

Film Ethnography: "No Man's Land" for an ESL Student

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This case study, presented at Catesol, Long Beach, 2005, was conducted at the Annenberg Center for Communication's Institute for Multimedia Literacy at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, from September to December 2003, under the aegis of Dr. Michael Genzuk.

Purpose

The main goal of our project was to research and film a subject for the purpose of investigating the interaction of language and human behavior in a cultural context. Our presentation depicted the findings of our ethnographical study in the format of a documentary film entitled "No Man's Land: A Chinese Boy's Experience in America."

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) write: "we act in the social world and yet are able to reflect upon ourselves and our actions as objects in that world." For the purposes of the study, the presenters focused on a second grade classroom in a primarily Hispanic school (96% Spanish-native speakers) within the LAUSD district. Most of the students in the school spoke Spanish as their heritage language, and while a few of them were labeled FEP (Fluent English Proficient), the majority of the others were English Only. The individual student who attracted our attention out was a Chinese boy labeled as LEP (Limited English Proficient), who we will designate as Li for the purposes of this paper. We were initially particularly interested in Li because of his unique linguistic situation: though few of the students spoke English as a heritage language, he was experiencing another level of linguistic isolation. Li was born in Canton, China and his family heritage language is Tai-Shan (a dialect of Cantonese). His parents spoke this dialect as well as Cantonese at home. They were both non-English speakers, educated no further than high school level, and had emigrated to the USA to give Li, their only child, a better future. Both parents were engaged in menial labor, the father as a cook in a Chinese restaurant

and the mother as a seamstress, taking in mending and working at home. Their interaction with an English-speaking American community was therefore slight, and their minimal language skills, after 5 years in the USA, reflected their social and linguistic isolation. We observed Li in the English (LAUSD) classroom as well as in the afternoon session at a Chinese school (where he was taught in Mandarin) as well as his playground activities, lunch breaks, and during his arrival and departure from the schools. Our observations focused on linguistic, socio-cultural, heritage language, and ethnic identity factors.

We observed that, while Li's academic skills were far above average, his social skills were not as developed, as indicated both within and outside the classroom. For our study, we paid particular attention to language as social discourse. The linguistic interactions that occur when one acquires language could be termed "the ethnography of speech," as it is an examination of the gap between linguistic and communicative competence. In the case of our subject, Li, though he had a clear sense of the linguistic elements of written and spoken English, it was clear that he did not necessarily know how to use it appropriately in order to communicate effectively. Since linguistic interaction is embedded in a broad structure of values, actions, and norms, our research should be of interest to a variety of disciplines including linguistics, sociology, psychology, and education.

Our observations of Li's linguistic and social behavior seemed to indicate that Li felt alienated not only from his new culture in America, but also from his home culture in China. We refer to Li's isolation as "no man's land" since he does not seem to feel strongly connected to either of his cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, though the teacher at the Chinese school focused on teaching the heritage language, she did not provide a supportive environment for the development of a dual cultural identity. She seemed to feel that her job was to deny or

eliminate the “American influence” within her sphere of influence in the Chinese schoolroom. When asked how she felt about the fact that these children in her care would in fact grow up “as Americans,” Li’s teacher seemed to reject the notion entirely. In the case of our study, the conflict between the linguistic and social identity of our subject became apparent, as did the inherent problems in the development of heritage language and ethnic identity. Our findings suggest the necessity of further research and development of the function of discourse, as opposed to language, in a cultural environment.

The most obvious problems that occur in this “no man’s land” situation are documented by Lucy Tse (Krashen, Tse, McQuillan 1998). She describes a pattern that is usual among immigrants as they move from an awareness of their ethnic differences to an attempted identification with the dominant group. If culture is what Brown has described as “the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others, . . . the ‘glue’ that binds a group of people together,” (Richard-Amato P and Snow, M (1992)) pp73), it follows that without this sense of identity through context one will experience a tremendous sense of dislocation. This can be just as acute, if not more acute, in the case of a child for whom the social framework is of vital importance, and whose very existence and sense of security cannot be independent of his surroundings.

The parental and community role in these cases are a vital link for an ESL student’s security, in that it provides a sense of rootedness in a meaningful past with a language and traditions of its own, as well as a sense of the reinforcement of a cultural identity. By means of a recognition of the importance of the heritage language and culture, one can achieve the self-esteem necessary to compensate for a lack of linguistic and socio-cultural skills in the new environment, at least until (or if) one achieves membership in this new environment.

The support and encouragement that Li receives from his parents is therefore of supreme importance to him in his development. He is lucky in that they have provided a framework that is typical of Chinese immigrant parents; they reinforce the traditional values of “esteem for age, authority, perfection, restraint, and practical achievements,” described by Hsu (Richard-Amato, P. & Snow, M. (1992) p. 113). In addition, they reinforce the predictable values of their culture such as role relations and hierarchical status, in which parents provide the children with a secure environment with high expectations and a great deal of encouragement and attention.

Traditionally, they also expect their children to retain the heritage language along with the newly acquired L2, which accounts for their sending Li to after-school studies in Chinese. This behavior on the part of his parents adequately prepares Li to absorb and accept what Genzuk has described as “Community Funds of Knowledge.” He defines these as representing “the information and strategies households and communities need to maintain their well being and perpetuation.” Knowledge, according to this compelling theory, is generated in a social context. In the context of our study, this would obviously and perhaps particularly apply to language learning as well in the case of our subject.

References

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