

Poetic Inquiry: Language learning Experiences

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Understanding language learning is more complex than other subject learning. It heavily involved in one's life experiences. This research investigates poems that a language learner wrote to explore the language learning process. Using poetic inquiry lead to look deeply inside of one's language learning experiences. Ten poems are analyzed qualitatively. The poems showed negative aspects of language learning, however, they also reflected positive aspects through various lessons that the participants went through. The participant described the experiences rather telling opinions about language learning. Listening one's voice is important; however, it may not be reliable as much as investigating the real experiences through poems. This study argues that to understand one's experience of language learning, poetic inquiry is a great tool to look deeply inside.

Key words : Language learning, Poem, Poetic Inquiry, Experiences

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I. Introduction

A baby

Think about how babies are learning language

Think about how long it will take for babies to learn the language

Just grasp everything
Just believe what people say
Just be curious about everything
Just question yourself and others
Just listen to others without any doubt
Just do not be afraid of making mistakes
Just be confident
Just beg to people who can help you
Just smile
Like a baby.

The process of learning a second language may involve many psychological and philosophical thoughts through one's mind. Language learning usually occurs during people's childhood and they learn unconsciously. As shown in the very beginning of this study, the opening poem of this poetic inquiry is "A baby." This poem can be a good start to think about what learning a second language through the author's general thought. The title of the poem, "A Baby" is metaphorically expressed as a learner. Babies are generally very simple, meek, and do not think too much. In this poem, the writer thinks that learning any language should not be so complicated if learners are open-minded and accept any challenge in learning a new language. However, this does not apply to learning a second language. That is, learning a second language is not the same as learning a first language.

Unlike a baby, the author in this paper started learning English as a foreign language in her middle school years and Japanese in her college years. In this poem, she described many thoughts, opinions, and ideas because she already has the ability of thinking through her mind. The lack of open-mindedness in adults is one reason why acquiring a second language proves to be difficult. This poetic inquiry explores the writer's view of learning a second language through her experiences. The purpose of this inquiry is to find out and analyze what learning a second language is like by looking at the poetry .

about the writer's experiences. Ten poems will be carefully observed to identify how the author went through the process of learning a second language and what lessons she earned from it. The methodology will report in the next section how poems were collected to analyze in this paper. For the chapter of result and discussion, three main categories will be given as descriptions; Negative aspects in learning a second language, lessons from the episodes, and positive movement in learning a second language.

II. Description of Method

The materials in this paper are poems about the experiences of learning a second language, written by the female author who attends a public university in Pennsylvania, USA. Her nationality is Korean but she has two second languages which are Japanese and English. Currently, she is seeking a master's degree in TESOL (Teaching English to Speaker of Other language) along with studying English. Since she has two second languages, the poetry has described the experiences from both cases. The place where she learned two languages is Japan.

The brain storming helped to organize the experiences at the beginning because many experiences are mixed and ambiguous. Poems were revised multiple times to be more specific. A total of 27 poems were written and commented by classmates. Then, all the poetry was carefully read multiple times and fixed to be more detailed. Before the poems were analyzed by a researcher, they were separated into three categories; negative impacts at the beginning of the stage in language learning, various episodes while in the process, and the positive impacts in collected poems. Chronicle development was found in the poetry of learning a second language experiences. Two main criteria were used for selecting poems to look carefully in this paper: a) description of the emotion; and b) aesthetic quality especially metaphor.

III. Result and Discussion

The discussion will start with the negative consideration caused by confusions in the experiences of learning a second language. The next section will contain unique happenings described in the process of the writer's language learning. At the last section, the author got lessons from the experiences of her original pessimistic point of view that eventually turned into a positive view of learning a second language, which will be shown as one category.

1. Negative Aspects in Language learning

The poem, “The Lunch Break” is the first one to be described to begin this chapter. This poem represents the early stage of the author’s learning as shown from the phrases such as “looking people without saying anything,” and “listening people without understanding.”

The Lunch Break

Silent lunch time for me

Fun lunch time for others

Eating with friends

Should be fun

But for me

Looking people without saying anything

Listening people without understanding

Dark on my side

Bright on their side

One attention to me

But just a moment

Hopeless, about to give up

Nothing I can do

Just let it be

Stay hard like a grass

Antonyms, “silent” and “fun,” “dark” and “bright” are in this poem to illustrate differences between the situations of the writer and others. Their circumstances are opposite even though they are having a lunch break at the same time since the author does not understand what others were saying. The author mentioned lunch time is very delightful as she wrote in this poem; “fun” and “bright.” However, it can be said that there is a spot of darkness and silence on the author’s side. The first stanza sounds very sad and is expressed as a lonely lunch time. The second stanza clearly has confusions and doubts. The rhyme is also well narrated such as “looking people without” and “on my and their side” to compare the different conditions. The third stanza has an emotion of depression for being in the lunchroom and not enjoying it. Words and phrases like, “hopeless, give up, and nothing I can do” indicate the desperate

impression about the language disability. For the entire poem, it appears that there are sad, lonely and hopeless moments for the writer unlike her other classmates. The writer uses the metaphor, “a grass” in the last line of the poem. The reason why she refers to herself as “a grass,” is that blades of grass are very strong even though people step on them all the time. They even endure through the hardships of winter. The author hopes to remain tough and hold on to the situation like a blade of grass in the face of many difficulties.

Need help

Does anyone prefer to have a study partner?
I think most students would like to have.
But does anyone want to have me as a study partner?
I hardly doubt that.

All I did for this class is studying
Even if I have 8 hours of the time for studying
I cannot concentrate.
Even if I learned a lot
I cannot remember everything
Even if I study a lot
I cannot speak.

No one wants to study with me
But I cannot study alone
Very little progress
I feel like I am wasting my time

I have to stand on my own feet
But it would be so much easy
If I have someone to study with
And it would be so much helpful
If I have someone to ask questions.

This poem represents another depressive feeling on learning a second language. We can see in the first stanza that although the author wants to have a study partner to study effectively,

it does not seem to work well for her because of her limited English. She is not confident about her English proficiency as seen in the phrase “But does anyone want to have me as a study partner?” in second stanza. Although her motivation is high to improve her English, the second stanza represents that self-motivation is not easy. In this same stanza, “cannot” is used multiple times to express the writer’s feeling of being miserable. The writer’s negative and depressed emotions are fully represented in the third stanza as well. The writer needs a partner for her studying, but she stated that there is no one who wants to study with her like the first line at this stanza. To learn an additional language, studying hard is not enough to improve the language. The writer is trying to study alone, but this poem indicates that she needs help and wants to study with someone so that she can ask questions or learn from others to make her studying productive.

The next poem, “No more English” contrasts with the first two poems mentioned above in both “The lunch break” and “Need a help” in previous part of this section. Those two poems have struggles from not improving and not knowing the language but the following poem is about the circumstance which has no chance to use English in her daily life.

No more English

I have 5 classes this semester;

English Literature, Phonology, Psychology, Linguistics Apply, and Cross-cultural
Communication

All I do in the class is just sitting and listening

I barely talk in class

I have been trying to practice English as much as I can

But

There is no chance to talk in English

There is no one I can talk with

I do not have to talk in English at all

Sometimes, I even forget what my major is

I am just losing my English skill

I cannot improve my English under this circumstance...

I do not even want to talk in English at all

This moment comes once a while
I cannot be satisfied with my condition; not being improved at all

Another moment comes again
My motivation just hides under my bed
I cannot find it
I mean, I could but I do not want to
I hope this does not last for a long time

I shouted to myself,
Look under the bed and find it!
I still try even if I feel like I am losing it
Because,
I could at least keep the level which I have now.

In the first stanza, the writer is not satisfied with the circumstance because there is no chance to practice English in college even though her major is English. This usually happens when people study a second language in their own country, not being in the target language community. The second stanza indicates that there is no motivation to study English any longer since there is no opportunity to apply what she has been learning. The last line of this stanza, "I even forget what my major is," is not literally forgetting the major but the writer means that in college, there are many kinds of subjects which are not related to the majors. The writer is enthusiastic about improving and applying what she learned because she recognized the feeling that she is going to forget things that she learned. Generally, in this stanza, having no one and no situation for applying her skills can be frustrating. However, the frustration was expressed in the third stanza as the writer literally said, "I do not even want to talk in English at all." Yet to contrast that, there is a line saying that "this moment comes once a while" which implies that it does not happen all the time.

However, there is "another moment" which the author loses her motivation again from the unsatisfying condition. The writer tries to convince herself to have the motivation back. She expressed this with the phrase of "My motivation just hides under my bed." The choice of expression that motivation hides under the bed is one that can be found and the writer does not want to lose it completely. As this poem shows, mastering a second language cannot be accomplished in a short period of time. Also, there are feelings of depression

and disappointment even if learners put in a great effort. It is obvious that there is an embroilment in language learning.

To sum up the first section of the result and discussion, there is great conflict in learning a second language as we have seen in these three poems. The first poem was about hopelessness because the initial stage of learning languages needs tolerance even though there is not a direct outcome. The second poem is about putting an effort on trying to study in her own way but it does not work because of the disability of language. Then there is the next step of frustration, since learning a language takes much time and it is difficult to see progress. It can be said that there is a conflict between distress and self-control when it comes to language learning.

2. Lessons from the Episodes

Learning a second language in the target country, there are many unique episodes that happen in the middle of the learning process because of poor understanding. The following poem happened while the author was attending school in Japan. The writer went to school, but it was a holiday.

No school?

Going to school as usual
But school does not seem as usual
There was no one around

I went to the classroom
But there was no one either
No school today?
I did not know it

Did someone even tell me?
Or
I just could not understand it?
This is not funny!

Happy for not having classes?
Or

Sad for not knowing the fact?

It is easy to imagine the morning of the school day from the first line but there was no one in the next line which shows that something wrong. The phrase “as usual” expresses nothing wrong and “no one” sounds like the writer was wondering what the situation was. At the second stanza, the author was still wondering why there was nobody at school, so she went to the class doubtfully. Then, she found out that there really was no school in the second stanza. From this line, her confusion is from the low level of her language skills because she does not know whether she was told by someone. The last line, “this is not funny!” has emotional expression from the fact that she went to school on a holiday. The last part of this poem gives mixed feelings of both happiness and sadness. This poem in general does not express much of a negative side however, the writer is confused about it. The reason why this poem was chosen is that it infers that learning a language can take place be random and silly like this poem. Things spontaneously occur frequently when learning a language and there are many possibilities of unpredictable events.

Here is another episode which occurred in the process of learning a second language. This was different from the formal poem, “No school?” in the way that the writer made it happen herself. The author was in class and it seemed that she was not a part of the class, so she decided to change that.

Introduce myself

I really do need to understand the lecture in class.

I really do need help.

But no one seems to care about me.

No one does think that I am different.

No one does think that I need help.

Before class began, I said,

“Hello,

My name is...

I am from Korea so I do not know English very well.

I might ask you for help in class...”

After class... they said,

“Did you understand the assignment?

If you have any questions,

Let me know.”

This was my strategy to get to know people in class.

It worked very well.

If I become active and open-minded,

They will open their minds too.

Do not hesitate to ask for help,

Let them know that I need help.

There is no time to wait for their help.

At the beginning of this poem, we can see that the writer is struggling in class because she is not sure what her professor says. It may often happen to second language learners who lose the track of the lecture; they usually have a hard time understanding the content of the class with their poor second language capacity. In the first stanza, the line “no one does think that I am different,” needs to be considered to see why the writer expressed this phrase. It can be interpreted along with American culture which is the melting pot culture. The definition from the American Heritage dictionary (2006) says, the *melting pot* is a concept of “*a place where immigrants of different cultures or races form an integrated society,*” like American or Canadian culture. Therefore, seeing different races is not rare for them which may relate to the phrase; “No one does think that I am different.”

Getting attention from classmates in a group discussion is hard for the second language learners. In class, they have to speak out, as seen in the second stanza. Therefore, the writer is introducing herself to the class to let people know that she does not know English very well. From this, the writer could possibly get attention and warning her language skill so that she can involve smoothly in a group discussion.

This stanza shows the action of her attempt, which can be seen from the locution of “before” and “I said,” and from third stanza; “after” and “they said” which represents the result of her tryout. Once the writer reveals that she does not know English fully and needs assistance from her classmates, suddenly they talked to her. It is crucial for the second language learners to be active and ask questions about anything right away whenever they do not understand. The writer assumes to notice it and the poem indicates it. At the fourth stanza, the writer shows her feeling of accomplishment and the lesson learned from this experience.

This stanza displays confidence and satisfaction unlike the other previous poetry.

The first poem of this section, “No school?” may seem discouraging. Such a negative event could possibly decrease a learner’s confidence and ultimately the student could lose their enthusiasm in the process of continuing to learn a second language. Language learning does not just offer bad experiences but may good ones. Those who partake in this process can learn how to deal with uncertainty, confusion of new topics, and how to handle knowledge in general.

From the second poem about introducing herself in class to let people know, we see that being an active learner can have positive outcomes. Finding new ways to learn and get help is very effective in learning a second language. Many episodes can happen in learning a language whether those are good or bad. The analysis of the poems in section 3.2 indicates that learning a second language is not only about studying; it needs passion, flexibility, perseverance, and the effort of getting rid of the stress which may occur in the learning process. To have a positive mind set is also very important as well, no matter what happens

3. Positive Attitude in Language learning

The third section will consider the positive outlook of the author’s learning a language through three pieces of poems. The first poem is about talking in English frequently and this poem describes a favorable emotion to learning a language.

Talking in English

“We should be talking more in English
Because I want to use what I have learned”
That was the time we have decided to speak English each other.

It does not work well at first,
It does not work well especially with my friends.
“Hi, thank you, let’s go, do you want to go eat?
Did you study? Did you finish your homework?”...
That was the limitation of words between us.

Just came up with a brilliant idea for this.
Make friends with people who speak English!
Went down to international office

Found some people who do speak English.

I could also teach my language to them in English.

“Where there is a will, there is always a way”

The author tries to speak English as much as she can but she does not have opportunities to do so. The first stanza exhibits the high motivation of the learner, but it does not work between friends as shown in the second stanza. From the phrases like “hi, thank you, let’s go...” in this stanza, both she and her friends cannot speak English well enough to communicate with each other. Even though she thinks it is not effective, she did not give up and tries to find another way. It is possible to see that she is very passionate about speaking English in third stanza. The passion even made her meet new native speakers instead of just complaining and being disappointed about her situation. She put her antenna up to pick up information where she could practice English. Also, the writer is ready to interact with foreigners, as we can guess from the last line of the third stanza. The last stanza which only has one line is a proverb which shows her excitement and achievement about language learning, along with her high motivation. She expressed her viewpoint about learning a second language with the maxim which sounds very optimistic.

In the next poem, the writer finally got to study in America. This happened at the beginning of her first semester, right after she got in America.

A waste of my time?

Finally, I got to study in the USA!

There are many events and I am going to make a lot of friends!

However, I was just sitting there.

I was just watching people talking.

People might think that I am bored.

People might feel sorry for me.

People might think I am strange.

It seems like it is not worth it at all being there.

But, I am just fine.

I am actually having fun.

I am not miserable.

I am not just doing nothing.

I am listening them in real situation.

I am learning and accumulating my knowledge.

Just being there around the target language

Unconsciously words are swimming in my head.

What I am doing is not wasting of my time.

There is nothing could not be worth it.

I just have to be patient for now.

I know I will get it eventually!

The first stanza narrates a very exciting sentiment about studying in America because of the use of “finally” for the opening word. There is a happy and bright emotion for her life in U.S.A. for two lines, but she suddenly realized how serious the real life is around her. However, the writer exhibits the way it is in the second stanza. She knows that she is outsider because of not knowing anyone and much about the language. In the next stanza, she admits the awkwardness of not knowing much and being a stranger and does not feel frustrated about it. “I am just fine,” and “I am actually having fun,” show that she is satisfied with her experiences from the past without having stress.

The last line of this stanza, “I am not just doing nothing,” has a double negative expression on purpose which emphasizes the point. The fourth stanza is a more detailed display from the last stanza, but it has more emotional thoughts. The last stanza in general shows that she trusts herself and the eventual outcome will be a positive one. This illustrates that she learns from experience that having patience and tolerance are necessary in learning a second language. In the last line, “I know I will get it eventually,” we see she is very optimistic. The use of the exclamation point shows her enthusiasm. The writer does not understand the language fully yet, and it gives the impression that learning a second language needs a long time to be accomplished.

Further in, the poem also manifests the patience and the perspective of positive attitude. This poem has a metaphorical expression of learning a second language process with the assembly of many little nickels.

Many a little makes a nickel

One, two, three...
Ten, twenty, thirty...
Hundred, thousand...
Now I know all numbers!

I have 10 words to memorize today.
I have another 10 words to memorize.

.....

I have 10 more words to memorize.
There are 30 days per month,
There are 365 days per year.
I learned 3650 words in total this year.
How many sentences can I make with these 3000 words?
About 3000 words should enough to speak English well.

A word cannot be disregard.
Each day I learn something of the language,
Even if it is a very little thing,
That could be the part of my learning.
It can be very useful.
I can talk with those.
And those little things are being used in everyday.

Just like a grain of sand makes a mountain.
Many a little makes a nickel.

The first stanza listed different numbers to show that there are many things to learn in language education. The word “now” shows that there was a time when she did not know them, but she is happy for the fact that she now understands. Also, she does not seem thwarted because she knows them. The writer mentioned that she needed to memorize 10 words and another 10 for the next day. According to these lines in the second stanza, doing something for the language seems very helpful. The rest of the phrases in this stanza show that 10 vocabulary words everyday are many and she can speak from those 3000 words. She described the numbers to emphasize that even 10 words can be a lot.

At the next stanza, the writer literally explains the second stanza and moreover, the words of “disregard” and “useful” value each vocabulary word that she memorized. The phrase “and those little things are being used in everyday” gives a sense of realization to readers that a little step of making an effort can lead to the success on learning a second language. The last two lines of this stanza are both poetic and aesthetic expressions of language which describe the experience of what this poem is about. It is possible to picture the theme of this poem clearly and artistically with these metaphors.

The section 3 has poems that the writer has positive point of view in learning a second language of her experiences. The writer tries different ways to learn effectively so that she can understand better. In the second poem, she has confident feeling about having a good outcome eventually because she had lessons from her previous episodes in her language learning process. Therefore, there is a frustration anymore. Also, as the third poem shows us that it is possible to see the writer’ s mature attitude of learning language which makes the writer to be patient. After all the different kinds of experiences that the writer had, she become sure about the great result which she will have in her learning a second language.

IV. Concluding Remarks

According to the poems represented in this poetic inquiry, there are several aspects of learning a second language through the experiences. Even though each poem has a different theme, the poems can be divided into three different stages of learning; a) Negative aspects in learning a second language, b) Lessons from the episodes, c) Positive aspects in learning a second language. The writer evolves over time as her perceptions toward second language learning change. Because of this, it was possible to divide each stage into diverse ideas.

In the first stage, language learning experiences were very negatively described in the poems; the writer’ s frustration, confusion, hopelessness, and depression on language learning. At the beginning of the stage, learners have a moment of silence and cannot utter their thoughts that they have. This perspective gives learners hopelessness because even if they try hard to output their thoughts, it may not occur smoothly. In terms of this, as three poems in the result and discussion chapter demonstrate, learners may get lost with what they are doing and feel frustration in the process of learning.

Perhaps this occurs not only at the beginning of learning, but also a little later when people start to understand little by little. They do not remember everything they have learned when

they do not have the chance to apply it.

Furthermore, learning a second language cannot only be about individual endeavors but also about interaction with people. There is a limit that learner can acquire by studying on their own, but there are not many situations where learners can have chances to interact with native speakers in their own country. These factors make learners have a pessimistic image of learning a second language and such problems which can be seen from poems (3.1) are experienced by learners.

While ongoing the learning process, second language learners many encounter diverse challenges especially when the learners are in the country of target language. The unexpected episodes can be crucial to have because people learn from those occurrences, and they last longer in their minds and stay with them better. The second poem from section 3.2 shows that not only learning from textbook and studying hard is necessary to learn a new language. Also learning practical ways and having physical and emotional incidents are beneficial in learning language whether those are bad or good occurrences.

After those numerous experiences from poems in section 3.1 and 3.2 learners leaned towards the positive aspect of learning a second language and towards self motivation. In this process, they could see their outcomes by studying often and being willing to develop the language skills. Because of this, learners become confident about learning which may lead to turn out to great outcome.

The last poem, “A firework,” contains both the positive and negative stages mentioned earlier in the inquiry, and metaphorically expresses the learning of a second language.

The firework

It takes a long time to make a firework
It needs a lot of work to make a firework
It must to be work very hard to make a firework
For a long time

Sometimes,
Those people might get tired
Those people might be upset
Those people might be stressed out
Those people might not had a productive day
Those people might failure

Those people might lonely

Once they make one

It will burst to the sky!

Learning language is just like it!

It does not matter how many times you fail,

What the matter is that you do not get up.

This is exact like learning a new language

Time consuming

But

Productive and great

When the time of satisfaction with the second language has come.

As seen in the beginning of the poem, as the process of the creation of firework, the author does not seem to be optimistic about making the firework which can apply on to learning a second language at the stage of beginning. The poem has “a long time” twice and “a lot of work” at the first stanza. From those words, the author thinks the process of learning a language needs much time to accomplish and it progresses very slowly like making a firework. Also, there are many negative words such as “tired”, “upset”, “stressed out”, “no productive”, “failure”, and “lonely.”

These represent clearly through the firework which refers that the author does not think learning a second language is not fun, but rather tough. On the other hand, at the end of the poem, the author started metaphorically relating the positive aspects of learning a second language to exploding fireworks. “Burst to the sky” has an exclamation mark that represents the positive outcome of the struggles. The process of learning a second language is challenging, frustrating, and time consuming. However, through carious experiences, learners can accomplish the seemingly daunting task and be amazed with the results like the firework explosion.

V. References

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (4th ed.). (2006). Houghton Mifflin Company.