

“All the Time Learning... Three Months are Equal to One Year”:
Second Language Learning in a Target-Language Community

Saffet Sayin

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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Abstract

Australia hosts thousands of English language learners every year and one of the reasons learners give for this is their belief that living in the target language community naturally avails them of more language learning opportunities than are available in their homelands. In fact, learners actually learn faster and more effectively compared to the limited gains in their respective countries. Believing that the target language community has a strong role in language learning, this research focuses on the factors and opportunities which enable students to develop their language skills in informal settings outside the school.

Due to the vast scope of the research area, six different types of data collection methods have been used so that a wider spectrum in SLA could be investigated. These include an exploration of learner beliefs about their language learning experiences and a study of authentic social activities and linguistic engagements within those activities.

The outcome of this research suggests that language learning is not first initiated “in the head”, but starts with the social activities in which learners participate and the qualities of the linguistic challenges and opportunities within these activities. The research draws on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1962, 1978), ecological approach to learning (van Lier 1999) and register theory (Halliday and Hasan 1985), and also on a range of research within second language acquisition studies.

The study illustrates that language learning occurs in the context of activity-based communication experiences in authentic contexts, and the more the constant challenge and varied linguistic opportunities exist in the learner’s ecology, the more and better the chances to learn language. An overall approach to understanding independent language learning and a conceptual framework for examining informal language learning opportunities, have been developed. The study concludes with some implications for pedagogical practice in English language classrooms.