Exploring EFL Learners' Experience of Foreign Language Proficiency Maintenance: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Having developed foreign language proficiency, a large number of EFL learners experience some degrees of foreign language loss later in life since English has no social function in many EFL contexts including Iran. However, there are some language learners who actively maintain and develop their proficiency long after they leave language education programs. This study aims at uncovering techniques applied by this minority group in maintaining their foreign language proficiency. Participants who were willing to share their experience of proficiency maintenance were selected through purposive and snowball sampling and verbalizations of their experience were then analyzed in line with phenomenology research design. Abstraction and thematic analysis of the participants' experiences revealed that they actively create conditions that are conducive to proficiency maintenance such as reviewing previously learned materials, watching target language movies and actively manipulating subtitles, reading for pleasure, attending discussion groups, and using internet to communicate in the target language. While proficiency loss and attrition is the norm in EFL contexts, maintenance is an exception; hence, the findings of this study have clear and immediate implications for both foreign language teachers and learners since they provide them with down-to-earth, data-driven techniques of proficiency maintenance.

Key words: Proficiency Maintenance, Leaners' Experience, Phenomenolog

INTRODUCTION

Taking the information function of English as the language of science, technology and medicine into account, in many EFL contexts including Iran, kids' English language education starts at pre-school and continues until they graduate from universities. Since English has no social function in society, developing an acceptable command of English is very demanding and challenging. Despite all the hardships, many EFL learners develop their language proficiency to a functional level beyond what is commonly known as the survival level; nonetheless, it is sad to notice that later in life a great majority of these learners lose their proficiency due to lack of use. It goes without saying that lack of use leads to atrophy; hence, language deskilling is a norm and proficiency maintenance is an exception. Although techniques of foreign language proficiency maintenance is critically important to both EFL teachers and learners and despite the fact that there are a minority group who actively and strategically maintain their language proficiency, very little is known as to how they actually move against the current; hence, the field of foreign language education in in urgent need of data-driven studies, which aim uncovering and theorizing EFL learners' expere-ince of foreign language proficiency maintenance. Having uncovered these down-to-earth practical techniques, we can feed them to foreign language teacher education programs and pave the way for training strategies that are conducive to proficiency maintenance and development once learners leave language education programs.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Although the scope of this study is limited to proficiency maintenance, it would be an understatement if we did not first review what is commonly known as language loss and attrition. But what are the underlying causes of language loss and attrition. Some variables in second language attrition are identified by Bardovi-Harlig and Stringer (2010). They believe that linguistic variables and extra-linguistic variables affect language attrition. They also recommend that these variables be considered if one aims at maintaining his/her second language. While these scholars take language attrition for granted, De Bot and Weltens (1995) suggest that once we acquire any type of knowledge, it is never lost. Whenever we put aside a foreign language, the only phenomenon that happens to our knowledge is a decline in the availability of the foreign language elements (De Bot & Weltens, 1995). Neisser (1984) and Szupica-Pyrzanowska (2016), list several helpful remedies for attrition including foreign language instructors, embedding language in a cultural context to pro-

voke the learners' motivation, the children's degree of literacy competence, which causes them to have more exposure to written materials in the foreign language, contact with the community in which the foreign language is spoken (Szupica-Pyrzanowska, 2016).

Although reviewing theoretical perspectives on language attrition proves useful, for brevity, what follows is limited to a review of empirical findings. To discover the influence of first language on the attrition of second language, Berman and Olshtain (2015) conducted a study to find which aspects of first language affects second language attrition. They concluded that the interlanguage acquired by learners is hardly lost whereas the attrition of second language features, such as lexical items and word-order constraints, is more probable (Berman & Olshtain, 2015). In addition, Tomiyama (2000) found that having difficulty in lexical retrieval which is a precursor of fluency loss was evident in the first 20 months of non-exposure to second language. From the 20 to 33 months of not using second language, the subject showed attrition in syntax, morphology, and prepositions. However, attrition in grammatical morphemes was not that evident. Despite these obstacles, the subject was able to produce speech spontaneously (Tomiyama, 2000).

With a focus on returnees, Yashiro (1992) found that they were interested in maintaining foreign language in order to keep their relationships and friendship with their friends abroad. Furthermore, their parents considered maintaining foreign language as an important issue since it they believed it overshadows their "personality, value orientation, world view, and human understanding" (Yashiro, 1992, p.62). Regarding maintenance classes in private institutes, Yashiro (1992) indicated that these classes help returnees to maintain their foreign language; however, the returnees feel free in building communication with foreign students. In a similar study, which aimed at exploring long-term retention of French by Dutch students, Weltens, Van Els, and Schils (1989) observed an increase in proficiency, despite the fact that subjects had very low contact with French in the intervening years. They related this increase in proficiency to "general cognitive maturation, further academic training, and continued learning of other foreign languages" (Weltens, Van Els, & Schils, 1989, p. 214). Overall, their global skills of French did not undergo attrition but the attrition rate of grammatical skills was much higher than lexical skills. Furthermore, Snow, Padilia, and Campbell (1988) found that the productive skills of the participants were lost sooner and the receptive skills were retained longer.

Schneider, Healy, and Bourne (2002) found that the experimental group taught French vocabularies through difficult methods revealed larger improvements across using unfamiliar French words as responses rather than using familiar English words as responses. Likewise, Rott (1999) explored the effectiveness of reading on retention of word knowledge by examining the effect of the text variable exposure frequency on such process. The participants of this study showed significant rate of retention four weeks after reading the text. Retention of receptive words was higher

that the productive words. Highlighting the role of reviewing the already studied materials in language proficiency maintenance, another research showed that when learners see the material frequently at first, and then at increasingly long intervals of time, the material is solidly retained in long- term memory. Similarly, in a study conducted with learners who studied Spanish for three years, those learners whose study involved spaced review remembered 72% of the vocabulary they had studied 50 years earlier (Bahrick 1984).

In a similar approach to language proficiency development and maintenance, Garza (1991) found that watching foreign movies with captions had a significant effect on reading/listening comprehension. In another study on the effects of captions, Markham (1999) investigated the effects of captioned videotapes on second language listening word recognitions skills. He reported that the presence of captions significantly improved adult ESL learners' listening word recognition of English language regardless of the level of pictorial support of the video. Conversely, Huang and Eskey's (2000) study revealed that captions improved not only listening comprehension skills of college-level ESL students but also their general comprehension and vocabulary development (Huang & Eskey, 2000). Rather than focusing on how learners' maintain their proficiency, Valmori (2014) focused on teachers and found that they develop and keep their foreign language knowledge through "the Internet, TV and movies in the FL, newsletters by teachers' associations, books, summer trips and a nationwide foreign language teachers' organization (LEND) which organized activities for professional development for the different languages" (p. 18).

Language proficiency attrition and maintenance have been studied from a multitude of perspectives. Some scholars explored the evidence of attrition phenomenon in different parts of language knowledge (Berman & Olshtain, 2015; Tomiyama, 2000). On the other hand, others focused on factors and techniques that contribute to language proficiency development (Arevalo, 2010; Bahrick, 1984; Garza, 1991; Huang & Eskey, 2000; Markham, 1999; Rott, 1999; Schneider, Healy, & Bourne, 2002; Snow, Padilia, & Campbell, 1988; Valmori, 2014; Weltens, Van Els, & Schils, 1989; Yashiro, 1992). None of these studies, however, explored and theorized EFL learners' experience of proficiency maintenance.

Purpose of the Study

Having left language education programs, a great majority of EFL learners experience deskilling since in EFL contexts they rarely find a chance to use what they have learned. Focusing on the experience of a minority group who actively and strategically maintain and develop their proficiency, this study aims at theorizing their experience of foreign language proficiency maintenance through a phenomenology research design. Less technically, focusing on the experiences of the successful learners in maintaining their language proficiency, this study aims at addressing the general research question, "What techniques do you use to maintain your language proficiency?

METHODOLOGY

This study follows the phenomenology research design which is a branch of philosophy, owing its origin to the work of Husserl (1990). Following Giorgi (1997), learners' experience of foreign language proficiency maintenance was gradually elucidated as they talked about their specific experiences with the phenomenon under study. Through purposive sampling (Kruger, 1988), we looked for those who had maintained their proficiency and were willing to share their experience with us. Extreme case sampling was also adapted to choose the cases representing success in the process of maintaining their foreign language proficiency. Purposive sampling was followed by snowball sampling to trace other qualified and interested participants. For ethical considerations, participants' informed consent was sought prior to data collection and analysis.

Data Collection

The major data source for phenomenological perspective is interviewing. The purpose behind these interviews is to reveal a common shared experience or phenomenon of a group of people (Marshall & Rossman, 2011); hence, questions aimed at eliciting the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the theme in question (Welman & Kruger, 1999). In addition, to record what we heard, saw, experienced and thought in the course of collecting data, we used memoing' (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Data collection continued until no new strategies could be uncovered from participants' verbalization of their experience.

Data Analysis

Following Creswell (1998), we searched for all possible meanings through data reduction and thematic analysis. Moreover, we did our best to bracket our own knowledge of proficiency maintenance together with previous empirical and theoretical perspectives. The verbatim transcript of the participant's experience was read repeatedly and salient features were underlined. Having uncovered all units of meaning, we checked for consistency among the codes. The uncovered codes or themes reflecting foreign language proficiency maintenance were reformulated and modified in alignment with field notes related to each interview. Finally, we tried to ground each uncovered strategy in the participants' perspectives by ensuring that they are verified by substantiating evidence.

RESULTS

Self-study

Having left the language teaching programs, participants tried not only to maintain their level of proficiency but they also tried to develop their language skills through self-study. Some of them found self- study more interesting than the courses they took to develop their proficiency because they believed that self-study gives them a chance to reap what they sowed. Moreover, self-study gave the participants to move away from contrived dialogues towards more authentic

text and talk. Elaborating self-study as an effective mode of maintaining proficiency, one of the participants explains:

I did many self-study activities to maintain and develop my language knowledge and skills. I had an active role in creating conditions that are conducive to language development. While in language courses I was limited to contrived materials now I have a chance to use authentic materials meant to inform and entertain native English speakers. I started with story books for kids, progressed into novels for teens, and onto general novels. I also watched movies with its corresponding subtitle in the target language at the initial stage and proceeded to watch non-subtitled movies gradually.

Contrary to what happens in rigid language programs, learning through self-study is more flexible since it can take many shapes and forms depending on the participants' preferences, likes and dislikes. What follows aims at elaborating and substantiating some of the different modes in which self-study was carried out by the participants.

Reviewing previously learned materials

Participants believed that reviewing the previously learned materials helped them to maintain and even develop their language proficiency. They further believed that reviewing what they had already learned helped move their knowledge to a subconscious level. More technically, repeating what they had learned paved the way for automatic use. In short, participants took reviewing as the means and automatic language use as the end. Explaining how he reviewed previously taught materials, one of the participants says:

I usually review the materials I have previously learned. This month, I reviewed a major course book which was taught in the language course I took. This course book contains 100 chapters. Each day, I reviewed one chapter by listening to the dialogues, and reading textual information at least three times. Repeated listening not only gave me a chance to remember what I had learner but also enabled me to use what I had learned more smoothly.

Not only did the participants review the textbooks they had studied during their formal education in private language schools, they also reviewed the materials they covered to prepare themselves for high stake tests. Taking reviewing previously learned materials as an effective mechanism for proficiency maintenance, one of the participants explains:

As part of the university entrance exam and due to the nature of this nation-wide test, I had studied many commercial materials to develop my reading, vocabulary and grammar. It took me a long time to learn these materials. Knowing that I will forget them sooner or later without any review, I systematically review what I had learned for the university entrance exam every now and then. I believe reviewing is the best way to brush up on my language knowledge.

Watching foreign movies

Participants believed that watching animations gave them a chance to uncover how the words and grammatical structures

they had learned in course books are used to exchange meaning. They further believed that watching cartoons and animations were much better than movies since they cover more familiar issues and language. Explaining how cartoons helped her, one of the participants states:

> *Cartoons gave me a chance to see how simple words and structures can be used not only to describe what happens but also to create an imaginary world. Moreover, watching cartoons made me realize that using and combining words in creative ways is more important than just filling your brain with useless words such as the ones presented in 1100 essential words. I further realized how science and fiction can be represented without any resort to the archaic words I had memorized.*

As with foreign movies, participants manipulated subtitles in different ways to improve their listening comprehension. Some of the participants preferred target language subtitles while others preferred subtitles presented in their mother tongue. More to the point, while some listened and followed the subtitles in a rigid non-flexible manner, others were more flexible in the use of subtitles. Explaining how subtitles helped him maintain and develop his proficiency, one of the participants states:

> *I believe you should use subtitles carefully. If you overuse them, I believe they negatively affect your listening ability because you get used to subtitles. When they are not there, listening proves difficult. To solve this problem, the first time I watch a movie, I switch on the subtitles. Then, I try to watch the movie again without subtitles because, I believe, reading subtitles shifts your attention away from listening towards reading.*

Attending free discussion groups

Participants believed that findings friends and groups with the same level of proficiency and interest gives them a chance to use language for interpersonal communication. They found group discussion as a unique chance since in EFL contexts English has no social use. They found group discussion a motivating way of exchanging news and views. On the merits of group discussion, one of the participants states:

> *Taking part in group discussion forced me to go beyond my current level of proficiency. In a discussion naturally you take side. While taking side was easy, presenting supportive evidence was very challenging. Although it was very difficult to convince others, surprisingly, it improved my reasoning ability.*

While those who had a higher level of proficiency took part in open discussions, others who had a lower level of proficiency took part in discussions with pre-determined topics. One of the participants expressed her experience in free discussion classes as follows:

> *Since the issues and the topics were pre-specified, I did my best to develop my knowledge of the topic and at the same time learn the words, expressions and fixed phrases related to the topic. During discussion, I did my best to use what I had learned prior to discussion. Not only did this technique help me maintain the level of proficiency I had developed painstakingly, it also gave me*

a chance to develop my proficiency. Compared with the time I left language course, I believe my level of proficiency is much higher.

Reading for pleasure

Participants found reading for pleasure more fun than reading expository texts which aimed at testing learners' proficiency. Moreover, they believed that language courses were very stressful since their level of performance was constantly compared with each other. It was even more stressful because they had to read to meet the demands of tests. Elaborating the merits of reading for pleasure, one of the participants states:

> *Here, I decide on what to read what not to read. Moreover, I read at my personal pace. Previously, the texts we read were either irrelevant to my interest or too difficult to understand. Now, however, whenever I am free I choose a story from among graded readers, and read it at my own pace without any stress. Since, there are no final exams or comprehension checks, I keep reading without fretting over unknown words.*

Participants favored pleasure reading on another ground. They believed reading for pleasure gives them a chance to follow their interests and read what they actually read in their native language. In this mode of reading, participants actively use their background knowledge to derive meaning from words and sentences. Reiterating the importance of background knowledge in motivating one to read, one of the participants argues:

> *In language courses, I had to read a pre-determined text for which I had no background knowledge. Presently, I follow my own interests. I am very interested in the news; hence, I listen to the news on a daily basis. Reading the news in English is not challenging at all because my understanding of the texts depends mainly on my background knowledge. This gives me a good chance to guess the meaning of unknown words more smoothly and get the meaning of the text more fluently.*

Making use of internet

Ease of access to internet for everyone and the increasing number of web-based English courses have encouraged and helped a lot of people to study English. Chat rooms can also be carried out through internet. In this situation, two or more individuals can "talk" on-line about various topics or issues. Online forums and social media platforms provide students with a place to ask questions and receive complete answers. Using internet to maintain and improve her language proficiency, one of the participants states:

> *By getting involved in the online discussion in the chat rooms, I had a chance to bring my knowledge up-to-date. Moreover, the need to communicate made me improve my vocabulary and grammar. But what is more interesting about internet is that it is the cheapest and the most affordable mode of communicating with others.*

While textbooks mainly aim at language teaching, the text and talk presented through internet are message-ori-

ented. That is, materials found in the internet do not aim at teaching language skills and components. Rather, they aim at communicating worthwhile information. Taking the information-function of online materials, one of the participants argues:

> *I had already learned about the food pyramid. But the online texts and talks on this subject are much more information-rich, up-to-date and interesting. I read these materials to improve my diet but at the same time I improve my level of proficiency. I myself use the internet mostly for information communication, not social communication.*

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The participants in this study used various strategies to maintain and improve their language proficiency. But all of these strategies were rooted in their inner drive or internal motivation. This fact is in alignment with Yashiro's (1992) view that proficiency maintenance depends more on learners' motivation and attitude rather than their age and level of proficiency. Similarly, it supports the findings that students with very favorable attitudes showed a slight drop in their speaking skills during the non-use period (Gardner, Lalonde, and Macpherson, 1985). Reviewing previously learned materials was a common strategy among the participants of this study. Likewise, Bahrick (1984) found that the review method resulted in a recall of about 72% of the materials they had studied fifty years earlier. Moreover, participants under study found watching foreign movies and strategically manipulating subtitles as an effective mode of maintaining their proficiency. Similarly, previous studies found that watching movies with subtitles increased learners' skill in reading and their vocabulary improved significantly after lengthy exposure to the target language captions (Garza, 1991; Markham, 1999; Peter, 2003).

As another effective strategy, the participants of this study took part in discussion groups to improve and maintain their language skills. Conversely, participants in Yashiro's (1992) study had very little communication with foreign friends or those who already knew the foreign language. The other explored technique was reading for pleasure through which the participants developed factual information about the world. Just like the participants in this study, those who took part in Rott's (1999) study found reading for pleasrue a facilitating factor in developing their factual information. Moreover, our participants' perceptions of internet are in alignment with those who took part Hoven (1999). Both groups believed that using communication opportunities provides by internet aids their communication capabilities.

While proficiency maintenance may not be a big issue in ESL setting, it is of vital importance in EFL contexts including Iran, where English has no social functions. More specifically, once developed, language proficiency can be used as the main mode of social and information communication in ESL contexts. Conversely, once developed, language proficiency is of no use in EFL contexts; hence, language learners are very likely to lose what they have learned painstakingly over time. It goes without saying that lack of use leads to atrophy. To avoid this phenomenon, learners should create conditions that are conducive to language maintenance and development. While a great majority of language learners undergo deskilling because of lack of use, the participants in this study not only maintained their level of proficiency but also developed it through actively using their language knowledge and skills; therefore, the findings of this study are useful for:

- Learners who have developed their proficiency in EFL context and are looking for strategies that help them maintain and improve their language skills;
- Teachers who are aware of the consequence of lack of use and atrophy and as such interested in making learners cognizant with proficiency maintenance strategies.

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