Social Influences on English Language Learners in the United States:

Contexts and Applications for Teachers

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Language acquisition is fundamentally communicative, so the nature of students' relationships with family and peers (with whom most of their communication takes place) affects the context in which to practice and acquire a given target language. Instructors of English language learners (ELLs) in the United States need to keep in mind both broad social contexts and the specific contributions of parents and peers in order to best meet the needs of their students. Specifically, instructors should 1) understand the importance of immigration without assuming it negatively influences second language acquisition, 2) recognize the limitations that many ELLs' families face in terms of socioeconomic status and English proficiency while also valuing parents' capacity to foster primary language proficiency and the integrative motivation to learn English, and 3) remember the critical role that native-speaking peers will play in providing comprehensible input to ELLs outside of the classroom. Bearing these three things in mind, teachers should build relationships with ELLs' families in order to help them support their students, and, as there is opportunity, include parents in classroom activities. These relationships will contextualize classroom instruction within the broader social influences on ELLs, serving as a key piece of a comprehensive process that supports ELLs' acquisition of English.

Instructors cannot effectively meet the needs of ELLs without paying attention to immigration. Immigration is driving the rapid influx of ELLs into U.S. schools: García, Jensen, and Scribner (2009) have noted that between 1990 and 2000, at least six states had a percentage increase of over 200 percent of ELLs in grades preK-8, largely due to immigrants following labor opportunities. Echevarría and Graves (2011) have explained that at the national level, the proportion of ELL students is growing faster than the student population is general; by the 2003-2004 school year, the number of ELL students in public schools had nearly doubled in a decade. Historic immigrant destination states including California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois,

and New Jersey continue to receive new ELLs as well (García et al., 2009). The most common nation of origin among immigrants is Mexico, although families come to the United States from every inhabited continent, and Spanish is the most common of the 350 languages spoken by ELLs (García et al., 2009). Students of immigrant families bring specific assets to the classroom: they "are more likely than children in native-born families to live with two parents and with siblings" and to have other relatives involved in their lives (García et al., 2009, p. 12). Educators of ELLs would do well to keep these social contexts in mind.

Yet one should not assume a direct relationship between immigration (or even language minority status) and challenges in second language acquisition. García et al. (2009) have provided helpful clarifications in this regard, describing three overlapping but distinct groups of students: "English language learners" are students "whose English proficiency has not yet developed to a point where they can profit fully from English instruction"; "language minority" students have a primary language other than English (but may be proficient or fluent in English); and "children from immigrant families" have "at least one foreign-born parent" (p.9-10). Many students from immigrant families are proficient in English, as are many students with a different primary language. To describe these differences statistically, over 14 million language-minority students attend K-12 schools in the United States, and approximately 10.8 million children ages 5-17 are from immigrant families, but only about 5 million students in K-12 schools (roughly one out of every ten students) are ELLs (p. 10).

Research on immigration and literacy reinforces the danger of making incorrect assumptions about the influence of immigration. Goldenberg, Rueda, and August (2008) have examined a number of studies related to immigration and literacy achievement among U.S. students. In the case of immigrant students, no strong correlation has been found between the

circumstances of students' immigration and literacy outcomes. Furthermore, this review of the literature has stated, perhaps counter-intuitively, "Although undocumented immigration and refugee experiences can create traumatic situations, there is no evidence that these experiences impeded literacy achievement" (Goldenberg et al., 2008, p. 103). The specific educational opportunities afforded students at home and school are apparently more significant than their status as immigrants or refugees. Similarly, there is no evidence that generation status (i.e. if a student is a first-, second-, third-, or other-generation immigrant) correlates with higher or lower literacy achievement in the classroom (Goldenberg et al., 2008).

At first glance, these results may raise eyebrows. How is it possible that first-generation immigrants are not disadvantaged for literacy achievement? Behind such questions are no doubt valid experiences (anecdotally reinforced) of immigrant students finding literacy a genuine challenge, much more than many of their non-immigrant peers. This research implies that the challenge such students face is not due to their immigration status and experience, but rather to other factors—factors which certain non-immigrant students may also face. The results of these studies indicate that educators' attention may need to be re-directed from immigrants in particular to any students whose opportunities for learning the language at home or school may be limited. That said, the prevalence of factors that do influence second language acquisition among immigrants warrants ESL educators' continued attention to immigration policy and circumstances affecting immigrants in the United States.

Determining the exact nature of the "other factors" that influence second language acquisition is obviously paramount to forming an effective policy for supporting ELLs. Research shows that both the social circumstances and level of English use in students' families have a marked effect on students' progress in acquiring English. Echevarría and Graves (2011) have

identified that "Socioeconomic status, maternal educational level, parent English proficiency level, and home literacy experiences all affect a student's acquisition of language" (p. 35). Specifically, ELLs are more likely than other students to come from low-income homes, have parents with less formal education, and come from a racial or ethnic minority. All three of these factors correlate with lower academic achievement (García et al., 2009). García et al. (2009) have cited a Reardon and Galindo (2006) study illustrating the importance of parents' proficiency in English. This study on achievement in reading and math has shown that Hispanic students "living in homes categorized as *primarily Spanish* or *Spanish only* lagged further behind . . . than did Hispanics who lived in homes categorized as *primarily English* or *English only*" (p. 11). Clearly, some of the greatest factors influencing students' acquisition of English are directly related to their family circumstances, both socioeconomically and in terms of English proficiency.

Given the importance of English proficiency, one may wonder how parents who are not fluent in English can best help their students in acquiring English. Goldenberg et al. (2008) have called for greater parental involvement in student literacy, but have also deemed the current state of research insufficient to prescribe language-specific practices for parents to support their children. Studies show that "language-minority parents express willingness and often have the ability to help their children succeed academically" and that "more home literacy experiences and opportunities are generally associated with superior literacy outcomes" (Goldenberg et al., 2008, p. 108). Socioeconomic status and parental education levels are consistently associated with literacy outcomes. Yet studies contradict each other as to the results of which language parents reinforce in the home: Some research reports that primary language experiences at home are associated only with primary language literacy outcomes (and some even show a negative

relationship with secondary language outcomes), while other research reports that primary

language experiences have a positive relationship with secondary language outcomes as well

(p.108-109). Goldenberg et al. have appropriately noted the need for much more thorough

research to clarify what kind of literacy experiences with parents will best assist students.

The lack of clarity in research on the subject of parent literacy involvement should not be

exploited to encourage families to abandon their primary language. Shin (2013) has repudiated

the "myth" that "immigrant parents should speak the societal language with their children at

home to help them succeed in school" (p. 13). This myth is grounded in the "linguistic mismatch

hypothesis" and the "maximum exposure hypothesis." The former posits that switching between

language at school and home confuses children, while the latter asserts that students who lack

proficiency in English need as much English (and as little of any other language) as possible in

order to catch up to their native speaking peers. Neither of these hypotheses has been validated

by research, and they seem to reflect the mental tendencies of a monolinguistic society; Shin

(2013) has noted that the majority of children worldwide grow up learning at least two languages

and are not "confused" in the process (p. 13). It is true that bilingual students tend to temporarily

possess a more limited vocabulary in English than native English-speaking peers (for example,

bilingual students without English at home may lack of English input for certain domestic

words). But this gap does not inhibit long-term academic achievement of bilingual students.

Similarly, bilingual students appear to slightly lag behind monolingual peers in mastering

grammar in *both* their languages, but this lag disappears over time (Shin, 2013, p.7). There is no

valid research showing that losing one's primary language is advantageous to acquiring a second

in the long-run.

In contrast to the linguistic mismatch and maximum exposure hypotheses, the "linguistic interdependence principle" implies that parents should tentatively adopt the strategy of continuing primary language use in the home in order to best help their children learn. Shin (2013) has referred to Cummins' (1996) "linguistic interdependence principle" which states that "a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency" underlies both students' primary and secondary languages which is strengthened when they improve their skills in either language (p.13). In other words, if Farsi-speaking students are learning English, continuing to learn Farsi will expand their underlying language proficiency, which will in turn strengthen their English as well. The success of many "strong form" bilingual education programs appears to validate this principle (p. 170). Such programs aim at promoting additive bilingualism, in which students gain competence both in their primary and secondary language. Shin (2013) has noted that "Research overwhelmingly supports strong forms of bilingual education in developing bilingual skills," often leading to academic proficiency in both languages (p. 170, 179-181). Thus, although a clearer research consensus on parental literacy involvement is needed, the linguistic interdependence principle is a strong candidate for shaping praxis in the meantime. Shin has recommended that parents continue to use students' primary language at home (p. 13). If students with regular exposure to both languages tend to excel, then it seems reasonable that parents should attempt to provide continued exposure to both languages. For many parents, this will mean continuing to speak and/or read the primary language at home, while students receive instruction in the secondary language at school. At the same time, parents should look to other contexts in which their students may be able to acquire both languages.

Beyond the home, motivation is a critical factor in students' acquisition of English. Echevarría & Graves (2011) have stressed the importance of motivation in second language

acquisition. In particular, integrative motivation- the desire to learn the language in order to become a fully active member of the language community- has been found to be the most effective in producing long-term results. In contrast, instrumental motivation- the desire to learn the language in order to meet a temporary goal- may only be effective until the goal is achieved (p.34). It also stands to reason the instrumental motivation may produce only the level of proficiency required to meet the goal. It should be noted that the integrative/instrumental framework assumes that "long-term results" include thorough social and academic proficiency in the target language; some scholars have challenged such a perspective. Shin (2013), although not in this exact language, has promoted instrumental motivation as normative: "bilinguals use their two languages with different people, in different contexts, and for different purposes" (p.13). Shin has warned against an assimilationist perspective that denigrates students' culture and language if it does not fit with the norms of the dominant culture and language. Even so, Shin (2013) has maintained academic achievement as a goal closely associated with students' empowerment, so examining the type of motivation relevant to achieving a thorough grasp of social and academic English does not seem irrelevant.

Spolsky (1969) has provided research bolstering the link between integrative motivation and language acquisition, arguing that "the attitude of the learner to the language and to its speakers" is essential in determining what level of proficiency the learner will gain (p. 274). Spolsky (1969) undertook a questionnaire study involving 315 students from 80 countries which sought to identify respondents' "reference group," that is, the language group in which they wished to maintain or gain membership. "[A] greater desire to be like speakers of English than to be like speakers of the native language" was taken to be indicative that "speakers of English constitute [the] reference group" and therefore of integrative motivation (Spolsky, 1969, p. 281).

Although one questions whether this competitive model of language groups is appropriate (since bilingual students may have complex and positive relationships with both language groups), the study does show that students who desired to become members of the English-speaking world in this way had developed greater proficiency in English than their peers, implying that students with integrative motivation learn English better than students with instrumental motivation (p. 281-282).

Even though students' motivation may draw them to communities outside the home, parents have a key role to play in shaping students' attitude toward those communities. R.C. Gardner (1985) has examined how parents can shape their children's motivation to acquire a second language. Interestingly, explicitly encouraging students to learn the second language has not been found to be most effective, because students' perceptions of such encouragement do not always align with their parents'. Gardner (1985) has suggested instead that parents best influence motivation by socializing children to value "the other language group and language study" in general (p. 122). An integrative motivation that leads to long-term investment in second language acquisition is fostered by parents' communication of a positive attitude toward the community that uses the second language.

Here the importance of relationships with native-speaker peers becomes immediately evident. Long (1998) has found that environments of relaxed play can especially allow language-learners to take advantage of communicative opportunities with native-speaker peers. Although her research was a single case study, so broad applications are difficult to make, Long's work has suggested that such play-based environments may allow students (with eager and cooperative native speaker peers) to acquire language in a gradual manner. Her study subject started with pre-linguistic "strategies" such as laughter, verbal intonation and facial expression, and mime

and performance, moving up through made-up words and altered primary-language pronunciation on to genuine use of the target language. In contrast to this active language use in play-based environments, the subject's language use in the classroom did not move beyond listening for several months. However, midway through the second year of residence, the language learner's written work was on-par with that of native-speaker peers (Long, 1998). More research is needed to validate the suggestions of this study in regard to the significance of play-based environments, but it serves to remind educators of the significance of students' language acquisition *outside* of the classroom.

    Long's research also neatly fits the influential theoretical model set down by Krashen (1987). Krashen summarized five hypotheses that should shape classroom instruction: the acquisition/learning hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis and the Affective Filter hypothesis. The acquisition/learning hypothesis holds that students do not learn a second language by giving conscious attention to its linguistic rules, but rather acquire their second language in the same way they do their first: by "picking [it] up" gradually (Krashen, 1987, p. 35). The natural order hypothesis posits that each language has an inherent "natural order" through which students progress as they acquire it, picking up certain aspects before others. The monitor hypothesis suggests that students use a mental "monitor" to check the accuracy of their language use, and that overuse of this monitor can inhibit fluency. The input hypothesis states that what students need to acquire language is "comprehensible input" in that language—input that is just one step beyond their current level of competence (Krashen, 1987, p. 38). The Affective Filter hypothesis holds that students possess an "Affective Filter" through which they receive input; this filter inhibits acquisition when its effect is amplified by anxiety, low motivation, or low self-esteem (Krashen, 1987, p. 39). Long's

suggestions about play-based acquisition match each of these hypotheses: her subject moved through the stages of language gradually, acquiring it in comprehensible stages from peers in informal contexts where the inhibiting force of the monitor and the Affective Filter was low.

Taken together, the research cited thus far provides a tentative paradigm for how parents and peers can influence second-language acquisition: even if parents' socioeconomic circumstances are detrimental, and even if parents may be limited in their capacity to provide comprehensible input in English to their children, they can help their students acquire English by continuing to use their primary language in the home, by fostering an attitude of respect for the English-speaking community, and by encouraging relationships with English-speaking peers. Those peers in turn can provide comprehensible input to ELLs, allowing them to gradually "pick up" the language as they become part of the English-speaking world. This model is supported by Shin's (2013) helpful summary of how children acquire language:

"bilingual proficiency is very much a result of experience with the languages in question. Children need to be exposed to a language in order to learn it . . . What children need in order to become bilingual are sustained opportunities to interact socially with speakers of other languages. These interactions need to be meaningful—children will not just learn another language if they know it won't serve the purpose of helping them communicate with people." (p. 191)

In other words, if students are to acquire English, they need to have relationships with English-speakers that require genuine communication. The most immediate opportunity is among English-speaking peers, and the support of such relationships from parents is essential.

In order to build upon the critical role that parents and peers play, ELL instructors should take care to build relationships with families. Elizabeth Coelho (1994) has noted that many

immigrant families (including the parents of many ELLs) come from countries where parents are expected *not* to be directly involved in their students' education at school; this can lead to confusion and misunderstanding between parents and teachers. Coelho has suggested that, in order to mitigate this possibility, administrators and teachers take a proactive role in reaching out to parents and building relationships with families. Specifically, Coelho (1994) has identified the need for established procedures for welcoming new families, such as conducting an initial meeting in which parents can meet their students' teachers, receive information about the school, take a brief tour, and learn about community language-learning resources (p. 313-316). Individual teachers can call parents early in the year to praise something their student has done well and form a positive first contact rather than waiting until a "problem" occurs.

Within the relationships established through these practices, teachers are well-positioned to encourage parental support of their children's English acquisition. Coelho (1994) has recommended that teachers advise parents to continue primary language use at home, informing families of the value of continued primary language literacy. Again, further research is needed to clarify and validate what has been suggested by Cummins (1996) and Shin (2013), but encouraging continued use of the primary language seems the most prudent practical approach at present. (This is a matter that reminds one of the old joke that "The difference between teachers and researchers is that teachers actually have to make decisions." Telling ELLs' parents to wait until further research has clarified what they should do is not an option.) Coelho has also noted the benefits of a home reading program; individual teachers would do well to participate in or help form programs that assist parents in reading to and with their children. Similarly, Echevarría and Graves (2011) have described "Family Literacy Nights" as ideal opportunities to bring

parents and teachers together, allowing parents to receive more detailed instructions on how to support their children's literacy and education at home (p. 75).

Furthermore, as there is opportunity, teachers should include families as well as native English-speaking peers in classroom instruction. Echevarría and Graves (2011) have stressed the importance of creating "a comfortable place" for all families in order to foster cultural and linguistic diversity, but the research considered so far suggests that bringing parents into the classroom may even augment language acquisition. Echevarría and Graves have suggested inviting family members in to serve the class through providing demonstrations, cultural information, and narratives of life experience (p. 75). By helping parents and students see themselves as part of the educational community, educators can shape the attitudes that lead to integrative motivation and long-term language success. Similarly, if there are opportunities to bring native English-speaking peers into collaborative activities with ELLs, all students will be enriched by the cultural exchange, and ELLs will gain exposure to comprehensible English input.

English language learners come from a wide variety of social contexts, but certain patterns emerge that should inform their instructors: many ELLs come from immigrant families, but more significantly, they often come from minority families of low socioeconomic status and limited formal education. Despite these challenges, families have much to offer their students: in addition to helping students maintain their primary language, parents in particular play a critical role in shaping students' attitudes towards speakers of English, which in turn may determine their level of motivation to learn English and their long-term proficiency in the language. Students' native English-speaking peers also have much to offer, since ELLs need to acquire language gradually in comprehensible forms. Teachers must take advantage of the opportunities

for parental and peer involvement in and out of the classroom, building relationships with

families as a context for including them as active members of the educational community. As

parents, peers, and educators collaborate, ELLs will find that their social contexts are a launching

board for success.

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