

Deconstructing the Environment: The Case of Adult Immigrants to Canada Learning English

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Abstract. This article identifies and deconstructs the ways in which professionally successful adult immigrants to Canada chose to interact with and reshape different environments in order to foster their English learning process. The sample for this study was selected to be representative of the “brain gain” immigration wave to Canada of the last two decades. All 20 participants belong to the same category of highly-educated (17+ years of education), independent immigrants who came to Canada as young adults. The data collection process consisted of a series of three interviews with each participant. The data were analyzed following the principles of the grounded theory method. Several qualitative themes associated with learning English as an adult immigrant in various types of environments in Canada (instructed environments, ‘manipulated’ naturalistic environments, and unaltered naturalistic environments) emerged from the interviews with the participants. The themes are critically explored and special emphasis is laid on the ways in which participants overcame difficulties inherent in the environmental factors that were not readily structured to offer immigrants opportunities to learn and practice English.

Keywords: *immigrants, Canada, English learning process*

Introduction

Canada’s Immigration policy of the last two decades has been designed to attract young skilled immigrants from a variety of professions, based on the premise that immigration is a key strategy for ensuring economic growth in Canada. Canada’s proportion of foreign-born people has reached the highest level in 75 years. In 2006, they accounted for approximately one in five (19.8%) of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2006). However, research indicates that immigrants are not integrating into the Canadian economy as readily as had been predicted (Duffy, 2000). Statistics Canada’s (2003) Second Wave of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada found that out of the principal applicants in the skilled worker category, between the ages of 25 and 44, only 48% found a job in their intended occupation. Moreover, nearly a fifth of recent immigrants are in chronic low income. In 2006, the national unemployment rate for immigrants who

had been in the country for less than 5 years was 11.5%, more than double the rate of 4.9% for the Canadian-born population (Statistics Canada, 2005).

One of the key barriers to the social and professional integration of immigrants is insufficient proficiency in English. Research findings indicate that high English proficiency has a positive effect on immigrant earnings and employment type in Canada (Chiswick & Miller, 1988; Boyd, 1990; DeSilva, 1997), while low English skills correlate with low income (Pendakur & Pendakur, 1997). Many highly educated immigrants living in Canada who do not speak English well drive taxi cabs and deliver pizza. For them that life in Canada falls short of its promises (Mazumdar, 2004).

Recent research on adult rates of second language acquisition (Watt & Lake, 2004) indicates that the second language acquisition of most adult immigrants slows down and plateaus or fossilizes at an intermediate level of proficiency. In order to access and be successful in various professional occupations such as engineering, medicine, and accounting, an advanced level of English is necessary. It is intriguing why only some adult immigrants become highly proficient in English and achieve their professional goals. Even if the environmental resources available to all immigrants may be similar, individuals may choose to use them in different ways. The current study inquires into how adult immigrants to Canada took advantage of or shaped their environment in order to improve their English proficiency to a level that would allow them to practice as professionals.

Research Perspectives on the Role of the Environment in Second Language Acquisition

Over three decades ago, Hymes (1972, p. xix) emphasized the importance of the environment in acquiring a second language, considering that the key to understanding language in context is to start with the context, as opposed to the language, but constantly relate the two. Second language acquisition researchers generally agree that the more exposure to the target language second language learners experience, the more proficient they will become. The field has seen two differing views on the role of the environment: one that overemphasizes psycho-linguistic factors (Long, 1997) at the expense of socio-linguistic variables and another that takes into account external factors (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Crookes, 1997) in addition to psycho-linguistic elements.

Several classifications of second learning environments have been proposed. The distinction between *natural* or *informal second environments* and

formal classroom environments is widely recognized in second language acquisition research:

The distinction between the two is usually stated as a set of contrasting conditions. In natural second language learning, the language is being used for communication, but in the formal situation, it is used only to teach. In natural second language learning, the learner is surrounded by fluent speakers of the target language, but in the formal classroom, only the teacher (if anyone) is fluent (Spolsky, 1989, p. 171).

Batstone (2002) distinguishes between *communicative contexts*, in which learners use the second language as a tool or means for exchanging information and accomplishing social tasks and *learning contexts*, in which input and learner output are fashioned with the assistance of a teacher. Platt and Brooks (1994, p. 507) argue that learners construct different meanings out of the same environment that offers comprehensible input. They also question the validity of the term *acquisition-rich environment* (Ellis, 1990), which assumes that contexts that provide opportunities for learning can be rich and a priori (Krashen, 1982) and claim that learning environments are not ontological realities, but are constructed by the speech activities learners produce. Proponents of the *ecological view* in both first language and second language acquisition on view language as inseparable from the speakers and their social networks (Leather & van Dam, 2003) and presume the non-existence of context-free language acquisition.

Norton's (2000) longitudinal study of five immigrant women in Canada offers a comparative account of participants' experiences with getting access to social networks in order to practice English and gain communicative competence. Norton's view is that it is erroneous to presume that responsibility for creating opportunities to practice the target language lies exclusively with second language learners, since their interactions with native speakers are already structured and often determined by inequitable relations of power. The author suggests that native speakers are more likely to avoid interactions with non-native speakers, rather than provide them with input and help them negotiate meaning in the target language. Norton challenges the view of naturalistic language learning as an ideal process, in which immigrants are immersed in an optimum second language environment and surrounded by supportive native speakers who interact with non-native speakers in an egalitarian and accepting manner. Under these circumstances, the language learners in her study became introverted, sensitive to rejection, and took less language risks. As a result, they did not manage to acquire a high level of English proficiency. Previous research has generally on immigrants

who felt marginalized and were relatively unsuccessful in learning English and gaining meaningful employment.

The current study gives voice to successful adult immigrants to Canada who have achieved their professional goals and acquired a high level of English proficiency. How did they use the environment in order to foster their second language acquisition? Research to date offers few insights into this question.

Research Question

The orienting question that guided this research study was:

What are some ways in which successful adult immigrants to Canada chose to interact with and reshape different environments in order to foster their second language acquisition and acquire high English proficiency?

Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 20 adult highly-proficient non-native speakers, who arrived in Canada after the age of 18 and who are academically or professionally successful. The age upon arrival ranged between 18 and 39 years old, with a group average of 28.95 years and the length of residence in Canada ranged between 5 and 37 years, with a group average of 11.55 years.

Research subjects were selected through theoretical sampling, a common procedure in qualitative research, according to which the subjects are selected based on how likely they are to contribute to the development of an emerging theory (Seale, 2004). The sample for this study was selected to be representative of the “brain gain” immigration wave to Canada of the last two decades. All participants belong to the same category of highly-educated (17+ years), independent immigrants who came to Canada as young adults. The sample included ten professional occupations in Canada (accountant, college instructor, computer professional, data analyst, engineer, geologist, interior designer, network specialist, architect, and technical sales representative) and thirteen first languages (Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Hungarian, Malayan, Marathi, Polish, Punjabi, Romanian, Serbian, Spanish, and Urdu) spoken by participants.

The researcher approached 12 organizations in a large city in Canada (educational institutions and companies that employ internationally-educated professionals) that were likely to know or employ adult English non-native speakers

and that would invite them to participate in this study on behalf of the researcher. The intermediaries at these organizations passed along the invitation to participate in this research study to adult immigrants who were perceived to have exceptional command of English, had come to Canada after the age of 18, had acquired high English proficiency as adults, and were professionals practicing in their field. Potential participants were given the contact information for the researcher and they were encouraged to follow through on the invitation at their earliest convenience.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process consisted of a series of three interviews with each participant. Open-ended and flexible questions were asked in all interviews (Appendix A). A significant amount of time was spent with each participant. The third interview was scheduled to explore in-depth aspects that emerged in the first and second ones. Interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed for data analysis. Participants were given the option to use their own name or a pseudonym. They were also asked to complete a background information questionnaire (Appendix B) to gather demographic information.

The data were analyzed following the principles of the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The process of data analysis was concomitant with the process of data gathering and began immediately after the first day in the field. Through the constant comparison method, three levels of codes were generated. Level I codes, also called *in vivo* or substantive codes, were the exact words that participants used in interviews. Level II codes resulted from comparing and condensing Level I codes. Similar Level I codes or items with shared characteristics fell into the same category. Finally, Level III codes were generated by integrating categories and their properties and raising the data to a higher level of abstraction to generate major themes.

Findings

For the purpose of this study, *instructed environments*, in which language learning is facilitated by a teacher or tutor, are distinguished from *naturalistic environments*, in which language acquisition occurs naturally. A further distinction is made between '*manipulated*' *naturalistic environments* and *unaltered naturalistic environments* in order to emphasize the presence or absence of

learners' involvement in adjusting the conditions of their natural environment. A *manipulated naturalistic environment* was adjusted or molded by second learners to accelerate their language acquisition process.

Table 1 summarizes the qualitative themes associated with learning English as an adult immigrant in various types of environments in Canada, which emerged from the interviews with the participants.

Table 1: Qualitative themes associated with learning English in different types of environments in Canada

Type of Environment	Qualitative Themes
Instructed environments	Enrolling in university or college courses
	Hiring a private tutor
'Manipulated' naturalistic environments	Manipulating or co-creating the every-day environment
	Combining a pragmatic and a learning purpose into the same object
Unaltered naturalistic environments	Seeking social interaction with English native speakers
	Cultivating extroversion/outgoingness
	Taking risks in speaking English
	Second language immersion
	Securing employment that requires a high level of communicative competence
	Seeking communication with English native-speaking co-workers

Learning English in Instructed Environments

Two themes emerged as associated with English acquisition in instructed environments: enrolling in university or college courses and hiring a private tutor. Even if the majority of participants immigrated after they had completed post secondary studies in their native countries, most of them undertook some form of education in Canada.

Participants viewed education as an investment in their second language development, which would give them greater access to the “symbolic and material resources” (Norton, 2000) of their new country. In terms of financial investment, they either used their life-time savings or obtained student loans to pay tuition. All

informants were highly-educated people with an appreciation of the gains in socio-linguistic and economic power that extra-schooling could bring.

Relations of power in society operate both at the macro level of institutions and the micro level of everyday encounters (Foucault, 1980) and immigrants who cannot speak the second language well often feel “powerless” and have limited access to the symbolic and material resources of their new country. In this light, participants’ investment in high-level education can be regarded a strategy for gaining access to more equitable power and resources in their adoptive society.

1. Enrolling in university or college courses

By taking high-level courses in their area of expertise, participants accomplished two goals: they upgraded their professional competence and improved their lexical knowledge. Post-secondary education was generally perceived as an eye-opening experience, leading to the realization that the way to keep up with native speakers peers was to put more effort into conscious learning.

Post-secondary school constitutes a perfect English learning environment, because it stimulates the growth of the context-reduced and cognitively-demanding language needed for academic tasks, but it also offers opportunities to practice the context-embedded, idiomatic, and natural language of ‘here and now’ (Cummins, 1996), because immigrants have an opportunity to communicate with their Canadian-born peers on lived experiences, exchange opinions, and share their views.

Post-secondary education requires extensive reading and participants put extra-time every day into studying the new words and relied on their ability to understand the overall meaning, resorting to background knowledge and underlying proficiency in spite of not knowing all the words in academic texts.

Extensive reading offers enough exposure to a large number of running words in a variety of texts to ensure that even infrequent words reoccur to provide the repetition necessary for lexical acquisition to take place. Intentional vocabulary learning from reading was repeatedly emphasized as essential for long-term lexical retention.

Participant: When I studied for the Engineering Ethics exam, I really improved my English. The first time when I read the book, it was really hard for me, but when I read it the second and the third time and I wrote down all the new words, it became easier. This is something that I usually do: I write down the

new words on yellow stickers that I keep in the book and, from time to time, I go through and read some of those words, and try to remember them and use them in sentences.

Participants mentioned various approaches they took to make the new words salient and easy to remember such as colorful stickers, vocabulary notebooks, and highlighters. The key aspect is that all these visual props were intentionally used to ensure better lexical acquisition.

Highly proficient second language speakers may have learned at least part of the low-frequency words they know not only because they read extensively in a field that interested them, but also because they developed and used a consistent protocol for intentional vocabulary learning from reading. They paid attention to the unknown words in a text, took the time to find their meanings, used visual props as self-made scaffolds to help them internalize and remember those words, and reviewed them at a later time.

2. *Hiring a private tutor*

A way of creating a semi-instructed English learning environment was to hire an English native speaker as private tutor or a non-native speaker with native-like English proficiency and a Canadian background. The relationship learner-tutor was perceived as being one of total trust and openness, with a high percentage of time spent together speaking English, simulating real-life situations, or solving language problems. The tutor acted as a bridge between learners and the target culture and language, providing a sheltered environment that makes the transition between instructed-language learning and naturalistic second language acquisition.

Participant: I had a private tutor for everything like reading, writing, speaking, and listening and I asked her to help me out. In the beginning, I asked her to help me review the grammar and writing, but after a while we just talked in English, we communicated a lot. She is from my country, but she has native-like proficiency and she has been in Canada for a long time... So in the past 5 years, I have improved a lot. I feel quite comfortable to talk about everything.

Most participants found their tutors by putting ads in the newspaper or finding available ones through university bulletin boards. Most tutors were Canadian-born graduate students who were willing to offer informal English training to supplement their income. Many learners saw great benefits for

improving their English proficiency in having a native speaker who acted as a friend and tutor:

Participant: I have a Canadian friend who is also my English tutor. I feel that my English has improved so much thanks to the opportunity of interacting with her and getting feedback.

Other participants mentioned the importance of establishing a trust-based relationship with a native speaker, who could correct their mistakes, without being judgmental:

Participant: I do have one Canadian friend who is my tutor and she corrects me when I make mistakes and I am not afraid of trying out new expressions and words when I am with her. I feel very comfortable with that friend, I don't feel threatened or embarrassed, and it's important to establish a level of trust.

Norton (2000) emphasizes that often adult immigrants to Canada do not get enough opportunities to practice the target language because of inequitable relations of power between native speakers and non-native speakers. In her imaginary example, Madame Rivest employs immigrant Saliha as a maid and in this way she controls both her access to material resources (wages) and to symbolic resources (opportunities to practice the second language).

The situation reported by the participants in this study was exactly the opposite: by hiring native speakers as tutors, they controlled access to material resources, as they put themselves in the position of employers, as well access to symbolic resources, as they created opportunities to practice English, by making native speakers speak and listen to them. Participants obtained the funds to pay for tutoring either by doing manual jobs initially or by using part of the savings they brought to Canada. None of the participants was wealthy in their country of origin, but they all worked as professionals and acquired some material capital, which they spent during their settlement process in Canada. Investing in specialized education and tutoring was seen as worthier than acquiring material goods.

The majority of participants emphasized that continuing their education in Canada in a formal learning environment (graduate education) or an informal one (tutor-mediated) played a major role in traveling the distance from intermediate to advanced English proficiency.

Acquiring English in 'Manipulated' Naturalistic Environments

Two themes emerged as associated with English acquisition in 'manipulated' naturalistic environments: manipulating or co-creating the every-day environment and combining a pragmatic, and a learning purpose into the same object or symbol.

1. Manipulating or co-creating the everyday environment

A recurrent view among participants is that they felt in charge of their English learning process as creators or co-creators of their environment. Most people were aware of how they learn best and took an active role in shaping an effective learning environment in their own home. For some people, it meant displaying the subtitles while watching TV programs in English:

Participant: I created an environment that helped our family tremendously. For all the TV programs that had subtitles, I kept the subtitles so I was learning visually and listening at the same time and, by this correlation, I was stimulating two ways of learning in the cortex.

Other participants found that watching TV without showing subtitles sharpened their listening comprehension ability and helped them pick words aurally:

Participant: In my case the best way was to watch movies without subtitles and listen to the radio.

An awareness of their natural learning predispositions helped most learners create an environment tailored to their needs. Most participants made a constant effort to create the optimum conditions for second language lexical acquisition to take place. That meant readjusting or calibrating the environmental conditions to better serve their purpose. What worked for them at a certain point in their learning journey may have become useless or redundant or even harmful at a later point, so constant and thorough re-evaluation of their progress was necessary in order to reap the highest rewards.

2. Combining a pragmatic and a learning purpose into the same object

Another reported way of maximizing the learning impact of everyday situations was to combine two purposes into the same object or symbol. Besides

telling the day and the time, a wall calendar was used as a systematic vocabulary learning device, because it offered an explanation, an example, and sometimes a picture of the targeted word. Some participants took a pro-active approach to vocabulary acquisition and purchased calendars with infrequent words. They learned at least a few new words every day, just by repeatedly looking at the calendar, while doing something else around the house.

Most participants emphasized that, after their arrival in Canada, they couldn't afford the luxury of putting their life on hold, waiting for their English vocabulary to improve. They still needed to make a living or complete various tasks, while acquiring vocabulary. An effective way of accomplishing both goals was to create visuals and display them prominently, in a space that was used for work. Some of them put colorful notes with the word meanings on the fridge or desk and repeated them while doing house chores or completing work tasks.

The keys to manipulating the natural environment to optimally respond to evolving learning needs are awareness and ingenuity. All participants revealed an awareness of their learning predispositions and commented on their efforts to adjust the physical environment to match their natural tendencies.

Acquiring English in Unaltered Naturalistic Environments

Six themes emerged as associated with English acquisition in unaltered naturalistic environments: seeking social interaction with native speakers, cultivating extroversion/outgoingness, taking risks in speaking English, second language immersion, securing employment that requires a high level of communicative competence and seeking communication with native speaking co-workers

1. Seeking social interaction with native speakers

Social interaction in every-day life English-speaking environments was regarded by most participants as essential for improving communicative proficiency. In order to acquire high communicative competence, non-native speakers need to be exposed to a variety of social situations where they can use English to accomplish tasks.

The findings of this study concur with those of Norton's in that non-native speakers who do not speak the target language well are not easily and naturally provided with opportunities to practice the second language. Participants did not

feel that they were automatically surrounded by supportive native speakers who interacted with them in an egalitarian and accepting manner. Native speakers were more likely to avoid interactions with non-native speakers, rather than provide them with input and help them negotiate meaning in the target language.

Participants in the current study went to great lengths to encounter opportunities to practice English in natural environments. They proved to be extremely ingenious and daring in their approaches and realized that it was important to find ways to make native speakers talk to them. Opportunities to practice the target language were not easily available, but all 20 participants in this study eventually discovered them by finding interlocutors in places such as: coffee shops, malls, playgrounds, children's schools, bookstores, neighbors, and sports clubs.

Participant: I tried to use all opportunities that everyday life offered and make them into language learning opportunities, and I think that in most social environments, there is something one can learn. So I learned to pay attention when people were having conversations on the bus or C-train, or I would start conversations myself when taking my kid to the playground, or going to the gym, or running into my neighbours. I invited my neighbours to dinner many times so we could speak English.

Participant: To learn the language, you have to talk to people... When you go to a coffee shop or to a bookstore, start talking to someone. Some people help when they see that you are trying to pick their language. Go to the mall, wherever, start talking to anybody, it doesn't hurt. What can happen? They are not going to punish you if you make a mistake.

As in the above excerpts, some native speakers were helpful and considered non-native speakers worthy interlocutors who made an effort to learn an additional language. To imply that all native speakers avoid interactions with non-native speakers would be stereotyping.

All participants took charge of their language learning process and were resourceful and perseverant in finding everyday-life environments where they could acquire English in a naturalistic way. They showed great human agency in their efforts to get access to opportunities to practice the target language with native speakers in everyday-life situations.

2. Cultivating extroversion/outgoingness

The participants who were not naturally outgoing or extroverted realized that they could compensate for their personality style through their attitude, by

getting out of their comfort zone, overcoming avoidance and fear, and welcoming social interaction in English:

Participant: In the beginning, the first few years, I was so afraid to speak...When I was in the playground with my child and somebody came by and started to speak, that was like the signal for me to go home, because I was so ashamed. I wanted to sound perfect, I wanted to speak the same way I spoke my first language and I knew my English wasn't at the same level, it wasn't as good as I wanted it to be, so I was running away, but now I'm not scared anymore.

Most interviewees considered themselves more extrovert than introvert and most of them defined their personality using words such as outgoing, outspoken, talkative, and friendly:

Participant: I am outgoing, I reach out, like I meet people on the bus and talk to them. I am comfortable talking to people from everywhere: Canada, India, everybody, and I find interesting topics. So in the past 5 years, I have improved a lot. Now, I feel quite comfortable to talk about everything.

Extroversion was not an innate characteristic of all participants. Some immigrants defined themselves as naturally outgoing and outspoken, while others cultivated an outgoing behaviour in order to improve their English.

Instead of becoming introverted and sensitive to rejection, participants cultivated outgoingness and extroversion, in spite of being at times rejected or ignored. They adopted an "extroverted persona" that allowed them to be someone other than themselves and understood that this consciously deployed manoeuvre would advance their English.

3. Taking risks in speaking English

Another characteristic that most participants considered as an important factor for developing high communicative ability in a second language is the ability to take risks in speaking English in natural environments. Without experimenting with the new words in various contexts, it is virtually impossible to gain high English proficiency. Several participants emphasized that in order to learn how to use the words properly, one needs to take risks in conversations and overcome the fear of making mistakes. Moreover, one needs to be resilient, tenacious, and courageous, make a conscious effort not to get discouraged by jokes about one's language mistakes, and believe that things will get better.

Participant: Don't be afraid to make mistakes, just go out and speak. If you don't know something, just ask, and ask people to correct you, don't hide like I did for a few years, but now I'm not hiding any more. Like what can happen, if you make a mistake?

For some participants, risk-taking implied avoiding isolation in a sheltered first language environment and getting involved in various social situations that require frequent second language use to accomplish communicative tasks. For other participants, risk taking meant experimenting with word uses and becoming comfortable when ridiculed by native speakers for making mistakes or using awkward lexical combinations. The highly proficient second language speakers interviewed went through an experimental phase, in which they made a conscious effort to be proactive and learned to accept or disregard jokes and ridicule.

Participant: Oh, another piece of advice, take risks and use the words, even if you're not sure of what they mean. People may make fun of you or joke. That happened to me many times. It happened, but you just have to be persistent, I guess, and continue to take risks. My English has improved a lot because I took so many risks in using words.

From the perspective of many participants, shedding one's inhibitions, developing a relatively 'thick skin', and risking the possibility of making mistakes is the only way high oral proficiency can be achieved and this requires perseverance and persistence.

The data of this study corroborate Ely's (1986) research findings that risk-taking has a positive impact on second language proficiency, as these learners try out or practice words or expressions they are not completely sure of. In contrast, the findings are inconsistent with the research claim that successful second language learners are moderate or calculated risk-takers who only experiment with words or expressions they have learned (Beebe, 1983), as they do not want to be the target of ridicule. The successful second language speakers interviewed for this study reported that their approach was to keep taking risks in spite of being occasionally ridiculed for imprecise lexical use.

4. *Second language immersion*

An important aspect that came up in the interviews is the awareness that, in order to be successful, one really has to switch mental gears and get to enjoy

'doing things in English', not only to make a living, but actually to live at least part of their private life immersed in a naturalistic English-speaking environment:

Participant: The most important thing would be English immersion. Do not live isolated in your first language environment. If you have only friends who speak your first language, then your chances of improving your English are quite slim. Try to speak English every day at least for a few hours, not only at work, and read the news, listen to the radio, watch TV, do something that you really like, find a hobby, but do it in English.

Most participants acknowledged that it was not enough to use the language for pragmatic or job-related purposes, but that it was essential to be 'in the language', even in one's leisure time:

Participant: One has to be in the language as they say ... Now I am really in the language, as I have lots of Canadian friends and my children have Canadian friends.

Participants felt that the more advanced their second language proficiency level became, the more access they gained to English native-speaking interlocutors and friends willing to communicate with them in English.

The majority of participants did not go to the extreme of giving up their first language at home, but stated that they used English for at least 75% of their time. As an average, they reported that they were immersed in English for at least eight hours a day for their job or studies. In addition, they also reported using English for other non-job-related activities for at least one-two hours a day.

5. Securing employment that requires a high level of communicative competence

In the last decade, many companies across Canada and particularly Alberta have been hiring more immigrants with lower English proficiency than before, due to the booming economy and workforce shortage. The strong market demands determined many employers to hire internationally-educated professionals with strong technical expertise, but relatively low English proficiency. Many participants in this study secured employment for which they did not have sufficient language proficiency in the beginning. They were hired for their professional knowledge and given the opportunity to improve their English on the job. A recurrent attitude expressed in the interviews was the willingness to learn, the desire to overcome obstacles, and the courage to place themselves in challenging work situations:

Participant: One of the best things I've done to improve my English was to take a technical sales job where I was forced to present and describe my products, find new words and new tricks to sell the products. I made my livelihood by using the language.

A recurrent verb that speaks volumes about the impact of the work environment on second language proficiency gains is 'forced'. Many participants found themselves 'forced' to improve their language in order to meet the challenging expectations of a job that required a high level of communicative competence and a lot of interaction. Instead of despairing or admitting that the communicative demands were too high for their language abilities, they took the challenge and used the work environment as a powerful motivator and an opportunity to improve their language.

Many participants noted that the best thing they did to improve their English was to 'jump into the deep end of the pool', by deliberately putting themselves into a work environment where they did not comprehend enough and were not able to communicate effectively in the beginning. They constantly compensated for their low English skills, by putting in many extra hours to complete the tasks, understand the work requirements, and look up the words they did not know. As a result, they experienced a steep second language learning curve in the first two years of their employment.

6. Seeking communication with English native-speaking co-workers

Work interactions with English native-speaking co-workers were viewed as a sure way of improving one's communicative ability:

Participant: Interacting with highly responsible native-speaking professionals in different capacities helped me improve my English. I benefited from a high level of interaction with very qualified and, most of the time, native professionals.

The opposite of the above scenario was also mentioned in the interviews. A job that requires very little and stereotypical verbal interaction was perceived as more likely to hinder rather than facilitate the development of adequate English proficiency:

Participant: If you sit in an office and all you do is work on a computer, not interfacing with anybody, of course you're not going to learn anything. Behind the computer you are not going to learn to communicate, as you have to interact with people... I know smart people who have been here for ten years and still haven't improved their English because they have job behind a computer, in a cubicle ...

Participant: Improving your English depends on the nature of your job. If you have a job as a designer and you just speak for 5 minutes with your supervisor every day, using the same vocabulary, getting the same instructions every day, you are not going to improve your English.

One of the conditions for verbal communication to take place is that interlocutors regard each other as worthy to speak and listen (Bourdieu, 1977, Norton, 2000). Participants in this study managed to command the attention of their listeners and impose reception in order to be regarded by native speakers as worthy to speak. Interestingly, it was not the quality of their language, but their human experiences and perceptions that commanded the attention of their native-speaking interlocutors.

Participant: The first year I came to Canada, I worked in a warehouse. My English improved a lot, because I used to initiate discussions and come up with interesting topics to make native speakers talk to me...

Participant: I used to tell my Canadian co-workers all kinds of stories about my life in my native country and they were curious to find out more. My English wasn't very good but my stories were captivating. Then they opened up and told me stories about their lives and I learnt a lot about Canadian culture and way of living.

Participants' perceptions of their second language acquisition in the workplace emphasize the importance of human agency, resourcefulness, and willpower in claiming their right to learn and speak the target language and in asserting their life experiences, knowledge, and cultural capital as worthy of being shared.

Summary and Conclusions

Both instructed and naturalistic second language acquisition in everyday-life environments and workplaces were perceived to advance lexical development and language proficiency gains. Participants invested in continuing their education as a strategy for gaining access to symbolic and material resources in their adoptive society. They were very creative and meta-cognitively aware in adjusting the natural environment to optimally respond to their evolving learning needs. Opportunities to practice English in natural environments were not easily available to them, but they were ingenious and daring in their approaches and realized that it was important to find ways to talk to native speakers.

They cultivated extroversion in spite of being at times rejected or ignored and kept taking risks in using English regardless of being occasionally ridiculed for imprecise lexical use. All participants felt that they finally managed to impose reception and make native speakers consider them worthy interlocutors. They gradually earned the status of competent second language speakers and asserted their life experiences, perceptions, and knowledge as worthy of being shared.

The highly proficient second language learners who participated in this study possess an innate awareness of how to make the most of the situational factors available to them, which settings to choose and immerse in (classrooms, naturalistic settings, or work environments). In addition, they are endowed with the tenacity to consistently activate the combination of factors that they have discovered to be beneficial, while remaining open to new insights and opportunities and recalibrating their approaches to adjust to their evolving language levels.

The three underlying psychological forces that participants have used to activate a unique combination of situational factors are *awareness* of the available resources, *ingenuity* in gaining access to them, and *tenacity* to consistently employ them in order to advance from intermediate to high second language proficiency.

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APPENDIX A: Sample Interview Questions

1. What is your current in Canada job? What was your occupation prior to immigrating to Canada?
2. How long have been working as a professional in Canada?
3. How would you describe your current level of English as compared to when you first came to Canada?
4. Why do you think you were able to improve your English up to an advanced level?
5. What are the environmental factors to which you attribute your success in acquiring high English proficiency?
6. How did you take advantage or shape the environment to improve your English?
7. How did you encounter opportunities to practice and improve your English?



8. How did you encounter opportunities to practice and improve your English?

APPENDIX B: Background Information Questionnaire

1. Your Pseudonym _____ 2. Date _____
3. Age _____ 4. Gender _____ 5. Mother tongue _____
6. Language(s) you speak at home _____
7. Highest level of education attained: _____
8. Occupation in Canada: _____
9. Occupation in your home country _____
10. How long did you study English before you came to Canada? _____
11. How long have you been in Canada? _____
12. How old were you when you arrived in Canada? _____
13. Do you speak other languages? (Circle one) Yes No
14. How many hours a day do you use English? _____