

A CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH OF A HERITAGE LEARNER TO ACQUIRE NEAR-NATIVE PROFICIENCY: A HUNGARIAN EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a case study conducted with a first generation American heritage learner of Hungarian in a college setting. The objective is to explore and describe the most important factors that contributed to a success story in Second Language Acquisition, and to analyze the personal, educational, socioeconomic and family background that contributed to the improved language skills confirmed by the highest level Hungarian language proficiency exam. This study might be of interest to language teachers and language learners interested in the role of teaching grammar to heritage learners whose objective is to acquire near-native proficiency of the educated speaker, with a special emphasis on improving writing skills.

INTRODUCTION

Research on second language learning and teaching has been conducted from multiple perspectives, such as applied linguistics, methodology, processes and development, or curricula, to mention a few (Hinkel, 2005). Second language acquisition (SLA) is an extremely large but well studied area. There have been several studies written on the particular group of special learners this study focuses on, i.e. bilingual students.

Bilingual language learners are sometimes also called heritage learners. Valdes (2005) argues that this term might be used in a restricted sense and she outlines a much broader sense. A good working definition is provided by Draper and Hicks (2000), referring to someone “who has had exposure to a non-English language outside the formal education system” (p. 19), most often someone with a second language spoken at home. The language characteristics and needs of heritage learners show a wide variety based on the generation (newly arrived vs. US-born and raised), schooling and academic skills in English as discussed in connection with Spanish heritage learners by Valdes (1995). The entire fall 2000 issue of *Bilingual Research Journal* contained articles concerning heritage language research.

There have been only a few studies on the language of the American Hungarians (Bako, 1962, Bako, 2002, Bartha, 2002, Fenyvesi, 2005). However, several authors agree that language maintenance is key to preserving the Hungarian culture outside Hungary (Nagy, 1984, Várdy, 1996, Tarjan, 2000, Tarjan, 2001, Ward & Agocs, 2004).

In sum, very few studies describe and analyze factors that may play a significant role in achieving near-native proficiency either as a heritage or L2 learner. Even fewer exist concerning the factors contributing to perfect writing skills to the same level, and

Hungarian as a less commonly taught language is not widely studied either. The research questions for this study can be formulated as follows:

- How can a heritage language learner achieve the level of the near-native proficiency of the educated speaker, which includes all four skills at this level: speaking, listening, reading, and writing?
- How do the personality and personal preferences in language learning strategies contribute to second language acquisition?
- What is the role of the family, the extended family and the community at large?

BACKGROUND

Hungarian Immigrants in the United States

Over 1.5 million people reported Hungarian ancestry in the 2002 census data in the United States, which includes 1.4 percent of the population of New Jersey (2000). According to the 2003 American Community Survey Summary Tables, 89,792 persons reported speaking the Hungarian language at home (US Census, 2003).

Hungarian immigrants arrived in the United States in several waves starting from the end of the 19th century. The history and issues of Hungarian immigration have been well studied and documented (e.g., Puskas, 1975, Puskas, 1982, Puskas, 2000).

Hungarian Studies at Rutgers

Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick features strong connections to Hungarian culture. Rutgers has supported undergraduate studies in Hungarian for over forty years. Besides Indiana University, which offers a Hungarian major, Rutgers is the only other institution with a degree program in the United States. Its Hungarian minor offers over fifteen courses on Hungarian culture and Hungarian as a second language. The Institute for Hungarian Studies contributes to the instructional and extracurricular content of the Central European Studies major, participates in joint research projects of the two countries in several areas, and fosters immediate contacts with Hungarian institutes of higher education. With its public lecture series, it also shapes the large Hungarian community in the New Brunswick area. Many students at Rutgers are those of Hungarian descent from the area, thus they have various levels of proficiency of the Hungarian language (Ward & Clark, 2005).

A visiting professor has been delegated by the Hungarian Ministry of Education for two-year periods since 1991, who teaches all language and cultural courses from Hungarian 101 to Hungarian 490, as well as English-language courses on Hungarian culture, literature, and civilization. The Fulbright Foundation also sponsors a visiting professor to Rutgers annually to teach a course in English on a topic related to Hungary and the Hungarian culture.

The Hungarian State Language Proficiency Exam

The Hungarian State Proficiency exam (also known as the ORIGO test system) tests the four skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking) at beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. It was designed, and has been conducted by the Centre for Advanced Language Learning (ITK), Budapest, Hungary, a member of the prestigious Association of Language Testers in Europe. The exam at the advanced level comprises a four-hour

written segment including a 50-question multiple choice grammar test, two types of reading comprehension, and a guided composition. The oral segment has a free conversational part, a discussion based on pictures, a situational dialogue, and a listening comprehension part based on a prerecorded text, carefully designed and tested by ITK.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical background to the research is rooted in the constructivist learning theory. In the constructivist perspective, students rely on their experience and prior knowledge while they apply new concepts that they learn in the course to construct new knowledge. The learner's role has been changing from a passive-receptive learner to a more active one, where students take more responsibility in their own learning. The new technology-based instructional applications provide an environment permitting more learner choices. Students have the chance to identify their own learning needs and make appropriate use of the available resources (Bloxham & Armitage, 2003) in a virtually unlimited learning environment. Learning from mistakes is encouraged (Gillespie, 1998). Learner success is highly related to the maintenance of motivation, levels of task engagement, and specific information-processing habits. On the other hand, the instructor should be prepared to encourage individuality and foster diversity in a virtual learning environment by accommodating a variety of learning styles, and to provide guidance but allow freedom at the same time (Porter, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

The present study has the distinctive features. The researcher is the instructor, and the informant-participant is the student. However, they share similarities in terms of age, educational background, values, and interests. The variety of interactions throughout the entire five years of the research provides rich, in-depth data on second language learning and teaching.

Setting

The setting of this qualitative study is a natural environment of a large state university surrounded by a sizeable Hungarian community. The setting was chosen for the following reasons. Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey is one of the three North American colleges that offer a degree program in Hungarian, a minor, which is strongly supported by the Hungarian government. Central New Jersey has traditionally had a large Hungarian community, providing the Rutgers Hungarian program with heritage language learners. The researcher had the privilege to teach in this program for four years as a visiting professor, and to observe a variety of student attitudes, learning styles, and advancements. The research emerged in this particular setting due to the unique opportunity of the encounter between the researcher and the participant in 1999, and the curricular and scholarly activities they have been involved since then.

Data Collection and Recording Procedures

Multiple methods of data collection included open-ended observations, formal and informal interviews (written and oral), and a variety of documents.

Observation was chosen as a convenient method in the given setting, since the researcher had the chance to follow the participant's advancement in a classroom setting

as a participant-observer. Field notes were collected and transcribed regularly in the first four years of the study from the on-site courses at Rutgers, the two-year online Fulbright project, and a language course at the American Hungarian Language Center also taught by the researcher. The extracurricular activities such as the Hungarian culture programs at Rutgers, the American Hungarian Educators' Conferences, and various programs at the American Hungarian Foundation were also the targets of observation. This method was feasible, as a means of tracking the participant's progress. Observations also highlighted the improvement in writing skills, which required applying another method.

Documents were collected throughout the entire period by the researcher and the participant, including personal documents such as class notes, course papers, individual and group projects, emails to the instructor, notes and log files of projects the researcher and the participant worked on together, and ad hoc discussions on a variety of subjects. Collected public documents are syllabi, course descriptions and requirements, proficiency exam requirements and certificates, and transcripts and records of the participant's current and previous studies.

Several informal conversational interviews were conducted to take advantage of the trust built among the participant, her family, and the researcher throughout the entire five years of the research. The formal written interview with the participant after the completion of her studies and taking the proficiency exam aimed at placing her achievements in a wider perspective in her life in terms of her motivation, goals, and plans. There was one formal exit interview conducted with the parents, both in Hungarian. A written interview was conducted via email with the father, while a phone interview with the mother was transcribed to retain and analyze data.

The Researcher

The researcher was a participant-observer in this study. The convenience of this role was that the researcher had the chance to make observations and conduct informal exploratory interviews without the risk of contaminating the research results, due to the researcher's function in the participant's life as her language instructor

Participants

The main participant-informant in the study is Sylvia, a female heritage learner of Hungarian descent in her mid-40s. She was born in the United States to a pair of Hungarian 56-er immigrants and she has been exposed to the Hungarian language in a variety of settings throughout her life. Her family and educational background also includes experience with learning other languages. She is professor of marketing at a prestigious private university, and an accomplished scholar herself. She voluntarily and willingly contributed to the research study.

The two other participants are her parents, both elderly, who were born, reared and educated in Hungary. They departed Hungary during the Revolution and relocated to the United States in 1957. The mother studied to be an opera singer in Hungary. She stayed somewhat close to her original career and became a music teacher in the U.S., while the father had to give up his profession as a lawyer, making a career change to become a librarian. They didn't speak or learn English before arriving in the U.S., but both were exposed to other foreign languages. The mother has good knowledge of

French, German, and Italian, while the father speaks German. It should be noted that they divorced, and the participant was reared by her mother alone from age ten.

Validity

In order to validate the accuracy, the following strategies were employed. The research applied participatory modes and member checking. The informant-participant was involved in most phases of the study, from the design to the conclusions. She also served as a check throughout the whole analysis process. During the entire period, the researcher and the participant maintained an ongoing dialogue regarding the interpretation of the reality and meanings, which included daily emails and phone conversations, all in Hungarian. This allowed for improved interpretation of the data and the drawing of relevant personal and theoretical conclusions. The long-term and repeated observations occurred over a five-year period. In order to ensure validity, data were collected through multiple sources, i.e. interviews, document analysis and observations.

RESULTS

Analyzing the data gained from the observations, interviews, and documents, disclosed the following model of success in improving language proficiency to the level of the near native educated speaker. Quotations in italics are the participant-informant's reflections, unless other noted.

The Role of the Family

Sylvia was born in the United States to a pair of political émigrés three years after their relocation to the new country from socialist Hungary. They came to the United States with the wave of immigrants after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution was defeated. Neither of the parents spoke English at that time, although they both came from well-educated families with impressive proficiency in other languages, as noted earlier. The parents' language used at home was obviously Hungarian, however, they both worked long hours to settle down and establish their careers in the new country. A British woman was taking care of the toddler, so Sylvia's first language was English, with a British accent.

According to the mother, the parents were constantly arguing over whether the child should learn Hungarian, similarly to many new immigrant families. The arguments for speaking only English can be accounted for by the fact that these were the first few years for them in the new country, and struggling with English themselves, they wanted the daughter to have a good command of the language. Her father was especially concerned about language interference at an early age. However, the language used in the family home between the parents remained Hungarian, so Sylvia was exposed to the language at home until her parents separated.

The mother insisted that the child must learn Hungarian. The parents got divorced when Sylvia was ten, at which point her mother was able to bring this goal to fruition. A visit from the mother's parents came just in time for Sylvia. The maternal grandparents didn't speak English at all when they met the 9-year-old granddaughter. This was the first time that Sylvia recalls receiving structured instruction in Hungarian.

This language learning opportunity was followed by many, some in the United States, others, in Hungary. As a young child and teenager, she had the chance to visit

relatives in Hungary with her father, which was a true cultural awakening for the child. The family reunions in the old country seem to have served as a great motivation later on, with the interest in the Hungarian language and culture definitely present as early as that.

As a child, peer support and peer pressure also played a role in improving her knowledge of the language, whether it be among American-Hungarian or Hungarian children or teenagers. Intensive language learning periods were parts of Sylvia's early years toward improving her language proficiency.

By this time the parents more or less had agreed that she should pursue this path. A unique opportunity to learn the language was also afforded Sylvia in her late teens; she completed her third year of high school at Veres Pálné gimnázium in Budapest. The complete timeline of her childhood Hungarian language learning experiences is shown in Table 1.

Ongoing	Parents always spoke Hungarian to each other
1968	Grandparents' visit from Hungary, they spoke only Hungarian, the grandfather taught her from books
1970	Sylvia's visiting relatives with her father in Pécs, Hungary, no one speaks English
1972	8-week intensive Hungarian language camp in Ligonier, PA
1973	4-week intensive Hungarian language camp in Fonyódliget, Hungary, taught by native speaker-teachers
1974	2-week in the same camp Fonyódliget, Hungary
1974	4-week intensive advanced-level Hungarian language camp in Sárospatak, Hungary, specifically designed for heritage learners, also taught by native speaker-teachers
1974/75	Academic year in Hungary, third year of high school at Veres Pálné gimnázium in Budapest

Table 1. Timeline of Sylvia's exposure to the Hungarian language as a child

Learning Other Languages

Sylvia's career took the direction of business in her college years, however she never abandoned languages. She was able to squeeze in some language courses into her busy schedule, no matter what the main focus of her life was. Her experience with learning foreign languages includes French, Latin, German, Italian, and Spanish.

All the language learning experiences took place in a structured classroom setting, indicating Sylvia's preference of learning languages. She argues that classroom instruction, possibly with a native speaker language teacher, is the most successful way to learn languages.

Toward Near-Native Proficiency

The Rutgers years have proven to be a turning point towards near-native proficiency in Sylvia's language learning. She enrolled in the first course, Hungarian Culture Today, taught in English, in the spring semester 1999. Her mother strongly encouraged Sylvia to try out the Hungarian program at Rutgers. Sylvia was back to school again, taking courses with undergraduates, many of them half of her age, but with a fragment of her enthusiasm and motivation. She was fluent in Hungarian with the large vocabulary of an educated speaker, and had some knowledge of Hungarian grammar at that time, but she still thought she had a lot to learn.

A series of lucky encounters started with meeting Zsuzsi, another student of Hungarian descent the same age as Sylvia. Zsuzsi was less fortunate in terms of being exposed to the language. As a child, she had spoken fairly well, together with her sister, Ági. However, the daily routine and the English-only environment overcame. Zsuzsi also did not enjoy the same level of parental support and had not been exposed to all the earlier structured learning experienced from which Sylvia had profited. The two student-friends supported each other throughout the entire program, taking all possible classes offered in Hungarian at and above the 300-level (Table 2.).

259	Hungarian Civilization
260	Hungarian Culture Today
301	Conversational Hungarian
321	Hungarian Poetry
355	Translation
402	Advanced Writing Workshop
403	Advanced Internship
490	Hungarian Literature Seminar
493	Independent Study
494	Independent Study

Table 2 Hungarian courses Sylvia took at Rutgers. Her GPA is 4.0

She also completed an advanced course in writing, grammar, and stylistics offered at the American Hungarian Language Center. This course was subsequently accredited at Rutgers as 401. By the conclusion of the courses, and before taking the Hungarian language proficiency exam, Sylvia was confident that her skills had significantly improved.

Sylvia's improvement can be hallmarked by a few milestones in the past five years. Not only did she excel in every class she took, but the example she set was contagious. Heritage learners of Hungarian at Rutgers wanted to take more courses, especially ones in order to improve their writing skills and to learn Hungarian grammar, which eventually resulted in the introduction of four new courses to the Hungarian minor. Sylvia was the first student who qualified to do an advanced level internship. As an intern, she participated in the daily teaching activities of the Hungarian 102, including classroom instruction, lab practices, quizzes, and grading.

The major achievement was passing the very challenging Hungarian State Proficiency Exam with flying colors (Table 3). The exam was first offered in the United States in 2002, and Sylvia was first candidate. Her oral proficiency exam was given by the Director and the Associate Director of the ORIGO Language Proficiency Systems visiting from Hungary for the occasion of opening the center. This type of certificate of language proficiency is extremely prestigious in Europe, where it serves to fulfill the rigorous language requirements of college entrance exams or degrees, depending on the level.

ORAL EXAM	Maximum	Score	
Communication	20	18	
Vocabulary	20	16	
Use of the language	20	14	
Listening comprehension (human)	5	5	
Listening comprehension (recorded)	25	19	
TOTAL	90	72	86%

WRITTEN EXAM	Maximum	Score	
Grammar and usage test	20	16	
Reading comprehension interpretation	20	18	
Threaded composition	20	17	
Reading comprehension test	20	18	
TOTAL	80	69	80%

Table 3. Sylvia's grades on the advanced level Hungarian language proficiency exam. The maximum is 100%, virtually unheard of, while the passing grade is 60%.

When she was asked to give examples of some activities she feels more comfortable doing after taking all these courses at Rutgers, Sylvia listed them as follows:

- *Reading in Hungarian: Because of all the practice in class, I feel much more comfortable reading other materials in Hungarian on my own. On a recent trip, I purchased popular Hungarian-language books and breezed through them without a dictionary.*
- *Writing e-mails: Thanks to my Hungarian keyboard coupled with my increased knowledge of spelling and grammar, composing e-mails to my friends and relatives has become much easier.*
- *Conversing at conferences: At both AHEA conferences and the Hungarian Congress in Cleveland, I am much more at ease, even in discussing fairly technical subjects.*
- *Conducting research: In my own professional research, including composing surveys and holding interviews, I am better able to communicate.*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The case study of a bilingual heritage speaker of Hungarian has revealed some patterns in the language learning behavior of the informant. The family background (including parental education levels and ethnic identity) has been found extremely motivating in terms of encouragement and financial assistance from the immediate family members in the long run. Additionally, improving proficiency of the language was also motivated by the need to keep in touch with the members of the extended family including a host of relatives in Hungary.

Childhood and young adult language learning experiences have proven decisive for the adult learner. The pattern of learning the Hungarian language in a structured language-learning environment, i.e. in a summer camp, a course, or at school, can be recognized in the early years of learning Hungarian. Her language learning preferences and favorite activities all trace back to the same pattern. However, as an adult, she was able to recognize this pattern, identify her own language learning needs and preferences,

and took the initiative to enroll in a Hungarian minor program to perfect her language skills to the desired level. She inadvertently followed the constructivist learning theory by taking responsibility for her own learning, and finding out about her own personal learning style and preference, i.e. classroom instruction with a native speaker instructor. Responsibility for her own learning made her creative in finding the best possible sources and settings for learning, e.g. the American Hungarian Language Center, when a course at Rutgers was not available.

Taking notes in class, and reviewing and discussing them with the instructor have resulted in a better understanding of grammar and usage. Learning structured grammar in a specific course to improve reading and writing skills was crucial, and the sound knowledge of grammar coupled with a general understanding of the culture resulted in the near-native proficiency. Reading and listening comprehension have improved simultaneously with writing too.

Sylvia was an outstanding student in terms of work ethic too. She never missed a class or a deadline, her class notes were exemplary, and she took every opportunity to learn a new word, phrase, or use. She would write down every single word or phrase with which she was unfamiliar in the particular context, and made sure she understood the meaning and context perfectly by asking questions in or after class. She was always willing to help others and work in pairs or in small groups on class projects. Sylvia was always the first to volunteer if the syllabus called for a project, a presentation, or any out-of-class activity, for all the inconveniences she had to encounter while driving a considerable distance to the classes two or three times a week. Many of her class projects are of such high quality that they could be used as examples or for teaching Hungarian culture. Some were even published in Hungarian and American Hungarian newspapers, such as interviews, translations, and summaries.

The marked improvement in Sylvia's language proficiency over the four years at Rutgers was truly astonishing. A decrease in the number of errors in the written samples collected from Sylvia's Hungarian studies also indicates improvement over time. Grammatical errors can be found only very infrequently in the later texts. As she became bolder in addressing areas with a vocabulary rather unfamiliar to her, there is a shift of the type of errors in the later texts from grammatical errors to small and sophisticated nuances in language use.

The special projects she was working on included a two-year experimental online American-Hungarian cultural awareness project, in which she played the role of the forum moderator. This project was reported by the researcher and Sylvia at a major conference of the American Hungarian Educators' Conference at Columbia University (Clark & Ward, 2003), and also published in the Proceedings of the 43rd Annual Congress of the Hungarian Scientific, Literary and Artistic Association (Clark & Ward, 2004).

She enthusiastically participated in all competitions organized for the students of the Hungarian program, winning first prizes in a contest in translating Hungarian literature and in a poem recitation competition.

Sylvia's improved language skills were noticed by her parents as well. The mother usually speaks Hungarian to her, and they talk daily. The conversations are smooth and flawless. Sylvia talks with her father a bit less frequently, but he is also impressed by her progress and results. Both parents are very proud of what Sylvia has

achieved in life, but especially that she is a bilingual American. Sylvia also shows a clear understanding of what it means to be a bilingual American-Hungarian.

In Sylvia's case, the professional interest and goals are obviously related to her ethnic background. Still, it was chosen in a later period in her career, once she was confident of her language proficiency. She decided first to test the waters by volunteering to do tasks that require strong Hungarian skills, such as teaching Hungarian 102, proofreading a Hungarian phrasebook, attending conferences and giving presentations about Hungarian subjects. She began with the instructor first, then continued alone, in English, but in a Hungarian setting.

The best indicator of her proficiency is her ability to conduct research about a Hungarian topic in her own subject area, i.e. in marketing among Hungarian companies. The research included a survey, with all questions and the accompanying cover letter written in Hungarian. It was distributed via the Internet to a large number of companies, and generated more than 400 responses in one week. Clearly, participants were more willing to respond to a survey in the native language.

All in all, it is clear that she has achieved a fuller, richer life, both personally and professionally, through the concerted effort to build and maintain her knowledge of Hungarian. A combination of family support from an early point and her own perseverance have accounted for much of her success. The Hungarian program at Rutgers University has the potential to create a successful heritage language learning environment in which professional competence and choice of textbooks contribute to acknowledging and addressing all learning styles, respecting cultural differences and multiple perspectives, and making errors is considered part of the learning process. From a more personal point of view, this research has confirmed that fostering mutual respect between a teacher and students is also key to success.

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