English Language Learning and Identity Formation

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In the context of global migration in which English is the language of wide communication, adolescent immigrants to Western Canada must learn this language as efficiently as possible. Learning this language is critical to their educational success as well as their ability to contribute fully to Canadian society. This problem of learning a second language is not unusual around the world, but the pressure to do so as effectively as possible in a very short time, is unique to immigration. Based on extensive data collected, over the past three years in an urban setting, on the adaptation of immigrant youth in which they must reconstruct themselves, I propose that they have a strategic competence that is observable in second language learning, and that goes beyond it to inform other phenomena as well, such as connecting themselves in spaces in both the new country and the country of origin. The presentation focuses on the reading strategies used by high proficiency learners and the kinds of interconnections these students make with their new and former surroundings. Two strategies are of particular interest: contextual guessing and morphological analysis. The most proficient tend to use both strategies effectively; other proficient readers tend to use one or the other. This appears to be linked to the way they connect with others, their spaces and surroundings, as illustrated in the youth’s own graphic renderings of their mental representations of their worlds. In other words, preferred reading strategies are linked to the nature of the students’ drawings in which they represent themselves, their friends and family, as well as the spaces they occupy, in the countries in which they have lived or currently live. Briefly put, youth learn languages in much the same way as they construct themselves. Presenting the data by Power Point, this analysis suggests that we must rethink not only English/second language learning, in terms of pedagogy for strategic learning, but also situate this learning within a broader process of construction of self in a globalized world.