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## Ethnographic Investigation of Learners' Perceptions in an ESL Program

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## **Ethnographic Investigation of Learners' Perceptions in an ESL Program**

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### **Introduction**

The foreign language classroom has various aspects that would influence a learner's proficiency development. Among these, the teacher-oriented aspect has increasingly gained more empirical attention because of the individual differences associated with it (e.g., Mackey et al., 2010). Although there is no doubt that a language teacher plays an indispensable role as a provider of foreign language input, a learner's perception of teachers' individual differences like their personality and its pedagogical influence, has been scarcely discussed in the field to this date. The current study aimed to draw more general understanding of learners' perception that would possibly account for successful foreign language learning. It is also our hope that the implemented qualitative approach would shed more light on how such perception would influence interaction in the class discussion in the foreign language classroom.

### **Theoretical Background**

A language teacher's individual differences, such as their roles and personality, are definitely significant factors in a learner's proficiency improvement in the foreign language class. This has been investigated theoretically and practically in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (Mackey, Polio, & McDonough, 2004). One reason for the interest in this factor is that, as has been largely accepted, the linguistic input which learners receive will facilitate their language acquisition. That is, it is important for foreign language learners to receive linguistic input that is slightly more advanced than their current proficiency levels (Krashen, 1985).

Based on the above consensus, it is not difficult to assume that in order for foreign language learners to improve their proficiency, the role of the language teacher is essential in the foreign language classroom. This is also because, in general, social speech between a foreign language teacher and their student is believed to facilitate language learning, which eventually helps build an ideal learning community in which language acquisition will more likely take place successfully (Foley, 1991; Lantolf, 2006). In fact, this view is in line with Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1985). That is, when learners feel less anxiety, which is described as a lowered filter, it consequently facilitates successful language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). In other words, the higher filter will likely hinder the successful acquisition of the target language. What is interesting is that, however, only a handful of research has addressed the direct relationship between the teacher's role and personality, and the learner's perception of them in the field to this date.

From a different theoretical view, furthermore, conversational adjustments such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, repetitions, and others that negotiate meaning would facilitate a learner's language learning (Long, 1980, 1981). However, as opposed to the well-accepted view on the importance of such interaction in a foreign language classroom, many concluded that the teacher was the one who usually initiates such meaningful negotiation in a sequence of "initiation," "response," and "feedback" (e.g., Ellis, 1985), which might potentially limit the real communicative interaction possibly attributed to a learner's successful proficiency development (Long, 2006; Schmidt, 1990; Swain, 2005). In other words, when considering the imbalanced relationship between a teacher and students in the classroom, what might have been overlooked in such an approach is the importance of learners' active engagement in the interactions. This is because there is no doubt that learners might have a fear of being seen as challenging to the authority (Pica, 1987). Thus, some claimed that working in a group with other students could be a solution to the above issue because of the frequent mutual interactions within a group of learners (Pica, 1997; Long, 1983).

Specifically, previous research reported that the learners often corrected their

peer's errors within a group without the teacher's instruction (Burton & Samuda, 1980). Other research also found that the learners frequently interacted and produced output within the group as much as their teacher did (Doughty & Pica, 1986). Furthermore, if learners are actively engaging in group activities, their observations of others can also be as beneficial as actively participating (Ellis & He, 1999; Ellis & Heimback, 1997). What is important is whether the language teacher successfully raises the learners' awareness of the target linguistic knowledge and systems (Nation, 2001). At the same time, however, some have pointed out that negotiating meaning is not the only factor that would help build an "acquisition-rich environment" (Foley, 1991); rather, it involves more complicated factors such as the psychological aspect which has lacked in the previous argument (Platt & Brooks, 1994). This may indicate that it is not group work itself but the learning condition of the group that benefits language learners. Nonetheless, after a number of studies investigated on the learners oriented aspect in the current framework, it has become well accepted that the learner's active engagement in such interaction plays an essential factor in establishing such linguistically beneficial learning community (Foley, 1991; Pica, 1997).

Another fundamental aspect associated with language learners in a foreign language classroom is called rapport. In principle, rapport is "the relationship that the students have with the teacher and vice versa" (Harmer, 2007, p. 113). In general, building a positive rapport is a key for the successful language classroom, and whether the teacher can build successful rapport depends on whether the teacher has built sufficient confidence by demonstrating knowledge of the subject as well as interacting with his or her own learners (Harmer, 2007). In other words, the lack of those components in the classroom seriously limits successful teaching of a foreign language. It may be true that it seems rather difficult to define what rapport actually means and how to measure it (Scrivener, 2005); however, many agreed that teachers have to make sure their relationship with their learners remains positive, which provides a huge impact on a learner's proficiency development (Harmer, 2007).

As seen in the previous studies, the interaction in a foreign language classroom

has been the focus of research within the field of SLA; however, whether the learners would value the interaction in an actual language classroom and how the teacher's personality influences the learners' learning in relation to the interaction still remains in question, which is the focus of the current investigation.

### **Ethnographic Research**

The current study is the preliminary investigation to initiate further exploration with regards to two aspects of the interaction in the future: a language teacher's role and personality as well as their learner's perception of them in an actual foreign language classroom. Yet, due to the psychological complexities involved in the investigation of the above two factors in the actual language classroom, the researcher decided to broadly observe the actual classroom in regards to the general guiding question for more clarified research focus. Besides, needs of an ethnographic approach have been increasing in the field in which learners' psychology seems to be involved deeply for language development (Skehan, 1989). For these reasons, it seemed valid to carry out the ethnographic investigation to specify the research focus as the investigation was progressing.

Ethnography is typically implemented in the field of anthropology in which investigators aim to reside within a target community in order to observe its culture, richly describe, and qualitatively analyze many aspects of the community (Dörnyei, 2011). It was hoped that the current method would narrow the number of observed behaviors and would lead to more specific research investigations in the future. Considering the nature of the current research objective, qualitative analysis using instruments such as nonparticipant observation, field notes, and emails as well as structured interviews and questionnaires were chosen, which helps analyze an English as Second Language (ESL) writing class at a middle sized U.S. college for three weeks in 2009. The scripts were transcribed and translated into Japanese.

## **First Observation and Specific Research Inquiry**

Generally speaking, according to the goals of the program stated on the school website, most of the ESL learners aim to get into U.S. colleges. But to get into an undergraduate program, the international students have to pass all levels of the program in general. Considering the environment where they have limited authentic interactions with native speakers in a classroom, it would take a significant amount of time to complete such levels. An alternative way, however, is to perform better on the Testing of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam. Students with sufficient TOEFL scores will be allowed to take undergraduate classes. Thus, obtaining better scores on TOEFL becomes their primary concern. As a result, some learners end up staying more than two years at the ESL program, while others skip the rest of the levels with sufficient TOEFL scores and start the undergraduate program in just a few months. Considering the objectives of the course, it is not surprising that the ESL classes mainly aim to foster students' academic skills effectively to survive in undergraduate classes. In other words, those who are allowed to study at the undergraduate program in college should have clear ideas of academic writing.

To refine the investigation, the class was observed without any specific focus at first. The instructor's name was Dr. Goodwin (pseudonym) whose age was approximately in the mid-50s. According to the field notes, the class was dominantly held in a teacher-centered approach. This was not expected. More specifically, it was assumed that Dr. Goodwin's authority and teacher's persona would be more enthusiastic as a typical American teacher. That is, the class would be filled with more dynamics in class interaction between the instructor and the students and among the students themselves, using more jokes and humor to draw the students' attentions and interests. Instead, she dominated the class by using a teacher-centered approach and focused on her explanations with limited interaction. The students seldom spoke unless the instructor called on them. What was surprising, however, was that nobody seemed unpleasant.

Another point noticed was that the instructor seemed very patient with the

student's behaviors, and her tone sounded a little bit less confident and authoritative. For example, Charlie, a Chinese male, yawned a couple times. Chris, another Chinese male, was dozing off. She did not give any warning. Another example is that Dr. Goodwin could have warned June, a Chinese female, when June did not bring her own textbook. To my surprise, Dr. Goodwin generously gave her permission to let her take photos of her friend's textbook in the middle of the class. Although many of them looked bored and did not seem to be trying to actively participate, the two Japanese students, Erin and Austin, caught our eyes because of their careful attention to the instructor's detailed analysis. Collectively, the initial observation narrowed our focus to what extent the teacher's roles and personality as well as cultural diversity in the class would affect the Japanese ESL students' learning.

Before examining the influence of the foreign language teacher's personality as well as the cultural diversity in the ESL writing class, thorough descriptions of the learning environment as well as the pedagogical structures are necessary. The ESL program in this investigation had two terms in a semester. Within each term, the students practiced two types of essays. The class observed in the second half of Fall 2009 involved students starting to learn about the Cause/Effect argumentative essay. The textbook was specialized for ESL learners and mainly focused on both grammatical exercises and comprehension checks in pre- and post-reading quizzes. The specific focus of the class was generally on hook, conjunctions, and a lot of reading analysis. The class was categorized as an intermediate class out of six writing competency levels. Its duration was 75 minutes, and the class met three times a week from 12:15 to 13:25 on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for four weeks in a regular location. Much of the class involved checking the homework questions.

### **A Teacher and Learners in the ESL Writing Class**

In addition to the course structure, the demographic information would be helpful for a further account of how the teacher's roles and personality might influence the ESL learners. The class had ten students at the time of the first observation: Austin (male,

Japanese), Erin (female, Japanese), Christy and Stephanie (females, Saudi-Arabian), June (female, Chinese), Feng, Chris, Charlie, Anthony (males, Chinese), and Katy (female, Turkish). Their names are all pseudonyms. In total, four different nationalities, five males and five females, and five different native languages blended in the class. The ages ranged from 18 to 22 based on the brief observation. The majority of the learners were from East Asian countries; it is easy to guess how it might affect the instructor's teaching in any aspect.

Generosity and willingness to help others were the first impression of Dr. Goodwin because she was the only person who granted permission to observe the writing class in the ESL program. To describe Dr. Goodwin's personality more, her emails were analyzed. Through a few email exchanges, some lines immediately caught our attention in terms of her personality. In her reply, she wrote:

Excerpt 1

I'm afraid my writing classes are not very good right now, I mean my teaching, not the students, so I really do not think it will be a wonderful opportunity, but, nonetheless, I give you my permission to observe us. (Oct.29)

Excerpt 1 illustrates how humble Dr. Goodwin was, which made us wonder how her personality would impact learners' learning. Furthermore, the emails seemed to imply that we should not expect much from her teaching. In fact, the above excerpt clearly shows her high anxiety and low confidence towards her teaching.

Other emails also corroboratively demonstrate such ineffective rapport as in Excerpt 2 sent immediately after the first observation.

Excerpt 2

My apologies for the quality of the class. I have not 'gotten into my stride' yet this semester. (Oct. 30)

You are welcome to visit my class, but I am afraid my teaching is going to be very poor. I just can't seem to get going this session. (Oct.31)

The emails show her low confident, and she seemed afraid that we would think her teaching was poor. In fact, her teaching style was a mixture of teacher-centered and open-ended discussion, which we assumed later that most students seemed to accept it, especially among the Asian students. From their prospective, it may be natural to accept it when considering their educational background. However, how she had ended up with this style seemed interesting to investigate. That is, generally speaking, most of the classes in U.S. colleges are heavily based on the student-centered approach that is also valued in the Western school systems.

### **Descriptions of Austin and Erin**

Austin was a Japanese male student who was a junior in college in Japan. He was an exchange student and planned to study abroad for two semesters. He usually sat on the end of the middle of the three rows. He seldom spoke up in class unless he was called on by Dr. Goodwin. However, he frequently nodded at her explanations as if he was compensating for the lack of verbal communication, which seemed to be an important communicative strategy to him.

The other interviewee, Erin, was a female exchange student from a Japanese college who planned to study only for a semester. She was a junior majoring in Japanese linguistics. She was very quiet and serious in class. She always sat alone at the end of the table in the first row. She seldom talked in class discussions, which gave us the idea that she must be an introverted person. Yet, Austin shared an interesting story about her direct action towards the ESL instructors. She went to the office to complain that many ESL instructors were not being responsible enough about their students' language progression. One of their teachers gave assignments from different textbooks, but did not go over it afterwards. This made her think that the instructor had no clear purpose in giving assignments. She concluded that the instructor gave the assignments not because they knew what would improve their students' proficiency but because they needed something to fill the class time. This upset Erin so much that she decided to make complaints at the office. The story clearly revealed her serious attitude

toward her language learning: She really cared about what she would learn in the ESL program.

### **Roles of the Writing Teacher in the ESL Writing**

To address the first inquiry of how the teacher's personality and teaching roles would influence the ESL students' learning in the writing class, further interviews were carried out with Austin and Erin. Their replies showed some similarities and differences. The similarities were mainly about what the writing teacher should focus on in their teaching. Specifically, according to the interviews, Austin and Erin thought that the focus in the class should be on grammar and writing style variation. Excerpt 4 reveals Austin's thought.

#### **Excerpt 4**

The teacher's role is a translator who translates the textbook to students. I think what the writing teacher should teach have two things. One is to teach grammar, the other is to teach variations of writing styles. I value more on variations of writing styles. To be able to write better, I need to know more writing conventions and formats. In class, we only focus on learning how to cite others' opinions, identifying topic sentences and hooks, and listening to her lectures. (Nov. 20)

Clearly, Austin was eager to learn more than Dr. Goodwin provided in the class. His answers to the questionnaire also indirectly revealed that he did not like to break writing conventions. Thus, he would only write in the way he was taught and did not like to take risks in terms of writing conventions (Nov. 12). Thus, Austin expected the writing instructor to show more variations in terms of writing styles, conventions, and formats. Excerpt 5 illustrates Erin's reply below.

#### **Excerpt 5**

I expect my teacher to correct every error and mistake in my paper. We as ESL learners make errors without realizing them. I often proofread

my paper and made sure there were no grammatical errors before turning in, but it always turned out with many grammatical errors when the instructor checked it. And I appreciated when she pointed out my every single error. The other thing is that even though I have an idea and careful thoughts, my limited expressions in English are not sufficient to make it more expressive to native speakers. So I need somebody to correct my grammar. (Nov. 23)

Interestingly, as seen in Excerpt 4 and 5, there is a similarity regarding the primary role of the writing instructor in the ESL: Correcting their grammar and providing various ways of expressions. But a different view on Dr. Goodwin's teaching in relation to her personality was clearly revealed in the following.

#### **Erin and Austin's Perception of Dr. Goodwin**

Despite the similar view on the role of Dr. Goodwin, a different perception of her teaching in relation to her personality was revealed.

##### **Excerpt 6**

She forces us to read sample essays and analyze where the hook is in an essay. We have been doing this these days. We don't know whether we are becoming better or not. On the top of that, she does not tell us the purpose of activities at the beginning. So we are kind of lost and less motivated to follow her. Besides, her explanation takes the most of class time. Although we tried to listen to her all the time, we became bored. We always complain that her teaching style is not effective. (Nov. 20)

As seen in Excerpt 6, Austin's view on Dr. Goodwin's approach was not so positive because of her teaching structure, which indicated less trust in her teaching. As stated in Excerpt 6, Austin needed more writing related activities to improve his writing.

In contrast, Erin shared a positive aspect of Dr. Goodwin's personality in teaching in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7

Not only her sincere attitude, I also appreciated when she took the control in class and called on students to answer the questions. I am really thankful to her enthusiasm put into the class. Her sincere attitude is worth to receive much more respect because of all of things she did to us in the class. Comparing her to other ESL instructors, she was the hard-working teacher and never stopped helping us not only in writing but also in other areas. (Nov. 23)

It was assumed that such difference could be ascribed to their different perceptions towards Dr. Goodwin with regards to a class discussion. According to the questionnaires, Austin and Erin mentioned that they tended to participate in the discussion only when they knew "the right answer." However, despite their similar views on participation in the discussion, Austin devalued the discussion because there were no right answers there, which he believed would not improve his writing. In turn, the following excerpts explain what Erin and Austin thought would improve their writing. First, Excerpt 8 shows Austin's view.

Excerpt 8

The students need to memorize a number of certain phrases or a paragraph which consists of a full of grammatically important structures. All we need to do to improve our writing is to memorize these and emulate them when we write papers. In other words, such reciting is the powerful tool to write papers for me. (Nov. 20)

When interviewing Austin, he started reciting phrases by heart he learned and continued at a decipherable speed. In doing so, he showed his expectation that Dr. Goodwin should provide more varieties of writing styles as a part of the instructor's role.

That is, neither the discussion nor essay analysis but the teacher should be at the center of direct teaching of writing styles. In contrast, Erin stated differently in Excerpt 9.

Excerpt 9

When I was at level four in the last term, what we did was reading and discussing it. I did not write any paper at all. Because I did not study grammar seriously when in grading schools, I am struggled with it now. Fear of making grammatical errors come first to get my attention before I express myself. So her cares help me a lot in writing the paper. I did not see this sincerity in other teachers. (Nov. 23)

As Excerpt 9 shows, Erin thought that Dr. Goodwin's guide had helped her writing because of her serious concern with Erin's development. Regarding the differences, Austin added more in Excerpt 10.

Excerpt 10

One more thing, there is no room for human interactions. There is no space that humor can fill in, which is very important to get students motivated. Humor plays very significant roles in class to engage students in activities. This is what lacks in her personality. (Nov. 20).

In sum, even though Austin believed that Dr. Goodwin's teaching and personality involved in the interaction did not empower him in academic writing (see Excerpt 6, 8, and 10), Erin thought that Dr. Goodwin's personality such as her seriousness and sincerity (see Excerpt 7 and 9) was very helpful, as Erin commented later: "Unlike other ESL teachers, she often paraphrases what I try to say in my essay, which really helps me. Because I only know a limited number of expressions, I can't successfully express myself. Her attentive care in class improves my writing" (Nov. 23). To Erin, Dr. Goodwin's personality was significant for writing improvement.

All in all, despite the overall agreement on the expected teachers' role in the writing class, both interviewees showed different perceptions of Dr. Goodwin's personality.

For more details, while both expected the teacher's role as a grammar gatekeeper, Erin appreciated that Dr. Goodwin took initiatives in the discussion and her enthusiastic and serious attitude of teaching. On the other hand, Austin expected Dr. Goodwin to provide him with more writing variations, conventions, and clear grading criteria with more confidence and humor. Interestingly, Erin pointed out what Dr. Goodwin actually did in the ESL writing class, whereas Austin pointed out what she did not do in general, which deserves more investigation in the future.

### **Influence of a Cultural Diversity in the Writing Class**

How cultural diversity in the class would influence the Japanese students' writing development was another concern of this ethnographic investigation. Needless to say, cultural diversity is one of the idiosyncratic features in the class in general (Harmer, 2007). As mentioned earlier, a mixture of four different nationalities, Japanese, Chinese, Saudi-Arabian, and Turkish, integrally created a unique learning community. At first, it was imagined that the more cultural diversity existed in the class, the more diverse cultural exchanges would likely happen. Despite the initial assumption, however, what had been observed was different. That is, the more cultural diversities in the class, the more difficulty the foreign language teacher encountered, which limited active interaction in the class discussion due to such ethnic diversity. In order to see how actively the learners participated in the discussion, the number of times Dr. Goodwin called on the learners and the number of times the learners voluntarily answered questions in class were counted. Table 1 and 2 illustrate the number of total interactions and the number of the spontaneous participation according to genders.

Table 1.

*Female-Students' Number of Interactions on November 4<sup>th</sup>*

Student	Erin	June	Stephaney	Christy	Katy
Nationality	Japan	China	Saudi-Arabia		Turkey
Total	0	0	15	4	20
Spontaneous	0	0	14	4	13

Table 2.

*Male-Students' Number of Interactions on November 4<sup>th</sup>*

Student	Austin	Charlie	Feng	Chris	Anthony
Nationality	Japan	China	China	China	China
Total	4	1	1	2	0
Spontaneous	0	0	0	2	0

Tables 1 and 2 indicate that the Turkish and Saudi students, Katy and Stephaney, dominated the discussion according to the number of interactions. What happened was that, occasionally, when Dr. Goodwin was looking for somebody to call on, Katy spontaneously and immediately interrupted Dr. Goodwin and answered the question. Yet, her answers were not always correct at first. But when Katy recognized her wrong guess, she corrected it and gave another so that no one got a chance to jump in the discussion.

As seen by the numbers in Tables 1 and 2, some were verbally more expressive and dominated the interaction with the instructor, while others were more introverted, less expressive, and less spontaneous in the discussion. The fieldnotes captured such domination as seen in Excerpt 11.

## Excerpt 11

The class on Wednesday went on with the same style: teacher-centered. Dr. Goodwin usually gives assignment to students and analyzes it in class and calls students for answers. Most class time is spent on her analysis and very few interactions in most cases. However, it is a little different this time. Katy dominated the whole class by answering almost every question that the instructor casted in class until she got tired and fell asleep in the middle of class. (Nov. 4)

What was observed later in the class, however, was that Dr. Goodwin taught the class

mainly using the teacher-centered approach. Needless to say, this is the most familiar approach in Asian countries, which places value more on lectures and less on open-ended discussions. Yet, Katy, a delightful and expressive student, showed more active participation in the class. Excerpt 12 illustrates a gap in active participation between the students, reported on the fieldnotes.

Excerpt 12

... most Asian students tend to nod heads as confirmation and agreement on questions. Some actually articulated 'Yes' or 'No.' However, when the question required complex structures or opinions in the open-ended question, only two Saudi-Arabian students and Katy, a Turkish, often attempted to answer. They rarely said 'I don't know.' Rather, they seemed to seek for answers in the conversation with the instructor on a trial-and-error basis. Asian students were quiet all the time. But, when Dr. Goodwin called Austin, he answered without hesitation, as if he had waited to be called. (Nov. 4)

What was more interesting was that among the interviewees, the ways Erin and Austin accepted such diversity differed in terms of active participation. For instance, when everyone was asked to write their answers on the board, Katy and Stephane did not seem to have completed their homework, while other Asian students seemed to have completed it. To my surprise, Katy asked one of the Chinese students to give her the answer when she was not sure what to write on the board. This indicated that apparently, Katy did not do her assignment at all. In contrast, Japanese ESL learners showed the opposite attitude. Austin and Erin knew the answers because they had obviously completed the assignments. But in the discussion, they seldom shared what they had in mind. They were not willing to share thoughts and ideas unless they were emotionally secure and confident that the answer was correct.

Regarding the above, Erin also commented on what she thought of working in a group with classmates from different countries as well as what she thought of other

classmates' active participation as seen in Excerpt 13.

Excerpt 13

It is good to discuss with classmates who came from other countries because we should speak English that gives us opportunities to think about not only the topic but also English. My classmates are excellent. Their English are better than mine and their ways of thinking are similar to Americans. (Nov. 12)

Erin perceived the participation in the group more positively and admired others as evidenced in Excerpt 13. She also added more seen in Excerpt 14.

Excerpt 14

I try to answer the question when I think that is an answer, however, it is sometimes difficult for me because I'm not sure that the answer is correct or not. (Nov. 12)

Similar to Erin's previous comment on Dr. Goodwin's roles, she appreciated her classmates for the group discussion. Excerpt 13 and 14 illustrated that Erin admired their performance and she hesitated to voluntarily answer questions because of her low self-confidence, unless Dr. Goodwin called on her. In fact, such reluctance to speak up might be merely a result of cultural differences on participating in the discussion. As mentioned earlier from the careful observation, while Erin internally sought for the answer and composed sentences to deliver her message, the expressive students had already attempted to give the same information in an ongoing discussion spontaneously. As a result, by the time Erin got ready to share her opinion, other students had already delivered their opinions and the whole discussion had moved on. In short, those who had not delivered their thoughts would end up with losing opportunities to share their opinions. This must be a part of the reason why Erin appreciated the teacher-centered class; Dr. Goodwin took control and led the discussion in a fair way that included everyone in class.

On the contrary, Austin had a different thought. Specifically, Excerpt 15 explains how he perceived working in a group with other classmates.

Excerpt 15

There are many good points. However, I don't think there is any significance in writing. There is no right answer. I am not sure how they write. I am not sure who writes well and who doesn't. This is what the instructor only knows. (Nov. 13)

As stated in Excerpt 15, Austin did not seem to appreciate the class discussion and showed indifference towards others. He also shared his thoughts on whether he would wait until the instructor called on him for answers or volunteer his answers. Although his patience was observed in class (see Excerpt 12), his comment on the questionnaire differed as noted in Excerpt 16.

Excerpt 16

I don't like to wait. It sounds risky if I wait until she calls me. Answering questions that I know can bring me participation points and secure me to avoid confusion. (Nov. 13)

Such contradictions appeared puzzling at first. But considering the ensured equalities provided by Dr. Goodwin's teacher-centered approach, he did not have to volunteer. He knew he would have chances to share his opinion under Dr. Goodwin's control. In fact, as seen in Excerpt 12, he gave the correct answer when he had the chance.

At the same time, however, Austin devalued the class discussion, which might underestimate the power of the ESL program to some extent. This is because, like Erin, Austin knew that expressive students received acknowledgements by their active participation in the ongoing discussion. Otherwise, he would not make an effort towards active participation because of the lack of "correct answers." This practical reason did not differ from Katy's motivation to active participation in the discussion; she kept on guessing answers for acknowledgements even when she did not do her

homework. Austin commented on his critical view.

Excerpt 17

It does not seem practical to group us in the same class by averaged test scores. Imagine there are two different persons in terms of the proficiency. One is good at speaking but poor at writing. The other is very opposite. Although the averages appear the same in the same class, it's not right to evaluate these two the same. Like one who speaks less gets underestimated because of less participation in discussion and another who speaks more gets more participation scores but performs poor in writing. Both go to the same level. (Nov. 13)

His point is, since there was no right or wrong answer at the end of the discussion, the entire discussion seemed meaningless because what he needed was a clear-cut answer. Besides, as seen in Excerpt 17, he considered the class discussion as an opportunity to get participation points to receive better grades, not as a writers' community where students would seek other perspectives to broaden their own and become better writers. However, it seemed fairly understandable because grades were always a concern among the learners to get into a college.

All in all, in the case of Dr. Goodwin's ESL writing class, the cultural diversity might distort the real value of the class discussion, which collaterally influenced the learners' writing development. Thus the teacher-centered approach might be selected to include all learners so that explicit directions were given to the students whose preferences were very diverse. Particularly, the teacher-centered approach equally benefited all students because of the strong control of the teacher. Overall, it is not necessary to specify more reasons for the selection of the teacher-centered approach because it seemed to work well in the class with only a few limitations. That being said, we cannot discard the possibility that the difference between Erin's and Austin's perceptions might be caused by their proficiency levels, which requires more attentive observation to illustrate this more clearly in future.

## **Pedagogical Implications**

Based on the qualitative investigation of the ESL writing class, what the language teachers need to keep in mind, regardless of their personality, is to know their learners when structuring a language-teaching curriculum. For instance, teachers need to know their own students' proficiency levels, demographic background such as age and nationality, and languages they speak and have studied, and their stylistic preferences in terms of learning, and purposes of learning a particular language. Considering the above factors will provide sufficient clues to account for what approaches and activities should be implemented in any classroom settings, which ensures equal opportunities for more successful learning. Eventually, knowing the learners would successfully lead to the learners' more active participation in class.

Such can be achieved through many ways: building a closer interpersonal relationship by having a teacher-learner conference out of the curriculum, paying close attention to survey results and teaching evaluations, reorganizing groups by considering effects of the size, the nationality, or the native language, providing equal opportunities to all learners to speak, introducing useful reference books and sample writings the teacher collected, and sharing interesting stories and experiences that would help the learners engage in the class participation. Yet, an important point of conducting the suggested instructions is to apply them appropriately in accordance with individual situations of the actual classrooms in which the learners and teacher interact together.

## **Conclusion**

This ethnographic investigation reported the contrastive views of active participation in class discussion and similar expectations on Dr. Goodwin's teaching role in relation to her personality in order for successful language learning to take place. In sum, the degree of language development differed according to the individual differences of how the learners perceived their language teacher, which unexpectedly limited the dynamics of interaction in the ESL writing class. However, the potential variables that were causing failure in linguistic development involved various aspects

encompassing different subject areas. Thus, it is obvious that thorough understanding of the influence of learners' perception of their teachers in a foreign language classroom requires more careful investigations in the future.

Some theoretical concerns need to be clarified more in a future investigation on the relationship between learners' perception of the teacher's personality and language development in the foreign language classroom. Specifically, the way the current study employed is more subjective, qualitative, and more descriptive; therefore, a more theoretical, quantitative, and empirical approach is necessary to complement what is found in the current investigation such as how to operationalize the degree of learners' perception, how to define a teacher's personality, and how to quantify those for more objective analysis and discussion. Such approaches, in turn, will allow more thorough understanding of the relationships pointed out in the current investigation.

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## **Abstract**

### **Ethnographic Investigation of Learners' Perceptions in an ESL Program**

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The Second Language (ESL) classroom has various aspects that would influence a learner's proficiency development. The current study investigated the teacher's personality in relation to the learner's perception of it, aiming to draw more general understanding of a direct influence of both on successful language learning. The investigation was mainly conducted with an ethnographic approach, using nonparticipant observation, emails, questionnaires, and structured interviews to refine the research focus along with the investigation. The researcher meticulously observed two Japanese ESL learners and an ESL teacher selected from an ESL writing class at a middle-sized U.S. college for three weeks in 2009. Based on the collected qualitative data, the study revealed; (1) the learners had contrastive views on active participation in the class discussion, and (2) two learners had similar expectations about the ESL instructor and the teaching role in relation to her personality. It was concluded that the perception of the teacher's personality differed among the ESL learners; moreover, utilization of the teacher-centered approach although providing equal opportunities to the learners, inadvertently limited the dynamics of class interaction. Based on the findings, several pedagogical implications were addressed for successful learning in ESL.