

## **Communication Disorders and the inclusion of newcomer African refugees in rural primary schools of British Columbia, Canada**

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### **Abstract**

In Canadian public primary schools, newcomer West African refugees like other ethnic immigrant students are a visible minority group, often referred as Linguistic and Culturally Different (LCD) students. In the province of British Columbia, newcomer immigrant students are subjected to a battery of tests, as soon as they enroll in the primary public school system. These tests are the provincial Standardized Assessment Tests (SAT) and classroom Teacher Assessment of Learning (TAL) that aim at obtaining data for diagnostic purposes of students' learning and teaching purposes. Specific to LCD refugee and immigrant students, they are also assessed on English Language Communication Proficiency (oral and written), Social Skills amongst others, regardless of the degree of proficiency in English language as members of the Anglo-phone Commonwealth countries whose curriculum and medium of instruction is British related. More often, the African immigrants and refugee students of the Anglo-phone African countries are most times diagnosed with English Language Communication Disorders (ELCDs), which has been questioned by some Canadian researchers of Learning Disabilities (LDs) and Multicultural Education (ME), especially with regards to the cultural compatibility of the assessment process/diagnostic tools, and criteria used to assess these LCD refugee and immigrant students. The article discusses the above discourse, with the support of findings of a qualitative ethnographic research findings and related literature.

**Keywords:** Communication Disorders; Primary Education, Learning Disabilities; Multicultural Education, Refugees, Canada

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## Introduction

Canada's current international refugee policy and practices are based on the 1951 United Nations' Refugee Convention (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2004; Dirks 1977). Many refugees across the world are provided political asylum in Canada, with many coming from the West African war torn countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia (Hoffman, 2006). In recent years, the education of these newcomer refugees has ignited educational policy debates which have encouraged policy modifications on the current inclusive educational paradigm on curriculum, and classroom management adaptations. The discourse has also included criticisms and calls for the refinement of the systems of accommodation that are meant to address the socio-cultural learning needs of new immigrants (Winton, 1989; Wolfgang, 1975). Despite the implementation of policy modifications, and in some cases innovations, various Canadian research reports and other empirical texts have contributed to ongoing criticisms concerning the teaching-learning implementation practices that address, meet, and accommodate the learning needs of ethnic minority immigrant and refugee students. The students are still also classified as Linguistic and Culturally Different (LCD) students (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1997; 2004; 2006).

Across northern British Columbia, new West African refugee students are visible minorities within the minority population of the public school system. As new students, their classroom teachers subject them to a battery of academic tests to assess their learning readiness, English language proficiency in reading, writing, and general communication. In addition, there are tests that are conducted which are related to social communication, skills and behavior. As a result of the tests, the students are diagnosed with Communication Disorders (Ashforth, 1975; McIntosh, 2000; Samuda, 1995). The teacher based assessments and diagnosis of newcomer refugee students and most ethnic immigrant students have been challenged by some Canadian antiracist, intercultural, and communication and LD researchers and theorists. The researchers and theorists challenge the premise of the test items, management and the reliability and validity of the test outcome and results (D'Oyley & Carl, 1998; Samuda, 1995; Rockhill & Tomic, 1995). In addition, some Canadian multicultural educationists and researchers have criticized the language content of standardized and teacher made test items as well as general learning assessments. According to the researchers, the tests have a Eurocentric middle class language and culture context. As a result of the context, the the learning heritage and cultural capital of ethnic minorities such as the refugees and immigrants, aboriginal students, lower class white students, and female students across Canadian primary and secondary schools are overlooked (Dei, 1996a; Rockhill & Tomic, 1995). Within the ongoing discourse many groups believe that mainstream teachers' inter-subjectivity and stereotypes of LCD group of students often influence the results of English language and communication proficiency assessment (ELCPA) results of ethnic minority students, thereby compromising the reliability and validity of the results (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000; Dei, 1996a).

The article examines teachers' diagnosis of communication disorders, and the pedagogical approaches in dealing with the misdiagnosis of the West African refugee student participants of my study. Vygotsky's theories regarding the Socio-Cultural Language Development (SCLD) of children's learning (Crain, 2000; Vygotsky,

1956), and Bandura's Social-Learning Theory (SLT) on vicarious learning in social communication (Bandura, 1977; Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000) are used as the theoretical framework of my discussion. Furthermore, the theoretical discussion supports my prescriptive, and effective teacher practices for promoting inclusive classroom practices for all students, regardless of their learning and cultural background.

The concluding section reiterates effective classroom and pedagogical practices teachers may adopt to not only ameliorate the misdiagnosis of the students (Harry & Klinger, 2006; Winton, 1989), and to provide professional instructional and learning remedies that meet the learning needs of the students, and inclusive involvement of the students' parents as partners to the teachers.

**Research Procedures.** The study orientation was based on an educational qualitative research, and the ethnographic design. Student participants were studied as an ethnic group, considering their socio- linguistic commonalities and experiences, and their official status as Linguistic and Cultural Diverse (LCD) learners in the provincial diversity educational programs (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1997). Purposeful sampling procedures (Creswell, 2005) were used to select ten grade three and four refugee children from the West African countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia as primary participants. All student participants had primary and nursery [kindergarten] education in their home countries and at the African refugee camps prior to their immigration to Canada. The students' prior education provided an insight on their previous formal and informal teaching-learning experience, nature and types of curricula that accommodated their linguistic and cultural settings. Taking into account the past learning experiences of the students allows the students and their parents to compare with that of the Canadian system. Selecting the student sample and background also enabled me to make a comparative assessment of the learning and teaching experience of the students, which helped me identify the major themes present in the socio-cultural learning heritage/background of the students. After collecting the data I was able to recommend effective teaching and learning support/accommodation for the students in diverse classrooms and promote inclusive education ideas that are in line with provincial educational policy.

Secondary participants were female parents of the students that had at least a high school level of education, and the teachers of the students. All teacher participants did not have any academic training or certification related to learning and diversity/multicultural education for inclusive classrooms. The teachers revealed that they did not have any social interaction with the children of minority learners prior to having them as students in their classrooms. My decision to take a sample of teachers facilitated teacher objectivity, and the measurement of their pedagogical accommodation and adaptations during whole-class instruction. Research sites included two rural public elementary schools, homes, and play ground of the students.

The written consent of the students was obtained from their parents, while separate written consent was obtained from the parents and teacher participants. In addition, I revised the terms of participation in the study with all the participants prior to collecting the social 'soft' data (Creswell, 2005); while the question of anonymity was addressed by concealing or masking the identities of all participants during data analysis, and reporting the research findings in this article.

Data collection techniques involved active face-to-face interviews with all the participants (Holstein & Gubrieum, 1997). Non-participant observation (NPO) was used to gather data on the students' performance and self-initiative in oral English communication at school, home and the playground. The process provides information on peer linguistic interaction that enable an understanding of the students efforts, and other participants' communication matrix in English language with the children. Informal discussions were held with the parents and their children at home to assess the frequencies of symbolic interaction using English language at home; and to compare similarities and differences with school experiences. Furthermore, the process allowed me to observe, and collect information on parents' involvement with students' homework in reading English literacy books, as well as examine the genre of books at home. The strategy enabled me assess the socio-cultural environmental impact on the children's' English communication, and the degree to which they 'co-switch' from the mother tongue to English language, a major focus of Vygotsky's theory on social and historical impact of language development in children (Crain, 2000).

Interview data was analyzed through transcription, a process that engages the conversion of oral interview data into textual data. The data was also categorized and converted to identify ideas as major codes. The merging of major codes with major themes are identified in my discussion of the students' linguistic and communication heritage, perspectives of teachers' diagnosis of students Communication Disorders (CDs), and the effective teacher approaches in dealing with CD diagnosis and prognosis. A content analysis approach was used to review and interpret the students' report cards from two terms in the school year. The process enabled me to assess teachers' remarks on the learning progress of the students in English language and communication areas.

The research process was very active on both sides considering the voluntary participation of all the participants, and my familiarity with the geographic settings of the research sites which made my access to all participants easier.

### **The Students' Socio-Linguistics and Communication Heritage**

Prior to immigrating, the student participants of my study had informal education that was grounded on the African Indigenous Knowledge System (AIKS), with language and communication skills reinforced in the mother tongue for daily conversations, the acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary for communal survival, and for effective social communication and general socialization praxis (Fafunwa, 1987; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986). The AIKS communication learning process begins at birth, with parents or significant adults of the infant whispering prayers and blessings (in the mother tongue) into the ears of the new born (Fafunwa, 1987). The process familiarizes the new born with the tribes' language of communication, with the cultural belief that children 'hear', and 'listen' to sounds at an early age, and the belief that it facilitates their early language and speech development in the mother tongue. The belief system is synonymous to the modern behaviorist theory on environmental reinforcement of stimulus as a pathway to facilitating language learning behavior in children, and described as the "babble-luck" theory of the Skinnerian view of language learning (Crain, 2000, p.351).

In addition, AIKS reinforces mother tongue language skills acquisition through family and peer pedagogies at home and in the community level. Communication is also extended and reinforced by teachers in primary schools, with the mother tongue and English language used as medium of instruction at the nursery, first grade and lower primary school grades; while the later language is used in higher primary school grades to reinforce a higher comprehension level for the of learners. The incorporation of both languages for classroom communication is instrumental in the educational policy reforms being put in place for de-colonizing the school curriculum, and promoting cultural continuities in schools across Sub-Sahara Africa (Fafunwa, 1987; Thiongo, 1986).

Theories of Interpersonal Communication and Culture (ICC) show how communication schemata are embedded in verbal and non-verbal communications in High Context Cultures (HCC) DeVito, Shimoni, & Clark (2008 p.198). Since ethnic tribes of Sub-Sahara Africa belong to the high context culture, younger members practice active listening, observation, and repetition of phonics, voice, and speech in the mother tongue, as communicated to them by adults or persons older and as role models. The communication practices move from the family units to school communities. This mode of teaching and learning is relevant to Vygotsky's concept of speech and internal dialogue, which allows a child to "internalize social interactions that [begin] as an interpersonal process, occurring between the parent and the child" (Vygotsky, 1931a, p.45). The theorist further ascertains its operational origin and practice to cultural and historical environment of children (Vygotsky, 1956). The impact of children's use of the mother tongue, as well as modeling significant others as adults, and peers through observation and imitation is considered the bedrock of socialization and communication of Social Learning Theory (SLT) (Bandura, 1977). The frequent use of the mother tongue has a greater impact on children's oral communication, hence, their use of English language in schools is affected by voice, and accent interference of the mother tongue, especially in English language conversation, and general classroom discussion.

In addition, communication in the mother tongue is often accompanied with non-verbal communication. Various gestures and a system of body language are used across ethnic tribes of Sub-Sahara Africa (Fafunwa, 1978). More often, age determines the type of behavior and body language pattern displayed by people during communication. For example, children are not supposed to have direct eye contact with elders, or older persons, especially those considered authority figures (i.e. teachers) during the course of conversation in public and private discourses (Razack, 1998; Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). Such elder-youth/child communication praxis demonstrates the role of age, a central practice of respect to elders in social gerontocracy, [common to high context cultures as that of ethnic tribes of Sub-Sahara Africa] (van der Geest, 2001).

African refugee children arrive with the aforementioned communication behaviors into Canadian primary classrooms, especially when communicating with their teachers. They are often perceived, assessed, and labeled as having communication disorders and social skill deficits, by some of their mainstream teachers, especially those of them with no prior information or knowledge of the students' cultural communication practices (Hutchinson, 2007; Razack, 1998).

Prior to immigration, my student participants had formal primary education that was based in the British English language, and with classroom discourses that accommodated mother tongue and colloquial 'pidgin English' languages as medium of teaching and learning at the lower primary grades and nursery. Since learners and teachers are from the same ethnic background, they are able to accommodate each other's voice and accent during classroom teaching and learning communication. As reiterated in the narrative of two of the parents in my research interviews-Case Study #1.

*Before immigrating to Canada, the family sought refuge in The Gambia refugee camp. Because the country medium of instruction is English, the refugee camp teachers were made up of teacher refugees from our country (Sierra Leone) and from Gambia. The teachers are all Africans and speak the West African lingua franca "Pidgin" and English language. They taught the kids in both languages, as well as ensured that instructional materials such as literacy books were culturally related as the Gambian government provided most of them. The children interacted more in the classroom, considering 'sameness' of the students population in the refugee camps, which is different from the Canadian classrooms where they are seeing and interacting with mainstream children and teachers for the first time, it was very challenging for our children in the first few weeks. 10209/PRI)*

In contrast to Canadian classrooms, mainstream teachers are not familiar with the children's English language communication dynamics of voice and accent in the production of speech as "voice disorder-as vocal quality, pitch, loudness, and resonance- that gives the voice a unique characteristic that identifies the speaker" (Kirk, Gallagher & Anastasiow, 2003, p.304), as a result students are recognized as having a communication disorder in the area of speech during learning. The teachers' misunderstanding of the students' English language communication background and heritage leads to not only a misdiagnosis of the students communication, but a prescription of classroom adaptations, accommodation and modifications that the students may not require. Such unnecessary modifications would include the school based 'segregated' or 'pull out' ESL classes (Rockhill & Tomic, 1995; Stotsky, 2002). Other Canadian studies such as the one detailed by Andrews & Lupart (2000, p. 97) identified how some immigrant ethnic minority students have been referred to intellectually disabled programs on the recommendation of their mainstream teachers. Errors of academic judgment, and assessment shortcomings of the teachers' misdiagnosis of the affected students' will not cause students to learn in the 'normal' classroom environment and progress along their peers in the formal curriculum and learning outcome, but will instead live with the stigma of negative learning.

In addition, the students' traditional experiences of teacher-student communication praxis of complete listenership, quiet, attentive, and active observation of teacher directed instruction and modeling in the formal and informal settings (Fafunwa, 1987), are in conflict with the Canadian classroom discourses. AIKS and in the primary schools require the younger ones not to speak to an elder when the latter is speaking, only when called upon to do so. In addition, the learners or children are expected to display non direct eye contact with the elder (i.e. teacher) as part of nonverbal body language in cultural interpersonal communication. To show observance in the culture of the children or students means showing respect to elders, this includes teachers and parents (Fafunwa, 1987; 1978). As my study participants

arrive in Canadian primary school classrooms with these non-verbal communication practices, these practices are at times perceived by the mainstream teachers as communication 'baggage' and a liability. The participants are also considered lacking in 'appropriate' communication skills (Razack, 1998).

Refugee West African children arrive in Canadian public elementary schools with those orthodox teaching-learning experiences, which are different from the Canadian pragmatic classroom communication that is student directed, and with teachers encouraging students to question authority (i.e. the teacher), and to express their opinions as part of the student-teacher communication and learning style. The newcomer refugee students find the Canadian teacher-student learning interaction to be different and in direct contrast to their cultural heritage process and values of communication with elders such as teachers. The differences affect classroom communication dynamics with teachers and peers, especially in the first year of their school enrollment.

The differences of classroom communication dynamics between the students previous classroom experiences and the new Canadian classroom are challenging for the students, which often are not understood by the mainstream teachers, and eventually affects their judgment and assessment of the children's English language communication, and social skills in the classrooms. Such teacher formal and informal assessments in these areas, especially those with little or no background in ESL and cultural education often result in LD misdiagnosis of the refugee children, and other new immigrant students. The preceding discussion elucidates the specific areas of the teachers' English communication and language disorders with the sample refugee study participants under discussion.

### **Teacher's Diagnosis of the Students' Communication Disorder**

Various literature on inclusive education have explained the relationship between communication and learning in children. Hunt & Marshall (2005) stated that "Communication, language and speech are related terms that constitute the foundation of teaching and learning in schools" (p. 313). In another dimension, the concept communication is described as the exchange of ideas, information, thoughts, and feelings (McCormick, Loeb, & Schiefellbusch, 2003, cited by Hunt & Marshall, 2005, p. 313). The process of communication involves words, or silence that are encoded with message values, which often are subject to interpretation by the persons communicating (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2002). It is the subject of interpretation that defines the acceptance or rejection of the mode, and message communicated, which often are relative to cultural descriptions and representation across diverse people and ethnic groups.

Communication exceptions in teaching and learning are explained as a disorder in speech (articulation, voice and fluency) and subjects are described as having a lack of expressive or receptive components of language (Hutchison, 2007, p. 83). Other facets of the disorder that are related to speech impairment are in most cases associated with neurological, physical or sensory factors (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Winzer, 2002). With the case of the LCD West African refugee children of my study, the teacher diagnosis of their communication disorder centered on speech, voice, phonology or articulation, and fluency in the Canadian English language.

Specific diagnoses are made on the students notation on ‘Voice Disorder’ some teachers state that the “student speaks slowly and softly in a husky voice, does not speak with normal pitch, loudness, duration or quality [and] is shy about expressing ideas” (Hutchinson, 2007, p. 85).

The quote may be interpreted and associated with an inter-subjective approach, self fulfilling prophecies, and stereotypes of immigrant and racial diverse learners, often expressed by mainstream teachers’ in public Canadian schools (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000). Most of the teachers pay more attention to the affected students’ ‘voice’ during conversations in Canadian English, rather than making sense of their grammatical expressions. The findings were reiterated in one of the teachers narrative- Case Study #2

*Teaching minority students for the first time was daunting to say the least. I had neither prior background nor report cards on the three LCD students in my class. To be honest, the first few weeks of my interaction with them was more in writing than oral, considering they were grade four students with visible writing skills. My oral conversation with them in the early weeks of the semester was more when I provided them with the extra English language tutorials after school, or immediately after recess. I used the private time to get used to their high tone and pronunciations of English words. I also held brief meetings with their moms when they came to pick them up afterschool, so I can get used to the accent of the students and parents, with the latter providing me a helping hand whenever I am unable to understand the student’s expressions. It was challenging but I eventually was able to pull through. (Interview # 11209/TSI)*

Additionally, as children with their mother tongue, the West African refugee students linguistic expression in terms of voice, has undue interference in their attempts at speaking the Canadian English language, thereby reinforcing the ‘husky voices’ of low or high voice expression that is referred as ‘voice disorders’ [in spoken Canadian English language] (Hutchinson, 2007, p.83).

In general classroom discourse teachers are perceived as role models or ‘significant others’ by their students (Bandura, 1986) or ‘elders’ in the African context of schooling. The latter school practice expect students to communicate with teachers as elders, and by demonstrating complete listening skills, being less vocal, except when stated otherwise by the teacher/elder to speak or respond to a question (Fafunwa, 1987). In addition, the culture expects require the West African refugee students to display respectful behavior through what may be perceived as shyness and quietness when communicating with an elder i.e. teacher. These orthodox teacher-student communications are brought and exhibited by the newcomer West African refugee children in Canadian classrooms, which are misunderstood by mainstream teachers as social and communication deficits of the children. Hutchinson (2007) noted that immigrant students are “shy about expressing ideas” (p.85). The lack of cultural compatibility of the children’s learning heritage by mainstream teachers is misinterpreted as a shortcoming of learning exceptionalities in communication disorders (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). Such cultural assumptions are also tied to teachers’ expectations and these children (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000); with teachers often prescribing the administration of more standardized English language tests



(McIntosh, 2000) (even when they do not require it) which leads to official prognosis of communication disorders on the students. For the most part, the children's academic communication labels are wrong, and this has an adverse effect of not only learning progression with their mainstream peers, but may affect the social learning of the children in the future. Canadian inclusive education observers have faulted quick assessments and diagnosis of such children, and considered the current approach as a reinforcement of the public school based tracking system, which often places visible minority children in schools at a disadvantage (Dei, 2000; Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000).

Mainstream teachers often label African refugee children with Canadian English communication speech and language disorder on the basis of poor "receptive language" - which is described as when a "student fails to understand oral instructions, even when given individually" (Hutchinson, 2007, p.85). While some of these communication diagnoses may be experienced by the refugee children, the causes may not be far from the fact that most teachers diagnosis are related to the perceived low expectation of the students, and related pedagogical deficits that are related to area of reading images, and grammar on visual language for effective communication (Frieberg, 1997). Others include mainstream teachers' lack of use and reinforcement of non-verbal cues and symbols to provide clarity of communication and instructional procedures that will enable the children learn, and follow the teachers sequence of "receptive language" approach (Andrews & Lupart, 2000), which were identified during my classroom observations in my study. Diagnosis of the new learners' communication skills in the Canadian English language by their classroom teachers is too early, as most of them have yet to adapt not only to the curriculum, but the social environment as new comers, a factor identified in the study of Samuda (1995) on standardized provincial assessment and immigrant learners in public schools of Ontario, Canada.

Teachers school based assessment procedures on English language communication with refugee and immigrant new comers the West African students are faulted due to differences of perception and understanding between the affected students and their mainstream teachers. As a result the students are classified as LCDs. Teachers in my study expressed difficulties in understanding the verbal expression of the children due to their mother tongue interference or accent, while at the same time the students also express to me how their teachers have an accent that is unfamiliar to them (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Kissen & Carr, 1997), thereby making it more challenging to follow their instructions and learning procedures. In addition, Samuda (1995) encourage mainstream teachers to provide more time before administering standardized and teacher made paper and pencil assessments, and more time opportunities to adjust to the accent of their immigrant students; especially in the situation where ESL teachers are not available. In another discourse, McKibbin (1995) reiterated the lack of distinction between language differences, and language disorders by teachers of the dominant culture on immigrant children in early classroom interaction, and also contributing to misdiagnoses of the children's learning outcome, which subsequently leads to prescriptive remedies that are dysfunctional to the child's learning. There is the need for mainstream teachers, and ESL trained teachers working with such children to inquire and posses some basic information or knowledge on the learning heritage and identities of these children (Ogbu & Matute-

Bianchi, 1986), before undertaking any diagnostic procedures that may involve tracking the children.

It is noted that the lack of a culturally relevant curriculum reflecting the diversity of a pluralistic classroom affects not only classroom participation but learning outcomes of minority children (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). In a research survey of Black minority public school students in Ontario, Canada, Dei (1996a) reported how the participants expressed concern of not 'seeing themselves' in Canadian history or literature and allied public school formal curriculum, which affected their reading motivation in school. As a result there were calls for text resources that can facilitate their language communication skills and literacy. The reactions of the students are congruent with similar findings in the US context with immigrant newcomer students on literature for academic transition (Rader, 2003). The flexibility and availability of such text, especially in the lower elementary classes will definitely provide incentives to English language development, should the affected students require such a learning progression (Stotsky, 2002; Meir, 2004).

On mainstream teachers stereotypes of immigrants/refugee students English/French language proficiencies in Canadian public primary classrooms, Hutchinson (2007, p. 152) cited the childhood learning experience of a Canadian Asian teacher, who described her experience as a student. The former student's elementary teacher assumed from her appearance she could not speak English. Such teacher stereotypes with immigrant and refugee ethnic minority learners are common in most Canadian and US classrooms (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Kissen & Carr, 1997; Young & Young Jr, 2001). The stereotypes are referenced in Schulz's theory of "inter-subjective reality or knowledge accumulated through personal experiences about others, as well as knowledge that has been transmitted to 'us' by teachers and parents" (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000, p. 96). Indeed, knowledge about 'others' are prone to biases, which may lead to an error of judgment of students' English language communication skills with minority children, as noted in the case of West African refugee children in Canadian public primary schools. In addition, Hargreaves et al (1975 cited by Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000) explained further the major dilemma of mainstream teachers' assessment of minority pupils' over time as "typifications of individual pupils ... as teachers speculate on language ability..." (p. 97). If mainstream teachers' 'learning prophecies' are manifested in assessment procedures of LCD children (Winton, 1989), then West African refugee children will fall short of their teachers' expectations, and may erroneously be diagnosed with English language communication disabilities, regardless of their previous learning knowledge and proficiency in British based English language curriculum, prior to immigration.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Based on the analyzed data, major findings revealed that mainstream teachers' perception, assessment and diagnosis of the student participants on communication in Canadian English language were influenced by the mainstream teachers assessment and diagnosis of the students LCDs related to personal assumptions and opinions. The assumptions were reinforced by limited or no information on the previous formal teaching and learning style of the refugee students; and the teachers had no previous information and social experience with the student's ethnic or native language and cultural information in the community and in schools as also noted in the study of

Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, (2007). The study identified the central control of mainstream teachers' diagnosis of the refugee students was based on disparity of cultural knowledge on communication, as teachers considered and expected the students to speak Canadian English with no accent, while the students also expect to hear their new teachers speak in the British English accent they are familiar with prior to immigrating to Canada. The teachers expectation also lead to pedagogical application of coaching the students to adopt the Canadian English language accent, thereby losing the 'accent' that relates to their mother tongue as a mark of their identity, and losing their British English language writing format i.e. spelling to a Canadian (American) perspective (Stotsky, 2002). The findings also revealed that most mainstream teacher participants and indeed in the part of the province lack the proper amount of ESL formal training, knowledge, and practices in multicultural education to properly assess the students' English language proficiency, skills and knowledge, which makes it difficult for them to differentiate between mother tongue accent, voice, and deficiency in English language. Teachers' communication and language assessments were also based on teacher made classroom tests, which are subject to errors and personal biases, due to a misinterpretation of the students' 'voices' and mother tongue accent which leads to the diagnoses of students as having communication disorders. Many teachers of the study penalize the students more on oral expression in the Canadian English language in the area of "voice impairment, impaired articulation, omitting sounds i.e. 'p' for 'f', caused by mother tongue interference, and the substituting sounds of English words [i.e. 'ztaa' instead of 'the'] (Andrews & Lupart, 2000, p. 142). The oral communication disorders identified are not applicable in the written communication of the students' essays or sentences as observed in their note books and work sheets during my participant observations. The students wrote perfectly, but with little acknowledgement of the teachers, as they are categorically labeled to have complete written and oral communications, which I consider an error of assessment of the teachers.

Further communication diagnoses of most main stream teachers label immigrant ethnic students with poor oral English language difficulties. Students are identified as "not following directions [of the teacher], de-centre take another view points, initiate and sustain communication as well as repair communication breakdown" (Andrews & Lupart, 2000, p.105). This was part of the diagnosis of the student participants of the study by their teachers. My classroom observation findings revealed that the students did follow teacher directions, but on a slower pace as compared to their mainstream peers. The inability to sustain communication with peers and teachers in academic learning tasks with literacy subjects, were attributed to teachers' non use of effective instructional images, signs, and related content visuals that will connect and motivate the students interaction. The course content is also meant to connect meanings during communication in the Canadian English language. Body language communication such as non- eye contact mannerisms of the refugee children were reiterated by the teacher participants of the study, which they consider as 'inattention; and disrespectful' (in their own words). These comments arise as a result of a lack of knowledge of the students' cultural background, which can be acquired directly from their parents. Due to little or no contact with the parents of the students, as gathered from the teachers who assume the parents of the refugee students of the study have limited English proficiency, and may have 'no answers' to questions regarding their students display of learning deficiencies on verbal and nonverbal interpersonal communication in the classroom. The teachers' assumptions

of the parents limited their collaboration with the parents, and limited the accuracy of their assessments of the students based on personal observations and assumptions/opinions; thereby leading to error of communication diagnosis of the affected students, described in Shultz theory of teacher intersubjectivity (Schultz, 1973).

In addition, part of the study findings reveal how teachers have limited exposure to cultural relevant curriculum materials such as fiction books that will incite more participation of the refugee students in reading, and storytelling in oral English language classroom discourses (Rader, 2003; Razack, 1993). In addition, observational data revealed that the children's English language literacy reading homework was always based on teachers' selected literature, which were all Eurocentric content based, despite the ethnic diversity population of the students. The lack of access and use of multicultural readers or story books by the refugee students, and indeed other immigrant students outside the mainstream culture limits their ability to connect to their previous knowledge, and interest in English language readers they are familiar with, thereby controlling their ability to orally engage in classroom discourse with teacher and peers of the mainstream culture (Rader, 2003). The teacher approach of selecting English based Canadian cultural content not only limits students ability to diversify their linguistic knowledge of literature, but their ability to improvise from their personal resource, and to share such books with their peers, which creates variety of curriculum content for all learners (BLAC, 1994). Additionally, the teacher's role of selecting these books narrows effective home-school collaboration on improvising readers related to children heritage (Rader, 2003); and limits parents awareness of what books their children are reading, as well as parents role of assisting the current dearth of school resources experienced as a result of financial cutbacks for public education in the recent economic recession (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009; Trumbull, 2001).

The study noted that the lack of multicultural literacy books limit the pace of interest in reading amongst West African refugee children, thereby, limiting their participation in oral conversation on reading narratives commonly used by teachers in lower primary classes across the province. A grade one teacher participant of the study expressed thus; Case Study #3

*Because of the rural geographic location of our school and the demographics, the children's literacy book collections with ethnic orientation in the School District resource center and the public library are scarce. However, a few books on First Nation storybooks are available, so I use those books to provide something close for the immigrant and refugee students in my class, but that is not enough. I sent letters to the Prince George School District for African based literacy books, but received only a few, and some videos that I incorporated in my Social Studies class. It is frustrating is one cannot get these resources, I believe teachers in the cities have more access than we do here. (Interview # 12209/TSI).*

Teachers' scaffolding process of correcting of students group and peer reading method facilitates meta-cognition, but creates a feeling of inadequacy and low self esteem with the upper refugee West African primary students, as most of

them felt embarrassed, which further reinforces 'withdrawal' from in-class oral peer interaction for fear of being bullied for their reading shortcoming.

Documentary and textual analysis of the students' report card of teachers' qualitative remarks of refugee student's English language communication skills performance tallied with my observation data on the progress of the students in acquiring English language communication at the same time retaining their versatility and behavior while speaking the mother tongue or pidgin English to their parents, members of their ethnic community, and to me as the researcher. The students are able to not only distinguish the learning style demands on language communication in Canadian English and the mother tongue, but are able to 'co-switch' and retain their heritage linguistic identity, a position that describes the acculturative approach in the discourse of language and culture (Katz, 1999; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Both children and parents appreciated teachers' positive comments of the learning progression of the students, thereby facilitating more homework engagement. The process of students and parents' engagement increases social responsibilities for making sure that homework is completed, and reviewed constantly to ensure mastery and recall whenever requested by the teacher.

The children's individual family based reading practices involved reading texts related to their interest as they read daily religious text and story books written in their mother tongue, and Pidgin English. The children's personal reading commitment enables them to compare what they have read in the native written books to that of English with parents' scaffolding. The home reading culture enables them practice the 'co-switching' approach using the Canadian thesaurus during literacy classes. In short, using text of personal interests provides motivation and better understanding of language adaptation and communication orally and in writing in school. Teachers fail to acknowledge the student's reading motivation interests, as well as liaise with their parents to know the types and forms of interests and motivation that will assist the students into effective English language communication adaptation, rather than assessing them with the disorders, and recycling books that are not related to their interests.

Peer play interaction at home and school had higher impact on the refugee student's growth and adaptation of Canadian English language and communication skills that are considered exceptionalities by the teachers' diagnosis. Playground observational data revealed how refugee students accommodated and accepted peer 'correction' or the re-phrase of unclear English language oral words for clearance and understanding, thereby making the impact of peer 'tutoring' more effective than the teachers' oral public correction during oral reading practice in the classroom, as many of the older refugee students felt embarrassed and sense of humiliation with the teachers method.

The findings conclude with a notification of mainstream teachers' limitation of communicating with parents of the West African refugee students and indeed other ethnic immigrant students based on the assumption that the parents are unlettered, which tallies with personal opinions of the children as having English language communication deficits, thereby having and experiencing disorder. Lastly, teachers' classroom discourses are preconceived with personal opinions on such students, and teachers do not allow and commit more time to study the students' communication

dynamics in relation to their ethnic backgrounds before making their assessments and labeling them as having Canadian English language communication disorders. The preceding discussion relates to literature based on effective classroom approaches that the study teacher participants and indeed other teachers in the rural part of the province with similar student participants or ethnic new immigrant learners may adopt for a more inclusive classroom, as well as minimize miss-diagnosis of the students on issues around learning communication disorders.

### **Effective Classroom Praxis for Teachers**

Special attention on the academic achievement of immigrant and refugee students in the Ontario public school systems have led to the implementation of at least a two year teaching-learning experience before administering the students with the provincial standardized tests for learning diagnosis (Samuda 1995). The Ontario strategy should be considered in the province of British Columbia, as this will allow West African refugee students, and indeed other new comer ethnic immigrant students to adjust to the curriculum processes and policies as well as the urban and rural Canadian English language and communication knowledge and skills, which are often cited in some language based test items as identified in the studies of Samuda (1995) in the Stanford-Binet standardized test items in written English. To achieve a higher dividend of the students written communication in the Canadian English language the students should be provided more time to adjust to the curriculum which will definitely minimize misdiagnosis of some of the students' assessment of the LDs. In addition, curriculum review and standardized test experts should reflect diverse cultural representation across the province. Studies revealed that few, and in extreme cases no ethnic minority test experts are represented or included in the design, implementation and interpretation of standardized tests across Canadian public schools (McIntosh, 2000; Samuda, 1995; Winton, 1989). Considering the mosaic population of most Canadian public schools in recent years, there is every need for a 'multicultural' team of test experts, as this will provide equity and balance of test items, especially in the linguistic phrasing, as well as minimize biases that may likely affect immigrant or LCD students as the African refugee minors, and other minority categories as white low class, first nations and females in public schools across the province.

Most school districts in northern BC lack ESL trained teachers, hence, most teachers adopt conventional or 'normal' assessment process to evaluate English language communication skills of not only the student participants of the study, but other ethnic newcomer refugee and immigrant students, and with little or no supervision by school principals or any agency familiar with assessment of Linguistic and Cultural Diverse Learners (LCDL) in the province. The teacher assessment practices often result in assessment errors of the students that lead to formal labeling of the affected students. In other words, there is the need for effective supervision of the teaching practices of teachers on issues of assessment of learning diagnosis as 'disorders' and the cultural learning diversity of students in the classroom. The supervision will not only minimize errors of diagnosis of the newcomer refugee students, and indeed immigrant ethnic students but ensure balance of theory and practices on inclusive education in the rural schools of the province.

To remedy teacher diagnoses of the students' Canadian oral English communication disorder that are central to miss pronunciation due to mother tongue interference (regardless of the students writing the correct English words), especially common words as 'szaa' for 'the' or 'another' pronounced as 'onoda' can be remedied through individualized self corrective learning with the use of audio language technological gadgets (Frieberg, 1997; Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2006) commonly found in language laboratories in urban schools (which can be borrowed by teachers through inter-library loan). Some of the equipment as audio tapes, two way receivers amongst others can be used for students by teachers for reading, or recording sentences or stories, and replaying it to listen to and correct the students' performances, which are vetted by the teachers to facilitate progress of learning and to provide the students extra scaffolding. Teachers should encourage and allow the affected students to use personal tape recorders from home to engage in the oral English language practice, and from time to time create extra time in school or visit the students to review student centered learning initiatives. In doing so, parents will also be more involved, thereby making home and school learner support more effective. The self-learning method provides privacy and individualized learning for the affected students with true LCDs, especially those in higher elementary classes that have a higher desire for privacy.

Teachers and principals should practice a permissive approach that gives students the opportunity to select English reading literacy books that are related to their interests, cultural background and previous knowledge as pragmatic knowledge and student based approaches (BLACK, 1995; Rader, 2003). The resource choice will motivate reading culture as well as provide refugee students the opportunity to confidently re-tell the stories of such books, especially those related to their heritage to their peers. The students peer re-teacher process facilitates their oral communication as active participants in conversations related to learning, especially at the lower elementary level. The issue of refugee students displaying learner communication behavior of quietness and non participation in classroom conversations and discourses as referenced by comments of most Canadian mainstream teachers stated by Hutchinson (2007) will be minimized and possibly eradicated. The oral presentation of their interest based readers will facilitate their active classroom discourse with their mainstream peers, thereby facilitating collaborative student centered learning, and higher language achievements and interest of all students (Ashworth 1975; Gollnick & Chinn, 2009; Meir, 2004).

The management of school districts across the rural area of the province should involve and sponsor teachers to attend ESL training organized by Immigrant and Multicultural centers in cities closer to them, and should be held within the districts professional development week (Usman, 2006). Engaging teachers will not only expose them to the classroom dynamics of language and communication process on ethnic refugee and minority immigrant students, but access to the center's resources as instructional ESL videos, cultural dynamics and workshops on body language communication of ethnic groups such as the African refugee and immigrant students will assist the mainstream teachers to remove stereotypical cultural assumptions on language and communication competencies of the racial minority children in their classrooms.. Furthermore, principals should encourage teachers to collaborate with refugee parents on resources by borrowing parents culturally based English textbooks to be used for the entire classroom based learning, as well as invite

refugee parents as guest speakers to acquaint mainstream teachers and students with the English accent of their ethnic group and knowledge based of the parents as done with other mainstream parents (Meier, 2004; Trumbull, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

Schools are constantly sorting, categorizing and labeling students into “learner fit” and those with challenges otherwise referred as disabled or disordered learners. The school based pupil assessment of learning identity approaches have constantly been debated by researchers and educators, with some believing the practice is reinforcing ‘segregation’ rather than inclusion of students. Others are of the opinion that the educational practice not only discriminates against learners with challenges but that most of them do not have the adequate learning resources they require to assist them into ameliorating their challenges. While such points may mean different things depending on which side one reflects, the truth is that classroom diversity is inevitable, as nature had set in existing differences i.e. gender as well as reinforced by movement of people in Canada. Regardless of what side of the debate one holds, individual learner difference and needs require professional support and attention as not only the right of education for a child, but a means of addressing equity and social justice for all students, which in my opinion is the praxis of inclusive education in Canadian public schooling.

The discussion has specifically addressed the learner difference and challenges of ethnic West African newcomer refugee students’ learning and teaching challenges on communication disorder by the student participants of my study. Canadian English language and culture in classroom communication was discussed with regards to types and causes of the students’ communication disorders/labels by their mainstream teachers. The facets of cultural linguistic differences and practices of general communication perceived by the refugee students and their mainstream teachers were reiterated to examine the ‘true’ diagnosis of the students learning labels on communication. The concluding part provided a synoptic professional and effective approach schools that teachers may adopt to ensure the understanding of learner’s previous cultural knowledge and interpretation on communication, and the challenges in the new Canadian learning environment ,so as to minimize error of diagnosis. In addition, teachers should be able to adopt a more effective style of assessment and addressing the disorder with those students properly identified with some forms of communication disorder in the Canadian English language and culture in the classroom.

As much as Canadian public schools reflect the cultural mosaic of Canadian society, more school home/community collaboration with refugee families and communities is required to ensure that refugees can participate effectively in society. While the ethnic centers in immigrant and multicultural organizations in the part of the province should frequently be visited as school trip venues. The initiative will improve teachers’ information, understanding and instructional direction of the affected students cultural learning heritage on communication in the classroom and accompanied behavior for their learning success. The teacher or school initiative can be applied to similar minority student population of students across public elementary schools across rural area of the province and the country in general.



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