English Language Teaching and Linguistics Studies
ISSN 2640-9836 (Print) ISSN 2640-9844 (Online)
Vol. 3, No. 2, 2021
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/eltls

Original Paper

Sociolets, Socioaffective Filters and Social Transference: Contextual Considerations For Urban, Immigrant, Language Learners

Adam J. Sacks[1*]

[1] Lecturer, School of Humanities, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

[*] Adam J. Sacks, Lecturer, School of Humanities, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Received: October 14, 2020 Accepted: October 21, 2021 Online Published: May 13, 2021

doi:10.22158/eltls.v3n2p37 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v3n2p37

This brief reflective report considers the role and influence of the culture industry and the immigrant experience in shaping the socio-affective filter of English language learners. These considerations will embrace the notion of emerging and transforming cultural identity for language learners in an urban, port city environment. The following remarks are largely a meditation on language learning concepts that flag the social: sociolet, "socioaffective filter," and "social transference." These notions are grouped as together they bring into stark relief the role of lived, social experience as it shapes and impacts uopn the internalization and reproduction of knowledge. Ultimately, these considerations serve to bolster the interwovenness of cultural pluralism and adolescent psychology within second language pedagogy.

The "Socio-affective filter" is akin to a cognitive sieve through which experiential and systematized knowledge pass through and internally grapple on the path toward internalization. Emotional and psychological memory, experience and trauma enhance and challenge the life worlds and self-forming exercises which complicate the path of the adolescent language learner. "Social transference," refers to how social input may be re-exported onto the learning context, the classroom, peers and educators. This broad idea reflects that the learning process is a much an exploration of the psyche as an advancement of skills. Arguably the greatest challenge facing immigrant learners is the lack of a common frame of cultural reference among all actors in the learning environment, namely the absence of subjects which may be presumed to know, as well as a consensus on what they do not, but should wish to know and acquire for the future.

The specific demographic in question is that of relatively recent immigrants (less than 5 years) who are post-puberty older adolescents, e.g., 14-18. These are learners who have already undergone cultural

immersion and socialization in differing national contexts and adaptation to pedagogic methods of educational systems other than that which they encounter in the United States. Needless to add, this is an age by which, the dominant hallmark of "otherness," the spoken accent, may only be transcended with greatest difficulty. This particular profile often includes a high degree of biographical mobility if not familial turbulence with a set of cultural allegiances and ego-identity under great stress and flux. The dominant vehicle into the new cultural environment is largely through technology in the service of mass media culture, specifically music and Internet memes, products of culture manufactured industrially. This myriad of influences that shape the learning process may be again referred to as the interaction between the "socioaffective filter," and "social transference." For educators with scant immersion in ethnography or sociology, such concepts might provide a valuable interpretive framework to make such cultural processes more legible.

Immigrant students living in under-resourced and highly stressed urban quarters arrive in the classroom having already begun a process of primary acculturation towards their immediate "subcultural" surroundings. The guarded use of "subcultural" here serves merely to indicate that vehicles of national media and representation tend to overlook transitional immigrant spaces. Furthermore, such cultural groupings are always internally multichromatic not fixed blocs. While immigrant learners may have more exposure to the non-immigrant public sphere than the reverse, in a strict social sense their daily life transpires in a liminal if not a marginal space. In addition, neighboring non-immigrant, so-called minority communities have fostered local cultures of protest and resistance against a hegemonic culture that has tended to treat such urban quarters as internal colonies. Linguistic markers of these cultures range from nonverbal codes to AAVE, as well as other American creoles whose distance to "broadcast" English is readily apparent. The language context in which many immigrant learners are immersed could rightly be called a "sociolet" namely, a strong bond of communicative activity without constituting a distinct language, but also more than semilingualism or code switching. A key component here are styles of nonverbal communication, tone and body language. Immigrant, language learners in the urban context, share, create and consume an ever renewing American urban subjective experience akin to an ethnic community all of its own, a fusion of local popular culture and the marketed media of a mass entertainment complex. This reality should be recognized as a domain distinct to itself and not merely as partial or incomplete. The notion of the immigrant as a regenerative, "new born" to a redemptive earth mother carries highly fraught Christological connotations from the ancient Alma Mater, to the Statue of Liberty even to Israel Zangwill's notion of the "melting pot." Too often, historical experience has proved the melting pot to be a smelting pot, that forges reductive and hardened non-dominant identity blocs out of highly fluid, complex and multichromatic preimmigrant subjective life-worlds.

Immigrant language learners are stressed between two contrasting if not conflictual linguistic demands, in the public school classroom they are tasked with "broadcast," scholastic English, but everywhere else in their community a more immediate demand awaits, the former often rendering the latter

invisible, and that is mastering the urban American "sociolet." Not to mention that the textbooks provided them too often include rather simplistic renderings of cultural categories and project an unreal or inaccessible version of American culture as well.

Popular cultural images that circulate in the music, videos and film that predominate this subculture often stress identification with narratives and regimes of frontier survival where material gain is a necessity and at immediate stake, rather than status markers of the educational system. For a nation whose narrative history was often viewed through a "frontier thesis," it is no small irony that the most apparent continuity with the rugged individualism of pioneering colonists is most closely replicated in ever new waves of immigrants in the urban context. The icons of this popular culture, are often self-made new cowboys, guerillas and desperados; romantic heroes who surmount war-like conditions upon a narrow avenue toward exceptional achievement.

The immigrant experience itself is one of upheaval, confusion and a plunge into life phases where stable authority, especially of family and tradition might seem absent or ill-equipped. The rapid absorption of the ambient sociolet culture is thus not a simple matter of proximity and popularity rather there is a substantive elective affinity at work; the appeal of such fashion, music and communicative bonds is precisely because they well articulate the language of a struggle for survival, and identity.

It is a sociological mainstay that anomie sets in with disorganization and the collapse of structure. The social and psychological struggle truly takes hold after the physical drama of migration has ceased. Only after stable situation in a new home, does the social status of immigrant become ever more real. Social stigmatization is a multifaceted phenomenon, reinforced by peers and by the perception of family in the light of new cultural codes. Perception of failure or shortcoming on the part of family or of immediate surroundings may create disappointment and even a sense of existential crisis and disjuncture with the past and narratives of the immigrant journey itself. The cognitive dissonance when confronting the lack of a shared context, between family and classroom, neighbors and the wider society can easily foster a sense of disbelief if not cynicism with the dream of a better life. It is precisely this cognitively dissonant, social experience which may be transferred onto teachers, authority figures as well as older family members.

The assimilation of ambient socioletic, cultural materials assists students in the mastery of certain forms of communication imperative for survival. Arguably, as much energy is expended on social survival, i.e., learning the bonding codes of their immediate environment as on language exercises themselves. The "socio-affective filter" of such language learners makes them "field sensitive," in the extreme. This serves to indicate that reactions to support or doubt from peer groups easily veer onto the psychologically destabilizing. There is neither a stable social context nor often strong ethno-cultural reinforcement from home which can help shield against mockery or shame. The ubiquity of social display or "over sharing" as facilitated by social media platforms seem to only compound this experience and the challenges posed to mental equilibrium.

For both such media platforms as well as the complex of mass entertainment, the adolescent learner is

first and foremost a passive consumer. Cultural products proffered are spectacles conveyed by technology, meme videos and downloadable ringtones. The recent prevalence of Marvel franchise/cartoon derived action films with little character development or psychological insight further compound the canyon between their struggles for identity and opportunities for reflection and thought in popular media. Arguably, the recurring subjection to the intensity of effects in screen offerings lacking an emotional fabric constitutes a kind of psychological brutality akin to abuse. Even the claim that such mass cultural products have displaced religion to become a new mythology seems both wishful and less focused upon the actual psychic impact of repeated viewings.

The spectator culture of much of mass entertainment restricts artistic needs and latches them passively to technology and consumerization. Arguably the most immediate and powerful process of Americanization, admittedly one already begin even before migration in some cases, is that transformation into a rapid cycle product consumer. Almost unavoidably, one can easily imagine that this integration could both aid acculturation but also exacerbate feelings of estrangement and inadequacy in the court of peer and public opinion, as the distance from the lived experience of the sociolet culture is extreme. In any case this state of affairs invites the paradoxically and challenging deduction that students from this demographic are considerably acculturated yet socially marginal.

A structural link between mass entertainment and ethnic identity is that both draw on pre-rational or even irrational forms of knowledge and experience. Ethno cultural identity in some forms may be prefigurative and imbued prior to language and education, through cuisine and clothing, and is somewhat fixed in place before full command of intellectual faculties. As far as the awareness of a cultural or ethnic self, internalization precedes intellectualization.

The cultural self develops through a series of unquestioned assumptions about one's surroundings. It is a kinesthetic imprinting that is most likely rarely questioned until the onset of adolescence. For immigrants, the sense of self-doubt and even internal accusation of the puberty years is magnified in not just imagining alternative worlds but actually living in and amongst one that contrasts with the home environment since earliest childhood.

The above considerations provide in outline form some constituent parts of the "socio-affective filter" and the social transference onto the learning environment which may ensue. This necessarily leads to the follow-up question of the kind of impact and consequences this field of inquiry might have for the learning process and language learning pedagogy.

First of all, any strict period of time assigned for language learning or even mastery is both theoretical and highly variable. What is sure is that absorption in an American English informed by mass culture occurs with immediacy, far quicker than the acquisition of academic skill sets. It is also conceivable that the former might well camouflage the actual development of the latter. A particularly challenging question is whether the intangible values transmitted by both mass entertainment and ambient sociolet culture in any significant way reinforce, serve and bolster the importance of scholastic skills and language acquisition as a worthy goal and one critical for a balanced, stable existence. By balance one

understands the tightrope between joy and responsibility; the forces of personal self-actualization and necessity and duty, inevitably weigh upon such students who, in turn embark on enterprises that provide some form of response to these existential dilemmas.

Immigrant language learners navigate how to relate outside labor, schoolwork and cultural struggle to the needs of others, responsible for their migration. This multichromatic, bicultural cognitive dissonance of immigrant language learners threatens collapse into the bare life of labor without loyalty. Even if their guardians or parents may hold advanced education from their country of origin they gradually grow aware of the gaze of the market that sees their existence in worth defined through value to the service market economy, as well as the erasure of social status from previous contexts. Needless to add, for the demographic group in question, those who are not required to work in addition to study even during high school years are the exception not the rule. This experience should be understood as a parallel education in the work place, one rarely connected either to the cognitive language skills needed in the classroom or skills that might help advance them toward professional study. An equally glaring gap persists between their passive consumption of entertainment technology and the lack of integration of such media in the learning process. A fusion including, experiential, digital learning and even methods of gamification could well serve to enhance engagement and expand technical skill sets.

This student demographic is one that arrives in the classroom already beset by a familial stress, material flux, and necessities of acculturation before confronting demands for success in school. Clearly this is not a context where “under challenging” remains an issue. While committed students may consistently complete tasks however elementary, what may be found wanting is the presence of identifiable and culturally related role models who may be emulated and who may strengthen confidence. This dimension of inferiority/superiority complex, as outlined by psychoanalyst Alfred Adler, is one of the most universal dimensions of the “socio affective filter.” If students are prompted to recite examples of role models, they often highlight sport stars, hip-hop artists or comedians, most of whom conform to the idea of guerilla or desperado as outlined earlier. The long feared top-down tribalization of American society, not coincidentally emerging sharply with the stigmatization of immigrants could have the effect of further exacerbating the trends outlined in this discussion. Marginalization and stigmatization of immigrant language learners may further alienate and decelerate processes of language learning, even endanger hard fought for webs of emergent, personal meaning. This demographic could conceivably be left as both target of and susceptible to the allures of any movement that speaks in Manichean, reductive terms. The effects of discourses even more hostile and aggressive can only have grave consequences and exacerbate the psychically most challenging components of the socio-affective filter and transference immigrant language learners bring into the classroom. Socio-affective competency, digital literacy, and a consciousness of constructive pluralism on the part of educators involves overcoming these divides through the infusion and integration of psychology, technical resources, and most of all the recognition and negotiation of urban, immigrant subjectivity forever entangled with the specter of broader neglect and personal alienation.

References

Brubaker. (2002). Ethncitiy without Groups. *European Journal of Sociology*, *43*(2), 163-189. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975602001066

Cardasco, F., & Bernstein, G. (1979). *Bilingual Education in American Schools*. Detroit: Gale Research Company.

Porter, R. P. (1990). *Forket Toungs: The Politics of Bilingual Education*. New York: Basic Books.

Porter, R. P. (Ed.). (2000). Education Language Minority Children. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Rendon, L. I., & Hope, R. O. (2000). *Educating a New Majority: Transforming America's Educational System for Diversity*. San Francisco, Josey Bass Publishers.

Sachar, E. (1991). *Shut Up and Let the Lady Teach: A Teacher's Year in Public School*. New York: Poseidon Press.

Sollors, W. (1987). *Beyond Ethnicity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.