

Anxiety during the Silent Period

Anxiety of the *unknown* specifically for temporary and refugee claimant students

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Abstract

This article focuses on the importance of supporting all English language learners, specifically those who endure an added level of stress due to their immigration journey. In this article, I will raise awareness by pointing out the importance of not only being aware of temporary/visa/no status students but also to be more compassionate while teaching them. Moreover, recent numbers such as the number of newcomers, visa students, and study permits will be shared, and the topic of anxiety will also be discussed, with the intention to best support students who are hoping to stay in Canada but do not necessarily have the permit to do so.

The reason for this article is to promote empathy and allow for greater support for newcomers, specifically for those who may not be able to stay in Canada permanently. In the past few years, the number of newcomers has increased. Furthermore, there has been an influx of temporary study permits and work visas. Most of these professionals come to Canada with their children (grades K - 12), with the intention to stay permanently. As a teacher, I have written an article to raise awareness of this influx of students, with the intention of supporting them in the classroom. Furthermore, the Silent Period is a stage that all language learners (L2) will enter. Stephen Krashen (2009) coined this term with the intention to raise awareness of English (L2) learners and why these students may remain quiet during the initial phase of language learning. I will discuss how this phase may become longer than expected, and one in which the student may



become anxious. It becomes imperative, therefore, to acknowledge students entering this phase with the intention to best support them during classroom activities. As any language teacher, the main goal is to teach student to become (more) prominent in language learning by recognizing first what might deter them from learning and/or by breaking down barriers that might impede language fluidity.

Introduction

In recent years, Canada has seen an increase of newcomers, which has been denoted as an important move to relocate people into Canadian territory. In fact, in 2021, Canada welcomed 401,000 newcomers in the form of permanent residents; this number set a record which was placed in 1913 (Government of Canada, 2023). Currently, Canada is set to break this short yet aggressive goal by allowing more than 1.5 newcomers within a 3-year plan (Government of Canada, 2023). These numbers, however, do not represent the number of temporary asylum seekers and/or refugee claimants entering Canada via a point of entry (border) legally or illegally. It is difficult to measure the number of immigrants that enter Canada outside of the official ports of entry such as a border crossing, given that these people might be smuggled and/or crossing to Canada without the necessarily legal documents. Nevertheless, it is crucial to mention this number that represents what our government has labelled as “irregular border crossers” (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2023). Since 2017, there has been a total of around 110,000 known cases or irregular border crossers (it is unknown the exact number of how many people cross the border without a permit/legal document). Adding approximately around 550,000 work visa, study and work permits (although this number has recently reduced to 360,000 – January 22, 2024, with the idea to stabilize the economy (Government of Canada, 2024b), the number of newcomers is simply increasing. Additionally, approximately 30% of newcomers have left Canada, primarily due to the cost of living (DeLaire, 2023). This information is important because “temporary” living conditions may affect language learners in their school, especially during the so-called Silent Period.

I consider temporary living conditions for any language learner who may not know if they will be staying in Canada permanently and/or has not received a permanent residence permit or is seeking asylum. As you may be aware, not everyone who seeks asylum in Canada is granted this coveted permit (More than 22,000 people were rejected permanent residence whereas close to 8,000 either abandoned Canada or were withdrawn, within February 2017 – September 2023 (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2023). In fact, not all who come with a work and/or study permit are guaranteed permanence in Canada. There is a points system established by the government of Canada (Canada PR point system, 2024), in which one can calculate a score that will then be used for the application of permanent residence (This applies exclusively to study/work permit holders who are considering staying in Canada permanently).



A high score depicts a better chance of being invited to stay in Canada permanently and subsequently, be considered a Canadian. A low score, however, may lead towards being rejected from staying in Canada, even if you and/or your family is already accustomed to the country's language and culture. This application process may last months if not years prior to being finalized.

The Silent Period

Any second or multi (I will be using English as a second language rather than multi language learner) language learner will embark into a Silent Period which is depicted by a time when the student does not communicate with the language that they are learning. In Canada for example, a student learning English as a second language, will enter this linguistic stage in which they will speak very minimal English. This may be due to the lack of English skills accompanied by the lack of feeling emotionally stable. It is also important to note that if a student has performed well in his previous school (where their L1 is spoken), they might feel an additional level of anxiety because they would not want to score a lower grade due to the lack of linguistic skills in English. This is considered fear of failure, which is linked to the fear of a negative evaluation or test anxiety (Front Matters, 2002).

The Silent Period is also known as a pre-production phase of language acquisition, in which a student is learning by listening and seeing language conventions (body language and non-verbal cues) (Shibata, n.d.). According to Stephen Krashen, the language learner (ELL) takes time to observe and to listen to the teacher and the other students, before using English as L2 (Silent Period, n.d.). This chapter is considered the earliest stage of language acquisition, where one can see the student is not only quiet but rather actively learning vocabulary, receiving, and processing information, and I would add, even producing a silent response (either as a 1-word answer, a short phrase, or a simple sentence). It is a vital stage in language learning given its nature to develop receptive vocabulary while observing other language users (English native speakers). Andie Cunningham and Ruth Shaoury (n.d.) also add that children in the Silent Period should not be forced to speak before they are ready to do so, given that they are unwilling and/or unable to communicate orally, perhaps due to not feeling comfortable in using English as an L2. Finally, Kristina Robertson and Karen Ford (2020) express that in the Silent Period, the student learns the language but does not yet speak it. Moreover, they add that this stage may last at least 6 weeks. In any case, it is important to know that a new language learner (ELL, MLL, or EL) may be acquiring language by listening, seeing, and by being engaged in formal and/or informal learning, while still being quiet and seen as nonparticipant.



The numbers in HWDSB (Hamilton Wentworth District School Board)

By January 18th, 2024, my school board, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) reached 700 assessments for elementary students. This high number was reached only once before (late May of 2022 – '23 scholastic year). There is no reason to believe that these numbers will slow down any time soon, given the current immigration patterns. Out of the mentioned 700 assessments, approximately 90 students were seeking asylum which would account for just under 13%. Moreover, approximately 250 students had a temporary study permit, which would justify a 36% of the total population of students. If we were to add both numbers, we would produce around 340 total students who have not acquire a permanent permit to staying in Canada. If we were to only calculate these numbers, we would notice that close to 50% of new students in the HWDSB are not sure if they would stay in Canada permanently. Again, this number does not consider the other 30% of newcomers (permanent residents) who leave Canada primarily for the inflated cost of living.

Why is this information deemed crucial to me? Purely because the lack of stability, that is, not knowing if one day you will be invited to leave your new home/country, may bring additional stress or even anxiety to any student.

Allow me to talk about Samuel (a pseudonym), a student whose father was seeking refuge in Canada. Samuel, like many others, came to Canada with a travel visa. However, after staying a few weeks, his family decided to seek refuge and attempt to stay in Canada permanently. This meant that his family needed to change their immigration documents from visa to seeking refuge in Canada. His family entered a long and painful migratory process of waiting for a definitive answer from the government of Canada. This meant that the student and his younger sister were allowed to enter a publicly funded school without having to pay any school-related fees that international students would have to pay. However, it also meant that the student and his family would enter a long, yet unpredictable process filled with uncertainty for their permanency in their future. That is, once a person seeks refuge in Canada, this person (and his family) must gather evidence pertaining to their lack of safety in their home country. Hence, this person will have to create a good case to convince the Canadian government why the family needs to stay in Canada. Failure to provide solid evidence of safety and/or showing a lack of proof, may result in their refugee application to be cut short and not be granted permanent residence. If this were the case, then the family is invited to leave the country by a specified date. If the family decides to stay longer than the pre-established departure date, they are considered living illegally. At that point, the immigration police (the RCMP) detain you,



charge you for committing a crime, and then deport you back to your home country. Though this family had suffered political turmoil in their country of origin, along with terrorism, they were denied staying in Canada permanently. Nevertheless, the final letter of rejection came a couple of years after having tried to stay in Canada. This meant that for this family, just like most who endure this journey, everyday living was interrupted by the constant worries of being declined to stay in Canada. Therefore, the children at home would see their parents trying to plan the next steps if given a negative response by the Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) department. This also meant that they needed to save their money, keep a low profile, and/or live under the radar, and try to think of either crossing the border to the USA, travel to another country, or be content with being sent back home. For the children, it signified that they were constantly exposed to the anxiety of not knowing what the future may hold and knowing the idea of needing to leave their *new* home country, Canada. It also meant that these two children showed an elevated level of anxiety even before they received their notice to leave Canada. This is mainly because their parents would often talk about their uncertainty of staying in Canada. Additionally, his parents constantly looked for the mailman hoping to receive a letter of acceptance from the government. The day that the letter arrived, the children's father had just come back from work. Two years had passed by, and he was already feeling useful and a contributing member of the Canadian community. He had even been promoted to supervisor in his employment, given that he had shown great leadership qualities. He parked his car in the driveway of the house that they were renting and greeted the mail carrier who was delivering the weekly flyers and monthly bills. He quickly noticed a Government of Canada envelope. He placed his thumb in the crevice of the envelope and opened it. He took the letter out and read the first few lines. Tears fell, and so did the flyers and other letters that he was carrying. As he dropped his arms down, his wife noticed his low spirits too. Her female intuition made her believe and understand that what he read was precisely the letter for which they had been patiently and anxiously waiting.

After finding out that they were not welcomed to stay in Canada, I felt a sense of sadness and distress for them. Knowing how much the family was trying to stay in Canada and how hard-working all of them were. I understood the anxiety that this family had been living since the moment that they left their country, the precise arrival time in Canada, the instant they decided to change their status to 'refugee claimant', and the second that they received the letter.



What is anxiety and how it is linked to learning?

According to Anxiety.org, anxiety is denoted as a physiological and psychological response to an external stimulus that is stressful, dangerous, and uncommon in nature (Jovanovic, T., 2024). Further, this state of being manifests in discomfort due to the lack of knowledge of a specific event. Mayo Clinic indicates that it is normal to feel a dose of anxiety especially if one is undergoing a time of stress in their lives. However, the problem lies the moment that the person cannot control the level of anxiety, and this therefore interferes with regular day-to-day activities (Mayo Foundation, 2017). Mayo Clinic also adds that living with generalized anxiety disorder may lead to long-term challenges. These feelings attributed to the level of anxiety may affect students who do not know their permanency in Canada.

According to Diane Couto (2014), anxiety may be linked to learning. In fact, elevated levels of anxiety diminish the ability to learn. The opposite can also be said. That is, lower levels of anxiety equal higher levels of learning. It is important to state the difference between anxiety and stress, given that a healthy dose of stress may lead to making changes in one's behaviour that may facilitate learning. The American Psychological Association (2022) denotes the difference between stress and anxiety by pointing out that stress is an emotional reaction caused by an external trigger, whereas anxiety, though the same, is the persistent and extreme worries that stick around even after the stressors are absent (Goldin, 2022). You might ask, how does stress or anxiety be linked to a newcomer who is undergoing the Silent Period? Moreover, would a student who does not know whether they might stay in Canada indefinitely suffer from more stress caused from the lack of stability or the lack of knowledge?

As an assessor, part of my job is to welcome newcomers into my city. It is critical that as an ambassador to the school board, that I help all families feel welcome and safe; valued and heard. I also try to listen to their needs, and at times, their demands for their own children. At the end, once we are finished with the interview/assessment, I reassure the parents by providing any feedback to support their child(ren) in the school board, I thank them for their time and finally, I welcome them to Canada once again. It is important to mention that the number of newcomers who only have a temporary permit to stay in Canada, and yet are hoping to stay permanently has increased tremendously (based on the numbers at the HWDSB that are above). In reality, 1 in 2 (340 out of 700 assessed students) students are either seeking refuge, have a study permit or visa, and/or their parents have a work permit (which allows them to study in any publicly funded school). Moreover, these students may be lacking stability and might be living an ongoing worry of not being able to stay in Canada permanently. It has been pointed out that a challenging event may provide the student with stress, which could lead to anxiety if not properly taken care of. In the case of the



family mentioned before, their lives were filled with stress simply for knowing that one day they may be unwelcome in Canada, hence sent back to their home country. Imagine for a second a war-torn country that lacks opportunities for a better future, is politically unstable, and does not provide the safety for a younger generation. Hence, the fact of not knowing your permanent status in Canada may add an incredible amount of stress to the newcomer.

A language learner might stay quiet in the classroom for two main reasons; the lack of English language to express their thoughts and feelings and the elevated level of anxiety attributed to (a) not wanting to make a mistake (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002) and (b) not knowing if they will stay in Canada permanently. It is important to point out the settlement curve for any newcomer and focus mainly on the downward slope. This part of the curve is present during the Silent Period. During this phase, a student is new to the culture and language (if they speak an L1 other than English), is beginning to adapt to a new culture and way of living and may be missing family, friends and routines that were once part of his daily living. I would also add that a student might be embarking on a new lifestyle that involves 6 plus hours of daily schooling which may have been different for them in their home country.

How to support during the Silent Period?

It has become imperative that teachers continuously foster a classroom environment filled with respect, empathy, care, trust, and dignity so that English language learners may thrive in their language acquisition in their search for becoming part of the class community. Further, a teacher should be vigilant and act timely and gracefully against actions of abuse, control (from one student to another) and bullying (Government of Ontario, 2023). It is also important for the teacher to recognize the so-called Silent Period (Krashen, 2009) —a critical stage of social and language development, which cannot be cancelled or taken lightly. This is the time when the teacher and the class help the newcomer feel a sense of self-efficacy because when ELLs know that they are learning, they will be more in control of their learning. It is also important to note that during the Silent Period, a student is learning by using all of the senses. And during this phase, they are processing information even if production of second language is not happening. DaSilva and Jang (2008) echo Krashen's study and affirm that in the Silent Period, there is a direct implication in language learning. That is, their receptive skills are improving and becoming greater each day even if they are not able to express (expressive vs. receptive language skills). Therefore, it is fundamental to allow extra time for processing information, for internal translation of information and for creating a potential response in their L1 (first) and then in English. Finally, Eleni Pappamiheil (2002) reiterates maintaining a safe environment by not demanding language learners to participate in front of the classroom. Nevertheless, it is important



to know your learners to find out whether class participation may add to their anxiety, or if they would thrive in such an environment should they be gregarious, social, and feel safe to doing so.

Many studies suggest that allowing your English language learners to speak their L1 with another student (someone who also speaks this L1), will create social interactions and hence facilitate communication and therefore break a language barrier.

Conclusion

As a second language teacher and a former refugee student, I find it important for my colleagues to know that refugee and study permit students may be feeling a greater sense of anxiety due to not knowing their future dwelling plans. Students who come with a work/study permit or refugee status to Canada, do not necessarily know how long they might stay in Canada. Most, if not all, refugee seekers hope to stay in Canada permanently. However, as we have already seen, there is no federal promise to allow them to stay, and their application via a formal process will have to be adopted, then reviewed, and finally accepted or declined. If rejected, as we saw with Samuel's family, the outcome may be detrimental, tiresome, and slow, and subsequently, may negatively impact the well-being of the student and their family. Finally, this Silent Period may be used in a positive way to help ELLs learn but we must be aware of the added level of anxiety displayed by our "temporary" students who are hoping to become Canadians. It is for this reason that I would like to suggest building a friendly and welcoming environment where all learners know that mistakes are normal part of learning and allowed, and where a newcomer may feel safe to take initiative in their L1 or L2 and be in control of their learning. After all, DaSilva et al. (2008) described the Silent Period as being a linguistically stretch of silence; nevertheless, it is a time where the student may also be involved and active.

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