Case study 9.1: ‘Why don’t they just learn the language?’ – social factors in second language acquisition by immigrants

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If you asked language learners around the world what they think is the best way to learn a foreign language, one of the most frequent answers you would hear would definitely be “to move to the country in which the language is spoken”. Indeed, moving to France when you are learning French, to Thailand when you are learning Thai or to South Africa when you are learning isiXhosa seems the ideal way to acquire these languages. No-one would doubt that the acquisition process would proceed more rapidly and easily in such a naturalistic language learning context than in a classroom setting in a country in which the language is not spoken.

Nevertheless, many countries have large numbers of immigrants who, even after having lived in the new country for many years, still have a very low proficiency in the dominant language spoken in that society. This lack of language learning progress made by some immigrants sometimes gives rise to irritated reactions by native speakers of the dominant language, such as: “why don’t they just learn the language?!” What could be the cause of this lack of L2 language learning progress among some immigrants? Why does moving to a new country not lead to a quick and effortless acquisition of the target language (the dominant language or L2 for the immigrants) for all people?

Hansen (2006) presents a case study of one Vietnamese family who immigrated to the US one year prior to the year in which her study was conducted. By observing the lifestyle, social network and working context of the wife, Ahn, and her husband, Nhi, she aimed to develop some insight into the social factors which influenced their English language learning. Interestingly, these factors turned out to be quite different for Ahn and Nhi, even though on the surface, wife and husband appeared to be in the same situation.

For instance, her research showed that the extent to which the two language learners had contact with native speakers of English was an important factor which affected their language acquisition. Although both Ahn and Nhi were working, their respective working contexts provided different opportunities: Ahn worked as a manicurist at a nail salon where nearly all of her colleagues were Vietnamese and most of her customers were Mexican women with limited English skills. As such, she had little opportunity to speak with native or proficient speakers of English. Her boss’ insistence on her having small talk with the few American customers while doing their nails only enhanced the stress Ahn experienced at work. As she said (Hansen, 2006:127):

I don’t understand American with a customer because I talk...vocabulary no sentence no structure ... I can’t explain I can’t explain their understand nail and disease ... I speak vocabulary ... no sentence no structure sentence ... customer don’t understand...
stand and I don’t understand them ... I think it is a bad experience.

Nhi, by contrast, worked in a factory and had two first language English American and two Mexican co-workers, with whom he became friends. He chatted with them during breaks, they taught him English vocabulary and, as he said, “when...break time...we have we talk we talk together funny”. Thus, while the working context did not result in any positive language learning experiences for Ahn, but rather stressed her and discouraged her from speaking English, Nhi enjoyed practicing English by chatting and joking with his new friends during work breaks.

Besides the opportunity to use the L2, the extent to which an L2 learner continues to use the L1 also influences the learning process. A study by Flege, Frieda and Nozawa (1997, referred to in Hansen, 2006) found that Italian immigrants in Canada who used Italian a lot in day-to-day life in Canada were rated (perceived) as having stronger accents when speaking English than immigrants who used their L1 (Italian) only sparingly. When at one point during Hansen’s (2006) study Ahn’s sister and her family moved next door to Ahn and Nhi’s house, this again affected Ahn and Nhi differently. For Ahn, the move created a tighter Vietnamese community around her: now she always spoke Vietnamese with her sister and when they went shopping together, her sister took over the communication in shops, leaving Ahn no opportunity to practise her English. For Nhi, by contrast, the same event led to a decreased L1 use, as he spent as much time as possible with his two nieces of 8 and 11 years, who spoke English fluently and had only receptive competence in Vietnamese (that is, they understood but did not speak it).

As he said (Hansen, 2006: 131):

Friday and Saturday I meet my niece ... I ... I try in hear hear hear them speak and I ... I I I ... we are were are we are speak ... together everything ... everything ... for example ... I ... you are you you you you pass me glass.

As Hansen (2006: 140) points out, the notion of ‘social identity’ also plays an important role in overcoming social barriers which hinder the L2 learning process. In constructing your social identity, you choose in-group memberships by associating yourself with particular communities: do you choose mostly the L1 community and its culture and customs, or the L2 community, or maybe both? Again, Hansen (2006) observed that the social identities Ahn and Nhi constructed for themselves were quite different. Nhi clearly wanted to associate with the American culture and lifestyle: he started wearing American clothes, and bought a car and other products which he believed were part of the American culture and would make him appear more American.

Ahn had more difficulty constructing a social identity in her new country. At first, she wanted to associate with her Vietnamese co-workers, and started wearing clothes like them, even though they were much younger than her. Later in the year, she deliberately tried to distance herself from this Vietnamese community, but struggled to develop an L2 American identity like Nhi, since she was immersed in an L1 Vietnamese community most of the time.

What this case study clearly shows is that language learning is a highly individual process, which is affected not only by linguistic constraints, but also by a large number of social factors.
These social factors may even be different for language learners who, on the surface, appear to be in very similar contexts. While Ahn and Nhi both very much wanted to improve their English skills as quickly as possible after their arrival in the US, their different social contexts provided different opportunities for them, thus leading to diverging L2 learning processes. As such, asking all immigrants to “just learn the language” at the same rate of acquisition is unreasonable: social factors which may be beyond their control may influence the speed and success of the acquisition process.