

# Research on Effect of Investment in Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills

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**Abstract:** *This case study analyses the student's investment of BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) at a school in the Los Angeles. In terms of the investment, this case study explores the relationship between the community, motivation, and the investment. This paper includes a series of observations and interviews in the School of Abram Friedman Occupational Centre for ten weeks, focusing on the ELD beginning level student named Roberto Hernandez Perez. The data gathered includes several week's class observation, the students' hands out, interviews of the students, his teacher, the school administrator, and his relatives. Overall, I conclude that Roberto's learning environment and social network of community support his investment. His motivation also matches with his high investment.*

**Keywords:** *BICS; Investment; Motivation; Community*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Investment in BICS

This paper aims to understand the community and motivation in BICS of an adult training school student, Roberto in terms of the investment. This theoretical focus, as well as an analysis of community, motivation, and other external factors, will aid in explaining his investment as a second language learner. Relying on the weekly observation of Roberto's performance in class, and his completed assignment, I conducted to assess his investment. I also made use of the interviews, the activities in class and his notebooks to analyze his community and motivation. Participant, School, and Community Context.

### 1.2 Case Study Student

Roberto Hernandez Perez is 48 years old, with Overall performance ELD Level 1-Beginning. He was born in Mexico, worked, and lived in Los Angeles for 30 years. His first language is Spanish. He has two sons, who speak Spanish with him at home but English at school. He has been attending the course for 5 months, starting in December. Students take four tests of listening, reading, speaking, and writing after the program. Based on their performance in the assessment, students are divided into 6 levels. Each class has specific objectives, and lesson grows harder. Students develop Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills at an early level. They develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) at a higher level. For beginners, the instructor will use Spanish and English in class. For advanced learners, the instructor only speaks English. Most lessons are given through traditional teaching approaches and the cognitive approach. The instructor uses the direct teaching approach, computer-assisted language learning, and task-based teaching.

### 1.3 Demographics of Community, School, and Classroom

Roberto attends the classroom of Beginner ELD, where all students are adults, living in Los Angeles. There are 25 gender-mixed students in class total, who are all from Hispanic community. Most of them are above 30 years old and working after class. There are five classes each week. Each class lasts for four hours, starting at 8:00. The School of Abram Friedman Occupational Center is located in 1646 S Olive St, Los Angeles, CA, 90015. There are representatively 86.1% Hispanic or Latino, 8.73% African American, 2.43% White, 2.41% Asian, 0.14% Native American studying in school [1] (Abram Friedman Occupational Center, 2018). Due to the relative number of language learners, I search for the community information below. In the downtown neighborhood in Central Los Angeles, there are 36.7% Latino, 22.3% Black, 21.3% Asian, 16.2% white. Mexican (23.1%) and Korean (3.6%) are the most common ancestries.

With average household income \$15,003, the High percentage of residents over 25 years old with less than a high school diploma [4] (Los Angeles Times, n.d). Most students share a similar identity, language proficiency, background language, and discourse. The same level students make similar progress in language proficiency.

## **2. Literature Review**

My theoretical focus is the investment of English proficiency in BICS as influenced by the community and motivation. BICS defined by Cummins, refers to basic interpersonal communication skills, which separates from the academic language proficiency. The conversational language skills discussed in this case study is the conversational fluency. It represents the ability to continue a conversation in familiar face-to-face situations, which involves use of high-frequency words and simple grammatical constructions. [2] (Cummins, 2005). As interpreted by Norton (2010), under the structure of sociologists, investment is the meaningful connection between a learner's motivation and engagement to learn a language, and their changing identity. [6]

In this case study, it will concentrate on the relationship between community and investment. Community, defined by Support students to draw on the social networks of their families and communities as well as identify students' multiple identities to support investment in language learning as emergent multilinguals [5] (Jenifer, 2019). This case study will analyze the social networks and the language learning environment of the community. A number of recent research projects, drawn from diverse regions of the world, are illustrative of the ways in which particular pedagogical practices in language classrooms can offer students opportunities to draw on their multiple identities, promote their investment in learning [6] (Norton, 2010, p. 362). For social networks, the construct of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex identity, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction [6] (Norton, 2010, p. 354). In the study of immigrant women in Canada, she also develops the construct of 'investment' to better understand the relationship of language learners to the target language [6] (Norton, 2010, p. 354).

Furthermore, this case study also explores the connection between motivation and investment. Following the post structuralist approach to social identity, Norton points out that the distinction between investment and motivation. The concept of motivation described as currently taken up in the SLA literature conceives of the language learner as having a unified, coherent identity [7] (Peirce, 1995, p.5). One function of learner's motivation is the access to the target language community [7] (Peirce, 1995).

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Data Collection**

I used several approaches to gather data for the best understanding of identity in my case study. First, I made interviews with the student, his teacher, and school administrator. I recorded their responses during the interview. In order to be objective and unbiased, interviews mainly are consisted of open questions, avoiding leading questions. Besides, I followed and asked my case study students the same questions several times after class. Second, I observed the class and my student's learning process. I took notes of the lesson activity, his performance, and teacher's feedback. Furthermore, I wrote down other student's behavior for comparison. Third, I analyzed his final test. At the end of the semester, he took the tests of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. I compared his results with prior results.

### **3.2 Results and Analysis**

Based on poststructuralist theories of language, my analysis examines Roberto's social networks, learning environment and motivation, exploring how those factors impact his investment in second language learning.

This first sub-claim of the case study claims that the Roberto's community of language learning environment stimulates his second language learning in BICS in the context of investment. Based on my class observation, the pedagogical practices in language classrooms reinforce Roberto's learning. The first evidence is that Roberto can complete the tasks in class independently, meeting the requirement. For example, after the teacher applies the strategy of total physical response to teach students the vocabulary about action, Roberto can accurate pronounce and tell the meaning of those target words.

Roberto's language learning enhanced the evidence of BICS's investment including his quotation from the interview. From our interview, Roberto said, "I like the activity in class. I can practice. The conversation about questions in class is the same...when I'm in supermarket. I can learn how to use. The teacher often tells about life here. I have the *casi s ñil pasado* (Spanish). It's very interesting." As stated in the interview, the teaching method in class such as information gap offers Roberto the opportunity to practice oral speaking and listening. Besides, the approach considering the social context in real life helps Roberto apply knowledge and realize the practical value. Hence, when he participated in the class with a familiar topic, he has a high investment and builds a sense of identity.

Apart from Roberto's progress and interest, his high investment reflects in his active participation in class. Roberto has the highest attendance rate in class without leaving school earlier. He is willing to help the absent student with their courses. When he explains the knowledge in the prior class, he makes use of the approach such as modelling which the teacher applied. In language classrooms, pedagogical approaches can not only offer students opportunities to draw on their multiple identities but also promote their investment in learning [6] (Norton, 2010). Roberto's learning environment enhances his knowledge, motivates him, and offers him a sense of identity. Hence, Roberto's high investment in class is associated with his language learning environment.

The second sub-claim of the case study illustrates that Roberto's community of social networks supports his second language learning in BICS in terms of investment. The benefits of a closer social relationship with others lead to Roberto's high investment in BICS. One obvious evidence of his high investment is that he has a notebook recording his pronunciation mistakes and unfamiliar expression from the daily conversation. He did the note-taking out of self-improvement, which is not required by the courses. He will collect and mark his repeated mistakes for practicing.

Roberto's investment in extra assignments results from the social relationship, connecting with the commentary from his son and himself. His son mentions, "At home, my dad only asks me whether I finished the homework, or how is it going at school. Sometimes we talk about soccer but in Spanish. He will try to speak English with me now. Even though he makes some mistakes, I will explain it to him. We spend more time together." Roberto said "I learn English for better knowing my sons, and their life." According to two interviews, his son is willing to help him with his language learning in BICS. The process of learning makes them share more common in social identity. With the strong inclination to maintain a better relationship with his family, his high investment becomes more evident, aiming to make the progress of BICS.

Aside from the desire and the interaction with family, he also has more sense of identity in his working community. He was the part-time uber driver. Before attending the course, he sticks the sign of "don't speak English" at the back of his seat. He seldom communicates with English speakers. However, currently he chats with passages about weather or daily life. From the comments which he received on the app, passages encourage him to keep practicing and give him positive feedback about his oral speaking. When the language learners speak for exchanging information [7] (Peirce, 1995), Roberto's active intercommunication with others accords with his high investment in BICS. He has a high affective filter to involve into the society.

The last sub-claim of this case study aims to explain that Roberto's motivation for BICS matches with his progress in BICS within the framework of investment. According to Roberto's note-taking and performance in class, and my interviews with him, I make the conclusion that Roberto's investment in BICS is high. The first evidence is that Robert has completed all 10 assignments of simple grammatical constructions with an average over 90% accuracy rate. For a part-time student who has to keep working as a driver after class, the number is significantly high for completion rate and correct rate.

The reason why Roberto's performance of assignments as an indication of high investment in BICS is coming response from the interview with Roberto. In the conversation with him, he said that he took the class including the learning activities and assignments seriously. He said, I come to the school to learn English. I pay for the course for learning, not *juego* (Spanish) play. My son and daughter, they all can speak English. I want to learn well to talk with them. Sometimes I have bad memory. I a *menudo* (Spanish) often forget some words and *pasado* (Spanish) the past tense. I repeat.. and practice after class. *Y repaso los comentarios del profesor* (Spanish). I see the notes from the class... and practice speaking. According to the quote from the interview, Roberto values the English learning opportunity in class. He has a clear and specific goal for studying. He reflects on his performance and be aware of his weakness. With this motivation in mind, he attaches importance to the assignments to enhance his acquisition.

Except for reflection and expectation, Roberto also associates the identity with other classmates in class. Roberto actively participates in group work with classmates. They practice oral speaking of the

dialogue in the textbook. During the break time, he questions the classmates in Spanish about what he does not understand. Roberto's high investment in BICS and activities as a result of his positive attitude towards others, as well as feeling motivated. According to Norton (2010), the needs, desires, and negotiations of students are integral to their investment in the target language [6] (p.355). Roberto's high motivation for BICS development is in accordance with his investment in second language learning. Thus, he has a high affective filter in class, which matches Krashen's affective filter hypothesis [3] (Krashen, 1982).

#### **4. Discussion**

##### ***4.1 Conclusions and Recommendations***

To conclude, I found that Roberto's investment of BICS is affected by the multiple factors of community and his motivation. First, Roberto's language learning environment makes him engage in language comprehension and construction, supporting his investment. Second, the shared identity of language closes the social connection between Roberto and others, which in turn stimulates his further investment. Third, Roberto's high investment accords with his strong motivation in improving his BICS.

Regarding the instructional program provided for Roberto, it is beneficial for building the learner's investment in the following aspects. First, the program applies differentiation that it divides students into six different levels. This distinction makes the program to design an appropriate course and select the proper material for learners with different language proficiency. Second, the program employs responsible and experienced instructors with certification. In the program, the instructors make use of various pedagogical approaches for language learning. For example, the instructor in my class uses the oral-situational approach and the communicative approach to improve students' listening and speaking. After class, instructors will gather to discuss their teaching methods, which aims to improve students' implicit and explicit knowledge.

I make some recommendations for the teacher and Roberto to support his further language development. First, drawing from Norton (2010), learners' investment should be conforming with the understanding and construction of the material [6]. Similar to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, to mediate learners' investment, the teacher should follow the principle of gradual improvement. Some of the formal newspaper reading is beyond students' capability, which may prevent them from further investing. The teacher may use informal reading like the advertisement instead. Second, we need to examine learners' multiple communities and understand who can and who cannot be imagined as a legitimate speaker of a particular language [8] (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p.595). Even though most student's first language is Spanish, they have various motivation and background. In class, the teacher should pay attention to the students who feel alienated. The teacher may employ strategies to explain the knowledge, catering to different learning styles. For example, when the teacher explains the vocabulary, she may use the pictures, action and the sound. Third, there are some suggestions for Roberto's future learning. His pronunciation is partly influenced by language transfer of his first language. He should pay attention to the difference of the dissimilar pronunciation between Spanish and English such as the pronunciation of b. Except for learning grammar knowledge in class, he could expand his horizon of culture and history of America to build this identity.

##### ***4.2 Personal Reflection on Case Study Experience***

As a teacher, I will consider whether I provide the available learning environment for learners' investment. First, I should design the activity to meet the lesson objectives. For example, for vocabulary teaching, I can teach semantic maps to connect the target word with relevant words. Second, students should be actively engaging in the lesson given. For instance, students are more interested in class with popular songs and TV shows.

##### ***4.3 Limitations of the Study***

The fact that this is a case-study cannot be generalized to other language learners. The study applies constrained methods for collecting data. Due to the limited time of the 10-class observation, the data gathered is insufficient as well. The purpose of the study is narrow in the deep understanding of the language learner with particular a topic.

## Appendices

### (1) Appendix A

Research Question for Case Study Student:

Hi! I'm Zhihui Zhang. I come here for observing the class in the following week. I choose you as my case study student. Now I have few questions for you. If you don't understand my questions, I will repeat it in Spanish. Te elijo Como mi estudiante de estudio de caso. Ahora tengo algunas preguntas para ti. Si no entiende mis preguntas, las repetiré en español.

- What's your name?
- How is going with you today?
- How old are you? When did you come to the USA?
- Who do you live with? Do they speak English?
- What do you do? Do other people in your company speak English?
- Why do you want to learn English? ¿Por qué quieres aprender inglés?
- How long have you participated in the program? Do you attend any other program before?
- How long will you plan to learn here?
- For speaking, listening, reading and writing, which parts do you have the most difficulty with? What other difficulty do you meet in learning? ¿Qué otra dificultad encuentras en el aprendizaje?
- Which section do you make progress after learning here? What activity in class you like the most? ¿Qué actividad en clase te gusta más?
- What do you do after class for learning? How do your family help your learning?

Thanks for your patience and time. Have a good weekend.

### (2) Appendix B

Research Question for Teacher of Case Study Student:

Hi! I'm Zhihui Zhang. I'm a graduate student from the TESOL program of USC. I really appreciate your time for this interview.

- First, where are you born? What is the nationality of your parents?
- What other languages can you speak except English?
- Are you always living in Los Angeles? Where have you been in the USA?
- Which university do you go to? Which subject do you major in?
- What other job do you do before?
- Why do you choose to teach English? Why do you want to teach adults?
- Tell me something about your teaching experience. How long have you been teaching adults? Which certification of teaching do you get?
- What kind of class do you prefer? Traditional class or Interactive class?
- What language do you speak in class? Will you use Spanish?
- What do you think of the students' absence? How do you adjust your lesson plan for different levels of students?
- What material do you use? Where do you find those materials?
- What exams do students take in the ESL class?
- What is the major problem of adults in L2 learning? How do you usually help them?
- Thank you so much for being here.

Administrator of Case Study Student:

Good morning! My name is Zhihui Zhang. I'm a graduate student from the TESOL program of USC. In this semester, I will go to school for class observation. Thank you for coming here today. I did some search online about your school. There are various programs here such as automotive technology, business education. However, today I will focus on the program of English as a Second Language.

- How old are students? What is their first language?
- How many students in one class? How many teachers in this program?
- What is the schedule of the program? How many students for one semester?
- There are different levels of class. How many levels?
- How are students evaluated?
- How do you receive students' feedback? What kind of feedback have you received?

Thank you for your time.

Son of Case Study Student:

Hello! My name is Zhihui. I'm a graduate student in USC. This semester, I choose your father as my case study student. Now I need you to help me answer some relevant questions.

- How is going with you?
- What do you usually talk with your father?
- What language do you speak at home?
- How do you help your father with his studying?

Thank you for your time.

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