Language Learner Profile

Bethany Anderson

Azusa Pacific University

Learner Description

Vivian* is a 46-year-old female from El Salvador whose L1 is Spanish. Vivian finished high school in El Salvador and attended one year of college in her home country majoring in public relations, but did not complete her university studies. She moved to the US at the age of 26, and has been living in the US for the 20 years since then. For the past two years, Vivian has worked at a nursing home as a dietary assistant; her duties include serving meals to residents (most of whom speak only English), and cleaning the dining room after meals. Nearly all her coworkers speak only English.

I met Vivian when she was a student in an adult ESL class I taught several years ago in the small town in southeastern Iowa where we both live. The classes were offered through a local community college for a minimal fee and met twice a week for two hours per class session. I no longer teach for this program but have kept in touch with Vivian and see her from time to time since our children attend the same schools. Vivian is not currently attending ESL classes due to responsibilities with work and family, but she hopes to enroll in a nearby community college to study ESL in the future.

Cognitive Factors

Vivian is an intelligent and dedicated student. She appeared to genuinely enjoy studying English when I had her in class, and she demonstrated a strong aptitude for language, picking up new forms and vocabulary easily in class and often being one of the first of her classmates to

Name has been changed

grasp a new concept. She has a fairly good level of metalinguistic awareness and is able to understand and articulate syntactic rules. She loves to write, both in English and Spanish, and says that she often corrects her husband's English spelling, even though he attended high school in the U.S. and his spoken English skills are stronger than hers.

Based on Vivian's answers to the Styles Awareness Checklist from Brown (2014, p. 134), and my own questions and observations, I gathered the following information about her individual cognitive and affective characteristics. Vivian learns best when she can write down new knowledge, demonstrating a **visual/verbal** orientation. She leans toward **field dependence**, displaying high emotional intelligence and sociability. She enjoyed pair work and group projects in class and would often go out of her way to help classmates who were struggling with a task. Vivian exhibits a **holistic**, right-brain processing style, self-reporting that she likes "to 'absorb' language and get the general 'gist' of what is said or written" (Brown, 2014). She is also an **impulsive** learner: she is always ready to take a risk when practicing the language and isn't overly focused on accuracy.

Affective Factors

Vivian demonstrates **instrumental intrinsic motivation** for learning English. In her own words, she wants to learn English "for better communication at appointments and talking to people in everyday life; to be independent." She has consistently sought out ESL classes since arriving in the US, demonstrating intrinsic motivation to learn the language. Vivian self-identifies as an **extrovert** and says she enjoys talking to people in new social settings and likes trying to help people "feel comfortable." This tendency is further evidenced by her love for her

job where she says it "is fun every day," and she loves working with the residents and hearing their stories.

Vivian has a **high tolerance for ambiguity**; although she reports that she sometimes only understands 50% of what is said in spoken English, she is usually able to catch the "main idea" and doesn't get frustrated if she doesn't understand all the words. She exhibits **high self-esteem and low inhibition**, noting that she likes it when people correct her English (as they sometimes do at work) and she doesn't feel embarrassed when this happens. Vivian has always demonstrated **low anxiety** in the classroom and does not easily become nervous when practicing English.

Description of Learner's Context

Linguistic Context

In El Salvador, Vivian studied English for 30 minutes per week in high school, but she describes the instruction as mainly consisting of very basic words and phrases. She reports that her high school teacher lacked fluency in English and classes were focused on learning lists of words like *table, pencil, chicken,* etc. At that time, she did not enjoy English class at all.

After arriving in California (where she lived before moving to Iowa), Vivian immediately enrolled in adult ESL classes. She started at the lowest level and had a positive learning experience as she progressed through to higher levels. From her descriptions of classes, they were most likely centered around a communicative approach, a combination of "Let's talk" and "Get it right in the end" (Lightbown & Spada 2013, pp. 165-171, 182-184) as were the classes I

taught when she was my student. Vivian especially enjoys writing in English, and would always take thorough notes in class. Vivian continued taking ESL classes consistently until she began working (two years ago when her youngest daughter started school).

Since Vivian is not currently enrolled in ESL classes, her main community of practice is at work. At her job, she needs to speak English because most of her coworkers and the nursing home residents speak only English. She describes a positive work environment where she is encouraged in her English practice, and is sometimes given corrective feedback when she makes a mistake. She enjoys interacting with and helping the residents, so this encourages her in using her English.

Cultural Context

When asked about what cultural differences she has noticed between the US and El Salvador, Vivian points to the higher value of relationships and social interactions in her home country. In El Salvador, she notes, people say hello to everyone they pass on the street (even strangers) as a matter of common courtesy. In addition, you are expected to greet everyone when arriving at a social gathering, and to say goodbye to everyone when leaving. In the case of family or friends, greetings and leave-taking is always accompanied by a kiss or handshake. Vivian expresses frustration with the differing cultural norms in the US: "sometimes in my job I say 'good morning' but. . . I don't have answer. Everybody just walk." Vivian believes that the pace of life in the US is much faster compared to El Salvador where people like to spend more time in conversation and have a more relaxed pace of life. In terms of things she appreciates about US culture, she mentions the emphasis on punctuality. She says that she herself likes to be punctual

and she likes the fact that in the US when you set a time, that is the time you can expect everyone to be there.

Social Context

Vivian's entire social support system is made up of Spanish speakers. Her mother and sister live nearby in the same town, as does her husband's entire family. Vivian says that she spends most of her social time with her family or her husband's family. In addition, their family is actively involved in their church which is a Spanish-speaking Catholic congregation. As a result, her exposure to English is limited to work, TV programs, and her children (as is the case in many immigrant families, Vivian and her husband usually speak to their children in Spanish, but they often answer in English). When asked if she has any friends who do not speak Spanish, she had to think for a long time before coming up with one person: her former boss who moved away and she no longer sees, but does communicate with occasionally via text message.

Description of Learner Language

Language Proficiency

Vivian is at a high beginning to low intermediate proficiency level. Her reading and writing skills are strongest, and listening and speaking skills are less developed. This makes sense considering that she most enjoys the writing component of ESL classes. She makes fewer grammatical errors in written tasks than she does in speaking tasks, and makes the most errors in unrehearsed conversational utterances.

Communicative Competence

From my observation of Vivian's spoken English, she tends to be weaker in grammatical and sociolinguistic competence. Her weakness in the area of grammatical competence is evidenced by numerous syntactic errors (*I say* vs. *I said*, *is a problem* vs. *it's a problem*, *I going,* etc.), lexical errors (*can garbage* vs. *garbage can, make a test, etc.*), and pronunciation errors (*buffet* pronounced boo-fett) in Vivian's spoken English. She seems to be able to self-correct some mistakes, but the majority slip by unnoticed when she is speaking conversationally. These errors do affect ease of comprehension at times and some native speakers might have trouble following along due to her frequent errors. Because her vocabulary and grammatical proficiency in English is not advanced enough to convey differing levels of formality, Vivian's sociolinguistic competence tends to suffer as a result.

In contrast, Vivian is much stronger in strategic and functional competence. As evidence of her strategic competence, Vivian's communication is effective overall, and she is able to explain what she means if she is lacking the vocabulary needed (for example, in explaining a native fruit used in special Holy Week desserts in El Salvador, she likened it to "a peach, but smaller"). She has enough confidence and tenacity to try different approaches if the communication is unsuccessful at first.

Vivian's functional competence may be her strongest area because she seems able to successfully accomplish the communicative purpose intended. To illustrate her functional competence, she told me a story about a new coworker who was doing her job incorrectly, which in turn made Vivian's job more difficult. Vivian called her coworker out and told her that she

shouldn't be doing the job that way. Even though her coworker got mad about it, she ended up fixing her work, so Vivian was able to successfully accomplish her intended purpose.

Learner Errors

During my sessions with Vivian, I recorded our conversations and identified some of her consistent errors in the areas of negation, grammatical morphemes, and L1 transfer.

Negation

Vivian is at a Stage 2 for negation as described by Lightbown and Spada where "'no' and 'not' may alternate with 'don't'. However, 'don't' is not marked for person, number, or tense" (2013, p. 49). Some examples of her alternating use of no/not and don't are listed below:

- *I not understand*
- *I not sure*
- *I not know how explain/ I don't know how explain*
- *I don't know how call a taxi*
- *We don't have presents*
- *She don't understand*

Grammatical Morphemes

Vivian demonstrated several errors with *be*, sometimes omitting it (as in the first two examples), and other times adding it unnecessarily (as in the last two):

- *I very busy*
- *I mad*
- *They are speak English and Spanish.*

- *My mom, she's made*

According to Krashen's sequence of grammatical morpheme acquisition (in Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 47) copula 'to be' is at the beginning stage of acquisition, suggesting that Vivian will struggle to an even greater degree with accuracy for morphemes on the higher end of the sequence.

This was confirmed by her frequent errors with irregular past forms such as the following examples:

- *She bring from El Salvador*

- *She take the bag and go outside and throw away*

Lightbown and Spada (2013), note that "learners with limited language may refer to events in the order in which they occurred or mention a time or place to show that the event occurred in the past" (p. 55). Vivian demonstrates this tendency in her spoken English, although she is able to identify and produce past tense forms more consistently in written form.

Vivian also often failed to use the third person singular -s, corresponding with Krashen's highest level of grammatical morpheme acquisition.

- *Sometimes he ask me*

- *He write it*

- *Every school have the big band*

L1 Transfer Errors

In addition to these developmental errors, Vivian displays many errors that can be attributed to negative transfer from Spanish:

- *Private* prouounced *pree-vat* (Spanish pronunciation of the *i* vowel sound: *private* is a cognate of Spanish *privado*)

- *In United States I have 20 years* (Spanish way to say I've lived in a certain place is *I have: Tengo 20 años en los Estados Unidos*)

- *The yucca* (Spanish commonly uses the definite article for general statements)

- *Fancies clothes* (In Spanish, adjective must match noun in number)

- *Here is better the pay* (common Spanish word order: VS)

- *The people Puerto Rican* (adjective follows noun as in Spanish)

- *Some people is friendly, but some people no* (*people* is singular in Spanish: *la gente*)

Analysis

As I have spent time studying Vivian over the past weeks, there is one question that has presented itself again and again: *Why has she not achieved a higher level of language proficiency when her cognitive and affective traits suggest she has the makings of an "ideal" language learner?* With average or above average intelligence, intrinsic motivation, a high tolerance of ambiguity, willingness to take risks, low inhibition, etc., an educated guess would say that she would have reached at least a high intermediate level of speaking skill after 20 years. This not being the case, it becomes necessary to examine the other factors affecting Vivian's language acquisition process.

One factor contributing to Vivian's failure to gain full L2 proficiency could be the relatively limited time she spends speaking English. For most of her time living in the US, her L2 learning has taken place mainly in ESL class, which consisted of only a few hours per week.

Once she started working two years ago, she has increased her listening/speaking practice time, but it may have been a case of 'too little, too late.'

Because of her natural interest in writing, she also may have focused more (whether consciously or inadvertently) on developing reading and writing skills over speaking skills. A greater interest in writing could have resulted in a higher level of intrinsic motivation associated with reading and writing tasks, as opposed to listening or speaking tasks.

Another explanation could be that since Vivian tends toward a holistic cognitive processing style, she may focus more on meaning than form, resulting in weaker grammatical competence because of her lack of focus on these features, especially in spoken form.

In terms of the influence of social context, Vivian exemplifies Duff's (2007) observation that some L2 learners "may not be fully invested in becoming socialized into the ways of [U.S. culture] because. . . they remain actively involved in and committed to their primary communities" (p. 310). Perhaps if provided with a wider variety of social contexts in which she needed to speak English, she could continue to improve her speaking proficiency. However, with such a strong social network in place, there is little need (or time) for her to seek out these opportunities.

From a theoretical standpoint, there are a variety of perspectives that could explain the causes of Vivian's lower-than-expected speaking proficiency. From an innatist point of view, Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis might suggest that she is lacking sufficient comprehensible input to allow her to successfully acquire the L2 (Lightbown & Spada, p. 106). Conversely, Swain's (1985) output hypothesis would lead us to believe that perhaps she hasn't been pushed enough to produce language, which would in turn aid the process of acquisition. A

cognitive perspective offers some different clues: Usage-based learning points toward the possibility that Vivian may not have heard enough examples of certain forms in spoken English for them to start to 'sound right' without consciously thinking about how to say them correctly (Lightbown & Spada, pp. 110-111). Input processing (Van Patten, 2004) may also suggest that if most of Vivian's speaking activities (whether in class or in 'the real world') have been focused on meaning, this would not allow her to notice specific language features. In other words, if she has not received instruction drawing her attention to how certain forms are used, she may not have noticed the forms themselves, focusing instead on the meaning (in Lightbown & Spada, pp. 116, 164-165).

Of the beforementioned perspectives, a combination of the usage-based learning and input processing approaches may offer the best explanation for Vivian's low speaking proficiency, as well as a possible path towards improvement. By listening to a substantial volume of spoken English corresponding with her problem areas, and by having her attention drawn specifically to the forms used, Vivian might well be able to begin to improve her grammatical competence. Despite the length of time she has lived in the US, I did not observe indications of fossilization—on the contrary, she would often demonstrate her ability to proactively change her speaking habits when offered corrective feedback. This offers hope that Vivian is still willing and able to continue increasing her English proficiency, and with appropriate instruction and practice, this could become a reality.

This project challenged my previous understanding of what makes a 'good language learner.' I was delighted to discover the many cognitive and affective features acting in Vivian's favor, and at the same time was perplexed by how this did not translate into better language proficiency. My interactions with her proved the impact of social context on learning, something

I had previously not given much thought. Looking at learners' social circles and who is and is not included may offer insight into the likelihood of them reaching their full potential as a language learner. Although we cannot encourage students to give up a strong and meaningful L1 social network, it may be helpful to recognize that learners with a social context that does not include the L2 may have to work extra hard to compensate for this deficit.

References

Brown, H. D. 2014. *Principles of language learning and teaching: A course in second language acquisition* (6th ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.

Duff, P. (2007). Second language socialization as sociocultural theory: Insights and issues. Language Teaching, 40, 309-319.

Lightbown, P. M. and Spada, N. 2013. *How languages are learned* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Swain, M. (1985). 'Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development' in S. Gass and C. Madden (eds.): *Input in Second Language Acquisition.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House. Pp. 235-53.