

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

Fostering Success: Belongingness Pedagogy for English Language Learners

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Abstract

Research in psychology has found that belongingness is an essential human need and motivation. However, in education, particularly in the field of additional language teaching and learning, the impacts of belongingness on academic success are often overlooked. With universities becoming increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse, knowing how to support students from non-English speaking backgrounds is integral for institutions and educators. This article explores the relationship between belongingness and academic success for additional language learners by examining four elements: positive peer relationships; meaningful student-faculty interaction; learner identity and academic success; and relevant experiences that meet academic goals. Pedagogical approaches that help increase belongingness for language learners are provided to support English as an additional language professionals in creating more welcoming and productive environments at universities and colleges in British Columbia. These approaches may also support other student populations, such as Indigenous students, at-risk students, and even students from traditional or mainstream backgrounds.

Introduction

With Canadian demographics rapidly changing (Hou & Lu, 2017) and multilingual and multicultural classrooms becoming more common (British Columbia Data Catalogue, 2017), how to address linguistic diversity at universities and colleges in British Columbia is a significant question. The concept of belonging in higher education has been identified as a powerful educational tool (Thomas, 2012; Wilson, 2016), but for post-secondary institutions in the British Columbian context, belongingness for English language learners has not yet been well explored. In this article, the idea of belongingness and how it connects to additional language students is examined through three key areas: what it means to belong, the impacts of belonging on additional language learners, and how a greater sense of belongingness can be supported by English as an additional language (EAL) professionals at institutions in British Columbia.

The Need to Belong

The need to belong can be considered one of the most powerful human drives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1970). Important aspects of belongingness include feeling a sense of membership, having qualities that match expectations of a group, and being positioned either socially or physically in ways that support an individual's sense of well-being (Oxford, n.d.).

In *Motivation and Personality* (1970), Maslow examined the topic of belongingness from psychological perspectives. He identified that belonging is an

elemental and highly motivating need for most human beings, as well as a fundamental aspect of a healthy community. Maslow (1970) wrote that when the need to belong goes unsatisfied, “a person will hunger for relations with people in general—for a place in the group or family—and will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal” (p. 20). He also identified belongingness as one of five major needs; the others being physiological needs, safety, self-esteem, and self-actualization (see Figure 1).

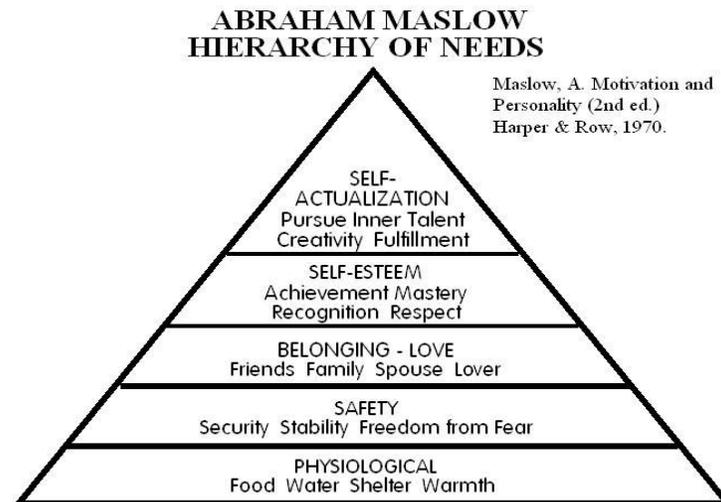


Figure 1 - Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs

In response to Maslow's theory, psychologists Baumeister and Leary (1995), investigated the “belongingness hypothesis” (p. 497) by collecting empirical data from hundreds of research articles. They determined that belonging could be considered a key human motivation by concluding that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497), which strongly supports Maslow's theory.

Belongingness and Education

If belongingness is indeed as integral as researchers have suggested, then the psychological and motivational implications of belonging clearly hold a great deal of relevance for teaching and learning (Shapiro, 2012; Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2012; Wilson, 2016). In 1993, Goodenow defined educational belonging as “students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (p. 25).

Goodenow's idea of social connectedness is an integral idea in educational theory (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004); however, in practice it is frequently found to be deficient both in classrooms and in institutions as a whole (Beck & Malley, 2003; Kunc, 1992; Slaten et al., 2014; Thomas, 2012). Baumeister and Leary (1995) note that when the need to belong goes unaddressed, a significant level of motivation is lost or considerably diminished.

Kunc (1992) asserts that students who are accepted by others can get their belongingness needs met in schools through popularity, academics, or athletics. However, for those who do not meet traditional or mainstream definitions of success, satisfying the belongingness need can be more challenging. To clarify his point, he created a model based on Maslow's hierarchy which illustrates the idea that achievement is often seen as a prerequisite for belongingness in schools, rather than the other way around (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Kunc's (1992) model of the educational system

This view of achievement has many repercussions for students in general (Beck & Malley, 2003), but for students struggling with cultural and/or linguistic differences, feelings of alienation and disengagement can have a devastating effect on social and academic success (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). As Yeh and Inose (2003) write, "an individual with a high sense of connectedness can easily form relationships with others and participate in social groups and activities, whereas, people who lack connectedness are inclined to experience low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression" (p. 17).

These topics are also mentioned by Baumeister and Leary (1995), who write that "many of the emotional problems for which people seek professional help (anxiety, depression, grief, loneliness, relationship problems, and the like) result from people's failure to meet their belongingness needs" (p. 521). The ramifications of not belonging not only increase anxiety/depression, loneliness, and isolation, but can also have derivative consequences, such as addiction, gang membership, and bullying (Beck & Malley, 2003; Kunc, 1992; Slaten et al., 2014; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

As noted in Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, these stressors can lead to anxiety and other emotional difficulties that prevent students from learning an additional language, thereby making academic and social struggles even more difficult.

Belongingness and Language Learners

Norton and Toohey's (2001) research has suggested that linguistic capability for language learners emerges through belongingness. They found that language learners with access to a linguistic "community of practice" (p. 311) were able to learn additional languages more quickly and efficiently than others because these communities provide needed social interactions for improving linguistic competency. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) also found that "students in... learning communities were more academically and socially engaged" (p. 47). Coelho (2004) has agreed, writing, "language learners need frequent opportunities to engage in extended, purposeful interaction in the target language" (p. 146). Lightbown and Spada (2013), too, emphasized conversational partners, both students and instructors, as an integral aspect of the language learning process.

The idea of linguistic communities of practice connects well to Vygotsky's (1978) conception of a Zone of Proximal Development, which identifies that working with adults or peers just beyond one's level of competence can improve academic development, a finding that strongly supports the value of creating highly integrated social interactions for language learners.

From an educational standpoint, belongingness also directly impacts individual language learners, who can become easily isolated by linguistic and cultural differences (Kim, 2012; Martin, Jansen, & Beckman, 2016; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Maslow (1970) identified the effects of "being a transient or newcomer rather than a native" (p. 20) on the integral need to belong and indicated the challenging consequences that outsiders experience. Kim (2012) pinpointed that feeling a sense of exclusion from the majority, being seen as culturally dissimilar, and having anxiety around oral communication are all key inhibitors of success for university students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB).

Supporting Students from NESB

With major shifts in demographics and increases in the number of students being admitted from non-English speaking backgrounds (British Columbia Data Catalogue, 2017), Canadian schools and universities are grappling with how to integrate and accommodate additional language learners (Anderson, 2014; Friesen & Keeney, 2013; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

Thomas' (2012) study on belongingness identified four key elements to creating more welcoming and inclusive university environments: "1) supportive peer relations, 2) meaningful interaction between staff and students, 3) developing knowledge, confidence, and identity as successful learners, and 4) experience that is relevant to interests and future goals" (pp. 14–15).

These findings link to Egbo's (2005) assertion for the need to build communities in schools through "empowering classroom practices" (para. 3). Egbo (2009) adds that "praxis oriented initiatives must give students a voice, foster their intellectual growth, affirm student identities, and focus on the needs of the individual" (p. 209).

As Goodenow (1993) identified, when students feel a sense of belonging, they are more motivated, have a greater personal outlook for achievement, and are able to find more meaning

in their work, thus building academic success. However, to ensure success for all students, it is integral to identify and address the specific needs of distinct populations, such as additional language learners and other marginalized groups within schools (Martin, et al., 2016; Shapiro, 2012; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Wilson (2016) noted that “rather than identifying just one or two specific interventions to improve engagement and success, it... [is] important to nurture a culture of belonging across the institution” (p. 40).

Belongingness, as a way to increase learning and improve motivation for students, is increasingly being recognized (Slaten et al., 2014; Thomas, 2012; Wilson, 2016), but what does that mean for educators and institutions? The following section uses Thomas’s (2012) four elements to examine institutional and pedagogical practices that can help increase a sense of belongingness for additional language learners, thereby improving academic success for these students.

Positive Student-to-Student Relationships

As Thomas (2012) identifies, peer-to-peer social support found within academic institutions increases feelings of belongingness. Activities that create both a sense of belonging and a sense of interpersonal stability in relationships are seen to be of benefit to most students (Thomas, 2012), but may be particularly beneficial to additional language learners (Martin, et al., 2016; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). In classrooms, collaborative opportunities for learning are seen as especially useful for creating a sense of belongingness because “all members... work together to achieve a common purpose” (Beck & Malley, 2003, para. 20). This collaboration teaches learners how to build functional, working communities in the target language (Engstrom and Tinto, 2008), which can create supportive learning environments that benefit language learners (Martin, et al., 2016).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) also found that belongingness is more strongly supported when social connections and interpersonal relationships are established, concerned, and ongoing. Myles and Cheng (2003) concurred. They concluded that “intercultural contact, and the social cohesion that can result from such contact, should be formally structured into student life” (p. 259). This kind of contact could be in the form of organized social activities with other students, as well as peer-pairing, both in and out of classrooms (Coelho, 2004). Providing language learners with formal or one-on-one opportunities to speak with proficient English speakers (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Myles & Cheng, 2003) would also be of benefit.

Engstrom and Tinto (2008) stated that collaborative work helps students, and particularly language learners, “feel less alone, more confident of their ability to succeed..., and more supported in their studies” (p. 48). Coelho (2004) has proposed that “extracurricular activities” (p. 161) and “peer tutors” (p. 186) would increase student interaction and motivation in academic matters. Both Engstrom and Tinto (2008) and Rochecouste, Oliver, and Mulligan (2012) also found that more socializing among peers creates positive academic results, thus supporting the idea of offering increased social opportunities for students. These findings are also well-supported in other current research in the field (Martin, et al., 2016; Wilson, 2016; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

Positive Student-to-Faculty Relationships

Thomas (2012) also identified the importance of positive relationships between staff and students to increase a sense of belongingness. Egbo (2009), too, acknowledged the significance of the instructor-to-student relationship and identified the importance of teachers meeting students' individual needs. She wrote, "teachers must treat each student as an individual human being requiring special attention... as it is in fact good teaching to pay attention to individual differences" (p. 211).

Relationships between Instructors and Students from NESB

Kanpol (1999) suggested that good pedagogy must heed "cultural and social heritage as a method to learn more about the individual's particular historical, cultural, social, and economic circumstances and differences" (p. 45). He recognized that each person must be seen on individual terms, while also being included as a full member of the classroom community. Lee (2009) also highlighted the necessity for educators to "appreciate the diverse language and cultural backgrounds of the students," stating it is important to "make appropriate provisions for international students' ... contributions" (p. 154). These provisions and the building of "warm and supportive relationships" (Strauss, 2012, p. 288) between staff and students are desirable elements for enhancing student belongingness.

In addition, as Egbo (2005) wrote, "positive educational outcomes for students, particularly those from nonmainstream backgrounds, depend on the degree of teachers' commitment to inclusive practices that embrace and value difference" (para. 2). Her proposition is maintained by Beck and Malley (2003), who stated that "the bond between the teacher and student creates the foundation upon which a sense of belonging can develop" (para. 12).

Unfortunately, as Hennebry, Lo, and Macaro (2012) found, "academic staff are not all equally sensitive to the needs of [non native speaking] NNS students" (p. 225). Thus, as Myles and Cheng (2003) stated, the need to address cultural sensitivity, as well as other issues, such as "stereotyping and discrimination" (p. 260), is crucial.

Caring Relationships

In terms of the relationships between instructors and students, Noddings (2012) suggested that "time spent on building a relation of care and trust is not time wasted" (p. 774). This concept of building relationships is also noted by hooks (1994). She stated, "caring about whether all students fulfill their responsibility to contribute to learning in the classroom" (p. 40) is essential for teaching diverse students. Both Kessler (1991) and Nieto (2003) identified that building concerned and responsive relationships engages students and can greatly improve academic success, particularly for non-traditional students. Nieto wrote, "[t]eachers' caring promotes an essential sense of belonging for students whose backgrounds differ from the mainstream" (p. 16).

Clarifying Academic Expectations

The ability to participate successfully within a target discourse community is also connected to cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), in which members of the majority group have insider advantages that allow them to succeed academically. Roessingh, Kover, and Watt (2005) further refined the definition of cultural capital as being that “something more” (p. 17) that contributes to academic success, but is not just language proficiency. Egbo (2009) suggested that supporting the attainment of cultural capital can improve feelings of belongingness because students are more easily able to partake in the community. Cultural capital can be gained in many ways, but one suggestion for instructors would be to provide more explicit instruction around academic and social expectations in the classroom and in institutions as a whole (Huang, 2010).

Huang’s (2010) identification of the “mismatch between students’ perceived needs and expectations and those of instructors” (pp. 532–533) suggests that having clear academic and social expectations is integral to student success (Hennebry, Lo, & Macaro, 2012; Huang, 2010; Kim, 2006; Storch & Tapper, 2009; Strauss, 2012). Providing tools for students to “develop the literacy behaviours they will need to participate in their target discourse communities” (Krase, 2007, p. 68) is key. An example might be a workshop on successfully navigating student-supervisor relationships in the university environment.

Learner Identity and Academic Success

Thomas (2012) suggested that supporting student academic success also means providing experiences that build confidence, support relevant future goals, and increase feelings of belongingness. As the barriers of language can be hard to overcome for English language learners (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), building student confidence and creating classrooms where it is safe to take risks is integral to student success (Coelho, 2004; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Improving Academic Success

One method for developing success for students from NESB is based on Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, wherein an interlocutor helps to bridge linguistic differences through scaffolding, thus helping to lead the student to the next stages of learning. This method also links to Krashen’s (1982) Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, in which educators use materials that can be easily understood, yet also challenge students because some information is just beyond the learner’s comprehension.

Other ways to increase confidence and improve academic success for English Language Learners (ELLs) are to “address issues related to foreign language learning anxiety” (Kim, 2006, p. 487), “include intercultural elements in... bridging programs” (Myles & Cheng, 2003, p. 260), clarify important linguistic elements (Huang, 2010; Strauss, 2012), and offer “reading, writing, and assessment preparation” (Huang, 2010; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011, p. 181). Krashen (2002) also suggested that low stress classroom environments are integral for increasing confidence and improving academic success. He noted, “the more our classes are low anxiety, the better off our students will be” (p. 222).

Increasing Student Voice

For language learners, recognition and support of student voice is a key element in developing confidence and success (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). hooks (1994) stated that community building in schools must be encouraged through the “recognition of each individual voice” (p. 40). However, for students from NESB, having the confidence to express one’s personal thoughts is very challenging (Hennebry, Lo, & Macaro, 2012; Lee, 2009). Kim (2012) identified blogging as one option for increasing student academic expression. Kim wrote, “the blog has the potential to improve international students’ communication by resolving the issues of cultural differences, a sense of belonging to a minority, and communication apprehension” (p. 543). Douglas (2010) concurred, identifying blogging as an important way to scaffold language learning in the classroom.

However, it is also essential to foster student voice by preparing students to be able to engage in classroom discussions. Kim (2006) wrote that “teachers need to simulate academic oral participation” (p. 486), while Lee (2009) suggested that schools “must specifically address classroom discourse skills” (p. 154). Terraschke and Wahid (2011) proposed offering courses that specifically focus on oral communication skills to meet these needs. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) also recommended offering courses for language learners that not only increase students’ comfort with peers, but also help to develop learners’ confidence in writing.

Relevant Experiences and Future Goals

As Huang (2010) has identified, practicing student-centred teaching means offering learners materials and experiences that reflect their distinct needs and interests, while also supporting their learning goals. Academic supports and content-based instruction are both practices that provide relevant academic experiences to language learners and help support students in meeting their future goals.

Academic Supports

By providing academic supports, such as targeted linguistic foundational skills courses that meet the linguistic needs of students, an institution demonstrates its commitment to language learners, while also increasing feelings of belongingness (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Thomas, 2012). Thomas’ (2012) research highlighted “the importance of engagement in activities with an overt academic purpose, through high quality student-centred learning and teaching strategies” (p. 17). Programming that provides information and practice pertaining to frequently assigned academic coursework is also considered very helpful (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007). In addition, Cadman (2002) proposed the use of student-generated curriculum, suggesting that this restructuring of the educational framework is more transformative and better able to meet the needs of learners.

Content-Based Instruction

Sloan and Porter (2010) identified that belongingness increases in programs where academic needs and interests are met. As Kim (2006) identified, the use of “content based instructions and tasks” (p. 487), where language is taught through discipline-centred material, helps match

students' interests and goals. This links to Thomas' (2012) proposition that students be "encouraged and facilitated to engage in appropriate opportunities... [that] include the provision of capacity-building modules in the core academic curriculum" (p. 18). As Sloan and Porter (2010) suggested, this kind of discipline-centred programming offers engaging linguistic support for those learning in a variety of academic fields.

Coelho (2004) wrote that students learn well in "language programs that connect clearly with the academic program by focusing on the language and study skills required in specific subject areas" (p. 162). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) also found that integrating a skills-based language course with an academic course allowed language learners to "not only learn more but to learn better" (p. 49).

As other researchers have written, when instructors "focus on the needs of the individual" (Egbo, 2009, p. 209) and "familiarize themselves with evolving content classroom formats and teaching methods" (Kim, 2006, p. 487), they provide two of the key elements for student success and belongingness (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Conclusion

With post-secondary institutions in British Columbia becoming increasingly diverse (British Columbia Data Catalogue, 2017; Hou & Lu, 2017), the question of how to support and retain students from NESB is a significant one. Institutional and classroom strategies supporting belongingness have been identified as beneficial for increasing student well-being and academic success in university environments (Thomas, 2012; Wilson, 2016), but may have an even greater impact for improving language acquisition and integration for students from NESB (Martin, et al., 2016; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Furthermore, as identified in the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Rose & Meyer, 2002), what is beneficial for one group can also be beneficial for many others. Therefore, belongingness strategies put in place to support language learners could also benefit many other students as well, such as Indigenous students, at-risk students, and even students from traditional or mainstream backgrounds.

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