

The Case Study of an English Learner

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Part 1: Introduction to the learner

Joey is a second year masters student at Vanderbilt University. He made the decision to attend Vanderbilt University after working in the field of education in China. Joey's L1 is the Mandarin dialect of Chinese. However, when he was eight years old he and his family moved to the northwestern part of China, the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region, for four years. The more specific part of this region that they lived in is called Yili Kazakhs Prefecture. Joey told me that "it's an ethnic minority populated area, the major ethnicity would be Kazakhs and Uyghur people." There they were surrounded by people who spoke different dialects, Uyghur and Kazakhs. Joey told me that these languages were subbranches of Arabic. There he and his family were the minority and were able to understand some of the new dialect but cannot speak it. Now that Joey lives in the United States he has limited opportunities to speak Mandarin with his family. Occasionally he is able to use his L1 with his family members over the phone or with Skype. However, he does have several friends that speak Mandarin in Nashville. This is his main source of practice with his L1. Through these resources Joey is able to communicate in his L1 in social settings, over the phone, and through text messages. Although the primary use of Joey's L1 in the United States is informal, he has had a formal education in Mandarin. He has the ability to use his native language in both academic and professional settings fluently. Joey is also fluent enough in both languages that he can easily switch between the two. During his time at Vanderbilt, he has been able to increase his knowledge of English while maintaining his fluency in Mandarin.

Joey has studied two second languages. He began to study Japanese during his undergraduate college career because of two reasons: it improved his chances of getting a job in Japan and he enjoys Japanese cartoons. These goals increased his motivation to learn Japanese;

however, after focusing on the English language, he claims to have lost the majority of his ability to speak Japanese. Although Joey had a clear motivation to learn Japanese, he began to study English as a part of his required education in China. The reward of being able to use Japanese with the cartoons he enjoyed provided him with support throughout his Japanese education. This type of motivator improves students' attitudes towards learning a language which increases the students' learning. Because he did not have the same type of motivation when learning English, there were slight differences in how quickly he was able to learn it.

Joey began learning English when he was twelve years-old because it was the only foreign language class available to him in middle school. His teachers at these levels were non-native speakers of English. In fact, they all had Mandarin as their native language. They also taught Joey with a traditional Chinese class structure. This instruction as focused on lecture and memorizing long vocabulary lists. Not much emphasis was put on pronunciation or fluency. It was geared more towards writing and accuracy. When he moved up to high school he attended a foreign language school; however, at this point it was too late for him to switch to another language. These classes were taught in a similar way to his previous English classes. Initially, Joey found it difficult to learn English which he now attributes to his dislike of the subject and the way the instructors taught him. Looking at his reasoning behind taking English, I think that his motivation to learn English was not very high. Choice alone can have a major impact on a student's motivation to learn. This lack of choice paired with the requirements of language education did not provide Joey with a strong foundation for motivation.

As he moved into the higher levels of English classes, he had native English speakers as his teachers that were able to make the language more relatable for him. They added a key piece of instruction that differed greatly from his previous teachers. This new feature was discussion. The learning of English changed from a focal point of written accuracy and vocabulary to oral language with an emphasis on effective communication. In his new classes students were encouraged to speak to one another in English. Joey's instructor also was able to teach the class almost completely in English. Through these changes Joey began to develop motivation to learn English that changed his perspective on the language. This new interest paired with the possibility of English allowing him to get a better job provided Joey with the motivation to major in English at the University of Shanghai in China.

Although motivation seemed to spark much of Joey's difficulties with learning English, there are other factors that may have influenced the ease to which he was able to learn this new language. First, we must look at the distance between the language families of English and Mandarin Chinese. Mandarin is one of the many dialects of Chinese. The Chinese language is a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family along with Burmese, Karen, and Tibetan. This family makes up 22% of all language users. The English language is a member of an entirely separate language family. It is a part of the Indo-European language family. Within this language family, English is a part of the Germanic language group along with languages like Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, German, Yiddish, and Dutch. English and Mandarin stem from vastly different languages and do not have many cognates. Because these languages are so distant from one another, learning one while having the other as a native language is very

difficult. If these languages would have been in the same language family or group, they would have been easier to learn. This challenge could have affected the way that Joey learned English.

There are several other factors that make learning English as a native Mandarin Chinese speaker. According to Phil Shoebottom's(2014) Introduction to Language Differences webpage, "Chinese does not have an alphabet but uses a logographic system for its written language."(Shoebottom, 2014) This system uses symbols that represent various words. This is very different than English which uses an alphabet containing letters that are combined to create a name for the meaning of the word. This alone provides a great challenge for any learner of English with an L1 of Mandarin.

Part 2:Learner's oral and written language abilities

Phonology

The distance between Mandarin and English language families causes challenges beyond the alphabet. The sounds that the speakers of each language use while speaking differ as well. By looking at the phonology of a language we can identify the specific sounds produced with certain phoneme combinations. There are many debates within the education world about how phonology is linked to reading and writing in the first language. Although the same can be argued for learning a new phonetic system in second language acquisition, many people believe that second language learners can use their knowledge of their first language's phonology to aid

in their acquisition of the new phonological system. However, the farther apart the L1 and the L2 are, the more difficult this connection will be.

As stated in chapter four of *Essential Linguistics*, “Each Language uses a different inventory of sounds. As a result, some phonemes from one language may be identical to those in another language, and some may be different.” (Freeman, 2004, p.92) Similarities may be used as a crutch when learning a second language, but the differences may cause major challenges. The different phonemes produced when we speak are formed by the muscles and movements within our mouths. Just like learning a new dance or sport, our muscles must be trained to move in specific ways repeatedly to produce the same sounds. Students of a new language may also have difficulties deciphering different phonemes than they are used to. For example, it is not uncommon for English language learners to confuse the vowel sounds used in standard English.

The phonetic systems used in Mandarin are very different than the one used in English. English has multiple sounds for each vowel. These sounds can be manipulated based on the consonants or other vowels around them. In Mandarin, tone is a major factor to meaning. This requires speakers of Mandarin to be very purposeful with the sounds they produce when speaking. In addition to these challenges, Mandarin does not have as many vowel sounds as English does. And, in Mandarin every vowel sound must be paired with a consonant. However, there are not many multiple syllabic words in Mandarin. These differences cause many Mandarin speaking learners of English to struggle with using the correct phonology in English.

Joey has had a substantial amount of instruction and practice in pronouncing the English language properly. Through his traditional Chinese style of instruction, he was drilled on pronunciation. He has very few problems with the phonology of his oral language. However, there are a few common mistakes that he makes on occasion. One of the phonetics that gave Joey trouble have to do with phoneme blending. While listening to the recording of the language sample I collected, I noticed that he had difficulty when pronouncing words spelled with -ng. Instead of pronouncing words like language, slang, or young with the [ŋ] sound, he used [n]. For example the word slang[slæŋ] was pronounced [slæn]. This mistake was made about 80% of the time -ng words were used and was the only semi-consistent error with blending.

Joey's major issue with phonology is that he mixes his vowel sounds. This could be an issue related to the fact that Mandarin does not have as many vowel sounds. As mentioned above, if there aren't as many vowel sounds second language learners may have difficulties differentiating between vowel sounds. Here is a chart of the common vowel mistakes that Joey made:

English Spelling	Phonetic Spelling	How Joey Pronounced the Word
Idioms	[Idims]	[idims]
Read	[Jid]	[JeId]
Week	[wik]	[wIk]
Bedroom	[bɛdJum]	[bædJum]
Another	[ænʌðJ]	[ænæðJ]
Bus	[bUs]	[bæs]

After reviewing this data I found a few common mistakes. The sound [I] and [i] are often mixed up. This could be a problem deciphering between the voiced and voiceless because [I] and [i] are both high front monophthongs. However, [I] is tense and [i] is lax. Although this was detected, it

can also be noted that there are problems switching between the front, middle, and back of the mouth to pronounce phonemes. [æ], [ʌ], and [ʊ] are confused for similar vowel sounds. This could determine that there is overall confusion with forming these phonemes within the mouth of the speaker. However, because there is not one common mistake, there is no specific problem that Joey has.

Joey also had problems pronouncing every phoneme within a word. This could be connected to the fact that Mandarin does not have many multi-syllabic words. He frequently left out a phoneme in the middle of the word. Occasionally he dropped the phoneme at the end or the beginning of a word. Here is a chart of these types of mistakes and a few other from his oral language use:

English Spelling	Phonetic Spelling	How Joey Pronounced the Word
Find	[fɑɪnd]	[fɑɪnt]
Tone	[tʊn]	[tʊ]
Reasons	[risʌns]	[risʌn]
Cartoon	[kɔɹtʊn]	[kɔtʊn]
Kind	[kɑɪnd]	[kɑɪn]
School	[skul]	[sku]
South	[saʊθ]	[θaʊθ]

When I look at this chart I see a few common mistakes. The consonant sounds being left out, avoided, or mistaken for all seem to be phonemes articulated in the alveolar. [d], [t], [n], [s], and [l] are all articulated in the alveolar. There does seem to be a pattern with phonemes that are voiced being left out. [d], [l], and [ɹ] at the end or the middle of a word is left out. All of these three phonemes are voiced. Another pattern that can be detected is that the consonants that are

being substituted seem to have some connections. For example, [s] and [θ] are both voiceless fricatives. And, [t] and [d] are both alveolar stops. A simple mispronunciation could be the cause of the problems. But, the pattern suggests that there is some proficiency.

When I think back on my participant's experience in learning his second language, I can point out a few things that may have led to this phoneme confusion. My initial thought is that his native language doesn't have a phonetically similar phoneme. (Freeman, 2004, p.83) As discussed earlier there are many differences between the phonology of Mandarin and English. A separate reason why Joey may have had difficulties with the acquisition of English phonology could be the difference in instruction he received by his teachers who spoke Chinese as their first language and his teachers who spoke English as their first language. He discussed the difference in their instruction and how it affected his language acquisition. He said: "I think that the native English-speaker teacher had conducted more communicative language teaching...their impartation of the culture deeply embedded in the English language, their beautiful pronunciations and friendly classroom learning environment." The initial classes, taught by naive Chinese speakers, were in the grammar-translation method of teaching; focusing on reading and writing. Where his classes that were taught by native English speakers focused more on conversation. This increased his motivation to use English and it promoted better communication skills. However, this type of instruction wasn't administered to Joey until he was in college. The delayed use of this type of instruction could be the cause of many of this phonological problems.

Morphology:

Just as we look to the phoneme as the smallest unit of sound in a word in phonology, we look to the morpheme as the smallest unit of meaning in morphology. In the book, *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*, morphology is described as “mental grammar.”(The Ohio State University, 2011, p.148) As native speakers we grow up using a language and understanding which words can be changed by adding suffixes and other affixes and those that cannot. We never apply specific grammar book rules to these words because they are a part of our language development. English learners often struggle with this because it is a difficult thing to explain on paper. When looking at the rules of the morphographic system you must look at both the form, “what the word sounds like when spoken”, and the meaning. (The Ohio State University, 2011, p.149) From there we decipher if words can undergo derivation and inflection. Both of these change the words we have stored in our lexicon but in different ways. Derivation adds affixes to a stem to change its lexical category. Inflection adds affixes to a stem to change the form of the word. Deciphering between these two things are the main reason why English learners have trouble.

Just like language families, there are morphological types of languages. The farther apart an English learner’s L1’s morphological type is from English, the more confusion that morphology will cause. Mandarin Chinese is considered to be an analytic language. It is “made up of sequences of free morphemes- each word consists of a single morpheme, used by itself with meaning and function intact”(The Ohio State University, 2011, p.165) On the other hand,

English is one of the three synthetic languages. It is a fusional language because of the way that “words are formed by adding bound morphemes to stems... the affixes may not be easy to separate from the stem.” (The Ohio State University, 2011, p.167) These differences cause many problems for native Mandarin speakers learning English, like Joey.

Unlike phonology, I can understand Joey’s knowledge of morphology through his written language and his oral language. First, I will look into his written language. Writing is a major part of many cultures and is dependent on language. There is a specific purpose to all aspects of writing which leads to the fact that there is always a system for writing. Joey speaks and writes in Mandarin. Written Mandarin is considered to be a part of John Mouton’s “orthographies” class of writing system due to its complex and diverse nature. In addition, written Mandarin is classified as a morphographic system because of its dependence on meaning. The written symbol for a word in written Mandarin does not tell us anything about the way that it is pronounced.

According to *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics* (2011), it did not take long for this system of only representing words or phrases by their meaning to fall short of its uses. Because of this, the rebus principle was developed and is used in Mandarin. Some words were pronounced the same and thus used the same written symbol even though they mean two different things. The combination of phonetic and semantic content played a major role in the development of written Mandarin. (The Ohio State University, 2011, 15.2) In addition to the traditional symbols used in written Mandarin, Mandarin writers are familiar with the pīnyīn. The pīnyīn is the roman system of pronouncing written Mandarin. This system was developed in the Soviet Union by Chinese immigrants in 1931. Currently the pīnyīn is “used for road signs, maps,

brand names, computer input, Chinese Braille, telegrams, semaphore, and for many other purposes.” (Ager, 2014) An interesting observation I noted when looking at Joeys handwriting in English is that he adds many sharp points and angles with the formation of his letters. Many of his ‘f’s and ‘t’s have added “hats” or points to them. I believe that this is an influence from his Chinese orthography.

Despite the difference in morphology between Mandarin and English, Joey demonstrates mastery of English morphology in his writing. He is able to correctly spell difficult words like ‘shopping’, ‘daughter, and ‘naughty’. Each of these words have unique spellings that some native English speakers have trouble spelling. The double ‘p’ in the word ‘shopping’ is a rule brought on by pronunciation. It is something that native English speakers may not have been directly taught. The doubling of some consonants are caused by the other vowels and consonants around them. A similar rule is followed when using the stem ‘aught’ in words. It creates a unique vowel sound that is represented by this spelling due to the other phonemes around it. These unique spellings are often referred to as ‘oddball words. I believe that Joey has mastery of these words because of the traditional Chinese way of teaching used when he first learned English. The long lists of words that Joey learned in his English classes were focused on accurately spelling. So, these correct spellings could be a sign of memorization as opposed to understanding a concept.

However, Joey does show an understanding of the basic morphological conventions of the fusional language, English. He accurately placed both derivational and inflectional endings to many of his written language. Here is a chart of the correctly spelled English words with affixes:

Correctly Spelled Inflectional Affixes	Function	Affix Used	Attached to the Free Morpheme...	Free/Bound Morpheme (Affix)
Talked	Past Tense	-ed	Talk (verb)	Bound
Looked	Past Tense	-ed	Look (verb)	Bound

Correctly Spelled Inflectional Affixes	Function	Affix Used	Attached to the Free Morpheme...	Free/Bound Morpheme (Affix)
Decided	Past Tense	-ed	Decide (verb)	Bound
Reached	Past Tense	-ed	Reach (verb)	Bound
Shopping	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Shop (verb)	Bound
Pushing	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Push (verb)	Bound
Talking	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Talk (verb)	Bound
Having	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Have (verb)	Bound
Paying	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Pay (verb)	Bound
Playing	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Play (verb)	Bound

Correctly Spelled Derivational Affixes	Function	Affix Used	Attached to the Free Morpheme...	Free/Bound Morpheme (Affix)
Happily	Adverb	-ly	Happy (adjective)	Bound
Secretly	Adverb	-ly	Secret (noun/ adjective)	Bound
Interesting	Adjective	-ing	Interest (noun)	Bound

As noted by the tables above there are many more inflectional affixes used than derivational. This could be a sign of comfort. Joey may have been more comfortable using inflectional affixes than derivational because he has a better understanding of them. Especially because Joey only used the inflectional suffixes ‘-ed’ and ‘-ing’. He also only used the derivational suffixes ‘-ly’ and ‘-ing’. However, it could also be that he just didn’t demonstrate this knowledge with is written sample. It can also be noted that the words I have listed for each category are listed in the order that they appeared on the page. It seems as though once he used one affix, he was able to replicate it several times before switching to another. For example he used the inflectional ending

“-ed” to represent the past tense for the first part of his written sample but then switched to using the inflectional affix of “-ing” to represent the progressive aspect for the rest of the writing sample. None of the affixes used in his writing sample were used incorrectly. However, there was one missing inflectional suffix in his writing. In one sentence he did not add the suffix “-s” to make the word needs a 3rd person singular present verb. This could be due to his common philological mistake of leaving off the [s] to many of his words.

Similar findings can be noted when looking at Joey’s speaking sample. He told me the same story he used in his written sample in his speaking sample. However he uses significantly less affixes in his oral language.

Correctly Spelled Inflectional Affixes	Function	Affix Used	Attached to the Free Morpheme...	Free/Bound Morpheme (Affix)
Shopping	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Shop (verb)	Bound
Going	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Go (verb)	Bound
Happened	Past Tense	-ed	Happen (verb)	Bound
Carrying	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Carry (verb)	Bound
Pushing	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Push (verb)	Bound
Reached	Past Tense	-ed	Reach (verb)	Bound
Talking	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Talk (verb)	Bound
Paying	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Pay (verb)	Bound
Walking	Progressive Aspect	-ing	Walk (verb)	Bound

Correctly Spelled Derivational Affixes	Function	Affix Used	Attached to the Free Morpheme...	Free/Bound Morpheme (Affix)
Happily	Adverb	-ly	Happy (adjective)	Bound

Opposite to the pattern of using the past tense function of the progressive aspect, and past tense inflectional suffixes, in Joeys speech he uses them in a more natural pattern. This could be because he could not read back to what he said before. He is speaking more freely. Additionally, he did not have the chance to really think it through before putting it out on paper. He also only used one derivational affix. This further supports my theory that Joey is uncomfortable using the derivational affixes. There were no improperly placed affixes but it seems as though he is using language that allows him to avoid the use of affixes.

Another aspect of both Joey's writing and oral language use that may be causing him some trouble is his use of verb tense. Joey consistently uses the wrong tense for the word 'find'. In his oral sample he says "then when he checked his watch he find wow! He's maybe three minutes or an hour late." Here he is using the verb 'to find' in the present tense, 'find'. However, he needed to use it as a past tense verb 'found'. The same error was made in his writing. He wrote "Sara, the little naughty girl, finally find a way to draw her mother's attention" using the word 'find' instead of 'found' again. These are morphological errors having to do with the inflectional changes to a word.

Joey's overall understanding of the morphology of English seems to be fairly good. Through both oral and written samples, I would conclude that Joey has a firm grasp of the use of inflectional suffixes that change the tense of verbs but not the verbs that we would consider irregular. He has some foundation in using derivational suffixes to create adverbs. However, he is lacking in understanding of the use of prefixes and other affixes for more complex phrases. He has done a good job of bridging the gap between his native morphological type of language and that

of English. I believe that this is mainly due to the type of the strict, accuracy-focused instruction he received when beginning his study of English.

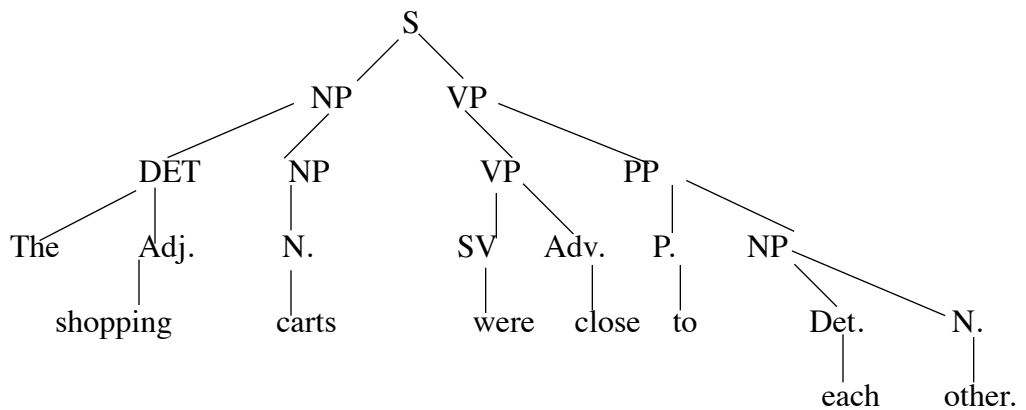
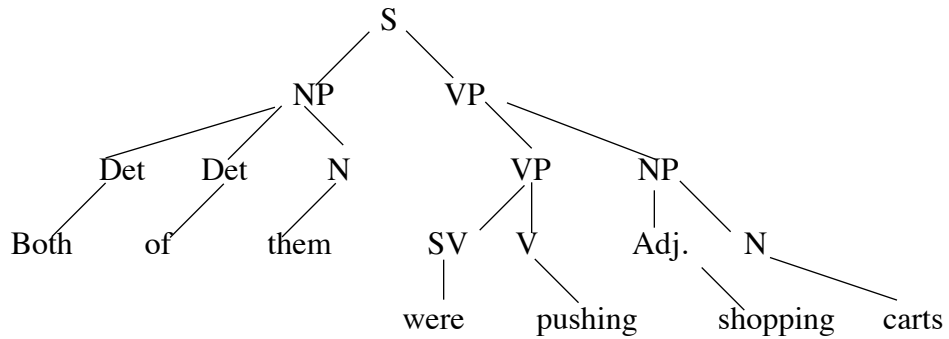
Syntax:

When looking at syntax, we are looking at the phrases or sentences in the natural stream of our speech patterns. For many languages the way that these phrases or sentences are put together change the meaning that they represent. Every language has a set of rules that determine whether or not a unit of speech (a phrase or sentence) is grammatical or ungrammatical. A unit that is considered grammatical will be accepted by the social language as an appropriate way to express ideas. The opposite is considered ungrammatical. We look at these phrase structure rules using Tree Diagrams. These diagrams take a sentence and break it down into phrases which are then broken into various parts of speech. From these we can see the syntactical conventions of a language. (The Ohio State University, 2011, chapter 5)

It is also very important to note that there are different rules that we follow when speaking compared to writing. For example, we often use partial sentences or refer to things incompletely and vaguely. Joey has a firm grasp of both of these sets of rules. However, he occasionally slips in both his writing and his speaking. In his writing, Joey demonstrates mastery of subject-verb agreement as well as the basic structure of the sentence. These sentences from his writing sample show this proficiency:

“Both of them were pushing shopping carts. The shopping carts were close to each other.”

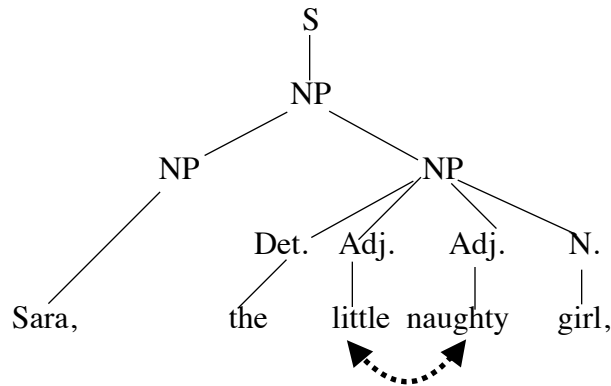
These sentences were written following the phrase structure rules demonstrated through these phase structure trees:



Joey was able to capture noun phrases, verb phrases, and prepositional phrases correctly using the phrase structure rules in his writing. The word ‘carts’ was followed by the verb ‘were’ instead of ‘was’ because he understood that the inflectional ending ‘-s’ made it plural. The rest of the sentence follows the general phrase structure rules by placing the adjective, determiners, and adverbs in the correct order.

The majority of Joey’s syntax is correctly used in his writing. However, there is one sentence that gives me trouble. The sentence, “Sara, the little naughty girl, finally find a way to

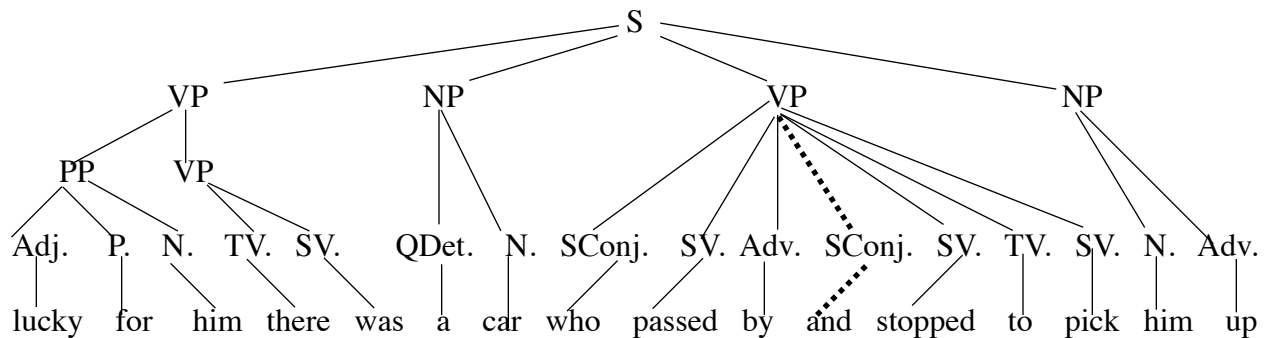
draw her mother’s attention by playing a trick on her mom’s friend”, has some confusing placement of adjectives.



As shown by the dotted arrows these two adjectives should have been placed in opposite order. This is a common mistake for English learners so it is not surprising that Joey is confusing this placement. However, these are little mistakes and do not completely interrupt the meaning that he is trying to express.

Joey also demonstrated some proficiency in phase structure in his oral language.

However, there were several sentences with some parts missing. For example the sentence, “lucky for him there was a car who passed by stopped to pick him up”, is missing the word ‘that’.



The addition of the subordinate conjunction allowed for the sentence to be grammatically correct. Things like this were commonly missed in Joey's oral language. However, just as in his written language use, the meaning he was trying to express was not hindered.

Joey's use of syntax had few errors in both his oral and written language. Although there were some mistakes, his syntax cannot be considered to be poor. I believe that his instruction through conversation with his native English speaking professors in college helped him improve his syntactical use. By practicing the language in a conversational way and by hearing others converse in English he was able to develop a firm understanding of the English Syntactical system.

Semantics & Pragmatics:

When we look at semantics and pragmatics we are focused on the meaning that our words and phrases are conveying. Semantics, however, deals with the specific word meanings independent from the word's context. When we look at semantics we look at hyponymy, synonymy, and antonymy. On the other hand, pragmatics is very context dependent. Pragmatics is the view of looking at meaning through the context. Here we look at the linguistic, situational, social, and epistemic context of where the language we are analyzing is coming from. And, just like the other parts of language looked at earlier in this case study, the semantics and pragmatics of the English language can be very difficult for English learners to grasp and cause many misunderstandings. (The Ohio State University, 2011)

Joey seems to have a good understanding of both semantics and pragmatics in both his written and oral language. In his written language Joey has crafted sentences using words as various parts of speech. For example, he uses the word ‘shopping’ to describe the action of going shopping but he also uses ‘shopping’ as an adjective in the phrase ‘shopping carts’. This understanding is semantic. He also demonstrates mastery of hyponymy when he writes the phrase ‘plays a game’ followed later on in the story to describe the same thing by the phrase ‘plays a trick.’ He was able to change his vocabulary without changing the meaning of his phrase. He also demonstrates mastery of semantics using synonymy in his oral language. He first describes a set of pictures by saying “he can’t find something” and then when he retells the story he describes the person to have “lost something”. This shows that he can correctly change vocabulary to talk about the same thing without changing the meaning in his oral language.

Although most of the time Joey’s use of pragmatics is conventional, he occasionally slips by combining idioms and phrases he has seen before in an incorrect way. For example, in his written sample Joey writes “ no matter under what circumstance”. Clearly he has heard, and probably used, the phrase “under any circumstance” or “no matter what” to express the meaning that something is always done. Here Joey is flouting the maxim of manner and quantity by combining both phrases. This causes his message to be obscure and wordy. He also misuses some English phrases when he writes “draw her mother’s attention by playing a trick on her.” In English the phrase “draw attention” is typically used when wanting to redirect someones attention to a concrete thing. It is sometimes used by presenters when they are talking about a specific topic. However, the way that Joey uses the phrase by talking about what the daughter did to receive attention is incorrect. This is dependent on the linguistic and social context of which it

is being used. In both written and oral language, Joey correctly uses and understands deictic or placeholder words. When discussing and writing about situations we viewed in pictures, he was able to understand what I meant when I referred to him or there even without pointing. He also correctly used them in his stories. He knew when it was appropriate to refer to the characters as him, her, she, or he and when he needed to address them by name. This is a further demonstration of Joey's proficiency in pragmatics

Joey's use of semantics and pragmatics are conventional with a few errors. I believe that his experiences studying in the United States and his English instruction by his native English speaking professors have allowed him to develop a strong background in semantics and a fairly solid one in pragmatics. Although he occasionally had some slips, Joey can effectively communicate in English.

Part 3: Learner's Second Language Acquisition

Second Language Acquisition Theoretical Framework:

Early Education

Joey began learning English early in his educational career. As mentioned before, he began learning English as a requirement when he was twelve years-old. The instruction that Joey received when he first began learning English was traditional to other language instruction methods in China. This method proved to make Joey a member of slow sequential bilingualism as he was highly unmotivated to learn English. He described how his teacher rarely spoke

English to the class and knew English as a second language himself. He had his students work on grammar-translation drills that sharpened their reading and writing skills. This practice is called the grammar-translation method and his considered to be a historical method of teaching. However, it is still very common for the instruction of English in many countries.

Traditionally, this method was used in teaching languages like Latin and Ancient Greek because they are no longer spoken. These ‘dead’ languages were only used for translating ancient texts into modern languages. These languages are still taught in this way because there is no use for communication or listening skills as they are not spoken. However, many teachers feel that this method is one that allows them to best introduce a new language’s grammatical rules so that students can understand and produce literary language. Joey’s teacher, like many other grammar-translation practitioners, focused on accuracy instead of fluency and constantly corrected students’ errors. The students worked individually to improve on their translation skills instead of in groups to work on conversational skills. Joey’s teachers took this approach through high school and built the solid foundational knowledge of English that Joey still uses today.

Higher Education

When Joey began his higher education at a university in Shanghai, he sought a degree in English language. There he experienced a drastic change in his style of instruction. His instructors were now native speakers of English from the United States. In these classes, Joey’s instructors began teaching using a method similar to the communicative competence model developed by Dell Hymes in 1966. His instructors used the already well developed grammatical competencies of their students to build on their sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic

competencies. The major change from Joey's previous instruction was the focus on fluency and communicative skills. His instructor mainly improved upon the sociolinguistic competencies as she focused on students communicating through class discussions regularly. This allowed the students to develop an understanding of the sociocultural customs of the English language and how to use them in both academic and social settings. This practice of using the language as instruction allowed Joey and his classmates to developed a more well-rounded knowledge of the English language. It also increased Joey's motivation to learn English and encouraged him to teach English himself.

Stage of Second Language Acquisition:

Now that Joey has been living in the United States for over a year, receiving instruction in English and using English in his everyday life, his stage of second language acquisition has increased in many areas. By taking a careful look at the the Tennessee English Proficiency levels along with the Lightbown and Spada learner characteristics, I was able to find an overview of Joey's stage of second language acquisition in English. By finishing this stage I will be able to develop instructional implications based on a theory of second language acquisition that will best serve Joey in his English abilities.

Joey's stage of second langue acquisition must be looked at as two separate sets of skills: receptive skills and productive skills. Furthermore, each of those should be divided between literacy skills and communicative skills. Joey's grammar-translation instruction sharpened his reading and writing skills and left his listening and speaking skills less developed. This

differentiation has caused Joey to land at a few different stages in in his English language acquisition.

Receptive Skills

First, we should look at the receptive skills that Joey has in the English language. Joey's reading skills prospered through his early education. His teachers taught him how to directly translate what he reads in English into Mandarin. Because of this and his experience at Vanderbilt University, I would say that Joey is a level five or proficient in his reading of English texts. He is able to comprehend complex, academic language that he is required to read for his courses. He is also able to read and understand texts that cover a variety of topics. He is able to understand "complicated literary and academic texts *that* may require *the* use of a dictionary when the language and context are unfamiliar." (Tennessee Department of Education) Over all his reading skills are very developed and do not cause him many problems.

The second receptive skill for second language acquisition is listening. Joey's listening skills developed later in his education. His initial instruction focused on reading and writing and did not devote much time to listening skills. However, this communicative skill was improved in Joey's higher education with his American teachers. Today, Joey is at a level four or intermediate in his listening skills. He is able to understand every day language and did not have any troubles understanding me when we worked together earlier this semester. He is able to comprehend English as it is spoken but often resorts to unpacking instead of fine-tuning the language. His major set backs in this area are the slang terms or idiomatic expressions. In his language sample, you can see me explaining a few of my expressions, like hitchhiking, while we discussed our

tasks. Despite this set back he does understand academic language because he is attending graduate level courses at Vanderbilt University. However, I would not label him as proficient in listening because of his troubles with idioms and slang. After a few more years in the United States, I would expect that he would move into the proficient level five.

Productive Skills

As a whole Joey seems to struggle with his productive language skills more than his receptive skills. However, his writing skills do seem to be higher than his speaking skills. Joey's formal education using the grammar-translation method enhanced his writing abilities in English. Through the samples that he provided for me, I was able to determine that his level of writing is five or proficient. He is able to write for many purposes including both academic texts and communicative texts (i.e. email and text messages). He is also very proficient in his use of the past tense. His writing sample has very few errors and shows that he has a multitude of ways to express the past tense. He uses the ending '-ed' as well as using the progressive (i.e. 'was going'). In addition, he is able to properly use possessive determiners in his writing as well. These skills were a priority for him in his early education as well as his education now making them easier for him to perform.

His speaking skills seem to be his weakest ability. Although he is able to understand what others are saying to him, his production of speech seems to be slightly flawed. He is able to communicate in a variety of settings as demonstrated in my language sample and his involvement in his course work. However, he often has issues with American idioms and slang. He does not know how to properly express them and has troubles keeping up with his American

peers. However, his questioning is well developed and he is able to explain things that happened in the past in a dynamic way. He also has command of the use of direct and indirect object pronouns. Over all his speaking skills are a level four or intermediate.

Summary

Joey's skills in reading, listening, writing, and speaking varied but all stayed between levels four and five. His reading and writing skills were proficient and level five because of his intensive grammar-translation education. However, his listening and speaking were level four or intermediate because of the later acquisition of these abilities. As a whole, I would say that Joey is between intermediate and proficient in his acquisition of English as his second language.

Instructional Plan:

Joey's motivation to learn English is his strongest attribute when it comes to second language acquisition. He is highly motivated to work with his American peers and to learn English in a way that will best serve his Chinese students wanting to learn English from him. This was a major change from his initial feelings towards the English language but will be the factor that drives him the most. He also has several strengths in other areas. His knowledge of English grammar and his strengths in morphology and syntax will provide his future learning with a solid foundation that will support growth.

He is able to understand complex ideas in English which will also assist him in his subsequent learning. His use of morphology is also very strong. He can correctly spell words with irregular or complex spelling patterns as well as add any affixes to enhance the words he is using in both his speech and his writing. He also seems to have mastery of syntax despite a few minor errors. And, his pragmatics and semantics are near proficiency. These things paired with Joey's motivation to learn English will support his future learning.

There are a few things that Joey needs to improve to be fully proficient in English. Phonology is one of Joey's major setbacks. He consistently confuses his vowel sounds when speaking. As mentioned above, his first language, Mandarin, often causes interference in this area of second language acquisition. Another problem that Joey has with phonology is fully pronouncing every syllable in each word. These two issues may cause troubles for his future students. If his students do not hear him pronouncing every syllable or confusing vowel sounds, they may be led to a misunderstanding of the word and how to spell it. This problem with phonology is typically attributed to accent. In most cases, I would leave this alone and work on other areas of the English language. However, because it is something that may affect his career, I think that it is important for Joey to try to master it.

The final aspect of the English language that Joey needs to work on is his use of idioms and slang. Although he is quickly learning new terms and phrases while living here in the United States, he still struggles to keep up with his American friends and colleagues when they use idiomatic expressions. This is a common issue for English language learners but is something that can be improved upon with practice.

Despite these struggles, Joey has many strengths that allow him to communicate effectively. All of these things combined lead me to believe that the sociocultural theory of second language acquisition is the best theory to improve Joey's English language acquisition. His motivation to learn will push him to constantly learn through the social interactions described by the sociocultural theory of second language acquisition. I believe that he would best benefit from this type of instruction because the things that he is having problems with (idioms, slang, and pronunciation) are best improved through practice. Joey also described one event where he was in a social situation and was not afraid to ask questions about the English language. This attitude would provide for an uninhibited mediation of his language use through social interactions. And, because he has already had such strong grammar instruction, the lack of focus on formal structures of language will not affect his development.

The classroom I foresee Joey thriving in is set up with large tables and other arrangements that promote collaboration and conversation. This type of classroom would provide students, like Joey, with an atmosphere that inspires students to interact socially. I would set up centers that have things like board games, current events discussions, and collaborative creative art projects. These things would encourage students to work together and have meaningful conversations. Another element I would include in Joey's classroom, is Skype sessions with other students learning English or experts on various fields. This would surround the students in the classroom with people using the English language in a multitude of ways.

I would also provide several opportunities to learn outside of the classroom. Because Joey is learning his second language, English, in America; it would be useful to provide him and

other students like him with possibilities to learn in the surrounding community. I would have students do every day things, like going to the grocery store together, attending sports events, visiting local museums, and take part in campus organization meetings that are centered around discussion. And, because Joey's motivation to learn Japanese was inspired by his interest in the things he was learning Japanese for, I would like to provide him with a variety of options to use his English so that he could choose which ones to participate in. This would add to his already large motivation to learn English. All of these things would expose Joey to new idioms and slang that he would be able to self-mediate into his language acquisition. They also force him to use his language. Practicing his pronunciation will improve upon his phonology; thus making him proficient in the English language.

Implications of this Learning on my Future Work with English Learners:

This project opened my eyes to a different side of teaching English language learners. I had traditionally thought of myself as teaching Spanish speaking children in an elementary school setting. When I received my participants information, I was nervous and anxious to see how my case study would go. As the weeks went by and I met with my participant to gather his language sample, I was pleasantly surprised to notice that our world is full of English learners that have unique backgrounds. I learned a lot about English learners just in the first few meetings I had with Joey.

One of the main things that I learned while working on this case study and critically looking at the topics we covered in class was that there is no set point when someone knows a

language. Joey, for example, knows more about English grammar than I do. However, things like pronunciation and idiomatic expressions cause him troubles. These are things that I have been able to do since high school. This new perspective has inspired me to take a wider view of my possibilities as a teacher of English learners.

Many of my assumptions about teaching English as a second language were also incorrect coming into this case study. I honestly believed that students would automatically have the motivation to learn and that their first language would harm or interfere with their acquisition of a second language. Now, I have learned that students are motivated by a variety of things that are unique to them. This motivation and their knowledge of their first language can be curtail to learning a second language. The first language can provide support for some of the structures and vocabulary for the second language. Finally, I learned that as a whole teaching a second language is very different than teaching a first language.

Coming away from this project, I have several changes that I would like to make to my teaching style. I plan to work in a classroom with English learners and hope that my teaching will enhance students' language acquisition. First, I would like to have a deep understanding of the conventions and language family of each of the first languages spoken in my classroom. This would require me to do research outside of the school day to try to better understand where my students are coming from. I would also like to find resources in the school community that would be willing to help me include all of my students' first languages in our classroom. This knowledge and support will help my students to use their first language as scaffolding in their acquisition of English.

Another thing that I would like to incorporate into my teaching is a balanced approach of second language acquisition theories. When I first researched second language acquisition theories, I found myself being biased towards the theories that I had the most experience with. Through writing this case study and analyzing Joey's background, I realized that each student has their own unique level of English abilities. Each of these abilities require different approaches. For example, Joey's current stage and abilities lead me to believe the the sociocultural theory is best for him. However, I recognize that this theory may not be the best theory for a learner who is just beginning to learn the language. Studying my students and modifying my lessons will be the best way for me to support each of my students second language acquisition.

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Appendix A

Language Sample Transcript

EDUC 3550

Participant Pseudonym: Joey

August 20th, 2014

(20:30) Question Task and Retell Portion of the Sample:

A: I am going to show you a set of pictures and first I want you to ask me some questions about what you see and then I can tell you about it. Ok?

J: mmhmm O.K.

A: And, here it is.

(21:12)

J: I don't know. Like mm. I think this picture is about somebody got up late and he checked his clock and thought wow, he is late. And he is rushing to. I don't know my question is I don't quite understand this. In this picture. This picture.

A: O.K.

J: I think.

A: So you were right about this picture. I do think that he woke up late.

J: He woke up late and he was because he woke up late so he was trying to find something.

A: Right

J: he need but he obviously he cant find the thing he wants. And then he was late for the bus.

A: For the bus. mmhmm.

J: So. Oh. And then he called his friend to pick him up.

A: O.K.

J: But, on that day it snow heavily. Right?

A: Yeah.

J: So his friend arrived but with a lot of snow on his car. Maybe the road was blocked due to the heavy snow. And the friend take out a hoe. I think. Something to clear, clean the snow so he can drive.

A: And, I don't know if they do this in China or not but they do Hitchhiking. Have you heard of that? (*Put thumb in the air*)

J: Oh this (*puts thumb up in the air*) is hitchhiking? Oh.

A: So I think maybe he is hitchhiking because he has his thumb up. But calling a friend is a good idea too.

J: Oh

A: It looks like it could have been that as well. So he could have been waving to his friend.

J: Waving to his friend. But this is. We don't have this in China.

A: Yeah, So you just put your thumb up, out. And that means anyone can. Can someone stop and pick me up. Or something like that.

J: But really I think that its very dangerous to do.

A: It is dangerous but I know people who have done it.

J: Just do this if you are in the middle of nowhere and you got lost. You just. Huh.

A: On a lot of American highways you will see people stopped on the side.

(23:13)

A: Ok. So can you. Oh you kind of already retold me the story.

J: You want me to retell again?

A: Sure! Just incase.

J: O.K. I think let's name this guy Tom. I think Tom. Maybe he was drunk last night he partied so he woke up very late. And, then when he checked his watch he find wow! He's maybe three minutes or an hour late. So he just got up very quickly and but he kind of lost something. Maybe he was looking for his phone. Cell phone. And then uh on his way to work maybe because he was late. maybe five minutes late so he just missed his bus. He's running up to the bus but the bus just didn't wait for him and then. he decided to hitchhike. So he make a very bold decision like hitchhiking in the snowy day. But lucky for him there was a car who passed by stopped to pick him up. But, there is one problem is that because there's snow very heavily last night so there is a lot of snow on his car and so the driver has to stop and to clean up the snow on the

front of the car and then they can drive away. I think Tom is very appreciative. for the people who give him a ride.

A: Yeah sounds great! Thank you!

(24:50)

A: Now we are going to go onto the third task which is the narrative task. And this one is another series of images or of events. And, Imagine that you saw these pictures and this event and I didn't. So with out me looking at the picture you can tell me what happened.

J: O.K.

(25:20)

J: *Gasp* This is a very funny story. I think maybe for the moms who shopping with a very little baby it could happen. Um Lets. I am going to name this lady um Kate. I think Kate is um very um busy lady. She one day, after her work, she went to a grocery shop. grocery shop. er do some grocery shopping and she happened to met her colleague slash her best friend, um Lucy. And, then Lucy was hap was carrying. was pushing a pushing a car cart and but her with her little young daughter. so they were they were they were at the shelf of the alcohol or no not the alcohol but the the vinegar or soy sauce this shelf and then um they were because they haven't met for a week so they can't wait to talk to each other to do some catch up. And then they didn't notice that the little her daughter, the little baby girl, she was so curios about the soy sauce or vinegar so she reached her hand out to grab a a bottle of vinegar and then she she happened to find that mrs. Kate's handbag is open on another cart which is next to her mom's cart so she just slide her bottle of vinegar into her bag while these two ladies they were so happily talking to each other that they didn't notice that. That the this lady the Kate that have a bottle of vinegar in her bag which could cause her trouble because if she didn't realize there was a a because if in a shopping mall you're not supposed to put the the the commodity or the merchandise into your own personal bag without paying the cash. right? SO I think she might encounter run into trouble by walking out the shopping mall or the the what do you call

A: The grocery store?

J: Yea, the grocery store. The thing will sound, will make a sound when you.

A: Oh yea!

J: didn't pay something. So I think it would be a very very funny story.

A: Very good! Alright thank you!

Appendix B
Written Sample from Participant
 (Annotated by Amanda Saladin)

Kate went grocery shopping on Sunday afternoon. She ran into her good friend Lucy and Lucy's little baby daughter Sara. Kate and Lucy haven't met each other due to their own schedules, so they talked to each other happily and seemed to forget shopping. ~~Both~~ Both of them were pushing a shopping cart, the shopping carts were ~~so~~ close to each other.

During their conversation to catch up, Sara got bored and looked around to find something interesting to do. She reached ~~a~~^{her} hand for the wine bottles on the shelf. She decided to play a little game with Kate. She put the wine bottle into Kate's tote bag ~~without~~ secretly. While Kate and Lucy were still busy talking without Sara's move and impatience noticing.

Kate might get into trouble by ~~not~~ having the wine bottle in her bag without paying ^{for} it. Lucy will also learn a lesson from this incident, which is that as a mom, she needs to pay attention to her baby daughter no matter under what circumstance. Sara, the little naughty girl, finally find ^{↳ found} a way to draw her mother's attention by playing a trick on her mom's friend.

[1] [1]