

LING 513 – SOCIOLINGUISTICS ARR

Case study and Treatment

Jasnoor Grewal

MA TESOL, Trinity Western University

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Eileen McWilliams

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Abstract

The field of Sociolinguistics continues to bring to us the research and knowledge about languages and societal factors affecting them. The quality with which Sociolinguistics and ethnography aim to explain various linguistic concepts and issues cannot be ignored. **Purpose:** This paper presents author's views on language and culture, and how these imply on the case study depicted, based on information from credible sources and peer-reviewed articles.

Method: Approaches of observation and research have been used by identifying relative concepts from literature. This Applied Research Report (ARR) draws on the case study presented in the paper. **Implications:** Based on the research applied and literature reviewed, treatment and ethnographic applications have been discussed to mitigate the sociolinguistic issue highlighted in the case study. This paper presents the treatment as pedagogical considerations for educators to consider while researching on similar classroom complications.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, ethnography, culture, language, Language Anxiety, classroom, ESL, applications, treatment, pedagogical implications

LING 513 – SOCIOLINGUISTICS ARR**Case study and Treatment**

This Applied Research Report (ARR) presents personal insights gained and perspectives developed in Ling 513 course, Sociolinguistics, focusing on language and culture based on research information from credible sources and peer-reviewed articles. An account of the same has been given under PART A and subsequent sections which build upon and highlight related concepts to elaborate meaning of the arguments put forth. A case study highlighting an issue in a language classroom follows. Anxiety over social acceptance are husky and tricky subjects which classrooms are not immune to. One wishes to learn certain skills and behaviours, to thrive, and successful language learning is one of them. Language learning triggers one's senses to adopt a wider lens through which they see and understand the new or the different world. If administered effectively, teaching of language increases knowledge, acceptance, tolerance, respect, and participation for all parties involved.

As individuals and groups, we create identities via language we use and the cultures we adopt (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 7). Identities are dynamic and keep evolving with personal constructs, experiences gained, and negotiations made in life. All languages are beautiful. Their evolution celebrates humankind and how it has emerged through fog of time and constraints. Learning and teaching languages not only makes us more aware, but also helps find the kindness and openness in ourselves. As educators, we can use ever evolving ethnography and sociolinguistic concepts to guide our practice. This report attempts for the outlooks discovered while compiling information to be useful, and that they can take us on journeys to realize how remarkably educators, students, and our language learning experiences are unique but connected.

PART A: Language and Culture Discussion

Language is referred to as the practice of communicating, either orally, in writing, or through signs, shared within a group or any part of society (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 2). It is a way in which we reach out for our needs, feelings, and make ourselves identified through our personality (Larsen-Freeman, 2019, p. 71). Therefore, it goes beyond just written words and voice, and includes our behavior, gestures, facial expressions, sounds we make, and actions we perform—all gear up to convey a meaning.

Cultures are born when individuals socially acquire specific ways of doing, thinking, and being, so they can be categorized as members of the group which, thus, owns or associates with that culture (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 10). Our interpretation of the world, both living and nonliving, prevails within the wisdom we gain as a part of culture. Dr. Robert Lado, in 1957, identified culture as “the ways of a people” (as cited in Spiro, 2013, p. 192).

Culture and language go hand in hand. Cultures originate in societies, which engage individuals trying to accomplish a common function (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 2). In order to make transmission of ideas possible, a common language must be shared so that participants can contribute from their knowledge and experiences in a medium that can be inferred by all the members of that group (p. 4). Sociolinguistics, the study of lives of people, in general and specifically, along with factors on a personal, social, economic, national, and global levels, bases itself on language and its use in these circumstances (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 1).

Taking the concept of culture a step further, and equating it with language, intercultural competence can be synergistically achieved (Spiro, 2013, p. 27). As an international language, English is no more confined to one geographic region or culture, and globalization, i.e. globalization plus localization of it, is empowering individuals to interact in, beyond, and out of their original cultures or associations, thus attracting users in a local significance where they could now feel more unified by using English as a mutual set when working among multilingual groups across the globe (McKay, 2018).

PART B: Overview of Language and Cultural Beliefs Held in the Classroom and by the educator in the Case Study (Thick and Thin Description)

It's the mid of January of the year 2020 and I arrive to teach students of a split class of Grade 6 and 7 as their class teacher at one of the elementary schools in Dawson Creek, a small city in northern British Columbia, Canada. All the students are between the age of 12 and 13 years. The classroom is situated on the east side of the school building, as the senior most class in the school.

When one enters inside our classroom, there are cupboards and a sink station with countertop on the right (south wall), another cupboard on the left (south wall), a whiteboard on the west wall and there's the teacher's desk by it, a window and an emergency exit on the north wall, and a bulletin board, shelves, and hooks for students to stow their personal belongings on the east wall. In the centre of the classroom there is student seating and a portable desk for the teacher. The layout of our classroom is outlined as Appendix A in Appendices.

Like every morning of the school week, I get the classroom ready for students to arrive. I hear the first morning at 8:55 AM and go to the classroom door to welcome my students in. We greet each other at the door. This is the first opportunity for me to connect with my students, convey that I'm glad for them to be a part of this class, and that we will learn while having fun until the final dismissal bell for the day at 2:36 PM.

I believe that relationship building, using different elements of a shared language and culture discussed earlier, must be enacted upon from the very beginning, each day, and consistently throughout. Coelho (1998) discusses the importance of first impressions and creating an inclusive environment in the classroom. She suggests that teachers adopt an open-minded and flexible approach when dealing with students of varied cultural backgrounds (p. 158).

Wong & Wong (2018) share the importance of consistency and organization by describing a classroom that holds the attributes of predictability, reliability, dependability, and

stability (p. 13). And thus, well-managed classrooms are the “foundation” to prosperous learning, and those that nurture an environment which is “calm, caring, thought provoking, challenging, and academically successful” (p. 13).

On my class roster, ten of the twenty-two total students are English as Second Language (ESL) learners. Out of these ten, three have immigrated from Mexico, two from China, three were born in Canada but used a different first language at home (First Nations and Métis students), and two have just moved—one from India and the other from Iran. The remaining twelve students use English as their mother tongue. Some of the ESL students identified above can also be considered as ESD learners, i.e. students of English as a Second Dialect, as they use a variation of English which is significantly different from the academic English used in the school (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 9).

When I plan my instruction, I take care to bring literature indigenous to North America, Canada in particular, so students are able to read about their own surroundings and history. In addition, we also hunt for readings focusing on the ethnic and cultural roots of the ESL students. Coelho highlights limitations of a specific type of curriculum only, Eurocentric Curriculum for example, which proves to be unrelated to the demographics of the class, raises biases and stereotypes, and results in other detrimental effects on student personalities which ultimately trickle down as students achieving low, both academically and socially (1998, p. 197).

To make sure that I stay informed of the performance and progress of my students, overall as well as for ESL, once an initial assessment has been done to know where they are at, ongoing assessments are one of the most effective methods to individualize instructional plans accordingly (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 7). In addition, I regularly participate in teacher professional development opportunities offered by the school district, and on a personal level, that present “comprehensive, coherent, and sustained” programs where we share our experiences and develop, keeping the vision of acting in students’ best interests as our goal (Wong & Wong, 2018, pp. 316-318).

Language is one of the skills necessary that feed the meaning of our existence and also motivates it in many ways (Lee, 2015). When students feel comfortable using a language that is common to the group and are confident that they can communicate themselves well, empowerment happens. Pütz et. al (2006) argue that empowerment is achieved through conduct via language, and English language is greatly associated with power, especially in parts of the world where English is not the primary language and for individuals who are raised in these cultures (as cited in Lessard-Clouston, 2015, p. 39). Thus, many of my ESL students wholeheartedly work toward achieving a better command on this language.

All students in my class share beliefs from their unique cultures around the world that speak volumes of different styles of learning they familiarize with- some are used to traditional ways of instruction where teachers have all or most authority, some regularly attach meaning and symbols in the surrounding to the mother nature, while others prefer hands-on experiences and a greater say in the classroom processes. As their teacher, I aim to deliver culturally inclusive and responsive instruction: The ninth professional standard from the Professional Standards for BC Educators advises to “...value and respect the languages, heritages, cultures, and ways of knowing and being.... Educators understand the power of focusing on connectedness and relationships to oneself, family, community and the natural world” (BC Teachers’ Council, 2019, p. 4).

In the North American continent, most therapeutic functions of education are independent and are directed to helping individuals hold self-esteem, self-reliance, cognitive intelligence, personal value systems, and self-expression. These are characteristics of an individualistic culture that works toward individual happiness and holds responsibility on oneself of all actions in society (Stivers, 2003, p. 57). It is very likely that children who grew up among and were born to parents practising individualistic culture, expect and act in an individualistic way. Countries that are said to hold individualistic ideologies are Canada, the U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand, western England, etc.

On the other hand, cultures of most ESL students focus on a collective responsibility approach. Collectivism is practised in about 70% of the world's cultures and braces attributes like cooperation, respect for authority, group norms, social orientations, responsiveness to society, public opinion, and so on (Stivers, 2003, p. 66-70). Collectivist societies sustain interdependently.

However, it must be noted that no society is extremely individualistic or collectivist. Now-a-day, individuals and families seek more information and adopt a mixed approach of required proportions of the two to evolve one that fits their needs. When I teach, I hope to create a balance of the two. The school and teachers make sure that we learn about each other's cultures in the classroom and come to appreciate our similarities and respect our differences. Life would have been extensively different if we existed without a language that didn't unite us. Celebrating language via all the learning and interaction that happens in our class helps us evolve as better human beings and develop as citizens of this country with liberty as well as fraternity.

PART C: The Case Study

After lunch break, the same day, it is our Language Arts block. My plan is to introduce poetry in the class with goals of developing fluency and pronunciation. I've planned this exercise to stretch for the entire term, two days a week, and by the end of the term, I hope that students not only experience a hike in their confidence and fluency in English language but also challenge their fear of public speaking or reading out loud. This activity is same for all students with difficulty level to be addressed by scaffolding and group work among ELL and non-ELLs. Therefore, this exercise also aims to raise social awareness by bringing a sense of responsibility, citizenship, and collaboration for the students.

I explain the activity and expectations with regard to taking turns, not interrupting when others read, etc. We start the activity. I am not surprised to find that some of my students, regardless of them being either ELL or non-ELLs, are shy or anxious to speak out loud in class.

It is Faith's turn to choose if she wants to read poetry out loud for her group or the class (Faith is a pseudonym; she is one of the ESL students). She hesitates. One of her group mates encourages her to go ahead. Faith acknowledges hearing her and reaches to point out at the beginning verse of the poem in an attempt to start reading. In a very soft and almost inaudible voice, she starts to read. When she's onto the next stanza, she picks up some volume but mispronounces a word. Suddenly, another student from a different group, Cody (a pseudonym) speaks out the correct pronunciation for the word she mispronounced, and adds, "It is super easy! Or do you not know how to read?" Faith immediately stops reading, crunches together, buries her head toward her body, and wraps her arms tight around her stomach. Her face is changed in colour to a pinkish hue.

PART D: Treatment and Sociolinguistic Applications

Literature review. The highlight issue in the case study is that of Language Anxiety. Language Anxiety (LA) involves communication anxiety, fear of invalidation, social pressure, and self-perceptions of one's language performance (Gkonou, 2014). Speaking anxiety and fear of pessimistic feedback, from both classmates (via ridicule) and the teacher (via public error correction), are a couple of the biggest stressors toward Language Anxiety (p. 25). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDS) provides detailed information on anxiety in children which can come forward as "fear or worry but can also make children irritable and angry...as well as physical symptoms like fatigue, headaches, or stomach-aches. Some anxious children keep their worries to themselves and, thus, the symptoms can be missed" (2020).

Gkonou (2014) asserts that there are many crucial patterns that can be found in children experiencing LA. More a learner is anxious about speaking, the less one tries to engage in

conversations- resulting in isolation. Students take fear of mockery from peers and that of in-public correction from the teacher, after expectations set too high aligning to achieve native-like pronunciation, as a blow at their self-esteem which often results in low self-worth, hampered self-esteem, unhealthy competitiveness, and further aggravation of LA (p. 18).

Faith is one of the students who immigrated to Canada about a year ago. She moved from Iran. She had been an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) student in Iran for about 5 years. Per Kumaravadivelu (2006), language is considered as an “ideology, not merely a system, and EFL education was believed to involve social, cultural, and political issues, rather than merely linguistic information (as cited in Aliakbari & Adibpour, 2018, p. 131). Although it hasn’t been very long since Faith has started to engage in Canadian culture and with children of her age, her background reflects that she is strong willed. On some encouragement from a peer, Faith wanted to try again, rising up beyond her fears but had to suffer a blow of language anxiety after unfavorable commentary from another peer.

Culturally speaking, Faith may have experienced classroom environments in her birth country that could be negatively disciplined, and show signs of gender bias, unshared authority, and little room for error (Aliakbari & Adibpour, 2018, p. 140). Her speaking anxiety which got aggravated after criticism from a male peer could also be seen linked here. The earlier methods of ethnography basically focused on scientific and quantitative analyses. At that time open ended approaches in anthropology, and thus ethnography, were not known. Qualitative analyses came into action and grew in response to shortcomings of these objective, scientific, measurable, quantitative methods of research and findings. When it came to be drawing on various issues and complexes of women including relationships in social and political contexts, these measured methods proved to be especially ineffective which were good for masking real voices of women in actual and subjective situations (Visweswaran, 1997).

She could have gained more momentum and confidence, had she not mispronounced a word- this could hint toward anxiety over not being able to achieve perfection. Anxiety and

perfectionism are not distant relatives. Gkonou's findings uncover that "highly anxious participants were influenced by others' evaluations and the subsequent possibility of looking foolish, and consistently linked their mistakes in speaking activities to that possibility" (2014, p. 19).

Treatment and Sociolinguistic Applications. The problem being discussed can be found in every classroom to an extent, whether ESL or non-ESL groups. The complication of Language Anxiety is serious, deep rooted, widely spread, and difficult to eradicate in one go. In order to address this issue, consistent and patient steps will need to be taken. As a matter of fact, the two issues that Gkonou (2014) identified to be the biggest contributors to LA: speaking anxiety and fear of pessimistic feedback, may not be fully eliminated but can be managed well. Following are some sociolinguistic applications and pedagogical considerations that could assist in alleviating the problem.

Teachers could make efforts to positvize the overall environment of an EFL or ESL classroom where students are not afraid of making mistakes by not setting native-like or too high expectations as goals and references. Administration can also play a vital role by placing learners together who are closer in their progression levels to avoid too big of a diversion in performance, hence competitiveness and LA (Gkonou, 2014, p. 18-19).

As learners usually fear speaking in front of the class or impromptu, in-advance lesson instructions and preceding peer discussions could be encouraged so that students get an opportunity to build relations and thus feel comfortable to make errors (Larsen-Freeman, 2019, p. 72).

Teachers can give a deeper thought to talking to students in person, providing feedback gradually but timely, as opposed to correcting errors out-loud publicly and providing corrections too soon before the learner has had an opportunity to try and reflect on his/her own. Individualized and customized planning can be done to better suit learners' needs rather than

using one teaching approach and method for the entire group. Documenting, recording, and assessing learner progress can aid in devising dynamic and up-to-date instructional plans for learners (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 9).

Teachers could follow the connection-before-correction approach which is where students can freely express in front of their teacher and also take feedback constructively. This shall help learners feel positively even when teachers have to address an error in front of the whole class. “Connection before correction” refers to building rapport with students so they don't feel embarrassed when teachers do choose to correct their errors publicly: “When children feel a connection, they feel belonging and significance” (Nelsen, 2020).

Teachers can benefit greatly by being avid learners themselves- learning from the needs of their students, from various professional development opportunities, from their colleagues' success and challenge stories, and customizing the solutions for the unique situations in their own classrooms (Wong & Wong, 2018, p. 37).

Building on students' prior experiences, and having an awareness of the same, teachers can shed a focused light on students' status quo and potentials. Students' personal, literacy, and linguistic experiences are also sometimes referred to as “schema” and teachers can motivate them to think and produce ideas in their mother tongue verbally or on paper to express their knowledge (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 8). Although the case study has more to do with phonology, it's crucial that a student gains confidence by acknowledging the linguistic knowledge one already possesses and the transition that one would need to tread to become an expert in the target language- spoken or written.

In the subject of phonology specifically, for students learning English for the first time, Wardhaugh (1970) argues that they must be taught spoken English through different series of exposure to the target language based on an assumption that even native speakers with English as their mother tongue learn to speak before they can read or write, and thus, the process should

be not different for students who are beginning to learn English as their second or additional language (p. 65).

Ethnographic understanding has made it possible to identify or devise the pedagogical considerations deduced above. These make the role and importance of ethnographic research more concrete and indispensable as no other research approach can portray a picture this deep and real. Role of ethnographers through interviews can help readers to explore beyond the skim. As every learner and every learning situation is unique, objective or solely quantitative methods are more likely to delude through generalizations and miss the core facts (Genzuk, 1999).

Conclusion

This ARR has delved deep into concepts of language and culture and has attempted to provide pedagogical considerations when dealing with a sociolinguistic issue discussed in the case study. The research and findings highlighted in this paper are resources with high confidence levels that base their findings on non-biased investigations. All of the references used for this paper have been suggested by either the instructor of this course or other educators in the field of TESOL. This paper has nine sections and stretches for eighteen pages, in total.

The details open with discussion of concepts of language and culture, and argue their applicability in the field of ESL, Sociolinguistics, and ethnography. By bringing a case study into the picture, an effort has been made to make readers ponder upon Language Anxiety (LA) and its implications for student success, especially for ELLs. The section thereon lists and explains various methods that could be considered by educators as ways to address the problem. The sociolinguistic applications have been expanded from a mere instruction view to rapport building and creating an atmosphere of community and autonomy in a classroom.

This paper also acknowledges the contribution of ethnographic research methods that bring truthful, subjective, and unique picture for further inquiry in the field of Sociolinguistics and TESOL.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Classroom layout

