

Affective Filter: Mexican English Learners in Chicago

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Abstract

Moving to a foreign country with a different language can be a challenging experience. Adapting in a foreign environment involves a cultural and thus linguistic effort. There are many factors that affect language learning in these situations, and one of them is the affective filter. The affective filter refers to the emotional factors that impact the language learning process. The following research shows the different challenges and perspectives towards English learning and cultural adaptation from three different participants. The participants are Mexican people of different ages and backgrounds that had recently move to Chicago and this led to their necessity of learning the English language. The research was carried out with a qualitative paradigm and a narrative inquiry. Data was collected through narrative interviews. It was found that the participants presented different opinions towards their processes of moving to an English speaking country and learning the language, however there were some patterns such as the impact on their identities and the feeling of safeness when using their L1.

Keywords: affective filter, identity, cross-cultural adaptation, language learning.

1. Introduction

Many people have the necessity to move from one place or country to another to find new academic, work, scientific, commercial or even social opportunities. When they move from one cultural context to another, they face new challenges in the whole process of adapting to a new culture. This adaptation brings with it the necessity to learn the host language, and what this might represent to immigrants. “They find themselves straddled between two worlds, the familiar milieu of the home culture and their new locus in the host society, and recognize that many of their previously held beliefs, taken-for-granted assumptions, and routinized behaviours no longer relevant or effectual” (Kim, 2012: 623).

Even though researchers such as Anderson (1994), Edwards (2009), Kim (2012), Krashen (1981), between others, have been working on the development of theories about cross-cultural adaptation, foreign language learning, and second language acquisition, they are a lot of different ideas and perceptions about how individuals adapt. In order for the process of adaptation to happen, communication is key, and to be able to communicate individuals need language. However, it has been proved that language learning process is a complex one, and that not only linguistic and cognitive factors affect it, but also affective factors may impact how the process is carried out and to what extent language is successfully learnt (Laine, 1988).

The following paper will explain and discuss the impact of the “affective filter” in second language learning and cultural adaptation. The topic will be approached specifically from the perspective of Mexican immigrants living in Chicago. A literature review with relevant concepts to the topic such as “affective filter”, “identity”, and “cross cultural adaptation” will be presented, as well as the methodology used for the aims of this research.

2. Literature review

Some concepts such as affective filter, identity and cross-cultural adaptation, which are relevant for this research and related to the affective filter in second language learning and acquisition will be discussed in the following part of the paper. Previous literature regarding these topics was revised and cited in this paper in order to obtain a wider perspective about it.

2.1 *Affective filter*

When it comes to learning or acquiring a language studying and explaining cognitive factors is considered vital to understand this process. However, there are other factors that are necessary to explore to have a wider perspective of everything that influences second language acquisition. Affective factors often prove to be decisive on the extent to which a language is acquired successfully.

The affective filter hypothesis was proposed by the linguist Stephen Krashen (1985). This theory suggests that language learners might be distracted by emotional factors in language learning process. It is possible that learners would not be able to absorb what they should because of feelings that they have towards the language, what the language represents, or even to what the language is attached to. The “filter theory”, in summary, argues that “affective variables act to block input from the LAD (Language Acquisition Device); that filter strength can vary according to personality, the relationships between the acquirer and the source of input, and the acquisition situation; and further that the filter strength increases markedly at about puberty” (Krashen, 1981: 101-102). The term can actually be tracked back to Dulay and Burt (1977), in the form “socio-affective filter”, later “affective filter”, and then just “filter”. The term has been shortened, but the essence of the concept is the same; “the part of the internal processing system that subconsciously screens incoming language based on what psychologists call “affect”: the learner’s motives, needs, attitudes, and emotional states” (Dulay et al., 1982: 46).

Krashen (1986) mentions motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety in the “affective filter hypothesis” as three categories of variables that play a role in second language acquisition. In essence, when feelings or emotions such as anxiety, fear, or embarrassment are elevated, it becomes difficult for language acquisition to occur. According to Krashen (1981), when language learners are anxious, input may not reach the acquisition part of the brain. Macintyre (1995) has concluded that, “language learning is a cognitive activity that relies on encoding, storage, and retrieval processes, and anxiety can interfere with each of these by creating a divided attention scenario for anxious students” (p. 96).

Further, when self-confidence and motivation are low, students may have more difficulty in learning a language. Brilliant (1995) found that immigrants who had negative emotions related to their moving to the United States progressed slower in their learning of English than their counterparts who had more positive feelings towards their move. The effect that affective filter has on learners can be potentialized by their social background. People who move to a foreign country and are forced to learn the language in order to survive can perceive the language learning process to be strongly attached with the culture mimicry, and thus develop

negative emotions towards the change. Learning another language does not necessary means acquiring its culture, nor changing your identity (Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

2.2 Identity

The author Laine (1988) defines identity as “A person’s feeling of sameness, integrity, unity at different times, places, and situations” (p. 11). A person’s identity is a core part of what the person is and the role he/she plays in society. The identity of people is formed by external factors such as their culture, gender, ethnicity, social class, and social background in general; and internal factors such as their personality, thoughts, feelings, interests. The author Block (2007) argues that “identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of past, present, and future. Individuals are shaped by their socio-histories but they also shape their socio-histories as life goes on” (p. 27). This mean that individuals are affected by their experiences, as well as the experiences affect individuals.

The concept of identity is strongly related to culture, since the further is considered part of the first one. For this reason, it is a crucial concept when talking about immigration. According to Block, when a learner is in a foreign country, a foreign-language mediated identity is developed as a survival tool. In other words, people can mediate and adopt different identities according to their social necessities.

The relation of identity with language learning is a topic which is still central concern to many scholars in the field of language education and applied linguistics. There is work, for example, on identity and pragmatics (Lo & Reyes, 2004; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), identity and sociolinguistics (Joseph, 2004; Omoniyi & White, 2007; Edwards, 2009); and identity and discourse (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Wodak et al., 2009; Young, 2009). Identity is an extremely wide topic and its relevance cannot be ignored. Having an identity can give you a sense of belonging. The author Kurp (2021) mentions that “identity plays an important role in empowering individuals to exercise their rights and responsibilities fairly and equitably in a modern society, and it is imperative for social, economic and digital inclusion.” For this reason, dealing with identity is one of the main issues of immigrants all over the world.

2.3 Cross cultural adaptation

Millions of people change home each year looking for better opportunities and crossing cultural boundaries. The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines the word “immigrant” as “a person who has come to a different country in order to live there permanently.” This permanency on the country brings as consequence a personal transformation for the individual, in which the challenge of adapting the original cultural perimeters towards a new reality is a big one.

The term “cross cultural adaptation” refers to “the process of internal change in individuals so as to be able to function in an unfamiliar culture” (Kim, 2012: 1). The author Anderson (1994) claims that “cross cultural adaptation is a case of a common process of environmental adaptation” (p. 293). It is a complex, dynamic, and evolutionary process an individual undergoes. Kim (2012) claims that it has multidimensional and multifaceted forces interacting simultaneously (p. 379). This means that it is a process that impacts almost every aspect of an individual’s life, and it can be perceived as an all-encompassing phenomenon.

Through continuous interaction with the different aspects of the new cultural environment, our internal systems undergo a progression of changes as we integrate culturally acceptable concepts, attitudes, and actions. In the author’s Kim (2012) words “we become fit to live in the company of others around us who share a similar image of reality and self” (p. 382). The author also talks about two important concepts that appear in the process of cross-cultural

adaptation: acculturation and deculturation. Acculturation is defined as “the process of acquiring a new culture’s symbols and practices by an individual whose prior cultural learning has taken place elsewhere” (Kim, 2012: 623). Deculturation, on the other hand, refers to “the process by which individuals at least temporarily suspend, or unlearn over time, some of the symbols and habitual practices of one’s native culture and replace them with new symbols and practices of the host culture” (Kim, 2012: 623). Both of these processes are present when moving to another country and learning the language, because language is a core part of culture and interaction. Acculturation, however, is not a process in which new cultural elements are simply added to prior internal conditions. “As new learning accumulates, some deculturation also takes place” (Kim, 2012: 624). It is not only about adopting new cultural experience and knowledge, but is to learn the balance and mediate between the new culture and your previous culture. It is to be able to put in pause your cultural practices to be able to mimicry in the new ones. For this reason, it can be seen that both of the processes, acculturation and deculturation, interact in daily practices simultaneously and alternately with each other.

The existence of predicaments in which immigrants’ groups and ethnic minorities find themselves as “victims” are caused because they have to deal with the contradictions between their internal identity and the external world. This kind of issue comes with the big issue of communication between cultures. Communication is the necessary tool without which adaptation cannot take place. Cross-cultural adaptation occurs as long as the individual remains in interaction with the host environment. When the processes of acculturation and deculturation are done successfully, individuals develop what is called to be a ‘intercultural identity’, which is “a psychological orientation toward self and others that is no longer clearly and rigidly defined by either the original cultural identity or the identity of the host culture” (Kim, 2012: 628). It is the optimal adaptation path.

3. Methodology

The methodology used for this research will be stated in the following part of the paper.

3.1 *Context and participants*

This research has 3 participants. They are Mexican people who recently moved to Chicago after living all their lives in Mexico. The first one is a Mexican 44 years old woman who needed to move to United States 8 months ago because of her husband’s job. She is a stay-home mom with 3 children. She has studied English before but she has never had the necessity to really use it. The second participant is a 44 years old man who moved 8 months ago to Chicago because of a job opportunity. He is a chemical engineer who has English knowledge, however has never exercised his profession in a complete English environment before. The third participant is an 18 young adult who is studying college in the Indiana University. He has been living in the United States for 3 years now, because his family had to move due to his father work. He had studied English before, but he was not advanced in the language until he moved out of Mexico.

3.2 *Research questions*

The present study addressed the following research question:

- How do affective factors influence the English language learning and cultural adaptation processes of a group of Mexican migrants in Chicago?

3.3 Qualitative approach

Teherani et al. (2015) define qualitative research as “the systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings. These phenomena can include, but are not limited to, how people experience aspects of their lives, how individuals and/or groups behave, how organizations function, and how interactions shape relationships.” The aim of qualitative approach in research is for the researcher to examine the reason(s) why certain events occur, how do they occur, and what does the event(s) meant for the participants of the study. “We use qualitative research as an umbrella term to refer to several research strategies that share certain characteristics” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Strategies such as collecting, narrating, reflecting, and analyzing people, places, events, conversations and social phenomena that concern the study. These authors also state five main characteristics every qualitative research needs to be: naturalistic, descriptive, concerned with the process and not just the product, inductive, meaningful. Qualitative researchers study individuals' understanding of their social reality. The authors Fossey et al. (2002) mention that “qualitative research aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds”. Qualitative research cares about participants' perceptions, and it provides the opportunity to obtain a more accurate picture of the events.

3.4 Narrative inquiry

According to Salkind (2010: 869) “Narrative research aims to explore and conceptualize human experience as it is represented in textual form.” The emphasis is on storied experience. Its main purpose is to achieve an in-depth exploration of the meanings people assign to their experiences. Dowling (2015) argues in his book ‘Ricoeur on time and narrative: An introduction to temps et re´cit’ that time is organized and experienced narratively; narratives bring order and meaning to the constantly changing reality. Also, narrative plays an important role on how we perceive ourselves. Salkind (2010) mentions that “we create stories of ourselves to connect our actions, mark our identity, and distinguish ourselves from others” (p. 869). He also mentions that “narrative research orients itself toward understanding human complexity, especially in those cases where the many variables that contribute to human life cannot be controlled” (Salkind, 2010: 870).

One of the most important advantages of narrative research is that it can produce data that includes participants' wishes, conflicts, goals, opinions, emotions, worldviews and morals, all of which are open to the gaze of the researcher. However, because of its subjective nature, it may lack reliability. This because people might change or create the stories according to the circumstances.

Regarding the procedure narrative research is usually done with small groups of participants to obtain rich and free-ranging discourse. It begins with a conceptual question which is planned to illuminate people's experience. “The narrative researcher creates “experience-near” questions related to the conceptual question that might be used to encourage participants to tell about their experiences” (Salkind, 2010: 871). Narrative research questions tend to focus on individual, developmental, and social processes that reflect how experience is constructed.

3.5 Narrative interviews

For the aim of this research, the inquiry tool used is one-to-one interviews to the participants through virtual sessions via the platform Zoom. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized to collect the data. Conceptual questions were previously prepared, however questions asked during the interviews were personalized in order to deepen the information acquired.

According to Francis (2018: 282) “the semi-structured interview guide allowed the researcher to let the participants tell their story and gave the participants the freedom to share whatever elements of their experience they chose to.”

Prior to the interviews, the research question and the purpose of the study were discussed with the potential participants. When beginning the interview participants were asked to proportionate their names, ages, scholar grade, city of origin, and their currently living location. Also, they were asked if they preferred the interview to be in English or in Spanish.

4. Analysis and discussion of results

Analysis of narratives revealed four themes. Relevant excerpts of the text that emerged from their answers have been included. Participants were given an alias to protect their identities (participant 1, participant 2, and participant 3). After careful analysis of the interviews, the four themes that emerged were as follows:

1. Perspectives of adapting to a new culture;
2. Difficulties of learning and using the language;
3. Personal identity;
4. Expectations vs reality of living in USA.

4.1 *Perspectives of adapting to a new culture*

When adapting to a new culture people face situations that deviate from the familiar and internalized original cultural script (Kim, 2005). This can be perceived as a challenging experience. Participant 1 mentioned that for her, adapting was a really tedious process.

“The process was quite long...the visa documentation was difficult as well as finding and renting a house, and even having a car. You need to have a record or background in order to obtain all of those things, and we didn’t have any. I felt overwhelmed of having many things to do to start having a life here, and in a different language it was harder to do them.”¹

As it can be observed, the participant felt this process as something arduous and demanding. This because of the nature of the process and its bureaucracy, but also because of the fact that she had to use the English language and get used to do procedures and other activities never done before by her in English almost overnight.

Further, participants 2 and 3 also share a similar opinions towards the process. Both of them mentioned that the challenges and the difficulty of the moving process exceeded their expectations.

“To be honest, it’s been a very intensive, very different experience. I would say that even beyond that I expected...” (Participant 2).

“Moving to an English speaking country is a very difficult experience...you feel like you know what to expect but you really have no idea” (Participant 3).

Further participant 3 also added:

“My new culture is very interesting; I feel that I compare it to my first culture everyday”.

¹ Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

This action of comparing all the time the two cultures can be interpreted as a coping mechanism toward the extreme change he has just lived a few years ago. He has lived in a Mexican culture his complete life and from one day to another he needed to change or adapt all of his cultural practices to the new culture's ones. It is reasonable that he feels this necessity of comparing cultures, almost as a nostalgic reaction.

Another concept strongly related to culture is religion. Two of the participants showed concern about their religion practices being changed to another language.

“One of the most difficult things was the topic of religion. For me it is very important to live my faith in Spanish and to educate my children to pray in Spanish...it is difficult for children and teenagers to be interested in religion, and even more when it is in a different language” (Participant 1).²

“In the beginning I started going to the church in English, but I needed a change. So, I decided to go to mass in Spanish, because it's tough enough to have a strong faith and all religious matters in your heart and in your mind, in your own language. It was very challenging trying to do that in English” (Participant 2).

It is interesting to see how even though the questions made in the interview were not related with religion, participants automatically related the concept culture with the concept of religion. This is understandable because at the end of the day, religion is a fundamental way in which humans experience and understand the world, as it is culture. Their feelings and confidence towards the English language interfere on how they live their faith.

4.2 Difficulties of learning and using the language

One of the first concerns of the participants using the English language was their accent and pronunciation. However, there was a noticeable division in participants' opinions. While participant 1 felt insecure about her accent, participant 2 actually embraces his accent. This can be interpreted as their perspective towards American people's opinion about Mexicans. Participant 1 shared:

“In Spanish we use different muscles to pronounce words that the ones we use in English. Pronunciation is difficult and I have a very marked accent because my mouth is not used to move for English. Even though I know all the words I want to say, sometimes I do not say them well because I want to be fluent and people do not understand me”.³

As the excerpt suggests, the participant feels worried about her pronunciation and accent. This can lead to her being worried about native speakers noticing she is Mexican. It can be assumed that she feels uncomfortable or not safe enough when using English, even though she has the content knowledge because she has learnt English before, she has not practiced enough with English speakers in order to feel confident with her pronunciation. Speaking is a crucial part of language learning and cultural adaptation. The author Goh (2007: 1) mentions that “besides the role that it plays in communication, speaking can also facilitate language acquisition and development.”

On the other hand, participant 2 mentioned:

² Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

³ Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

“I’ve been feeling safe...all the community is very used to the Hispanic accent. We have very clear that we have a different accent and they realize that. And I have found a lot of people very open, very comprehensive about the difference, almost everyone is open to understand.”

As observed in the excerpts, one of the participants feels judge about having a Mexican accent, while the other feels comfortable to have one. It is not a factor of confidence diminishment for participant 2, which can be one or the main reason why participant 1 chose to do the interview in Spanish, and participant 2 in English.

Regarding the amount of English that participants uses in a daily basis, participant 1 mentioned:

“After being a complete weekend speaking in Spanish in my house, on Monday my English is all rusty...then throughout the week it gets better and better, but then the cycle repeats and the next Monday my English is not that good again.”⁴

This answer conducted to a follow up question which was ‘How was the dynamic in her house regarding language use?’. This with the objective of inquiring how does language was approached in her personal life or inner circle, to see the extent of the importance of Spanish in her daily life. Participant 1 then answered:

“In my house we speak Spanish, because I am educating Mexican children.”⁵

As it is noticeable this comment is closely related to cultural factors. Participant 1 seems to understand and actually perceive as integrated concepts language and culture. The authors Mazari and Derraz (2015: 353) suggest that “the formulation of cultural meanings is through the language of the community...language represents the most important means to acquire the culture and to share it with others”. It can be understood that for participant 1 using Spanish in her house is like teaching the Mexican culture to her children. For her it is important that even though they are in a foreign country, her children are still in touch with their Mexican roots. This is certainly an expression of the affective filter towards the use of the language. She might feel that allowing English in her house and family dynamic is parallel to losing their native culture to the new one in which they are now.

On the other hand, participant 3 mentioned that he prefers using English as much as possible to increase his proficiency. However, he has mixed feelings with this because of the fact of completely leaving out his first language (Spanish).

“I feel that I am getting better and better as I speak more English, but I had noticed that my level of proficiency in Spanish decreases. I sometimes struggle to come up with the words in Spanish for an object, an action, or simply a phrase”.

This is a common situation for immigrants. Their necessity of using their second language to complete activities to survive and interact in the foreign country shores them to stop using their first language. According to (Liao, 2021) many immigrants must adopt a new language in place of their first one to “succeed” in America. This can be perceived as an emotional grief that can affect the participant perception towards the home or the new culture.

Regarding their English learning process, I could notice that the participants expressed similar ideas. Participant 1 mentioned the following:

⁴ Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

⁵ Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

“There are many things that even though I studied English in Mexico are very different here. Many of the everyday expressions are not used...textbook English is very different from the English used here, so I don't feel completely prepared with the English knowledge I have yet.”⁶

This supports the idea that self-confidence, which is part of our identity and emotional component, is something that impacts participants' performance in a daily basis. For this reason, participants might feel the necessity of going back and forth with the use of their first language in order to boost their confidence and not feeling out of the place or as a “textbook speaker” all the time.

Participant 2 added:

“Whatever I have learnt in the past has obviously helped me all the time. But now I'm learning just by listening and interacting with my colleagues at job. I know what are the words that I should use and which ones are not because of the context”.

As it can be observed participant 2 expresses that his learning process is more focused to discourse. Now that he is living in a completely English environment he has the opportunity to understand how words are used in a real context, and even the level of formality needed in a conversation. He also mentions this part of ‘learning by listening’. Which can conclude that the participant is no longer having an explicit or direct language learning, but more indirect by being immerse in the context. This can lead to the idea of acquisition. The participant now is not learning, but rather acquiring more English language knowledge.

Participant 3 also mentioned that the process is more inductive than learning English in Mexico. He even uses the words “being forced”, which can lead to assuming that is not that he wants to use English for everything, but he has to do it.

“It is very different to learn English and having to use it in order to be able to communicate, and accomplish tasks... it forces you to think of what you're saying and how you say it, and if the other person understood what you were trying to say.”

4.3 Personal identity

Concerning the consequences that language can have in the participants' identities, some excerpts of the narratives showed that speaking English is a crucial factor for participants feeling of sameness. The three participants agree on the idea that speaking two languages is having two different personalities. Participant 1 argued:

“I miss using Spanish. I am a very sarcastic person who likes to do jokes, and when I am speaking in English sometimes I do not get the chance to do them. My personality is not actually reflected when I am speaking English...I feel more me when I am speaking Spanish, so if the person to which I am talking to speaks Spanish, I prefer to use it instead of English.”⁷

Further participant 2 added:

“I'm a guy that is always trying to make jokes during the day. I like to be happy to make jokes and it's very difficult when you change your language... it's a fact that it has impacted my personality or at least the perception that I let the people have about me.”

The idea of changing your personality or not getting to be yourself can be a tough one. For this reason, speakers seem to avoid the use of the English language whenever they have the

⁶ Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

⁷ Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

opportunity. It is almost as if the least they use English, the more they can be themselves. This can be problematic because at the end of the day, they are living in an English environment. Not having the feeling of ‘selfness’ can jeopardize their learning and adaptation process.

4.4 Expectations vs reality of living in USA

The findings suggest that participants were positively and also negatively surprised regarding their expectations of this experience. It was notorious the contrast of opinions participants had about USA before and after moving. As in every country, Mexican people have their constructed stereotypes about the American community. Some of them were expressed by the participants, such as:

“I didn’t realize what racism really was until I got here” (Participant 1).⁸

Participant 1 expresses being surprised of how strong the social phenomenon of racism is in USA. Latinos still face overt and subtle racism and discrimination every day, sometimes this is not conceivable to people until they live it in a daily basis. This obviously can lead to having negative feelings towards the host culture.

“I was shocked when I notice that people here are actually taught about world history and social studies in general. I used to think they weren’t because TV shows display Americans uninterested or even ignorants about other things that are not their country” (Participant 1).⁹

It can be observed that the perception of the participant 1 towards the American community was not a positive one. This might be because of the influence of media or even inherited thoughts. This might become an issue because it is strongly related to the feeling that the English language can produce in the participant, being the English language completely attached to the American culture. Having negative feelings or ideas regarding English can be an obstacle in the learning process or language performance.

On the other hand, participant 2 commented:

“There’s a lot of things that have changed because from my experiences. I had the idea that the family here in general was more like destructed, more like a completely fallen down concept. And now I can tell you that it is not the case... They really value the time that the parents stay with the kids, the time that the kids stay with sports, the respect for the law, all the respect for their culture, for the customs, for everything.”

By changing his perspective of the new culture to a positive one, participant 2 seems to be more open to the adaptation process, thus everything that may come with it including language acquisition.

5. Conclusion

Adapting to new culture is a complex and non-linear process. Participants faced many challenges related to cultural practices and language. How they face these challenges and the consequences of them has a great impact on participants’ emotional component. Perceptions and feelings towards the host culture and its language strongly affects the extent to which participants are willing to change or adapt., this includes their willingness toward learning the language. However, as discussed in this paper, participants learning attitude was a facilitator to achieve the

⁸ Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

⁹ Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

language goals. Some of them are still working on the improvement of their idea of the host culture, but still all of the participants noticed an improvement in their language skills after moving to the foreign country. It can be seen, by their language use and outcomes, that the ones that had a positive perspective or feeling about the host culture have had a more successful learning process. This research has demonstrated that affective factors have an impact on immigrants' adaptation processes and language performance. For further research, it would be good to have participants that have never learnt English before in order to have a clearer picture of the consequences of the affective filter in their learning process.

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