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Dosier: Real Issues in Real English Classrooms - Problemáticas reales en aulas reales de enseñanza del Inglés

English Language Learning in Context: How Social and Affective Factors Shape Language Interaction Abroad

El aprendizaje del inglés en contexto: factores sociales y afectivos que influyen en la interacción en el extranjero

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ABSTRACT

Working in a Summer Camp is one of the ways nonnative pre-service teachers use to practice English in a real context. However, when Mexican pre-service teachers find themselves abroad and have to interact with the real use of the language, they might face several socio-affective factors that may influence their performance. The research was conducted at the English Language School of a Public University in Mexico after a group of Undergraduate students came back from working in Summer Camps in the USA. The study adopted a qualitative approach and pursued two primary objectives: (1) to identify the socio-affective factors that influence non-native speakers' interactions when traveling abroad, and (2) to analyze the impact these socio-affective factors have on their ability to communicate effectively in a foreign context. To gather data aligned with the research objectives, a questionnaire consisting of twelve questions was administered to six participants whose responses allowed for a more in-depth data analysis. The findings revealed that participants experienced anxiety and self-esteem challenges during their initial interactions with native English speakers. In the beginning, they lacked confidence in their English communication skills at the outset. Nevertheless, over time, this group of undergraduate students developed greater self-confidence through the implementation of various strategies aimed at enhancing their listening and speaking abilities which led them to successful communication during their experiences abroad.

Keywords: socio-affective factors, interactions abroad, Summer camp, anxiety, English communication

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RESUMEN

Trabajar en un campamento de verano es una de las maneras en que los futuros docentes no nativos pueden practicar inglés en un contexto real. Sin embargo, cuando los futuros docentes mexicanos se encuentran en el extranjero y tienen que interactuar con el uso real del idioma, pueden enfrentar diversos factores socioafectivos que influyen en su desempeño. Esta investigación se llevó a cabo en la Facultad de Inglés de una universidad pública Mexicana, después de que un grupo de estudiantes de licenciatura regresara de trabajar en campamentos de verano en Estados Unidos. El estudio adoptó un enfoque cualitativo y persiguió dos objetivos principales: (1) identificar los factores socioafectivos que influyen en las interacciones de los hablantes no nativos al viajar al extranjero, y (2) analizar el impacto de estos factores socioafectivos en su capacidad para comunicarse eficazmente en un contexto extranjero. Para recopilar datos alineados con los objetivos de la investigación, se administró un cuestionario de doce preguntas a seis participantes, cuyas respuestas permitieron un análisis más profundo de los datos. Los hallazgos revelaron que los participantes experimentaron ansiedad y problemas de autoestima durante sus interacciones iniciales con hablantes nativos de inglés. Al principio, mostraron falta de confianza en sus habilidades de comunicación en inglés. Sin embargo, con el tiempo, este grupo de estudiantes universitarios desarrolló una mayor confianza en sí mismos mediante la implementación de diversas estrategias para mejorar sus habilidades de escucha y expresión oral, lo que les permitió comunicarse con éxito durante sus experiencias en el extranjero.

Palabras clave: factores socioafectivos, interacciones en el extranjero, campamento de verano, ansiedad, comunicación en inglés

Introduction

The transition from learning English in an academic environment to using it in real-world contexts can be a challenging experience for non-native speakers (NNS). This study explores the socio-affective factors that influence the communicative performance of NNS when interacting with native speakers (NS) in immersive environments. Drawing from real experiences at a U.S. summer camp, this research aims to identify how variables such as self-confidence, self-esteem, and fear of making mistakes affect oral communication (Laoli, 2025). Findings highlight the critical role of emotional readiness in achieving effective communication beyond linguistic proficiency.

For individuals who have learned English as a foreign language primarily in academic settings, using the language in authentic, real-world environments can pose significant challenges. This becomes especially evident when engaging in immersive experiences such as working at a summer camp in the United States. The transition from classroom-based language learning to spontaneous interaction with native speakers can be intimidating, as it involves not only linguistic knowledge but also emotional and psychological adaptation.

Initial interactions between non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS) may be hindered by a lack of familiarity with colloquial expressions, regional accents, and conversational dynamics. Elements such as fluency, listening comprehension, and pronunciation often affect the fluidity of communication. Loewen and Sato (2018) emphasize that interaction entails communicative exchanges between speakers, where meaning is co-constructed through clarification requests, confirmation checks, and feedback strategies. Such exchanges enable learners to modify their output, receive comprehensible input, and notice gaps in their interlanguage, thereby facilitating both language development and communicative fluency in real-world contexts. Complementing this view, Parra-Guinaldo (2022) frames interaction as a dynamic and socially situated process that fosters negotiation of meaning and learner engagement. This author highlights that interaction not only supports linguistic development but also enhances learners' confidence and motivation, particularly in immersive or authentic language environments. Hoppler et al, (2022) have included a set of components which are involved in social interaction: actor, partner, relation, activities, context and evaluation which include well-being and care. Taken together, these perspectives underscore

that interaction extends beyond simple information exchange; it is a socially and emotionally charged process that supports both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning. This theoretical foundation is particularly relevant to the present study, which explores how socio-affective factors influence non-native speakers' communicative performance in immersive English-speaking contexts.

This research is grounded in the experiences of a group of Mexican college students during summer camps in the United States -an experience that marked their first time traveling abroad and communicating in English outside of a formal educational setting.

Prior to the trip, the students felt confident in the accuracy of their English skills, which had been developed through years of academic instruction. However, the first real interaction with a native speaker provoked feeling of anxiety, shame, and inadequacy. Despite possessing the necessary linguistic knowledge, the fear of making mistakes and being judged negatively impaired their ability to communicate. Upon arrival at the camp, in the interaction with fellow international staff members who were also non-native English speakers they expressed similar concerns—particularly a lack of confidence when speaking with native speakers, and a pervasive fear of making grammatical or pronunciation errors, even though they had previously demonstrated competence in the language. These shared experiences raised a central purpose for the study: To identify the socio-affective factors that might impact the communicative performance and the quality of interactions of non-native speakers in real world, immersive English-speaking contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in contemporary perspectives within Second Language Acquisition (SLA) which emphasize the centrality of socio-affective factors in communicative performance. Traditionally, language learning research has focused on linguistic competence; grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as the primary determinants of success. However, recent studies reveal that variables, such as self-confidence, self-esteem, language anxiety, and willingness to communicate (WTC), are equally, if not more critical, in determining a learner's ability to effectively use the target language in real-world contexts (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2021; Teimouri et al., 2022).

According to MacIntyre and Gregersen (2021), language learners operate within dynamic emotional environments, especially in immersive settings where language use is spontaneous and often unpredictable. Their work, rooted in Dynamic Systems Theory, conceptualizes second language communication as an interaction between cognitive, emotional, and contextual variables. They argue that successful L2 communication is not merely a product of acquired knowledge, but rather of emotional readiness the learner's capacity to regulate anxiety, manage self-perception, and remain open to communicative risks. This theoretical orientation aligns with the present study, which examines how learners with high linguistic proficiency may still struggle in real-world interactions due to socio-affective barriers.

Additionally, Teimouri et al. (2022) revisit and expand upon the concept of the affective filter, originally proposed by Krashen (1982), suggesting that negative emotions such as fear of making mistakes or fear of negative evaluation can inhibit input processing and output fluency. In immersive environments such as a U.S. summer camp, where learners must communicate in unscripted, high-stakes interactions the affective filter can be particularly active, leading to communication breakdowns even among proficient speakers.

Furthermore, recent studies have linked self-perceived communicative competence with actual performance outcomes in multilingual contexts. Lake (2021) emphasizes the role of positive psychology in SLA, arguing that constructs such as self-efficacy and resilience contribute to learners' willingness to engage with native speakers and persist in communication despite errors or misunderstandings. These findings support the notion that emotional and psychological factors are not secondary to language learning but are constitutive elements of communicative competence.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study perspective. According to Mohajan (2018), qualitative research constitutes a form of social inquiry that emphasizes how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences in order to comprehend social reality. The author highlights that qualitative research employs various instruments to collect, analyze, and interpret data. Furthermore, Mohajan (2018) asserts that qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with individuals' beliefs, experiences, and perspectives within their own systems of meaning. What renders qualitative methodology appropriate for this study is its focus not on statistical analysis or empirical measurement, but rather on the systematic description and interpretation of issues or phenomena based on the thoughts and perceptions of the individuals or groups under investigation. This approach facilitates the generation of new concepts and theoretical insights by answering the research questions that were posed for the study:

RQ1: Which are the socio-affective factors that influence non-native speakers' interactions when they travel abroad?

RQ2: How can socio-affective factors impact the emotions and communicative performance of non-native speakers when they travel abroad and communicate in real contexts?

The study involved six participants, all of them were Mexican university students between the ages of 22 and 24. Spanish was their native language, and English was their foreign language. The participants were labeled under a pseudonym (Patricio, Angel, Osmar, Maria, Andrea and Daniela) as this study concerned their privacy. All the participants were enrolled at *Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP)*. The group was evenly composed of three male and three female participants. The participants were informed of the study and they gave their consent to participate in this research.

Regarding the instrument, a twelve open-ended questionnaire was used to gather information aimed at addressing and answering the initial research questions established in the beginning of the study. Participants completed the questionnaire and provided written reflections regarding their experiences and emotions related to their first time in the U.S. (See Appendix 1).

Findings

Following the administration of the data collection instrument, the findings were organized into four main categories: (1) participants' background information, (2) initial interactions with native speakers (NS), (3) an overview of participants' experiences throughout the immersion, and (4) emotional responses before, during, and after the experience. Upon

presenting these findings, a discussion and interpretation of the results will be provided, along with reflections and concluding insights.

As for the first category, Figure 1 presents key demographic and contextual information about

the participants, including their names, ages, academic backgrounds, the year of their first visit to the United States, duration of their stay, and their assigned roles within the summer camp.

Figure 1: Background of the participants

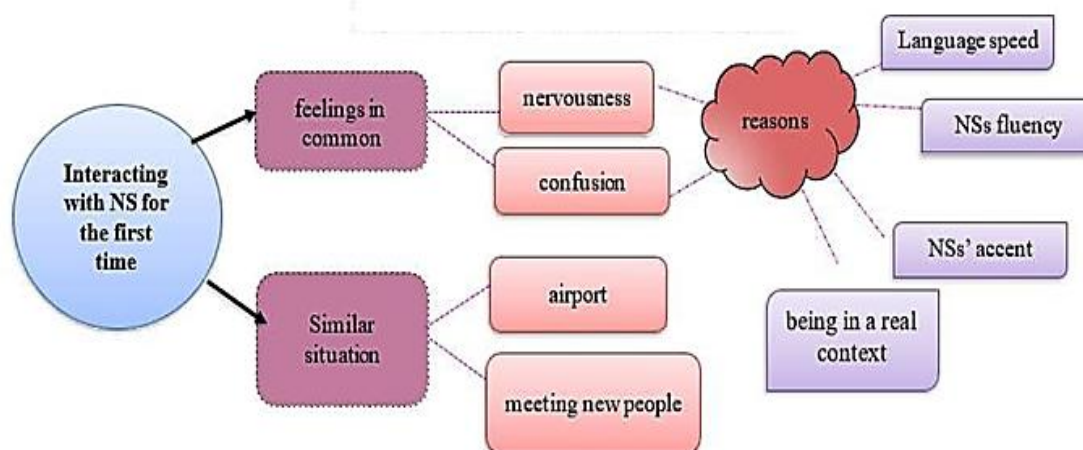
PARTICIPANT	AGE	MAJOR	LOCATION OF THE SUMMER CAMP	YEAR	POSITION	DURATION OF STAY
Patricio	26	Electronics Engineering	Michigan	2022	Kitchen Staff	4 months
Angel	24	Mechatronics Engineering	Wisconsin	2022	Kitchen Staff	4 months
Osmar	26	English Language Teaching	Pennsylvania	2022	Counselor	4 months
María	25	Gastronomy	Philadelphia	2023	Counselor	4 months
Andrea	25	English Language Teaching	Wisconsin	2022	Kitchen Staff	4 months
Daniela	24	English Language Teaching	Wisconsin	2023	Counselor	6 months

Source: *Own Elaboration*

The data indicate that the majority of participants remained in the U.S. for approximately four months, suggesting a substantial period for language immersion. Notably, three of the participants held the position of camp counselors, a role which, involves continuous and direct interaction with native speakers often spanning 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This constant exposure likely provided these individuals more opportunities to engage in spontaneous communication, contributing to the development of their oral proficiency and intercultural competence. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that both the quantity and quality of interactions with members of the host culture are significant predictors of intercultural competence (Kinging, 2021; Meng et al., 2024) Conversely, participants who served as kitchen staff also had opportunities to interact with native speakers; however, the frequency and extent of these interactions were comparatively limited due to the nature of their roles, which primarily confined them to the kitchen environment.

In the category initial interacting with native speakers for the first time. Participants mentioned some feelings and situations that were similar among them. They are illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2: Initial interaction with NS



Source: *Own elaboration*

Interacting with native speakers for the first time often elicits common emotional responses and challenging situations among language learners. In our data, participants reported feelings such as nervousness and confusion, particularly in contexts like arriving at the airport or meeting new people. These situations were especially relevant as airports represent one of the first real-world, high-stakes exposures, and meeting unfamiliar native speakers often heightens anxieties related to accent comprehension, speed of speech, and fluency. These findings align with recent work on foreign language anxiety (FLA) and accent anxiety, which show that initial interactions with native speakers tend to evoke negative feelings due to perceived deficits in comprehension, self-monitoring of errors, and worry about negative evaluation. Study abroad experiences indicate that early phases abroad often involve emotional as frustration, confusion, and fear stemming from unfamiliarity with local accents, colloquial speech, and situational demands (Baran-Łucarz et al., 2017; Kimura, 2021).

As for the third category: Participants’ experiences throughout the immersion, they reflected on the challenges they encountered when using the foreign language in real-world contexts, as well as the strategies they employed to overcome these difficulties and the emotions they experienced during the process. The majority of participants identified listening comprehension as the most prominent struggle, while others highlighted spoken production as a significant difficulty. To address these challenges, participants adopted various coping mechanisms. Several emphasized the importance of self-confidence as a means of overcoming communicative barriers, whereas others found that seeking assistance from native speakers or peers was the most effective strategy. These findings underscore the variability in learners’ affective and behavioral responses when navigating authentic language use outside the classroom. See figure 3.

Figure 3: Participants’ experiences throughout the immersion

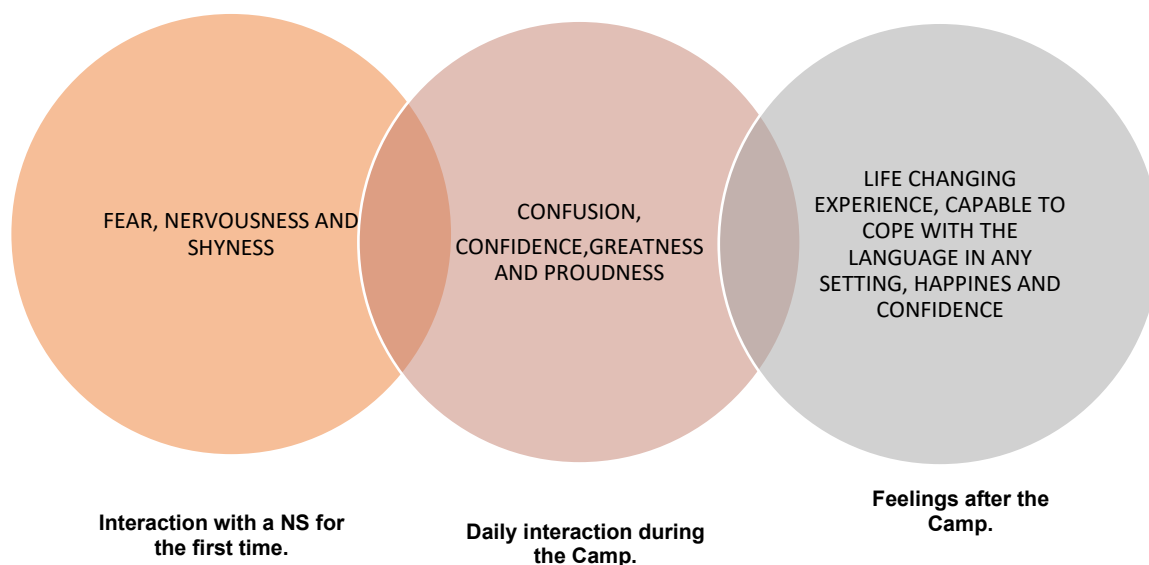
Struggles using the language	Strategies employed to overcome challenges	Feelings before and after overcoming language challenges
To be able to understand what people say at a very fast pace (listening)	Practicing	Nervous Excited- Good
Some of them speak too fast (listening)	Practicing	Nervous Great
Listening because I felt like they spoke fast, and in speaking because I was afraid to commit mistakes (listening and speaking)	Paying attention to what they say	Nervous and shy Happy
Problems because not everyone speaks the same way (idioms, slang, and the speed is different) (listening)	Having less fear When making mistakes	Nervous and excited I feel I’m still overcoming my thoughts.
The way they speak. They do it fast When speaking because I was afraid to commit mistakes (listening and speaking)	Making new friends, listening carefully, and practicing	Confused and bizarre Confident
Understanding the accent, language speed and all the contractions they used to talk. I didn’t understand several words, (listening, vocabulary)	Talking, not being afraid of making mistakes, Practicing	Nervous and not confident Great and capable

Source: *Own elaboration*

Most participants reported that their primary difficulties when engaging in authentic interactions in the foreign language involved listening comprehension, with several also noting challenges in speaking, and one specific participant highlighting vocabulary limitations. To overcome these obstacles, participants engaged in repeated exposure to native speaker speech practicing listening attentively, observing pronunciation, speech rate, and fluency and exercised bravery by initiating conversation in settings beyond the classroom, including interactions with native-speaking peers. Such proactive engagement appeared to facilitate reductions in anxiety associated with real-world language use. Participants commonly described being nervous prior to their first significant face-to-face interaction with native speakers (for example, upon arrival at the U.S. summer camp), but reported feeling happier and more confident by the end of the camp experience. These findings are consistent with research on foreign language anxiety and listening anxiety, which shows that initial exposure to authentic speech, as well as active speaking contribute to greater self-confidence and emotional adjustment over time (Ji et al., 2022; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Regarding the last category: emotional responses before, during, and after the experience, participants reflected on their emotional responses throughout the entirety of the experience. The participants expressed how they felt before, during, and after the program. Emotions such as nervousness, shyness, and a sense of gratitude or personal growth were commonly expressed in their accounts. See figure 4.

Figure 4: Emotional responses



Source: *Own elaboration*

Participants also reported experiencing a range of emotions during their daily interactions with native speakers. These emotional responses were particularly heightened due to the necessity of using English as the primary means of communication within their living environment. Notably, a comparison of participants’ initial and final emotional states revealed a marked improvement in their self-perceptions and comfort levels. Initially, many participants expressed feelings of nervousness, shyness, and a lack of confidence when engaging with native speakers. However, by the end of the experience, they described feeling happy, more confident, and capable of sustaining authentic interactions. Several participants even characterized the experience as life-changing. These findings align with previous research, which suggests that sustained interaction with native speakers in immersive environments can significantly reduce foreign language anxiety and promote personal growth and intercultural competence (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019).

The findings of this study highlight a pattern commonly reported in second language acquisition research: participants experienced the greatest challenges in listening comprehension, followed by speaking, with several struggling in both. This is consistent with Wah's (2019) assertion that effective verbal communication requires focused listening and a clear understanding of the speaker’s message in order to actively participate in meaningful dialogue. In other words, difficulties in listening often lead to communication breakdowns, which in turn hinder the development of speaking skills.

A plausible explanation for these difficulties lies in the participants' previous learning environments. Most of them had had limited exposure to authentic communicative contexts, having primarily practiced English with classmates in controlled, classroom-based interactions. As a result, their first real interactions with native speakers triggered a range of socio-affective challenges, particularly nervousness and fear, which are often linked to language anxiety and low self-esteem (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2021). These emotional barriers can inhibit learners’ willingness to communicate and reduce opportunities for spontaneous language use.

However, the immersive environment of the U.S. summer camp provided participants with sustained, meaningful exposure to the language in authentic contexts. Being surrounded by native speakers and other non-native speakers, participants were required to use English daily for both social and practical purposes. This real-world interaction not only supported the development of listening and speaking skills but also contributed to increased confidence and motivation, as reflected in participants' self-reports.

For instance, Maria shared:

“I feel more motivated to continue improving in speaking English.”

Similarly, Osmar remarked:

“I feel more confident and able to keep a conversation with a native speaker.”

These reflections support the findings of Kiruthiga and Christopher (2022), who demonstrated that learner motivation is positively correlated with language proficiency. When learners are motivated particularly through meaningful experiences such as study abroad or cultural immersion they tend to increase their productivity and demonstrate significant gains in communicative competence.

In sum, the transition from anxiety-ridden initial interactions to more confident and motivated language use by the end of the camp experience illustrates the transformative potential of immersive environments. These settings not only improve linguistic abilities but also foster affective and psychological readiness for continued language development.

Conclusions

The key findings of this study highlight the emotional and linguistic challenges participants experienced during their initial exposure to English in real-world contexts. When first required to use the language outside the classroom—particularly in interactions with native speakers—participants reported feeling nervous, shy, scared, and generally lacking in confidence. These emotional responses are understandable given that, prior to this experience, their engagement with the language had been largely restricted to academic English used within the classroom and practiced exclusively among fellow non-native peers. Consequently, encountering authentic spoken English, including unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, colloquial vocabulary, and other features of natural discourse, posed a significant challenge.

Despite these initial difficulties, participants noted a progressive increase in confidence and communicative ability as they spent more time interacting with native-speaking coworkers in the immersive environment of a U.S. summer camp. Through repeated and meaningful exposure to authentic communicative situations, they began to develop their communicative competence, including both speaking and listening skills, which had previously been the most difficult language domains for them to master. As these interactions became more frequent and familiar, participants expressed feeling more capable of establishing relationships and sustaining conversations with native speakers.

Importantly, all six participants indicated that although they had prior theoretical knowledge of English, they did not feel adequately prepared for real-time interaction. The lack of practical experience led to anxiety and fear of communication breakdowns. However, being immersed in an English-speaking environment provided a transformative learning opportunity. It not only enhanced their oral proficiency, but also contributed to greater self-assurance and motivation to continue improving. Several participants described the experience as life-changing, noting that by the end of the program, they felt happy, empowered, and confident in

their ability to engage in spontaneous conversations with native speakers. These outcomes underscore the value of immersive language experiences in bridging the gap between academic language instruction and real-world language use, particularly in the development of oral communication skills and the reduction of language-related anxiety.

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Appendix 1

The instrument:

SOCIO-AFFECTIVE FACTORS AND INTERACTION ABROAD

The next questionnaire will help to collect data for a research study in order to explore how socio-affective factors influence interaction when students go abroad to a USA Camp.

1. When did you go abroad and where for the first time?
2. How long were you there?
3. How was the first time you interacted with native speakers in the USA?
4. How did you feel interacting with native speakers for the first time?
5. Why do you think you felt that way?
6. What was the most difficult issue in getting used to native English?
7. How did you feel when you began to listen and speak English daily?
8. Did you have any struggles in listening/speaking English? Why?
9. In which moment did you start to feel confident in speaking English? Why?
10. What did you do to achieve confidence?
11. How did you feel when you overcame your first thoughts?

How do you feel after that experience?

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