

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF AN AFGHAN EFL STUDENT

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Abstract

This short case study investigated the history of an Afghan student's English language learning process. The study also aimed to determine which learning style was best suited to Osman, as the participant of this study, to learning English. Moreover, the study attempted to assess oral skills, written skills, the participant's attitudes towards learning English, preferences, and language learning history. Therefore, the data was collected from both an online survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The findings of the study revealed that he, despite several social factors, could successfully learn English. During his language learning process, the number of his characteristics was determined. He was a visual learner and learned the target text which had pictorial aspects. Furthermore, the study also yielded that he would speak better than his classmates as he followed several other channels for learning English online, (i.e., BBC, CNN, Podcasts, YouTube, and other English learning websites).

Keywords: *Afghan, learning English, case study, written, oral skill assessment*

1. Introduction

English plays a crucial role in Afghan society and it has been one of the major courses in Afghan schools and universities for years (Orfan & Noori, 2021). A remarkable number of Afghan students including girls started learning English in the 1980s and the number was always on the rise since 2001. English has now been the medium of instruction in some important faculties, (i.e., Computer, Engineering, and Medical

Sciences) across Afghanistan (Orfan, 2020). Moreover, English is used in many areas of the country. It is extensively used in education, business, economy, government, and media (e.g., social networking sites) Coleman, 2019; Akramy, 2021; Akramy, 2020).

Several studies have been conducted in the Afghan context and explored the attitudes of EFL learners towards learning English from different aspects. Orfan (2020) studied the attitudes of Afghan undergraduate students towards learning English from three aspects, (i.e., cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects). Attitudes of religious scholars toward learning English, attitudes of civil servants towards learning English, motivation of students towards learning, and attitudes of Afghan students towards pronunciation were all the studies conducted by Afghan researchers respectively to explore the reported experience of students while they were learning English in their learning context (Akramy, 2022; Alimyar, 2020; Orfan & Noori, 2021; Zafary, 2021).

There has been less or no study conducted to explore the reported experiences of students in terms of learning styles, oral skill assessment, and some other social factors hindering learners from learning English in the context of Afghanistan. In this short case study, I studied the whole history of Osman's learning English how, where and why he learned English, which style is best suited to him while learning English and the quality of his speech while communicating in English with his peers. Carrying out this study will also lessen the worries and concerns both students and teachers have in their learning and teaching context. Moreover, the current case study will also help the students in Afghanistan to fill the gaps they feel in their learning process until they can consider the factors that prevent them from learning and seek tangible solutions.

In addition to the importance of the study, this case study will also explore some important issues from various outlooks about the academic life of Osman in learning English and any other languages that he knows currently. Those important issues are the history of language learning (background information about him, his family, environment, and... etc.), learning styles and personalities (the way how he learned or acquired the languages well), oral skills (fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, etc.), and writing skills (content, structure, organization, punctuation and... etc.). In addition, this case study reflects the challenges that Osman encountered while acquiring or learning the languages. Furthermore, this study presents the strategies that helped Osman to solve his problems and enhance his language learning.

2. Method

My case study subject is Osman who majored in English, Language and Literature Faculty at Takhar University. The reason that I selected him as my case study participant is that I know him very well, he is my friend, and he is patient, honest, and capable to answer my questions clearly and logically. When I invited him to participate in the study, he showed more willingness to participate in my study. After he signed the consent letter, I prepared my case study questions and invited him to an interview to collect my data.

For collecting data from the study participant, I used various collecting data techniques and tools. The data collection techniques were an interview, a questionnaire, two pictures, and a topic. The tools were a mobile phone, pen, notebook and computer. For language learning history, I used a semi-structured interview because I needed to use some follow-up questions during the interview in order to find clear and exact answers to my questions. The interview questions were 24 plus 3 follow-up questions. I asked the questions one by one and the participant answered them patiently. When the answers to some questions were not clear, I asked to follow-up questions to get clear answers. When I started interviewing the participant, I set my mobile to recording and recorded the interviewee's voice and noted some key points in my notebook while he was answering the questions. Afterward, I transcribed the recording and analyzed the data about his language learning history. The interview lasted between 20 to 25 minutes to answer all the questions.

For the learning style and personality part, I used a questionnaire. There were 6 questions and each question had three choices about language learning style. In the instruction, I asked the participant to circle the best choice that fits his language learning style. This part took 3 minutes.

For the oral skills assessment section, I gave the participant two pictures to describe them orally. The participant talked about pictures for 4 minutes. I recorded his voice on my mobile phone and then transcribed it. The last part was a written skill assessment. For this part, I gave the participant three topics to choose from and write an essay about. I gave him the chance of talking about one of the topics of his choice. For this part, I gave the participant 20 minutes to write the essay. For oral and written skills there were separate rubrics that I analyzed and discussed the data based on them.

3. Results

In the following section, I have drawn four major themes that affected my participant's language learning process.

3.1. Language Learning History

Osman, the participant in this case study, stated that when he started learning English, he faced many problems. One of the problems was that people around him were speaking different languages, and he could not know what they are saying about him. This could discourage him except for his native language. Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) and Sinha, et al. (2009) stated that while learning a foreign language, alphabetical shapes and structures of the first language (L1) would create interference. Furthermore, their studies also highlighted that the medium of instruction in the EFL setting is mostly the first language. Therefore, they do not get enough exposure to acquiring language. This problem was a social factor and had a physiological effect on him. Even one time, he decided to leave his studies and return to his hometown, but his teachers in school encouraged him not to leave this land. His teachers said that over time, everything gets better. When he finished school, he gradually got accustomed to everything here from small things to people living around him.

By the passage of time, he improved his language and talked with his friends in English. During his school period, he was very keen to study at the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences. After he found English a great language and funny, he changed his mind. He then participated in the countrywide exam (entrance) and got admission to the faculty of his choice which was the English Department at Takhar University.

Apart from learning English at university, he also had a class in one of the English language centers in the city. After he became a sophomore student, he started teaching some beginner classes English. To teach perfectly, he used to watch English movies and listen to different English audios in order to improve his speaking. He used to listen to podcasts broadcast by BBC and other networks from different English-speaking countries through his mobile phone. Listening to podcasts helped him to improve his speaking and pronunciation. Furthermore, he also used a reliable online dictionary for checking the pronunciation. Besides, he followed some online public speaking courses and chatted in the English language on Facebook with his friends. After 2 years, he

could communicate in English easily. He continued his studies enthusiastically. When he faced some problems, he would share his problems with his teachers to fix them.

Osman had some friends who were teaching him the Pashto language. His friends helped him when he was going shopping. They were communicating in Pashto with him. He was learning English and Pashto at the same time. After 6 months he had good improvement in learning the Pashto language. He was able to convey his message and communicate in the Pashto language better than in the English language because he was learning Pashto from the environment and many people were communicating in Pashto with him at school. Schumann (1976) said social distance affects language learning. If there is a social distance between the learner and the environment, learning a language will be difficult and if there is no distance between the learner and the environment, the learner can learn the language well. Being in an environment where he could communicate in Pashto was a great opportunity for him. After passing four years, he is now able to talk in Pashto fluently. His speaking level is very good in Pashto, but his writing is very weak. He can write in Pashto, but not as good as is required. He said, "I know the Pashto alphabet as well as I can write in Pashto and I can read my handwriting, but reading my handwriting is not easy for others." The reason that his communication is better than his writing is the effects of being in the environment.

He is a talented person in learning a language and he is interested in learning languages. When he was in school, he did not like mathematics and physics so he was absent most of the days when the mathematics and physics teachers came to the class. He started English language learning at the age of 14 in school. During the school period, he was studying the English language as a foreign language. Due to a lack of professional English language teachers, and a lack of English language materials, he could not learn the English language well. He said, "I was interested in learning English, but our teacher said that English does not have any usage in the Afghan context so do not focus on it." Therefore, he could not learn English well and he could not speak English. Only he knew some basic rules of the English language that was not enough to establish communication with others in the community.

His improvement in the English language was also good. He learned the English language's basic rules formally and there were good opportunities for him to practice the English language in the class. He said, "Our speaking teacher always provided engaging tasks for us and encouraged us to practice the English language as much as possible."

He learned the English language through practice and interaction with his classmates as well as with his teachers. As it is proved that social interaction plays a key role in learning a language. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), language develops primarily from social interaction. So, it is worth mentioning more interaction causes success in learning a language. He said that he learned the English language easily because, in the learning language process, the learners have to follow the same rules as he did. Also, there were some similar rules in learning the English language that he has experienced those rules for learning Pashto and Persian languages. As Lightbown and Spada (2006) stated, foreign language learning starts with the habits formed in the first language and these habits would interfere with the new ones needed for foreign language learning.

Another positive factor for Osman is motivation. Motivation is one of the psychological factors that affected his language learning process. He said, “the important thing that helped me to learn the English language was motivation.” His family motivated him to learn something and serve his country and people honestly. He also added that all of his family members encouraged him, especially his mother. Sometimes, he felt tired, but the motivation of his mother caused him to be strong and continue his studies seriously. Learning an international language in order to serve his country was an intrinsic motivation for him. Besides the motivation that he received from his family, his teachers also motivated him intrinsically by using appraising words and extrinsically by giving good scores when he did well. As Deci and Flaste (1995) stated, motivation affects the performance of the learners and causes success in learning either intrinsically or extrinsically.

Along with attending formal classes at university, he improved his English language proficiency by attending one of the special speaking classes in a private English course in Taluqan, Takhar, Afghanistan. Moreover, he would often read English novels every night in order to improve his critical reading skills and vocabulary. For improving his listening skills, he listened to the recent English audios and videos on YouTube. For improving his writing skills, he would write one essay per week and submit it to one of his peers who was a good writer. His friend gave him feedback and sent it through e-mail. Using reliable internet sources for getting information about recent events all over the world was another way that he was improving his English language.

He is now speaking English like a native speaker. His listening skill also improved well. He can understand native speakers from different countries with different accents very well. When I interviewed him, I noted some mistakes he made during the interview. He made some mistakes in using verbs, but he quickly corrected the mistakes himself. According to Ur (2012), mistakes are slips of a language that are natural and can be corrected by speakers themselves.

3.2.Learning Style of Osman

For identifying his learning style, I gave him a questionnaire (VARK) (<http://vark-learn.com>). This questionnaire is designed for checking and identifying different types of learning styles and it is one of the standard tests used around the world. I have downloaded the questionnaire and its result section from the internet. The questionnaire included 30 multiple-choice questions. After he answered each item of the questionnaire, I found that there were 9 selection visual options, 3 selection aural options and 4 selection kinesthetic options. He mostly selected option (a) and based on information provided in the result section, I found him a visual learner.

According to Celce-Murcia (2001), learning style is the biologically and developmentally set of characteristics that affect the techniques and ways of someone's learning process. Each person has a different learning style. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), visual learners learn through visualizing things. Osman said, "I learn best when our teachers provide some videos and pictures as teaching materials." It means seeing and watching something has the main role in learning. For instance, for teaching vocabulary if the teacher uses pictures, those learners who like visuals will learn the target words better and more properly. Moreover, for teaching tenses in grammar, a teacher can draw some diagrams in order to visualize tenses for them. Videos, pictures, slide shows, charts, diagrams, flashcards, symbols and signs are the best teaching materials for visual learners. Finally, it can be concluded that Osman is a visual learner and he learns different things through videos, pictures, and charts better than the things which are not pictorial.

3.3.Oral Skill Assessment

For assessing the oral skill of my participant, I gave him the chance to talk about one of the topics of his choice. So, he preferred to talk about his hometown. When he was speaking, his speaking speed was normal. Neither was he talking too fast nor too slow. His speech was understandable, clear and meaningful. His speaking was as accurate and

fluent as is required and satisfactory for a senior student in the English department. He spoke logically and he tried to speak meaningfully as well as correctly. One positive point about his oral skill that drew my attention was his self-esteem. He was talking without any stress and very confidently without being afraid of making mistakes. He could express his ideas, but he was reluctant to talk sometimes about the related issues confidently. He had some sort of anxiety in his speaking. Akramy (2020) stated that anxiety is a type of concern and stress a learner may feel while communicating. Moreover, one of the good points is that whenever he was making mistake, he corrected his own mistake without being ashamed and losing face. I think the secret to his success in learning the English language is his high level of self-confidence. Those students who have a high level of self-confidence can learn better and it was inferred from his speaking, that he seemed to have suffered from anxiety. As MacIntyre (1995) mentioned that anxious learners will not learn as quickly as relaxed students.

He has some problems with grammar. During his speaking, I realized that he wanted to talk as correctly as possible. He was trying to avoid making mistakes, but he had some small problems in using the correct forms of verbs and tenses. For instance, in some cases instead of using perfect tense, he used simple present or past tense. Or in some cases, he used simple present tense instead of simple past tense or past tense instead of simple present tense. For instance, he used “could” instead of “can”. His problems were language slips, not errors. While he was making such mistakes suddenly and automatically, he corrected his own mistake. As Ur (2012) said that mistakes are the language slips that learners want to correct forms, but due to some reasons, these slips are happening then learners correct their mistakes by themselves. Generally, his problem is in grammar he does not use standard grammar. As I observed the reason that he was making such mistakes during speaking is the habit that has formed from the early stage of learning English.

His vocabulary storage was good and he used appropriate vocabulary incorrect places in order to convey the message. Whenever I could not catch some words, he tried to repeat the word or tried to clarify it by using the synonym or using two or three words in order to make sense similarly. Also, when he was talking, he was using body language and gestures too much. I asked him if it was possible to talk without gestures and body language? He answered but not properly. When he was using gestures, he was trying to communicate and convey the message in a better way. Thus, using gestures and body

language made him feel confident. While he was talking, he tried to have eye contact with me as the audience. He said, “Having eye contact is one of the important factors for being a good speaker and can draw the audience’s attention.” He also said, “I am studying public speaking and I am trying to use the roles of public speaking in my speech in order to be a good speaker.” He confessed that speed of speaking is not important for him. Instead, he preferred to talk more accurately, understandably, logically, effectively and meaningfully.

His pronunciation was really good. Mostly, he was pronouncing the words correctly, but he had some small problems in pronouncing some words. As I listened to his speech, I found that his pronunciation is better than that of those who learn English in different English language centers. As I observed and realized, he was trying to imitate British pronunciation. Mostly, he was pronouncing the words shortly and did not pronounce the letter (r) at the end of every single wordless. He was not pronouncing the letter (r) in many words like British speakers. The main reason that he was imitating British pronunciation was listening to B.B.C. He was not a native-like speaker, but his pronunciation was really good as a foreign language learner. Furthermore, he was pronouncing some words incorrectly like he pronounced memories /mæmūriez/ not /meməriz/ or he pronounced river /rævər/ not the authentic one which is /rIvər/. Finally, it can be concluded that Osman’s oral skill is very good. He talks fluently, accurately and confidently. His speaking is not perfect because he is not a native speaker. His proficiency level in oral skills is medium.

3.4. Written Skill Assessment

For assessing the written skill of my participant, I asked him to bring me the recent assignment on his writing subject that he has written, but he said, “we do not have a writing subject this semester and I did not write any academic essay recently.” So, I asked him to write a one-page essay by observing the rules of academic writing because I was sure that they studied academic essay structure in an academic writing course with all its rules in the fifth and sixth semesters. Afterward, he wrote an essay about a topic of his choice. He submitted the essay after two days. His essay contained a one-half page of information about the topic.

When I read and checked his written essay, I realized that academic writing is one problematic course for all learners even for senior students. All, his written skill was not as good as it is required for a senior student. He did not observe the essential rules of

academic writing. He did not use the correct structure of the essay correctly. He started his introductory paragraph with a question as a hook. The starting point of the essay is good and he wrote a really good hook. After the hook, there were some supporting sentences, but there was no any thesis statement which is one of the important parts of an essay. The supporting paragraphs somehow supported the topic sentence but not completely. There was no logical order among sentences and paragraphs. Some paragraphs were off the topic. For instance, the main topic was 'Peace in Afghanistan', but he wrote two or three paragraphs about ignorance then he wrote a long narrative paragraph about the importance of life in Afghanistan that was not related to the issue. Also, there was no concluding paragraph in order to close the essay. If a reader read his essay the reader would not find any closing point and he/she would think that the essay had a continuation.

As I assessed his written paper, I realized that he had a remarkable number of problems in his writing. His written performance showed that he needed more effort in order to improve his writing skill as he was himself one of the senior students. Moreover, lack of constructive feedback is one of the biggest problems in writing courses of large multilevel classes. A teacher can't check all students' written assignments and give them constructive feedback. As Hess (2001) mentioned, writing is a productive skill of language that a teacher can teach it more effectively by giving constructive feedback. He mentioned that peer review is an important point that helps the teachers to correct students' mistakes in their assignments. For example, there is a topic about Kabul province. When the writer of the topic does not use some words like, (i.e., finally, in conclusion, to sum up, etc.) then how the reader understands it is finished or it is the end of the topic because none of those above words which show ending of the topic is used in order to convince the reader about the conclusion of the topic.

The major problems that he repeated many times were the lack of using punctuation marks appropriately some mistakes in spelling and using incorrect tenses. Furthermore, his problem is the lack of using punctuation marks was due to having no awareness of the importance of punctuation marks. One of the most important points for effective teaching is the justification of the lesson. Whenever a teacher teaches an issue, he or she should say about its importance. He can justify it otherwise students may take it easy and may not pay attention. As Ur (2012) claimed that when a teacher is justifying the lesson, it causes learners to learn it in a better and deeper way.

In addition, the mistakes he made in grammar are developmental problems. Developmental problems reflect on the understanding of learners of a second language rather than a transformation from the native language. Generally, it can be concluded that his writing was not good as is required for a senior student in the English department. He was weak in writing and he needed improvement. His writing proficiency level is lower than his speaking skill. For further clarification, I mentioned a few sentences written by Osman. *“In every way, anyway foods are really good. The good food in the world is the food of Iran. If you search you will find or if you want to eat the most delicious food you should eat Turkish food because it is accepted everywhere. In every committee, it is accepted.”*

4. Discussion

The main purpose of this case study was to investigate the learning styles, techniques, and ways of his language learning process. The study also determined to assess his oral skill and the challenges he faced during the language learning process in the Afghan EFL context. Furthermore, it also attempted to determine the factors which hindered him from language improvement in his learning context. The results of the current study revealed that Osman faced several challenges while learning English. One of the social factors was his economic problems which were very hard for him to continue learning English. Another factor that was a big obstacle to him while learning English was the interference of his native language. While communicating in English with other peers, he was usually reluctant to produce the target statement. His mother language was Dari and most of the time, his mother language would interfere with his speech. The result is in line with the findings of the studies carried out by Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) and Sinha, et al. (2009) who found out that while learning a foreign language alphabetical shapes and structures of the first language (L1) would create interference. Furthermore, the studies also highlighted that the medium of instruction in the EFL setting is mostly the first language. Therefore, they do not get enough exposure to acquiring language.

In addition, the results of the study showed that Osman was a visual learner. He would learn everything through watching and seeing. That is, his learning preferences were more videos, charts, pictures, diagrams, graphs, and any things which have pictorial aspects. The result is corroborated by the findings of the study carried out by M. Reid (1987) who compared the students of Korea and the U.S. and concluded that Korean

students were the most visual in their learning style preferences. They were more visual than the U.S. and Japanese students. Arabic and Chinese language groups were also strong visual learners as they prefer to learn everything through pictures and charts. Moreover, the study reported that Osman's oral skill was very good. His speech was understandable, clear and meaningful. His speaking was as accurate and fluent as is required and satisfactory for a senior student in the English department. He spoke logically and tried to speak meaningfully as well as correctly. One positive point about his oral skill that drew my attention was his self-esteem. Although he was speaking with some stress, he could overcome the anxiety and continued speaking until I stopped him. This finding is in support of the study conducted by Akramy (2020) who reported that the students' attitudes towards speaking skills caused a lot of anxiety. Moreover, his study showed that students get anxious while speaking English or being asked to speak in front of their peers. The study also revealed that the more low self-confidence is felt in students the more anxious they become while they are speaking.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study explored the reported experiences of Osman language learning history in the Afghan EFL context. The study also aimed to determine which learning style was best suited to Osman, as the participant of this study, to learning English. Moreover, the study attempted to assess oral skills, written skills, the participant's attitudes towards learning English, preferences, and language learning history. The findings of the study revealed that he, despite several social factors, could successfully learn English. During his language learning process, the number of his characteristics was determined. He was a visual learner and learned the target text which had pictorial aspects. Furthermore, the study also yielded that he would speak better than his classmates as he followed several other channels for learning English online, (i.e., BBC, CNN, Podcasts, YouTube, and some other English learning websites).

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