

Chapter 18

Sociocultural and Linguistic Assets of a High School Student Named Maria: Amigos y Anime

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ABSTRACT

This chapter tells the story of the language learning aspirations and educational experiences of Maria, a high school student from an immigrant family living in a large metropolitan area of the southeastern United States. Her story documents her quest to acquire literacy in a heritage language, Spanish, and to learn other foreign languages, French and Japanese. Her experiences have been shaped by the languages spoken in her home, the respective educational levels of family members and friends who provide academic support to her, the larger multilingual community in which she lives, interpersonal interactions with teachers, and popular culture. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and other theories derived from this theory were used to analyze her experiences. Stories like hers can serve as a powerful resource for scholars and practitioners of language teaching and learning who seek to inform their practice through greater understanding of many sociocultural factors and linguistic assets that influence the success of language learners at the individual level.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter chronicles the story of the language learning aspirations and educational experiences of a 17-year-old high school student from an immigrant family, Maria (a pseudonym). Maria has studied four languages, English, Spanish, French and Japanese, and lives in a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States (U.S.). Like 90% of American children from immigrant families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021), she was born in the United States (U.S.). The research literature refers to these children as “second-generation immigrants.” Second-generation immigrants bring considerable linguistic and cultural capital into the nation’s schools. Indeed, 10% of the children in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Furthermore, more than 400 languages are spoken by families whose children are enrolled in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

However, these statistics shed little light on the language learning and literacy development experiences of second-generation immigrants, like Maria. These numbers do not tell educators how to leverage the rich linguistic backgrounds of their students in the classroom, nor provide insight into the quality of instruction these students receive or how it might be improved. Numbers do not put a student face to a demographic trend.

Using case study research, this chapter introduces the reader to Maria, a young woman who has studied four languages, English, Spanish, French, and Japanese. Her language learning experiences are examined to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the language learning and literacy development experiences of a second-generation immigrant pursuing studies in Spanish, French, and Japanese?
2. How do sociocultural theories of language learning account for Maria’s experiences?
3. How can her experiences inform teaching practice and program design?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two influential ways of thinking about case study research are introduced here. First, Stake (1995) classified case study research as being intrinsic, collective, or instrumental. An intrinsic case study involves the investigation of a single case, whereas a collective case study looks at multiple cases to explore similarities and differences among them. An instrumental case study, such as the one discussed in the present study, focuses on a single case for the purpose of explaining a theory. Flyvbjerg (2006) indicated that despite the conventional view that instrumental case studies “cannot contribute to scientific development,” they produce context-dependent knowledge that enable “people to develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts” (p. 221). Second, Yin (2009) asserted that even though case studies, especially those of a single sample, are not generalizable to a population, they may be generalizable to theories.

Thus, with the goal of building upon theory, this paper begins with a cursory review of sociocultural theories of learning and pedagogy (including Vygotskian sociocultural theory), funds of knowledge, heritage language education, and languaging. It was hypothesized that each of these could explain different dimensions of the learner experience and be used to answer the research questions above. Each theory is briefly described in this section with a statement of the author’s assumptions of the value of each in analyzing Maria’s story.

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