

Second Language Acquisition through the Eyes of Teenagers

BY ALEKSANDER KLIBISZ

The study of Second Language Acquisition has been a field of active research and debate for nearly five decades.¹ Research within this field originated with Pitt Corder's 1967 essay, *The Significance of Learners Errors*, which suggested that a language is acquired through a process of fundamental linguistic processes common to all humans. Debate began with the publication of Larry Selinker's 1972 paper, *Interlanguage*, which argued that humans make use of unique linguistic systems that differ between the first and second languages learned. The 1970s primarily featured further exploration of Corder's and Selinker's ideas through naturalistic studies of people learning new languages.

The most significant advance of the 1980s came in the form of Stephen Krashen's *Input Hypothesis*, a collection of ideas in which Krashen theorized that language acquisition progresses through comprehensible input, or parts of a language that a person already understands and uses to add further elements of a language to his comprehensible input. Krashen's research did leave some gaps however, and linguists spent the majority of the 1980s trying to fill in these gaps.

Research in the 1990s featured four new major theories. Noam Chomsky's *Universal Grammar* stated that all languages feature a set of overlying grammatical similarities, which humans use when learning new languages. Michael Long's *Interaction Hypothesis* stated that

¹ Gass, Susan M., and Selinker, Larry. *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, 2008).

linguistic proficiency is best attained through face-to-face interaction. Merrill Swain's *Comprehensible Output Hypothesis* stated that the human mind learns a language by systematically recognizing and filling gaps in linguistic knowledge. Richard Schmidt's *Noticing Hypothesis* stated that noticing features of language is the first step to expanding knowledge of a language. Research in the 2000s built upon these advances from the 1990s while splitting linguists into two general areas of opinion in regards to the true approach to learning a second language: linguistic and psychological.²

While linguists continually debate the processes by which humans learn new languages, people around the world are doing just that – learning new languages. They are leaving their homes and moving to completely new places, trading familiar languages for new ones which they must learn from scratch. This process of migration and adaptation to new languages occurs each and every day, and its course of progression and ultimate effects can be best observed in the world's next generation of leaders, thinkers, and innovators – today's teenagers.

As children and teens, they leave behind all they know in their native lands and are dropped into a completely new culture. They face no other option than to learn a strange, new language and acclimate to entirely new surroundings. And at the end of the day, many succeed at a task so complex that the world's most prominent linguists have not yet been able to come to a general consensus about in decades. So how do they do it? When interviewed, ten teenagers

² VanPatten, Bill, and Benati, Alessandro G. *Key Terms in Second Language Acquisition*. (London: Continuum, 2010).

that have moved to new countries from all over the world described their experiences and shared their secrets to learning a new language.³

It is important for the reader to know that the following excerpts come from student interviews that took place in November and December of 2011. Access to the sample was gained through personal contacts, and the students were interviewed using two slightly varied versions of a ten-question email survey, one for students who had moved to the United States, the other for American students who had gone abroad. The ten students interviewed included four Cleveland and Chattanooga, Tennessee area high school seniors who had immigrated permanently to the United States at varying ages, three German exchange students to the United States during the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years, and three American exchange students who had participated in the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange program in Germany during the 2010 – 2011 school year. Each of these students are known by the author on varying levels, though experiences such as attendance of the same school with three of them and though studying abroad as a member of the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange program with three others.

Izabella Villa, a seventeen-year-old high school senior, was just eleven years old when she, her mother, and her stepfather moved from Brazil to the United States. Izabella had studied English in Brazil, but said she understood almost nothing when she arrived. She commented about some of her first experiences in the United States: “I was thrown into the swim team the day after I got here and I could not understand anything my coaches tried to tell me. My mom would have to translate almost everything for me.” Along with watching television and movies

³ In order to preserve their privacy, the names of all students interviewed have been changed. Their experiences and opinions remain unchanged.

with subtitles and reading simple books, Izabella said her time on the swim team was an essential factor in learning English. When asked how long it took her to reach a level of fluency, she responded, “Three months. The day I started dreaming fully in English I knew I had learned the language.” Izabella did, however, say that her Portuguese has suffered since moving to the United States. “It is more difficult to carry on a full-speed conversation in Portuguese. I have to stop and think of what I am about to say or else I'll start mixing Portuguese with English.” When asked what she considers her native language to be, she quickly responded, “English.” Six years after leaving her native Brazil, Izabella speaks perfect English and is on her way to graduating high school with honors and attending university in the fall of 2012.⁴

At the age of eleven, Michael Jaworski, now nineteen and a senior in high school, moved from Warsaw, Poland to the United States at the age of ten. When asked about his first experiences in the United States, Michael commented, “When I first arrived in the U.S., I could barely speak any English. I knew only the basic words but could not form them into sentences. From the moment I stepped foot in the fifth grade classroom in America, I faced immense language barriers. At first, communication with my peers and teachers was almost impossible.” Michael said he learned the most English by simply listening to the conversations around him. He added that going to school, where his knowledge of the language was critical, and the time he spent playing on a competitive soccer team accelerated his learning process as well. When asked how long it took before he felt like he could speak fluent English, Michael responded, “Entering middle school in sixth grade I felt very comfortable with the language and was

⁴ Villa, Izabella. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, December 1, 2011.

mostly fluent. But it wasn't until my seventh grade year that I lost my accent and had no problems with communicating and writing." Michael still speaks Polish at home on a daily basis and still considers Polish to be his first language. He did, however, say, "My Polish has certainly been impaired, simply because I don't use it as much as English. Many times when I can't come up with the desired Polish word instantly, I say it in English, mixing the two into what I like to call Pinglish." All Pinglish aside, Michael has accomplished a lot since coming to this country as an eleven-year-old. He is the captain of his high school's varsity soccer team and helped lead his team to its first ever state tournament last year. He will be graduating with honors this coming spring and plans to attend university and eventually medical school. ⁵

Juan Delgado, an eighteen-year-old high school senior, moved to the United States from Ecuador at the age of fourteen. When asked about his experience with the English language before coming to the United States, he responded, "I had English courses from a very young age because of the educational system in Ecuador, but I also learned some Italian from my grandfather. I'm only fluent in English and Spanish though. [...] We had always had family living in California so we would visit them every other summer or so, but once I actually moved there [the United States] the whole game changed. I realized that I knew enough English to understand it, read, and write, but I had to learn how to actually speak it almost from scratch." Juan continued by describing his experiences learning English, saying, "In Ecuador you take English classes from kindergarten to twelfth grade, but I truly believe that the one medium by which I learned most was from movies and television. I got out of the ESL classes after three months and joined the regular English classes. I was able to communicate fluently six

⁵ Jaworski, Michael. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, November 25, 2011.

to eight months after moving to the U.S.” When asked about his personal interpretation of fluency, Juan answered, “I think the point where you truly know that you are fluent in another language is when you start thinking in your second language instead of your native one. That’s your ‘aha moment.’” Juan still feels very confident in his Spanish abilities, saying, “The best thing to do after moving away and learning a new language is to keep speaking it [the native language] at home so that it’s not lost. That’s what we do at home.” He is on track to graduate with honors in the spring of 2012 and plans to continue on to university.⁶

Rajiv Gupta, a fifteen-year-old high school senior, moved from India to the United States at the age of twelve. He considers his native language to be Gujarati but also speaks fluent Hindi. Rajiv said that, although he had learned some English in school in India, speaking English was very difficult at first. “English as a second language classes helped me a lot, and socializing with friends also helped.” He continued, “I am still learning, and I guess I will always be. But that’s not a bad thing.” When asked what he thinks he could still improve on in English, Rajiv responded, “I still have a lot of trouble saying things in front of my class and giving speeches, but overall I feel very comfortable speaking English.” Rajiv speaks Gujarati on a daily basis at home and feels his Gujarati has not been affected since moving to the United States. He will graduate with honors in the spring of 2012 and plans to continue on to university and eventually medical school.⁷

Thomas Schiffer and Leah Winkel are fifteen-year-old German exchange students spending the 2011 – 2012 school year in the United States. They arrived in the United States nearly five months ago and both say that the first two weeks of school proved to be the most

⁶ Delgado, Juan. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, TN, December 3, 2011.

⁷ Gupta, Rajiv. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, November 22, 2011.

difficult time for them. Although he still sometimes gets nervous speaking English to people he does not know, Thomas now understands everything and says that speaking English is quickly becoming more and more natural. Leah described similar feelings, saying that she understands everything at home and in school but still cannot always find ways to express her thoughts in English. When asked about her German, Leah laughed and responded, “What do you mean? If you mean that I can’t speak German anymore, definitely! I said *das Löffel* and *der Messer*⁸ just the other day.” Thomas described his current situation, saying, “I feel like I’m in a sort of in-between phase. My English isn’t perfect yet, and my German is getting pretty rusty. But I guess that means I’m learning English, and that’s always good!” Both students said that speaking as little German and as much English as possible has helped their English more than anything else. Thomas and Leah will stay in the United States until June of 2012, and they both look forward to continually improving their English.^{9 10}

Dominik Kortig is a seventeen-year-old German student who spent the 2010 – 2011 school year in the United States. He said that after just one year abroad he felt that he could speak nearly perfect English. He described his course of progress, saying, “When I first came, I would ask a question at school or order something in a restaurant, and the first response I would hear was, ‘I love your accent! Where are you from?’ I don’t remember ever hearing that in the last three or four months.” And while he had taken English classes since the fifth grade in Germany, Dominik, like the other exchange students, said the language proved to be a real challenge in the first two to three weeks of school. When asked how much English he has

⁸ Proper German is *der Löffel* and *das Messer*

⁹ Schiffer, Thomas. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, December 1, 2011.

¹⁰ Winkel, Leah. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, November 24, 2011.

spoken since leaving the United States, Dominik replied, “Now I only speak it three times a week when I have English class at school. I can definitely tell that I’m losing a little bit, but it seems to come back really quickly when I talk to my host family or friends back in America.” Dominik will complete the rigorous German *Abitur* examinations at the end of the 2012 – 2013 school year and plans to continue on to university. At the end of his interview he added, “I would like more than anything to spend at least one more semester studying in the United States. I might even try to attend university in America.”¹¹

Courtney Myers, a seventeen-year-old high school senior, spent the 2010 – 2011 school year studying abroad in Germany. When asked why she wanted to go to Germany, Courtney responded, “I wanted to master another language and experience another culture. I also looked forward to traveling and gaining some independence.” Courtney described the challenges and process of learning a new language, saying, “I had had three years of German before the exchange and was able to speak decently. I wasn’t fluent, but I could converse and understand most of what I heard and read. [...] Most of my memorable moments regarding language involve mispronunciations or mix-ups. I remember calling gingerbread¹² *Leberkuchen*, which would translate to liver cake. I also used the verb *blasen* when *pusten* would have been way more appropriate. Both mean ‘to blow’ but *blasen* carries a very different connotation. That usually got a laugh out of people, although I didn’t understand why for a while.” She continued, “I first began to truly feel fluent in December [five months after arriving]. There was no real ‘aha moment,’ but I gradually began to realize that my language had improved because classmates and friends spoke more normally with me. They began to quit using perfect

¹¹ Kortig, Dominik. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, December 5, 2011.

¹² Correct translation is *Lebkuchen*

grammar, to speak with their regional accent, to use slang, and to speak more casually without enunciating.” Courtney said her German has indeed suffered since returning nearly six months ago, but added, “I think if I were to go back to Germany, I would speak it just as well as I used to within two or three weeks.” When asked to compare language education in America and Germany, Courtney commented, “I definitely think that Americans should more actively pursue fluency in foreign languages. It improves one's understanding of English and allows one to better understand another culture. I think that Germans are presented with much less of a choice when it comes to language education. They must take English as a core subject through high school, and several years of another language are also required. I think this is a good policy and that it would be beneficial for American students to take more rigorous foreign language courses as a part of a core curriculum.” Courtney is on track to graduate with honors and plans to study German through college and hopefully use it in her career one day.¹³

James Vargas, a nineteen-year-old college freshman, spent the 2010 – 2011 school year in Germany. When asked about his motives in studying abroad, James replied, “The main reason was definitely just to learn a second language by complete immersion, but the free plane ticket also won me over.” Like Courtney, James had taken three years of German before traveling to Germany but felt it did not help him as much as he had expected. “I think it’s safe to say that I was just as lost as the students who had no skills at all before starting school in Germany. [...] School started two days after I met my host family, so not only was I still uncomfortable with them, but I was thrown into conversing with peers at school. [...] I was completely lost for the first month that I was in Germany. [...] I can’t think of a specific moment when learning

¹³ Myers, Courtney. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, November 19, 2011.

German was most challenging. It was more like a giant space of time that was the most challenging.” James continued, “After a month or two of school and conversing with my host family, I was able to communicate much more effectively with other students and I gradually made friends.” He continued, “In my opinion, the most difficult obstacle that most people face [while learning a new language] is being afraid to speak incorrectly. I had very much trouble because I am a perfectionist, and I didn’t want to say something wrong. [...] I considered myself completely fluent by November or December [four to five months after arriving]. The only thing that hindered me at that point was vocabulary, which was inevitable.” James still speaks German on a weekly basis, talking with his host family on Skype every Sunday and writing with German friends on the internet. He said he has yet to notice any significant decline in his speaking abilities and actually believes his reading and writing skills have improved because of the many e-mails he has exchanged with German friends. Like Courtney, James believes Americans have much room for improvement when it comes to foreign languages. He elaborated on this subject in his interview, saying, “Most Americans can’t speak a foreign language at all, but that is somewhat understandable. One of the reasons that Europeans speak two or three languages is geography. It’s much more practical for them to learn foreign languages, but I think we are nearing a point where Americans will have to do the same. Most places in America require students to take a foreign language for two years – that’s it! Most German students are required to take English from the fifth grade up and usually a second language as well. Everyone in Germany within the last two generations can speak at least a little

English – everyone!” As of now, James plans to pursue a degree in International Studies with a minor in German.¹⁴

Neil Martin, a nineteen-year-old college freshman, spent the 2010 – 2011 school year as an exchange student in Germany. When interviewed, he explained, “For me, studying abroad for a year was a chance to see another culture and to venture away from the norms that society tends to expect. I would say starting in seventh or eighth grade, I decided that studying abroad was something I wanted to do after high school. After visiting my uncle and hearing too many stories of his Norwegian study abroad experience, it seemed like something that I couldn’t ignore. I felt the need to experience it for myself.” When asked about learning German, Neil said, “Before going to Germany I had taken four years of German. [...] Continuing to learn German seemed to be a fairly smooth process. There were a few instances where I would hang out with my host brother and start talking about more serious topics. I didn’t always feel like I could express what I wanted to say. So in that sense it was frustrating to feel like people could only make inferences as to what I meant.” Neil continued by explaining his approach to learning German. “Anything that I let myself do, it was in a German format. I would say the most beneficial activities were those that allowed me to surround myself with Germans. This included playing soccer, cooking with my host mother, or meeting with people in the city.” He elaborated, “It took a solid five months for me to realize how much progress I had actually made in learning the language. It was around this time that I noticed that I had little to no difficulty saying what I wanted or expressing my thoughts or feelings with other people.” Neil believes his abilities in German have declined since returning to the United States. “Even

¹⁴ Vargas, James. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, November 29, 2011.

though I'm still taking a German course, I'm no longer able to observe speaking patterns and choice of vocabulary with certainty, because anyone I speak with now is also American and could also be making mistakes speaking the language." Neil's opinions about language education in the United States were very similar to those of Courtney and James. "I definitely think Americans could get better about learning new languages. To me, it seems the American standard of learning a new language is learning how to say 'hello,' 'goodbye,' and 'where's the bathroom?' It never seems to be in depth, and schools seem to treat it like a joke. In regards to language education, I think the American school system is awful in comparison to the German system. Yes, the availability to use foreign languages for Americans is significantly less than that of Germans, but it seems as though the German system is more serious and more extensive when it comes to teaching languages." Unfortunately, Neil will not be able to continue studying German, but he plans to continue finding opportunities to speak it and hopes to one day make use of it in his career. ¹⁵

Though their cultural backgrounds and native languages vary widely, all of these teenagers share common traits that linguists and language learners alike can learn from. By completely immersing themselves in a new culture and language, persisting when understanding and speaking became difficult, and, most importantly, understanding that there was always something they could improve upon, each of these students has mastered or is in the process of mastering a second language.

For people starting or struggling to learn a second language, the most important lesson to be taken from the experiences of these teenagers is that language acquisition goes hand in

¹⁵ Martin, Neil. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, November 22, 2011.

hand with complete cultural immersion. The problem does, however, arise that such immersion cannot always be practically achieved. But there are alternatives. Interaction with native speakers as well as exposure to film, music, and literature in other languages are all practical, effective methods by which a language-learner can slowly but surely achieve proficiency in a new language. Several of the teenagers that were interviewed can attest to the effectiveness of these methods. Izabella Villa, eleven when she moved to the United States from Brazil, and Juan Delgado, fourteen when he moved to the United States from Ecuador, both said they made frequent use of simple books, films, and television shows to learn English.

So what can one learn from these teenagers in regards to second language as a whole? It is simple, really. These students have proven that second language acquisition, in its most effective form, consists of two driving elements: a will to immerse oneself in a new culture and language and persistent observation and application of the language being learned.

While some moved to a new country temporarily and others permanently, all of the students interviewed were willing and ready to take on the challenge of immersing themselves in their new cultures and languages. As seen in his interview, James Vargas, a self-proclaimed perfectionist, described the difficulties of learning a new language while immersed in a new culture like this: "In my opinion, the most difficult obstacle that most people face [while learning a new language] is being afraid to speak incorrectly. I had very much trouble because I am a perfectionist, and I didn't want to say something wrong."¹⁶ In the end, these students persevered through difficult, often discouraging, and sometimes embarrassing situations and have been rewarded for it.

¹⁶ Vargas, James. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, November 29, 2011.

But complete immersion by itself will not bring proficiency. It must be accompanied by persistent observation and application of a new language. These students took an active role in learning new languages by listening and practicing their language skills tirelessly. Michael Jaworski, who moved to the United States from Poland at the age of ten, confirmed the importance of constant observation, saying that he believes he learned the most English by simply listening to the conversations around him. Neil Martin, an exchange student to Germany during the 2010 – 2011 school year, described how he fostered his skills through persistent application, saying, “Anything that I let myself do, it was in a German format.”¹⁷

While the survey sample was relatively small and somewhat repetitive in regards to the exchange students interviewed, it is believable that these students’ experiences present an accurate portrayal of the experiences, challenges, and results of learning a new language through complete immersion. These students come from a variety of national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and have all shown success in learning a new language. However, not every case of complete immersion ultimately brings success; travelers and language learners often face overwhelmingly difficult circumstances. This being said, it is again believable that each of these students effectively addressed the challenges they faced when immersing themselves in a new language and, while acclimating to new surroundings, presented personally-proven methods for overcoming these challenges. These teenagers have shown us that second language acquisition can be most effectively applied through a combination of cultural and linguistic immersion and persistent observation and application of the new language.

¹⁷ Martin, Neil. Interview by author. Email interview. Cleveland, Tennessee, November 22, 2011.