Social Factors and English Learning: The Case of Some Senior High School Students in Eastern Region, Ghana.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extent to which social factors contribute to the success of English language learning among Senior High School 2 and 3 students in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Existing evidence according to the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) report reveals that learners have difficulties learning English. We examine the extent to which the social context in three environments namely; school, home and the neighbourhood support English learning. Data was collected using questionnaires from 1444 students carefully selected from 75 public schools. This was complemented by data from interviews held for teachers and headmaster/mistresses. Results reveal that existing social activities that support learning outside the classroom are minimal. The community trusts in the school and school personnel to provide the best possible education of English for their children. With the school environment only providing the platform for English usage, there is need for learners to be provided or exposed more to English through activities which can be proposed by a cooperation of stakeholders in the education sector and the community as well.

Keywords: *Social, Factors, English, Learning, School and Home.*

Introduction

The influence of social factors on the acquisition of a second language is evident[1]. Butler and Hakuta (2006) note that social factors have great influence on L2 learning as they uniquely contribute to individual difference in second language (L2) learning. The social cultural contexts they claim, influence the way in which it all occurs. One of the contributing factors that they point out is prior knowledge transfer that L2 learners carry including first language (L2) learner's imperfect knowledge. Thus, transfer carries both negative and positive influences from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1. As a result, they argue that transfer is no longer uni-directional but interaction or cross linguistic influence. On the same thought line, Faltis and Jaconson (1990) mention that "national as well as a local view on the use of more than one language in school and society have a powerful influence on the ways the two languages are distributed and used for learning, which has an impact on how well students become bilingual." Another area of the contribution social factors make towards the shaping of language learning is in the area of acquisition of grammar and phonology. By pointing out that the acquisition of grammar and phonology previously concentrated on non-social mechanisms, Baldwin and

Meyer (2007) argue that social mechanisms are central to the acquisition of the structural aspects of language in addition to other components such as the lexicon.

In another development, other existing research findings that consider social factors and the influence they have on second language learning reveal that indirectly social factors affect second language learning in various ways, namely: the shaping of a learner's attitudes, provision of learning opportunities or support form and motivation. These factors, they argue influence language attainment which in turn influences identity. Such findings reveal that learners are able to develop a positive identity in L1 and L2 if additive bilingualism[2] occurs.

Attitudes towards a language whether it is beautiful, rich, and efficient are often confounded with attitudes towards the users of that language. Grosjean (1982) quotes Hangen (1956) who reiterates that whenever languages are in contact, one is likely to find certain prevalent attitudes of favor or disfavor towards the languages involved. In most contact situations one language is usually considered more prestigious. Those that are rejected are based on various reasons such as; no word value, not productive and no written grammar and does not lend itself to the expression of abstract concepts. This can have profound effect on the psychology of the individuals and on their use of the languages. These attitudes are sometimes directed at the people who use the languages and are therefore judged or stereotyped. Language attitudes are likely to be affected by age, socio-economic status, and gender amongst other factors. Language attitude consequences can be both negative and positive and carry profound effects. It is a widely known fact that language is inherently social and as a result social factors influence language learning at many levels structural (phonology, syntax) and content-related (word meaning), Baldwin and Meyer (2007). Tomasello (2003, 2004) in Baldwin and Meyer in support for this emphasize that the grammatical structure of language is learnt through observation and analysis. Our analysis on the influence of social factors on English learning in the Eastern Region in this chapter is in line with this view in which we investigate the extent in which social factors influence English learning among learners in Eastern Region. *What kind of social factors do we consider in this study?* is the question we first and foremost need to address. In Baldwin and Meyer's discussion on how inherently social language is, they consider three kinds of social factors namely; social input, social responsiveness and social understanding (learners desires, intentions and beliefs). In this study, our scope is on social input and social understanding. Under social input we examine the social environment, namely the home, neighborhood and school to find out the activities carried out that support learning. Such activities (if any) provide for learning situations and opportunities. In these very environments, we also examine learner perceptions about other people's beliefs, learner abilities and learner behavior which fall under social understanding.

The social context model propounded by Spolsky (1989) highlights the fact that social context affects language learning indirectly by shaping the attitude of the learner and providing for learning opportunities outside the classroom. A schematic representation of the model is presented on the next page: *A model of Second language learning* (directly copied from Spolsky (1989: 28). Faltis (2002) mentions that understanding the nature and role of context for bilingual learners is complex and remains understudied. It is along this line and based on

the sociolinguistic situation of learners under study (are bilingual with a dominant language spoken-Twi), this chapter is aimed at answering the following questions:

1. Do learners and teachers acknowledge language learning support from the social environment, namely home and the neighborhood?
2. What kind of home, school and/or neighborhood activities support English learning?
3. Among those that provide the support, which one is highly ranked in support provision? The frequency or the patronage is used to calculate the ranking.
4. What view do learners hold with respect to receiving support outside the classroom and how does this impact on their learning behavior?

The focus of the present chapter, therefore, is on the opportunities the learners of English in Eastern Region have available within the community and/or the type of support they receive from the community. It draws on interviewing learners on the support received and opportunities available outside the classroom. A growing body of research points to this area of language learning and social context research as having been neglected, thus, the justification for this study Newcombe (2007:38).

Acknowledgement of Language Learning from the Social Environment

An examination of the teachers' teaching styles reveals that teachers do not cover all that they need to in the syllabus, instead, they give the learners the opportunity to do some percentage of the learning. The question however, is whether the teachers let the learners know or assume that they know and need to cover up for the remaining portions not covered in class. Teacher feedback on teaching styles statements given reveals their acknowledging learners to receive support from other environments. In a statement to which they responded indicating whether they explain everything to learners in class, 38.9% responded saying very little, followed by 33.3% saying no as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Teacher response on 'I like to explain everything to students'

Response Category	As a teacher, I like to explain everything to the student	
	Count	%
No	6	33.3%
Yes	5	27.8%
A little	7	38.9%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

We take these results to imply that the teachers expect the learners to also contribute to the learning process because majority of the teachers provide few explanations of everything to the students as evidenced in the answers given in Table 1. The question we need to answer then is, *how do the learners contribute to the learning process?* Contribution can be based on an individual basis through self-study or seeking out for reading materials from different sources, or learners can seek help or support from their peers, or relations at home or individuals from the community within the neighbourhood. Based on the fact that human beings are social beings, with this, we argue that learners are fully aware of the sources outside the classroom that they can fall back to. Thus, they acknowledge a different environment besides that of the classroom in which they can also learn English.

Asked whether at home learners should learn by reading newspapers, teachers through their feedback acknowledged social support in learning. The teachers agreed to students reading newspapers at home. 72.2% said yes, 11.1% no and 16.7% said a little, see Table 2. We will assume that those who said no or little had in mind the fact that not all homes can afford a newspaper daily and/or have no idea that the newspapers carry articles that can enhance a learners' English learning. For example, the Daily Graphic newspaper carries articles every Monday on various aspects of English namely affixes, vocabulary, proofreading answering questions in comprehension, summary writing, the use of appropriate question tags, qualifiers etc. (list not exhaustive).

Table 2: Teacher response on 'at home students should learn by reading newspapers'

Response Category	At home students should learn by reading newspapers	
	Count	%
No	2	11.1%
Yes	13	72.2%
A little	3	16.79%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

Asked whether students should learn by watching TV programs in English at home, majority of the teachers said yes, see Table 3.

However, the percentage was lower than that of reading newspapers. We take this percentage to imply that not every home has a TV. The question we pose here too is how many of the programs aired on TV are in English and how many carry activities that learners can learn from? These are questions we answer later on in the chapter. At this point we want to show the evidence from the teachers that acknowledge their social support for learning.

Table 3: Teachers response on 'at home students should learn by watching TV in English'

Response Category	At home students should learn by watching TV in English	
	Count	%
No	2	11.1%
Yes	10	55.6%
A little	6	33.3%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

Using cassettes as support tools to study (see Table 4), studying English books at home (Table 5), talking to friends in English (Table 6) and using English everyday as they shop (Table 7) are indicators the teachers acknowledged as opportunities that support English learning outside the classroom.

Table 4: Teacher response on 'at home students should learn by using cassettes'

Response Category	At home students should learn using cassettes	
	Count	%
No	3	16.7%
Yes	7	38.9%
A little	7	38.9%
No Response	1	5.6%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

Table 5: Teacher response on 'at home students should learn by studying English books'

Response Category	At home students should learn by studying English Books	
	Count	%
Yes	17	94.4%
A little	1	5.6%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

Table 6: Teacher response on 'I like students to learn by talking to friends in English'

Response Category	I like students to learn by talking to friends in English	
	Count	%
Yes	1	5.6%
A little	17	94.4%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

Table 7: Teacher response on 'students to learn by using English in shops and daily life'

Response Category	Students to learn by using English shops and daily life	
	Count	%
Yes	16	88.9%
A little	2	11.1%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

We conclude that from the teachers' point of view that English learning should not be left entirely to them, some support must be given outside the classroom to complement that which

they are providing within the classroom as evidenced from feedback shown in Table 1 through to 7, providing their acknowledgement recognition of social support, while at the same time pointing out the specific opportunities.

The teachers also recognized the role of social support in language learning when they agreed that the home and neighbourhood social environments influence their teaching both positively and negatively. From a positive point of view the teachers unanimously agreed that the social environment plays an integral role in complementing that which is taught in class. However, from a negative point of view the teachers had this to say "*Their interaction with peer and neighbours makes them speak a lot of Pidgin English which affects their performance during English lessons.*"

Acknowledgement of support outside the classroom is also seen in the opinions expressed by the learners when asked what they thought would be the best steps in learning English. Learners were asked to give their opinions on steps they thought must be taken to help them and others learn English successfully. This was an open-ended question and resulting statements given were grouped into eight different groups and the frequency distributions calculated for each group. The groupings are listed below. Learning styles are ranked highly followed by social support:

1. Ban use of local languages and pidgin English and create rules to enforce it: use English language only in school.
2. Provide more reading support such as story books.
3. Provide research facility: library/internet.
4. Teaching styles
5. Learning styles
6. Motivation (from both school and home): guidance, counselling, text book provision.
7. Teacher training/professionals
8. Social support: church, friends, relative's Statistical details of each group are as follows:
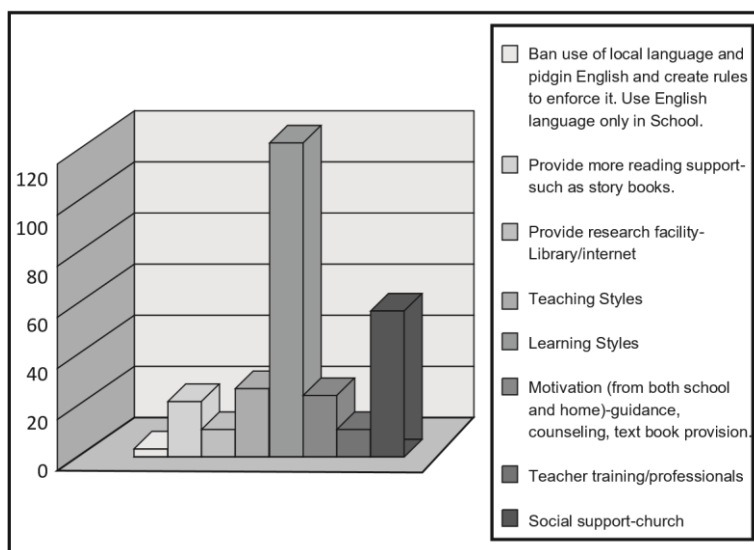

Figure 1: Social Support

Ranking of social support second is an indicator of the expression that outside the class, learners expect to receive support subsequently acknowledging it. The question is: - Is this support available within the communities in which the learners find themselves, and if yes, what kind of individual and/or group activities support English learning? Answers to these questions are dealt with later.

Learners were also given ten options to select from what they thought constituted good language learning. The options ranged from those within the classroom namely; explanations to class to those outside the classroom namely; Conversation practice, Error correction, Language games, listening to/using cassettes, Pair work, Pronunciation practice, Student self-discovery of errors, Using pictures/films and Vocabulary development. Note however, that overlapping is possible in that those techniques labeled outside the classroom can still be used within the classroom. For instance, conversation practice can be done in the classroom as well as outside the classroom. Listening to cassettes, language games, and pair work are active activities that can be employed within and outside the classroom. However, in this case we categorize them as activities outside the classroom and use the results to assess the learner's acknowledgment of support outside school.

Table 8: What constitutes good language learning

Response Category	Constitutes good language learning	
	Count	%
Conversation Practice	624	43.2%
Error Correction	218	15.1%
Explanations to Class	96	6.6%
Language Games	27	1.9%
Listening to Cassettes	15	1.0%
Pair Work	9	0.6%
Pronunciation Practice	84	5.8%
Self-discovery of errors	60	4.2%
Using Pictures or Films	12	0.8%

Vocabulary Development	239	16.6%
Others	15	1.0%
No Response	45	3.1%
Total	1444	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

Conversation practice which was highly ranked demands that learners have individuals who will work together with them to facilitate conversation practice. This in turn implies that the other person must have knowledge of the language in order for them to be able to sustain a conversation or lead the learner in practicing in other forms such as reading texts to polish up pronunciation skills or acquire new vocabulary. But how many individuals do learners have access to and can communicate or hold a conversation with in English besides his or her classmates? How can a learner develop his/her vocabulary outside the classroom? Research reveals that vocabulary development is enhanced through the following methods (list not exhaustive): Wide Reading, Prepared Word List, Word Derivation Method, Contextual methods for Familiar Words, Contextual Methods for Unfamiliar Words, Theme Studies, Dictionary Method, Word Manipulation, From Context and Class Development, Finding Difference in Similar Words, and Getting at the Common Element(s) from an Analysis of Contextual Uses, and Recommended References on Vocabulary Development (Education Resources Information Center-www.eric.ed.gov). How many of these methods do learners in the Eastern Region have access to? Do learners have prior knowledge of helpful methods outside the classroom?

Language input from a social point of view to the learner is crucial for learning to take place as evidenced in chapter four. Having established the learners' recognition for social support in language learning, are there any human activities within the community that can be viewed as input from a social point of view that support learning English as a second language? Can these activities be viewed as offering adequate support? What degree of access to social experiences allows for negotiation of meaning and corrective feedback? To answer these questions, we first begin by providing a brief description of activities that support English learning within the community in Ghana from a general point of view.

Media and other activities that support English Learning

Both the print and electronic media carry articles and programs that support English learning. The Daily Graphic newspaper for instance as stated earlier on caries articles on various aspects of English grammar written by Africanus Owusu-Ansah every Monday and occasionally, other individuals write articles on English on some other days. TV programs such as 'mind your language' which is also aired on radio teaches learners how to pronounce English words as well their use (grammar). But how many learners watch such programs, and how much positive impact (with respect to contributing to learning English) has the program made on learners? Is

a question that remains to be answered. How much are these activities patronized and/or how accessible are they to learners? These questions define areas we did not cover, but are quite significant.

Activities that support English Learning Discussed

Block (2003) states that while it is right for researchers to distinguish between classroom, naturalistic and foreign contexts of learning a second language, they should bear in mind that none of the contexts provides learning opportunities in a predictable manner. Knowing that learners as well as teachers recognize learning opportunities outside the classroom as discussed in section 5.1, our goal in this section is to discuss activities and/or opportunities that support learning in environments outside the classroom. However, these activities are not necessarily meant to be predictable or consistent. Our aim is to primarily identify and discuss the activities and also find out the patronage.

Learners were given three environments namely; school, home, neighborhood and were asked to rank the environment in which they speak English most. The rationale for asking this question was to be able to identify out of the three environments given which one had activities that fostered speaking English and thus, would be used as activities that support English learning outside the classroom. Results indicate that the school environment was highly ranked as evidenced in Table 9 below. 88.4% of the total number of respondents stated that they speak and/or use English most at school, which was followed by 5.9% home environment and 2.5% within the neighborhood. The range between the school and home environment is 82.5% too wide a range that we conclude that it is only within the school environment that students get to learn as well as practice speaking English. No doubt about it since the school environment is where teaching and learning takes place.

These findings are consistent in the sense that the learners are learning English in an environment where they have access to other learners as opposed to being in an environment where there is no accessibility either to other learners or native speakers of English. Thus, use of English is within the school environment. These results suggest that students' attitudes and motivation towards learning English are enhanced when they are within the school environment where they feel supported in their efforts to learn. These findings are consistent with findings in learning styles where students ranked listening to the teachers as the most highly ranked learning style.

Table 9. Environment in which English is spoken

Response Category	Which environment do you speak English?	
	Count	%
School	1277	88.4%

Home	85	5.9%
Neighborhood	36	2.5%
Others	23	1.6%
No Response	23	1.6%
Total	1444	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

To further investigate any other activities within the community or human activities that support learning, the learners were also asked to state individuals that help them solve English exercises given to them by the teachers as homework. They were given options from which they should select namely: self, teachers, peers, family members and neighbours. Results tabulated in Table 10 reveal that 66.1% do it themselves and get no help from another person. Those that stated they receive help from the teachers were 11.9% and from their peers 13.8%, followed by 4.0% from family and 1.4% from the neighbours.

Table 10: Solving of English exercises

Response Category	Who helps you solve English exercise?	
	Count	%
Self	955	66.1%
Teacher	172	11.1%
Peers	199	13.8%
Family Members	58	4.0%
Neighborhood	20	1.4%
Others	17	1.2%
No Response	23	1.6%
Total	1444	100.0%

Source: Field Survey 2012.

Out of these options we take help received from teachers, self and peers to fall under the school environment. Added together brings the total to 91.8% support received from within or the community that make up the school environment, as opposed to 4.0% from family. We do not conclude here that there is little parental support offered to the learners, because we did not go

into examining the educational background and/or activities of the parents or individuals within the community. However, research shows that educated families are more involved with their children's formal education. Research carried out shows that parental involvement, behaviour, and expectation influence a child's academic outcome (Lindholm-Leary 2001). With the 4.0% support, it is possible that learners under study could be from homes where the parents are not educated and thus, there is no way they can offer any support since they themselves are not literate. However, families from all situations and background, regardless of formal education of the parents and/or guardians, and regardless of the ability or class of the learners, can use strategies to encourage and influence their children's education and development. Bruner's (1975) research endorses the idea that linguistic support provided during a one-on-one social contact with a parent or other adult is crucial to language learning. On a more general note, there is less expectation of the learners' opinion on social support. Why? We think this is so because the learners are learning English in an environment in which English is not spoken, but rather the local language. This makes us conclude that the local language is more dominant and widely used than English among the learners. Based on the evidence that Twi is the dominant local language, and teachers stating that learners like to use Twi more than English, we explore factors that lead to the dominance of the local language and more specifically Twi. Learners acknowledged among the benefits of successful learning and speaking English the fact that one can get a job after school, can reach a wider community all over the world amongst others, one would expect an aggressive campaign and/or the desire and aggressive use of English available at any opportunity. History teaches us that in any colonial control, the culture and the language of the conqueror is imposed on the conquered in order to promote the language. Normally the language of the conqueror is an economically powerful and/or language of upward mobility and the other language less powerful economically resulting to the acculturation into the powerful language. However, it is not always the case. English for instance, is the official language in most countries, but there are cases for instance Kenya, where the forceful use of English is feared to be killing the use of Swahili. Even though the perception is known, practically what is on the ground is not so. The majority of the population use Swahili in offices and business replacing the official use of English. The same scenario seems to be going on in Ghana. With the official status given to English, most business transaction and office communication amongst other are carried on in the local language of the individual involved.

Results on attitudes towards the English language indicate that learners carry a positive attitude even though some gave comments on their not using English for fear of being laughed at. Teachers also noted that some students do not even attempt to answer questions in class and some are not motivated at all to study English because colleagues laughed at them in class whenever they used wrong English words and did make ungrammatical structures. Some students said that even within the community, if one spoke English, they would hear comments such as 'brofo!' which in some cases made them not to be served, for instance if in a shop buying something for being labeled as a show off. Such comments from the community, some of which are also made at home create fear in learners who are trying out every means to gain competence in English. Thus, the only solution is to be like everybody. Speak the local

language. What factors contribute to the dominance of Twi and/or more use of the Twi language in Eastern Region? Societal attitude towards the use of English, multilingualism in general (language contact), education policy, deep rooted cultural preservation values, cognitive processing in bilinguals (language choice and code switching).

Even though English is the official language, research reveals that 46% of the population in Ghana is illiterate. With this figure, one would not expect a 100% attitude and/or practical evidence of the use of English for official purposes. In a multilingual setting, attitudes exist towards the use of languages. Thus, societal and community ideologies about language learning impact the learning. In a multilingual setting, the status a language carries whether political, social or economic as well as the level of proficiency will determine its use by speakers who may use different languages in different settings.

Conclusion

Indeed, we conclude from the evidence given that both learners and teachers acknowledge English learning activities outside the classroom from the social environment namely, the school, home and the neighborhood. This is evidenced from the teaching styles used by the teachers in which they propose for learning activities outside the classroom to complement that which they cover in the classroom. This evidence is confirmed when teachers state that they do not teach all they have to in class, but rather expect learners to complement their teaching to maximize their learning. The teachers do this through their affirmation that learners can learn more by reading newspapers while at home, watching TV in English, using cassettes, study English books, talk to friends in English and use English in shops and daily life. The learner's viewpoint on learning styles results reveal evidence of acknowledgment and/or recognition of learning support outside the classroom. They acknowledged social support and conversation practice to support English learning. However, an examination of existing social support activities is minimal and/or less within Eastern Region only covering one TV/radio program 'mind your language', and articles that appear in the Daily Graphic on the grammar of English. On the other hand, learners mentioned the school environment as one in which they use English most. With the minimal activities that support learning outside the classroom, we hold the view that the community trusts the school and school personnel to provide the best possible education of English for their children. With the school environment only providing the platform for English usage, we conclude that learners have been provided with good exposure to their local language.

There is the need for learners to be provided with or exposed more to English. Therefore, we recommend for the sensitization of the community to offer more activities to support English learning to complement that which learners receive in the classroom since learners already have good exposure to their local languages. Such activities can be proposed by a cooperation of stakeholders in the education sector and the community putting their heads together to design activities such as language learning cultures in which students receive training in learner autonomy with support groups from the community on student chosen topics such as sports, and cooking. The education sector should also let the community members and parents know that to some extent they are responsible for creating contexts that learners can

rely on for English learning outside the classroom, so that socially, the home as well as the neighborhood environment can play a role in language learning, an ideology both teachers and learners hold. Languages are used to promote bilingualism. In Ghana, English as the official and language of education and the local languages taught in each region. Each language however, carries its social historic dimensions of power and utility for society. Thus, between English and Twi, there is a difference between the significance of acquiring a second language and the language being acquired. Because there is less and/or no contact with speakers of English outside the classroom, coupled with the fact that English is taught 'academically' as a subject rather than a communication tool, gaining proficiency in English is an instrumental one. Thus, students are expected and/or expect to acquire high levels of English, the language of power, business and education, while at the same time the very learners and their communities are pressured to acquire high levels of the dominant local languages, because the local languages count and everyone knows this. Thus, there is need for education stakeholders to recognize this difference and implement policies and/or practices that will help promote gaining proficiency and competence in both languages.

Notes

1.   Loveday (1982) carries examples drawn from Rubin (1968), Lewis (1965), Gal (1979) and Taylor, Meynard & Rheault (1977) which indicate learning Spanish as a second language in a Guarani setting, French in a Welsh setting, English in a Celtic language setting and French learning in an English setting in Canada respectively all showing the impact of social factors in learning a second language.

2.   Additive bilingualism is possible if the learning environment values both languages and allows learners to develop a positive identity in each.

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