

UNDERSTANDING REFUGEE SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the trauma associated with involuntary or forced migration, and the resulting effect on the learner's ability to concentrate on second language learning. Drawing on the Indo-chinese refugee experience, the author discusses how and why social service and linguistic needs of refugees must be addressed simultaneously if the ESL program is to be successful. The paper also suggests ways in which the refugee's second language acquisition potential can be fed both within and outside the classroom to facilitate resettlement.

We are all aware of the massive body of literature that has accumulated over the last 30 years in the field of second language learning and teaching. In this period we have become increasingly sensitive to the complexities of the second language learning and teaching processes as our sophistication

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with such disciplines as linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, and other fields has developed. We have been able to integrate insights from all of these disciplines to contribute to our knowledge, learning in the process, if nothing else, that the number of variables affecting the learning and teaching of a second language is almost endless.

Yet, if one looks through the tables of contents of the professional journals in our field, one cannot help noticing the overwhelming emphasis on studies of educated, university-enrolled ESL students. To be sure, we have learned a great deal about second language learning and teaching from these university-based studies. What is striking, however, is the relative lack of research attention paid to another very sizable group of ESL learners and the incomplete picture of the second language learning and teaching process that we may be left with as a result. I am speaking of the Indochinese refugees, three-quarters of a million of whom have come to the United States since 1975.

What is especially noteworthy about the Indochinese refugees is the circumstances under which they have relocated. The Indochinese refugees were, in effect, pushed out of their native countries, forced to migrate to strange lands, frequently leaving loved ones behind. The trauma and psychological stress experienced by these involuntary migrants have been overwhelming. Any migration, even a voluntary one, is a traumatic experience. It represents an interruption and frustration of natural life expectations. It is one of the most obvious instances of the complete disorganization of the individual's role system and the partial disturbance of social identity. It is cognitively stressful, forcing the immigrant to change familiar images and build a new cognitive map. For the involuntary migrant, the psychological risks can be even greater.

The intensity of stress as a result of involuntary migration has been pointed out in Cohon (1981), who reviewed refugee

Refugee Second Language Learning

symptomatology and treatment methods. Among the symptoms he noted were delusions of persecution, disturbing dreams, poor sleep, states of confusion, somatic complaints, feelings of insecurity, isolation, resentment, guilt, inadequacy, bereavement, tension, fatigue, restlessness, and detachment. Cohon and others (Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare 1979) pointed out that these problems may be chronic or delayed. Frequently they remain dormant until after an initial period of resettlement has passed and the refugee is able to reflect upon his life situation (Robinson 1980:33).

To understand the implications of the refugee experience for second language learning and teaching, it is useful to look at the theoretical work on social-psychological stress done by Dohrenwend (1961). Dohrenwend proposed a model of stress based on a case of forced relation. In the model, stress brought on by forced relocation is affected by external and internal factors. External factors include objective conditions of one's life situation based in part by comparing old and new life conditions. Internal factors include subjective aspiration which have been internalized and which affect the choice of life goals. The greater the relative deprivation experienced as the person makes comparisons between past and present life conditions, the greater is the effect of external factors on stress. The greater the threat to one's internalized status aspirations, the greater is the effect of internal factors on stress. In applying Dohrenwend's model to the Indochinese refugee population, externally induced stress would be a result of a negative comparison between life circumstances in the native country and the country of refuge. Internally induced stress would be a result of status aspirations for achievement in American society that conflict with existing life circumstances. It follows that refugees who have a positive evaluation of life circumstances, and aspirations which fit well with them, should experience less overall stress in functioning. Refugees who have a negative evaluation of life circumstances and un-

realistic aspirations relative to their life circumstances should experience greater stress in life functioning.

It is obvious that one cannot talk about ESL education for refugees without considering the circumstances that have brought them to the classroom, and the life situation in which they find themselves. Linguists have long recognized that sociocultural adjustment (the resolution of internal and external constraint) and host language acquisition are inter-related processes, but customarily the ESL educator did not encounter students with such severe social-psychological problems as the Indochinese refugees. This extreme situation has highlighted the need for integrating with the ESL program an effective, ongoing, social and support service system which can reduce levels of constraint and psychological stress.

One model of such a system in the early stages of resettlement is the sponsorship arrangement, which may fairly be compared with the "halfway house" facilities used to ease people with physical, social and psychological problems back into mainstream society after a period of institutionalization. Like a halfway house, a sponsorship provides a temporary sheltered environment which allows the refugee to move gradually, and in a planned way, out into the host society. If properly oriented, the sponsor is organized, sensitized and in many other ways prepared to receive, welcome and assist the refugee in putting his or her life back together again in the totally new and foreign environment. The sponsor is able to neutralize somewhat the effects of what has been labeled "nesting obsession" — concern over feeling comfortable where one is living after having relocated, and "transition anxiety" — the anxiety brought about by concern over details of moving to a foreign culture (Schumann 1980; Schumann and Schumann 1977). Of course, to be fully effective the sponsorship arrangement should be tied into a network of professional social and psychological services.

While the conjoining of TESL expertise with an effective

Refugee Second Language Learning

support services system is a necessary component of effective resettlement, ESL educators must exercise caution in applying TESL research findings to refugee programs. Much second language learning theory and teaching practice develop from studies of carefully controlled environments where a fairly uniform level of basic aptitude and interest, plus a regulated schedule and semicommon student goals exist. Resettlement of Indochinese refugees has taught us that few of the customary assumptions hold, especially in the case of undereducated refugees. This has been a source of frustration, and has spawned a growing uneasiness among refugee ESL educators who question the applicability of ESL research findings, teaching methods and techniques (Cain 1979). Barriers to successful second language learning such as overcrowded classrooms, multi-level classes, and varying educational backgrounds (Heaton 1979; Peck 1979), while definitely factors in refugee ESL programs, nevertheless do not account entirely for the inordinate difficulty many refugees experience in ESL classes. Observations about the undereducated Indochinese ESL learners seem to suggest that the adult refugee presents an exception to accepted theory and technique. As one ESL educator lamented, "There is very little in the way of texts, examinations, research and publication in the field of linguistics, applied linguistics and TESL that is relevant to the situation of the Indochinese refugee" (Cain 1979).

Fortunately, the situation has improved since those words were published in 1979. We must be ever mindful, however, that the ESL education of undereducated Indochinese refugee adults necessitates dealing with special difficulties not encountered in working with other adult second language learners. To understand their problems learning English, it is useful to examine a model of second language acquisition known as the Monitor (Krashen 1976).

The Monitor Model and Indochinese Refugees

The Monitor Model is a theory of adult second language development. An important feature of the theory is the distinction it makes between acquisition and learning. Acquisition refers to the process of developing language competence in predictable stages without formal instruction but through active involvement with the target language. It is the process entailed by first language development in children and second language development in adults when they are involved in meaningful, communicative interaction in the target language.

Mere exposure to English is insufficient for acquisition to take place. Active involvement with the target language is necessary for acquisition to occur (Krashen 1976:166). Typically, actively involved learners are individuals who maximize practice opportunities in the target language by stimulating language output from their interlocutors during verbal interactions with them (Seliger 1977). This results in their receiving large doses of focused target language input, enabling them to formulate and test hypotheses about the target language, which contributes to their acquired second language competence.

The lack of active involvement that Indochinese refugees, especially the undereducated, have with English is well known among resettlement professionals and may explain why some refugees are poor acquirers of English. These refugees may be characterized as "low input generators," retreating from second language interactions and reluctant to exploit practice opportunities (Seliger, 1977:265, 275).

Learning, in Monitor Model terms, refers to the process of consciously attending to linguistic form. It usually takes place in formal environments where rule isolation, error detection and error correction take place. Language output is "monitored" by the learner who uses conscious linguistic knowledge to edit what he or she has learned. By monitoring,

the learner supplements knowledge of second language material that has already been acquired. The learner does this by using language knowledge that has consciously been learned by rule to adjust, prior to production, the proper form of the utterance. The notion of learning in Monitor Theory is related to the individual's ability to isolate rules and focus on errors and their correction, usually in formal environments such as ESL classrooms. Implicit in this concept is the learner's ability to analyze linguistic form based on a formal grammar he or she has stored and can consciously refer to for language production and repair. It is not unusual, therefore, that adults enrolled in intensive ESL programs at universities would outperform nonacademically oriented foreign adults, and especially those with little or no formal education. Second language learners with limited formal education in their first language simply do not have the experience or skills necessary to formalize language data into rules to which they can refer. In this connection there is little difference between undereducated Indochinese refugees and other undereducated foreign adults. Both groups are unable to develop a sophisticated enough Monitor in formal second language learning environments. In contrast, experience with Soviet refugees attending non-university ESL programs has been that they are excellent learners in the Monitor Model sense. One important reason for this is that most of them are better equipped to deal with formal ESL instruction, having completed a high school education in the Soviet Union.

To summarize, the difficulty undereducated refugees have in developing competence in English can be attributed in part to the following:

1. They are unable to take advantage of traditional formal ESL learning environments where language rules are presented and explained.
2. They do not involve themselves actively in the target language through second language interaction with other

students in the same classroom.

3. They avoid second language contact with native speakers outside the ESL classroom.

In Monitor Model terms, we may say they are poor learners and poor acquirers of a second language. What this suggests, of course, is that we must re-examine what we are doing inside the classroom to help Indochinese refugees develop English language proficiency, and we must think of ways to increase their likelihood to approach second language contact opportunities outside the classroom.

Key features of an ESL classroom which would increase the likelihood of active involvement on the part of Indochinese refugees include the following:

1. Topic selection relevant to the refugees' lives and in language which would be immediately usable. Topics and language related to everyday coping skills, prevocational skills, and employment needs of the student would rank high in this category.
2. De-emphasis on formal rules.
3. Small group interaction activities to make the learners feel more comfortable using English.
4. The teaching of "attending skills" (Cope and Acton 1976 for use by students during group interaction activities. These are appropriate listening behaviors which will generate further language output from the speaker and greater input into the listener's mental language acquisition mechanism.

In short, the classroom needs to de-emphasize learning and emphasize acquisition in the Monitor Model sense of the terms.

Outside the Classroom

Because second language acquisition and sociocultural adjustment are interdependent, the emphasis upon acquisition activities within the classroom is inadequate by itself. The

Refugee Second Language Learning

classroom situation is inherently artificial and for someone without a formal education it can be quite tedious and unproductive.

The refugee must be afforded the opportunity for genuine crosscultural encounter outside the classroom. This, however, entails knotty problems. The newly arrived, undereducated, non-English speaking refugee is not equipped to find housing, employment or social interaction opportunities for himself or herself (Dean 1977; Montero 1979). Without guidance, encouragement and outside help, the refugee is likely to fall into a pattern of avoidance of and isolation from the target culture, and remain there. This points again to the need for an effective support service system. With such a network, refugees can be sensitized to American culture, institutions, and systems, and be exposed to meaningful out-of-class intake environments which complement in-class language acquisition activities. Such exposure would enhance the refugee's second language acquisition potential as well as overall adjustment.

In closing let me reiterate that the special circumstances of the involuntary migration of Indochinese refugees require us to consider external factors in second language acquisition in designing and operating ESL programs. Support services must be available to alleviate various stresses and facilitate sociocultural adjustment. In addition, the refugee's acquisition potential must be fed within and outside the classroom, and the ESL curriculum should address the needs of refugees in survival, prevocational, and occupational areas. These are just some recommendations. We need more reports and formal studies of refugees and their adjustment experiences. Through them we will have a more complete picture of what determines successful (and unsuccessful) second language acquisition, sociocultural adjustment, and overall resettlement.

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Refugee Second Language Learning

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