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Newly arrived immigrant youth in Sweden negotiate identity, language & literacy

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on social contexts of language learning and identity has illuminated how mastering a new language and literacy is central to experiences of migration and resettlement for many immigrants and refugees (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In light of the historical and contemporary marginalization of linguistic minority students in classrooms around the world, many questions and concerns remain around the role of multilingualism in learning. This article presents findings from a qualitative study of the nature of language learning among newly arrived immigrant and refugee students attending a linguistically isolated urban elementary school in Sweden. The data were analyzed using an ecology of language framework and the principles of “context” and “affordance” in particular (Creese, Martin & Hornberger, 2008; Van Lier, 2004). By analyzing the perspectives and learning of these students within this sociolinguistic context, this research illustrates how language learning challenges and successes are intensely local to particular spaces and experiences, and are contingent upon access to knowledge and processes of social inclusion and exclusion.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades global migration around the world has disarticulated powerful paradigms of linguistic and cultural homogeneity in many nations. The dynamic nature of migration transforms community linguistic spaces and practices as languages come into contact and meanings are negotiated between individual speakers (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). Yet while many urban centers are becoming increasingly linguistically diverse, newly arrived immigrant and refugees overwhelmingly resettle in communities and neighborhoods that are physically segregated from mainstream, or dominant social, political and economic spaces (Orfield & Lee, 2006).

Like many Western European countries, Sweden's foreign-born population has tripled over the past two decades, and in 2010, multilingual, immigrant origin students represented 20 percent of its elementary and secondary school student population (Skolverket, 2013; Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2015). Sweden has proportionately resettled more refugees, including unaccompanied minors, than any other European nation to date (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015). Many immigrants and refugees in Sweden resettle in urban neighborhoods and in government subsidized housing, and these

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neighborhoods have become sites of increasing unrest due to residents' social and economic marginalization (Malmberg, Andersson, & Östh, 2013). Language minority immigrant and refugee origin students in urban Sweden disproportionately attend linguistically isolated schools, spurred in part by the country's implementation of a school voucher system in the 1990s, which allows parents to enroll their children in any public or private school within a school district (Bunar, 2010a). Language minority students are less likely to graduate from secondary school and have lower literacy levels than their native Swedish-speaking peers (Taguma, Kim, Brink, & Teltemann, 2010).

In this paper, I deploy a language ecology framework (Van Lier, 2004) to explore what linguistic isolation means for individual learner identities by examining how newly arrived¹ immigrant youths' language and literacy practices develop in specific contexts and through certain relationships (Creese, Martin & Hornberger, 2008). As schools seek solutions to instructional dilemmas inherent in the inclusion of newcomer immigrant and refugee students in Swedish-medium classrooms, there is a concurrent need to examine how students perceive of themselves and their learning within this dynamic.

2. Literature review

2.1. Linguistic isolation

Newly arrived language minority students' language and literacy learning and overall academic progress is significantly influenced by the power relations that inform social policy and pedagogical practices in schools (Cummins & Early, 2011, Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The growing resettlement of newly arrived immigrants and refugees in linguistically isolated neighborhoods and schools raises important questions about the school contexts in which these students find themselves, including the quality of instruction available to them, and contact with "native" speakers of the dominant language.

I utilize the concept of linguistic isolation to characterize the classroom, school and neighborhood contexts in which they study took place. Measures of linguistic isolation in the United States are determined by English-speaking abilities of adults in a household where a language other than English is spoken, and where no individual over the age of 14 is English proficient (Siegel, Martin, & Bruno, 2001, pp. 167–190). For the purposes of this study, linguistic isolation characterizes environments where few individuals speak the dominant national language, which affords limited opportunities to develop social and linguistic capital through majority language ability (Hernandez, 2004; Nawyn, Gjokaj, Agbenyiga, & Grace, 2012). Students in this study had limited exposure to the Swedish language in school and in the surrounding neighborhood, where they primarily used their home languages to communicate with peers, siblings, parents and community members.

As Vega, Ang, Rodríguez, and Finch (2011) argue, neighborhood linguistic isolation represents more than just a language indicator.

Although this is largely a demographic measure of individual households, which is then aggregated to the level of a neighborhood, it is an important proxy marker for cultural conditions within a neighborhood. Linguistic isolation is a marker for the presence of an ethnic enclave and ethnic sub-group homogeneity (p.115).

Other research has reported the negative effects of school, home and community linguistic isolation on childhood cognitive development (Glick, Walker, & Luz, 2013) and academic achievement among high school language minorities in the U.S. (Drake, 2014; Rumberger & Tran, 2010). Each of these studies also found a correlation between household poverty and linguistic isolation. Community linguistic isolation influences school demographics, the kinds of programming decisions made for students, the available linguistic and academic resources, access to social and linguistic capital, and academic achievement (Drake, 2014). Students who are newcomers in linguistically isolated neighborhood schools are often placed in separate intensive language classes before transitioning to mainstream classrooms.

A growing body of scholarship in school contexts around the world has critiqued school policies and pedagogical practices that physically or symbolically marginalize linguistic minority students in public primary and secondary schools (e.g., Cederberg, 2006; Kanno, 2004; Mohanty, 2008). Scholars in the U.S. have examined within-school and within-class segregation of linguistic minority students, and Latino students in particular (Arias & Faltis, 2012; Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Lillie, Markos, Arias, & Wiley, 2012). This scholarship has explored various facets of and outcomes of linguistic isolation, including tracking, and school drop-out, as well as student attitudes and self-esteem. The assumption underlying pull-out English as a Second Language (ESL) programming in the U.S., for example, is that English learners will develop sufficient proficiency to transition into mainstream classrooms within one year. However, in their research on Structured English Immersion programs in Arizona public schools, Lillie et al. (2012) found that English learners rarely exit English language programming within this time period, which limits students' access to English-speaking peers and academic content. Gifford and Valdés (2006) argue in relation to linguistic isolation among Hispanic students in U.S. schools, "It is only through language acquisition that students can become full participants in their community" (p 126).

¹ I use the term 'newly arrived' (*nyanlända*) throughout this article to refer to students who have resided in Sweden for two years or less. It is a direct translation of the term most commonly used in Swedish policy and scholarship.

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