

Keeping a Language Alive: EFL Learners' Practices in Maintaining English Proficiency

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Abstract

In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, learners are exposed to English from early childhood through tertiary education; however, sustained proficiency remains difficult to achieve. This difficulty largely stems from the limited functional role of English in learners' everyday lives, which often leads to gradual language attrition once formal instruction ends. Despite this widespread challenge, some learners continue to actively maintain and even develop their English proficiency well beyond their formal schooling years. Examining the experiences of these learners offers important insights into the mechanisms that support long-term language maintenance. This study explores how Taiwanese EFL learners perceive and sustain their English proficiency over time. Participants were purposively selected based on their demonstrated commitment to ongoing language maintenance and were interviewed about their post-educational English learning experiences. Adopting a grounded theory methodology, the study analyzes participants' narratives to uncover recurring patterns, strategies, and developmental processes. The findings indicate that learners commonly undergo an initial period of proficiency decline due to reduced exposure and use. However, rather than remaining passive, they actively respond by constructing individualized and adaptive maintenance practices. These practices are driven primarily by intrinsic motivation and characterized by high levels of learner autonomy and self-regulation. Specifically, participants engage in a range of self-directed activities, including revisiting previously learned materials, selectively consuming English-language media, reading for personal interest, participating in informal discussion communities, and using English for online communication.

Keywords: EFL, English proficiency, language maintenance, motivation, semi-structured interviews

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Introduction

Given the global role of English as a primary medium of communication, learners in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts including Taiwan are introduced to English from preschool and continue formal instruction through university. Despite this prolonged exposure, achieving and sustaining an adequate level of proficiency remains a persistent challenge. One key reason is that English often lacks a meaningful social function in learners' everyday environments, limiting opportunities for authentic use beyond the classroom.

While some learners manage to develop functional proficiency beyond basic survival-level communication, such gains are frequently fragile. In the absence of continued use, language attrition is widespread, and previously acquired skills tend to deteriorate over time. As with other forms of skill development, disuse leads to decline; consequently, language deskilling is a common outcome, and maintaining proficiency poses an ongoing difficulty for many EFL learners.

Despite the practical importance of long-term proficiency maintenance, there remains a notable lack of empirical, data-driven research that systematically examines how learners sustain their language abilities after formal education. This gap is particularly significant given that both teachers and learners would benefit from a clearer understanding of effective maintenance strategies.

Notably, a small group of learners succeeds in actively and strategically maintaining and even further developing their English proficiency. However, little is currently known about the processes, practices, and motivations that underpin their continued progress. Identifying these strategies would not only deepen theoretical understanding of language maintenance but also offer valuable pedagogical implications. Such insights could inform the design of teacher education programs and contribute to the development of instructional approaches that better support learners in sustaining and extending their language proficiency beyond the classroom.

Literature Review

Although the present study focuses on language proficiency maintenance, it is necessary to first consider the phenomenon of language attrition, as the two are closely intertwined. A central question concerns why language attrition occurs in the first place. Bardovi-Harlig and Stringer (2010) identify a range of factors influencing second language attrition, broadly categorized as linguistic and extralinguistic variables. Their work suggests that successful maintenance depends on learners' ability to manage these interacting influences. In contrast, De Bot and Weltens (1995) argue that language knowledge is not entirely lost; rather, reduced use leads to diminished accessibility and performance, not the disappearance of underlying competence.

From a pedagogical perspective, scholars such as Neisser (1984) and Szupica-Pyrzanowska (2016) propose several approaches to counteract attrition. These include embedding language learning within meaningful cultural contexts, fostering contact with target-language communities, and increasing exposure to written materials. Such strategies emphasize the importance of sustained engagement and meaningful use in preserving language ability.

Empirical research further illuminates patterns of language loss and retention. Berman and Olshtain (2015) found that while learners' interlanguage systems tend to remain relatively

stable, certain linguistic features, particularly lexical items and word-order constraints are more vulnerable to attrition. Similarly, Tomiyama (2000) documented a staged process of decline: lexical retrieval difficulties emerged within the first 20 months of non-use, followed by attrition in syntax, morphology, and prepositions between 20 and 33 months. Notably, grammatical morphemes appeared more resistant to loss, and learners retained the ability to communicate spontaneously despite reduced accuracy.

Motivational and social dimensions also play a crucial role in maintenance. Yashiro (1992) observed that returnees were strongly motivated to maintain their foreign language skills in order to sustain interpersonal relationships and cross-cultural identities. Parental beliefs further reinforced this motivation, linking language proficiency to broader dimensions such as worldview and personal development. In addition, structured opportunities, such as continued language classes were found to support both maintenance and meaningful communication.

Interestingly, some studies suggest that language proficiency can be sustained or even improved despite limited direct exposure. Weltens et al. (1989) reported that Dutch learners of French demonstrated gains in overall proficiency over time, attributing this to cognitive maturation, ongoing academic development, and the learning of additional languages. However, grammatical knowledge was more susceptible to attrition than lexical knowledge. Complementing this finding, Snow et al. (1988) showed that receptive skills tend to be retained longer than productive skills, highlighting differential patterns of language retention.

A substantial body of research has also examined instructional and learning strategies that facilitate long-term retention. Schneider et al. (2002) demonstrated that deeper, more cognitively demanding vocabulary learning tasks lead to stronger retention. Rott (1999) found that repeated exposure to vocabulary through reading significantly enhances retention, particularly for receptive knowledge. The importance of spaced review is further supported by Bahrick (1984), whose longitudinal research showed that learners retained a substantial proportion of vocabulary even decades later when learning was reinforced over extended intervals.

Media exposure has likewise been identified as an effective tool for maintenance. Garza (1991) and Markham (1999) found that captioned audiovisual materials significantly improve comprehension and vocabulary recognition. Similarly, Huang and Eskey (2000) demonstrated that captions enhance listening comprehension and overall language development among ESL learners. Extending beyond formal instruction, Valmori (2014) reported that language teachers maintain proficiency through diverse, self-directed activities, including reading, media consumption, travel, online engagement, and participation in professional communities.

In summary, previous research has approached language attrition and maintenance from multiple perspectives, including cognitive, linguistic, social, and instructional dimensions. While some studies focus on patterns of attrition across different language domains, others highlight strategies that support retention and continued development. However, despite these valuable contributions, there remains a notable gap in the literature: few studies have systematically examined or theorized EFL learners' lived experiences of long-term language proficiency maintenance. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of how learners sustain and extend their language abilities beyond formal education.

Research Method

This study adopts a grounded theory research design, an approach rooted in the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998). Grounded theory is particularly suited to exploring underexamined phenomena, as it enables theoretical insights to emerge inductively from participants' lived experiences. In this study, learners' experiences of maintaining foreign language proficiency were elicited through in-depth discussions, allowing participants to articulate and reflect on their personal practices and trajectories (Giorgi, 1997).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to identify individuals who had demonstrably sustained their language proficiency and were willing to share their experiences (Kruger, 1988). Following this initial phase, snowball sampling was employed to recruit additional participants who met the study criteria through referrals within existing participant networks. Prior to data collection, all participants provided informed consent, ensuring that ethical standards governing research participation, confidentiality, and data use were fully observed.

Data Collection

Interviews constituted the primary data source in this grounded theory study. The design and conduct of the interviews were guided by the principles outlined by Charmaz (2006), particularly the use of flexible, open-ended questioning to facilitate the emergence of participants' perspectives. Consistent with this approach, the interviews were conducted in a collaborative manner in which participants and the researcher were positioned as co-constructors of meaning rather than occupying hierarchical roles (Scott, 2011). Participants were given autonomy to select the time and location of the interviews, thereby fostering a comfortable and participant-centered environment (Birks & Mills, 2012).

The interviews were semi-structured and guided by open-ended questions without rigidly predetermined agendas. The researcher encouraged participants to elaborate freely on their experiences, allowing the conversation to evolve organically. During the interviews, participants were prompted to provide concrete examples of events, behaviors, and practices in order to deepen and clarify their accounts, including their thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and motivations related to language maintenance (Welman & Kruger, 1999). The overarching aim was to capture shared patterns within a common experiential phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

To enhance analytic depth, the researcher employed memo writing throughout the data collection process to document observations, reflections, and emerging conceptual insights (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Clarification strategies, such as paraphrasing and repeating participants' responses, were used to ensure accuracy of interpretation. Additionally, earlier responses informed subsequent questioning, enabling the progressive refinement of emerging themes. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of new insights or strategies related to language proficiency maintenance.

The interview protocol began with brief biographical questions to contextualize participants' backgrounds, including their educational histories and prior English learning experiences. Subsequent questions focused on their developmental trajectories as English learners, their ongoing engagement with the language, and the strategies they employed to maintain proficiency. In line with the iterative nature of grounded theory, interview questions were

continuously adapted in response to participants' answers and emerging analytical categories. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was audio-recorded with participants' consent, and was transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Given the recognized importance of English language proficiency and the need to address the research gap identified in the preceding section, grounded theory was selected as the most appropriate methodological approach. Grounded theory, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is defined as the systematic generation of theory from data derived from social research. This approach is particularly well suited to capturing dynamic psychosocial processes and is therefore effective for examining how EFL learners sustain their English language proficiency over time.

Data analysis followed a systematic grounded theory procedure involving open and axial coding. In the initial stage, open coding was conducted through repeated, close readings of the interview transcripts. Segments of data were identified, highlighted, and labeled based on recurring ideas, patterns, and concepts emerging from participants' accounts. This inductive process enabled the identification of preliminary codes grounded in the data.

Subsequently, axial coding was employed to establish relationships among these codes. Related codes were grouped and organized around central phenomena, allowing for the development of broader categories and thematic structures. Through this process, key dimensions and properties of language maintenance practices were identified and conceptually linked.

Data analysis was iterative and ongoing throughout the study. Codes were continuously refined as new data were collected and compared. To enhance analytical rigor, both the researcher and a research assistant independently coded the data during the initial phase. Their coding results were then compared and reconciled to produce a consolidated coding scheme for subsequent analysis. A second round of coding was conducted using this refined framework, followed by additional cross-checking to ensure a high level of agreement and consistency.

All emergent codes were ultimately integrated into higher-order categories that captured the core processes underlying foreign language proficiency maintenance. These categories were further refined through constant comparison with analytic memos recorded during data collection. As a result, the final themes were closely aligned with both the empirical data and the evolving conceptual insights documented throughout the research process.

Results

Self-Directed Learning

After leaving formal language instruction, participants not only sought to maintain their existing level of English proficiency but also actively pursued further development through self-study. Many participants perceived self-directed learning as more engaging and personally rewarding than classroom-based instruction, largely because it allowed them to directly experience the outcomes of their own efforts. In addition, self-study enabled a shift from contrived classroom interactions to more authentic language use, thereby increasing exposure to meaningful communication.

One participant described the value of self-study in maintaining and enhancing language proficiency as follows:

I engaged in a range of self-study activities to maintain and further develop my English proficiency. I took an active role in creating environments that supported my language learning. In formal language classes, I was often restricted to simplified or artificial materials, whereas self-study allowed me to work with authentic texts intended for real communication with native speakers. I began with children's storybooks, then gradually progressed to young adult novels and eventually to general fiction. Similarly, I first watched films with subtitles in the target language and progressively moved toward watching them without subtitles.

As this account illustrates, self-directed language learning offers a high degree of flexibility, allowing learners to tailor their practices according to individual interests, preferences, and motivations. Unlike formal instruction, which is typically structured and externally regulated, self-study enables learners to design personalized pathways for language engagement. The following section further outlines the various self-study strategies employed by participants to sustain and develop their English proficiency.

Review of Previously Learned Content

Participants consistently reported that reviewing previously learned materials played a crucial role in maintaining and in some cases enhancing their language proficiency. They viewed review not merely as repetition, but as a process that facilitates the internalization of knowledge and supports the transition from conscious effort to more automatic language use. Through repeated exposure and practice, learners were able to consolidate their knowledge and move toward greater fluency and ease of retrieval. One participant described this process as follows:

I usually review materials I have already studied. This month, for example, I went back to a coursebook from a previous language class. It consists of 12 chapters, and I read it at least three times, working through one chapter per day while listening to the accompanying dialogues. Through repeated exposure, I was able to retain what I had learned more effectively and apply it with greater ease.

In addition to revisiting course materials, participants also reported reviewing content originally studied for high-stakes examinations, such as university entrance tests. These materials, which often required intensive memorization and practice, were seen as valuable resources for long-term maintenance. One participant explained:

Because the university entrance examination is a nationwide test, I had to study a substantial amount of material to improve my grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Since I was aware that I would eventually forget what I had learned without continued practice, I regularly review those materials. For me, reviewing is one of the most effective ways to maintain and enhance my language skills.

Taken together, these accounts highlight the importance of systematic review as a self-regulated strategy for sustaining language proficiency. Participants did not treat review as a passive activity; rather, they approached it as a deliberate and ongoing process aimed at reinforcing prior learning, enhancing retention, and promoting automaticity in language use.

Use of Animations and Subtitled Media

Participants reported that watching animations played a significant role in helping them understand how vocabulary and grammatical structures learned in formal instruction are used in authentic communicative contexts. In particular, they perceived cartoons and animations as more accessible and beneficial than films, as these media often feature everyday topics and more comprehensible language. Through such exposure, learners were able to observe how linguistic elements function dynamically to convey meaning. One participant described the value of cartoons as follows:

Cartoons helped me understand how basic words and structures can be used not only to describe events but also to construct imaginative worlds. They also showed me that using language creatively is more important than simply memorizing isolated words.

This account highlights a shift from form-focused learning toward a more functional and creative understanding of language use.

In addition to animations, participants reported using films in the target language as a means of enhancing listening comprehension. A common strategy involved the selective and strategic use of subtitles. Participants adopted different approaches: some preferred subtitles in the target language to reinforce form–meaning connections, while others used subtitles in their first language to support comprehension. Moreover, learners demonstrated varying degrees of reliance on subtitles, ranging from consistent use to more flexible and adaptive practices. One participant explained his approach as follows:

I believe subtitles should be used judiciously. Overreliance on them can weaken my listening skills, as I may become dependent on reading rather than processing spoken language. Since listening is challenging, I typically watch a film with subtitles first and then rewatch it without them. I find that reading subtitles can distract me from fully focusing on listening.

Overall, these findings suggest that participants engaged with audiovisual media in a strategic and self-regulated manner. By adjusting their use of subtitles and selecting appropriate content, they were able to balance comprehension support with the development of listening skills, thereby contributing to the maintenance and gradual improvement of their language proficiency.

Engagement in Group Learning Activities

Participants reported that forming friendships and groups with peers of similar language proficiency and shared interests facilitates effective interpersonal communication. In EFL contexts, where English is rarely used for daily social interaction, group discussions offer a distinctive and valuable opportunity for meaningful language practice. Many participants viewed these discussions as motivating spaces for exchanging ideas and sharing information. One participant particularly emphasized the benefits of joining discussion groups.

Participation in discussion groups pushes me beyond my current level of proficiency. During discussions, it is common to take a stance on an issue. While selecting a position is relatively straightforward, providing well-supported arguments is considerably more challenging. Despite the difficulty of persuading others, this experience strengthens my critical thinking and reasoning skills.

It was also observed that participants with higher proficiency tended to engage in more open-ended discussions, whereas those with lower proficiency were more likely to participate in discussions based on pre-selected topics. One participant described her experience in open-ended classes as follows:

I made an effort to memorize vocabulary, idioms, and expressions related to the assigned topics while also broadening my understanding of them, since the discussion themes were predetermined. I attempted to apply prior knowledge during the discussions. This approach enabled me to continuously refine my language skills while maintaining the proficiency level I had already achieved. I believe my overall proficiency has improved significantly after completing formal language training in school.

Pleasure Reading

Participants reported that reading for leisure was generally perceived as more enjoyable than reading materials designed for language proficiency testing. They further noted that frequent comparisons of proficiency levels among peers contributed to increased learning-related stress. This stress was exacerbated by the requirement to read texts primarily for examination purposes rather than personal interest. One participant explained the benefits of reading for pleasure as follows:

Here, I decide what to read and what not to read. In addition, I read at my own pace. In the past, the texts we studied were either too difficult for me to understand or unrelated to my interests. However, now, during my free time, I choose a story from a list of graded readers and read it in a relaxed manner at my own speed. Since there are no comprehension tests or final examinations, I can continue reading without worrying about unfamiliar vocabulary.

In contrast, participants expressed a clear preference for reading for enjoyment, emphasizing that it allows them to engage with texts aligned with their interests and to read in a more autonomous manner. In this mode, readers actively construct meaning by interpreting words and expressions based on their prior knowledge. One participant highlighted the importance of background knowledge in enhancing reading motivation:

Previously, I was required to read assigned texts in language classes that I knew nothing about. Currently, I pursue my own interests. I read the news every day because I find it very interesting. It is not difficult for me to read news articles in English because my comprehension primarily depends on my prior knowledge. This increases my ability to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words and understand the content more quickly.

Internet-Mediated Activities

Participants also noted that English learning can be supported and enhanced through the easy accessibility of the Internet and the increasing availability of web-based English courses. In addition, online chat rooms and communication platforms allow users to engage in real-time discussions on a wide range of topics. Learners can also ask questions and receive feedback through online forums and social media platforms. One participant, for example, described how she used the Internet to sustain and develop her English proficiency:

Participation in online discussions in chat rooms allowed me to improve my language proficiency. In addition, the need to communicate encouraged me to focus on developing my grammar and vocabulary. However, the most appealing aspect of the Internet is that it provides the most economical means of communicating with people.

Participants also distinguished between traditional textbooks and online materials, noting that the latter are primarily message-oriented rather than designed specifically for language instruction. In other words, online resources are not created with the explicit purpose of teaching language skills, but rather to convey information and knowledge. One participant illustrated the informational function of online resources as follows:

I am already familiar with the food pyramid. However, online lectures and articles on this topic are far more interesting, up to date, and information-rich. I use these resources to maintain and improve my English proficiency while also making dietary improvements. Rather than for social interaction, I primarily use the Internet for accessing and communicating information.

Discussion and Conclusion

In light of the results, participants employed a range of strategies to maintain and enhance their language proficiency, most of which were primarily driven by intrinsic motivation. This result is consistent with the findings of Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) and Lamb et al. (2019), who argue that learners' motivation and attitudes are more influential than factors such as age and proficiency level in the maintenance of language proficiency. It also corroborates Gardner et al. (1985), who reported that learners with consistently positive attitudes during periods of non-use experienced only minimal decline in speaking ability.

Reviewing learned materials emerged as a frequently reported strategy among participants. In a similar vein, Bahrick (1984) demonstrated that approximately 72% of previously learned material could still be retained even after fifty years, largely as a result of systematic review. Participants also indicated that watching target-language films and intentionally manipulating subtitles were effective strategies for maintaining language proficiency. This finding is consistent with prior research (Peters & Webb, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2022), which has shown that exposure to subtitled films can enhance reading comprehension and facilitate vocabulary acquisition through sustained input.

Moreover, participants identified discussion groups as another important means of sustaining and developing language proficiency. However, this finding contrasts with Yashiro's (1992) study, in which learners reported limited interaction with fluent speakers or foreign interlocutors. Another strategy highlighted in the present study was reading for enjoyment, which allowed participants to engage with authentic texts while simultaneously expanding their knowledge of the world. Similarly, Rott (1999) found that extensive reading for pleasure contributes to the development of learners' factual knowledge. In addition, participants' perceptions of Internet use aligned with those reported by Hoven (1999), as both groups regarded online communication tools as beneficial for improving communicative competence.

While the maintenance of language proficiency may not be a central concern in ESL contexts, it is particularly significant in EFL environments such as Taiwan, where English is seldom used for daily social communication. In ESL settings, language proficiency often functions as a

primary medium for both social and informational exchange once acquired. In contrast, in EFL contexts, language skills are more susceptible to attrition due to limited opportunities for use. As the well-known adage suggests, “use it or lose it.” Therefore, learners need to actively create environments that facilitate ongoing language use in order to prevent skill deterioration. Although many learners experience attrition due to disuse, participants in the present study demonstrated proactive engagement in a variety of strategies to sustain and improve their proficiency. These findings are particularly relevant for learners who have already achieved a certain level of English proficiency in EFL contexts and are seeking ways to maintain and further develop their skills, as well as for teachers aiming to raise awareness of language attrition and its consequences.

Pedagogically, the study offers several implications for foreign language instruction and multilingual education programs. First, teachers should actively foster learner autonomy during formal instruction, as it not only enhances immediate learning outcomes but also supports continued language development beyond formal education (Reeve, 2016). For instance, teachers can encourage learners to reflect on how the target language may be applied in future real-world contexts. Such connections between classroom learning and authentic future use can significantly enhance learner motivation.

Second, given the importance of foreign language education in developing learners’ proficiency, teachers should strive to enrich the learning experience by cultivating a positive classroom atmosphere and integrating elements of enjoyment into instruction. As Jiang and Dewaele (2019) note, teachers often play a central role in shaping learners’ interest in foreign languages. Accordingly, supporting teachers in incorporating engaging and enjoyable pedagogical practices is essential. Learners are more likely to sustain their learning efforts when they experience enjoyment during the language learning process, thereby contributing to the long-term sustainability of language programs.

Finally, teachers can play a crucial role in enhancing learner motivation by intentionally incorporating opportunities for choice and decision-making into classroom practices, thereby strengthening learners’ sense of autonomy and achievement. For example, adopting an autonomy-supportive and encouraging stance can contribute to a more supportive and empowering learning environment (Reeve, 2016). Such pedagogical support may, in turn, enhance learners’ sense of accomplishment and intrinsic motivation, leading to greater commitment to sustained language learning over time.

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