Psychological Factors in Second Language Aquisition: Why Your International Students are *Sudando La Gota Gorda* (Sweating Buckets)

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Why is it so difficult and emotionally trying for adults to acquire a second language? What makes our international and newly arrived immigrant students sprout gray hairs and frown lines when they try to learn a *lingua franca* like English that could pave their road to academic and career success? At Bunker Hill Community College, where second language speakers often make up the majority of a class, what types of classroom management and teaching practices can be used to promote the development of students' second language communication skills?

Linguists have often pointed out that children in every culture all over the world manage to achieve communicative competence in their "first" or "native" languages — unless they have a specific language processing problem like autism or have been restricted to a developmental environment markedly deficient in language stimuli. After years of working with the language(s) in use within the home and immediate community, children become increasingly more fluent and effective in their command of the native tongue. Subsequent work within a school setting with a more abstract or decontextualized use of the native language — and with the addition of written as well as oral use of language — further strengthens the child's communicative competence. It might at first glance seem logical that an academically well-prepared adolescent or adult who makes a "second" language an object of serious study could likewise achieve proficiency in that language without undue stress or emotional turmoil. But as any educator of new learners of English will attest, a smooth and seamless course is rarely the pattern for second language acquisition within a college setting.

There are, of course, enormous cognitive differences between young adults and developing children, which could account for *some* of the difficulties college students encounter in mastering a second language. Linguists and educators like Eric Lenneberg and Derek Bickerton subscribe to the view that there is a biological timetable for optimal language learning which stymies the efforts of adolescents and young adults to acquire language. Theoreticians like Judith Strozer have applied this line of reasoning to second language acquisition and would predict a more difficult course for second language acquisition in adolescents and adults, as compared to children, due to differences in brain plasticity.

An opposing pack of linguists downplay the role of the biological clock in second language learning. Most notably, Catherine Snow and M. Hoefnagel-Höhle have argued that adolescents, if studied systematically, actually can be shown to be the fastest language learners in all areas except pronunciation, with adults following and school-age children bringing up the rear (337-343). A possible explanation is that adolescents and adults can make use of their better-developed abilities for abstract logical reasoning (what Piaget would term "formal operations") to achieve an analytical understanding of the new language being studied, while children can only reason about language in relatively concrete terms. Adolescents can add a child-like willingness to experiment and

play with language to this capacity for metalinguistic awareness, and so they become the speediest second language learners.

Regardless of which view of the "biological timetable" issue seems more compelling to the educator, it is virtually beyond dispute that certain cognitive factors such as verbal intelligence, phonological processing ability, and long-term memory capacity strongly influence the student's ability to learn a second language (Rubin 42). However, there are important facilitating factors as well as roadblocks to second language learning that have little to do with cognition or capacity for conceptual understanding.

Second language acquisition researcher Stephen Krashen developed the construct of an affective filter, consisting of the variables of anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence. According to Krashen, these psychological variables may strongly enhance or inhibit second language acquisition by playing a critical mediating role between the linguistic input available in the educational setting and the student's ability to learn (30-32). In order for students to fully engage their innate capacity to acquire language within an input-rich environment, they should ideally be relaxed, motivated, and self-confident. Unfortunately, however, this rosy picture is far from typical in the case of the new learner of English, who may often feel anxious, discouraged, and embarrassed within the classroom setting. A variety of second language acquisition researchers have sketched out the dynamics of this malaise that so impedes second language learning.

Alexander Guiora, whose research focuses on personality factors in second language acquisition, holds that "...second language learning in all of its aspects demands that the individual, to a certain extent, take on a new identity" (145). Since an individual's identity is developed within a context of communication and interaction — for example, with family members and peers — and since language plays a salient role in interpersonal relations, language becomes central to the sense of self. Changing that basic sense of who you are can be difficult, to say the least, particularly where the individual's sense of self-efficacy or confidence in her or his key abilities is challenged in the process. Competence in communicating with others is just such a key ability central to the individual's self esteem. Facing that stripping away of language competence which occurs when we try to communicate in a second language requires tremendous ego strength, an ability to retain a sense of self esteem even when exposing and exploring an area of real weakness. For these reasons, bolstering the student's sense of self-esteem is the key to working with new learners of English in the college context.

Second language acquisition researcher John Schumann explores the concept of "language shock," a fear of appearing comical or making a fool of oneself when attempting to communicate in a second language (382). The student's desire to avoid narcissistic injury, in combination with his or her social inhibitions and fear of criticism, may function to decrease his or her motivation to learn English as a second language and to master course content expressed in English. The anxiety and disorientation that the international student or the immigrant faces in entering a new culture, which Schumann terms "culture shock," can further complicate the learning process for these students. If we notice that a student acquiring English is reticent to speak up in class discussions or displays a writing style that is somewhat terse or parrot-like, we need to be aware of the possibility that the student is facing the frustrations of language and culture shock. These students need to be helped to become full participants in the educational process that is taking place in the classroom, rather than acquiesce and become passive audience

members. Again, bolstering students' self-esteem by showing a willingness to work non-judgmentally to help them develop better communicative capacities in English could help increase their motivation and achievement.

Finally, in considering the range of psychological variables which may either facilitate or inhibit the efforts of new learners of English, we should not overlook the issue of power. English may well be perceived by the international student as the language of a rich and powerful post-industrial society, while the native language may be seen as somehow less impressive and respected. This perceived differential between the power and respectability of the native language and that of English could be expected to aggravate the psychological difficulties which interfere with language learning: anxiety, low self-esteem and motivation, identity conflict, language shock and culture shock.

As one way of easing the newly arrived immigrant or international student's conflictual identification with the English language and American culture, these issues could be explicitly addressed by incorporating them into the class curriculum. The opportunity to design classroom activities (such as student presentations and culture circles) which address issues of acculturation and invite valuing and sharing of personal experience — as well as use of native language — would seem particularly fitted to course areas like behavioral science, social science and literature, as well as English as a Second Language.

Within this context, I would like to suggest Jim Cummins' reciprocal interaction model of education, which sees a network of meaningful oral and written communication among students and teachers as the matrix of learning. Student-directed projects, presentations and classroom discussions supplement and even begin to supplant the traditional lecture format. In this way, validation of minority students' cultural experiences becomes a powerful tool for actively involving new speakers of English in the learning experiences happening within the classroom. According to Cummins, "This clearly implies that minority students' first language (L1) should be valued within the classroom and its development encouraged" (34). This attitude stands in opposition to the traditional "English-only" approach to working with international students and other non-native speakers of English in the classroom.

"Transmission" models of pedagogy, Cummins explains, exclude and suppress the students' experiences from the classroom in the interest of establishing a one-way flow of information from the teacher to the students. In this too-familiar pedagogical approach, the teacher passively transmits, the students passively receive and the school authorities wield exclusive control of the learning process while minimizing the participatory involvement of students. The most basic function of language, meaningful communication, tends to get lost in the shuffle — a dynamic which inhibits language learning. Interactive or experiential pedagogy, by contrast, would seek to incorporate the students' expression of cultural and language experiences in the classroom in order to validate students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as to stimulate their active participation in classroom learning. The challenge for community college educators is to find ways of inviting and structuring such participation within the learning community so that both second language students and native speakers achieve the fullest possible benefits.

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