Language and literacy learning among transnational high schoolers: Peer interaction and performance

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This presentation examines trajectories of language learning and socialization among transnational youth in a U.S. newcomer high school. Through close analysis of two learners in one classroom, we document the role of peer oral language interaction in the process of learning English and learning to read English. Further, we illustrate how these everyday classroom interactions intersect with broader global discourses surrounding Somali and Amharic scripts as well as with local notions of what it means to perform a ‘good student’ identity in this context.

Data come from a one-year study and five months of intensive observation and video-taping in two English language arts classes for recently arrived youth. New students join the classes weekly as enrollment continues throughout the academic year. Students with and without formal schooling, print literacy, or oral English language skills are together in this class, and frequently engage in peer work, with varied social and academic outcomes. Close analysis of video and audio recordings traces peer interactions, socialization mechanisms, and performance of identities between two asymmetri-cally paired female adolescent students: an Amharic newcomer with prior schooling in Ethiopia and beginning oral English skills, and a Somali speaker with stronger English skills but limited formal schooling experiences.

Findings demonstrate how the two students’ respective academic and personal trajectories shape the ways these peer interactions unfold, as well as how the students support each other’s learning and learn from each other. Data further illustrate how the histories and politics of the written Somali and Amharic scripts are enacted and reconfigured across both time and space by refugee students in this present-day classroom.

Keywords: transnational youth, trajectories, language socialization.