From Semilingualism to Academic Language: Challenging Dichotomous Framings in US Language Education Policy

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1976,
New York City

- Eligibility for transitional bilingual education
  - Scored below the 20th percentile in English
  - Scored higher in Spanish than they did in English

"What about the students who did not do well on the Spanish either"

-Camille Garcia

"That was really one of our fears that children would not do well either in English or Spanish…**They have kind of a hybrid understanding of two languages none of them good enough to function in one of the languages**… we have to think out the issue of the children not being really able to function in any language in the complete sense."

-Mario Anglada

2006,
New York City

- A high school ESL teacher
- Most students were "Long Term English Learners"
- Failed to master "academic language" in either English or Spanish

"Thus these emergent bilingual students have had **limited opportunities for academic language development** in either English or their native languages. As a result, although LTELLs are **orally bilingual when using language for social purposes**, they typically have **limited academic literacy skills in English or in their native languages**. As bilingual education programs in the city decrease overall, it is likely that **more emergent bilinguals will experience linguistically subtractive schooling** and over time become LTELLs" (Menken, et al, 2009).

What changed?

- Discussion of eligibility for transitional bilingual education to classification and reclassification of English Learners for any language programs
- Shift from overtly deficit language ("hybrid understanding," "none of them good enough") to seemingly objective language ("lacking academic language")

What remained constant?

- Latinx students who can communicate in English and Spanish may not have sufficient proficiency in either of them
- Connected to a much broader colonial history of languagelessness

Race, Language and the Emergence of Modern US Language Education Policy

Reconfiguring race in the postcolonial world

- Shift from biological to cultural explanations that leaves its onto-epistemological foundations and material consequences of racism intact
  - Postcolonial nations framed as primitive and in need of modernization
  - Racialized communities in US has having a culture of poverty
- A cadre of professionals from these communities with contingent proximity to whiteness in exchange for accepting colonial representations of their communities

The national conversation shaping bilingual education

CULTURE OF POVERTY

- Multiple generations of poverty led to cultural pathologies that prevented racialized communities from escaping poverty
- Used by social scientists and policymakers to develop programs to fix these cultural pathologies
- Bilingual education as such an approach for Mexican American and Puerto Rican students

CULTURAL MAINTENANCE

- Multiple generations of racial oppression led racialized communities to be disconnected from their cultural identities
- Used by civil rights activists to promote more culturally affirming educational approaches
- Bilingual education as such an approach for Mexican American and Puerto Rican students

Raciolinguistic ideologies and the Culture of Poverty/Maintenance

- **African Americans**: no additional language that could be incorporated into remediation/ maintained
- **Native Americans**: no additional language with a legitimate literary tradition that could be incorporated into remediation/ maintained without language modernization
- **White ethnic:** have an additional language with a legitimate literary tradition that could be maintained as a form of enrichment
- **Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans:** having an additional language with a legitimate literary tradition that could be incorporated into remediation/maintained
  - Semilingual rather than bilingual—need remediation before maintenance is possible

Semilingualism and the Culture of Poverty

- A range of bilingual education programs emerged in the 1960s as models that adopted the perspective of linguistic pathology as the root of the challenges of Mexican American and Puerto Rican students
- The Good Samaritan was a model bilingual preschool created in partnership with Kenneth Kramer, a psychology professor at Trinity College

"as compared to middle-class children, [Spanish dominant] children are **more restricted in language skills and lack the capacity for abstract language**"

"the child's **language deprivation is his central educational handicap** from which his other handicaps derive."

"**remedy these language deficiencies by developing a preschool curriculum** that focuses on increasing the language and communication skills of the Spanish-speaking child."

Semilingualism and Cultural Maintenance

"There appears to be relatively little dispute about the 'existence' of the phenomenon to which the term 'semilingualism' was inappropriately applied, namely**, limited access to academic/ literate registers in both L1 and L2** among some bilingual groups who experienced the effects of long-term coercive relations of power both in schools and society" (Cummins, 2000).

- Coercive relations of power had led to **subtractive bilingualism** for many Latinx students where Spanish was gradually replaced with English
- **Additive bilingualism** could challenge these coercive relations of power by ensuring these students develop academic language in Spanish they can transfer to English

Putting it all together

- Bilingual education proposed a linguistic solution to a political and economic problem aligned with broader shift toward cultural explanation for global racial inequities
- Core of US debates around bilingual education were culture of poverty vs. cultural maintenance
- Culture of poverty and cultural maintenance are two sides of the same coin that both inherit longstanding colonial logics
  - Cultural maintenance as only possible for groups with connections to a named language with a legitimate literary tradition
  - Legitimate literary tradition still not sufficient for US Latinxs who are framed as needing to have their bilingualism fixed before it can be maintained

Race, Language and the Emergence of the English Learner

What is an “English Learner?”

“whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual…the ability to meet the State’s proficient level of achievement on State assessments”

- For a bilingual student to be fully proficient in English means they must be proficient on State assessments
- A bilingual student is either an EL who struggles to achieve proficiency on State assessments and is entitled to extra support or a non-EL who achieves proficiency on State assessments and is not entitled to extra support
- This framing has direct roots in the remedial frame of the Bilingual Education Act

Who is eligible for bilingual education?

- 1971 manual for BEA funding:
  - "in order to justify a bilingual education project, evidence must be presented that **the other language is, in fact, the dominant language** of the children to be served"
  - "instances in which **children speak English imperfectly because of a foreign language background** but **do not speak the foreign language themselves at home**…would justify a program in English as a second language, but not a bilingual program."
- The 1976 Lau Remedies:
  - Mandated home language survey to identify potential ELs
  - Home language as other than English if one of three criteria were met: (1) The student's first acquired language is other than English, (2) the language most often spoken by the student is other than English, or (3) the language most often spoken in the student's home is other than English**, regardless of the language spoken by the student**.

Who is *really* eligible for bilingual education?

- Researchers working in a California district identified 3 types of ELs:
  - (1) non-English superior students who are more proficient in their home language;
  - (2) English superior students who, although limited in English, are more proficient in English than in their home language; and
  - (3) equally limited students whose proficiency in their home language and in English are limited to an equal extent.
- The researchers concluded that only non-English superior and equally limited students more proficient in their home language should be eligible for bilingual education

Who is *really really* eligible for bilingual education?

"Because parents are **ashamed of their cultural background** or feel they speak an inferior dialect of L1, they may not strongly encourage children to develop L1 skills in the home"

"they may communicate with the child only when necessary **or use a mixture of L1 and L2 in the home**"

"**without a conceptual basis for learning L1 in an L2-only school situation** leading to "low levels of proficiency (e.g. reading skills) in both languages."

(Cummins, 1980)

- Cummins concluded that suggesting "English superior" LEP students should not be eligible for bilingual education focuses "only on surface manifestations of language [and] ignores the sociocultural determinants of minority children's school failure" (Cummins, 1980, p. 48).
- Any assessment determine eligibility for bilingual education should assess English CALP skills

Resources for Developing a Student Placement System for Bilingual Program

- **Language Skills Framework (LFS)** that identified 285 different language skills to assist Title VII funding programs in identifying students eligible for bilingual education and monitoring their progress and exit from these programs

classroom interaction skills "that enable the student to interact appropriately with the teacher during classroom instruction"

reading proficiency "based on the content and skills in the major reading programs that are used in schools throughout the country

writing proficiency based on an "analysis and specification of the actual writing skills taught by the writing programs that are used in classrooms."

Putting it all together

- The remedial frame of the BEA introduced a policy question of how to determine who was eligible for bilingual education
- Advocates for bilingual education sought to define “limited” English proficiency as broadly as possible to ensure the greatest number of bilingual students were deemed eligible for these programs
- Eventually this became needing to meet grade level expectations in English even as policy moved away from bilingual education to English-Only approaches

Race, Language, and the Emergence of the Long Term English Learner

NCLB and More "Potential LEP" Students

- NCLB mandated disaggregated data and the development of ELP standards and assessments aligned to general content standards and assessments
- More "potential LEP" students were identified as LEP and once classified had to meet higher standards to be reclassified
- Long Term English Learners (LTEL)
  - Students who never get reclassified
  - Institutionalized into law in California in 2012 and into federal law in ESSA
- All determined by increasing difficult assessments designed to assess "academic language" bi/multilingual students are said to be lacking

The Specter of Semilingualism in the Discursive Construction of the LTEL

"the impact of **weak English language skills** and not having received targeted language development"

"an '**imprecise' social language**"

"**fossilized features of language** based upon the home language system superimposed with English vocabulary, and **frequently code-switch**"

"while it is expressive and functional in many social situations, it is **not a strong foundation for the language demands of academic work** in Standard English"

(Olsen, 2010)

"in order to engage with the academic demands of secondary school curriculum, they **must learn more complex syntax, richer oral language, and the specialized vocabulary needed to understand academic text** and participate in classroom discussions"

"focuses on powerful oral language development, explicit literacy development, instruction in the academic uses of English, high quality writing, extensive reading of relevant texts, and **an emphasis on academic language and complex vocabulary**"

LTEL as Raciolinguistic Ideology

- Connection to other racialized speakers

"might look **similar to struggling adolescent native speakers** and they also struggle with academic language and comprehending academic texts"

"share **much in common with other Standard English learners**—the mix of English vocabulary superimposed on the structure of the heritage language and the use of a dialect of English that differs from academic English."

(Olsen, 2010)

Standard English Learner Screener

"would particularly benefit from mainstream English language development."

"African American linguistic features"

"Hawaiian American linguistic features"

"Mexican American linguistic features"

Standard English	Possible (MxAL) Responses	Linguistic Features (Explicit)	√
1. Don't be bad.	Doont be baaad.	Circumflex Intonation (sing-song musical intonation)	
2. She has **an** umbrella.	a	Indefinite Article	
3. Do you have a p**e**n?	pin	Vowel Pairs/Homophones	
4. We **were** driving down the street.	was	Past Tense Auxiliary Verb	
5. Miguel wore a **wh**ite hat.	hwite	Breath ***"h"*** Sound	
6. He **doesn't** have **any** friends.	don't, no	Multiple Negation	
7. My brother **is** going to the movies.	he's	Topicalization	
8. She run**s** everyday.	run	Third Person Singular	
9. She doesn't mind if you talk.	don', mine	Consonant Clusters	
10. Alex is sitting **on** the couch.	in	Prepositional Variation	
11. Yesterday, he start**ed** selling newspapers.	start	Past Tense Marker	
12. The Pharaohs were the kings **of** Egypt.	in	Prepositional Variation	
13. Rai**s**e the flag!	race	***"Z"*** Sound	
14. The firemen saved many li**v**es.	lifes	***"V"*** Sound	
15. This game is new, it **just** came out.	barely	Lexical Item "barely" replaces the colloquial use of timeliness or scarcity.	
16. **The** apple.	thuh	Pronunciation of "the" as "thee" before a word that starts with a vowel	
18. He jump**s** rope to get into shape.	jump	Third Person Singular	
19. There's a big tree with leaves on **it**.	them	Prepositional Variation.	
20. **He** is washing **his** hair.	...is washing the hair	Pronoun Usage	

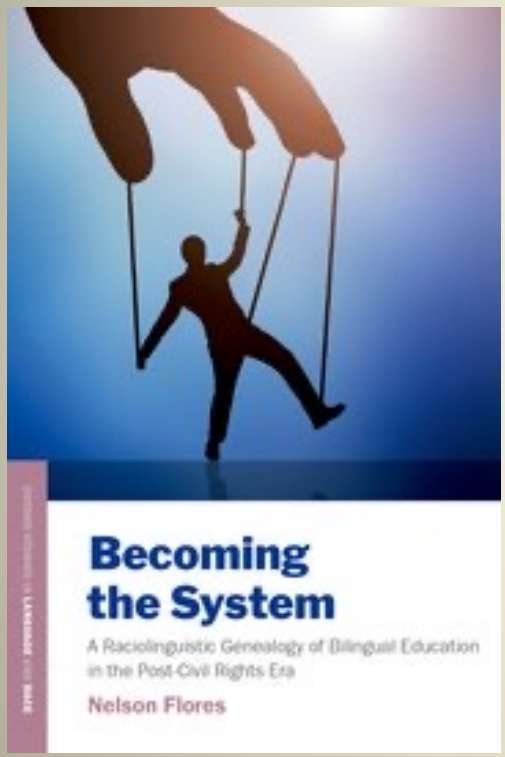
Putting it all together

- The Long Term English Learner category continues the legacy of offering linguistic solutions to political and economic challenges
- The category doubles down on the deficit perspectives associated with dominant framings of bilingual education without any explicit commitment to access to bilingual education as a goal
- Its underlying raciolinguistic ideologies overlap with the framing of other students of color framed as “standard English learners” or “academic language learners”
- These designation reproduces deficit perspectives that encourage remedial educational approaches for students of color

Shifting our Perception

"The experiences of these students in school points to a level of complexity that must be recognized and addressed through more-responsive schooling. They are **not students lacking language**, but (emergent) bilinguals with a repertoire that **allows them to maneuver multiple languages and contexts in ways that are complex and dynamic**. They are also students with strong ties to their family's country of origin, yet who have **transnational sensibilities** that can be simultaneously developed. They have to be **seen through the strengths they bring to school**, and those must be overtly valued and embedded into classroom instruction" (Flores, Kleyn & Menken, 2015).

Read more about this in my new book!



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