Teaching purposefully: Considering the perspectives of foreign language learners in language skill development

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Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are the four foundational skills in language learning. In language learning classrooms, students are guided to achieve proficiency in all or some of these skills in order to be able to use language effectively. Using a qualitative approach, the study investigates the perspectives of some students of Swahili, a Less Commonly Taught Language (LCTL), about their language skills. Specifically, the study investigates the goals of the students regarding the development of their language skills, how the students develop their language skills, and the challenges they face in honing their language skills. The study revealed that the purposes for which students enroll in the language class and the challenges they face with the development of their language skills influence their perspectives on the various language skills. Thus, the findings confirmed existing research that students have diverse reasons for learning a language. The study encourages teachers of Swahili-as-a-foreign-language (SFL) to purposefully guide students in developing their language skills by considering the students' perspectives.

Keywords: Less Commonly Taught Language; Skill Development; Swahili; Swahili as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Foreign language teaching and learning has evolved over the years. The evolution is evident in the existence of the various methods, approaches, styles, and techniques in foreign language teaching (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007, 2008). In recent times, there has been a shift in language pedagogy from emphasizing grammar to emphasizing communication (Baltus & Belhiah, 2013; Brown, 2016; East, 2016; Fakoya & Yuka, 2014; Farrell, 2015; Kanakri, 2017; Kazemi & Azimifar, 2019; Kissau, Wang, Rodgers, Haudeck & Biebricher, 2019; Kramsch, 2014; Piazzoli, 2014; Pregot, 2013; Saniboo & Sinwongsuwat, 2016; Wyatt, 2014). Most foreign language instructors guide students to become effective communicators and not grammar experts who cannot communicate effectively. Similarly, most foreign language classrooms are changing from teacher-centered to student-centered classrooms where the interests, demands, and needs of students are the focus of the teaching

experience (Al-Zu'be, 2013; Garrett, 2008; Geisli, 2009; Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014; Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Salmani Nodoushan, 2009, 2011). Thus, foreign language teachers must consider the perspectives of their students in their instruction. Instructors must ask themselves why the students are learning the language and what they want to gain from studying the language. They need to know if students are interested in being able to communicate orally with native speakers of the language for personal reasons, or they are fulfilling a requirement of some kind. These are some of the vital questions that should be considered by foreign language instructors in teaching.

This study investigates the perspectives of students of a Less Commonly Taught Language (LCTL), specifically Swahili, on the development of their language skills. Although numerous studies have been conducted on the Swahili language (Khromov, 2006; Marten, 2000; Riedel & de Vos, 2017; Schadeberg, 2001; Spinner & Thomas, 2014), most of such studies have focused on grammar. There is no known study that has investigated the perspectives of Swahili students on the development of their language skills. This study will, therefore, fill a gap in the literature as far as teaching and learning Swahili as a Foreign Language (SFL) is concerned. Further, the study will contribute to effective instructional planning and implementation in SFL classrooms. Although generalizability is not the intention of this qualitative study, the findings could be transferred to other related cases in the teaching of SFL and other Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs).

2. Background

2.1. Learning LCTLs

LCTLs are languages other than English, French, German, and Spanish that are taught in schools in the USA (Janus, 2000; NCOLCTL, 2019; Robin, 2013). Some of these languages include Arabic, Chinese, Dari, Hindi, Russian, Swahili, Turkish, and Urdu. Approximately nine percent of Americans study such languages, according to the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages (NCOLCTL, 2019). Thus, studying LCTLs is not as popular as studying Most Commonly Taught Languages (MCTLs) (Furman, Goldberg & Lusin, 2007; Long & Uscinski, 2012; Murphy, Magnan, Back, & Garrett-Rucks, 2009). However, teaching and learning such languages is very important to US government for the purpose of strengthening national security (Malone, Montee, & DiSilvio, 2010; Sanatullova-Alison, 2008; Wang, 2009). It is, therefore, not surprising that the National Security Agency provides a federal grant to support the teaching and learning of LCTLs (Malone, Montee, & DiSilvio, 2010; Wang, 2009). Due to the relatively smaller number of students who study LCTLs, Walton (1992) explains that students who decide to learn

LCTLs may have a different motivation and purpose in comparison with those who decide to study MCTLs.

Past studies have shown that foreign language learners enroll in language classes for various reasons (Bernat & Gvozdenko,2005; Husseinali, 2006; Murphy, et al., 2009; Smith & Strong, 2009). The interest and desire to learn about other people's culture, travelling abroad, career opportunities, and fulfilling a degree requirement are some of the key reasons students enroll in language classes (Gallagher-Brett, 2004; Kozar & Sweller, 2014; Magnan & Tochon, 2001; Ossipov, 2000; Price & Gascoigne, 2006). Specifically, some studies have investigated why students decide to study LCTLs (Geisherik, 2004; Husseinali, 2006; Walker, & McGinnis, 1995; Yang, 2003). These studies have indicated that the reasons students decide to study LCTLs vary. They include, but are not limited to, heritage affiliation, better understanding of the culture of the target language, and the desire to communicate with speakers of the language.

Few studies have also investigated the perspectives of students regarding the development of their language skills which includes speaking, writing, listening, and reading (Badshah & Khan, 2017; Darancik, 2018; Sakui & Gaies,1999). Badshah and Khan (2017), for instance, explained that while some foreign language learners may want to develop their speaking skill to be able to speak with native speakers, others may want to learn the language to become proficient writers. In another study, Darancik (2018) found that the skill that most foreign language learners want to develop is speaking. Thus, these past studies have shown that foreign language learners have various goals regarding their language skills.

Overall, language learners, including LCTL learners, have various goals for learning a language. Their perspectives affect how they approach language learning; therefore, knowing the perspectives of language learners is significant. Teachers who know their students' perspectives are in a better position to teach purposefully and appropriately to suit students' goals (Badshah & Khan, 2017; Murphy, et al., 2009; Tse, 2000).

2.2. Teaching LCTLs

The method, technique, style, or approach a teacher uses in the classroom determines whether the perspectives of students will be considered in teaching. There are various methods and approaches to language teaching: Grammar Translation Method, Audiolingual Method (ALM), and Total Physical Response (TPR), just to mention a few (Salmani Nodoushan, 2006). This paper focuses on one approach in particular, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

CLT is an approach that is popular in foreign language teaching in the US; foreign language classes are mostly taught using the CLT approach (East, 2016; Kramsch, 2014). CLT is an approach that upholds the perspectives of language learners. Not only does CLT emphasize communicative competence but also it offers language learners the opportunity to become autonomous learners (Brown & Lee, 2015; East, 2016; Harmer, 2007; Littlewood, 1981; Richards, 2006). Richards (2006) explains that, in order to develop language learners' communicative competence, the purposes for which the learner wishes to learn the target language should be considered. When a language student leaves the classroom and goes into the real world, they should be in the position to use the language they. Thus, the perspectives of students cannot be overlooked in LCTL classrooms. As teachers develop their syllabi and plan their lessons, the purposes for which students decided to learn the language should be considered. This will ensure that students' communicative needs are met. In addition, considering students' perspectives will lead to better instructional planning and implementation.

3. Method

The study investigates the perspectives of SFL students on their language skills: speaking, writing, reading, and listening. This study was conducted in a university located in the mid-western part of the US. In this university, various LCTLs including Swahili are studied. At the time of this study, there were three levels of Swahili taught at the university: elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The total number of students who were enrolled in the various levels at the time of the study, the Spring 2018/19 semester, was about 30. Most of these students were enrolled in the elementary level with the fewest in the advanced level class.

The study, specifically, investigates the goal(s) of these SFL students regarding their language skills, how these students develop their language skills, and the challenges they face in honing their language skills. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the goals of SFL students regarding the development of their language skills?

- How do SFL students develop their language skills?

- What challenges do SFL students face in honing their language skills?

A qualitative methodology was employed to answer the research questions. Specifically, audio-recorded interviews were used as the method of data collection to get first-hand information from the participants. Through interviews, the participants were provided with the opportunity to share their perspectives regarding the development of their language skills.

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were purposefully selected. To be eligible to take part in the study, a participant needed to be a college student who studies Swahili as a foreign language. Studying Swahili as a foreign language means learning Swahili in an environment where Swahili is not the native language of the people. Therefore, studying Swahili in the US is considered studying Swahili as a foreign language.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study to ensure that participants were selected strategically in line with the purpose of the study. Specifically, the participants of the study were students who had studied Swahili for at least a semester at the university. The students were at diverse levels of language proficiency. The participants included two elementary-proficiency-level learners: Hodari and Nuru (pseudonyms), two intermediate-proficiency-level learners: Maua and Asani (pseudonyms), and one advanced-proficiency-level learner: Neema (pseudonym). At the time of the study, the advanced-proficiency-level class had only one student enrolled in it which explains why there were two participants for each proficiency level except for the advanced. The number of participants in this study might seem relatively few; however, a qualitative interview applied to a sample of participants who have experienced similar conditions provides power to the stories of such relatively few participants (Seidman, 2006). Thus, conclusions drawn from interviewing the participants could be transferred to other similar settings. Further background information on the participants is provided below:

Participant 1: Hodari

Hodari was an international student from Kuwait who was majoring in Linguistics and minoring in Political Science at this university located in the mid-western part of the US At the time of the study, she was a senior in college. She spoke Arabic, which was her first language, and English. Also, Hodari understood Turkish but could not speak the language. She was an elementary-proficiency-level Swahili learner who started studying Swahili in Fall 2018. Prior to enrolling in the Swahili class, Hodari had attempted studying Spanish.

Participant 2: Nuru

Nuru was also an elementary-proficiency-level Swahili learner who started studying Swahili in Fall 2018. She was an American, and English was her first language. She studied Spanish in high school but was not fluent in the language. At the time of this study, she was a freshman at the university.

Participant 3: Maua

Maua started studying Swahili in Fall 2017; thus, she was an intermediate-

proficiency–level Swahili student. She was a senior at the university at the time of this study majoring in Environmental Biology. She was American and spoke only English.

Participant 4: Asani

Asani was an intermediate-level Swahili student who began studying Swahili in Fall 2017. He was in his final year at the time of conducting this study. He majored in Criminology and African American Studies. Asani was from the US. He spoke only English. Similar to other participants, Asani had studied Spanish before; however, he did not speak the language.

Participant 5: Neema

Neema was the only advanced-proficiency-level learner of Swahili at the mid-western university at the time of the study. Neema was an American; She spoke English. Apart from Swahili, she was studying Arabic at this same university. She started studying Swahili in Fall 2017. Her major was in Development Geography and African studies, and she was a senior at the university when this study was conducted. Prior to studying Swahili, she had studied French at high school.

3.2. Procedure

To ensure that participation in the study was voluntary, first I contacted the teachers of the various Swahili classes to seek permission to visit their classes and explain the study, its purpose, and significance to the students. After the teachers granted permission, I visited the various classes to talk about the study. Afterward, a recruitment email was sent to the teachers to forward to their students. In the email, I asked potential participants to contact me via phone or email. Eventually, some of the students voluntarily contacted me, hence became participants in the study.

After a student had agreed to participate in the study, they were purposefully asked to choose a date, time, and location for the interview. This was to ensure that the participants were as comfortable as possible. The interview was conducted in English. It began with rapport building conversations and proceeded to asking some semi-standardized questions which focused on getting answers to the central research questions. Some of the semi-standardized questions used in the study are as follows:

- When did you start studying Swahili?
- Why did you choose to study Swahili?
- Tell me about your journey with Swahili so far.
- Walk me through a typical day in your classroom.

- Tell me about the language skills you are interested in developing the most and why.
- How do you build/develop your language skills?
- How do you practice your language skills outside the classroom?
- Tell me about your overall experience with developing your language skills.
- What are some challenges you face in developing/honing your skills?

3.3. Analysis

Guided by the purpose of the study, I carried out a thematic analysis to transform the conversation I had with the students into findings. The analysis took the following procedure. First, I transcribed the audio-recorded conversations. Then, I studied all the transcripts to distinguish between data which were relevant to the study and those that were not. Afterward, I copied and pasted the responses which were relevant to the study onto a new Microsoft Word document. This was to ensure that the analysis focused on the data that were relevant to the research problem. Subsequently, I highlighted the emerging themes with different colors: red, blue, and grey. Red represented data related to the participants' skill interests, blue represented data on how participants honed their skills, and grey represented data on the participants' challenges.

4. Results

To investigate the perspectives of the SFL students regarding the development of their language skills, this study was guided by three research questions. Below, I provide the answers to the research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the goals of SFL students regarding the development of their language skills?

The SFL students explained that they enrolled in Swahili classes for various reasons; they explained that they have different goals regarding their language skills. The reasons that the participants provided for deciding to study Swahili include recommendations from others, the desire to work in East Africa, the desire to communicate with Swahili speakers, traveling to East Africa, and interest. Maua, an intermediate-proficiency-level learner, explained:

> . . . I chose Swahili because I heard good things about it. I heard it was interesting and fun . . . .

Similarly, Hodari, one of the students in the elementary-proficiency-level class

shared:

> I had some Omani friends who spoke Swahili, and they encouraged me, because I tried Spanish before and Spanish did not really work for me, so I decided to try Swahili.

Thus, Maua and Hodari explained how their decision to study Swahili was influenced by recommendations from others. Asani, the other intermediate-proficiency-level learner, cited interest as his reason for deciding to study Swahili. Asani said:

> In one of my African American Studies classes we learned like during the black [inaudible] movements in America, they started teaching Swahili to the people and I thought it would be interesting to go back and learn the language.

The other elementary-proficiency-level learner, Nuru explained that her purpose for studying Swahili was related to her desire to travel to an East African country. She commented:

> I really wanted to go to Tanzania . . . so, I figured that learning the language will be a good step to do that and like I wasn't just a lazy American going for the tourism. I actually wanted to understand everything there . . . .

The advanced-proficiency-level learner, Neema decided to study Swahili because of her desire to communicate with speakers of Swahili as well as her aspiration to work in East Africa. She explained that, prior to enrolling in her first Swahili class, she got an opportunity to travel to Tanzania to work at a water engineering office. However, because she did not know the language, she could not interact with the inhabitants of the community as she really wanted. Neema shared:

> I had this really great opportunity to shadow this water engineering office . . . I really wanted to talk to the people that were benefitting from the project to see what their perspectives were, but I couldn't talk to them. Because I didn't really know the language, the trust wasn't there. I realized that I really wanted to work in that area, so I needed to learn the language . . . .

The responses provided by the participants show that the students enrolled in the SFL classes for diverse reasons. Thus, although students may be sitting together in the same language class, they are likely to have different and/or

personal reasons for enrolling in the class. Therefore, teaching purposefully by taking into consideration the students' goals and perspectives will lead to effective instruction.

In line with the varying goals for deciding to study Swahili, the participants explained that they have different goals regarding the development of their language skills. Some participants shared that they are interested in developing all the language skills and others indicated their interest in developing a particular skill. Not only did the participants indicate their goals regarding the development of their language skills, but also they rated some skills as more important to them than others. For instance, Hodari said:

> I think speaking is the skill I am most interested in developing because of my major and interest. I am thinking of working for the embassy or something like that. I am also thinking of doing some volunteer work so the speaking skill will be more beneficial.

Although Hodari mentioned that speaking is the skill she is most interested in, she expressed her interest in other skills and further stated the skill she has less interest in developing. She shared:

> I am interested in all the skills, but I think the least important skill for me is writing because I don't think I will need to write in Swahili with regards to whatever I am going to do in the future.

Nuru also shared that, although she did not have any goals regarding the development of her skills before enrolling in the elementary class, currently she is interested in developing all the skills. She, however, stated that the listening skill is what she currently wants to build the most. Nuru commented:

> I want to learn and be fluent. I want to have a good understanding with speaking and reading. And I guess writing. All of them. I am really bad at listening . . . . I definitely need to work on that. That's my worst area. So maybe that's my goal; to be better at listening.

Having studied Swahili for at least a year, the intermediate students, Maua and Asani explained how they have been able to develop some skills but feel deficient in others; hence their goal is geared towards building or developing the skills that are currently deficient in. Asani explained:

> I think I am pretty good at reading and then I am decent at writing, but listening is where I have problems . . . . Listening is really hard for me to grasp . . . .

Maua also shared:

> I think I am better at writing and speaking. I can definitely speak more, and writing is probably the easiest because I have the most time to think through it, but in real life situations I would probably need it the least. Listening is the most difficult for me and I would like to improve that.

Neema, the advanced-proficiency-level learner, pointed out that the goals regarding the development of her skills have evolved over the years. Further, she shared that there are specific skills she desires to develop the most. Neema explained:

> Well at the beginning I wanted to be able to speak with the people and be able to understand them. Now there are so many things I am interested in, like to be able to read and understand proverbs and hidden meanings. But overall I would say it is listening and speaking that is most important to me.

Even though Neema disclosed that listening and speaking are very essential to her, she added that she does not disregard the other skills.

Overall, the differences in the goals of the students regarding the development of their language skills are consistent with the diverse reasons why they decided to enroll in a SFL class. The results emphasize the significance of teaching students purposefully by considering their perspectives and goals.

Research Question 2: How do SFL students develop their language skills?

When a language learner is studying a language in a second language context where the language is predominantly spoken in the environment, such an environment plays a key role in the student's skill development. However, in a foreign language context, a supportive classroom environment and the student's personal initiative are important means of skill development. In answering the second research question, the participants highlighted how their teachers guide them in developing their skills through classroom lessons which are geared towards building the language skills. For instance, Neema commented:

> I am taking advanced level courses with two separate teachers. I started last semester by studying grammar on Mondays, speaking and listening on Wednesdays, and reading on Fridays . . . .

Similarly, Nuru shared that her teacher guides the class in building all their language skills through various classroom activities. Commenting on the skills that her teacher focuses on in the classroom, Nuru said:

> I think it is very general, and then whatever skill we are having issues with, she'll definitely focus more on those.

Beyond the guidance given by the Swahili instructors, some of the participants mentioned that they take personal initiatives to practice and develop their language skills. Some participants revealed that they use mobile phone applications, and other participants described their utilization of Swahili videos and audios to support the development of their skills. Regarding the use of videos and audios, Neema, for instance, said:

> I always listen to Swahili music. All the time! Also, I watch some Swahili shows or movies. I like reading proverbs and seeing if I can understand the meaning.

Similarly, Nuru shared:

> A friend asked me to watch this Tanzanian show on *Youtube* so I do that.

Nuru, however, admitted that she usually uses *Quizlet*, which is an application, to further practice her skills. Another student who also mentioned the use of an application was Hodari. She commented:

> I have downloaded a Swahili language app where they send me a new word every day. They have different categories: basic words, numbers. I go and review them almost every week so I can keep up.

Maua and Asani, the two intermediate-level learners, did not mention that they use either applications or media to support their skill development. Maua pointed out that she likes to review the notes she takes in class and Asani stated that he does nothing personally to develop his skills.

The participants, therefore, cited two major ways by which they develop their language skills: classroom instruction and taking personal initiatives, such as using applications to study.

Research Question 3: What challenges do SFL students face in honing their language skills?

The major challenge that most of the SFL students mentioned that they encounter is inadequate exposure to the language outside the classroom. This

was what Nuru had to say concerning this challenge:

> . . . a lot of people don't know what Swahili is so that's kind of hard.

Maua also said:

> I don't know anyone else that speaks Swahili.

Interestingly, Neema had a different experience to share concerning exposure to the language. She said:

> For me, I think I am very lucky because I have that one on one time with my teachers. They are also my good friends, so I am around them a lot, which is quite different from when I was in the elementary class. Also, I do a lot of things with other Swahili speakers . . . .

As mentioned earlier, Neema is the only student enrolled in the advanced-level class, therefore, her situation is different from the other students in the elementary and intermediate-level classes. Neema, however, mentioned that the main challenge she faces is the difficulty understanding a Swahili speaker that she meets for the first time and tries to engage them in a conversation. She shared:

> The main challenge has been to be able to recognize words. When I meet somebody new that I have never spoken with, it takes me a little while to understand when they are talking, and I want to get better at navigating that.

Apart from not getting enough exposure to the language, Nuru acknowledged that another challenge to honing her skills has been the ability to memorize vocabulary.

Therefore, the challenges that the SFL students mentioned they face in honing their language skills include inadequate exposure to the language, difficulty in memorizing vocabulary, and difficulty in understanding native speakers.

Overall, the results indicated that students enroll in the SFL classes for different reasons; hence they have diverse goals regarding their language skills and the development of such skills. Further, the results showed that the students have two main ways by which they develop their skills: teachers' support or guidance and students' personal initiatives. In addition, the results indicated that the students have some challenges that impede their efforts to hone their language skills. The main challenge they pointed out was lack of exposure to the language outside the classroom.

5. Discussion

This study was, primarily, conducted to investigate the perspectives of SFL students in the development of their language skills. Not only did this study seek to fill a gap in research as far as teaching and learning SFL is concerned, but also to explain why it is necessary for SFL instructors to teach purposefully by taking into consideration the perspectives of their students.

The study revealed that SFL students enroll in SFL classes for a variety of reasons, which corroborates previously conducted studies that found that students engage in language classes for various reasons (Bernat & Gvozdenko,2005; Geisherik, 2004; Husseinali, 2006; Murphy, et al., 2009; Smith & Strong, 2009; Yang, 2003). Further, the study revealed that the SFL students have various goals regarding the development of their language skills. While some students view a particular skill as more important to them than other skills, other students have the goal of building all the four skills. This finding is consistent with the findings of Badshah and Khan (2017) and Darincik (2018). Another finding in relation to the students' skill development is that students in the intermediate-proficiency-level and advanced-proficiency-level classes had goals of developing specific skills. Having studied the language for at least a year, these students had developed some of their language skills to some extent but were struggling in other language skills. Therefore, their goal was to become better at the skills they were currently struggling in. Interestingly, the elementary-proficiency-level learners expressed interest in all of the skills; however, they had an overriding skill they were interested in. Therefore, every SFL student mentioned a skill which they were interested in currently developing. Overall, the varying interests and perspectives of the students regarding their language skills were related to two things: (1) the students' overarching goals for deciding to study Swahili, and (2) the challenges the students face with the language skills. These varying perspectives and interests demonstrate the need for SFL teachers to consider their students' perspectives when teaching.

Further, the study showed that teachers play a critical role in the development of the SFL students' language skills. On their own, students are likely not to be able to acquire or develop these skills, especially in a foreign language context. Therefore, the teacher needs to support the students in that regard. Goh and Burns (2012) explain that the role of the language teacher is to structure their students' learning experiences in a way that will support their language skill development, in and outside the classroom. In this study, the students commented on how the teachers support them in the classroom. Outside the classroom, some students mentioned that they take personal initiatives to support the development of their language skills. Other students shared that, apart from classroom instruction which provides them with the

opportunity to engage in classroom related activities to develop their skills, they do nothing personally to develop their skills. It is likely that such students do not realize that successful language learning and skill development does not only depend on teachers; it depends on learners themselves as well (Goh & Burns, 2012). Teachers should, therefore, encourage students to take responsibility for developing and improving their language skills. Although getting exposure to a language in a foreign language context may not be as easy as getting such exposure in a second language context, encouraging students to take such responsibility would expose them more to the language.

6. Conclusion

Investigating the perspectives of SFL students in a university located in a mid-western part of the US, the study confirmed the findings of past studies that students enroll in language classes for various reasons. Further, the study revealed that the reasons why students enroll in the SFL classes, coupled with the challenges they encounter with their language skills, inform students' perspectives regarding the development of their language skills. Thus, the study admonishes teachers to teach purposefully in order to be able to help students meet their goals regarding the development of their language skills. Although this qualitative study is not intended to be generalized, teachers who teach Swahili as a foreign language in other settings as well as instructors of other LCTLs could find the results and suggestions useful for their classrooms. In the future, a similar study could be conducted using a quantitative approach. Also, the perspectives of SFL teachers regarding the development of students' language skills could be investigated in the future, since this study investigated the perspectives of students.

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