Towards an Understanding of EFL Learners' Experiences of Maintaining Foreign Language Proficiency: A Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract

In many EFL settings, English language education begins in preschool and continues through college. Throughout their learning trajectories, many English learners develop language proficiency to a certain functional level. Nonetheless, it has been noted that after developing foreign language proficiency, many English learners later experience some foreign language loss because English to some extent has no social function in their real lives. Therefore, developing acceptable English proficiency is difficult and challenging. However, some language learners still actively seek to maintain and develop their language skills long after they have left school. This study aims to explore the strategies employed by this group of learners in maintaining proficiency in a foreign language in Taiwan. Purposive sampling was used to select participants willing to share their proficiency maintenance experiences. Their experiences were then analyzed based on a grounded theory research design. Thematic analysis of the participants' experiences shows that while a majority of participants underwent deskilling because of lack of use, they not only sought to maintain their level of proficiency using a variety of strategies driven by their intrinsic motivation but also developed proficiency through actively using their language knowledge and skills. They created conditions conducive to maintaining proficiency, such as reviewing previously learned materials, watching target language films and actively manipulating subtitles, enjoying reading, participating in discussion groups, and using the Internet to communicate in the target language. Implications of the results of this study for foreign language education are discussed.

Keywords: Bi/Multilingual, Motivation, Language Choice, Scholarly Publishing, Chinese/English

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Introduction

Considering the role of English as the language of communication, many EFL contexts, like Taiwan, children receive an English language education beginning in preschool and continuing until they graduate from university. However, it is difficult and demanding to acquire an acceptable command of English because it serves no social purpose in society. Despite all the difficulties, some EFL learners progress their language skills to a functional level above and above what is referred to as the survival level. Nevertheless, it is disheartening to observe that the majority of these learners lose their English language proficiency as a result of lack of use. Naturally, atrophy results from inactivity; for this reason, language deskilling is common and proficiency maintenance is no exception. The field of foreign language education is in urgent need of data-driven studies that aim to uncover and theorize EFL learners' experiences of foreign language proficiency maintenance, even though strategies of foreign language proficiency maintenance are crucial for both EFL teachers and learners. Although there is a minority group that actively and strategically maintains their language proficiency, very little is known as to how they actually move forward. If these useful strategies are identified, it would be helpful to include them into programs for preparing foreign language teachers and open doors for training approaches that support learners' continued proficiency growth and maintenance after they graduate from schools.

Literature Review

Maintenance of Language Proficiency

Even though the focus of this study is on maintaining language proficiency, it would be premature if we do not at first examine language loss and attrition. However, what are the fundamental reasons behind attrition and language loss. Bardovi-Harlig and Stringer (2010) have discovered a few variables related to second language attrition. They contend that language loss is influenced by both extralinguistic and linguistic factors. They also advise taking these factors into account if one wants to keep using their second language. Although these researchers take language attrition for granted, De Bot and Weltens (1995) contend that knowledge is never lost once it is acquired. The only thing that happens to our knowledge once we stop using a foreign language, there is a decrease in language proficiency (De Bot & Weltens, 1995). Foreign language instructors embedding language in a cultural context to stimulate learners' motivation, contact with the community where the foreign language is spoken, and increased exposure to written materials in the foreign language are some of the helpful remedies for language attrition specified by Neisser (1984) and Szupica-Pyrzanowska (2016).

While it is helpful to explore theoretical perspectives on language attrition, the following is limited to a review of empirical findings. Berman and Olshtain (2015) conducted a study to determine which elements of first language affect second language attrition in order to ascertain the impact of first language on second language attrition. They concluded that the interlanguage gained by learners is hardly lost although the attrition of second language aspects, such as lexical items and word-order constraints, is more likely (Berman & Olshtain, 2015). Furthermore, Tomiyama (2000) discovered that within the first 20 months of not being exposed to a second language, there was a noticeable decline in lexical retrieval skills, which is a prelude to fluency loss. From the 20 to 33 months of not using second language, the subject showed attrition in syntax, morphology, and prepositions. Attrition in grammatical

morphemes, however, was less noticeable. The subject was nevertheless able to speak spontaneously in spite of these challenges (Tomiyama, 2000).

Yashiro (1992), focusing on returnees, found that they were motivated to continue speaking a foreign language in order to preserve their friendships and connections with friends who lived overseas. Moreover, the parents deemed it crucial to maintain their foreign language skills because they felt it impacted their "personality, value orientation, world view, and human understanding" (Yashiro, 1992, p. 62). Yashiro (1992) reported that attending language classes regularly assist returnees in maintaining their foreign language, but they also provide them the freedom to communicate with foreign students. In a similar study, which aimed at studying long-term retention of French by Dutch students, Weltens et al. (1989) observed a gain in proficiency, despite the fact that subjects had relatively minimal interaction with French in the subsequent years. "General cognitive maturation, further academic training, and continued learning of other foreign languages" were cited as the reasons for improvement in language proficiency (Weltens et al., 1989, p. 214). Their overall proficiency in French did not deteriorate, although grammatical proficiency attrition was significantly higher than lexical proficiency. In addition, Snow et al. (1988) found that in their study participants' receptive skills were kept for a longer period of time whereas their productive skills were lost sooner.

In Schneider et al.'s (2002) study, they discovered that when the experimental group was taught French vocabulary through challenging methods, there were greater improvements when unfamiliar French words were used as responses as opposed to words from familiar English words. Rott (1999) explored the impact of text variation exposure frequency on word retention in order to determine the efficacy of reading on this process. Four weeks after reading the text, the participants exhibited a remarkable rate of retention. Receptive words were more likely to be retained than productive words. Another study demonstrated that learners solidly retained the material in long-term memory when they initially examined it often and then at progressively longer intervals of time. This finding highlights the need of reviewing previously learned topics in maintaining language proficiency. In a similar vein, students who learned Spanish for three years including spaced review were able to recall 72 percent of the vocabulary they had studied fifty years before (Bahrick, 1984).

Garza (1991), using a similar strategy for the development and maintenance of language proficiency, found that watching target language films with captions had a major impact on reading and listening comprehension. Markham (1999) examined the impact of captioned videotapes on second language learners' word recognition abilities in a different study on the topic. Regardless of the video's degree of graphical accompaniment, he discovered that the inclusion of subtitles greatly enhanced adult ESL learners' listening word recognition of the English language. On the other hand, Huang and Eskey's (2000) study found that captions enhanced college-level ESL students' listening comprehension abilities as well, not to mention their growth in vocabulary and overall comprehension (Huang & Eskey, 2000). Valmori's (2014) result showed that teachers maintained their foreign language proficiency through books, summer trips, TV, and movies in the foreign language, the Internet, newsletters from teachers' associations, books, and a national organization called LEND (which organized professional development activities for teachers of various languages).

In sum, the attrition and maintenance of language proficiency have been examined from various angles. Some researchers investigated the attrition in different aspects of language knowledge (Tomiyama, 2000; Bergman & Olshtain, 2015). Conversely, other studies

(Arevalo, 2010; Bahrick, 1984; Garza, 1991; Huang & Eskey, 2000; Markham, 1999; Rott, 1999; Schneider et al., 2002; Snow et al., 1988; Valmori, 2014; Weltens et al., 1989; Yashiro, 1992) focused on the methods that support the development of language proficiency. However, none of these studies examined or conceptualized EFL learners' experience of language proficiency maintenance.

Using Grounded Theory to Explore Learners' Perspectives

Grounded theory is an inductive research process that keeps away from preconceived notions and follows lines of inquiry. It is a research methodology based on participant viewpoints, realities, and experiences. Processes for conducting research, gathering data, analyzing it, reviewing the literature, and developing substantial hypotheses all come from intricate, real-world situations that are not designed to conform to preconceived notions of research. By reflecting back and explaining the real world as it is, as well as by avoiding preconceived notions, grounded theory preserves its integrity (Urquhart, 2013).

As grounded theory does not seek to modify, oversimplify, or disguise the real world as a study setting, it is a suitable research methodology for investigating learners' perspectives. Grounded theory, on the other hand, firmly grounds data collection in the complexity of the real world. Thus, using grounded theory to investigate learners' perspectives from social interactions in intricate circumstances can be beneficial. In order to gain a deeper understanding, researchers might use grounded theory to challenge their own biases and integrate formal research methods with inquiry, experiential learning, and autonomous learning (Andersen et al., 2013). It provides possibilities for researchers to investigate from the learners' perspectives in authentic settings while keeping an open mind to new concepts, theories, and explanations.

Grounded theory also has the advantage of allowing what is important and relevant to the participants to emerge and shape continuing research processes and theory development through its inductive and cumulative cycle data gathering and analysis processes. During the data collecting and analysis phases, research areas from various angles may be determined to be pertinent, and these areas can then be incorporated and further investigated as part of the study. Grounded theory is useful because it goes beyond simple process description. The resulting substantive theories provide an inductive explanation of social dynamics in intricate real-world situations (Cohen et al., 2007). When it is unclear what will be discovered or what will be required to advance the investigation, grounded theory is a useful tool for exploring "uncharted territories" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 155).

As indicated earlier, the majority of EFL learners face deskilling after leaving language education programs because they rarely have the chance to use what they have learned in EFL environments. Through a grounded theory research approach, this study attempts to theorize the experience of a minority population that actively and strategically maintains and develops their proficiency in a foreign language. Specifically, the present study intends to address the research question, "What strategies do EFL learners use to maintain their foreign language proficiency?", by focusing on the experiences of successful learners in language maintenance.

Research Method

The study adheres to the grounded theory research design, a philosophical field that has its roots in Strauss and Corbin's study (1998). Learners' experiences of maintaining foreign language proficiency was elucidated as they discussed and shared their personal experiences (Giorgi, 1997). The researcher searched for learners who had maintained their proficiency and were willing to share their experience by using purposive sampling (Kruger, 1988). Snowball sampling was used after purposeful sampling to find additional eligible participants. Informed consent from participants was obtained before data collection and analysis for ethical reasons.

Data Collection

Interviews were the main source of information from grounded theory perspective. Charmaz's (2006) suggestions regarding suitable interview questions for grounded theory investigations were followed. For example, in the current study, during the interviews participants and the researcher were regarded as equals (Scott, 2011). Besides leading the discussion, participants chose the interview's time and venue (Birks & Mills, 2012). The researcher asked open questions, without predetermined issues, listened to the participants, let the conversation flow, and enabled participants to share their experiences and viewpoints (Scott, 2011).

In the course of interviews, participants were requested to provide instances of particular events, incidents, and behavior in order to elicit and clarify their experiences, stories, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and convictions regarding the subject in issue (Welman & Kruger, 1999). The aim of these interviews was to share a common experience or phenomenon of a group of people (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In addition, to capture what was heard, seen, experienced, and thought in the course of collecting data, the researcher used memoing (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Participant statements were repeated as well to ensure clarity and interpretation. Previous responses from them were used to generate new discussion topics. Data were thoroughly collected until participants' verbalization of their experiences revealed no new strategies regarding how they maintain their foreign language proficiency.

Specifically, the interview questions were asked about participants' learning experiences as follows. They were asked basic biographical questions at the start of the semi-structured interviews in order to contextualize their experiences and gain insight into the demographics of the participants, including their educational backgrounds and past experiences in the classroom. The interview questions thereafter encompassed the participants' journey towards becoming an English language learner, their experiences as a learner, as well as their perspectives and strategies on maintaining their English language proficiency. However, specific questions were also developed in response to the researcher's sensitivity to the participants' answers. Because grounded theory is iterative, the researcher had to switch between data and theoretical categories as they emerged. As a result, interview questions were updated based on participants' responses, and additional questions were posed to elucidate any unclear areas. The interviews each lasted roughly forty minutes. Every interview was audio recorded. The interview data were verbatim transcribed.

Data Analysis

Given the importance of English language proficiency among English learners as well as the requirement to fill the gap in the literature stated in the preceding section, grounded theory is an ideal methodological choice. Grounded theory is referred to as "the discovery of theory from data obtained systematically from social research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2), making it a preferable research method for reflecting the ever-changing reality of psychosocial processes. Using grounded theory as an approach can aid in understanding how EFL learners maintain their English language proficiency.

As a result, the data were examined using a ground-theory technique, first with an open coding system and then with an axial coding system. The interview data were coded through recursive interpretations of the data by circling and underlining participants' words and phrases linked to reoccurring subjects that emerged. Following that, the primary phenomena (the axis) and the other features and dimensions surrounding it were identified by connecting the codes and organizing them into distinct probable main themes.

In other words, data analysis was a continuous and iterative process. In this study, important points were selected and designated with different codes based on the participants' transcriptions. Following their mutual cross-checking of each other's codes after the first wave of coding, the researcher and research assistant created a refined list of codes that was used for the second phase of coding. To determine whether there was a high degree of agreement between the researcher and research assistant, they cross-checked each other's codes after the second round of coding. All of the codes were covered by the categories that were created during the additional analysis. The codes or themes that emerged that demonstrated the maintenance of foreign language proficiency were revised and altered to be consistent with the memos that went along with each interview.

Results

Self-Study

Participants who left language training in schools attempted not only to retain their level of proficiency but also to increase their language skills through self-study. Because they felt that self-study allowed them to reap the benefits of their efforts, several of them thought it was more engaging than the classes they took to advance their skills. Additionally, self-study allowed the participants to shift from contrived conversations to more authentic communications. One of the participants elaborated on the benefits of self-study as a means of maintaining proficiency:

> I engaged in a variety of self-study activities to maintain and enhance my language knowledge and skills. I played an active role in generating language development-friendly environments. In language classes, I used to be limited to contrived materials, but now I have the opportunity to use authentic materials designed to communicate with native English speakers. I began with children's story books, then moved on to teen novels, and then to general novels. Also, I began by watching movies with subtitles in the target language and gradually moving on to watching movies without subtitles.

Self-study language learning is more flexible than traditional language training since it can take on a variety of forms based on the interests, likes, and dislikes of the individual participants. The following below further explains some of the various ways that the participants conducted their own self-study.

Reviewing Learned Materials

Participants stated that reviewing previously learned materials helped them maintain and even improve their language skills. They also regarded that reviewing what they had already learned helped them transfer their knowledge to a subconscious level. More specifically, they laid the way for automated use by repeating what they had learned. Participants saw reviewing as a means to an end of automatic language use. For example, one of the participants explained how he reviewed previously taught materials:

> Usually, I go over the information I have already studied. I reviewed a course book this month that I studied for my language course. This course book contains 12 chapters. I read the book at least three times and listened to the dialogues as I went over one chapter every day. I was able to retain what I had learned and apply it more easily after listening to the material several times.

The participants reviewed the topics they had covered to get ready for exams in addition to the textbooks they had studied during their formal study in schools. Another example comes from a participant who explained that reviewing previously learned materials is a good way to maintain proficiency:

> Because the university entrance exam is a nationwide test, I had to study lots of materials to improve my grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. I had to spend a lot of time learning these materials. Knowing that if I do not study them, I will forget them sooner or later, so I go over what I learned for the university entrance exam on a regular basis. I believe that reviewing is the best method for me to improve my language skills.

Watching Target Language Films

Participants stated that watching animations allowed them to discover how the words and grammatical structures they had learned in course materials used to exchange meaning. They also particularly indicated that cartoons and animations were superior to movies because they generally cover more common topics and language use. One of the participants explained how cartoons helped her learn language:

> Cartoons allowed me to discover how basic words and structures may be utilized to construct an imaginary world in addition to describing what happens. Furthermore, I learned from watching cartoons that it is more vital to use words creatively than to just memorize meaningless words.

When watching target language films, participants manipulated subtitles in various ways to enhance their listening comprehension. Some participants preferred subtitles in the target language, while others chose subtitles in their mother tongue. More specifically, whereas some people listened to and followed the subtitles rigidly, others were more flexible in their

use of subtitles. One of the participants explained how subtitles helped him retain and enhance his proficiency:

> I feel I should use subtitles with caution. Excessive use of subtitles might have a negative impact on my listening ability as I would get used to subtitles. Listening is indeed challenging. I usually turn on subtitles before watching a movie. Then I try watching the movie again without subtitles since I feel reading them may divert my attention from listening to reading.

Joining Discussion Groups

Finding friends and groups with similar language proficiency and interests allows for effective interpersonal communication, according to participants. Group discussions provide a unique opportunity in EFL environments where English is not commonly used for social purposes. Group discussions were a motivating opportunity for them to share news and ideas. One participant highlighted the benefits of joining discussion groups.

> Joining discussion groups pushes me beyond my current level of proficiency. During a discussion, it is normal to take sides. Choosing a side is simple, but presenting supporting data well is tough. Despite the challenge of persuading people, the experience enhances my thinking and critical skills.

It is noted that some of the higher proficiency participants engaged in open talks, while lower proficiency participants tended to engage in discussions on pre-selected themes. One of the participants shared the following below about her experiences in open-ended classes:

> I tried my best to memorize the words, idioms, and phrases associated with the topics while also expanding my understanding of it because the topics were predetermined. I aimed to apply the knowledge I knew before the talk. This strategy allowed me to continue sharpening my skills while also providing me with the opportunity to maintain the level of proficiency I had attained. I think my level has significantly increased after I completed the formal language training in schools.

Reading for Enjoyment

Participants considered reading for leisure more enjoyable than reading materials for the purpose of testing language proficiency. Furthermore, they considered that the frequent comparison of their levels with one another made language learning stressful. Because learners had to read to meet test requirements, it was even more stressful. One participant explained why reading for pleasure is beneficial.

> Here I decide what to read what not to read. In addition, I read at my own speed. In the past, the texts we studied were either too complex for me to understand or unrelated to my interests. But now, when I have free time, I select a story from a list of graded readers and read it stress-free at my own speed. There are no comprehension tests or final exams, so I continue reading without worrying about unfamiliar vocabulary.

On the other hand, participants preferred reading for enjoyment. They regarded that reading for enjoyment allowed them to read in their original language and pursue their interests.

When reading in this mode, readers actively interpret words and phrases based on their prior knowledge. One participant emphasized the impact of background information on motivation to read.

> Previously I was required to read pre-written texts in language classes that I knew nothing about. Currently I pursue my own interests. I listen to the news every day because I find it to be quite interesting. It is not difficult at all for me to read the news in English because my comprehension of the texts primarily relies on my prior knowledge. This increases my chances of correctly interpreting unknown words and understanding the text's content more quickly.

Using the Internet

Participant also stated that people could be inspired and helped to learn English due to the ease access to Internet and the growing quantity of web-based English courses. Chat rooms can be accessed via the Internet as well. In this case, two or more people can talk online on a range of subjects or problems. Learners can ask questions and get responses in online forums and social media platforms. For instance, using the Internet to sustain and advance her English skills, a participant said:

> Participating in the online discussions in the chat rooms allowed me to enhance my language proficiency. In addition, the need to communicate forced me to work on my grammar and vocabulary. The most fascinating thing about the Internet, though, is that it is the most economical way to communicate with people.

While textbooks are primarily intended for language instruction, the text and chat given on the Internet are message-oriented. That is, materials obtained on the Internet are not intended to teach language skills. Rather, they convey useful knowledge. Taking the information-function of online materials as an example, one of the participants stated:

> I am familiar with the dietary pyramid already. However, the online lectures and literature on this topic are far more intriguing, up-to-date, and packed with information. I read these resources to maintain and enhance my language proficiency while also making dietary improvements. Rather than for social interaction, I personally use the Internet primarily for information communication.

Discussion and Conclusion

In light of the results, the participants in the study employed a variety of strategies to maintain and advance their language skills. However, these strategies were mostly derived from their intrinsic motivation or drive. This finding supports Yashiro's (1992) and McEown et al.'s (2014) studies that learners' motivation and attitude, rather than their age and proficiency level, are more important factors in maintaining language proficiency. It also confirms the findings of Gardner et al. (1985) that learners who heldintervery positive views throughout the non-use period had a little decline in their speaking abilities. Reviewing learned materials was a prevalent method used by the participants. Similarly, Bahrick (1984) discovered that approximately 72% of the materials they had studied fifty years ago were remembered as a result of the review process. Furthermore, the participants in the study discovered that watching target language films and purposefully changing the subtitles was a good way to maintain their language proficiency. Similar findings were made by earlier

research (Markham, 1999; Peter, 2003) which showed that watching movies with subtitles improved learners' reading skills and boosted their vocabulary following extended exposure to the target language captions.

Moreover, the participants in the present study employed discussion groups as an additional effective strategy to enhance and maintain their language proficiency. However, Yashiro's (1992) study's participants spoke little to foreign acquaintances or those who were fluent in the language. The other strategy that was investigated involved reading for enjoyment, which helped the participants learn accurate facts about the outside world. Similar to the participants in the present study, in Rott's (1999) study, the participants discovered that reading for enjoyment facilitated in the development of their factual knowledge. Furthermore, the perceptions of the participants in the present study regarding the Internet use are consistent with those of the Hoven's (1999) group. Both groups felt that using the online communication tools improves their ability to communicate.

While maintaining language proficiency may not be the biggest concern in an ESL context, it is crucial in EFL contexts, such as Taiwan, where English is not used for social purposes. More precisely, in ESL environments, language proficiency can serve as the primary means of social and informational communication once it has been achieved. However, once acquired, language proficiency is often useless in EFL settings. Therefore, language learners are likely to gradually forget all they have studied. It should go without saying that atrophy results from inactivity. Learners should establish environments that support language growth and maintenance in order to prevent this happening. Despite the fact that most language learners deskill due to lack of use, the participants in the present study actively used their language knowledge and skills to maintain and improve their level of language proficiency. For this reason, the findings are helpful to learners who have developed their language proficiency in an EFL context and are looking for strategies to help them maintain and improve their language skills, and teachers who are interested in helping students become aware of the consequences of atrophy and lack of use.

Pedagogically, the present study provides important implications for foreign language courses and similar multilingualism programs. First, when learners are at the stage of studying in schools, it is important for teachers to help learners develop autonomous learning, which is not only critical in enhancing the results of multilingual education but also crucial in continuing their studies beyond graduation (Reeve, 2016). In particular, teachers for example can ask learners to think of different ways of using the language in future opportunities. Learners are generally more motivated to learn a language when they can make the connection between what they have learned in the classroom and how they could use this knowledge to meet their requirements in the real world in the future.

Second, in view of the significance of foreign language education in augmenting learners' proficiency in the target language, teachers ought to endeavor to enhance learners' curricular experience by fostering a positive classroom environment and fusing instruction with leisure. Jiang and Dewaele (2019) note that teachers are the ones who would most likely initiate learners' interest in foreign languages. Hence, it is critical to support teachers in emphasizing entertainment as a means of enhancing their pedagogical skills. Learners may be more inclined to sustain their learning efforts when they enjoy the process of studying a foreign language. As a result, ways to make such courses and programs more sustainable could be developed.

Finally, teachers can also provide choice and decision-making opportunities to create a sense of accomplishment for students and make them feel autonomous to learn. They can deliver the message, for instance: "I am your ally; I will help you; I am here to support you and your strivings" (Reeve, 2016, p. 130). This sense of achievement in turn might boost leaners' drive and desire to study harder in the future.

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