

King Felix: The Case of a Taiwanese Man Acquiring English through Major League Baseball Broadcasts

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While philosophies behind teaching and acquiring English may vary around the world, the two most common approaches can be defined as belonging to either Skill-Building or Comprehension-Based methodology (Krashen, 2017).

In Taiwan, in-school English education largely follows the Skill-Building methodology, or at best an eclectic approach consisting of both Skill-Building and Comprehension-Based techniques, despite evidence to support a purely Comprehension-Based approach (Mason, 2004; Smith, 2006). The following case study of an adult learner, Felix, offers additional evidence to support comprehension-based methodology for foreign language acquisition.

Meeting Felix

Felix is a 41-year-old Taiwanese man with a high school education, who currently works in the construction industry in Taipei, Taiwan. I met Felix on my return to Taiwan in August 2018, when I was temporarily living in the *Backpackers Hostel* in Taipei. As is often the case in hostels, rooms at the *Backpackers Hostel* were small and had a number of bunk beds. I was shown where I would be resting my head for the next two nights. When I opened the door, I was greeted with a friendly smile and the following greeting in English: “Hi, my name is Felix. I’m in this one.” (pointing to his bunk).

I responded to his greeting with: “Like the cat?”

He said, “No, like the baseball pitcher from the Seattle Mariners, King Felix.”

Being from Massachusetts, I had grown up listening to radio broadcasts of baseball games, watching games on television and going to Fenway Park (the oldest ballpark in Major League Baseball) with family and friends. Because Major League Baseball was part of my upbringing and because of my interest in second language acquisition I decided to engage further with Felix.

I think Felix and I connected with each other because neither of us was a typical resident of *Backpackers Hostel*. A casual conversation ensued with this greying, tired-eyed man I was sharing my room with. Felix was a 41-year-old Taiwanese man working in the construction industry. He preferred to live in hostels in order to save enough money so he could some day buy his own apartment.

I told Felix that I was American and was doing a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. I had been teaching English for many years at a University in Kaohsiung, and if I wanted to continue to do so, I needed a Ph.D. I added that I was in Taiwan because I had taken a break from my studies, and would be living in Taipei for a little while. All of this seemed to interest Felix.

Communicating with Felix in English

Felix had chosen to engage with me in English. As soon as I opened the door he had greeted me with a “Hi”, making it clear that he wanted to converse in English. Although there were

mistakes in his syntax and he was also not very fluent, he was able to communicate quite clearly. I asked Felix to tell me about his English language learning experience in Taiwan. A smile spread across his face as if he had something exciting to tell me that he had been waiting to share, and I just happened to be there to hear it.

Approach 1: English Learning in School

Felix told me that there was nothing exciting or unusual about his English language learning experience in school. He had received a traditional education in high school, however he never finished school. He told me he had not attended any English cram schools (extra schooling students take after school classes mostly to prepare them for examinations). Felix's description of his educational experiences and his attitude could at best be described as "indifferent". When I explained the word to Felix, he did not quite understand it, but he nodded as if to imply, "You understand".

He added that he did not really like school and that learning English was all about memorizing words, studying grammar, doing worksheets and taking tests. He explained that he had lost interest in learning English, and eventually no longer wanted to continue with his studies.

Approach 2: Acquiring English through Major League Baseball Broadcasts

Felix told me that although he had decided to drop out of school, he still thought English was important. Therefore he decided to try a different approach—one in which he combined something that he loved, baseball, and something he felt was important, acquiring English. He decided to listen to the broadcasts of Major League Baseball (MLB, as Felix and many Taiwanese call it, referring to the highest level professional baseball played in the United States and Canada).

Felix explained that in Taiwan, when Major League Baseball games are broadcast, one can

listen to them in either Mandarin or English—something I did not know. As Felix was a fan of baseball and had played it as a young man, he understood the game. Moreover, he found watching and listening to games on TV compelling. Krashen (1996), in a paper titled "The Case For Narrow Listening", provides theoretical support for what Felix was telling me. Krashen states: "Repeated listening, interest in the topic, and familiar context help make the input comprehensible". Felix explained to me that he listened to the baseball broadcast to help him improve his English fluency, which he values and thinks is important for his life ahead. Furthermore, he deeply enjoyed listening to the broadcasts. Krashen, Lee, and Lao (2017), explain that interesting comprehensible input may not be enough; compelling comprehensible input is ideal in order for language acquisition to occur. Felix told me that listening to Major League Baseball broadcasts is now all he does to improve his English. He said that he could have a brief chance encounter with an English-speaking foreigner on the streets or in a hostel where he may be staying, but that was unlikely. Listening to baseball games was a better, more regular way of interacting with English, rather than waiting to come across a foreigner to talk to.

While there were no standardized tests to assess Felix's progress in English, one may conclude that listening to Major League Broadcasts in English has been effective in improving Felix's fluency as he was able to communicate with me quite freely. Felix told me he would most likely not have had the confidence to initiate a conversation or interact with a foreigner prior to his new English language acquisition approach.

Conclusion

I was expecting Felix to be around the *Backpackers Hostel* for a while longer, so I could talk to him some more. However, I did

not see him again after that first night. There are two main conclusions to be drawn from the “King Felix” case study.

- (1) Evidence seems to support the conclusion that the ideal conditions for language acquisition include not only comprehensible input, but also highly interesting, or “compelling” input (Krashen, Lee and Lao, 2017).
- (2) Some people, despite how they are taught in school, find ways to acquire a second language on their own.

Despite the fact that the Taiwan education system did not work for him, Felix was able to figure out how to acquire English in the best way for himself. Perhaps schools in Taiwan and in other places where English is taught as a foreign language ought to reconsider their attachment to Skill-Building and adopt a more Comprehension-Based methodology. Not only was this methodology more effective for “King Felix”, but it was also more enjoyable for him.

References

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