

Chapter 1

Introduction

Many theories on human learning and research into second language acquisition helped to build the basis for approaches and methods to language learning. Many psychologists and other researchers have attempted to define the learning process and have proposed theories on how humans learn. Yet, they have been unable to account for all the mental processes involved as there are different types of human learning (Brown, 2007).

English has become the most used language of the world and learning it as a second language or foreign language is one of the most important and demanding tasks for many learners who see it as a need to accomplish. English is now used as a means for social as well as economic advancement in non-English speaking countries like Asia as Asia's economy is increasingly growing. Smith (2000) states it is likely that English, along with other educational improvements, can benefit disadvantaged communities in the developing world by giving individuals access to more rewarding jobs, and by making societies more attractive to investment. Thus, people learn English as it becomes very important and has many advantages to develop human resources. In the EFL context, although English language competence is potentially most valuable to individuals and their families, it is also most hard to attain. Those English language learners who have experiences in the language learning process may notice that while some of their classmates who learn the language with ease and achieve their goal in learning, there are still many other learners who struggle in learning. For this reason, it is a common belief that some people are better at learning languages compared to others. However, there must be some reasons why these learners were better than others although learners come from the same background, learn under the same conditions and have similar motivations.

Through various research that has been conducted, we know that there are many factors which have influence on language learning success such as aptitude, motivation, personality and cognitive style. Thus, this study will attempt to address and identify the influence factors of five successful English language learners from Myanmar.

1.1. Background and rationale

Much research has shed light on individual learner differences in aptitude, motivation and learning strategies but there has been very little empirical investigation of whether these factors can explain L2 achievement in environments where exposure to and use of the L2 are strictly limited. Therefore, this section will present the background about the history of English in Myanmar, recent Myanmar history and provide the

background information about the strictly limited situation when Myanmar was practicing its own “Burmese way to socialism”.

Myanmar and English are the only languages taught as compulsory subjects at all levels of education. However, these two languages have not received the same attention at all times due to the political and socio-economic changes in the country. In the colonial times, in Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries under the British rule, English, the language of colonial power became the most important language based on the belief that ‘an English education bought great social and economic advantages’. Then, English was the language of administration and medium of instruction from kindergarten to university. As a result, the status of Myanmar and its teaching declined at that time (Allott, 1985).

In 1920 university students struck for the establishment of national schools in order to revive and restore Myanmar to its rightful place as the national medium of instruction. Then by 1930, the role of Myanmar as a medium of instruction to all schools was extended and the study of Myanmar was fully established at the University of Yangon and then Mandalay (Allott, 1985).

In 1948, Myanmar became independent and Myanmar language became the official language according to the new constitution (Allott, 1985). The use of English also could continue and the standard of Myanmar education was said to be one of the highest in Asia (Kyi, et al., 2000). However, in 1964, after the socialist government had taken place, a new Education system was introduced and all schools including universities became state-run schools under a single uniform system. Myanmar became the only medium of instruction at all levels and the teaching of English began only from standard 5 and English which used to be a major subject was relegated to that of a foreign language ‘to be taught as a tool’ (Allott, 1985).

Kyi, et al. (2000) also points out that the new education system affected many good schools which had been established by missionaries and local philanthropic and voluntary organizations. Textbooks were not available and teachers in the university had to use the translations of standard books as lecture notes to be distributed to students. Other literature was also not available for the students to read. The content of education changed so frequently that it led to unnecessary adjustment problems for both students and teachers. Lwin (2000) also states that Myanmar education was dominated by subject-orientated teaching and children’s rote learning. As a result, the higher education system became broken and completely declined. Kyi, et al. (2000) also asserts that Myanmar’s improvement in education has been slow in the last 20 years while other Southeast Asia countries have improved greatly in their educational standards.

The economic and political system in this era also affected Burma’s education. During this era, according to Steinberg (2010), the government tried to reduce contact with the outside world. As the country was effectively cut off from the outside world, the economic system also declined and made the country poorer as the cost of living rose. This was due to the government practicing the Burma way to socialism (Aung-Thwin, 1997) which had no communication with others but was intended to depend on its own people. Then, Myanmar was declared as a “least developed nation” by the United Nations (Steinberg, 2010). This isolation from the rest of the world just

created unsatisfactory educational development for Myanmar as some students dropped out of school due to the poverty (Kyi, et al. , 2000). In an EFL context, learning opportunities and exposure to learn the language play an important role in developing language proficiency. However, Myanmar, according to Steinberg, had few international contacts as the government controlled tourism. Thus, opportunities for contact with English speakers were rare and the education system was unable to provide the conditions in which language skill could develop. Besides, Steinberg states that some shortwave radios existed, but television was lacking and all books and magazines entering the country were controlled. Hence, unlike the other successful learners in an EFL context, it was hard for the learners from Myanmar to get exposure from the media access. In those days, there were also no language centers and private schools to learn English like we have nowadays as the government nationalized all the private schools (Kyi, et al. 2000). Therefore, the education system could not help the learners to achieve their goals in learning English. As English was paid little attention to and was not encouraged for use in students' daily life, the result according to Kyi, et al. (2000) was the educational system becoming completely out of line and thousands of students came out of the system barely educated and could not speak English.

Yet, within these difficult circumstances and limited exposure, there were some learners who were highly motivated and found their own way to achieve in learning English. Researchers such as Rubin and Thomson (1983) and the other professionals described the characteristics of the good language learners as people who had clear goals and knew how to approach them in their life. They were committed, motivated, consistent, hardworking, well-organized and able to tackle the problems to attain their final goal. They had a high level of self-confidence and never gave up in failure or difficulty. However, it will be crucial to predict whether successful learners possess all the qualities stated above. Despite the difficult circumstances in Myanmar, there are learners who have succeeded to some extent in learning English academically and achieving a degree of communicative competence in English. Their performance of speaking, reading and writing skills in English is at a higher level compared to the other learners of their age. In this study five perseverant and successful learners who learned the language in limited conditions were chosen to be investigated. One of them is now a director of an international language center in Myanmar which is also her own private English learning center. The other four work as instructors in English Language centers and universities. All of them earned their master's degrees in teaching English from international universities outside Myanmar. They are recognized by their peers, students and communities for their communicative and writing competence as well as teaching skill.

Therefore this study is to investigate what enables these individual perseverant and successful learners to transcend the contextual constraints. It is also hoped that the findings from this study may be able to help the learners who fail to learn the L2 or foreign language, including those who want to succeed in learning the language in developing countries like Myanmar where teaching facilities and learning environments are limited. There is no research in Myanmar about successful learners and factors that affect their learning in difficult conditions. Hence, there is a need to conduct research in this neglected area in Myanmar's context to help the teaching society and to contribute in the learning process. In addition, this study also aims to

provide more understanding towards learner differences and factors that contribute to success in languages to the practitioners, educators and teachers who want to help their students improve through learner training.

1.2. Objectives of the study

The objective of the study is to investigate the five perseverant and successful learners in the limited teaching and learning context of Myanmar. This study is to provide in depth qualitative data of second/ foreign language learning from the perseverant and successful language learners' perspective. The study will address the following research questions.

1. What kind of teaching and learning context did they experience?
2. What learning opportunities as well as obstacles did they have during their time due to the political, social and economic situation?
3. What is their previous and present attitude towards learning English?
4. What are the individual learning factors that enabled these perseverant learners to become successful?
5. What strategies did they use and which methods do they feel to be most successful?

1.3. Significance of the study

This study will be significant in several ways. First, it can add to the existing research on factors affecting the Second/ Foreign Language learning by providing indepth interpretive data on the individual factors of these participants. It can also discover the context of teaching and learning where the circumstances and conditions of language learning are less than ideal.

This study, secondly, is focusing on subjects who have never been studied in previous studies since there has been no research or study on the achievement of successful English Language Learners in Myanmar.

This study will provide information for the future researchers who want to do research on successful language learners and factors that affect their success. The information from this study will give new understanding to the educators, material developers, curriculum designers and the teachers. Moreover, this study will facilitate teachers to understand more about differences in their students in pursuing their learning and enable their students to learn by using their own language learning strategies to continue as better learners of English.

1.4. Scope and limitations

This research is to study five participants from Myanmar who persevered and succeeded in English language learning where the teaching and learning context was so limited. It was during the time when Socialist government isolated Myanmar from the other countries. Thus, it was hard for its citizens to access to the outside world and education level declined due to the restriction and limited learning resources. They are considered to be successful due to the higher degree of proficiency they achieved in English and their position as English teaching instructors in recognized universities

in Myanmar. This study will discover the experiences which the five participants have had. However, some data could be insufficient because the information in questions was of many years ago and so the participants might not remember them in detail. Besides, there would not be journals or records about their learning process and how they became successful language learners. Qualitative research methods will be carried out to collect the required information for the research. The interview for this research will be done in Burmese language as it is the common language for both the participants and the researcher.

1.5. Definition of terms

Perseverant learners:	Learners who continue effort and try to gain their goal despite difficulties, failure, or opposition.
Successful language learners:	Learners who are thoughtful and aware of themselves in relation to the learning process. They take conscious decisions and they follow their own preferred learning style. They are learners who are able to talk effectively about their language learning because they have a well-developed metalanguage for doing so. (Ellis, 2003)
Learning strategies:	The way which learners attempt to work out the meanings and uses of words, grammatical rules, and other aspects of the language they are learning. (Richard & Schmidt, 2002)
Learner autonomy:	The skills of learners to take charge of their own learning.
Proficiency:	the degree or skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language. (Richard & Schmidt, 2002)
The Burmese way to socialism:	This term refers to the ideology of the Socialist regime in Burma. The Burmese Way to Socialism is an economic treatise written in April 1962 by the Revolutionary Council, shortly after the coup, as a blueprint for economic development, reducing foreign influence in Burma, and increasing the role of the military.

1.6. Summary and organization of the study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter one presents the rationale and problems of the study, purposes of the study and research questions, significance of the study, scope of the study and definitions of terms. Chapter two presents a literature review of factors affect the learning. Chapter three presents the research methodology which consists of research instrument, data collecting procedure, participants and data analysis. Chapter four presents the story, pilot study and discusses the results of the study. Then chapter five is the conclusion part and it presents implications and the recommendations for the future research in the area of language learning strategies.

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