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PHAP DAM, Ph.D.
Texas Woman's University
Series Editor

MELINDA T. COWART, Ed.D.
Texas Woman's University
Managing Editor

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Acculturation and Adjustment: Factors in Second Language Acquisition among Refugee English Language Learners

Melinda T. Cowart
Texas Woman's University

Introduction

In 2008 a cataclysmic cyclone struck the country of Myanmar with unrelenting force, leaving behind a path of death and destruction in its aftermath. The ensuing reluctance to accept aid by the ruling party of Myanmar shocked the world as offers of assistance in the form of food and medical care were routinely declined (Science Daily, 2009). The tight control over the media, both foreign and domestic, that was exercised by the government of Myanmar made it difficult if not impossible to assess the extent of death, destruction, and subsequent deprivation left in the wake of the storm.

Yet the devastation from the storm paled in comparison to the cruel treatment already enacted against two ethnic groups in Burma (Barron, Okell, Yin, VanBik, Swain, Larkin, Allott, & Ewers, 2007). Targeted for extinction by those in positions of official power in Burma, now known as Myanmar at the request of the ruling party, the Karen and Chin Burmese have been fleeing for their lives across international borders to find safe haven in refugee camps set up by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Their hope is to find peace, freedom, and a

cessation of the persecution that has plagued them with a vengeance for a number of years.

Through the process of escape and refugee resettlement many survivors of political upheaval, civil war, and ethnic cleansing will enter the United States as legal permanent residents. As the children of newcomers enter U.S. schools, the primary concern will be to teach them English. Another consideration must be that of a positive acculturation experience into U.S. American society. Defined as adjusting to a new culture while maintaining the cultural traditions, beliefs, values, and language of the heritage culture, the acculturation process can be quite difficult for culturally and linguistically diverse ELLs and their families (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2010). Because parents of newly arriving refugee students may suffer homesickness, melancholy, apprehension about the future, and frustration during initial efforts to begin establishing their lives again in the new host country, the acculturation process may occur differently and at varied paces for different members of the same family. The children may feel vulnerable and defenseless if their parents are unable to provide the reassurance and constancy normally associated with parenting, thus faltering during acculturation (Igoa, 1995).

Both children and adults may experience cultural bereavement, or a sense of loss of culture, a feeling of being estranged from what went before and a fear of becoming detached from all that was traditional and comfortable in the homeland. Children experiencing cultural bereavement wonder why they are in the new place, what will happen to them and who they can trust (Eisenbruch, 1988). When refugee children make progress in learning English, experience some success in learning in school, and begin to adjust to U. S. American culture and society, they

sometimes feel that each successful accomplishment denotes more abandonment of what was happy, memorable, significant, and familiar in their former homeland. Thus, the small successes that would seem to facilitate confidence in school for newcomer ELLs may actually undermine the acculturation process because of a greater sense of loss and cultural bereavement. Inattention to cultural bereavement may lead ELLs to stumble during acculturation. Without a concerned and informed adult to guide the process and to provide reassurance that the acculturative experience allows the maintenance of the heritage culture and language while learning the new language and adapting to the new culture, the refugee student will be hesitant, constantly wondering if the path he or she takes will cause the loss of cultural and linguistic identity. What is the impact of a failed acculturation experience? What may teachers do to mediate the negative effects of social and psychological distance experienced by many newcomer refugee students?

The purpose of the remainder of this paper is two-fold – to explore the acculturative needs of refugee students and to discuss the impact of the refugee experience on acculturation and second language acquisition. First a demographic overview of the latest new arrivals will be provided along with a discussion of current trends in refugee resettlement in the United States. Subsequently, essential information for educators regarding the refugee experience will be given, and possible ways educators may attend to issues of social and psychological distance as they relate to newcomer ELLs will be discussed. How relevant are such issues to academic success? According to a Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights (1992):

When students feel like outsiders in the school environment, do not have a sense of belonging, have few friends involved in school, and are not integrated into the social or academic life of their school, they become likely candidates for academic failure. (p.70)

The same report to the Civil Rights Commission went on to state that a significant and unusual aspect of the lives of the newcomers at that time, Southeast Asian refugee children, should be known. The political upheaval in Southeast Asia resulted in Southeast Asian children experiencing battlefield-like situations in the home country and deprivation and ongoing loss in their escape to refugee camps.

Still vivid and alive are their memories of starvation, violence, torture, cruelty, and even witnessing the rape and murder of their parents, siblings, or relatives.” (p. 69)

Unfortunately, some things never change.

Refugee resettlement in the United States: An update

After a military takeover in 1962, the nation of Burma experienced a rapid decline of its resources, making it one of the least developed and most oppressive countries in the world today. The refugee crisis that persists in Burma is one of the most prolonged tragedies in modern history (Barron et al., 2007). Between 2007 and 2009, the U.S. State Department resettled over 40,000 refugees from Burma, and the resettlement project continues today (Martin, 2010). Two groups in particular have been brutally persecuted by the ruling party. The Chin Burmese have been mistreated for ethnic and religious reasons while the Karen Burmese have been persecuted primarily because of their

strong nationalist resistance to the ruling military party (Barron et al., 2007).

Another group of people who have fled a brutal regime and war is that of Iraqi refugees. This group constituted 25 % of all refugees resettled in the United States in 2009 (Martin, 2010). Resettlement agencies working in collaboration with the U.S. State Department are resettling refugees from Iraq in all areas of the U.S. with six states receiving the largest amount – Arizona, California, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, and Texas (Ghareeb, Ranard, & Tutunji, 2008). Rounding out the top ten countries of nationality for new refugee arrivals between 2007 and 2009 are Bhutan, Iran, Cuba, Somalia, Eritrea, Vietnam, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Burundi (Martin, 2010).

The term “refugee” is not a term one gives oneself. Rather, it is assigned by the new host country. Refugees did not suddenly appear because of political or civil unrest and war in modern times. However, the development of the term “refugee” helped to shed light on what Portes and Rumbaut (2006) describe as contexts of exit or the different circumstances that frame an individual’s departure from the home country. Whereas earlier immigration issues seemed to focus on the environment into which a newcomer was received in the new host country, the conditions that precipitate the exit have emerged as a topic of concern.

Refugee resettlement is not new to the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Each year the U.S. grants sanctuary for persons who match the definition of refugee described in the Immigration and Nationality Act 101(a)(42) (Martin & Hoefer, 2009). Specifically, an individual who is incapable or reluctant to return to his or her own country of nationality because of a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, or

membership in a particular political or social group may be designated as having refugee status (Martin, 2010). Two programs are in place to assist such persons – refugee resettlement for persons living outside of the U.S. and political asylum for individuals of nationalities other than U.S. American who have already arrived on U.S. soil. In 2009 a total of 74,602 persons were lawfully admitted to the United States as refugees, marking the highest number of refugee arrivals in ten years. Refugee arrivals numbered over 100,000 each year during the 1990s. However, changes in resettlement policies and procedures following September 11, 2001 resulted in a decline in numbers of refugees being resettled (Martin, 2010). The 2009 figures were an increase of 24 percent from 2008 numbers of 60,107 after an increase of 25 percent from 2007 to 2008. The primary countries of nationality were Iraq, Burma, and Bhutan. More than two thirds of all refugees resettled in the United States in 2009 were from those three nations with one third of refugees being under the age of 18. In the same year another 22,119 individuals were granted political asylum. The major countries of those granted asylum were China, Ethiopia, and Haiti. The largest percentage of refugees was resettled in California and Texas. Other states receiving large numbers of refugees included Florida, New York, Michigan, and Arizona (Martin, 2010). Several cities in the United States, including the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, have become centers for new arrivals. In fact newcomers consisting of immigrants, refugees, and political asylees now comprise one in every seven students in the Dallas Independent School District (Hernandez & Jacobson, 2008). Other cities such as San Antonio, Houston, New York, and Los Angeles reflect similar demographics as they continue to be new arrival centers.

During the 1980's and early 1990's the major groups that were resettled included refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, followed by those from Cuba and Haiti. Very large numbers, more than 100,000, were resettled each year throughout that time period. The U.S. State Department tended to support resettling refugees in large enclaves in cities designated as primary resettlement sites. This practice allowed refugees to access rather large support groups with whom to relate and associate. Resettlement agencies such as Catholic Charities, International Rescue Committee, and Church World Service were more likely to cluster services near densely populated, cohesive refugee communities.

In recent years a variety of factors have combined to force changes in refugee resettlement. New trends point to a focus on resettling smaller groups from a larger variety of countries (Martin & Hoefer, 2009). This change alone has created several exceptional challenges for resettlement agencies and school districts which must find personnel to assist with a greater assortment of languages and cultures.

In addition there has been an impact on newcomer students and their families who have arrived in the U.S. only to find small or non-existent groups of their own countrymen to advocate and assist with adjustment. A more detrimental result may be increased social and psychological distance between new arrivals and mainstream U.S. American society.

Acculturation and second language acquisition

Schumann (1978) has suggested that learning a new language is actually part of a larger acculturation process. According to Schumann (1986) the success of second language acquisition is

dependent in a significant way on how positive the acculturation process is, stating “the learner will acquire the second language only to the degree that he acculturates.” (p. 379). He goes on to say that certain factors will either promote or stifle contact between the macro group in society and the newcomers, effectively affecting the acculturative process of the incoming refugees, political asylees, and immigrants. For students, the degree of social and psychological distance they may experience as ELLs will greatly influence the success of their attempt to learn a second language.

Psychological distance

Psychological distance stems from affective variables including what Schumann (1986) referred to as language shock, culture shock, motivation, and ego-permeability. Language shock refers to a perceived loss of status when communication is stifled by a lack of native-like proficiency. Igoa (1995) notes that one trait shared by all immigrant children is that of a silent stage when the children seem to be non-communicative in the target language of English. During this time associated with language shock, newcomers may appear to be shy, emotional, and afraid. The children would normally participate with their peers in school, but lacking proficiency in English and fearing ridicule, elect to remain observant and silent. In her memoir of survival during her young life under Pol Pot's brutal regime in Cambodia and her subsequent escape to Thailand followed by resettlement in the United States, Loung Ung (2005) recounts her first experiences in adjustment to her new language, culture, and life, stating:

At times, it all seems so strange. One year ago, I was afraid of being killed by soldiers, and now my big fear is that the teacher will call on me to answer a question. When I *do* get called on, my mind swirls and jumbles up all the

grammar rules in my head. Then slowly I have to work my thoughts into a sentence and force my tongue and mouth to speak it. In Khmer and Chinese, there seem to be no pronouns, plurals, or tenses. In English, there are all these grammar rules and then there are all the exceptions for all the rules, and the exceptions for all the exceptions. It takes so much energy, work and effort to listen, understand, talk, study, learn, and remember everything in class that I often go off by myself during recess to be quiet. (p. 83)

Culture shock consists of the anxiety that results from the loss of all that is meaningful, familiar and comforting. Learners experience this when the problem-solving strategies they learned in the homeland no longer work in the new culture. An activity that used to be commonplace in the home country may become an arduous task because of language and cultural differences in the new host country. Learning to live in two social worlds is a fact of life for most newcomers. They learn quickly that home and school cultures are more often in conflict than in harmony. When even the simplest chore becomes impossible because the ELL does not yet comprehend U.S. culture or language, the newcomer may feel a pervasive sense of defeat and failure. Until English is learned, the ELLs will face obstacles of various kinds (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Ung (2005), who lost several family members including her parents in the Cambodian holocaust, wrote of her difficulty in making friends in America:

I have been going to school for two weeks now but I have not made any American friends. In Cambodia, before the Khmer Rouge takeover, I had many friends and the kids thought I talked a lot and was very funny. But I don't know how to be funny in America or in English. So when the other students gather at one another's desks before class, I keep to myself and read my schoolbooks. When the bell

rings for recess, I walk around the jungle gym by myself. Around me, other kids play and scream and run and swing. (p.67)

Schumann (1986) states that a student who is trying to identify the cause of the new disequilibrium may reject his culture, language, himself and anything associated with the new host country, making acquisition of the target language improbable. In describing the uprooting process experienced by every immigrant, refugee, and political asylee student Igoa (1995) acknowledges that if a child believes that assimilation is the only choice he or she may deny his or her culture and past experiences. The author of this chapter, a former teacher of ESL at the middle school level, has personally observed ELLs from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Sudan, and Ethiopia deny heritage languages and cultures, at times appearing to strive with their very beings to become American and to find acceptance with their peers. When the adventure into becoming as American as possible hits a roadblock, the same ELLs have rejected the new culture and language, reaching new heights in frustration amid a strong sense of belonging nowhere. Cowart (2006) noted that teachers of newcomers have an incredible opportunity to either facilitate a successful school experience or to unintentionally permit a child to fail in school. The end result, whether a child experiences acculturation and is encouraged to learn to balance two cultures and languages or endures a continual feeling of being a foreigner in U.S. American society, is dependent upon the extent of knowledge a teacher possesses about the students and the cultural and linguistic capital they bring into the classroom.

Motivation is another factor to consider in psychological distance. Brown (2000) makes the distinction between integrative

and instrumental motivation for acquiring a second language. Integrative motivation is where a learner seeks to learn the target language in order to fit in and therefore wants to be able to meet with, talk with and become like native speakers of the target language. On the other hand an instrumentally motivated individual simply wants to learn the second language in order to accomplish a goal, get a better job, or obtain recognition. Most young children are integratively motivated to learn the target language because of their desire to find acceptance among teachers and peers and to be asked to become involved (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2006). The motivation to survive calamitous events in the home country may also point to greater integrative motivation among refugees during the initial stages of resettlement. However, Cochrane, Cochrane, Scalena, and Buchanan (1984) explain that children who feel that success in school must occur at the cost of cultural identity may lose the intent or motivation to learn. Failure to form the intent to learn coupled with a negative attitude towards the target language and culture points to the probability of greater psychological distance and will serve to inhibit second language acquisition.

Schumann's discussion of ego-permeability, similar to Brown's (2000) discussion of a fragile language ego, refers to the relative openness an ELL may have for learning the target language. This openness is influenced by personality factors such as self-consciousness and reticence as well as by external factors such as respect for the learner's heritage language and culture and the tolerance of a listener for errors while the ELL continues to learn language. Schumann (1986) believes reducing the language learner's inhibitions may enhance ego-permeability. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) would add that it would also be necessary to

lower the affective filter, stating that a high affective filter, whereby a student feels anxious, upset, worried, or concerned about prior events or threatened in the current situation essentially guarantees that little learning will take place. Ishmael Beah (2007), recruited as a child soldier to commit heinous acts against his fellow countrymen in Sierra Leone and resettled as a refugee in New York City, described his initial adjustment to a new culture and language in the following excerpt from his book:

I was afraid to fall asleep, but staying awake also brought back painful memories. Memories I sometimes wish I could wash away, even though I am aware that they are an important part of what my life is; who I am now. I stayed awake all night, anxiously waiting for daylight, so that I could fully return to my new life, to rediscover the happiness I had known as a child, the joy that had stayed alive inside me even through times when being alive itself became a burden. These days I live in three worlds: my dreams, and the experiences of my new life, which trigger memories from the past. (pp. 19-20)

Sometimes, particularly for refugee students who have experienced multiple traumas in the homeland, during escape or in resettlement, or for students who were formerly child soldiers, what raises the affective filter and decreases a learner's openness to the target language and culture is not school-related, but must be addressed if language acquisition is to proceed.

Schumann completes his discussion of psychological distance by asserting that without adequate motivation and ego-permeability, and if language shock and culture shock are not mediated, a learner will fail in the acculturation process and will not acquire the target language. Igoa (1995) suggests that for children who are catastrophically uprooted by traumatic events

such as war and ethnic cleansing, the psychological effects, while pervasive, are much less obvious and will continue to impact learning until appropriately acknowledged and attended to.

Social distance

While there are four primary components of psychological distance, eight factors affect social distance, including social dominance, integration pattern, or the extent to which intermingling between new and existing majority and minority groups occurs, enclosure or encapsulation, cohesiveness, size of the group of newcomers, cultural congruence, or similarities of the new target culture to the heritage culture of new arrivals, the attitude toward members of the cultural group of the target-language, and intended length of stay in the new host country (Freeman & Freeman, 2001). Which of Schumann's suggested factors in social distance will enhance or inhibit second language acquisition and acculturation for newcomer English language learners?

Four of the eight influencing factors will be more likely to be impacted by the changes in resettlement policies, including cultural congruence, group size, enclosure, and integration pattern. As smaller groups of refugees from a wider variety of nations are resettled in the primary U.S. resettlement sites, group size will become less of a factor in social distance. There simply will not be large enough numbers of Burmese, Burundians, Bhutanese or others for them to remain in isolation, dependent only on one another for resources, news, markets, and entertainment. Their group size will be too small to lead to cultural encapsulation or enclosure, another factor in social distance. They will necessarily have to venture out into mainstream society, making contact with

other ethnic groups in order to have even the most basic needs of food, clothing, and medical care met.

However, the remaining two factors could lead to substantial social distance. Little cultural congruence exists between U.S. American culture and the cultures of several of the newly arriving refugees. With the advent of the post-September 11, 2001 world and the ongoing War on Terror, it became apparent that geography and cultural awareness were not strong suits of the general public. Common knowledge of the events surrounding what occurred on that day reveals that many American adults and children had difficulty finding Afghanistan on a map. Still fewer knew any details of the people and cultures of Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, or Jordan. U.S. Americans tend to know little of the languages and cultures of people from other countries. In light of ongoing worldwide tensions and political unrest coupled with a wide range of sentiments among U.S. citizens regarding immigration in general, the dearth of cultural awareness and sensitivity contribute to an atmosphere that borders on xenophobia, or a fear of foreigners. Similarly, there has been little history of integration of the newcomer groups with the members of the macro U.S. American society. Most U.S. citizens in the workforce or in professional positions have not yet worked side by side a newcomer from Burma, Burundi, Bhutan, or Iraq. Thus, stereotypes along with prejudice and discrimination, usually found to diminish as groups have more contact with one another, have had time to increase, not decrease, for newcomer groups and U.S. citizens alike (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

Recommendations

Refugee resettlement, immigration and the political asylum

process will continue to contribute to the ranks of newcomers in U.S. Schools. The diversity among this segment of the general school population will continue to increase, and the needs of newcomer ELLs will become more varied. It is incumbent on educators, administrators and school districts to be proactive in planning for their academic success. Diminishing the negative effects of social and psychological distance should be top priorities for any individual working with newcomer groups. The goal of reducing social distance in the classroom is to enhance the opportunities for contact between the target language group and newcomer ELLs so that intercultural understanding will grow and acculturation may take place. In turn psychological distance might be lessened because the group learning a second language will think more favorably about learning the target language and culture (Schumann, 1986). Following are recommendations for reducing both types of distance in the classroom:

- Find up-to-date information about newcomer students who will be attending school. Many large school districts have intake centers where each child from another country who is entering a school district for the first time in the United States must be registered and processed. These centers are eye-opening regarding the degree of diversity that may be part of a school district. Obtaining accurate information about the cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds of the students is essential.
- Develop partnerships and chains of communication with local resettlement agencies so that advance preparations may be made in a timely manner for teaching students whose cultures and languages are new to a school

or classroom. If a school and teacher are informed by a resettlement agency that five Burmese students will enroll at the school in two weeks, information regarding cultural differences and possible problems learning English may be secured.

- Employ a multicultural approach to teaching each subject in the curriculum. Include information by and about people from a wide variety of cultures, languages, and nations in an effort to reduce social distance and to help students understand more about self and others. Avoid limiting the culturally relevant materials to only those cultures represented by students in the classroom. Multicultural instruction provides the opportunity to use the learner's culture and the target culture to teach English. The more students know about one another, the more positively they feel about one another. When this occurs, their focus is more on similarities than differences, and social distance may be reduced.

- Utilize multicultural children's literature to promote an atmosphere of acceptance and respect. Such literature allows students to see themselves in the curriculum and to believe that school is a place for them. When each child feels accepted and respected, the result is greater respect among the students for each other, thus reducing inhibitions and psychological distance.

- Search for and use multicultural bilingual books. The books should include a language other than English and English on the same page. Again it will be imperative to find books that are bilingual in many languages, not only the languages represented by the students in a particular

classroom. Doing so will assist in creating a welcoming environment even when the teacher does not speak the heritage languages of all of the students. It will also give status and acceptance to the heritage languages of all students. Multicultural bilingual books will assist in supporting the native languages of students, and allow diverse students to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the curriculum. Finally, the practice will encourage respect, appreciation, and curiosity for languages in general.

Conclusion

Educators can powerfully support their newcomer students by being familiar with their needs and previous lives and cultures, and by being knowledgeable of the influence of the refugee experience on acculturation and second language acquisition. The strongest reception that an educator can provide is the gift of accurate information coupled with time, patience, and an understanding of how to mediate early acculturation experiences so that newly arriving refugee students and their families may successfully adjust to the new lives of self-determination and safety they wish to pursue.

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