

# Low-Achieving Students' Perceptions of Online Language Learning: A Case of English Proficiency Threshold

Ai-Ling Wang<sup>1</sup>, Yuh-Chang Lin<sup>2</sup>, and Shu-Fen Chang<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tamkang University, English Department, New Taipei City, Taiwan  
Wanga@mail.tku.edu.tw

<sup>2</sup> Aletheia University, Center for General Education, New Taipei City, Taiwan  
Au1258@mail.au.edu.tw

<sup>3</sup> Kang-Ning Junior College of Medical Care and Management, Taipei, Taiwan  
Fen587@webmail.knjc.edu.tw

**Abstract.** This study aims at exploring how low-achieving EFL learners perceive and make use of the instructional web site to fulfill part of the requirements for a college degree. Participants were college students who did not pass the threshold of the required level of English proficiency set by the college.

Online Tutorial English was a one-semester course offered for the above-mentioned students; they did not come to the class for onsite instruction except for the weeks before the mid-term and final exam. Students were provided with weekly reading articles and were required to do assignments online. At the end of the semester, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire and some students volunteered for an interview.

The researchers analyzed the qualitative data, using Grounded Theory Method. Findings of the study showed that low-achieving EFL learners could not really be motivated to learn and that the primary aim for those students to learn English as a foreign language was to pass the course and get their college diploma.

**Keywords:** English proficiency threshold, online language learning, low-achieving language learners, remedial English course.

## 1 Introduction

Modern technologies have made online learning more and more popular and feasible, especially in the field of language learning. People may learn different languages through communicating with people online. On the other hand, being able to communicate in the global community has become more and more important for people who wish to enrich their life. English has long been the lingua franca of the world. Although some people may claim that social, political, technological, and economical changes may alter the status of English as the lingua franca of the world, English is still the most widely used language in the global community [1].

Standardized English proficiency tests, such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and The

International English Language Testing System (IELTS), have been developed to measure an individual's English proficiency. Achieving a certain level of English proficiency may be required for admission to a university, employment in a trading company or a travel agency, promotion to a higher level of position, and application of a scholarship [2].

In Taiwan, the government has urged college administrators to set an English proficiency threshold for a college degree in the hope that college graduates can have basic skills to communicate in English and can participate in the global community freely and easily. Many colleges in Taiwan have set different levels of English proficiency threshold, depending on their students' general English proficiency and the levels of proficiency required in their professional studies and types of their future career. However, we may say that some students are not really apt to language learning. They may have excellent professional knowledge in a certain field; however, they have problems expressing themselves in an international context. For those low-achieving students, some colleges in Taiwan offer alternatives for them. It is a general practice that those who fail to step across the threshold are allowed to take an English course instead.

This study aims at exploring how low-achieving college students who took a remedial English course online to partially fulfill the requirements for a college degree perceive learning English online. On the other hand, how English proficiency threshold is practiced in Taiwan and how those students perceive the practice of English proficiency threshold.

## **2 Literature Review**

In this section, the authors will review two domains of literature relevant the present study, namely English proficiency threshold and low-achieving language learners and distance learning.

### **2.1 English Proficiency Threshold**

As mentioned earlier, in order to prepare students for their future career or further studies, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan has urged college administrators to set an English proficiency threshold as one of the requirements for a college degree and many colleges have done so. In some of the public and private sectors, achieving a certain level of English proficiency is a must before one can be hired. The tendency has revealed that the government in Taiwan is eager to actively participate in the global community and being proficient in English is the first step for its citizens to communicate with people from different countries.

Chun Shin Limited [2] reported that Japanese and Korean students outperformed Taiwanese students on TOEIC in the recent years. The government in Taiwan is aware of the importance of its citizens' being able to communicate and function in the global community. In this report, the authors reported some of the effective ways of language management practiced in Japanese and Korean educational institutions and

private sectors. For example, the Rakuten Global Market in Japan, led by its CEO Hiroshi Mikitani, strictly practiced its Englishnization in the organization and had developed its language management system, which requires its employees to reach a certain level of English proficiency, depending on their position level and their chances of using English in their workplace. The government in Taiwan is eager to learn from those successful cases to advance its citizens to the global community.

For those students who have problems crossing the threshold of English proficiency test, many schools offer alternatives. Students may be allowed to take a remedial English course instead. Generally speaking, these students are low-achieving language learners and they are not motivated to learn English as a foreign language. They lack the confidence and the affective factors required to learn a second or foreign language. How to motivate low-achieving EFL learners to learn online is even more complicated than language teachers can expect, given the fact that teachers cannot really monitor students learning as they do in the traditional classroom context.

## 2.2 Distance Learning

Distance learning is definitely not new to educators and students. However, as White [3] mentioned, due to differences between traditional classroom and online language learning environment, learners will face new challenges when they move their language learning environment to an online one. These challenges include:

- There are some immediate demands to adjust to an online language learning environment, such as feeling being isolated, problems with motivation and self-discipline, and the need for effective time management.
- The absence of teacher mediation and real-time face-to-face interaction requires language learners to establish their own set of learning behaviors and manage the course of their own learning.
- Online learning is a self-instruction context and learners need to be more self-directed and better aware of the process of language learning and the need to manage their learning.
- Online language learning provides learners with a wide variety of learning opportunities to cross the border to interact and collaborate with physically apart learners. However, new technologies are constantly developing and new skills need to be developed in order to function within technology-mediated language learning environments.

Distance learners need to adjust their learning behaviors in an online learning context as mentioned above. The same is true for distance teachers. Chuah [4] urged distance teachers to re-design students' learning experience to attract, inform, and invoke students. He argued that, in order to ensure the design can provide students with an enjoyable e-learning experience, the design of an online course should be entertaining, educational, esthetic, and escapist. Chuah argued that the way distance teachers create the learning environment may be crucial to motivate students to learn and may contribute to the success of language learning.

From the literature reviewed above, we may conclude that online learning is different from traditional classroom learning. The present study aims at exploring how low-achieving language learners perceive online language learning and how they would say about their online language learning experience.

3 Methodology

In this section, the researchers will first introduce the research paradigm employed and the participants involved in the present study. Then they will go on to introduce the online language learning course. Finally, they authors will describe how the data were collected and analyzed.

3.1 Research Paradigm

The present study was developed under the qualitative research paradigm. The researchers followed the Grounded Theory Method (GTM) to collect and analyze data. Bryant and Charmaz [5] defined Grounded Theory Method as “a systematic inductive and comparative approach for conducting inquiry for the purpose of constructing theory....The method is designed to encourage researchers’ persistent interaction with their data, while remaining constantly involved with their emerging analyses”. That is, for grounded theorists, data are key to research, and researchers do not have pre-dominant assumptions. Rather, they let patterns or theories emerge from data. As stated by Dick [6], grounded theorists do not test hypothesis; rather, they aim to discover the patterns and theories implicit in the data.

Approaches to grounded theory method may be slightly different among different grounded theorists. However, the principles of grounded theory remain the same. Dick [6] sketched the phases through which grounded theorists work:

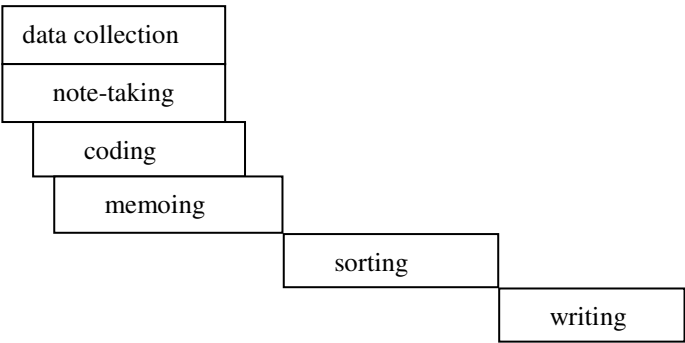


Fig. 1. Phases of Grounded Theory Method

In the entire process, researchers may do data collection, note-taking, and coding at the same time from the very beginning. After they look over all the data they have collected and assign each important part of the data a code, researchers may sort the

data based on the similar categories or properties they address. Finally, researchers may write the research report up and present findings based on the patterns that have emerged from the data.

### **3.2 Participants**

The researchers have been offering remedial English courses for those college students who failed to pass the English proficiency test required by the school. Participants of the present study were those students who took Tutorial English with the researchers as an alternative to an English proficiency test and they were in different academic fields. Students were required to take an official English proficiency test before they were allowed to enroll in the course as an alternative. It was because the school wanted to make sure that students did try and take an English proficiency test at least once. Only those who failed were allowed to take the remedial English course. It is obvious that the school was trying hard to encourage its students to take English proficiency tests and to improve their communicative skills in English. In order to secure the validity and reliability of the present study, the researchers collected data for three consecutive semesters. That is, participants of the study were from three different groups of students in three different semesters. With a larger group of participants, the researchers believe that they could better draw a picture of how low-achieving language learners perceive online language learning.

### **3.3 The Course**

The remedial English course is termed Tutorial English. It is because this is an online course. Students did not have to physically attend the class for onsite instruction except for two or three designated days. Instructional websites, WebCT and Moodle, were organized especially for the course. At the beginning of the web page there was technical instruction as to how to register for the website, how to download articles, upload assignments, discuss with peer students, etc. Each week, the instructor would post articles of students' interest and challenge students with some questions or assignments. Students were required to read these articles and upload their assignments or responses to the questions to the website before the date due. Their assignments would then be graded and posted on the website and students could check their own scores. In order to help students read these articles on their own, the instructor also uploaded explanation of vocabulary words, sentences, and important grammatical points in PowerPoint files.

Students might also raise questions relevant to the required readings or ask for technical help on the discussion board, and the instructor, teaching assistants or even peer students would help answer these questions. Occasionally, words of encouragement, complaint or valuable information would appear on the discussion board. The instructor or teaching assistants would also make use of the discussion board to make announcements, explain some grammatical issues or share personal experiences of learning English as a foreign language with students.

### 3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researchers collected data for the present study from different sources, including: students' assignments uploaded to the website, students' postings on the discussion board, oral and written conversations between the instructor and the teaching assistants, open-ended questions responded by the students, interviews with students, and the researchers' field notes. These data were then analyzed, following the steps of grounded theory method. The researchers found some patterns emerged from the data, which will be discussed in the next section.

## 4 Findings and Discussion

Based on the patterns emerged from different sources of qualitative data, the researchers would like to present findings of the present study as follows.

### 4.1 Low-Achieving EFL Learners Are Aware of the Importance of English Proficiency in the Modern Society

From students' postings on the WebCT or Moodle website and in-depth interviews with students, the researchers found that most low-achieving EFL learners agree that having a certain level of English proficiency is quite important in the modern society even though they themselves have problems learning English. The key here is that they are aware that even though they can pass the required English proficiency threshold and graduate, there is still another English proficiency threshold waiting for them to attain in their job seeking and future career.

In the interview with students, most of the students claimed that definitely they think that attaining a certain degree of English proficiency is very important for them. A graduate student from the department of finance stated that even though they are not required to write their M.A. thesis in English, they feel an English version of thesis is more prestigious. He also felt it important that in his future career search, he may be required to submit his certificate of English proficiency and his level of English proficiency may affect his future promotion.

*"I am graduating and I need to look for a job pretty soon. I understand that if I want a better job, I definitely need to improve my English."*

Another graduate student from the Department of Electrical Engineering expressed his frustration of not being able to publish an academic article in English even though his articles had considerable professional values. English proficiency has been his greatest barrier in his professional growth. It was quite common that his academic papers contributed to professional journals were rejected because of his poor expression in English.

*“As a graduate student, I am required to publish my articles in professional journals in order to get my degree. However, my articles were always rejected with comments such as, poor English, a lot of grammatical errors, etc.*

Students' comments on English proficiency mentioned above showed that students did feel a sense of urgency in terms of English proficiency despite that they felt frustrated in their learning process. However, feeling an urgency to improve their English proficiency is one thing; how they can do with their poor English is another. Generally speaking, students felt they could not get immediate reward even though they focus their attention on the study of English as a subject.

#### **4.2 Online Learning Cannot Really Motivate Students to Learn**

From students' postings on the discussion board, the researchers found that mostly students care about their grades, technical problems, and forthcoming exams. Although the researchers encouraged students to post whatever vocabulary words or grammatical problems they might have and share their language learning experiences with peer students, such kinds of postings were seldom found in the discussion board. Mostly students cared about whether or not they can pass the course and get their degree.

An overview of students' postings on the discussion board, the researchers found that almost 90% postings were relevant to technological problems, inquiries of assignments and assignment-related questions, grades assigned to them, texts to be covered on the exams, and excuses for being uploading assignment late.

*“How come I didn't get my grade for the 3rd exercise?”*

*“I had problems uploading my assignment for this week. Can I turn in a hard-copy instead? Please!”*

*“Dear teacher: Please double check my grade for the mid-term. I felt I deserved more points.”*

Only about 10% of the postings were relevant to grammatical issues, vocabulary words, and language learning strategies. It is obvious from the phenomenon that being able to pass the course was students' upmost goal. Although online learning can provide learners with more freedom to learn, this alone is not sufficient to engage students in the learning environment. Students were seeking whatever may benefit them in their learning process. For example, they may hope they can develop friendship with learning partners and help each other with their learning of English.

#### **4.3 Students Care More about Their Professional Study Than about Learning English**

In the interview with students, the researchers found that students obviously prioritized their professional study. They felt that their professional knowledge can really help them in their future professional career. There are a lot of professional areas to

be covered in their curricula and English is regarded as a plus to their academic achievement. This is most obvious in the science fields. The class roster showed that 70% of the students who took Tutorial English were science majors, and only 30% of the students were social science majors.

Science majors, especially, devoted most of their time to the study of their professional subjects. In the interview with students, most of the science majors mentioned that they have well-achieved their professional studies, such as computer science, physics, electrical engineering, etc. However, they have problems expressing themselves in English and have problems getting their articles published in professional journals. For them, reading professional textbooks written in Chinese is much easier than reading articles written in English. An electrical engineering major mentioned in an interview that, although it is not uncommon for college professors to assign English textbooks for students to read, students tend to buy a Chinese version of the textbook to help them understand the professional messages.

*"Can anybody tell me what will be on the final exam? I am sorry I didn't attend the onsite final review class because I had an important meeting with my Chemistry professor."*

*"Dear teacher: I am sorry I will not be able to attend your review class tomorrow because I have an important exam on Physics tomorrow. Could you please let me know what will be covered on the final exam?"*

It may be clear from here that professional subjects weigh heavily on students' mind, compared with English as a subject. It may be because students feel they can have considerable immediate rewards, such as higher grades and professional growth, if they focus on their professional subjects as mentioned earlier. For them, English is but an academic course and they have a lot of professional courses to take. Improving English proficiency may take time and require long-term planning. It is a great challenge for language teachers to heighten students' language awareness and to draw students' attention that English, as a lingua franca, can function in a variety of ways, such as helping professional growth.

## 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

From findings of the present study mentioned above, the researchers would like to conclude that low-achieving EFL learners are aware of the importance of English proficiency in their career. However, these same learners lack confidence required to improve their English proficiency. Some students may have considerable professional knowledge in a specific field, such as computer science, statistics, or chemistry; however, they feel they are not apt to language learning.

Another issue found in the present study was that online language learning is not necessarily effective for low-achieving language learners. Creating an enjoyable and effective online learning environment may be the key to motivating students to learn. An environment of learning community may provide students with a sense of



participation. In the virtual community, students may help each other in their learning process and students will not feel alone and isolated. Wang [7] pointed out that online learning should be beneficial to all participants and distance teachers should create an optimal learning environment to ensure effective language learning to occur.

Findings of the present study showed that most of the students cared about their professional studies. The researchers would like to suggest that online language learning curricula may incorporate with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to meet low-achieving students' needs. In this case, students may secure their professional studies, and improve their English proficiency at the same time and they may feel particularly rewarding to learn English online.

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