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## WHO ARE THE SIGNIFICANT OTHERS IN THE LEARNING PROCESS?

The article provides a brief insight into the position and influence of the so called 'significant others' in the learning process. To be more specific, the paper aims at distinguishing an individual who helps the learner to learn a language, presenting the characteristics of the 'important figure', and defining the roles the person plays in learners' lives. The research findings emphasize a valuable contribution and effort the important figures take in order to shape learners' emotional states and attitudes towards learning, the language itself, and the TLC.

### **Introduction**

The process of learning has long been thought of as principally directed by the teacher, and strongly influenced by the classroom procedures. A number of research studies and investigations, therefore, present a deep insight into the role, position and actions taken by the teacher in the school environment.

Harmer (1997:235ff.), for example, fully explains the duties of the teacher known as a controller, organizer, resource, prompter, etc. Janowski (1998:37), on the other hand, highlights the importance of the so called teaching policy comparing the classroom situation to the stage or scene of action, and the teacher to the actor who is the main author of the script and director of learner's behind and onstage behaviours.

Important as the function of the teacher may seem, the learning process is strongly determined and influenced by the learner's both in and outside school environment understood as an individual or a group of people playing a central part in students' educational development.

Thus, the aim of this paper is, in broader terms, to measure the influence of the learner's environment on the learning process, identify the individuals that enter into the relationship with the learner, and gather information on the frequency and quality of their actions contributing to successful and effective learning.

## The interactionist view of the learning process

The secret of effective learning, as manifested in social interactionist theories, “lies in the nature of *social interaction* between two or more people with different levels of skill and knowledge.” (Williams and Burden, 1999:40). The experiences both parties exchange take the form of a stimulus – response pattern of behaviour encouraged and initiated by the one with most knowledge, that is the teacher or *other significant people* in the process of learning.

### Place and role of significant others in the process of learning

Other significant people or significant others, as Vygotsky and Feuerstein (in Williams and Burden 1999:40) observe, are more competent adults or more proficient peers who play an important part in learners’ lives by shaping and enhancing their learning experiences. The learners, on the other hand, being more precise about who the significant others are, confine themselves to the family environment, and admit that it is most often their *parents, brothers and sisters* as well as *distant relatives* who help and encourage them to learn a language.

Parents, as the students report, are given the first place because of respect they enjoy among their children, and trust the children put in them.

Older brothers and sisters are said to be of great assistance in view of their good command of language which brings about their readiness to help in different learning tasks.

Finally, distant relatives are, as students point out, their cousins (English Department students) or aunts (English teachers) they can always turn to when they need a particular language handbook, or want to practise their spoken English.

Different as the age, sex, social status, education and the actual support of those important figures may be, their role remains intact, and amounts to, as Feuerstein (in Williams and Burden 1999:68) emphasises, helping learners

- to acquire the knowledge;
- to learn more;
- to tackle problems;
- to function properly in a particular culture and its changing society and;
- to meet new, emerging and unpredictable demands.

Diversified as the duties of significant others are, they all encompass the idea of helping the learners to become autonomous and individual thinkers, and thus are organised around promoting and directing learning experiences.

### Ways of promoting learning experiences

The actions that, generally speaking, aim at enhancing learning and wider education of the students are twofold and involve *shaping learners’ emotional states and attitudes* as well as *shaping learners’ language experience*.

A set of behaviours involved in the first group is centred upon forming learners' personality traits and positive feelings about learning so that they are, as Wright (1991:28) notices, co-operative, competitive, achieving and sensitive language users. In view of the roles the students are expected to adopt, the task of significant others consists in

- instilling learners' positive self-image;
- encouraging learners' positive self-esteem and;
- boosting learners' self-confidence.

The part the significant others play in learners' lives when developing their linguistic competence constitutes *supervising their learning outcomes*, and *posing challenges* together with *setting short and long term learning goals*. The former one, to be more specific, comprises helping learners with homework, correcting mistakes, lecturing, revising for a test, etc. The latter, on the other hand, is connected with equipping students with extra language materials, e.g. additional learning tasks, newly published specialist dictionaries or supplementary coursebooks, and providing them with information on effective learning strategies to enhance decision and initiative taking in the future.

Clear and precise as the duties of significant others are, it is vital to emphasize that both the scope of their actions as well as the frequency of their assistance depend a great deal on, and change with learners' motivation for learning a language, increasing emotional and intellectual maturity, linguistic development or such factors as a change of the learning environment or place of work.

## Research design

This section is a description of all the actions and procedures undertaken by the researcher starting from the reasons for doing the research in question, and the main area of concern to tools and subjects used in a month project.

## Research questions

The study has been designed to provide answers to the main research question, that is Who are the significant others in the learning process?

In order to clearly identify the so called personal profile, roles and duties of the important figures in learners' lives, some additional questions should be considered. They are as follows:

- What actions do the significant others take to promote and enhance learning?
- What actions do the significant others take to shape learners' emotional states and attitudes towards learning?
- In what ways do the significant others shape learners' language experiences?  
and
- How often, and when, do the learners turn to other significant people for assistance and advice?



## Research method

Since a questionnaire is very often referred to as a reliable source of collecting detailed information about a particular subject, I intend to make it an integral part of the research. As this method creates as stress-free atmosphere among the respondents as possible, and gives them an opportunity to reflect and ponder over the subject matter in question, I expect to gain the accurate data representing students' honest responses, and constituting the answer to all the questions listed above.

## Questionnaire

The questionnaire prepared for the purpose of this study consists of two parts, namely *Background information section* and the second part entitled *Significant others in the learning process*.

Background information section, as the heading suggests, aims at gaining information about the subjects. This involves collecting the so called factual data concerning the students (e.g. age, sex, occupation, etc.) as well as an inquiry about their learning experiences covering proficiency level, place and number of years studying English. However, the issue that is given special attention in this part touches upon the reasons for mastering the English language reported by the learners. Here, the statements included range from e.g. fashion and fun centred options to school curriculum or professional career development factors. Different as these aspects are, they are believed to determine the type and level of students' motivation for learning, and constitute a justification for learners' responses placed in the subsequent section of the questionnaire.

The second part of the questionnaire, that is *Significant others in the learning process* consists of three statements.

In statement no 1 the students are asked to choose an individual or a group of people who, generally speaking, help them with their learning. The alternative answers involve the learners' home, school or work environment, and together with a short explanation provided create the image of a significant person.

Statement no 2 allows for taking a closer look at those who direct and monitor students' learning experiences, and is organized around gaining information on the reasons why the people mentioned by the subjects are of great assistance to them. This time, the possible answers are connected with such aspects as the contact the significant others have with native speakers or the TLC, professional qualifications they hold or language skills they possess.

Finally, learners' answers to the third statement are to provide information on the ways the significant others take to promote learning, and, consequently define the roles most frequently ascribed to them. These include developing learners' affective states and forming their attitudes towards learning (e.g. by encouraging positive self-esteem, risk taking, or boosting learners' self-confidence) as well as shaping learners' language experiences by means of e.g. controlling their learning outcomes, posing challenges or setting goals. Students' choice dictated by a preference and fre-

quency scale is expected to reflect the actions most often repeated by the significant people, and show likes and dislikes the informants express about a student – significant other interaction.

## Subjects

The study's sample consisted of 14 secondary school students (group A) and 12 English evening course participants (group B).

Group A, to be more specific, was represented by a team of 16 year-old grammar school students (eleven females and three males) studying English at the pre-intermediate level in the first form of a grammar school in Bytom, Poland. The majority of learners came across the English language prior to secondary education. The process of learning, in most cases, lasted three years and took place in the junior middle school they attended. Almost one quarter of the subjects, however, mentioned taking additional English lessons at private tutorials, and the other two admitted participation in an English evening course.

Group B, on the other hand, involved seven female and five male adult learners aged 20 – 39 constituting members of different professional groups. These comprised teachers, university students, accountants, economists, sociologists as well as an engineer and a clerk all taking part in the pre-intermediate English course at "Yes" English Language School in Ruda Śląska, Poland. Here, the learners' previous language experience, in most cases, covered the period of two to three years. Two students, nevertheless, mentioned a more frequent contact with English through university classes simultaneously with the evening course, and the other two stated frequent visits to the English-speaking countries.

As regards the reasons for studying English, the answers provided by learners of both groups did not reveal any considerable differences between them.

Table 1. Reasons for learning English

	agree		disagree		don't know	
	A	B	A	B	A	B
1. Fashion	14%	42%	14%	33%	72%	25%
2. A must	14%	–	72%	–	14%	–
3. School / university curriculum	21%	25%	72%	75%	14%	0%
4. Work requirements	–	16%	–	68%	–	16%
5. School promotion	14%	–	86%	–	0%	–
6. Matura exam	21%	–	79%	–	0%	–
7. English studies	0%	–	86%	–	14%	–
8. A well-paid job	72%	84%	0%	16%	28%	0%

9. Career development	–	25%	–	75%	–	0%
10. Fun	50%	75%	22%	25%	28%	0%
11. Travelling abroad	7%	50%	93%	50%	0%	0%
12. Contact with native speakers	22%	16%	0%	0%	78%	84%
13. Stay abroad	22%	–	28%	–	50%	–
14. Mass media understanding	50%	50%	7%	0%	43%	50%
15. Other reasons (communication)	72%	86%	0%	0%	28%	14%

As it can be seen in the table, the majority of respondents, regardless of age and profession, learn English because of fun and enjoyment it brings to them. Some other reasons mentioned by the subjects concerned fashion, the necessity of mass media understanding, willingness to communicate, and endeavours to get a well-paid job. Surprisingly enough, only about 20 percent of those in question present purely instrumental motivation, and learn English to e.g. pass to another class (A) or raise their qualifications (B).

Similar as the students' attitudes towards the language and the TLC are, the issue of significant others, however, shows clear disparities between two teams of subjects involved in the project. These refer to:

- An individual the students consider a knower and supporter in their learning process
- The status, educational background and personal attributes of a significant other
- The role a significant other plays in learners' lives.

## Data presentation and analysis

The results of the study closely correspond to the aspects listed above and are discussed under the following subheadings:

### Choosing a significant other

This section, as the title suggests, is devoted to selecting and, consequently, justifying the choice of individuals who, according to students, play an important part in their lives.

Out of nine alternatives placed next to statement no 1 (parents, brothers and sisters, distant relatives, neighbours, classmates, fellow workers, playground friends, supervisors, best friends), the students were asked to circle three possibilities reflecting the most influential individuals in their process of learning a language. Their choice revealed the following percentage rate:



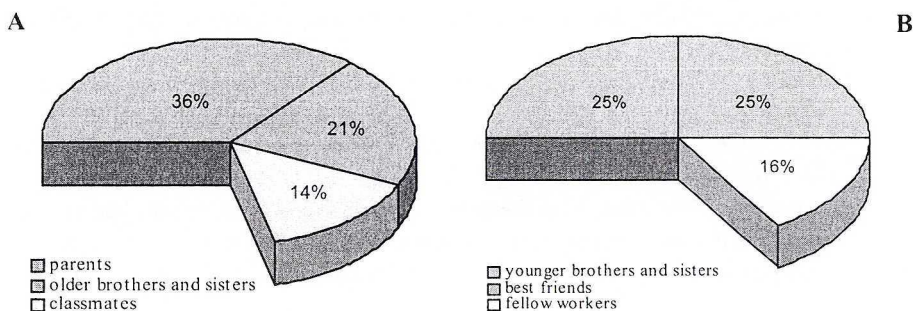


Fig.1 Significant others in the learning process

The majority of students in group A, as it turned out, are fairly successful in English thank to their parents who encourage them to learn by “stressing out the advantages and importance of English these days, and comforting whenever something goes wrong”.

The second place, as the figure indicates, is given to students’ older brothers and sisters because of good command of English they have and a wide range of materials they are ready to share.

Classmates, on the other hand, who were placed in the third rate, help students learn a language both in and outside the classroom; working together on lesson tasks in the former case and revising for a test or exchanging notes in the latter.

The remaining 29 percent of students’ answers constitute four separate sets of responses expressed by four different students. They include:

- an aunt who, being an English teacher, is “an absolute authority on language matters” according to one of the respondents;
- a family living in Egypt who gives the learner an opportunity to travel abroad very often, and, thus, encourages him to master English he uses there during his stay;
- a pen-friend who, by means of sending letters, helps the student practise writing skills and motivates him to make progress and;
- an Internet friend who, as the student points out, functions as his private language adviser helping him with homework, a language puzzle or simply developing his speaking skills when talking on the Internet.

In the group of adult learners (B), on the other hand, it is the subjects’ younger brothers and sisters who most often help them by learning. The kind of support the learners are provided with this time consists of “sharing language experience and sometimes learning materials with a person who has been learning a language for a longer period of time.”

Learners’ friends and fellow workers mentioned by the informants in the second place, are believed to play equally important role in learners’ lives. The former ones believe in positive outcomes of students’ learning experiences, and, thus, help them build up their self-confidence. The latter, on the other hand, by means of tough com-

petition they hold at work, make the learners attend English courses and raise their qualifications.

The remaining 34 percent in this case refer to other significant people described by learners as:

- a boyfriend who is an English Department student, and “always sets an example to follow”;
- an Internet friend who, as in the previous case, being a native speaker of English, “solves different language problems the student comes across” and;
- a nobody listed by two students meaning “there is no one they learn for”.

### Constructing a profile of a significant other

Having defined a person who, to a certain degree, is responsible for learners' learning experiences, the subjects were requested to give more detailed information concerning all the people they rely on when learning. The questions in this part (see Table 2) ranged from the qualifications the significant others have to their contact with the TLC as well as mastery of language skills.

The results are the following:

Table 2. A profile of a significant other

A significant other is	agree		disagree		don't know	
	A	B	A	B	A	B
1. a certified English translator	0%	0%	100%	100%	0%	0%
2. an English teacher	7%	0%	93%	100%	0%	0%
3. an English Department student	0%	8%	0%	92%	0%	0%
4. my coursemate	36%	25%	64%	75%	0%	0%
5. an FCE, etc. holder	21%	33%	64%	67%	15%	0%
6. employed in an English-speaking country	7%	8%	93%	92%	0%	0%
7. a frequent visitor to the English-speaking country	64%	67%	36%	33%	0%	0%
8. a friend of the British / American citizens	50%	50%	50%	50%	0%	0%
9. a winner of English in and out-school contests	21%	33%	79%	67%	0%	0%
10. the best student in the class / course	43%	50%	57%	50%	0%	0%
11. very good at English	64%	50%	36%	50%	0%	0%
12. good at speaking exercises in English	64%	84%	36%	16%	0%	0%



13. good at writing in English	64%	84%	36%	16%	0%	0%
14. good at vocabulary in English	64%	84%	36%	16%	0%	0%
15. good at English grammar	64%	84%	36%	16%	0%	0%

As it can be seen in the table, the students of both groups express fairly similar opinions concerning the qualities their significant people possess. They are as follows:

- Good command of English including both receptive and productive skills (according to about 80 percent of the informants)
- Familiarity with the TLC by means of a personal contact with the native speakers of English, travelling a lot on holidays or business meetings listed by 60 percent of the students
- Outstanding test results in all school subjects mentioned by about 50 percent of the subjects in question.

As regards the educational background and qualifications of those who play an important role in subjects' lives, it is the school or course knowledge they rely on in most cases. Two people, however, as the students emphasize, are highly competent in English; one being an English teacher and supporter of an A group learner, the other an English Department student helping one subject from group B.

### Defining roles of a significant other

Having established who the significant others are, the students' proceeded to answers incorporated in statement no 3 (see Table 3), and concentrated on defining the roles the important figures perform. Apart from the actual responsibilities, the learners indicated the frequency of actions taken by significant others. Finally, they were asked to present the attitude they have towards each of the aspects listed. The answers made up the following percentage figures:

Table 3. Roles of significant others

	I						II							
	like		dislike		neutral		always		often		seldom		never	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Correcting homework	93	50	7	50	0	0	100	0	0	50	0	50	0	0
Correcting mistakes	93	50	7	50	0	0	7	0	93	50	0	50	0	0
Revising for a test	100	50	0	50	0	0	0	0	79	50	21	50	0	0
Explaining language rules	100	100	0	0	0	0	0	14	50	86	50	0	0	0
Communicating on a test	100	50	0	50	0	0	0	0	50	0	50	0	0	100

Lending English books, etc.	50	100	50	0	0	0	0	0	50	86	50	14	0	0
Lending language handbooks	50	100	50	0	0	0	0	0	0	86	50	14	50	0
Preparing additional materials	86	100	14	0	0	0	86	0	14	0	0	50	0	50
Encouraging individual work	86	100	14	0	0	0	0	0	79	0	21	0	0	100
Recommending difficult tasks	79	100	21	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	21	50	79	50
Informing about language contests	86	50	14	50	0	0	7	0	93	0	0	0	0	100
Recommending English-speaking TV programmes	50	86	0	14	50	0	0	0	0	64	14	36	86	0
Informing about effective learning styles and strategies	50	7	50	93	0	0	0	0	86	0	14	8	0	92
Planning time for learning	7	7	93	93	0	0	0	0	86	0	14	0	0	100
Setting goals	7	7	93	93	0	0	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
Criticizing lack of progress	86	7	14	93	0	0	21	0	79	0	0	50	0	50
Criticizing lack of involvement	86	7	14	93	0	0	21	0	79	0	0	0	0	100
Criticizing insufficient time devoted to learning	100	100	0	0	0	0	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
Motivating to learn	100	100	0	0	0	0	100	0	0	86	0	14	0	0
Belief in positive outcomes	50	100	50	0	0	0	100	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
Comforting	79	50	21	50	0	0	0	100	0	0	14	0	86	0
Criticizing too much time devoted to learning	86	50	14	50	0	0	14	0	86	0	0	0	0	100
Belief in language skills	100	14	0	86	0	0	0	100	64	0	36	0	0	0
Rewarding in front of course/classmates	0	0	100	0	0	100	0	0	40	0	36	8	24	92
Praising in front of supervisors	0	0	100	0	0	100	0	0	50	0	50	0	0	100

Discouraging from following others' example	0	0	100	0	0	100	0	0	50	0	50	0	0	100
Encouraging to follow others' example	0	0	100	10	0	100	0	0	50	0	50	0	0	100

As the table shows, the roles the significant others occupy most frequently according to 100 percent of group A students comprise *correcting mistakes* and *homework*, as well as *recommending English speaking TV programmes* with reference to shaping learners' experiences.

The process of shaping learners' attitudes towards learning and the target language, on the other hand, is most often connected with *criticizing lack of progress*, *motivating to learn*, *setting goals* and *planning time for learning*, as well as *belief in positive outcomes*.

Slightly less common roles of those who help and encourage students to learn English include *communicating on tests*, *sharing English books, magazines, language handbooks*, *additional materials* in the classroom context, and *criticizing too much time devoted to learning* in the outside school environment.

As regards students' likes and dislikes concerning a particular part a significant other is to play in shaping their language experiences, it is *revising for a test*, *explaining language rules*, *communicating on tests*, and *making corrections* in general that students have strong (100 percent) preference for.

In comparison, the duties that are given little attention on the part of the students involve *preparing additional materials*, *recommending difficult learning tasks*, and *encouraging individual work at home*.

In the section devoted to shaping learners' emotional states and attitudes towards learning a language and the TLC, nevertheless, the most favourable answers provided covered *motivating to learn*, and *belief in positive outcomes* by means of comforting learners whenever something goes wrong, and assuring that "it will be much better next time".

Students' negative feelings, this time, referred to the so called significant others' interference defined by all the students involved as

- setting goals and planning time for learning;
- praising in front of a classmate or teacher and;
- saying whether to follow others' example or not.

The responses produced by adult learners (group B) reflect a high degree of students' independence and autonomous learning they aim at. Thus, the role of significant others, be it language or behaviour shaping, is fairly restricted.

As a result, shaping learners' language experiences consists in *regular explanation of language rules* students do not understand, and *lending English books, magazines and language handbooks* 100 percent of students are in favour of.

The kind of support, however, the subjects under discussion do not experience and are not interested in involves *communicating on tests*, *encouraging to work individually at home* and *informing about language contests or effective learning styles*.



The process of shaping learners' positive attitude towards learning a language, on the other hand, seems to be very effective providing it is based on a strong belief in learners' success, and is not connected with such outrageous behaviour on the part of significant others as *setting goals*, *bitter criticism* and *humiliation* defined as praising in front of a coursemate, let alone a supervisor.

## Data interpretation

Diversified as students' opinions on the qualities and responsibilities of significant others are, the results of the study presented above make it clear that there are some aspects in which the subjects' answers overlap and allow for generalizations. These refer to the image of a knower or a supporter the student creates himself, and the roles he ascribes to a person who encourages him to learn.

The first point to be made here is that the person the majority of students consider helpful in the learning process is *someone they are in close contact with*. This entails, in most cases, a family member or a best friend they spend a lot of time with, and ask for help "any time they want".

Important as a good relationship with a significant other is, it should be based on *mutual trust and understanding* which are the basis of successful learning.

Some other important aspects of effective learning, though not mentioned in the first place, involve *a high level of language competence* the significant others have, as well as *the ability to pass on the knowledge they demonstrate*.

As regards the actual roles the important figures perform, it is, more often than not, *controlling*, *monitoring* and *facilitating the process of learning* that e.g. parents in group A and younger brothers and sisters in group B undertake.

Speaking about the kind of support the students seek most frequently, it is both *emotional backup* and *theoretical background* mentioned before. The former one, as the results show, is equally important for both teams of learners. The latter aspect, however, is approached differently by the respondents. The students of group A, for example, seem to be taking the line of least resistance, and expect only a ready made answer or solution from their knowers. The subjects of group B, on the other hand, even when provided with a clear cut answer, tend to process the information and work out the rules, which makes them more independent or semi-autonomous learners, and reflects a high level of intrinsic motivation they have.

## Final word

Obviously, a small sample of subjects as the one used in the study discussed above, does not reflect abroad spectrum of students' opinions. On the contrary, it points to certain tendencies, and presents some of the students' beliefs concerning the process of learning a language which, when studied in detail, are to provide a more precise answer to the question of who the significant others really are.

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