humiliated, and frustrated.

### Stops and Starts

Ching decided it was time to return to the classroom for further English training and very quickly learned of a seemingly perfect opportunity. She had already successfully prepared and passed the citizenship test in English and liked the structure of a purposeful study objective. Ching asked a friend about an ESL/GED program she had heard about and enrolled with her friend the following week. When the class was being divided into upper and lower levels, she panicked at hearing the word, *advanced* and insisted on staying with the basic or beginner group in order to build confidence and accuracy in pronunciation. This turned out to be very disappointing as the lower, basic level class dissolved into a very low level review of simple forms and pronunciation and failed to work toward the GED objective. Ching had been waylaid by her own lack of confidence and, also, by a misunderstanding of her own classroom needs. In reaching for a sense of classroom comfort, she set herself up in a class that could not take her to her goal. However, continuing with the upper level group might have been a failure as well. Even if she had been able to manage the material and skill level challenges with that group, she left halfway through the semester for a 2 month trip to Taiwan to take care of personal and family business.

Researcher: I see you had only four different classes for about 2 months each time. How long have you been in your current English class?

Learner: About 3 months.

Researcher: With four classes, it looks like a total of about less than 1 year, but you've been in the country for almost 8 years. Can you tell me why you don't have more classroom opportunity in that time?

Learner: Sometime I have work, I don't have time.

Researcher: Are there any other reasons why not to go to English class?

Learner: I think very important. . . I know how writing and reading, I very like English. That's very important. But now I'm not good for writing and reading. I don't know.

Researcher: What other reasons are there?

Learner: I'm lazy.

Researcher: Are you also busy taking care of other commitments or activities?

Learner: In the summer. . . I like to going to Taiwan, go back to Taiwan.

Researcher: How often do you go back to Taiwan?

Learner: Yes.

Researcher: How often?

Learner: Every year.

Researcher: How long?

Learner: Two months.

Researcher: Everything is 2 months. . . 2 months English class, 2 months travel?

Learner: That's my life.

Researcher: Do you have a special English name?

Learner: No.

Researcher: Do you study outside of the classroom?

Learner: No.

Researcher: Do you do English homework outside of the classroom?

Learner: No.

Researcher: Do you have many English language practice opportunities?

Learner: No, not really.

Researcher: At home do you speak English or Chinese?

Learner: Chinese. So, I speak Chinese more than English.

Researcher: What helps you learn English best? What really helps you?

Learner: For me, I don't know, I need the patient people or something. . . if I say, "right-light" and you can't understand, and you angry. I say twice, third time and you angry.

Researcher: What's your feeling about learning English?

Learner: For me, English not push. . . we need interesting for us, for me, story or love story, story some interesting story that's very good for me, because I forgot very easy. Or interesting story, I remember forever, maybe. Writing maybe not, but story I remember.

Researcher: Are you able to study English on your own or do you need a teacher?

Learner: No, I need a teacher. I think. . . own, I study English is boring. I just stuck here. Or you go in the class is more interesting. Everybody story different, everybody level is different and you get in the class, I think, is good for your learning.

Researcher: What else can you tell me about your English learning experience?

Learner: Now, ok, I'm very like if I'm spelling wrong or prononce is wrong, somebody told me, "hey that's wrong," and I like it.

Researcher: You like to be corrected?

Learner: Yeah. Because houseband=husband. Somebody told me, not houseband, husband.

Researcher: How do you feel when you get it wrong?

Learner: I don't know, nobody tell me.

Researcher: How did you feel when you learn the correct way?

Learner: I'm happy.

Researcher: How do you feel when you make a mistake in English?

Learner: I don't know.

Researcher: How do you feel when you make a mistake in the classroom?

Learner: Everybody laughing.

Researcher: Is that good or bad?

Learner: Baaaad.

Researcher: What's more difficult for you, reading or writing English?

Learner: I don't know, maybe my membory's not good and I, reading, I very easy forgot.

Researcher: What about writing English?

Learner: Same, very easy forgot.

Researcher: What's the problem with reading English? After memory, what's another problem with reading English?

Learner: OK I think for me, maybe I'm not very practice the letters, and that's why I can't very good for remember.

Researcher: Are you comfortable writing English?

Learner: I want, but just forgot easy. So, you writing, like writing sorry. . . s-o-r. . . okay, and I forgot, I just quit.

Researcher: So you have some spelling problems?

Learner: Maybe remember problem. And maybe from the start, the letter, what, maybe like that, I don't know.

Researcher: Would you like to write in English?

Learner: Yeah.

Researcher: Would you like to read in English?

Learner: Yeah.

Researcher: Have you had any similar problems in Chinese?

Learner: Yeah. Same. Because start Taiwanese, turn the Chinese. We just different, so that time, I not practice the Chinese the beginning.

Researcher: How do you feel about learning English? Does it seem possible to learn English for you?

Learner: Maybe. If I don't speak Chinese, maybe getting better for the English, I think, that's help. But I usually use the Chinese.

Researcher: So what's the next thing you can do to get better?

Learner: Good teacher?

Researcher: Get a good teacher? Is there anything else you can do?

Learner: Yeah. Good teacher, I can learning more. . . and teacher patient and speak more.

While this might appear, on the surface, to reveal an instinct for overdependence on an instructor, the learner described a craving for a consistently high quality of instruction, even as she took responsibility for her own learning. With her own suggestion that she not speak Chinese, as much, in order to strengthen her English skills, she is participating in finding a solution to her problem.

## Chapter Summary

Until the last few questions, all the previous questions and answers were focused on the past, and on weaknesses and failures, whether explicitly or implicitly. However, the few questions that focused on the future brought out genuine optimism on the part of the participant and the belief in possibility. Given the first opportunity, the learner provided suggestions for solving, or at least addressing, her problem. By defining her path to future English learning, the learner identified what she believed to be her own primary weaknesses. First, she suggested that she stop speaking Chinese at every opportunity and speak more English as a habit. Second, she suggested that she should study English with a good teacher and she added one, apparently crucial quality this teacher should possess, patience.

The learner pointed first to her own behavior and then suggested that she would like to participate in an English class with a good instructor. For her, it came down to learning with a patient instructor and disciplined speech practice on her own part.

This researcher could make the very same recommendations and hardly be criticized. However, there is much more that contributes to effective language learning, just as surely as there are other difficulties than lack of practice and poor quality teaching that contribute to unsuccessful or ineffective language learning. While this author applauds the learner for taking responsibility for her own learning, as adults are inclined to do, this learner's language learning deficits or differences are not weaknesses that she can overcome by simply trying harder and attending a low pressure English class.

It is this author's opinion that the increased attention given to her learning situation, as a result of this study, caused the learner to reflect more carefully on her learning situation. In a brief number of contacts with the participant after the interview and follow-up, it seemed to this researcher that she had come to the realization that the learning equation included internal, as well as external forces, and that she found renewed motivation as a result of reflection on her language study.

As a researcher one is not invisible. For this participant, the specific attention to her English learning experience, from an objective approach, seemed to generate renewed optimism and motivation. For this researcher, this confirms not only that this learner is basically optimistic, but also that the road to foreign or second language fluency and literacy is a long one, and that adult ESL learners require encouragement to keep plodding that road. In Chapter 5, Discussion, conclusions are drawn from the results of the study and its basic research questions will be answered.

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION

The objective of this case study was to answer five research questions with data gleaned from the experience of the sole participant by way of researcher observation and formal and informal interviews with the participant. As observer and interviewer, this researcher sought to explore and describe this participant's lifelong learning, especially language learning, and ESL learning experiences in order to understand why she failed to make expected progress in English, even after living in the United States for nearly 8 years. The study was guided by and attempted to answer these basic research questions:

1. Why has the participant failed to make expected progress in learning English?
2. What role did her first language learning experience play in her lifelong learning experience?
3. What role did her early education experience play in her English lifelong learning experience?
4. Has this EFL/ESL learner ever been taught the sound-letter (phonological-orthographic) rule system of English?
5. Does this learner have an English language learning disability, such as dyslexia or other?

In addition to attempting to answer these questions, this author hoped to provide insight and useful recommendations to ESL program directors and instructors, so that learners with similar learning experiences might gain from this learner's experience.

Learning a second language can be influenced by a variety of individual differences including: (a) personality, attitudes, and motivation (Ellis, 1997; Lalonde & Gardner, 1984, as cited in Downey & Snyder, 2000); (b) language aptitude (Ellis, 1997; Carroll, 1985, as cited in Downey & Snyder); (c) anxiety (von Worde, 1998; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, as cited in Downey & Snyder); and (d) social and psychological issues (Burling, 1981, as cited in Downey & Snyder). While there is no generally acclaimed hierarchy of priorities or pitfalls, there are a combination of weaknesses that created learning difficulty for this learner.

### Hindrances

Clearly, as Schwarz and Terrill (2000) pointed out, there can be many reasons for the lack of expected English language progress. Specifically, the findings demonstrated that this learner had limited learning skills based on her limited early education experience, both in primary and secondary school, and on her not completing high school, whatever its qualities or failures. Also, it appears that the learner failed to develop effective study skills, both in her choice of self-study materials and in regard to irregular study habits. This is possibly a symptom of the learner simply not knowing how to study in general, other than to read on a topic, a strategy not effective in the learning of a second language.

The most basic and glaring behavioral factors contributing to this learner's lack of progress were sporadic classroom attendance and the lack of practice outside the classroom. It is a given that any learner of any skill or subject should actually study and learn that skill or subject in order to be considered a student of that skill or subject, and her inattention to the study of English was undeniable, regardless of cause. Still, it is important to balance this reality with the possibility that this learner experienced at least a self-perceived inability or possibly even a language learning disability and that the motivation to participate was deadened by what must have seemed, at times, to be an insurmountable barrier to acquisition. While a discussion of the effects of learner's first language learning experience follows, the *foreignness* of alphabetic English was, for this learner, never addressed in any classroom or by any instructor.

### *Anxiety*

Also, the data showed that the learner experienced fear, nervousness, and anxiety, which hindered her willing participation in interaction that could have played a key role in her continued learning. Language learning anxiety or foreign language (FL) anxiety not only inhibits interaction, but also, according to Krashen (1985a, 1985b, as cited in von Worde, 1998), "inhibits the learner's ability to process incoming language and short-circuits the process of acquisition" (p. 31). According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, as cited in von Worde), language anxiety can interfere with the acquisition, retention, and production of the new language, while Crookall and Oxford (1991, as cited in von Worde) suggested that language anxiety

may cause problems with self-esteem, self-confidence and risk-taking ability and “ultimately hampers proficiency in the second language” (p. 33). It is possible that this learner’s English language anxiety might have interfered with more than her capacity to socially interact in the target language, but also with her cognitive ability to acquire the target language.

Ching reported that she was unaware of her English mistakes and said that she felt happy when someone corrected her mistakes so she could learn from them.

Young (1991, as cited in von Worde, 1998) found that students who suffered from FL anxiety felt that correction caused anxiety, as did the *absence* of correction. Making mistakes is a part of new language experimentation, and instructors need to let their students know this and also that it is alright to make mistakes. The most important aspect of correction is in how it is done. According to von Worde, instructors should model corrections, and students should be allowed the opportunity for success after the correction is modeled.

### *Motivation*

The findings showed that this learner experienced a number of challenges in learning English, but there are some hindrances that can have a negative effect on all attempts to learn a foreign language (FL). Some of these hindrances are behavioral or psychological and pertain to personality. Motivation is perhaps the key affective variable. Dsrnyei (2002a, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003) identified motivation as “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity [and] how hard they are going to pursue it,” (p. 75). Ellis (1997)

identified four types of motivation and observed that motivation involves the attitudes and affective states that influence the degree of effort that learners make to learn a second language, and that it may vary dynamically depending on the context or task of the language activity. Ching had been *forced* to learn English; it was not an interest or a curiosity she developed on her own. Studies by Gardner (1985) and Masgoret and Gardner (2003, both cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman) supported the theory that one particular type of motivation promotes successful acquisition of the second language, regardless of age, that is, *integrative* motivation, learning the language in order to identify with and become a part of the community that speaks the language. Ching might have enjoyed becoming a part of her community, but was not driven to learn English by this integrative type of motivation to the extent that it would help her overcome her difficulties.

Ellis contrasted the integrative motivations of those who are interested in the people and culture of the target language with those who are motivated to learn the target language by a desire to stand up to and overcome the people of the target language. Ching was not driven by this flip side of integrative motivation either. She was not interested in *overcoming* the people of her new home culture and language, even the thought would be absurd to those who knew her; she accepted and wanted to be accepted by everybody.

An excellent complement to integrative motivation is *resultative* motivation, an energy that comes from the experience of success in the language learning process that creates the drive to continue (Ellis, 1997). According to Moss and Ross-Feldman (2003), research on improving learner motivation suggests that social factors such as

learning environment, group dynamics, and even a partner's motivation, affect a learner's attitude, effort, classroom behavior and successful language acquisition (Dsrnyei, 2002b, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman). While the social aspect plays a major role in developing learner motivation, a learner must experience success in language learning and experimentation in order to enjoy the resulting motivation; for Ching, those successes were few and far between.

Perhaps the primary type of motivation for many successful ESL learners, *instrumental* motivation drives learners to succeed in order to improve their life, or to meet their needs or goals in life. An example of this was when Ching spent several months laboriously learning specific English content in order to pass the examination for U.S. citizenship. While this effort was successful, it failed to generate long term momentum for this learner, either in fluency or in literacy.

The fourth type of motivation is *intrinsic*, which reflects "the arousal and maintenance of curiosity" in learning activities themselves by learners (Ellis, 1997). Intrinsically motivated learners simply enjoy the process of second language learning and thrive in the environment of the second language classroom as well as in the target language learning environment. Perhaps for Ching, who was already keenly aware of her lack of English ability, the only English activities that were intrinsically motivating were those that were entertaining. She enjoyed stories immensely, especially love stories, whether in simple ESL lessons or in movies or television, but they could not provide the solid foundation or necessary practice for effective English learning.

### *First Language*

Every learner of a foreign language is bound to experience some level of first language interference, or *negative transfer* as it is referred to, and defined by Ellis (1997) as “the influence that the learner’s L1 (first language) exerts over the acquisition of an L2 (second language)” (p. 51). However, for some FL learners, negative transfer is only one of many problems related to the first language.

The findings showed that the learner had a weak and almost ambiguous first language and early education experience, first learning her local language orally and then developing her first literacy learning her second language in the classroom from teachers unskilled in the process of teaching second language. Thus, she was not literate in her first language; she was preliterate, as defined by Huntley (1992, as cited in Burt & Peyton, 2003). Her first literacy began relatively late in her childhood development, setting the stage for a weak first language learning experience and a less than ideal early education.

Since FL learning is the learning of language and skills in the native language provide the foundation for FL learning (Ganschow, Sparks, & Javorsky, 1998), this learner might have been doomed to language learning difficulty early in life. In learning ESL, learners draw on the skills they used to learn their first language (Coady, 1979, as cited in Holm & Dodd, 1996). Ching’s first language and first literacy learning skills were not well developed and were based mostly on memorization. That language learning background did very little to prepare her for the study of English.

English is an alphabetic language with phonological (i.e., letter/sound) and orthographic (i.e., letter/spelling) rules that do not exist in nonalphabetic languages, so

ESL learners whose first language was nonalphabetic and who learned their native language without the use of phonological and orthographic rules might have a much lower *phonological awareness* than ESL learners who learned their first language with an alphabetic system or whose first language is alphabetic. Learners of ESL whose first language is not alphabetical and who did not learn their first language in an alphabetically coded manner will have particular difficulty in learning English (Ganschow et al., 1998; Holm & Dodd, 1996; Krug et al., 2002). Further, Campbell and Butterworth (1985, as cited in Holm & Dodd) established that phonological awareness is an important skill for the processing of unknown words in English.

Other authors (Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Mann, 1986; Read, Zhang, Nie, & Ding, 1986; all cited in Holm & Dodd, 1996) have shown that phonological awareness is developed *only* through acquisition of an alphabetic orthography and that people with specific reading disability in English usually show deficits in phonological processing. Neither the participant's first oral language nor her first literacy was taught with the aid of phonemic coding. Oral Taiwanese was learned by mimicking and Chinese, a logographic written form, was taught by a *look and say* method. Thus, when the learner was exposed to English, first in middle school and later in more demanding situations as an adult learner, she was not versed in or otherwise prepared to approach the sound and spelling or phonological/orthographic rules system of the alphabetic English language.

Even as an adult ESL learner, she had never been exposed to that way of language learning, nor had she been taught the phonological and orthographic rules necessary to the efficient study of English as a second language. Like the similarly

taught Hong Kong-Chinese ESL learners in the Holm and Dodd (1996) study, Ching had limited phonological awareness, and her ability to learn new words in English suffered from that limitation.

While some of these deficits might reflect aptitude weaknesses in phonemic coding ability or grammatical sensitivity, for example, screening data regarding the participant's language learning aptitude and the possibility of the existence of language learning disability were unavailable at the time of the study as the participant had not been tested or screened for these. However, it is important to note, in light of the importance of motivation, and prior to further discussion about learning disability, that studies have found that large numbers of students *without* learning disabilities (LD) exhibited FL learning difficulties and that attitude and motivation problems were not the *cause* of FL learning problems but were the *result* of such problems (Ganschow & Sparks, 1995, 1996; Ganschow et al., 1994; Ganschow et al., 1991; Sparks & Ganschow, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1996; Ganschow, Sparks, Javorsky, Pohlman, & Patton, 1992a, 1992b; all cited in Ganschow et al.).

### Language Learning Disability

This researcher was not qualified to make any determination about the possibility of the existence of learning disability in the learner and had no access to the tools used for the screening and diagnosis of them and attempts to pursue screening for this participant locally at the university, and community college levels were unsuccessful. Furthermore, the mystery around the existence of and the diagnosis of language learning disability creates doubt for this researcher.

The original suspicion of the possibility of the existence of a learning disability such as dyslexia arose from the researcher's observation of a modest number of documents from the participant's English class homework and spelling practice sheets and other discreet observations regarding the participant's recording of numbers. The leap from such observations to a suspicion of learning disability was possibly too great, and was based on mostly superficial appearances, and as such, was an amateurish, unskilled, and perhaps ill advised suggestion.

Since, for example, "d" and "b" both exist in English, the learner's mistaken use of one in place of the other does not necessarily constitute a transposed writing of a letter, and the same is true for "p" and "q" as these are the kinds of mistakes that were noticeable in some of the learner's earlier work. However, these kinds of mistakes are more and more rare in the learner's most recent work, an indication that increasing familiarity with the alphabet, combined with closer copying of English texts for writing practice and attention to detail, has eliminated the majority of those simple spelling mistakes.

While it would have been useful to the study to have had the learner screened for language learning disability and tested for general language learning aptitude, such resources and instruments were simply not available to the researcher during the course of this study, neither in English nor in the learner's native language. Also, there are other important considerations around diagnosis. First, it is generally acknowledged that there is no effective and consistent instrument for the diagnosis of LLD (Shank, 2001; Schwarz, 2003). Second, diagnostics are not suitable for adult ESL learners, in part, because they are normed on younger, native English speakers.

Third, screeners can not measure a diagnosed English disability against many other languages and, apparently, this is doubly true when the learner's first language is Chinese, and the screening results cannot be verified in the native language. This seems to contradict the Schwarz and Terrill indication that LD can often be covered up and compensated for in an individual's native language, but surface in the learning and practice of a second language. It seems to this researcher that the diagnosis of language learning disability is a mysterious, restrictive, and politically charged endeavor.

Schwarz and Terrill (2000) emphasized, as did Shank (2001), that the benefits of identifying adults as LD should be weighed against the potential stigma of the label, and they urged the consideration of other reasons for limited progress in English. Ganschow et al. (1998) cautioned that those interested in screening a learner should first establish whether a student has a documented history of difficulty with native language learning a verifiable record of failure in, or inordinate struggle with native language learning, before pursuing the possibility of learning disability. Since this researcher is not able to establish any of those precursors, screening is not only unavailable to this learner, but possibly can not be justified for this learner.

In lieu of standard assessments, Schwarz and Terrill (2000) offered alternative evaluation methods that included learner interviews and portfolio collection which might provide a more complete picture of a learner's performance over time, a more useful tool in following a learner's progress, however modest.

However, even the existence of LLD does not preclude a learner from success in FL learning. Downey and Snyder (2000) found that students with LLD could: (a)

acquire FL skills, (b) achieve at levels that match their peers in regular FL classes, and (c) satisfy university FL requirements by participation in the modified FL classes with proper instruction and accommodation. The researchers established that most students with LLD could acquire FL proficiency in classes modified to meet their needs. They found that the use of accommodations, such as extensive pretest preparation, extra time for tests and quizzes, a smaller amount of content, smaller class sizes and a low pressure, safe classroom environment helped students perform better and develop greater confidence.

Downey and Snyder (2000) suggested that the most important aspect of instruction was the “explicit and direct teaching of phonology and orthography of the new sound-symbol system” (p. 90). Schwarz and Terrill suggested a number instructional methods and materials gleaned from previous research (Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1996; Baca & Cervantes, 1991; Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Riviere, 1996, as cited in Schwarz & Terrill, 2000) that rely on structured and predictable activities and reinforce previous teaching and incorporate a multisensory approach. The Ganschow et al. (1998) findings supported the conclusion that direct teaching of the phonological/orthographic and grammatical rule system is essential to help poor FL learners.

As cited in Ganschow et al. (1998), Pimsleur (1968) and Pimsleur, Sundland, and McIntyre (1964) suggested that different levels of ability to process sounds and sound/symbol units was often the cause of differences in FL learning that could not be attributed to low motivation or intelligence. Dinklage (1971, as cited in Ganschow et al.) concluded that otherwise high achieving students at Harvard University who

failed FL requirements, showed learning weaknesses in: (a) reading and spelling, (b) letter/symbol reversals, (c) sound and syllable discrimination in the FL, and (d) in verbal memory.

Research has shown that learners with difficulties and/or disabilities can learn foreign language and there is consensus, even among researchers across viewpoints for and against LD diagnosis, that the most important teachable tool is the phonological/orthographic, sound/symbol rule system of the target language, and that this becomes more critical for a learner whose first language bears no similarity to the target language and the first literacy bears no similarity to the target literacy. Without explicit teaching of the English letter, sound, spelling, and pronunciation rules, the learner was doomed to make limited progress in English, regardless of the existence or nonexistence of diagnosable learning disability.

It is a recurring theme for this learner that she craves a return to basics. She instinctively knows that something important is lacking at the foundational level of her language learning experience.

#### Adult Learning Themes

Given the first opportunity, the learner described her ideal learning situation. The environment is low pressured and comfortable, the material is interesting, there is a sense of community, and above all, the instructor is patient. None of this is revolutionary. The absence of these played a notable role in this learner's limited language improvement. In addition, this learner experienced, first hand, other themes common to adult learning, such as a wide variety of barriers to participation (Merriam

& Caffarella, 1999), including and especially, questionable practicality and usefulness of instruction content in ESL, and the marginality experienced by limited English-proficient learners and of ESL instruction programs in general (Orem, 2000).

According to Crandall (1993, as cited in Orem, 2000), the adult ESL industry in the U.S. suffers from significant marginalization, both for instructors who tend to be untrained, part-time employees without benefits or hope for advancement and the limited English-proficient learners who are “generally, the most marginal members of our adult population” (p. 440). Often, high turnover and low morale are coincidental to a lower quality of teaching since there is little structure in place to support the needs of teachers, especially with regard to teacher development and learner advocacy (Crandall, 1993; Chisman, Wrigley, & Ewen, 1993; Pennington, 1992; Orem 1989, all cited in Orem).

Another adult learning theme that bears mention is cognitive ability. The learner mentioned several times the apparent poor memory that seemed to inhibit her ability to learn English. While adults require a slower instructional pace than children (Schaie & Willis, 1978, as cited in Lueers, 1983), this is because of a slowing in information processing capability which is likely related to depth of processing. In a 25 year longitudinal study, Schaie (1982, as cited in Lueers, 1983) established that there was no significant decline in performance over time of a number of different mental abilities. If this learner experiences genuine memory or retention problems specific to language, it could be due to a diagnosable deficit or some physiological variable that might be manageable via memory or mental exercises, such as learning activities themselves. This remains a question for follow-up study or evaluation by someone trained in those areas.

### Self-Expression

There is great significance to the researcher's question and the participant's one-word answer about whether the learner had taken an English first name, such as is taken by so many learners of English as a second language (ESL). Some learners benefit by, and enjoy taking on a new persona as they step onto the language learning and practice stage (Horwitz, 1986; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, as cited in von Worde, 1998). What was significant about the learner's answer to this question was its comment about identity. She answered the question briefly and decidedly, "No." This learner had a name she liked just fine and had no desire to take on a different identity. The learner's strong sense of identity was both a source of personal strength and a limiting factor in her learning experience.

Crookall and Oxford (1991, as cited in von Worde, 1998) reported that misunderstandings relating to others and representing one's true self can lead to withdrawal and increased alienation, using the terms, "reduced personality" and "culture shock" (p. 23). Such social marginalization and associated lack of access to natural language practice opportunities might be particularly frustrating for a woman (Burton, 1993; Nyikos, 1990; Hart & Cumming, 1997; all cited in Wang, 1999) because women, more so than men, place a very high value on interpersonal relationships, which are crucial to many women's self-concept (Caffarella & Olson, 1993, as cited in Tenant & Pogson, 1995). The learner had difficulty being herself while practicing English at a level from which it was nearly impossible for her to express herself, for too long. She missed out on a crucial aspect of English learning and, at the same time, missed a part of

herself. As Peirce (1995, as cited in Wang) pointed out, the successful learner needs more than what is inside her; she needs the willing participation of another person.

Since these combined frustrations can compound the effects and causes of the perceived failure to progress, Ching's potential sense of personal emptiness and failure might have led to shame and embarrassment and further inhibited the practical and natural acquisition of the new language. She needed the opportunity to share understandable input and feedback (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994; all cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003) and the conversational interaction that "facilitates acquisition because it connects input; internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and output in productive ways" (p. 2). In Ching's case, there may have been a lack of comprehensible input for her to work with or she had possible retention problems in using whatever English she might have picked up. She was then unable to build on any significant language learning and felt discouraged over not being able to *be herself, in English*. This, in turn, made it more difficult for her to negotiate the culturally overlapping experience that Rosaldo (1989 as cited in Lim & Wieling, 2004, p. 148) referred to as the *cultural borderlands* and find a space in this experience, a *sense of place* in the new culture (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004, p. 388) that she could know to be her very own. If "the limit of my language means the limit of my world" (Wittgenstein, 2001, as quoted in Curzon, 2005, p. 105), then Ching's new world experience was severely limited along with her ability to express herself.

## Conclusion

The answers to the original research questions, based on the data from researcher observation and first person interviews were:

1. There were several compounding reasons that the learner failed to make expected progress in English;
2. The learner's first language learning experience, due to its foundational inadequacies and in its ambiguity, negatively effected her adult language learning experience;
3. Her early education experience was weak and did not provide her the tools necessary to continue effective lifelong learning;
4. The learner, whose first literacy was in a logographic language, had never been taught the sound-letter, phonological-orthographic rule system of English; and
5. It has not been determined whether this learner had language learning disability or whether it would have been beneficial to test or diagnose.

Ultimately, the phenomenological design of this study could only come up short.

Despite the intent and effect of attempting to tell the learner's story in her own words, the reality was that they were not truly her own words, even though she spoke them out of her own mouth. No, her own words had always been, like her foods, family, and favorite things in life, Taiwanese. Her truest self-expression had always been in that language, in that culture.

However, like the apple of her youth, and her developed ability to artfully express herself in Chinese, her second language, her optimism and ability to embrace the positive qualities in those around her and in her new experiences, she would still find the motivation and opportunity to continue learning this very foreign language. Given the ideal learning situation, as described by respected researchers above, this learner would relish the opportunity to learn English in a well-structured and comfortable learning environment, with a patient and well-trained ESL instructor, with a number of learners at a similar level of ability, starting with the basics.

#### Implications

Many researchers, including Christison and Kennedy (1999), Comstock and Kamara (2003), Downey and Snyder (2000), and Schwarz and Terrill (2000) pointed to the need to teach to learners' strengths and to multiple intelligences and to build lesson plans that are structured and predictable and that review and reinforce previously taught material and content. Ganschow et al. (1998) recommended interventions to help students with learning difficulties, such as: (a) in-class accommodations, such as untimed tests; (b) slowed pacing of verbal instructions; and (c) paired oral and visual cues to relate content.

The ESL field remains weak, among many things, in regard to teacher training and standard methodology, especially around explicit teaching of the English phonological/orthographic rule system, especially for all learners whose first language was not alphabetic. A learner does not have to be diagnosed with a learning

disability or to have even shown difficulties in learning English in order for better practices to be implemented for the benefit of all learners of ESL or FL.

### Suggestions for Further Research

There remains a need for further research, with attention to funding, ESL marginality, and practice, especially during a time of increased discussion on immigration in the U.S. Also, a companion study to follow up on this participant with regard to the explicit teaching of and effectiveness of the teaching of the phonologic/orthographic rules system, ideally in the classroom environment of a stable, structured, objective-oriented program, would benefit interested parties.

### Project Summary

The project explored the experience of one adult female immigrant to the U.S. who has become known to the reader as Ching. This author sought to understand and describe her difficulties in learning English as a second language (ESL), and identify the most likely reasons for her lack of progress, based on knowledge from research highlighted in Chapter 2, Review of Literature, and on the learner's account of her own learning experience. This phenomenological, case study research was accomplished by way of personal observation and interviews with the learner, which allowed the learner the opportunity to tell her own story, and added depth to the study.

The available literature provided a large amount of data regarding the many challenges facing foreign language (FL) learners, including language learning disability (LLD), and the findings in this study showed that the learner struggled with notable and multiple difficulties. Primarily, the data showed that the learner, whose first and second

languages were nonalphabetical, had never been taught the sound/letter rules system of English, and this fundamental deficit played a major role in the learner's English learning experience. This basic weakness, in turn, affected her classroom attendance, motivation to learn and practice English, social interaction, and ultimately, her lack of progress in the target language. The question of the existence of LLD remained unanswered and created more questions around the availability and justification of screening and diagnosis.

This author hopes that this learner's story can add depth and texture to the discussion of, and improvement to marginalized ESL programs, instructors, and learners and that interested ESL instructors and program directors will consider the need for basic phonological/orthographic training to be implemented in basic ESL programs, especially for nonalphabetical first language learners.

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