

## Teaching EFL in Korea and Analyzing a Student to Learn More about Learner Profiles

<sup>1</sup>Michael Gale, <sup>2</sup>Lee Hughes,  
<sup>1,2</sup> Asia University, Tokyo, 180-8629, Japan

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**ABSTRACT:** As a teacher of any kind, it is very important to understand about your students in order to provide a better learning experience for them. This study followed one teacher's experience in Korea in which he tried to learn more about the language learner profile of one of his students and use that to gain knowledge about learner profiles and use that to improve his understanding of how important it is to understand as much as you can about your students in order to maximize their opportunities for language learning in and outside of the classroom.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The learner's pseudonym is "Sam." Sam was one of the first students for the last two months and was also the most dedicated. It was noticed that there was something special about him when he came to class every day ready to take notes and always asking questions. Whenever optional homework was given out, he completed it. He would also stay after class for questions related to the lesson or his writing. The learner is a thirty-year old Korean from Seoul who is studying Veterinary Medicine at Konkuk University in Seoul. At the time, he was in his third year in the veterinary program. When Sam was first met, Michael Gale thought he was an extrovert. He later found out during their sessions together that he was an introvert. He found social interaction exhausting even though he was very social in class. He noticed him to be quite intelligent since he had a good command of the English language. He thinks that Sam would have a high aptitude in regards to language learning because he (Carroll, 1991, as cited in Light brown & Spada, 2006) learns quickly. During their sessions together, it was noticed that Sam was able to grasp the concepts discussed in grammar and in the class, he was able to use the target vocabulary and language structures properly. The learner had a moderate level of self-esteem. While he has gained confidence in speaking English, he has doubts about his performance and has mentioned it to Mr. Gale.

Sam's cognitive processing style would be field dependent. He is people centered and learns through social relations. During class, Mr. Gale paired Sam up with a learner that was not too talkative and Sam engaged the other learner in conversation and got him to participate. When the other learner was not participating, the learner urged him to continue talking. This benefited both learners because the other learner was less talkative and was engaged more and the learner benefited from social relations. The learner's cognitive representation would be classified as 'auditory.' Sam benefits from listening and prefers more auditory forms of learning. During class exercises, he was always focused on listening to what his teacher had to say and he is an excellent listener. There were several affective factors discussed in this course. Sam would have (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, as cited in Light brown & Spada, 2006) instrumental motivation. He is motivated to learn English for when he opens his animal clinic and needs to interact with foreign clients. Also, he is studying English because he feels it is important in Korea. The learner's self-determination is extrinsic. Sam is learning English because society has told him that it is important. He feels that learning English will help him with his veterinary practice because a higher authority (parents) or institution (university) imposes this belief on him.

In regards to Light brown & Spade's ten questions of contexts for learning, the one that would be most applicable is (Light brown & Spada, 2006) question 7 about contact with proficient speakers. Sam has been able to become proficient in English with lack of native speakers being around him. Although his brother did study English in England for two years, it would not suffice as someone who is proficient in the language. Also, Sam has had limited time speaking English. In the possible characteristics of a good language learner discussed by Light brown & Spada, my learner is "willing to make mistakes" and "he attends to whether his performance meets the standards he has learned" (Light brown & Spada, p.55, 2006). Sam (Light brown & Spada, 2006) makes mistakes and learns from them. If he does not understand something, he always asks questions. Sam always (Light brown & Spada, 2006) attends to his performance and if there are any problems, he asks for clarification to verify if his performance met what he has learned.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Sam's exposure to English began when he was in middle and high school. Sam studied English for three hours a week in middle and high school. He has studied English for a total of six years and two months. The instruction in the Korean school system is form focused on reading and grammar. There is little time for speaking and the teachers don't give much error correction, the "ratio of native speakers to learners" is low, and there is no "ample time for learning" since the student only had three hours of instruction per week (Lightbrown & Spada, p.111, 2006). After completing high school, Sam used English less. However, he gained more exposure to English because his brother who lived in the UK taught him English grammar and pronunciation. His brother lived and studied English in England for two and a half years and this has given my learner an advantage in grammar and pronunciation. 'Get it right from the beginning' was a proposal presented in *How Languages Are Learned* which mentioned that "Students were presented with vocabulary lists, often accompanied by translation equivalents, and grammar rules" (Lightbrown and Spada, p.138, 2006). Korean English Education focuses heavily on this type of teaching, and Sam spent most of his time memorizing English vocabulary and grammar. This has been a disadvantage for him because he has been given less time for speaking and more focus on grammar. Mr. Gale was quite surprised when Sam wanted to focus a majority of his sessions on grammar since the school system focused on grammar more. He thinks a reason could be because he has not studied English in a classroom since he was in high school or it could be because he felt more comfortable studying the way he was taught.

Sam has several aspects in his social, cultural, and linguistic contexts that are working for and against him in acquiring English. The learner would have a (Schumann, 1986) low exposure to enclosure at this time. He uses English every day in a school setting (M-F) for fifty minutes with Mr. Gale. The learner has no exposure to English at churches, schools, and clubs. We think that the learner's low enclosure is limiting his contact with other native speakers and Mr. Gale recommended that he find some English activities in Seoul. In reference to the social factors (Schuman, 1986) cohesiveness and size, both would hurt Sam's ability in acquiring English. Since Seoul is such a large city and Koreans are cohesive (Schumann, 1986), this will limit contact with my language learner and English. Mr. Gale knows that his student rarely has contact with other native speakers of English. Attitude was another social factor mentioned and it (Schuman, 1986) will greatly improve my learner's English ability. Sam has a positive attitude towards Americans and views them in a positive light. The learner's positive attitude is a major reason why he has been able to do so well in acquiring English because he has many things going against him in social contexts. Sam's learner's proficiency level would be Level 3 Intermediate according to the Wisconsin Administrative Rule. He is able to understand most concepts with his teacher's help and he has shown less difficulty learning the target structures than a beginner would. The learner's listening ability is the most developed. He is able to comprehend nearly everything his teacher says to him and this may have to do with the fact he is an auditory learner. Sam's weakest area is his writing and this is because he has not had much experience with formal writing. He will need improvement with forming paragraphs and on his spelling. The area that seems most important to him is writing. The learner brought in extra writing assignments that he wanted Mr. Gale to grade. He has the ability to write; he just needs more form focused instruction on how to put paragraphs in order.

Although Sam can express himself well, there are areas in which he has committed errors. For example, he has had difficulty with articles which would be a (Scovel, 2007) negative transfer. In a written assignment, he said "I'm gonna watch special movie with my relatives." He forgot to add the article 'a' before movie which would show lack of using the article. Koreans don't use articles and this could be a reason for the negative transfer error. Lightbrown & Spada (2006) mentioned that Japanese learners continue to struggle with articles even at the advanced stage and this holds true with Korean students. Mr. Gale gave his learner additional grammar exercises on articles and noticed when 'the' was needed for common nouns like churches (the church) his student made an error of not supplying the article 'the.' However, when 'the' was not needed my student supplied it. So, there are miscues due to L1 transfer with articles and Korean students. Sam encountered developmental errors in his writing assignments. For example, there were a few times when he didn't use a pronoun in a sentence. Here is a sentence he composed, "I'm gonna learn more about New Year's Day from grandpa." Notice, he was supposed to add my grandpa because it is showing possession. The learner also had great difficulty with prepositions. Sometimes he would use the wrong preposition. He wrote in his writing "Lunar New Year's holiday is one of the representative holiday in Korea." The sentence should be Lunar New Years is a representative holiday of Korea. There was another sentence where the learner stated "It seems to be very hard to start something after finishing two months vacation."

He forgot to add the preposition "of" after two months in this sentence. Mr. Gale told the learner to look over prepositions and to continue to practice using them in his writing. In the components of communicative

competence, Sam is most developed in strategic competence. Concerning repair, the student sometimes catches errors when he is speaking for example correcting “he don’t” to “he doesn’t.” When he loses his train of thought, he asks for his teacher’s assistance and if he doesn’t understand Mr. Gale he will ask for additional clarification. He is always focused when it comes to repair and you can see it whenever there is a problem in conversation. Sam’s classroom behavior demonstrates a student who is competent in communication and is very self-aware when concerned with repair. Grammatical competence would be one of Sam’s weakest areas and he mentioned it to Mr. Gale when they first began their tutoring sessions. The areas that are most problematic for him have to do with syntax and morphology (grammar) and writing mechanics. Sam struggles with the following grammatical structures: articles, prepositions, and pronouns. In many cases, he leaves out articles in sentences or adds the wrong preposition. Also, at times he forgets to add possessive pronouns like “my.” In Mr. Gale’s opinion, if his student continues practicing his grammar he can improve in his least developed areas. He helped Sam purchase a grammar book and encouraged him to work through the exercises in the book. Sam also struggles with his writing mechanics. The areas he can improve on are: capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Mr. Gale thinks that if his learner were to take a writing class that focused on these areas he could improve tremendously.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sam’s current level of second language proficiency is surprising to Mr. Gale because of his lack of ESL classes since high school. For Sam to be at his current level, his brother must have been an important factor in helping him improve his English. Also, the learner is interested in L2 media so this may explain why his listening comprehension was good. Mr. Gale learned a great deal from this project as it challenged him to be more critical when it comes to his student’s errors and more analytical in their acquisition process. With Sam, he was able to gain a better analysis of how to judge errors and to accommodate the different needs of his students. Beliefs that were confirmed in this project were in error analysis. It is known that some Korean students had trouble with articles and the third person singular suffix –s. However, we did not understand the reason why they made these errors until a student a few months ago brought up that there weren’t articles in Korean. We did not think about it in SLA terms as being a L1 transfer error, but this class has given us that knowledge. The personality characteristics we thought that made a good language learner were challenged through this assignment. It was always thought that the extroverted students were the most outgoing and social. However, Mr. Gale found that his learner, Sam, was introverted and he was talkative in class. This helped him realize that introverted students may appear social and taught him not to judge them as extroverted just because they are social. Schumann’s (1981) social factors were illustrated to him through this project because he was able to determine which areas his student could use improvement in according to his social factors. For example, Sam has a low enclosure and that is a factor in why his proficiency level has not improved to upper intermediate. However, the learner’s linguistic context at home has been an advantage due to his brother using English there. These were two important principles that Mr. Gale kept going back to for information with Sam. There were several theories on second language acquisition discussed in this class. The Cognitive/Developmental theory is instrumental in helping the learner succeed in English. The role of the learner is physical interaction with the environment and Sam had this type of interaction with his brother. His brother also acted as an interlocutor for Sam by correcting him and improving his English. These factors were important in applying the cognitive and developmental approach with him.

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