

Ethnographic Study: Motivation, Socialization and Writing Proficiency

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Abstract

The present paper is a mini-ethnographic study of a Taiwanese ESL student over the course of one semester (approximately three months). Its purpose is to explore the major reasons behind this student's low language proficiency. Writing has been selected as a focal point of analysis because it is believed to be more indicative of learners' overall proficiency. The study also aims at examining the participant's patterns of thinking as reflected in his writing errors and accounting for the difficulties he encounters in L2 writing. To do so, motivation and socialization are analyzed as possible key factors contributing to the student's success or failure.

I. Literature Review

1. Ethnography

Recently, ethnographic research studies have become more popular in the ESL field. Watson-Gegeo (1988) defines ethnography as “the study of people’s behavior in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior” (p. 38). Having roots in anthropology, the focus of ethnographic research is on a group of people’s sociocultural patterns in behavior; however, the individual remains the recipient of the end goal. According to Watson-Gegeo (1988), individual informants are the ones being observed and interviewed and are the ones with whom the ethnographer establishes a rapport. Thus, an ethnographic study should not be understood as the melting pot where individuality dissolves and where patterns of behavior are the desirable, ultimate goal; rather, it is about studying an individual’s behavior with the aim of improving some facet of their life. Carrasco (1981) investigated teacher awareness of unacknowledged student talents with the purpose of helping teachers recognize the capabilities of students who are failing according to the educational status quo. Enright (1984) conducted an ethnographically-oriented research on how teachers manage students’ turn taking. In a classroom ethnography, Liebman (1988) conducted a contrastive rhetoric study to examine how freshman ESL and native English-speaking academic students write. As obvious as it seems, these studies concentrated on individual language-learning issues and considered the individual as a member of a larger community. The findings, of course, cannot be generalized to the larger population, but they are pertinent to the sample studied and help raise questions for large-scale research (DuFon, 2002).

Ethnography in the ESL context can have a variety of theoretical and practical benefits. Thanks to its flexible, creativity-invoking nature, ethnography allows for a wide range of methodologies such as interviews, participant observation, videotaping, and even surveys to collect naturalistic data (DuFon, 2002). Through a well-rounded, holistic study, a thorough ethnographic research can lead to profound, deep and “thick” data (Geertz, 1973), which can be analyzed to develop grounded theory (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Spindler and Hammond (2000) explain that one trait of ethnographic research is openness or flexibility in the sense that hypotheses are not formulated at the beginning of the study, but they are made after interpreting the data.

According to Whitehead (2004), ethnographic informants are not sheer “numerical values;” instead, they are representative of human experience. Watson-Gegeo (1988) expands on this to manifest one of the most beneficial attributes of ethnography which is capturing specific moments able to provide realistic perspective.

From this “thick,” deep and realistic standpoint, ethnography can benefit instruction by informing formative assessment and ultimately improving both teaching and learning. It is conducted through the lenses of a socio-cultural perspective, hence its valuable insight into human relationships (Lazaraton, 2003). This insight can not only be utilized to help comprehend the failures of individuals (e.g. Duff, 2002), but it can also provide a detailed description of extraneous pressures surrounding the processes of learning and teaching (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Thus, ethnography in ESL can transcend the realm of the individual informant or of small communities of practice to uncover institutional and societal implications.

2. Motivation

With regard to students’ success or lack of success in academics, motivation has always been recognized among the major factors affecting academic performance. The phenomenon of student motivation has long been the subject of investigation in education and educational psychology. In social psychology, Kidd (1973) examines adult learning within its social and cultural contexts and focuses on the concept of one’s self, asserting that learning takes place only when it has substantial meaning to the way learners perceive themselves and to what they aspire to attain from the learning experience. Knowles (1990) refines adult education theory with the concept of “andragogy,” the process through which adults are involved in the learning experience. Unlike young learners, adults succumb to physical, social, cultural and psychological factors which, in turn, affect their learning process. Thus, according to Knowles’ theory of andragogy, six main principles should be taken into consideration when dealing with adult learners’ motivation:

- 1) Adults are in need of knowing what they are learning;
- 2) They are in need of taking responsibility for their own choices, and hence being driven by self-concept as self-directed beings;
- 3) They bring with them a plethora of life experiences that can be a rich resource for their learning and an essential element of who they are;
- 4) They are ready to learn what immediately relates to their needs;
- 5) They are interested in a problem-centered approach to learning;
- 6) They are intrinsically motivated.

Therefore, adult learners are supposed to respond to sources of motivation that are distinct from those typical of their young counterparts, which makes their entire learning process oriented differently.

In the field of second language acquisition, Dornyei (1994) defines motivation as the aspiration to learn a language and the accompanying positive attitudes toward this endeavor. However, motivation is an elusive concept, a factor affecting learning and simultaneously can easily be affected by other factors. Babaei (2012) ascertains that learning does not occur independently of extraneous variables; it is shaped by a multitude of circumstances and situations, yet motivation remains a significant determinant. Jarvis (1987) emphasizes the importance of a harmonious relationship between the adult learners’ aptitude for learning and the atmosphere where they are supposed to learn. Deeming motivation as a product of a healthy, educational environment is a necessity on the part of ESL educators and administrators; thus, learning is unlikely to occur when incongruity exists. In line with this is Krashen’s (1982) hypothetical affective filter which can function as an obstacle preventing input from being processed if spurred by psychological and emotional variables such as stress, anxiety, discouragement, and the like.

3. Socialization

From the language socialization standpoint, “language is learned through social interaction” (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 43). Learning a second language does not only mean learning linguistic structures and forms, yet it also means being able to interpret cultural and social customs in a given context. Therefore, communicative competence presupposes knowledge of contextual appropriateness with regard to the social environment in or around which learning occurs. Fowler-Frey (1998) emphasizes the importance of being cognizant of the role that culture plays in the field of adult ESL learning and teaching. The focus on communicative competence, she argues, should not prevent ESL educators and administrators from recognizing the subtle differences between mainstream American culture and the sociocultural norms that ESL students bring with them. Accordingly, recognizing the huge influence that teaching sociocultural rules have on learning is of paramount importance so as to avoid causing any communication problems and psychological harm to ESL students.

This is closely related to Skutnabb-Kangas's (2000) investigation of hegemonic attitudes holding that many ESL practitioners have toward their teaching practice as they depict mainstream US and British cultures superior to other cultures. In fact, considerable body of literature has criticized ESL practices for imposing Western culture and favoring Western ways of teaching and learning; some even describe contemporary language teaching in ESL contexts as euro-Anglo-centered, linguistic imperialism (e.g. Phillipson, 1992; Auerbach, 1993; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Viet, 2008).

Nevertheless, language socialization as an interdisciplinary field of study links language acquisition with the processes of enculturation and broadens perspective on how language learners interact within cultural environments. In recent years, several studies have been conducted on socialization processes and language learning. Duff et al. (2002) examined the linguistic and social pressures that immigrant men and women face in Canadian workplace. Talmy (2008) investigated the dynamics of language socialization by analyzing ESL students' and their first-year teachers' interaction at a US public high school. Kim (2012) examined the socialization processes that adult Korean ESL learners coming from disparate backgrounds undergo and the construction of new identities in order to achieve entry to the host culture and become accepted social members. In short, what all these studies have in common is their support for cultural engagement that ensures integration or acculturation and not assimilation. Learning becomes mutual, reciprocal outcome when all parties involved engage in an exchange of ideas without imposing values of any culture upon the others (Kottak, 2007).

4. Implications of Writing Errors

ESL students' writing errors have also been at the researchers' and practitioners' center of attention for decades. According to Huang (2009), several factors have a bearing on ESL students' writing. These factors include native language, overall language proficiency, native culture, communication style, and register, to name but a few. A number of research studies have focused on the influence of students' first languages have on their second language writing. Silva (1993) conducted a study that investigated the "salient" differences between L1 and L2 writing in view of writing processes (outlining, planning, drafting and editing) and properties of written texts (fluency, accuracy, quality, and structure). The findings of Silva's research suggested that L2 writing was simpler, less effective, less fluent and less accurate than L1 writing, which testifies to the unique nature of L2 writing and annuls the assumption that L1 and L2 are the same or should be analyzed similarly. Wang and Wen (2002) researched how Chinese ESL/ EFL writers employ their L1 in English writing. The think-aloud protocols and study analyses revealed that L1 was influential in L2 writing; however, Wang and Wen (2002) explain, "One important difference between L1 and L2 writing processes is that L2 writers have more than one language at their disposal. They may use both L1 and L2 for cognitive operations when they are composing in the L2" (p. 225).

Closely related to cognitive operations is Kaplan's (1966) seminal work on contrastive rhetoric hypothesis which analyzes how a person's native language and culture affect his/ her L2 writing. In his investigation of rhetoric employed in essays written by students from different cultures, he observed that students' cultural background determined the way they wrote and the manner they attempted to persuade their audience. Thus, he argued that logic used in L2 is contingent on the students' home culture. A term associated with Kaplan's (1966) is "thought patterns." During his two-year-long research, over six hundred essays were analyzed. In Kaplan's view, these essays illustrated five major linguistic categories: Western, Semitic, Oriental, Romance, and Russian languages (see appendix 1). Each of these language groups represents a certain pattern of thinking. Several research projects using contrastive rhetoric have indicated the validity of transferring rhetorical patterns and therefore corroborated Kaplan's findings (e.g. Santiago, 1970; Burtoff; 1983; Norment, 1984). However, fairly recent studies have criticized Kaplan's (1966) claims mainly due to their minimalistic approach that dwarfs all factors except the influence of the writer's cultural background. Kubota and Lehner (2004), for example, argue that contrastive rhetoric reinforces a hegemonic way of thinking partial to Western or English culture (English language is direct, linear and logical; whereas, other linguistic traditions are zig-zag; spiral, indirect and non-logical), subtly advocating a hidden ideology of imperialism.

Nevertheless, another area significant to the present study is error analysis. Corder's (1967) groundbreaking article has paved the way for many research studies as it viewed error analysis in a distinct light. According to Corder (1967), whether or not errors result from sheer inadequacies in understanding L2 and are a reflection of flawed knowledge, they should be viewed as learning and teaching tools. Students' recognition of the errors they frequently make is mandatory to their advancement. Also, students' errors can be effectively used to inform the teaching practice. Corder (1974) identifies two goals for error analysis.

While the first is a theoretical objective aiming at disambiguating the learning process, the second is applied and attempts to optimize pedagogy. In line with this, Richards and Sampson (1974) contend that error analysis can be used as a mechanism for formative assessment to benefit the learners and improve pedagogical practices.

II. Ethnographic Study

1. Research Questions

This mini-ethnographic study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What do the participant's writing errors reveal about his patterns of thought and his writing difficulties?
- 2) How do the participant's motivation and socialization processes affect his overall proficiency and learning progress in general and his writing competence in particular?

1. Participant

For the sake of confidentiality, I explained to my participant the importance of identity protection and accordingly he has chosen the pseudonym *John*.

John is a 34-year-old Taiwanese male. He was born in Taiwan to a lower-middle-class family. He has a 25 year-old brother who lives with his parents. John has spent almost all of his life in a major Taiwanese city where he was born and raised. As far as his educational background is concerned, he holds a bachelor of science in computer science from a Taiwanese university. After graduation, he worked as a computer engineer for an electronics company in his home city for almost seven years.

As most Taiwanese students, he started learning English in the third grade. However, after finishing high school, he stopped studying English until he realized it was the right time to earn a Master's degree. In January 2012, he decided to pursue his studies in the United States; however, due to financial reasons, he wanted to prepare for the TOEFL exam in a language school in Malta where he spent six months. In May 2012, he enrolled in an English-as-Second-Language (ESL) learning center in a mid-sized, private, non-profit university in a small town in the Midwest in the United States. As the rest of all new comers, he took the placement test and placed in level 1 (out of 6). He failed the first term, but passed the next. Then, he failed level 2 the first try. As of this writing, his instructors have revealed to me that he is going to take level 2 again.

My relationship with John is akin to any good relationship between an instructor and his student. I have known John since the second day he arrived on campus. I taught him in level 1 grammar class and also level 2 reading class. As a person, he is sociable, friendly, respectful and open to other cultures. As a student, he can be described as an average yet hardworking and responsible student. He is one of the few students in the program who have been very serious about going to the drop-in tutoring center where American, education major students work with ESL students and help them with their language difficulties. So almost every day after ESL classes are over, John would go and meet with a tutor for a couple of hours. One of his tutors mentioned that he always has questions about grammatical rules that are often not part of the grammar curriculum for his level. John's inquisitiveness about grammar is examined later.

2. Methodology

Since the present study is an ethnographic venture, all data collected came from qualitative methodologies. I mainly relied on informal and formal observations, one-on-one interviews and written artifacts. Informal observations included paying attention to the participant's social behavior outside of class when interacting with teachers and other students and during social events such as school parties and field trips. Formal observations comprised three in-class observations to watch how he acted and reacted in other classes taught by three different instructors. Additionally, I interviewed him twice a week for a period of over two months. Each interview period lasted about two hours. During these interviews, we talked about several issues related to his education such as motivation, socialization, barriers to language learning, and writing difficulties. In fact, some sessions turned into supplementary English courses as I tried to help him with his language problems. Moreover, written artifacts were collected to analyze his writing errors. All data were gathered and written in the form of weekly reports to allow for a relatively longitudinal assessment of the participant's progress and changing views. Combining these methods to collect data allows me to gain an insider, emic perspective (through interviews and observations) without being too subjective (using written artifacts to keep myself at a distance and reflect on the participant's progress).

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), normally a three-step process is followed in order to analyze ethnographic data. First, the ethnographer commences with an elaborate account that describes the subject of study, then classifies the data into their meanings, and ultimately interprets the data. This mini-ethnographic study follows similar steps and is based on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) ground theory approach; hence, hypotheses are made after analysis and examination of data.

3. Findings

3.1 Motivation

John's motivation can be described as instrumental (Hudson, 2000) in the sense that he is learning English to return home and obtain a better job. As mentioned earlier, he worked for an electronics company for several years and realized that the salary he was earning was not enough to provide a better life for himself and his parents, so he decided to save money and come to study an MBA in America.

Throughout the course of almost three months or even longer considering the fact that I have known John since May, it appears that he has been losing his motivation. In one of the interviews, he disclosed that there are several factors affecting his motivation. First, he mentioned that he did not feel he was making any tangible progress despite the fact that he was making "indescribable" effort. Using his words, he said, "I can't [...] describe this. Too much work." It is important to digress at this point and briefly explain the curricular changes that the ESL center has recently gone through. When John joined this institution, the program was eight levels with a transition-to-academics level; each level lasted seven weeks and a half. However, during the second term of the summer (the July term), the program changed to six levels, adopting a proficiency-based assessment with the same curricular content yet in less time. This has made the program extremely difficult to matriculate for most students. This also meant doubling the load of homework students have each day. John could experience this change as he saw a huge distinction between level 1 and level 2, adding to his frustration with the program.

Toward the end of last term, the program director and faculty held a meeting with all students to explain the new proficiency-based curriculum because a lot of students were still having trouble understanding it. At a moment of frustration and anger, John stood up, shouted at one of his instructors and told him to "shut up." Then, in a barely comprehensible pronunciation, he went on trying to explain how the program did not help him progress and how he did not learn anything during that term. His disrespectful reaction caused him to receive a warning from the university. A day or two after that meeting, I talked to John and he did express regret about what had happened. He said that he had a lot on his mind and that he behaved that way in the heat of the moment.

Academic pressure is not the only kind of pressure John experienced. In fact, repeating level 2 last term raised serious concerns about his financial ability to finish his ESL and graduate studies. He mentioned that according to his estimation, he was supposed to study ESL for only a year, but after failing level 2, he was sure he was going to run out of money before finishing his graduate program. This situation may force him to ask his family for money. From the conversations I had with him about his family in Taiwan, he alluded to his distant relationship he has with them and how they did not really support his decision to come to the United States and spend all the money he had saved after many years of work to pursue his studies and earn a Master's degree. This financial issue, in fact, was a positive motivational influence in his case; however, as time passed and no forward-looking outcomes were achieved, the issue of money caused him a lot of stress and anxiety, which, in turn, affected his academic performance negatively, raising his affective filter (Krashen, 1982). In a response to a question concerning his motivation, John indicated that anxiety and frustration were feelings that he could not control and that lowered his intrinsic motivation in particular.

3.2 Socialization

As far the kind of socialization he has in this Midwestern town, he mentioned that the "true" friends he has here are all either Taiwanese or Chinese; in other words, they all speak his language, which forced him to speak Chinese outside of school, and in many occasions he admitted that this was something not good for his language learning. When I asked him why not trying to make friends who could only speak to him in English, he replied that it was very difficult for him to befriend native speakers of English for two reasons. First, his language competence is very low, so whenever he tried to interact with native speakers, they didn't understand what he said. The second reason, he mentioned, was that he did not have enough time to go to social events to meet new friends due to the heavy load of homework he had every day.

He said that when he was in level 1, he had time to go to the gym and play basketball with Americans and other international students and that gave him a chance to speak English outside of school, but now after moving to level 2 and after the changes in the program, he did not have such time to go to the gym as he felt that the teachers' expectations and amount of homework doubled. Therefore, his low language proficiency and academic pressure were major hindrances to his socialization.

From the onset of this endeavor, it was evident that John had wrongly believed that language was a set of grammatical rules, and if he memorized these rules, he would achieve language mastery. Thus, before his participation in this study, he had not paid any attention whatsoever to the importance of social interaction and engagement as a vehicle to language learning. Fortunately for John, this misbelief changed and now John is acutely aware of how significant interaction in the host culture is. In fact, after discussing this issue with him, he recently invited a group of American students to his apartment and cooked traditional Taiwanese food for them. He had not known these student neighbors of his. He took the initiative and talked to them. He mentioned that the conversations he had with them were oftentimes broken, confusing and somehow fragmentary due to his limited listening and speaking competence; however, he strongly believed this occasion was a good start and he would definitely invite them another time or ask them out to dinner.

3.3 Implication of Writing Errors

With regard to the scope of this mini-ethnographic research, only a few samples are being analyzed. These are believed to be representative of John's writing proficiency at the time of writing and are thus attached as appendices.

Before embarking on the analysis of his writing errors, it is vital that his declarative knowledge be discussed. During several meetings with John, we reviewed his writing samples. One time, I had him write a paragraph answering the question: "*Can animals think?*" The question comes from an article he had already read in his reading textbook. After he had finished writing, I underlined most of the obvious grammatical and lexical errors he made and asked him to try to tell me why they were errors and figure out a way to correct them.

From our discussion of his errors, it was lucidly clear that he held a lot of misconceptions about English grammar and use of vocabulary. For example, he did not know the difference between the subject/ object and noun, thinking that the words *subject* and *object* referred to grammatical categories and not syntactic functions. The latter were brand-new concepts for him. He also kept using the modal *could* to describe an ability in the past although it is something that is relevant in the present. One sentence was "*Monkey could draw.*" In his understanding, he is referring to a present time activity. When I explained to him that the modal *could* can also be used to express other propositions and fulfill other functions such as possibility and polite requests and that the sentence he wrote can mean that *it is possible for the monkey to draw now or in the future*, he was astonished by this news. From all the examples we touched on, it was evident that he had faulty comprehension of several grammatical concepts in English, even misconceptions of language rules he had supposedly learned with me in previous terms.

Nevertheless, to evaluate his writing progress, writing samples from summer terms (May and July terms) are first analyzed. Samples in Appendix 2 clearly indicate his lack of understanding of several grammatical, syntactic and mechanical rules of English writing (e.g. subject-verb agreement: "*Mr. Berman work hard*"; tense: "*had fun with animals, and see many animals*"; word order: "*time great*" and "*air fresh*"; possessive adjectives: "*she has, lunch with his friend*"; articles: "*she takes bus to go the home*" and "*Berman has difficult and tired Job*"; mechanics: misusing commas resulting in comma splices, run-on sentences, and fragments).

Looking at the samples in Appendix 3 which were written a month or two after the samples in Appendix 2, a minor progress in terms of lexis can be detected. The use of more advanced vocabularies such as *death*, *similar*, *stimulation*, and *pass away* reflect his improved and growing knowledge of active vocabulary. However, grammatical and syntactic issues (problems with tense, verb forms, word order, punctuation and sentence structure) still exist throughout these samples.

In terms of fluency and grammatical accuracy, Appendix 4 is not any different from previously composed samples. In fact, it mirrors the same, if not, more issues with problems with tense, verb forms, word order, sentence structure, punctuation, and even logic. In some parts of this paragraph, the complexity of ideas that John tried to manifest clouded the meaning he attempted to convey. Considering this sentence as an example, "*This is a table more expensive, I went found inexpensive or on sale but never each I like shape of a table.*"

It is very confusing to the reader what he aspired to convey. Whether he bought an expensive table because of its shape or he bought an inexpensive table that was on sale and he didn't like its shape is unclear due to the complexity of the idea he hoped to communicate.

The essay under Appendix 5 has recently been written. It is, in fact, an ambitious attempt on the part of John to write an essay while he is still in level 2, which focuses only on writing different paragraph types. An improvement at the sentential level is noticeable through the correct use of periods (.) more often compared to earlier writings. There is also an improvement at the level of writing fluency, moving from writing short paragraphs to writing in an essay format. Yet, grammatically and syntactically, the same mistakes as those noted in former samples persist. Nevertheless, a noteworthy observation is his hypothesis testing. In sentences such as the following “*You must find learn English method;*” and “*you make write sentences;*” he is overusing verb forms. When asked why, he mentioned that his writing teacher had told him that every single sentence in English must come with, at the very least, one verb, and that is why he must make sure his sentences come with a verb.

With respect to Kaplan's (1966) cultural thought patterns, the analysis of John's writing samples is, to a great extent, in conformity with Kaplan's claims. If examining Appendices 4 and 5, the latter are filled with repetitions of what John considers key words. In Appendix 4, the word table is mentioned nine times. This meant going back to the key idea to remind the reader of how valuable this possession is to him. In Appendix 5, the idea of acquiring a learning strategy or “method” is expressed throughout the essay regardless of what supporting ideas are being used. For instance, despite discussing the importance of having a regular study schedule in the third body paragraph, he goes back to the idea of “method” at the end of the paragraph.

Furthermore, the use of “we” in Sample 2 Appendix 2 can be interpreted as adherence to collectivism, a desirable value in Asian cultures. Although the prompt asked, “*Write about what you did last weekend,*” John interprets “you” as being representative of a group of addressees. Among the findings of a study that investigated writing attributes connected with individualistic or collectivist thought among Taiwanese and US students, Wu and Rubin (2000) found that Taiwanese students' English compositions demonstrated L1 transfer in terms of indirectness and the use of more proverbial phrases and expressions that showed collectivistic orientations. The findings of Wu and Rubin's study are in agreement with the above assumptions regarding John's circular thinking pattern. Thus, it is plausible to state that his writing reflects a typical Oriental pattern of thought organization characterized by indirectness, repetitiveness, and also stressing collective values—if seen through the lenses of Western writing conventions.

4. Discussion & Hypothesis Formulation

Pertinent to his progress is the question of what strategies John uses to improve his overall proficiency and his writing in particular. With regard to what steps he takes to write in English, John mentioned that the first step he takes is translating the prompt to his native language, and then he refers to his English-Chinese grammar book that explains grammatical rules of English in Chinese. After that, he translates any possible vocabulary that he might think of to answer the prompt. He explained that he was taught this process while studying English writing in a public Taiwanese high school. I also asked what strategies he follows to advance his overall knowledge of English. His answer was that he usually reads business articles on *CNN*, *New York Times* and *Businessweek*.

Accordingly, it can be hypothesized that John's writing errors and difficulties may be attributed to three main causes:

- 1) Interference of L1: He not only depends on his native language to translate vocabulary and generate ideas, but he also uses strategies that he was taught in the Taiwanese school system., which hinders his progress. This is in support of Corder's (1974) assumptions. Furthermore, inter-lingual transfer of learning habits and rules may also account for resorting to an Oriental pattern of thinking when writing in English, which supports Kaplan's (1966) contentions about cultural thought patterns.
- 2) Incomprehensible target language input: Reading advanced, specialized and authentic material is undoubtedly beyond his language abilities at this level. Whereas this attests to his ambition and devotion to excel at English, it can also explain why he is progressing at a slower pace compared to his peers. Also, lack of sufficient exposure to English outside of the classroom may be a reason why he is not making considerable progress. These hypothetical assumptions would corroborate Krashen's (1982) input theory.

3) Inadequate understanding of English: Appendices 2 to 5 evince his low competence which can lead to false hypotheses about L2 and misinterpretations of syntactic and grammatical rules. Richards (1974) describes these errors as intralingual or developmental as they may emerge from the learner's flawed understanding of L2 or from other sources rather than negative L1 transfer.

The importance of ethnographic studies stems from their cultural dimension in studying the phenomena or subjects under scrutiny. In John's case, motivation and cultural engagement are prerequisite to his progress. Prior to participating in this study and having the opportunity to assess his learning, he had not had any desire to integrate the cultural community outside of school; however, now he has developed integrative motivation and awareness to the significance of cultural integration. Being part of the outer community outside of the classroom will and does provide ample opportunities for him to use English in meaningful, communicative contexts. However, extraneous factors affecting his progress should not be neglected. For instance, his family's lack of support and financial problems may put an end to his academic aspirations.

5. Limitations

Of course, the findings of this mini-ethnography are far from being generalizable. Replicating this research is also impossible due to the impracticability of reproducing the same natural setting and human behaviors. Because all ethnographies are conducted in natural environments, controlling external variables is not possible, which affects the study's validity. Another notion that has been a subject of heated debate among those for and against ethnographies is the concept of reflexivity which has been defined by Altheide and Johnson (1994) as a description of how qualitative research was conducted and of the researcher's interpretations. Since reflexivity allows the researcher to be part of the study and sometimes alter the way the informants respond and participate, achieving objectivity can be difficult. Nonetheless, the present study can lead to more decisive results if turned into a longitudinal ethnographic research carried out over an extensive period of time, providing more in-depth data.

IV. Conclusion

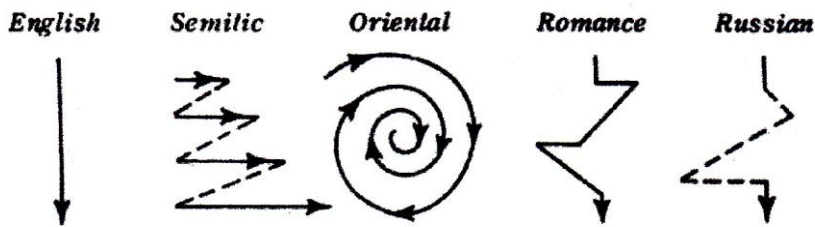
This study attempted to explore the main causes of an ESL student's low writing proficiency by analyzing his writing errors and examining his motivation and engagement in the L2 culture. The study has significant pedagogical implications because I taught the participant for two terms prior to this research and strongly believed that I knew everything I needed to know about him to help him improve his language proficiency. To my shock, every session spent interviewing with him one-on-one or observing him in social interaction belied my initial impressions. Therefore, conducting this mini-ethnographic study has surely opened my eyes to a wider reality regarding my pedagogical practices.

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Appendix 1



Robert Kaplan's Diagrams from "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education." *Language Learning*, 16.1 (1966): p. 15

Appendix 2

Sample 1

Mr. Berman work hard, first, Berman always goes to work at 8:00, second, she is takes pictures for the news from 9:00 and 12:00. Third, she has, lunch with his friend at 12:00. After that, she goes to back to work develops photos from 1:00 to 5:00. Finally, she takes bus to go home at 5:30 P.M. and in conclusion, Berman has difficult and tired Job.

The above is a paragraph John wrote in June 2012 for his level 1 writing class. The prompt asked students to look at some pictures that illustrate the daily routine of Ms. Berman, a reporter, and write about that.

Sample 2

Last weekend we went to Malabar farm students Access we had fun with animals, and see many animals like duck, horse, cow, pig and we spend time great with friends and ate food in the picnic outside in the mountain of Jeez was beautiful and air fresh. After that, we visited the big house of American writer from 1940 very famous in America, his name is Bromfield the house famous actors have wedding in the past in the big house. Finally, we returned to [town's name] at 6:00P.M. and we went to the apartment and do homeworks for tomorrow.

Sample 2 is a paragraph written in late July of 2012. The prompt asked students to write about what they did the previous weekend.

Appendix 3

Sample 1: Summary: The Story of an Hour

The story of an hour this text is talk about Louise Mallard her husband's death by train accident. She was not believed this is true and she locked himself in the room and cried. She is adjust her feeling and got up and open the door. She saw a man similar is husband she didn't believe. Her see is his husband but this is true her very surprised but she can't stimulation and Passed out. Finally, of joy that kills.

Sample 2: Summary: The Tell-tale Heart

The tell-tale heart this text is talk about the tell-tale heart this text is talk about one nervous and madmen man killed old man. But madmen man there is no reason to kill the old man just only this old man eye, a horrible eye. He killed the old man and he cut this old man's arms and legs and head, Until some people beating house door. Have three policeman asked man where is the old man why house have noise similar heart voice. Until find heart and prove old man is dead because this is old man heart.

The above are two summaries that John wrote in early August 2012 as an assignment after reading two short stories.

Appendix 4

In recent days, I bought table this is very large I can spend more time do my homework or do something, before I do my homework, I will go to eagle's nest, I bought a table I can in the apartment do my homework and I can ate my breakfast, lunch and dinner on the table, before I ate food, I will stand eat something, because before I bought a table. This is a table more expensive, I went found inexpensive or on sale but never each I like shape of a table. This table color is gray and shape is long and large size the table can with six around chairs, maybe I can buy some chairs, I will check I want size or color. In summary, I can spend a lot of time do my homework I don't have to go to school do my homework, even though I spend a lot of money to buy table I also never regret.

The above is a descriptive paragraph that John wrote in October 2012. The prompt was to write a paragraph describing a valuable possession.

Appendix 5

How to Improve your English Proficiency quickly

People are unceasing find how to improve your English proficiency quickly. You must find learn English method you will don't spend more time to your learn. In my opinion, you must find you study English skill. In your study, you must effective study all English rules. You must regular time study English everyday.

First of all, you must find you study English skill method. For instance, when you study vocabulary you must clear understand everyone vocabulary part of speech, because when you don't understand every vocabulary part of speech you will can not correct use every vocabulary.

Second, In your study, you must effective study all English rules. For example, When you make write sentences you must clear understand grammar, because when you make sentences you must writer correct grammar eles they will understand you want meaning of the expression.

Moreover, You must regular time study English everyday. For example, when you regular study English everyday you will memorize your study because you can review and practice, you study spend long time everyday, you will quickly learn your English by best method.

In conclusion, you need keep the same time study English everyday. Study your English you need correct use English rules, if you can find learn English best skill, you will effective study your English, when you fined your study best effective study method, you will don't spend a lot of your time to learn.

Appendix 5 is an essay John wrote in December 2012.