The Importance of Learning English: Language, Class and Mobility

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English for the generation of Spaniards in their twenties and thirties is a highly valued skill that is required in order to gain access to a job in these current times of crisis and unemployment (Duchêne and Heller 2011). It is for this reason that large numbers of young people from Spain have recently moved to the UK to learn English with the goal of returning home to find work in a highly competitive marketplace where few jobs are available.

The present paper analyzes narratives of language and mobility of fourteen Spaniards from all parts of Spain who were living in London in 2012 when this ethnographic study was undertaken. The majority of the participants in the study hold a university degree and are either unemployed or they held an underpayed job in Spain. Hence, the decision to move to the UK to acquire English in order to have better chances of finding employment connected to their training.

The commodification of English (Heller 2011, Sung-Yul Park and Wee 2012, Pennycook 2007) and a critical appraisal of the ideologies about London as an imagined and authentic space for learning English (Moyer 2012, Gilbert 2001), as well as the mostly unsuccessful acquisition of English by these mobile citizens has been analyzed elsewhere. This paper explores the dynamics of social structuration through personal narratives (Giddens 1984, Bourdieu 1984) as it relates to perceived and enacted social position both in Spain and in the UK. In the current era of globalization, social class and processes of structuration must encompass the complex meanings that shape the identities and perceptions of people on the go. Furthermore, it constitutes a critique of methodological nationalism that measures social class in a national context alone (Delanty 2009).

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