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U.S. linguistic policy and push-back

Introduction

Language maintenance programs, with no rush to learn the second language (L2), are effective for language-minority students' L2 academic achievement (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). Additionally, first language (L1) reading helps L2 reading achievement (Chuang, Joshi, & Dixon, 2012; Goldenberg, 2008). Although Spanish is the most common L1, spoken at home by 71% of emergent bilingual students in the U.S.A. (Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015) and the research supporting L1 literacy instruction, many U.S. public primary and secondary educators shun Spanish because of federal English-only education policies and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011). In 2001, the Office of Bilingual Education became the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students. The office change conveys the U.S. government's deficit beliefs about emergent bilinguals. More deeply, these English policies demonstrate xenophobia, racism, linguisticism, and fear of polyglot cultures (Luke, 2005).

Moreover, the office name demonstrates bracketing or segmenting of English and Spanish, the opposite of translanguaging. Translanguaging is when bi(poly) linguals employ their linguistic repertoires in reading, writing, speaking, and listening for sense-making (García & Kleifgen, 2010). An example would be, "I feel sorry for *la pobrecita* [the poor thing]." Wow, *que triste* [how sad]." Many officials and educators shun translanguaging because of political and linguistic boundaries and policies, such as NCLB and the U.S. social milieu. This bracketing impacts Texas border children who cannot demonstrate their content knowledge and skills by using their full linguistic repertoires and many receive punishment for translanguaging (García & Kleifgen).

Alas, hailing from a social justice perspective, this ethnographic study in *Promesa* (all names are pseudonyms) explored how a Spanish wealth project helped Latino/a children to revalue Spanish and translanguaging and to read and write in Spanish as push-back against U.S. English-focused policies. The research question was, "What did participating children believe about Spanish and translanguaging and what were their Spanish language skills at the beginning and end of our intensive program?" Since 2006, I have taught this neighborhood-based literacy and language methods course and have co-coordinated this service project. After the youth, tutorial staff, and parent volunteers leave at 6 p.m., I have taught the university mentors enrolled in my course at the tutorial center. Our service project and lesson plans had focused on gardening for many years.

However, May 2016 signified a switch from gardening to creating a bilingual newsletter because the children needed more help with L1 and L2 academic language development. Thus, 2016 interactions between my 13 students (all studying to be elementary and secondary teachers) and 19 *Promesa* children centered on L1 and L2 reading and writing for authentic purposes and audiences. Through class discussions and readings, the university mentors discovered translanguaging is beautiful, that smart people do it, and that it is a language for making and sharing meaning (García & Kleifgen, 2010). Furthermore, my students dialogued about their own language experiences and read research to support maintenance bilingual education and translanguaging. They could not teach the youth to honor Spanish and translanguaging if they did not undergo conscientization themselves (Freire, 2000).

Theoretical framework

Social justice theory, focused on identifying and resisting structural inequalities and affirming culturally diverse children's lived experiences, informed all aspects of this research (Freire, 2000). Policies and schools are structures and they play major roles in shaping children's identities and abilities. Although access to one's L1 is a universal linguistic right (UNESCO, 1996), the U.S. English acquisition policy robs children of their L1 and places them at an educational disadvantage because they lack L1 academic background as a linguistic bridge. Additionally, L1 Spanish-speaking children along the Mexico border learn in school they should bracket or dichotomize English and Spanish (García & Kleifgen, 2010) and that English is the language of power (Fishman, 2001). These notions harm children emotionally and academically because language is connected to how we perceive ourselves. As Anzaldúa (2007) proclaimed, "I am my language" (p. 81).

Regarding honoring children's lived experiences, translanguaging, common along country borders with diverse languages, represents a strength (García & Kleifgen, 2010). Last, realizing systemic inequities and resisting official attempts to censor one's language signifies conscientization, which can help children to rename their world and to reposition themselves as equity actors (Freire, 2000).

Research site

This study occurred in the most economically disadvantaged U.S. community for its size (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), but rich in hard-working, unified people. *Promesa*, a Texas colonia along the Mexico border, is an unincorporated southwestern settlement lacking basic services (Texas Secretary of State, n.d.). About 54% of *Promesa's* 7,000 residents live below the poverty line and only 31% of residents 25 years and older have earned a high school diploma or equivalent. Approximately 99% are Latinos/as who speak Spanish as a mother tongue (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This service project, language, culture, and literacy methods course, and study took

place at a tutorial agency in *Promesa*, where children voluntarily attend after school for homework help. Although Mexico has hundreds of indigenous languages, no child participant reported knowing any.

Methods

This study, under institutional review board (IRB) approval, occurred during a three-week program, from 3:30 to 9 pm, Monday through Thursday, in May and June 2016. Participants signed assent and consent forms before data gathering; one of my students and four children and their families chose not to participate in the study. Respondents were 18 Mexican-heritage and one Honduran-heritage children, ages 6 to 13, eight males and 11 females. Twelve Mexican-heritage and one Taiwanese-heritage teacher candidates participated; all were female.

Arriving at 3 and leaving at 9, I assisted the tutorial staff in supervising and planning the program daily. I interviewed two children simultaneously to save time in the three-week program. I recorded and transcribed interviews and focus group discussions and asked participants to review interview transcripts for member-checking. For peer debriefing, I discussed my findings with tutorial agency staff and university colleagues who have conducted language and literacy studies in *Promesa*. Data analysis consisted of grounded theory in which I reread data several times, developing and delineating key themes vis-à-vis a social justice framework (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Data sources

Child data consisted of semi-structured interviews, children's drawings of what Spanish meant to them, a child focus group about their drawings, daily learning logs, and newsletter artifacts. Mentor data were lesson plans implemented with the children, written reflections, reading responses, and a focus group discussion about the program. Participant observation constituted another data source for all.

Findings

Limited, but negative L1 school instruction and L1 and L2 academic difficulty

Many child participants said teachers and administrators have prohibited them from speaking Spanish in school. Most youth started school in English-only programs (submersion bilingual education) with federally-mandated standardized tests in English. Bilingual education in name-only is common in Texas schools because of administrators' monolingual pressures related to NCLB; however, Texas law mandates bilingual students receive instruction in English and Spanish (Hinton, 2015). Some youth participated in transitional bilingual education, with quick Spanish language exit, and with the goal of preparing the children for high-stakes tests in English. The latter have enormous consequences on children; youth cannot advance in grade levels until they pass these exams. Some erroneously believe L2 submersion and transitional bilingual programs help youth to master L2 academic skills rapidly.

Most children participants experienced difficulty with L1 and L2 reading and writing because they lacked academic background in their L1. A mentor wrote, "Both of my tutees are able to speak fluently Spanish and English. However, they both struggle with writing in either language." The children's L2 print literacy skills were so low that many told their mentors at the beginning of our program that the youth had to attend summer school to pass to higher grade levels in the fall. Alfredo, 10, was born in Mexico and had attended local Texas schools for three years by May 2016; school officials retained him a grade level because he struggled with L2 reading and writing. In fact, he experienced Spanish instruction in kindergarten only and was placed in English-only classes in first grade. It is a shame and a sham for the U.S. government to ignore the longitudinal research support for maintenance and developmental bilingual education; children in these programs have higher academic achievement than their peers in transitional and English as a second language (ESL) programs (Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005; Thomas & Collier, 2003).

Moreover, because of schools' English-only push, some children were forgetting their mother tongue. Many could not read or write in Spanish. Bombero, 9, claimed Spanish was the language his family spoke at home and that he learned Spanish as a baby. However, he said, "I really don't know that much in Spanish." Javier, 11, explained why he exited the bilingual program:

- Javier: I was in the bilingual program and I got out uh, when I was in in first grade.
Kathy: Why?
Javier: 'Cause you take a test to get out of the bilingual program and I passed it. I was one of the few students and I got out.
Kathy: You didn't want it? You didn't want to be in it?
Javier: No, it's cause, most of the schools, you have to get out of the bilingual program in first grade or second.

Apparently, Javier felt the school system pushes out children from bilingual education early. Also, he stated few participated in bilingual education, even though he attended a school district his entire life with a 99% Hispanic enrollment. Although Javier never mentioned being punished for translanguaging, he had to rewrite his essays several times because teachers did believed translanguaging was wrong.

Immediately after Javier said "first grade or second," Francisco, 11, Javier's interview partner, said his school let him stay in bilingual education, but Francisco planned to exit soon because educators punished him for translanguaging. Both Javier and Francisco struggled with L1 and L2 reading comprehension and writing and had attended local Texas schools since kindergarten. Oddly, Francisco told me he was in bilingual education because his mentor stated he could not speak Spanish, "He told me he understands Spanish, but doesn't know how to

read, write, or speak it. Since he has difficulty with the language, he is shy to carry a conversation with others when they speak to him in Spanish.” Perhaps Francisco’s belief that he does not speak Spanish relates to his lack of Spanish and translanguaging confidence, as educators constantly corrected his essays. As with the other child interviewees, Francisco learned Spanish as a baby and his family spoke only Spanish at home. Perhaps Francisco believed he could not speak Spanish because educators constantly corrected his language. Francisco learned Spanish as a baby, his family spoke only Spanish at home, and he spoke to me in standard Spanish. The following segment reveals how he perceived teachers’ language corrections:

- Francisco: But for me, I want to get out because when I do writing, they have to correct the writing and you have to write it over and over again.
- Javier: Yeah.
- Kathy: (To Francisco) So, are you still in bilingual?
- Francisco: I'm getting out.
- Kathy: Why do you want out, [Francisco]?
- Francisco: Why do I want out?
- Kathy: Yeah, why? *¿Por qué quieres salir del programa bilingüe?* [Why do you want to get out of bilingual education?]
- Francisco: Ah, cause I don't wanna do more writing. They put us to do writing and if you do something wrong, they correct it and you have to do it again.
- Kathy: That's awful. But you have to do writings [sic] for a test?
- Francisco: Yes
- Kathy: Why are they correcting your Spanish? ...
- Javier: It's cause when you mix the English and Spanish, it's cause some people call it Spanglish. It's like when you say uhm like, *trocka*, it's truck and *camion*. In Spanish, you say *camioneta*, not *trocka*, so you have to correct it to *camioneta* or truck instead of *trocka*.
- Kathy: So that's the way they're correcting your Spanish?
- Javier: Yeah. Instead of *trocka* it's *camioneta*.
- Kathy: *¿Pero, estás escribiendo en español, no?* [But, aren't you writing in Spanish?]
- Both youth: *Sí* [Yes].
- Kathy: *¿Y ellos están corrigiendo el español?* [And they are correcting your Spanish?]
- Both youth: *Sí* [Yes].
- Kathy: *Diciéndote que no está correcto. ¿Y cómo sientes con esto?* [Telling you that your Spanish isn't correct. And how do you feel about this?]
- Francisco: *Mal*. [Bad].
- Kathy: *¿Por qué?* [Why?]
- Francisco: I do all my hard works to do it.
- Kathy: And then they fix it?
- Francisco: Yeah.
- Javier: They fix it and then they make you do it all over again. All over, the same thing.
- Kathy: But why are they correcting the Spanish? It's 'cause they don't like it?
- Javier: No, it's cause it's misspelled; it's mispronounced.

Translanguaging, common along international borders, is part of many local people’s identity, but some perceive translanguaging as unsophisticated. I have heard translanguaging numerous times among the youth in my longitudinal research in *Promesa*, and my 2016 study was no exception. Although Javier never mentioned being punished for translanguaging, he had to rewrite his essays several times because teachers believed translanguaging was wrong. Having to redo his work because of translanguaging was why Francisco wanted to exit bilingual education. The unofficial curriculum (Giroux & Penna, 1983) taught the boys translanguaging was incorrect. Javier believed translanguaging meant misspelling and mispronouncing words, but his *trocka* example indicated written translanguaging. The schools’ attempts constituted linguistic terrorism because language is our identity (Anzaldúa, 2007). Thus, erasing our language erases us. Making Mexican-heritage border children write *camión* instead of *trocka* may have had a deeper goal. If youth feel incompetent and embarrassed regarding their ways with words (Heath, 1983), perhaps they will cease learning that language academically. Indeed, language maintenance and revitalization are much easier for the next generation if people can speak, understand, read, and write it; and to possess this full linguistic repertoire, they must value it (Fishman, 2001). Indeed, calling translanguaging a language is political and it has everything to do with social justice, because we cannot separate words from the world (Freire, 2000). For example, it is easier to criticize someone for the “way they speak” than it is to criticize their language. Furthermore, accepting people’s language is a first step in accepting them.

Negative academic spanish attitudes and bracketing language

So, how would English-only instruction and punishing children for translanguaging affect the youth? Francisco told his university mentor that he disliked writing because of “mistakes” and that he wanted her to teach him in Spanish or in English, but that he did not want her to translanguague. This demonstrates a bracketing or dichotomizing of language.

From several data sources, I found that youth with the least amount of academic Spanish instruction disliked academic Spanish the most. Next, when I asked, “What does Spanish mean to you?,” the children segmented Spanish to only include only spoken language at home, another form of dichotomizing language and the context in which it occurred. None associated Spanish with school, businesses, the arts, news, or high-powered spheres (Fishman, 2001). Alfredo said, “For me, not that much. Only in my house. I’m not, my teacher doesn’t let me speak it.”

Improved academic spanish skills and attitudes after the program

Indeed, the university mentors faced many challenges to improve the children’s Spanish and translanguaging attitudes and academic Spanish skills during the intensive program. Mentors helped the children to write news stories related to the children’s passions for our Internet newsletter. Each child wrote the story in her/his dominant academic language and then translated their story into their non-dominant language. Since most of the children could not write in Spanish, they wrote their stories first in English and then received help from mentors, tutorial staff, and other children for the Spanish translations. Each child read part of her/his article aloud (in her/his preferred language) as part of our culminating experience on June 1, 2016. Most of the children said they had never translated written documents, nor had they written an article in any language for publication. Most mentors were of Mexican heritage and were bilingual and biliterate in Spanish and English; hence, the children looked up to them.

Although three mentors did not speak Spanish, participant observation and other data revealed that the mentors valued translanguaging and formal and informal Spanish. Bombero, who previously reported not knowing “that much in Spanish,” translated his English descriptions about firefighters and police into Spanish, but his mentor (who was bilingual and biliterate in Spanish and English) did not correct Bombero’s translanguaged description: “*El sheriff da tickets ala [sic] personas que van rapido [sic]*” [The sheriff gives tickets to people who go fast].

Additionally, the mentors conducted lessons focusing on child and family strengths and used technology to entice their young charges. Alfredo’s mentor recalled teaching Alfredo to read in Spanish and to honor his mother tongue:

I helped [him] to embrace his home language which [sic] was Spanish. I knew I made an impact on him because I overheard him tell [the tutorial director] that Spanish is important. He told me he had never read in Spanish before so I helped him out and he began reading like a pro.

Through this experience, Alfredo’s mentor learned that Alfredo actually read more fluently and understood in Spanish, which he said he had never read before. She commented, “I learned that he reads Spanish better than English and more confidently.” Since Alfredo’s home and community life focused on Spanish, it was easier for him to read it because he had acquired Spanish naturally through literacy practices, e.g., storytelling and family get-togethers, which he reported. Alfredo even told his public school teacher at the end of our program that Spanish was important. Again, this was the teacher who “doesn’t let me speak it.” Alfredo was pushing back and was becoming an equity from his dialogues with his mentor, who wrote about Alfredo’s assertiveness regarding his L1: “I realized that he was taking in what I have been teaching him.” According to his mentor, Alfredo became motivated to read Spanish books on his own time and even selected books in Spanish as part of the culminating experience. This was the same boy who, at the beginning of our program, told me that Spanish did not mean anything to him, except for a language spoken in his house.

Many children told their mentors they enjoyed reading and writing more in English and Spanish after the intensive program. A mentor of two children, wrote, “I also helped them to remember the importance of being biliterate ... When we worked on the newsletter, they were able to see how their L1 was a very important part of them and how it could be used as a strength.” Although this mentor did not speak Spanish, knowing three languages gave her more credence with the youth. No data support Francisco’s belief changes regarding translanguaging, but his interview partner, Javier, did say toward the end of the program that Spanish meant to him “Mexican power.” Since this is a qualitative study, I cannot establish causality. However, after rereading all data several times, it is obvious the program had many positive influences on the children’s language skills and attitudes.

Significance

This study occurred in a neighborhood about 10 miles north of the Mexico border. Given this context, a mentor was amazed at the tutorial children’s limited academic development in Spanish. She wrote,

They only learn Spanish language at home, but they do not learn the rules for the Spanish language and they can barely read it and write it. It is incredible that here in the border there are Mexican Americans that don’t know their native language 100% and this is because they don’t get the correct instruction in their native language.

Most of the children’s public school teachers are Latinos/as, as per the school district website, so the English-focused instruction appears to relate to U.S. education and language policies and socio-economic-political contexts. Spanish is the children’s mother tongue and the language the children hear and speak at home, yet most child participants could not read it or write it because they attended U.S. schools that did not value their L1.

To reverse this situation, mother tongue wealth projects, with mentors who value the L1, can nurture L1 border youths' L1 pride and academic language. Yet, educators who interact with these language minority children must undergo their own transformation before or during work with the children (Freire, 2000).

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