

“Good” English Language Learners: Understanding Different Perspectives on Immigrant Students in an Urban Public School

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Abstract

There is a persistent lack of explicit pedagogical attention to issues such as diversity of immigrants' experiences in learning English, identity negotiation, and the values of being “good” and “successful”. This paper examines the relationships between the notions of *good* (second) *language learners* as articulated in institutional practices and policy and in how immigrant students interpret their learning. The study focuses on two Vietnamese adolescents as they negotiated their roles as “good” language learners and their agency in learning English in response to institutional stereotypes and assumptions. The author argues that understanding “good” language learners requires particular attention to the social contexts and practices in which learning is embedded. The study offers pedagogical implications for our effort to address learning needs in increasingly diverse classrooms.

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on Immigrant Students in an Urban Public School

Public school classrooms are becoming more and more linguistically and culturally diverse in the United States. Children whose home language is not English are taking up a great proportion of the student population. For example, the number of children ages five to seventeen who spoke a language other than English at home rose from 4.7 to 11.2 million between 1980 and 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Given diversity as the new norm and the current political climate of accountability, schools and teachers are under greater pressure to identify good language learners, promote their successful strategies, and adopt best teaching practices in classrooms.

The concept of the Good Language Learner (GLL) became influential in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in the 1970s (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978). The premise of the GLL is that language learning is more of an individual, internal process of decoding linguistic structures; a GLL is thus competent and motivated enough to develop effective learning strategies for learning a second language. Although individual differences, such as aptitude, motivation, and the age at which learning begins, are regarded as important factors in defining a GLL, Lightbown and Spada (2006) maintain that “individual differences must also take into account the social and educational settings in which learners find themselves” (p. 56), because certain social and educational situations (e.g., those that marginalize linguistic minorities) are not created in a way to encourage learners' participation in communication, thus failing them in language learning.

In a seminal commentary published in *TESOL Quarterly*, Norton and Toohey (2001) draw upon research on adult and child English language learners and revisit the prevalent concept of

the GLL in SLA. They contend that it is problematic when SLA assumes that successful learners possess “particular constellations of personality characteristics, cognitive styles, and attitudes, motivations, or past learning experiences” (p. 309), in that the assumption fails to take into account “the dialectic between the individual and the social; between the human agency of these learners and the social practices of their communities” (p. 308). Norton and Toohey argue that it is crucial to go beyond a list of desirable personal traits to investigate learners’ situated experiences in social practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In so doing, educators will gain a better understanding of students’ language proficiency in their social conditions and in their identity formation as language learners.

Researchers and practitioners have been exploring ways to link classroom teaching to individual learning for better instructional results, for example, by developing learner autonomy among students (Reinders, 2010), or by studying interactions among GLLs in group settings (Maftoon, Daftarifard, & Lavasani, 2011). However, as teachers face daily challenges of understanding and assessing student language development that is *not* based on the textbook characteristics of a GLL, much research is needed to investigate the complexity of students’ language learning experience.

Cultural Production of Good Language Learners

Guided by a sociocultural and poststructural perspective, the author defines a good language learner as a cultural production in school contexts of increasing linguistic, cultural, and social diversity. Aligned with Norton & Toohey’s (2001) reconceptualization of the GLL that challenges the traditional assumption of learners’ innate ability to acquire a second language, the framework of this study is grounded in Levinson & Holland’s (1996) proposition of “cultural

production,” which sheds light on both the ideological conditions for creating a good language learner and the learner’s confrontation with these conditions.

The concept of cultural production provides new lenses with which to examine human agency within and against structural constraints. It highlights an activist-oriented perspective on students’ social negotiations of identity as good students, for instance, in social institutions like schools.

Cultural productions [...] provide a direction for understanding how human agency operates under powerful structural constraints. Through the production of cultural forms, created within the structural constraints of sites such as schools, subjectivities form and agency develops. These are the processes we seek to evoke with our phrase, “the cultural production of the educated person.” Indeed, the very ambiguity of the phrase operates to index the dialectic of structure and agency. For while the educated person is culturally produced in definite sites, the educated person also culturally produces cultural forms.

(Levinson & Holland, 1996, p.14)

Studies of cultural production in sites like schools often investigate such areas as class, race, gender, and mobility in global contexts (e.g., Mir, 2009; Froerer & Portisch, 2012). For example, Ghaffar-Kucher (2012) examines how Pakistani-American youths negotiate religion, identity, and citizenship in the post September 11 United States. Parajuli (2008) investigates schooling as perceived on the local levels of rural Nepalese villages and the consequence of denied access to education for the poor and the underrepresented (e.g., women). Other studies focus more closely on language learning and language education. For instance, Talmy (2004) analyzes how ESL is culturally produced in a high school ESL class/curriculum, where English monolingualism is positioned and rationalized as more legitimate than the rich repertoires EL

students brought to school (e.g., other languages than English, dialects, bi/multilingualism). Using professional development as a lens, Bruna (2009) proposes the cultural production of literacy and identity; in the context of EL literacy development, s/he discusses the “cultural dialogue” between the ideologies reflected in professional development curriculum and teachers’ agency within and against structural forces.

The concept of cultural production allows educators to understand students’ interactions with the social sites and structures (e.g., mainstream classroom vs. ESL class; library vs. cafeteria, etc.) that represent different expectations and relations. Whereas most studies are conducted on a macro-level (e.g., by looking at a group, a program, or a curriculum), more attention should be given to studies that focus on individual students. Through the lenses of two Vietnamese adolescents, the author examines the relationships between the notions of the GLL as articulated in institutional policy, and as interpreted by immigrant students in their literacy practices, in order to demonstrate how the GLL is culturally constructed in the complexities of language ideologies, cultural assimilation, and public education.

The Study

Between 2003 and 2006, the author conducted two independent ethnographic case studies (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) at Linton, an urban school in a mid-sized, post-industrial Midwestern city with a large Vietnamese immigrant population. Both investigated what it means for immigrant adolescents to learn English within the political context of standardization and accountability. One research question raised in both studies was how the notion of the GLL was played out at Linton among students and teachers. The two focal students were Vietnamese immigrants who had been in the country for less than a year. Danh¹ was seventeen and Thao was fifteen when they participated in the studies from 2003 to 2004 and from 2004 to 2006

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

respectively. Other participants included their counselors, general education teachers, and the Vietnamese language aide. The author collected multiple types of data, which included interview transcripts, student work (quick writes, class project presentations, exams, and individual work and group assignments), site documents and the author's own reflective memos. All these data provide a rich context to situate the case and to facilitate an inductive process of analysis. In the following section, the author will first discuss the notion of good language learners that is articulated in the institutional policy at Linton. The researcher will then focus on the two Vietnamese students, unraveling their perceptions and appropriation of being good language learners in mainstream classrooms.

An Institutional Account of Good Language Learners

Although twenty percent of Linton's student population was new immigrant students, these two hundred and fifty students only had one counselor, Mr. Norman, who supervised their course selection and academic progress and used a set of criteria to distinguish GLLs. The first criterion was their length of stay in the country. According to Mr. Norman (who was a Haitian immigrant himself), after immigrant students have been immersed in the school environments for a year or so, they should be proficient for mainstream classrooms. This view echoed the psycholinguistic definition of GLLs as having past learning experience. Immigrant students are prescribed to take the ESL program or receive first language assistance according to the number of years they have lived in the country, which served as an indicator of their linguistic command of English. The administrators and classroom teachers agreed that to support new immigrants, the "transitional ESL program was one way to circumvent failure" (Mr. Norman, interview transcript, September 2004).

The school's second criterion was whether the students were "mainstreamed," since this was identified as one way to produce more GLLs.

... [T]he kids are pretty young, uh, between 14 and 17 years old. So most of the kids have the ability to learn English as their second language pretty quick. And after two or three months, they started being immersed into the culture and then get some English speaking ability. That allowed the teacher of ESL, uh, to be released to be teaching something else. You know, so therefore, these kids can move off to a good situation in regular class (Mr. Norman, interview transcript, October 2004).

The counselor was not alone. His matter-of-fact prescription reflected the prevalent English-Only ideology, a misconception that language problems will be naturally resolved when English language learners are immersed in an English-speaking classroom environment. However, this second criterion was not plausible at Linton in 2004 because its ESL program had been reduced from four classes to one, which was only open to recent immigrants with zero English. Thao, Danh and their peers had no way but to be mainstreamed and become, in Mr. Norman's perspective, good students.

The third criterion applied to Asian immigrants directly. The model minority rhetoric seemed to be a handy indicator to predict students' language development. This rhetoric defines Asians as self-dependent, cooperative, and hardworking. As a result, the assumption that Danh and Thao were culturally a no-problem group reverberated at Linton. Mr. Norman praised them for their good citizenship and academic effort in contrast with their Mexican, African, or African American peers. His comments on Danh, for instance, were direct and representative:

It is impressive. (Reads teacher comments on Danh's transcript from previous semesters.) 'Excellent citizenship', 'Good citizenship', 'making a good effort and shows

initiative'. Well, for one course, 'periodic test and quiz scores frequently low', that's English. Well, you understand why, because English is a second language for him. ... So you look at the student who probably comes here with language difficulties while still managing to pass all the classes and, at the same time, score at the level of 2.0 or better. Well, he's over 2.0 as an average, so therefore, that can tell me that Danh is exactly as anybody else, uh, in Asian population. ... They are always at the top. ... They are people for whom you can come and expect they are going to do what is told to do and they are going to do it well in the best of their ability (Mr. Norman, interview transcript, October 2004).

Classroom teachers also emphasized their belief in and appreciation of the positive attitudes shown by their Asian immigrant students who came to school prepared, even though they took test scores as the major factor in describing a GLL. It seemed to the teachers of both Danh and Thao that the two focal students could be both good and not good – good in that they never challenged teachers in classrooms; not good in that their test scores and writing ability were not satisfactory. For example, Danh's English teacher was frustrated about his repeated errors in spelling, word use, verb agreement, and verb conjugation. Despite knowing how these students struggled with language, the teachers found themselves having to take care of the majority in their isolated classrooms. They were concerned whether Danh and Thao would be able to graduate with sufficient literacy skills; however, they acknowledged their own need for support and guidance in working with linguistically diverse students, in order to truly include them in the classroom. With a disappointing lack of a systematic support for new immigrants, the teachers who were interviewed in the study hoped that their students would progress academically on their own pace. As a compromise, many teachers chose to give good grades to keep Thao and

Danh motivated and/or to avoid the anxiety of not being able to address their language learning challenges.

In short, the institution emphasized students' age, categorization as ESL or mainstreamed, ethnicity and race, as well as grades as indicator of GLLs. Such an account revealed stereotypical and problematic views of ELLs that are continuously perpetrating larger political, social and pedagogical struggles in the American educational system.

An Individual Account of Good Language Learners

The symbolic meaning of being good language learners was interpreted and negotiated by individual students. Thao and Danh demonstrated how they drew upon their cultural understanding of success, effort, attitude and agency in and out of the classroom.

Danh

For Danh, it was unrealistic to assume all Asian students are GLLs because many were struggling through transition into the American school system and yet “no one look[s] at how many Vietnamese kids dropped out” (Danh, interview transcript, September 2003). As a teenager who almost quit school, Danh revealed that it was much easier to overgeneralize about Asian students than to identify who needed what kind of academic support. When the author shared with him the belief that GLLs have many innate qualities (e.g., high motivation), Danh appeared incredulous and asked, “If I am too old [to learn English well], I should just give up, right? I want to learn, but nobody in school teach me how. My parents just ask me not give up” (Danh, interview transcript, November 2003).

Danh did not care much about whether he was regarded by the school and his teachers as a good student, but he took pride in his perseverance in searching for help with his English learning and in his luck of finding the help he needed. Ironically, the most valuable help he

received came from neighbors and friends who tutored him after school. Danh argued that the community of supporters, who were mostly immigrants and bilingual themselves, was the incentive that kept him going forward in school.

I learn, like, how to put grammar in sentence, like conjunction. ... And only good thing that I think I did is that I try. I goal is to learn English and influence others about my way of life (Danh, interview transcript, November 2003).

In the classroom, Danh followed his teachers' directions and participated in activities. He was a popular speaker in his communication class, not because he had native-like pronunciation and perfect grammar, but because many of his speeches were based on his unique experience as an immigrant. His "incredible knack for humor," in the teacher's words, won him respect and applause from his classmates. Once among many of the moments when Danh felt validated in the classroom, he presented a funny story as part of a speech class assignment about his cousin mistaking a rapper's name (50 Cent) for the price of the music album.

Even without a catch phrase, a closing line, or any other technical part of a standup comedy routine, Danh's presentation was well received. The joke's originality came from his immigrant experience; furthermore, the classroom environment was welcoming and safe enough for Danh to interact with his peers. Danh was pleased he was able to become the center of attention, build some confidence, and entertain his classmates, all of which indicated that, in Danh's own words, "he was doing well as a good student." Not surprisingly, the supportive environment in the Speech Communication class was rare at Linton. From Danh's perspective, being a GLL is closely tied to a nurturing and supportive community of people and classrooms and to self-determination in working hard and using the available resources.

Thao

Ninth-grader Thao eagerly presented herself as a good student – a non-ESL who was proficient in functional African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and a student who was diligent in schoolwork. The author had a conversation with Thao in the school library on vocabulary and pronunciation of the AAVE widely used by students at Linton.

Author: I don't understand some of their words, like 'Yo!' [It was] You [who] taught me [its meaning]. But there are many other words I don't understand.

Thao: Because you Chinese.

Author: But you speak Vietnamese. You understand [what they say]?

Thao: Because like, I learn USA in Vietnam. A lot USA stuff. And I come here already know English. I hang out with black people. I have friends black stuff.

The author misunderstood Thao at first when she said “because you Chinese.” Thao meant that the author only spoke Chinese as a learner. She emphasized her situation of having learned English in Vietnam and later being immersed in her black friends’ English-speaking circle. Thao pointed out not only the need to learn “a lot USA stuff,” but also the importance of “hanging out” with friends – a socialization process that she believed gave her an edge over the author. Her advice to the author clearly indicates the sociocultural aspect of language learning.

As a freshman at Linton, Thao was critical about the ESL label after being placed in the ESL program and later in the mainstream classroom. For Thao, it was humiliating to be called an ESL student, because most ESL students at Linton did not speak a word of English. In addition, the ESL classrooms were in a remote corner of the basement that was detached from

most classrooms and activity areas in the building. “I’m not slow at all!” Thao protested. She was desperate to distinguish herself from the ESL track and proud that she could converse with her schoolmates effectively.

Thao believed a good student should work hard and follow directions. “You listen to your teacher and do the homework and do what the teacher tell to do. Be a great student. I do my work and talk and do a lot stuff” (Thao, interview transcript, March 2005). Indeed, Thao was the only student in her biology class who remembered to bring in cardboard labels cut from cereal boxes with nutrition facts on them. In English class, especially during group work, Thao would frequently remind her group to complete the task in time. She strived to obtain all the stamps (smiley faces) her teacher awarded for assignments in the Science Fiction class.

Yet Thao found it frustrating to learn to decipher her teachers’ feedback to her work. For example, she was not familiar with the abstract conventions that her English teacher used in her grammar and writing exercises (e.g., abbreviations such as “p. p.” for present perfect tense, “awk” for awkward, inappropriate expressions, or a symbol to indicate beginning of a new paragraph), nor was she able to understand how to respond to the teacher’s signals. Her teacher would smile and tell her to take it easy, but never explained clearly how she should improve her writing. Thao’s helplessness contrasted with her successful collection of teacher stamps for participation. Little was done to support Thao’s literacy development in expressing her ideas clearly in writing. From Thao’s perspective, she worked hard enough to be able to speak fluently with her peers, to avoid being labeled an ESL, and to be diligent. She was however often at a loss seeing the discrepancy between an overwhelming number of stamps – a strong sign of approval from her teachers towards her work – and their red ink critiques of her writings.

Discussion

Danh and Thao sounded proud when they described themselves as students who worked hard and aimed high in order to create a better future for themselves and their future children in their new country. They appreciated the seemingly positive reactions they received from the staff members at Linton because of their cultural heritage and family value in academic excellence, and yet they were unsure how to use school to seek specific help with their English and how to become articulate speakers and writers step by step. Their learning was complicated by the school-based education serving as a “contradictory resource” (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 1) rather than offering direct and intrinsic benefit.

Within the school context, Danh and Thao, as well as teachers and administrators, all played a role in negotiating and constructing the notion of a GLL. Interpretations of being a GLL from all participants reflected various political ideologies and focuses on key elements in learning a second language. Although SLA research offers a set of attributes such as “the special combination of interests, inclinations, skills, temperament, needs and motivations that comprised [one’s] personality” (Fillmore, 1979, p. 221) to describe a GLL, the definition focuses only on learners’ innate quality and self-monitoring ability in language learning. As interpreted by the institution, GLLs were those who possess specific resources and experiences, e.g., length of stay in the U.S.; motivation was also an important factor, which corresponded with SLA characteristics. However, when it comes to how students learn, understanding was vaguely articulated and over-generalized. Danh was not expected, and thus not explicitly supported, to achieve more than a good citizen — an illusive model student to fit into the Asian immigrant stereotype. The institution’s version of the GLL revealed its low expectations of under-represented immigrant students and implicitly denied their full participation in the academic

curriculum. The English Only mentality also played a role. GLLs were believed to be able to succeed eventually in learning English simply by being in the country and going to school with native speakers. Danh and Thao's specific academic needs were overlooked.

Comments about the two Vietnamese students were based mostly on assumptions that they were good regardless of their language level. Even though they would benefit tremendously from a deeper understanding among their teachers and counselors of their challenges in learning English, the students were not given the opportunity and guidance to develop their literacy and communication skills. The institution's mere reliance on the cultural differences among linguistic minority students to determine their potential in learning English was problematic in that it allowed certain characteristics assumed common in a group to determine success or failure in school.

Using cultural difference as an excuse was particularly present in the two case studies. Interview transcripts indicated that Danh's and Thao's progress was always commented on in relation to their African-American peers and Asian background. On the one hand, regardless of their grades, Danh and Thao were always "very good" students because, to echo the counselor, there were so many African-American and Cuban students who could not even get an average GPA of 1.0. On the other hand, as some teachers and staff believed, both Danh and Thao would finally conquer English and grow into "excellent" students due to their heritage, which should strongly and positively impact their commitment to study. Such a position ignores students' individual struggles to learn and evades the institutional obligation to help.

Using Levinson and Holland's (1996) argument for an activist-oriented perspective on students' social negotiations of identity as good students, we see from this study how Danh and Thao exercised their agency to develop their own standards for becoming GLLs. They took

pride in using English to share their life stories. They appreciated opportunities to interact with their classmates and friends. Being good and successful had always happened in an environment where teachers communicated their objectives well and involved them in producing topics of interest, even though such an environment was rare in their schooling. Danh and Thao were awarded grades because they submitted assignments on time; however, the goodwill and empathy of most of their teachers towards new immigrant students, through passing grades for quantitative rather than qualitative achievement, did not help advance their development. The apparent lack of effective instructional tools and of understanding in language, literacy and second language development exacerbated the challenges Danh and Thao faced in trying to learn high school subject areas at the same time English. Within the institutional constraints and limited support for English language learners, the students recognized the many tracks (e.g., mainstream vs. ESL) they were assigned to, the positive and negative connotations of being an English language learner, an Asian student, and a mainstreamed GLL, and were desperately trying to demonstrate the strengths that made them unique as individuals.

Implications

Grounded in a sociocultural perspective that views learning as a social practice, the author argues that a GLL is culturally produced in schools where linguistically diverse students are represented by their language proficiency test scores, judged by their attitudes and personalities, and baffled in low track programs. The purpose of this paper is to investigate this significant yet under-investigated phenomenon by looking at the experiences of two English language learners in a Midwestern High School. The theoretical and pedagogical implications of the study call for a situated view of language learners in urban schools in our effort to address the learning needs of students in increasingly diverse classrooms. Understanding the GLL requires particular

attention to the social contexts and practices in which learning is embedded (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Levinson & Holland, 1996; Norton & Toohey, 2001) and to the cultural production of an essentialized view of GLLs. This tends to “view English language learners as members of particular cultural groups rather than as complex individuals” (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003, p. 128). In fact, research shows a drastic in-group difference with respect to academic achievement in reading and math among Asian students, especially Southeast Asian students and Pacific Islanders (Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

To deepen the understanding of what it means to be a GLL, teacher educators should indicate to future teachers the danger in classifying English language learners according to their so-called innate ability to learn a language, in failing to recognize students as social members using English as a communicative tool, and in using the GLL or model minority as an excuse for the lack of academic support to students. The key is to create more opportunities for English language learners to use their knowledge and experience and involve them in classroom interactions.

Teacher education courses should not only emphasize a knowledge base for future teachers to understand how teenage students learn a second language in school and to build effective pedagogy when teaching content areas, but more importantly, to encourage projects that investigate how English language learners negotiate instructional expectations, the language demands of various subjects, and their own language learning resources. Future teachers need opportunities to delve into and critically analyze their students from many perspectives. This requires teacher education programs to design and order credential courses in a way that candidates are offered sufficient time and consistent guidance to observe, interact with their EL

students in schools, understand students' agency to learn, and reflect on their beliefs and practice as teachers.

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