

# Teaching A Third Culture Kid - Change in Attitude and Readiness to Learn

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## Abstract

**Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is essential for third culture kids to integrate with their community. In language learning settings, interaction is a key factor to the success of teaching second languages. Since all students learn differently and it takes a lot of effort to drive learners' enthusiasm for tiresome language learning, teachers must find effective methods to trigger students' motivation. This paper reviews the SLA of third culture kids in classroom settings by analyzing the importance of the interaction, emotion, and motivation of the students. Following this, implications and possible solutions to assist students' SLA are considered based on the three areas, and suggestions for further research are concluded.**

## Keywords

**Third Culture Kids; Second Language Students; Second Language Acquisition; Interaction; Emotion; Motivation.**

## 1. Introduction

In second language learning (also known as second language acquisition, SLA), students' positive attitude is affected by the enjoyment of learning content, communication needs, level of the tasks, incentives from teachers, and others. Attitude is often accepted as a crucial concept to understand human behavior and is defined as a mental state that includes beliefs and feelings [1]. It is situational and can hence be generalized by the surrounding environment. It is an essential factor in children's SLA. Theorists and researchers generally view SLA as a mental process, that is, to believe that language acquisition resides primarily, if not solely, in mind [2]. They are keen to quantify that mental process in order to understand how and through what procedures individuals acquire a second language. Among them, the language learning of Third Culture Kids has long been a focus of many researchers. Third Culture Kids (TCKs), unlike typical second language learners or native speakers, have spent a significant part of their developmental years in places that are not their parents' homeland (Ruth Hill Useem, the 1950s).

I taught a Third Culture Kid (referred to as "R") English online privately for more than six months. R is a Canadian-born Chinese who has spent his kindergarten time in China and the rest in Canada. He is 11 years old, in the fifth grade, and lives in the Great Toronto Area with his family. Like many other TCK, R experienced two different cultures and language backgrounds. This essay aims to analyze the cause of Third Culture Kids' attitude change towards SLA based on my reflection of teaching R. My teaching style has been divided into two stages: (1) giving R repetitive worksheets and plainly working through them; (2) preparing for creative and different activities every class. In this analysis, I will focus on three areas of learning based on each stage: interaction, which refers to the classroom communication between the student and the teacher; emotion, which is the student's feeling directly from learning; and motivation, which refers to reward-driven or self-driven behaviors.

## 2. Organization of the Text

### 2.1. Interaction

In the framework of the Interactive Hypothesis, conversational interaction "facilitates language acquisition because it connects input (what learners hear and read) and output (what learners produce) in productive ways" (Long, 1996, pp. 451-452). Interaction within the classroom allows learners to receive comprehensible input and feedback (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994) and instantly modify their own language output (Swain, 1995).

Throughout the time interval, I attempted different ways of teaching and uses of language to foster the interaction between R and myself. A significant aspect I discovered for maintaining the interaction between the student and the teacher is to adjust the teaching format, sequence, or content frequently. Consider an elementary student arriving to class each week knowing he would complete the same uninteresting work as usual; of course, this will not give him any passion for the class and thus cannot motivate the student to connect with the teacher.

When I first started teaching, I guided him through the same type of worksheets every single time. For example, I would pull out the fill-out-the-blank worksheets that were formatted the same as last class but with different vocabularies, and I would ask him if he can identify the answers as always. The reaction I got from him was unpleasant -- he barely responded to me even though I explicitly pointed out the answer. Sometimes he even turned his camera off. When I called out his name and asked him to speak, he would act irritated and continue to be unresponsive. This indicates a refusal to share his thoughts with me and my failure to connect his inputs and outputs. As the session progressed, I became aware of the issue and started to experiment with other teaching strategies. At first, I changed the worksheets to colorful slideshows and began incorporating interactive games and videos. Visual interactions helped me communicate with R by providing him with information that he may not have understood if it was presented in written or spoken form. They also aroused his interest and attention and allowed him to store information for a lengthier period. For instance, I once played a 5 minutes video about t-shirt making, and R was able to answer all the questions regarding that exercise. His concentration lasted about 20 minutes. Previously, he would already show impatience when he only filled out one blank from the worksheet. Furthermore, the interactive games raised R's participation because he must communicate with me to play the game. It also reduced the boredom from regular class, which regained his energy and focus. Games have consistently been demonstrated to increase motivation, lower anxiety, and increase readiness to communicate [3]. Incorporating instructional content into the games improves R's exposure to the inputs.

In *Digital Gaming in L2 Teaching and Learning*, professor Jonathon Reinhardt identified games as "metaphorical tutors and tools" (208). His paper describes games as a tutor because many games involve the contextualized use of many vocabulary items. I believe this to be accurate because R often tried hard to spell an unfamiliar word out when we played Pictionary games since he desired to win. Even if he came across an unknown word, he would ask for the meaning, which increased his vocabulary input. The tool metaphor is straightforward: games serve as a tool for teachers to interact and communicate with students and sometimes deepen students' understanding of the teaching content. Victor Samuel Zirawaga (2017) also described games as educational tools because they "are constructive as they liven up teaching methods which are normally considered dull and boring." Peterson (2012) also illustrated how EFL learners could practice communications in the MMORPG *Wonderland* (a multiplayer online role-playing game). If available, more advanced interactive games for R would further improve his communication skills and interaction within the classroom.

To sum up, students' interaction can imply their willingness to learn. Interactive and creative learning can deliver more language inputs and effectively turn them into outputs, therefore it

is a necessary part of TCK's language learning. It can be built through games, different formats of teaching, and other approaches in the classroom.

## 2.2. Emotion

Surprisingly, researchers have given little attention to the role of emotion in second language learning. Students in class experience a range of emotions from the positive (e.g., enjoyment) to the negative (e.g., anxiety), where positive emotions could stimulate learners' attention and trigger the learning process and negatives for the opposite. Conclusions from many studies suggest that positive emotion aids resource building because it broadens the learner's perspective, allowing the learner to accept more language input. Negative emotion, on the other hand, narrows the concentration and restricts the spectrum of potential language input. Johnmarshall Reeve defined emotion as "short-lived, feeling-arousal-purposive-expressive phenomena that help us adapt to the opportunities and challenges we face during important life events." (2005, p. 294).

When I taught R, I noticed many evident emotional states of him under various situations. In stage one, he would often use being tired as an excuse to not respond to me when I asked him to do the worksheet. Moreover, when I warned or corrected him, he would show frustration or anger, becoming more reluctant to learn. At this moment, he was experiencing negative emotions. Continuing the teaching will be ineffective because he had no readiness to learn. I had to change the content to trigger his emotional engagement: letting him find the class enjoyable, fun, and engaging.

After I changed my way of teaching by adding more interactive activities (e.g., games) and visual stimuli (e.g., videos), R's emotions became more positive. The interactive game, for example, successfully prompted his interest. He started to speak more and displayed an energetic attitude which remained even after the game. A change in emotion also existed after I decided to change my teaching style and sequence regularly. R began to ask me the plan for the day's class, whereas he would show disinterested expressions regarding the class before. This adjustment lessened R's boredom, a negative emotion, and generated a sense of curiosity and motivation (positive emotions) to the class.

Next, students' emotions can be altered by the complexity of the learning content. This notion is explained by Vygotsky's scaffolding theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which has been defined as the difference between what a child can do on its own, and what can be accomplished with assistance (Snowman, Biehler & McCown, 2009, p.378-379). Language learning occurs only at the potential development level when the input is somewhat above the learner's current level but still understandable. The complexity of the learning content does not necessarily refer to its hardness, especially when it comes to TCK. Some young TCK might perceive content such as culture shock as very affirming or challenging of their experience. As for R, I had a hard time finding his ZPD. When I gave him exercises that are a grade lower than his current level, he would be annoyed and speak loudly. But when I gave exercises that were just a bit harder than regular work, he would ignore me and not talk. Both of them triggered his negative emotions. In conclusion, the teacher must find their learner's ZPD in order to boost their language skills.

Another aspect where I triggered R's positive emotions is my use of language. As I mentioned, R often lost patience and felt angry whenever I corrected him or explained the answers. Therefore, in stage 2 of teaching, I decided to let him finish all the work and inform him of his error later. This action enables the learner to work continuously with confidence, which is a positive emotion. While he was doing the practice, I kept encouraging him with simple phrases such as "This is great!", "Do not give up!" and "You are getting faster and better at it!" These words of encouragement reminded R that he has the power to learn and succeed. Furthermore, the encouragement provides intrinsic motivation because he wanted to demonstrate that "he

can do it." It also strengthened my relationship with him, which would make interaction easier in the future.

In short, positive emotions are crucial in second language learning as they profoundly impact students' amount of input taken in class. Emotions are expected to promote regulation of learning. Moreover, emotions also affect students' intrinsic motivation to learn. Students' emotions could be affected by the teacher's interaction, the complexity of teaching content, and other aspects of the class. However, students' emotions could also be affected outside of the classroom such as family relationships and friendships. For some TCK, especially, any emotional influences will be amplified. TCKs often find a lack of belongings, recognitions and connections which are necessary for all kids, so they are more sensitive to the surrounding environment and often more emotional. Thus, teachers should pay more attention to TCK's emotional states, helping them to find belongings, recognitions and connections.

### 2.3. Motivation

Gardner [1985] defines motivation in a second language acquisition setting as "the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity." Student motivation is regarded as a dynamic, multidimensional phenomenon (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Graham & Weiner, 1996; Seifert, 2004). It is often split into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. An extrinsically motivated student acts "to obtain some reward or avoid some punishment external to the activity itself," [4] while intrinsically motivated student engages in an activity "for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes." [4] Motivation, especially intrinsic motivation, is an important indicator of a learner's success because it offers the primary impetus to begin second language learning and sustain the tedious learning process (Dr. Majid, 2011). According to Lennartsson(2008), motivations to learn a second language are the factors that were considered much more essential than other variables. For example, studies have revealed that less talented students with a higher level of motivation are among the best language learners. One common method to promote SLA is to posit learners in a situation where the second language is required for social activities. Nevertheless, it is no longer as effective because many ESL students stay home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. So teachers and parents should explore new strategies to encourage children's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

As a TCK, R has enough communication skills to socialize with friends, but he clearly lacked the necessary academic language proficiency that would allow him to perform successfully in his academic studies. He does not have a long-term intrinsic motivation to improve his language skills. This phenomenon is common for many TCKs -- they often think that their English is already at a satisfactory level as a "foreigner", so they don't need to further improve. In class, R was not willing to confront challenging tasks at all. This might reflect a mechanism that is often shown in second language learners: fossilization.

Selinker [1972] noted that most second language learners fail to reach target-language competence. That is, they stop learning while their internalized rule system contains rules different from those of the target system. This is referred to as 'fossilization.' It can also be viewed as a cognitive process whereby new learning is blocked by existing learning (Ellis, R. 2008. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* [2nd edition]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 963).

The indication of fossilization in R's language learning is visible through his error reappearance, where improper grammar use that has been addressed repeatedly continued to appear. In writing, for example, he always made simple mistakes, such as subject-verb agreement and capitalization, even though I have corrected him multiple times. R's present goal for SLA is only to talk with friends of the same age; therefore, he ceased to take more language input once he

reached his target level. If he continues to stay in this situation and becomes accustomed to his mistakes, his English learning is likely to turn into a true fossilization state. One approach to solve this is finding ways to connect him with external motivational factors: actuating him with language, rewarding him with games and breaks, and connecting the learning to something he enjoys. These short-term adjustments can trigger his emotion which subsequently affects his motivation. In my stage two of teaching, I told R beforehand that he will get a break and game time only if he finished the exercise planned. Along with my encouragement throughout the exercise, this method has raised his motivation to learn. However, these strategies are typically straightforward and only create a short-term effect.

Now the concern falls to how to foster long-term intrinsic motivation in students' language learning. The teacher should stimulate students' intrinsic motivation by making them dissatisfied with their current level of SLA. For elementary ESL students, this can be accomplished mostly by linking the students' personal life to learning. For example, adults could have the student's friends learn together, creating a sense of competition -- since children often want to demonstrate their ability relative to others by outperforming them. Teachers could also consider adding some difficulty to the task while keeping it within the range of the student's zone of proximal development. The exercise must be enjoyable so that it could pique the learner's interest while still challenging. The teacher should approach students' mistakes with a developmental mindset: blame the students less and encourage them more. Teachers should as well give strategic feedback to encourage and stimulate students to continue learning while telling them to correct their mistakes. Continuing this process could build up their self-esteem and willingness to learn.

### 3. Conclusion

This analysis concludes that interaction, emotion, and motivation can directly affect a TCK's language learning. Students' interaction can imply their willingness to learn and determine their language output; positive emotions may support regulation and broaden student's language input; motivations can determine student's willingness to learn and prevent fossilization in SLA. To assist elementary TCKs' learning, teachers should adopt a creative and interactive teaching style to constantly encourage students and explore their interests. An optimal language learning environment should make students feel enjoyable, recognized, and connected. Although considerable research on teaching in SLA has been conducted, it seems that a suitable motivation teaching strategy for all second language teachers is still lacking.

To move forward, it would be worthwhile for researchers to dive deeper into how teachers can better support their young ESL students' emotional well-being that is affected outside the classroom. Having a deeper connection with the students and frequently talking with their parents are beneficial in knowing young TCKs' emotional needs, but solving that need in an educational setting is a complex task for teachers. Secondly, gamification in SLA is another element worth exploring. Good educational and interactive games would foster young TCKs' acquisition of language input and turn them into outputs.

### Acknowledgments

Natural Science Foundation.

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