The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Education Review
College of Education

Journal Homepage: Texas Education Review
Published online: February 2019
Submit your article to this journal

When Caring Hurts: "Foreign" Teachers in Texas Bilingual Classrooms

NATHALY BATISTA-MORALES
The University of Texas at Austin

To cite this article: Batista-Morales, N. (2018). When caring hurts: "Foreign" teachers in Texas bilingual classrooms. *Texas Education Review*, *7*(1), 21-29. http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/9

When Caring Hurts: "Foreign" Teachers in Texas Bilingual Classrooms

NATHALY BATISTA-MORALES
The University of Texas at Austin

"There are some things that are better left unspoken" (Carrillo, 2010, p. 74).

> "¿Vamos a la carpeta maestra?" "Carpeta, carpeta." The teacher was puzzled, she wondered what her student meant. It had to be the three-ring binders they used to collect their best work; I mean that was the most feasible explanation. Instead, he approached the carpet with nothing but a 6-year-old's smile ready to conquer his first day of class. She could have kept quiet but instead decided to yell out "¡Oh, alfombra, sí, vamos a la alfombra!" That teacher was me. Skype had made it possible for a principal from a small East Austin elementary school to, inconspicuously, hire a Puerto Rican teacher who seemed had all the tools to conquer the Texan, bilingual classroom. After all, she spoke Spanish and was Latina. What else could a class of Mexican-American students need?

There are times when some teachers must bite their tongue. Times when they need to resist the temptation of correcting their students, even when it comes from the heart because you think *it is what's best for them*. Because we all know every loving teacher wants their students to go out into the world speaking "correctly." But, at what cost?

It wasn't until almost two years later when I was able to understand how wrong we both had been. It took a multitude of readings, lectures, and conversations in my doctoral program for me to realize my first-grade class had needed much more than a linguistic and – what seemed like – ethnic match. I finally understood how on that very first day of class I had invalidated my most brilliant student by correcting the only Spanish he knew, the one his mother and father had rightfully shared with him for his entire life, the one that echoed his home, complex socio-political past, and identity as a Mexican-American, simultaneous bilingual student.

This essay is about me, a former bilingual teacher, who like many was hired abroad, from Puerto Rico,[1] Spain and other Latin-American countries. However, if you are a teacher who speaks a different variety of their student's language, you will likely see yourself in my story. Maybe your students are like mine, Mexican-American and Central-American students whose daily linguistic interactions are sometimes puzzling and unfamiliar, or maybe your students speak Puerto Rican Spanglish up in New York; TexMex here in my new hometown, or African-American Vernacular English. Perhaps you see yourself in the principal that hired me or in the administrators that run the type of program that made it possible for me to come and teach in Central Texas. It is my hope this essay speaks to you as well.

[1]Although Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth, I position Puerto Rican teachers as "culturally foreign" to the Mexican, Central American and Mexican-American cultures, histories, and experiences.

Setting the Stage

Bilingual Education

According to the most recent data made available by the Texas Education Agency (2018), Texas currently serves 18.8% of all English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States (U.S.). The same report positions Texas and Nevada competing for the second highest rates of participation in ELL programs in the nation. The majority of these students speak Spanish at home—908,304 in pre-school to the twelfth grade to be exact.

The Bilingual Education Act (BEA; Title VII of The Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1968) set aside funding to support English Language Learners in U.S. schools for the first time ever. However, this funding was set aside for transitional bilingual programs where the end goal is to develop English as quickly as possible (Baker, 2011). Under the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2001), the BEA was eliminated and replaced with the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act 7 (NCLB, 2001). As evidenced by its name, this act was completely focused on developing English proficiency. In the most recent federal government education act, the, Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015), the focus continues to be on English language proficiency and there is no mention of bilingual education

At the state level here in Texas, bilingual education carries a long legacy. Beginning in the 1800's, communities engaged in early forms of bilingual education in Spanish, Czech, German and other languages (Blanton, 2004). English-only policies however have come and gone throughout the decades, yet entire generations have been deprived from their language and have experienced unequal facilities, segregation, and unfair grade placement (Powers, 2008). Throughout these English-only policies and ideologies, the Spanish speaking community has shown resistance (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998) and bilingual education continues to live on today. Although these federal and state mandates only require some form of support for English learners, Texas prides itself in being one of the few states that offers bilingual education in primary schools and in a handful of middle and high schools.

In Texas, bilingual education looks different across districts and grades, depending on the number of ELLs enrolled in the school and federal and state policies. At the high school level, the state requires English as a Second Language (ESL) support that can look like an ESL pullout or push in support with the goal of developing the English language. In the lower levels, bilingual education programs can range between similar ESL programs, to Transitional models focused on English development, to Dual Language models that aim to develop bilingualism and biliteracy by the fifth grade (Baker, 2011). These policies, along with the limited number of bilingual educators who graduate each year, create an unsustainable need for bilingual educators in the state and result in large, urban districts to search abroad for qualified bilingual educators.

The solution seems simple, either hire teachers from Spain or carry out wide teacher recruitment fairs in the Commonwealth (not a country, not a state) of Puerto Rico. To bring Spanish teachers, Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Ministry of Education of Spain for the Texas-Spain Visiting International Teacher Program (VIT program) hold a memorandum of understanding (Isett, 2016). This program helps Spanish teachers acquire a work visa and come to the United States in exchange for three years of service. Puerto Rican teachers, moreover, are born U.S. citizens and hold at least two of the requirements to enter Texan bilingual classrooms: (a) Permission to work legally in the U.S., and (b) ability to speak the target language of Spanish.

Complications. There are however unexamined complexities in this process. Not all varieties of Spanish are the same and more importantly, some hold more power than others. Simply speaking the target language, does not mean a cultural and linguistic match. Teachers hired from abroad step into bilingual classrooms with close to no knowledge on the Mexican or Mexican-American cultural practices, home values, and linguistic repertoires. I know because I was one of those teachers. I was once a Puerto Rican teacher for a group of Mexican American children. Clueless about their history, their different paths to citizenship, linguistic practices, and home values I often imposed my experience on them. Without these understandings, I often substituted their lexical repertoire with mine, *a proper type of Spanish*, invalidating their home language and identities. I am not the only one. A recent visit to a fifth-grade classroom revealed similar sentiments felt by one of my dear Puerto Rican friends; a deep lack of knowledge of her students' culture(s), issues of miscommunication, and assumptions and feelings of guilt permeated our conversation. Additionally, in the new Trump Era where our Mexican, Mexican-American students, Central-American, and other immigrant and minority students face new attacks and experience old fears, Mexican American students are entitled to teachers who have at the minimum some knowledge of their home life and past experiences. Yet, we are thrown into the classroom with no training on these issues. School districts continue think it is okay to fill in the gap with teachers who can connect so little with their students. Could professional development on culture, Mexican-American Spanish, history, policies, and immigration fill in some gaps and strengthen these teachers' practices in the classroom?

Theoretical Framework

"So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity-I am my language" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 81).

I approach this piece from a triad of theories: Anzaldúa's Borderland Theories, Bourdieu's concept of Social Capital and Freire's Critical Pedagogy. Together, they frame my understandings of the issues presented in this piece around language, power and the discovery of my oppressive role in the bilingual classroom.

No one captures the sentiment of linguistic resistance as well as Gloria Anzaldúa in her essay *How to Tame a Wild Tongue* (1987). "We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration" referring to their Chicano tongue, "an orphan tongue…a bastard language" (p. 80). Anzaldúa makes a case for the need for Chicanos near the border to create a new tongue; the need to give voice to their unique identities. She draws on her experiences as both a student and a Chicana to voice how she often felt censured by teachers who expected her to speak English only and by other Latinas whose Spanish they positioned as correct without thinking of the immense historical, social, and political differences. Anzaldúa invites me to reflect: How often did I make my students feel like they spoke "poor Spanish?", how often does a Chicana feel uncomfortable around me, a Puerto Rican Latina, "afraid of [my] censorship?" Anzaldúa pushes me to acknowledge my role as an oppressive, censoring entity in my student's lives and pushes me to do things differently.

To accomplish this, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991) offers a lens through which to analyze teacher-student linguistic interactions. He poses that all linguistic exchanges function in a similar way as the economic system of the time in that they have acquisitive value, or what he calls linguistic capital. He argues that linguistic exchanges function as economic exchanges and utterances are both "signs of wealth" and more importantly to my work "signs of authority intended to be believed and obeyed" (p. 504). In Bourdieu's logic, utterances have value dependent on the symbolic market or the value placed on it that is most favorable to the interlocutor with most power. That power is not limited to language itself, but to societal roles such as employer-employee, and in this teacher-student context. In this circumstance, the teacher's Spanish from Spain or from Puerto Rico

can be positioned as more valuable than the student's TexMex or local Spanish variation. I argue that although teachers sit on a higher plane, they can choose to place equal value on both linguistic interactions, theirs and their students, thus breaking down the market Bourdieu describes. If they fail to attempt this, students will internalize the language of power – not theirs – and might decide to use an alternate register in hopes to increase their linguistic capital. It is here where I found myself, imposing my own Spanish on my students and thus becoming a type of oppressor as articulated by Freire (1970).

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, laid the foundation for the critical pedagogy we know today. In his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) he positioned education as a political act. Freire taught reading and writing to his adult students though their social realities in the *barrios*, using concepts close to their daily experiences as members of the lower working class. Through this work, he theorized an invaluable body of concepts such as humanization, problem-posing education, dialogue, and praxis. Today, Freire helps me articulate my position as the oppressor in my previous linguistic interactions with my Mexican-American students. These concepts provide a lens through which to look back at my experiences and of those teachers like me described in the literature and recognize our faults. It provides a framework for the teachers in my position to realize that the liberation- linguistic in this case- of the oppressed must be created with them and not for them in a space that values all linguistic registers, those of the oppressor and the oppressed.

Review of the Literature

Several researchers have pointed out the issues of hiring Latin American and Spanish teachers to fill in vacancies in bilingual classrooms (Cervantes, in press; Smith, 2002; Valdes, 2002). Although these teachers speak Spanish, the target language, difference in class, culture, and migratory experiences should send, in the least, a cautionary message to school districts, overseas recruiters, and school administrators. Valdez (2002,) notes that "teachers from Spain knew little about poor children from Mexico and even less about the racial context of the United States" (p. 193) when describing the experience of one western United States school district trying to fill in the gap. Cervantes (in press) argued that teachers from Latin America and Spain belong to a different social class, are highly educated, and are not able to identify with their marginalized students, often devaluing their language practices, experiences, and identities. An excerpt from a study by Smith (2001) on studying the role of community resources of the minority language students and their role in the classroom drives the situation deeper by pointing at the less tangible issue of language discourse and ideologies:

> After an English-dominant Mexican American student answered,
> "Hoy fuimos ala marqueta" (sic), Sra. Galarraga, a native of Puerto Rico,
> supplied the word "colmado"[store] and wrote on the board the sentence,
> "Hoy fuimos al colmado La Calle. " As she wrote, students spelled each
> word aloud in Spanish. Despite substitution of the non-Spanish form
> "marqueta" there was no discussion of the Caribbean term "colmado" or
> comparison with local terms for "market," such as "tiendita" or "mercado."
> (p. 387)

Smith (2001) termed the word "marqueta" as "non-Spanish" in the excerpt above and focused on the fact that the teacher in his study did not stop to discuss the term "colmado" as the Caribbean term. For me, this classroom instance holds a different importance. This episode leads me to hypothesize that foreign teachers could in fact position their own Spanish variation as superior than that of minority Mexican-American or Central American students. Henderson (2015), in her extensive literature review on language ideologies, stated that "a language ideology could operate con-

sciously or unconsciously, and it could be used to silence, empower or oppress" (p. 26). Is it possible that teachers of these different backgrounds will position their variation of Spanish as superior? Ideologies matter to students. For example, Martínez (2013) found in his study of the use of Spanglish in a language arts classroom with sixth graders in Los Angeles that students internalized dominant language ideologies when they were asked about their linguistic practices as they described English as proper and expressed deficits views on their Spanglish. Deficit views can negatively impact students' self-esteem and create a disconnect from in-school learning and out-of-school knowledge impacting student's achievement in school. Palmer (2009) argued that the underachievement of bilingual students could be linked to inequities in Dual Language classrooms where English dominant students and unaware teachers create an imbalance of conversational power. The cited research helps us understand the possible ideological battles present in the context addressed in this piece.

How We Got Here

Language mixing practices and ideologies are a complex issue discussed by many experts in the bilingual education field (e.g., Baker, 2006; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Poplack, 1980; Valdez, 1981). What is clear is that Texan bilingual classrooms are a result of a complex history between the United States and Mexico that naturally reflects on our children's linguistic practices. Mexico was invaded in the 1500's by the Spanish Crown, thus resulting in their use of their Spanish today, along with more than 60 indigenous languages. In 1848, Mexico lost 40 percent of their territory to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe de Hidalgo (Toro-Morn, 2009), or what some communities describe as *"I did not cross the border, the border crossed me."* This event led children of Mexican descent as well as to their newly arrived amigos y primos, to develop their own language with the passage of time, "a living language…one that is not incorrect, [a language that] sprang out of the Chicano's need to identify [themselves] as a distinct people," (p. 77) or Chicano Spanish as described by Anzaldúa (1987). This is what we are left with, the children born of a relationship between Conquista and appropriation being educated by strangers to their suffering, history and language.

Why It Matters

Latinx students who speak Spanish as their home language continue to grow across Texas and the United States (NCES, 2015). It is imperative teachers learn how to draw on these student's linguistic and cultural resources. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), made the case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the success of African American and other historically marginalized students. In her article *But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1995), she exemplifies the work of teachers of African-American students who successfully incorporate their students' culture and language into their lessons. Her review of the literature in that same article revealed that student's whose home language is used in the classroom are more likely to be successful academically and that the students whose home culture is present in the classroom do better, the case of White, middle class students. However, simply hiring a teacher that is a linguistic match does not guarantee success. Much more has to be done in preparing teachers for the task of a culturally and linguistically humanizing teaching experience.

Concluding Thoughts

Recommendations

Hiring teachers from foreign contexts to teach in Texan bilingual classrooms is a more complex issue that we can begin to untangle through this piece. Although there is existent research in the dual language field looking at inequalities between the English and Spanish languages (Cervantes-Soon, in press; Martinez, 2013; Palmer, 2009; Valdez, 1997), I invite researchers in the field to take a closer look at the dynamics between two Spanish registers as discussed in this paper. In the meantime, there are actionable steps all stakeholders can begin to take in the process of addressing the intricacies of "foreign" teachers leading out bilingual classrooms.

School principals, recruiters, and other district personal need to be aware of these complexities when hiring qualified teachers for our bilingual classrooms and take a clear stance on what they value most; (a) home grown teachers with rich experiences as Mexican and Central Americans growing up in our communities or (b) the idea of bringing what some deem correct, academic Spanish (Flores & Rosa, 2015) into the classroom without giving it much thought. When there are not enough home-grown teachers available to fill the need for teachers, comprehensive professional development on: (a) Mexican-American/Central-American history, (b) politics, (c) documented and undocumented migration, (d) cultural differences and (e) language usage could have an impact on preparing teachers from foreign contexts to better address this specific context.

Lastly, bilingual teachers themselves must have a pivotal role. Teachers can take a more active role in learning about their student's history, culture and language. Homegrown educators from the local communities can become leaders in their campuses supporting other teachers and administrators not aware of these issues. These same teachers are the most apt to collaborate with researchers in the field to develop instructional practices that support these theories.

Reflections

This was hard for me. Changing my views on the Spanish register that should be used as the means of instruction in bilingual elementary classrooms was an arduous process of reflection and ideological shifts. It was hard to cope with the feeling of not teaching my students academic Spanish all the time. Was I and am I taking tools away from my students? Don't they need it to survive in the future, get into college, and be ready for jobs that required bilingualism? I do not propose we take from students of color the opportunity of mastering both registers, their own and the language of power. I am asking teachers and researchers for ongoing reflection, constant acknowledgement of their complex sociopolitical history, and a fierce appreciation for who they are, how they speak, and what they bring.

Nathaly Batista-Morales, M.A., is a Puerto Rican doctoral student in the Bilingual and Bicultural Education program in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on the preparation of bilingual literacy teachers with a focus on Critical Literacies. Additionally, she explores how bilingual and bicultural elementary students take up activism and social change in their biliteracy classrooms. She teaches undergraduate courses in Bilingual Reading Methods, Reading Assessment and Development, and English as Second Language Methods.

References

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands: La Frontera* (Vol. 3). San Francisco: Aunt Lute.

Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (Vol. 79). Multilingual matters.

Blanton, C. K. (2007). *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1836-1981* (Vol. 2). Texas A&M University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press.

Carrillo, J. (2010). Teaching that breaks your heart: Reflections on the soul wounds of a first-year Latina teacher. *Harvard Educational Review*, *80*(1), 74-81.

Cervantes-Soon, C. G., Dorner, L., Palmer, D., Heiman, D., Schwerdtfeger, R., & Choi, J. (2017). Combating inequalities in two-way language immersion programs: Toward critical consciousness in bilingual education spaces. *Review of Research in Education*, *41*(1), 403-427.

Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, *85*(2), 149-171.

Freire, P. (1970/1990). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). Translanguaging and education. In *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Henderson, K. I. (2015). Dual language bilingual education program implementation, teacher language ideologies and local Language policy. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Texas at Austin: Austin, Texas.

Isett, C. (2016). Legacy Prep and ILTexas Recruit Teachers from Spain and Puerto Rico. Retrieved from http://www.txcharterschools.org/legacy-prep-and-iltexas-recruit-teachers-from-spain-and-puerto-rico/

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, *34*(3), 159-165.

Martínez, R. A. (2013). Reading the world in Spanglish: Hybrid language practices and ideological contestation in a sixth-grade English language arts classroom. *Linguistics and Education*, *24*(3), 276-288.

Mitchell, C. (2016). Need for Bilingual Educators Moves School Recruitment Abroad. Retrieved from http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/01/27/need-for-bilingual-educators-moves-school-recruitment.html

National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2015). *English Language Learners in public schools.* Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp.

Palmer, D. K. (2009). Middle-class English speakers in a two-way immersion bilingual classroom: "Everybody should be listening to Jonathan right now…". *Tesol Quarterly*, *43*(2), 177-202.

Poplack, S. (2000). Sometimes I'll start a sentence in Spanish y termino en espanol: Toward a typology of code-switching. *The Bilingualism Reader*, *18*(2), 221-256.

Powers, J. M. (2008). Forgotten history: Mexican American school segregation in Arizona from 1900–1951. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 41*(4), 467-481.

San Miguel, G., & Valencia, R. (1998). From the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to Hopwood: The educational plight and struggle of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. *Harvard Educational Review*, *68*(3), 353-413.

Smith, P. H. (2001). Community language resources in dual language schooling. *Bilingual Research Journal*, *25*(3), 375-404.

Texas Education Agency. (2017). *Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2017-2018*. Retrieved from https://tea.texas.gov/acctres/enroll_index.html.

Valdés, G. (1981). Codeswitching as deliberate verbal strategy. *Latino Language and Communicative Behavior*, 95-108.

Valdés, G. (2002). Enlarging the pie: Another look at bilingualism and schooling in the US. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 155*(156), 187–195.

Valdés, G. (1997). Dual-language immersion programs: A cautionary note concerning the education of language-minority students. *Harvard Educational Review*, *67*(3), 391-430.