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ABSTRACT

An examination of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction in York County, South Carolina focuses on community attitudes toward limited-English-proficient (LEP) residents. Factors discussed include the perception that virtually all residents speak English and that children who don't speak English fluently, generally Hispanics, will have left the area before learning enough to function in mainstream classes; the state mandate for English-only instruction; and a generally hostile environment for LEP residents. Common responses to LEP students appear to be either classification as disabled students, perception as untenable expenses, and relegation to language laboratories to "correct" their language problems. LEP students are often lacking in self-confidence, are mocked by native English-speaking peers, and must become language brokers for their families. Suggestions made for ameliorating the situation include acknowledgement of the LEP population and teacher education in support of bilingual teachers and bilingual education. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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**The "Old English District":  
ESL Problems in South Carolina.**

by: Marguerite Quintelli-Neary

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**Marguerite Quintelli-Neary**

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A chance encounter with a Guatemalan-born woman who has resided in Rock Hill, South Carolina for over twenty years prompted my investigation into the management or mismanagement of ESL students in public schools in the Upcountry region of the state. The Department of Tourism promotes York County, a northernmost South Carolina county that borders the state of North Carolina and is comprised of many bedroom communities of urban Charlotte, as part of the quaint "Old English District" of South Carolina. Though the original settlers were actually predominantly Scots Irish transplants who had emigrated from Pennsylvania, their language has always been English; other than black vernacular dialect, the heritage of descendants of slaves imported in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, and a few remaining speakers of the West African Gullah in the low country, virtually everyone is said to speak no language other than standard English. Amazingly, many residents appear to be deaf to the foreign tongues that can be heard in the kitchens of local restaurants, in the fields owned by area nursery owners, and in the halls of local schools. And the "new" language that is starting to emerge in York County is Spanish. A recent report in The Charlotte Observer notes that the Hispanic population in York County has risen 50% in the last nine years, with an estimated figure of 1000 inhabitants in the area (there are reportedly approximately 150,000 statewide).

Some of the educators in York County schools, who were grappling with bilingual issues and participating in a School to work Institute I was teaching in the spring of 1998, expressed their concerns about how to deal with their limited English proficiency students, so I invited our local crusader, also known as "the Spanish lady," to address the group. She was prepared to speak for twenty minutes; at the end of an hour, the questions had not stopped pouring out. "How can we teach Communications in the Workplace to adolescents who are not even fluent in English?" "How can we deal with a literacy problem in non-native speakers when there are no bilingual

facilities?" And, scarier still: "How can we teach Language Arts to children of parents who may not be literate in their own language?"

Ultimately, we determined that the majority of language minority students in the consortium were Hispanic in origin, and that the monolingual educators were handicapped by their own districts' positions on bilingual education, which, in turn, reflected state codes. As our Hispanic volunteer fished out an Ernie doll that greeted us in Spanish, along with a map of Spanish-speaking countries, she began to educate us with tales of her intervention in the schools and the court system, having come to the rescue of a 15-year-old Mexican girl who was accused of infanticide; she also reported her own fears of living in a state that aggressively defended its English only policy and introduced us to the psychology of the limited English student and the intimidation created by an environment that is hostile to those who are not fluent in English. She is, at the moment, lobbying for the acceptance in public schools of the children of illegals, who are residing in South Carolina and can be reported and denied access to educational facilities. Because the state mandates that it is acceptable to speak a foreign language only in federally mandated language classes, both official and unofficial bilingualism are discouraged. A xenophobic attitude, coupled with the notion that the Hispanic majority, of Mexican origin, was a seasonal population, sending their children to school from November to March, fosters a wait and see attitude that permits local school districts to hold off on ordering materials or hiring additional staff to interpret for and assist these students in their transition to English. With any luck, they'll be out of the country before serious pressure is exerted to teach them in a way they can understand.

Consequently, many administrators prefer to think that these students will be in transit, to another state or their home country, before they engage in transition. As a librarian from a local

high school explained: "It's not worth putting my job on the line for these kids. The district only sees them as migratory students in whom we cannot invest any money." Because of this, York Comprehensive High School's official bilingual resources consist of one Spanish-English dictionary and one English-Spanish dictionary.

James Crawford asserts that the U.S. English movement, which has vainly attempted to amend the U.S. Constitution so that its citizens can be linguistically united, appeals to white racism, in part. He notes that when contributors were asked why they supported the amendment, 42 % endorsed the statement: "I wanted America to stand strong and not cave in to Hispanics who shouldn't be here" (Hold Your Tongue 163). Interestingly, one of the strongest supporters of the English Language Amendment in 1981 was (and still is) South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond, as well as North Carolina's Jesse Helms, both of whom succeeded in enacting English Only laws in their respective states in 1987. Thurmond, long known for his early position on integration (he supported segregationism), as well as his endorsement of states' rights, fosters a spirit of defiance to the federally mandated Bilingual Education Act of 1968.

Most English Only states seem to exhibit paranoia when bilingual facilities are requested. They tend to favor the immersion theory, in which students are saturated with the official language to the point at which they supposedly achieve fluency. But Crawford hastens to explain that immersion, while useful in a caring, supportive environment (as in living with relatives in a foreign country for a limited period of time), can be a nightmare in unfamiliar surroundings (Hold Your Tongue 209). And, as Jean Bethke Elshtain points out, "We try to do by compulsion what we don't seem to be doing as part of a normal evolution" ("Language and American Citizens" 57). Why do we try to force a process that will occur naturally? If transition to English takes roughly three generations, and if it is true, as Paul Lang documents in The

English Language Debate, that three out of four Hispanics who have been in the United States fifteen years or more speak English every day (56), then why should there be such resistance to providing some help at the beginning of their residency and launching these willing learners into successful transition?

Again, the response to this query may be found in the phobic notion that Hispanics are looking for easy assimilation into United States culture and are putting the onus of designing bilingual education programs on descendants of immigrants who made it on their own. Such ideology plays into the myths about ESL support seekers that are explained by Juan Cartagena; opponents of bilingual programs assert that their ancestors never received any special treatment; that language minority citizens don't really want to learn English; and that English Only laws will speed up the immigrant's acquisition of English ("English Only in the 1980s" 17-20). Cartagena then goes on to refute these assertions, arguing that, while early immigrants were often non-English speaking, their struggle was probably much longer than it had to be and the suffering they went through could have been alleviated by language support; that Latinos are acquiring English at a rate equal to or faster than other language minority groups; and finally, that the real purpose behind English Only legislation is not to hasten the process of language acquisition, but rather to eliminate the costs of education (17-20).

If budget concerns are a factor in the push for English Only ruling, then South Carolina certainly meets the criterion of funding deficiencies. Oddly, state budget surpluses regularly make headlines, as the South Carolina attracts foreign industries and retirees with lenient environmental restrictions and low property taxes. And, while recent proposals for a state lottery hold the hope that the education budget will be revitalized with new funds, many critics of the proposal continue to argue that there is little correlation between spending money in the schools

and student achievement. The battle for improved SAT scores (South Carolina currently ranks fiftieth in the nation) has pitted district against district and created such self-esteem issues that I actually had a student write a research paper about why the state regularly ranks at the bottom of the heap. Among her thesis points was that child well-being (encompassing parental presence, nutrition, and health care, among other factors) accounted for strong test scores, all the components of which rely on financial wellness. When the standardized test issue becomes clouded with the inclusion of limited English proficiency students, many of whom are indigent, administrators fear further damage to their districts' reputations. Viewed as a liability, they seem to comprise a body of high maintenance students who may not be worth the investment.

The threat of sustaining a population of language minority students therefore requires some thought about how they can be classified. Although many schools prefer to ignore rather than overtly reject non-native speakers, those students who persist and remain in the school system must undergo testing. The solution, according to the 1998 code of laws of South Carolina, is to classify these students as disabled, likening them to those students with disabilities "such as severe to profound hearing disability" (Title 59, Education). The language used removes them from the category of students with moderate learning disorders; by relegating them to a severely disabled status, the state waives the written portion of the exit exam for ESLs until such time as an alternative testing mechanism may be developed. Putting aside the irony of the deaf ear in this ruling, we need to consider the social and psychological impact of treating the language minority student as victim of a biological defect. If s/he is cured (that is, learns English), does s/he become a normal, hearing person again?

Such subtle, psychological exclusion may explain the bilingual education program which is in place at Rock Hill High School. There, language minority students can avail themselves of the

Computer Curriculum Corporation's autodidactic language arts program, obviating the need for any live instructor to engage in any sort of bilingual conversation with the student. While this technique obviously decontextualizes the teaching of literacy, it saves the district money, while marginally complying with federal bilingual mandates. As a former foreign exchange student myself, I cringe at the suggestion that computer immersion in any language program benefits the bilingual learner. The language lab was designed to supplement the classroom experience, in which an exchange of ideas occurred among many students, not as a replacement for the classroom dynamics. The emphasis in CCC appears to be correction of the language problem (which, again, may be likened to a physical handicap), with no validation of or vocal support for the student's native tongue. As Gillian Stevens points out, economic and academic success are often achieved by non-native speakers who acquire the new language and maintain use of their minority language, affirming their ethnic identity ("The Social and Demographic Context of Language Use in the U.S." 171). Yet, the computerized approach to teaching ESLs English denies them the opportunity to express themselves in both languages to others. Disregard for cultural affirmation seems to prevail in other schools, as recently demonstrated by the treatment of a student from Honduras, who was enrolled at York Comprehensive High School and was anxious to find out if Hurricane Mitch had affected any members of her family residing in her home country. Any and all translations were denied this exchange student, who, after all, would be going back to Honduras and could find out on her own. The Spanish teacher at the York County high school was "too busy" to take the time to translate the newspaper; the members of her English class were apparently uncomfortable with the idea of being exposed to her language. She remained confused and alienated, denied the chance to express herself in Spanish and receive bilingual response.



As one of the most dynamic and creative teachers in the consortium explained to me, there is a certain discomfort in witnessing bilingual events. She admits to having problems adjusting to the ATM machine at her bank, which has just started offering an English/Spanish menu; that was clearly not a part of South Carolina culture. And Hispanic residents are noticeably sensitive to the awkwardness with which their language is received, speaking softly in their native tongue and embarrassed to be witnessed doing so.

Not only are Hispanic students self-conscious about their presence in a relatively hostile educational environment, in which they are often mocked by native-born students, but they also bear the burden of communicating for and carrying messages to minority language parents, who historically acquire a new language more slowly than children under fourteen, and who find few opportunities for bilingual education in South Carolina. Lucy Tse discovered that most language minority students brokered for their families in a study she undertook, and that 97% translated notes between home and school. This information indicates that they are performing linguistically demanding tasks and assuming responsibilities with which adults are normally charged ("Language Brokering Among Latino Adolescents" 189). The quality of these linguistic accomplishments, however, is not always reflected in minority language students' grades, which raises questions such as whether these students perform poorly because they lack confidence (and fear success), whether social pressure, from peers, discourages strong classroom performance, or whether alternative assessment need to be investigated. As the daughter of a minority language parent who brokered for her own parents in the 1920s and 1930s, I can attest to the limited confidence factor and the humiliation endured each time a native speaker witnessed her halting English. But I can also affirm the strong ethnic identity she derived from her English Plus experience. Like the Hispanic students in Tse's study, who learned English

faster via brokering if they were foreign-born and more about their first culture if they were U.S.-born, she was unavoidably plunged into the adult world of electric bills and rent hikes in New York City, of immunization notices and PTA meetings, while introduced to ethnic cuisine and holiday customs by translating supermarket postings. The only reported mistranslation she has ever confessed to is the school nurse's note suggesting a visit to the optometrist; she reported a perfect eye exam and continued to squint through school.

While it is unrealistic to expect school districts to provide multilingual services, particularly in districts with severely limited funding, it is possible to acknowledge the presence of a growing population and to assemble some bilingual materials for a major group of limited English proficiency students. Ever since the Supreme Court nullified the Nebraska Act of 1921, in which the state's (first U.S.) official English language law was used to bar a teacher from teaching in German, federal policy has formally acknowledged the multilingualism of the United States. But protection of language rights is difficult to enforce and attitudes are even more difficult to change. Even though the Spanish-American League Against Discrimination (SALAD) formed English Plus in 1985, in response to the English Only movement, more states have enacted English only laws (which certainly extend beyond educational institutions and into the world of commerce and law). Victor Villanueva suggests that a "historic ill will to Hispanics" underpins the English Only movement ("Solamente Ingles and Hispanics" 78); he further likens the language proficiency requirement to the process that had been used to prevent southern blacks from voting ("Solamente Ingles" 81). South Carolina defiantly hoisted the Confederate flag on the state capitol during the civil rights era and is just now in the process of removing a state law that bans interracial marriage, so resentment at federal interference runs deep. If it is true that Hispanics, who are sometimes descendants from racial mixes, such as Carib Indian or West

African, suffer from a similar prejudice that was used to deny the advancement of southern blacks, and that, as a predominantly Catholic group, Hispanics are less welcome in some Bible belt areas than in other parts of the country, the resistance to bilingualism may be more easily appreciated.

But there is, fortunately, an interest among many recent teachers-in-training to prepare for and work with limited English proficient students. Armed with the knowledge that nearly 50% of non-English-speaking Hispanics will drop out of high school, these pre-service teachers are often taking up Spanish minor or learning some basic vocabulary. While this remedy does not place the responsibility for bilingual resources on the state, where it should rest, it does indicate a proactive stance and a refusal to allow the language minority students to remain invisible. Because I direct the teacher education program at my university, I utilize a portion of the methods class to conduct a personal linguistic history, using Leila Christenbury's model in Making the Journey. As my students begin to examine their own use of dialect, to listen to their accents (about which many of them harbor serious anxiety), and to trace their linguistic heritage, they discover the advantages and disadvantages that their parent' education, English fluency, and monolingualism or bilingualism have afforded them. We are slowly becoming a more heterogeneous population in York County; transplants from other parts of the country are invading the region, and with them, immigrants from Asia, Central America and the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. Ethnic eateries are spreading across the border, as Charlotteans are introduced to multiculturalism and trying to run from urban sprawl. A Catholic church in Rock Hill is now offering a Sunday service in Spanish until Easter, with plans to continue if attendance remains constant. Isolationism can no longer prevail, as the staunch stronghold of descendants of revolutionary and post-revolutionary-ear English speaking Protestants becomes home to

citizens from diverse backgrounds. And, of course, "the Spanish lady" is out there every day, championing the cause of bilingual education.

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