

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE HOMESTAY EXPERIENCE TO LINGUISTIC SELF- CONFIDENCE IN L2 ACQUISITION

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Clément's linguistic self-confidence model was used to study the effects of homestay experience on students' language confidence. Data were obtained from student responses in questionnaires and interviews before and after immersion. High anxiety and low perception of proficiency in L2 before immersion were attributable to fear and worries about linguistic limitation and different living styles of the host family. Anxiety was alleviated and students' perception of proficiency in L2 enhanced during and after immersion when homes provided a rich language environment and limited internet access. Employment of intercultural communication strategies, exchange of cultural knowledge, and social gathering organized by host families helped enhance quality of interaction which, in turn, contributed to the development of linguistic self-confidence.

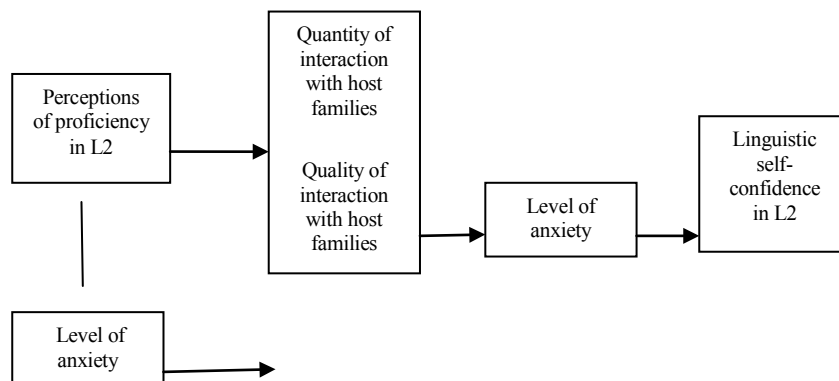
Not only is the homestay experience a core element of linguistic immersion programmes, it can be considered to be the major factor in providing second-language (L2) learners with authentic situations for the development of both linguistic and communicative competence. A common assumption has been that students studying and living abroad with a host family would have a large amount of language contact within the target language group, which in turn would lead to language proficiency development. This belief is indeed supported by many studies. For example, Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993) found that 77% of students on a study programme had their listening, oral, and reading proficiency enhanced, while Segalowitz and Freed (2004) found that students developed oral fluency.

The core benefits perceived by students who experience homestay during immersion include improved language skills, as well as increased international knowledge. This is because the homestay experience provides an immediate and non-threatening environment that exposes students to authentic linguistic situations to use and learn the new language (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990; Chaseling, 2001; Koestler, 1986; Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990). It also allows for tertiary socialization,

which occurs when students enter a profession or occupation (see Alfred & Byram, 2002).

Linguistic self-confidence, as proposed by Clément (1980), is a socially defined construct, which also has a cognitive component, perceived L2 proficiency. According to Clément, it is a powerful mediating process in a multilingual setting that affects a person’s motivation to learn and use the language of another speech community. A positive attitude on the part of L2 learners would direct them to seek contact with the target L2 community members. Linguistic confidence is associated with both social and cognitive components which are intertwined. If the quality and quantity of interaction with the L2 community are relatively frequent and pleasant, self-confidence in using the L2 would develop (Noels & Clément, 1996; Noels, Pon, & Clément, 1996). Linguistic confidence is associated with low anxiety. According to Seligman, Walker, and Rosenhan (2001), anxiety is a psychological state characterized by cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components which combine to create an unpleasant feeling that is typically associated with uneasiness, fear, or worry. Anxiety acts as an affective component and the belief in one’s capacity to cope adequately in an inter-group contact situation as a cognitive component (Gudykunst, 1988). In the context of homestay experience, anxiety may encourage students to avoid language contact with host families because they feel uneasy, fear, or worry when talking to them (Allen & Herron, 2003), negatively affecting the quantity of potential future communication (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994a, 1994b). Figure 1 illustrates how the social and psychological variables proposed by Clément are related.

Figure 1
Relationships between Social and Psychological Factors in Enhancing Linguistic Self-confidence in L2



To further unpack Clément's linguistic confidence model, quantity of interaction in this paper is defined as the amount of time L2 learners spend with the target language group, i.e. host family. Quality of interaction refers to L2 learners' personal opinion of whether they enjoy the time with the host family in an experience that is pleasant and in which students interact with the host family with low anxiety and without feeling threatened. Good quality of interaction will, in turn, lead to a high level of social involvement in the target community and high self-perception of proficiency in L2.

Clément's social context model of second language acquisition is particularly relevant to the present study (see Clément, 1986; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985). It emphasizes the importance of contact and linguistic L2 confidence in L2 acquisition. It does not, however, evaluate the function and process of particular contextual variables and how they might impact on L2 acquisition. To address this lacuna, the study described in this paper investigated how contextual variables (quantity and quality of interactions) were related to students' linguistic self-confidence (anxiety and self-perception of proficiency in L2) before and after immersion.

METHOD

A questionnaire designed to assess linguistic confidence and associated variables was administered to a group of Year 3 students majoring in English education before their immersion. Only students' responses to a limited number of items in the questionnaire are reported in the study described in this paper. Before and after immersion, students were asked to rate their confidence in their ability to use English as well as to rate their listening and speaking proficiency in the language. Prior to immersion, they were asked if they were looking forward to their homestay experience. Before and after immersion, they were asked about enjoyment of their homestay experience (anticipated and post-immersion) and about their views of the usefulness of talking to homestay families. All questions were accompanied by an appropriate 5-point rating scale (see Tables 1 to 5). Pre-departure and post-return interviews were conducted with a randomly chosen sub-sample of students to elicit further detail on language learning during immersion, as well as to fill any gaps in understanding arising from questionnaire responses.

Participants

The sample comprised 93 Hong Kong and Mainland China students majoring in English education; 12 weeks of English immersion was required by their Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme. Students were allowed to state a preferred destination from among four countries: the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. Pre-departure and post-return interviews were conducted with 10 randomly chosen respondents.

Procedure

All BEd students at a teacher training institute in Hong Kong were invited to answer the questionnaire to be completed in the lecture hall. Students were assured that the information they provided would only serve the purpose of this study. Respondents were told that their participation was completely voluntary and that all data collected would remain confidential. Informed consent forms were also distributed. Thirty minutes were allocated to complete the questionnaire, with additional time given upon request.

Interviews were conducted in a small meeting room, where the researcher stated the purpose and manner of the interviews. Choice of using either Chinese or English in interviews was offered to all participants. As participants were all English major students, they indicated that they were comfortable responding in English. All data were transcribed for coding. Respondents were reminded that the interview would be tape-recorded.

Analysis

Numbers (and percentages) of students choosing each response options are presented. To test the statistical significance of differences between pre- and post-immersion responses, responses to each question were scored on a 5-point scale, means and standard deviations were calculated, and the statistical significance of differences calculated.

RESULTS

Pre-immersion Stage

Quantity and Quality of Interaction. In the pre-immersion stage, the only information available to students was the host family's name, address, email address (if available), occupation, number of children, and whether they had pets. Students were free to send emails or letters to the host family before

immersion. With the limited means of communication, the quantity and quality of interaction with the host families were minimal.

Anxiety. Anxiety was a consequence of students' limited interaction with the host family. When students were asked if they were looking forward to the homestay experience, almost two-thirds said that they were, while over a third were not or had mixed feelings about it (Table 1).

Table 1
Numbers and Percentages of Students Looking Forward to Homestay Experience (N=93)

Responses	N	%
No, not at all	4	4.3
A little	2	2.2
Mixed feelings	27	29.0
Somewhat	33	35.5
Yes, a lot	27	29.0

Most of the participants in the pre-departure interviews stated that differences in living styles between themselves and the host families were their biggest concern. They believed the differences would be the major hurdle contributing to quality of interaction.

'Or maybe, I sleep very late...about 1 or 2 am at midnight, but for the Australians – they sleep very early. We may have some conflict?'

Anxiety about different living styles might result in language contact avoidance with the host family and reduce the quantity of interaction.

'Well, at home I can do lots of things. I can watch TV, play on my computer, or even talk with my parents. But in England... using the computers, I'll have to ask them for permission... For television, I'll have to ask them again too. So lots of things are limited...I am not sure if I can do that...'

Several students were concerned that linguistic limitations could contribute to poor quantity and quality of interaction. One such limitation was the expectation of different accents. For example,

'My host family, because she is a 65-year old lady. I am afraid that she will have a very different accent...I may not be able to understand her.'

Students were also worried that the pace of speech of native speakers might prevent them understanding conversations, making communication ineffective and resulting in language contact avoidance.

A further linguistic issue related to students' confidence in expressing themselves in English generated a high level of anxiety. Students' lack of confidence in expressing themselves could be expected to greatly reduce the quantity and quality of interaction.

'I think it may be somewhat difficult in communicating with our host family because we rarely use English when we deal with daily life issues. And sometimes we may have to express our feelings in English and I think that is the most difficult.'

Finally, students expressed a concern arising from the fact that the conversation topics they would have in common with the host family would be limited, a fact likely to contribute to poor quantity and quality of interaction.

During and Following Immersions

Linguistic Self-confidence. Following immersion, students had perceived their confidence in their ability to use English with the host families to have significantly improved ($t=11.06$; $p<.0001$) (Table 2). Almost all were confident or very confident in this regard.

Table 2
Numbers and Percentages of Students Expressing Confidence in Ability to Use English, Pre- and Post-Immersion (N=93)

Responses	Pre-immersion		Post- immersion	
	N	%	N	%
Not at all confident (1)	0	0.0	0	0.0
A little confident (2)	13	14.0	0	0.0
Somewhat confident (3)	43	46.2	4	4.3
Confident (4)	31	33.3	56	60.2
Very confident (5)	6	6.5	33	35.5
	M:3.32; SD:0.79		M:4.32; SD:0.52	

Listening and Speaking Proficiency. Increased percentages of students also perceived higher levels of listening ($t=4.80$; $p<.0001$) and speaking ($t=3.80$; $p<.0000$) proficiency following immersion (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3
Numbers and Percentages of Students Reporting Perceived Listening Proficiency, Pre- and Post-Immersion (N=93)

	Pre-immersion		Post-immersion	
	N	%	N	%
Poor (1)	0	0.0	0	0.0
Basic (2)	4	4.3	2	2.2
OK (3)	51	54.8	31	33.3
Competent (4)	36	38.7	56	60.2
Excellent (5)	2	2.2	4	4.3
	M:3.32; SD:0.61		M:3.67; SD:0.60	

Table 4
Numbers and Percentages of Students Reporting Perceived Speaking Proficiency, Pre- and Post-Immersion (N=93)

	Pre-immersion		Post-immersion	
	N	%	N	%
Poor (1)	0	0.0	0	0.0
Basic (2)	16	17.2	2	2.2
OK (3)	54	58.1	47	50.5
Competent (4)	23	24.7	40	43.0
Excellent (5)	0	0.0	4	4.3
	M:3.08; SD:0.65		M:3.49; SD:0.62	

Enjoyment of Homestay Experience. A large majority of students expressed positive feelings about their homestay experience (Table 5). The number increased considerably following immersion ($t=9.06$; $p<.0001$).

Table 5
Numbers and Percentages of Students Anticipating and Expressing Enjoyment in Their Homestay Experience, Pre- and Post-Immersion (N=93)

Responses	Pre-immersion		Post-immersion	
	N	%	N	%
No, not at all (1)	4	4.3	0	0.0
A little (2)	2	2.2	3	3.2
Mixed feelings (3)	27	29.0	12	12.9
Somewhat (4)	33	35.5	21	22.6
Yes, a lot (5)	27	29.0	57	61.3
	M:3.88; SD:1.02		M:4.42; SD:0.84	

Quantity and Quality of Interaction. Students reported enhanced self-linguistic confidence following immersion. Interview data revealed that quality of interaction with the host family (i.e., the amount of time spent with the family) was a major contributor to students' confidence. In students' responses to a question which asked them how they viewed the usefulness of talking to host families in improving their English, 44% rated the usefulness as 'a great deal' following immersion compared to less than 20% at the pre-immersion stage (Table 6) ($t=5.39$; $p<.0001$).

Table 6
Numbers and Percentages of Students Describing Usefulness of Talking to Homestay Families, Pre- and Post-Immersion (N=93)

Responses	Pre-immersion		Post immersion	
	N	%	N	%
Not at all (1)	0	0.0	0	0.0
A little (2)	4	4.3	2	2.2
Some (3)	23	24.7	19	20.4
A lot (4)	48	51.6	31	33.3
A great deal (5)	18	19.4	41	44.1
	M:3.86; SD:0.77		M:4.19; SD=0.84	

Three major factors were identified by students as contributing to the high quantity of interaction with families. First was a rich language environment which helped maximize students' English usage. When students spend a substantial amount of time with the host family, the language exposure and practices provided gradually lowered the level of anxiety they had before immersion. The second factor contributing to the high quantity of interaction was the physical setting of the house of the host family. Students believed that the house setting had generated a lot of social time between them and the host family. A student described how the physical setting of the house helped him develop linguistic confidence.

'Because in Australia the setting of the house is different. They have the kitchen area and the dining room, and they are linked. In HK, it is blocked by a wall. In Australia we washed together and even when we were watching TV and I was washing, or sometimes we washed together, we could still talk.'

Limited internet access was the last factor students identified as helping them socialize and interact with their host families.

‘It was a good opportunity for me to speak more and read more books... I think it was really good that I stayed away from the internet.’

Several factors were identified by students as contributing to the quality of interaction. The first was students’ participation in social gatherings held by host families. Integration with the local culture provided an authentic opportunity to use and learn English. Intercultural communication strategies enhanced the quality of interaction. A variety of intercultural communications strategies were employed by host families to bridge language gaps: pointing to real objects if the student did not know the meaning of words; slowing speech; writing a word (which the student might check in a dictionary); searching Google on the internet; and spelling difficult words.

CONCLUSION

This study adopted Clément’s social context model of second language acquisition to examine how students develop linguistic self-confidence before and after immersion. Clément’s model emphasizes the importance of language contact and linguistic self-confidence in L2 acquisition. The model is particularly useful in explaining students’ L2 acquisition behaviour before and during immersion because it uses the contextual variables (quantity and quality of interaction) to predict students’ linguistic self-confidence. If the quantity and quality of interaction between a student and a host family are sufficient and pleasant, self-confidence in using the L2, operationally defined in terms of low anxiety and high self-perceptions of proficiency, will develop (Clément, 1986; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985).

This behaviour was observed in this study. Before immersion, students were anxious about the homestay experience. Prior to interaction with host families, minimal contact with the host family and the uncertainties they anticipated gave rise to mixed feelings towards homestay. Anxiety about different life styles and linguistic limitations concerned them most as these were threats that were perceived to be uncontrollable or unavoidable.

The substantial amount of time students spent with their host families was an important aspect of their immersion, supporting Clément’s view that quantity and quality of interaction enhance students’ linguistic self-confidence. The position was also supported by Meara (1994) who claimed that the amount of social time spent with native speakers could play an

important role in language improvement since the high quality and quantity of interaction helped lower students' anxiety and enhance their perception of proficiency in L2.

Quality of interaction as well as quantity is important. The use of intercultural communication strategies between students and host families serve the very fundamental practical function of engaging students in language learning during their homestay. With the contextual help of joining social gatherings at the invitation of host families, students were more easily able to engage with the local culture. The resulting use of L2 in authentic situations helped students enhance the quality of interaction and their linguistic self-confidence. Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight (2004) found that homestay was a crucial component of successful immersion programmes. The time spent with host families and the extent to which host families integrated students into family activities – thereby helping them learn their target language – were considered highly important in language immersion.

Stepping into both a new home and a radically different culture can be a daunting experience. Given this situation, communication with host families before immersion can be expected to play a fundamental role in a positive transition to the new environment. A caring and positive attitude will help students focus on the learning objectives of their immersion.

Anxiety can be alleviated through communication if students understand that it originates from negative anticipation and uncertainty. In the pre-immersion stage, students can initiate communication by sending emails to their host families and asking questions about troubling uncertainties. However, if they tolerate their anxiety about living with their future host family, students will experience greater difficulty in developing their previously acquired linguistic competencies and applying them in real-life situations. In this scenario, the quantity and quality of communication is not likely to be enhanced. Clément's model of linguistic self-confidence describes student learning motivation particularly well in the pre-immersion stage.

Immersion students will benefit from a host family's welcoming attitude and caring approach, while both sides should exhibit an open attitude towards the different living and communication styles of the other culture. These approaches will help ensure successful acculturation, adaptation, and effective language learning during each student's immersion. Furthermore, the use of intercultural communication strategies will serve to minimize level of anxiety and enhance linguistic self-confidence.

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