Engaging Pre-Service Teachers in an Exploration of the Politics of Language

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Abstract

This study is concerned with an exploration of the politics of language with predominately white pre-service teachers through a linguistic activity. It is a continuous, joint effort of three teacher educators working at two universities. Different pedagogical emphases and data collection methods are used at these two universities to investigate their impact on the pre-service teachers' awareness of the politics of language. It is shown that the pre-service teachers who are required to read critical literature and to reflect specifically on the linguistic activity through guiding questions become more aware of the political aspects of language than those who are not. Yet this critical awareness does not necessarily carry over into a change in their thinking about literacy education with language minority students. This study is hoped to serve as a prompt for more dialogue in this area.

Introduction

Unlike traditional literacy education, critical literacy/pedagogy argues that literacy should not be defined narrowly to include only skills of reading and writing. It proposes that literacy education should promote the principles of democracy

and justice, of questioning and analysis, and of resistance and action (Edelsky, 1999). Similarly, Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) argue,

> Critical literacy practices encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice. (p. 3)

Research and scholarship in the vein of critical literacy/pedagogy (e.g., Comber & Simpson, 2001; Janks, 2000; Leland & Harste, 2000) can hardly escape the influence of Paulo Freire. For Freire, there is an invisible solidarity between humans and their world: we are not only "in" the world but also "with" the world (Freire, 1972, p. 51). Therefore, literacy does not merely mean the ability to read "words," but also involves the capacity to interpret and transform the "world." Such a view on literacy is also duly captured by the title of one of Freire's books—*Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Following Freire, Giroux (1993) argues that literacy is not only social and ideological, but also plural and political. Literacy educators are supposed to empower the marginalized and transform social inequalities. They should act as social activists and change agents that make an impact on students' learning and even on society as a whole (McLaren, 1997).

Consequently, empowerment or liberation through literacy education is one of the main concerns of critical literacists. Freire (1984) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one of the most important works in critical literacy/pedagogy, contrasts the role of the oppressed and that of the oppressors in relation to emancipation in the following manner:

> It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter, as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves. It is therefore essential that *the oppressed* wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught; and the contradiction will be resolved by the appearance of the new man: neither oppressor nor oppressed, but man in the process of liberation. (p. 42)

For Freire, it is not only the oppressed but also the oppressors who need to be emancipated. However, he seems to disagree with the participation of the oppressors in emancipation because "[p]edagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression" (Freire, 1984, p. 39). It seems that the oppressed need to take the initiative in, and assume the responsibility for, their (and even the oppressors') emancipation while the oppressors appear to have little to

contribute. This perspective on emancipation can be misinterpreted to blame the victims (the oppressed) if the project of emancipation fails. Yet is it true that the oppressors play no part in emancipation? Freire would say yes unless they experience "a profound rebirth" and become comrades of the oppressed (Freire, 1984, p. 47). This puts the role of the oppressed in relief as opposed to that of the oppressors. Yet some in the dominant group may want to join the marginalized in the process of liberation but feel powerless. At this crossroads, we can turn to multiculturalism for insight.

Multiculturalism or multicultural education is a term that "has emerged and spread so rapidly, has been applied to so many phenomena in so many contexts, has been used in attack and in defense so often to cover such very different developments, that it is no easy task to describe what one means by multiculturalism" (Glazer, 1997, p. 7). Multiculturalism, according to Duarte and Smith (2000), can be divided at least into four foundational perspectives: ethnic studies multiculturalism, antiracist multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism, and liberal democratic multiculturalism. Though each perspective has a distinct agenda, all of them have one thing in common: they take on an oppositional position toward assimilationism "because it emphasizes cultural sameness rather than cultural diversity" (Duarte & Smith, 2000, p. 5). In addition, they insist that the dominant should not exempt themselves from but contribute to the liberation of the marginalized through reflexivity and action.

McIntyre (1997) and Sleeter (2000), for example, have worked with pre-service teachers (most of them are whites) in investigating their whiteness and its impact on their teaching as whiteness is usually invisible and normalized. This is especially important in the light that white pre-service teachers are reported to have little cross-cultural knowledge and experience (Ladson-Billings, 2001, 2005). Yet they consist of the majority of the teaching force and are likely to run into minority/immigrant students in their teaching careers (Gilbert, 1995; Sleeter, 2001). One of the central themes recurring throughout Lisa Delpit and Joanne Kilgour Dowdy's (2002) edited book, *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*, is that in order to help language minority students learn "Standard English," we need to value their cultures and home languages first. We would like to present an extended quotation from Joan Wynne (2002) as she points out aptly what we as teacher educators have experienced personally in our profession and why we as researchers have conducted this study:

> With the research that is now available about the importance of schools accepting a child's home language while still teaching them the standard dialect, too many teachers are astoundingly ignorant of the basic truths about language. The lack of knowledge about language development amongst many of our teachers spoke to a gap in the professional development of these teachers; and, to me, it suggests as well how insignificant many colleges of education may assume that kind of knowledge is. But such

> neglect by colleges to include in their curriculum the politics of language is no small matter. . . . Moreover, all children—as well as teachers—who are never given a forum to examine the oppressive assumption that one language is better than another become vulnerable to other acts of oppression. (pp. 212–213)

Wynne calls this neglect of the politics of language in our curriculum "miseducation," and without teaching linguistic politics, "we teach a lie" (Wynne, 2002, p. 207).

We agree with critical literacists that literacy/language (the terms "literacy" and "language" are used loosely to refer to the same thing in this study) is not neutral and should be examined critically. We also share with multiculturalists the belief that the dominant (or pre-service teachers in our study) are responsible for and should participate in liberating the marginalized from linguistic oppression. Informed theoretically by these two areas of scholarship, our study explored the politics of language with predominantly white pre-service teachers in our teacher education programs through a linguistic activity. Different pedagogical emphases and data collection methods were used on two research sites to investigate their impact on the pre-service teachers' awareness of the politics of language. Pedagogically, understanding the importance of incorporating the politics of language into literacy education, we were interested in how this could be implemented in our teacher education programs. We wanted to know whether explicit instruction of critical literature helped raise pre-service teachers' awareness of the politics of language. Methodologically, we were also curious about whether guided reflection had any effect on their awareness. Consequently, on one research site, the pre-service teachers were required to read critical literature before the linguistic activity and, after the activity, to reflect specifically on the activity by completing a questionnaire. On the other site, the pre-service teachers were not required to do either of these activities (i.e., reading critical literature or completing a questionnaire), but they were required to write down their thoughts about the activity. In what follows, we will discuss our participants, methods, findings, and implications in detail.

Contextualizing the Study

Midwest University

One of the research sites is at a Midwestern university (Midwest University) in the United States. Midwest University is located in a city where there are an increasing number of immigrant students. The student population is very diverse in one of the city's school corporations with which Midwest University works closely in placing its pre-service teachers for internship and student teaching. This school corporation is largely urban with 53% white, 26% African-American, 12% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 1% Native American, and 5% multiracial. All schools

in this corporation include at least 4 racial/ethnic groups while most schools contain 5 or 6. Of the 31,549 students, 54% receive free lunch and 9% reduced lunch. Yet most of the pre-service teachers in Midwest University's teacher education program are middle-class Caucasians and have little experience working with minority students.

A total of 30 pre-service teachers at Midwest University participated in the study: 20 in the fall 2009 and 10 in the spring 2010. The participants consisted of all the students from the Critical Reading in the Content Area class offered in these two semesters. It was offered to secondary education majors in the teacher education program. Critical literacy was one of the emphases for this course. Among the 30 participants, only one was African-American; the rest were non-Hispanic whites. The purpose of the class was to help the pre-service teachers understand the power and politics of literacy, reflect critically on those aspects of literacy, and implement a curriculum that can empower their future students. While there was little disagreement among the pre-service teachers that literacy serves as an avenue to success, they were not explicitly aware that literacy, including academic literacy, is also a product of the dominant culture and that it can be used to marginalize others. If the focus is only on teaching literacy to empower students without questioning what is embedded in it, there is a risk of perpetuating the dominant culture and continuing to marginalize the disadvantaged. Therefore, without reflecting critically on what they would be teaching, the pre-service teachers' well-meant intent of helping the disadvantaged children could turn into the opposite.

Northwest University

The other research site is also at a university (Northwest University) in the United States. Northwest University is located in a rural city of about 20,000, where the population is predominantly White and Hispanic, the demographic terms used by the state for categorizing people. There are an increasing number of Hispanic immigrant students and students of migrant farm workers. Currently, 52% of the local school district population, where Northwest University is located, is Hispanic. The student population in a larger nearby city registers 45% Hispanic, showing the changing trend across the state. Northwest University works closely with surrounding school districts in placing its pre-service teachers for field practica and student teaching. Unlike Midwest University's primarily undergraduate teacher preparation program, Northwest University's programs are Master of Arts (MAT) programs. Most of the pre-service graduate candidates in the program are middle-class whites and have little experience working with minority students.

The participants on this site were the students taking a class titled Teaching Language Arts to Middle School/High School Students. It was the methods class offered for teachers wishing to teach Language Arts (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening, and so on.). There were 12 students enrolled in this course in the fall 2009, one Hawaiian student and the remaining students Caucasian.

These students had never taken a course in critical literacy, but had taken general literacy strategy course work. At this point in the MAT program, they were observing in their field experience placements but had not yet started their student teaching.

Methods

To find out whether exposure to critical literature made a difference, the participants at Midwest University were given critical texts (e.g., Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Janks, 1997; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; McIntosh, 1997) to read and discuss while the participants at Northwest University were not. Then, a linguistic activity was designed to engage the participants at both universities. The linguistic activity simulated a scenario where the languages created by the participants were likely to change through discussion, negotiation, contestation, compromise, marginalization, etc. After the activity, the participants at both universities were asked to reflect and write down their thoughts. However, the participants at Midwest University had to respond to specific questions on a questionnaire while those at Northwest University simply wrote down their thoughts without the guiding questions. These differential treatments allowed us to examine whether exposure to critical literature and guided reflection had an impact on their awareness of the politics of language. In what follows, more details are provided.

Linguistic Activity

The linguistic activity was designed to help the pre-service teachers put themselves in the shoes of the marginalized to experience the politics of language. The pre-service teachers were divided into eight groups.[1] Each group was asked to create their own language that represented the meaning of the statement, "I enjoy this class; it is critical." Each group was allowed to use the English alphabet, pictures, numbers, or any other symbols to denote the meaning of the statement. The only restriction was that their native tongue, English, should not be used. For example, they could use the English alphabet, a total of 26 letters, as their basic linguistic units to create their own languages, yet any meaningful English words such as "enjoy" and "critical" could not be used to represent the meanings of "enjoy" and "critical" in English.

After each of the eight groups came up with a language to represent the statement, two groups were combined into one, and a total of four larger groups were formed. Again, each group's task was to come to a consensus on what symbols they would use in their languages to represent the statement. Then the process was repeated; that is, four groups merged into two even larger groups to discuss the languages they agreed upon. Finally, the entire class gathered together, and only one language was put forth to represent the statement. This final language was called "the Standard Language of the Class," which was regarded as the

"standard" way of communicating the meaning of the statement. Everything else was considered "non-standard" and should be prohibited. At the end of the activity, the pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on the process.

Data Collection: Midwest University

At Midwest University, data were collected from a total of 30 participants through a questionnaire (more on this later) with specific questions related directly to the politics of language. There were a total of seven questions on the questionnaire. Unlike a traditional questionnaire with standardized questions and limited answer choices (see Robson, 2002, Chapter 8), all of the questions for this study, except the first one, were open-ended. Question 1 was a "yes or no" type of question designed deliberately to find out how many participants had experienced changes in their languages throughout the process. Questions 2 to 6 asked participants to reflect on how they felt about the process and why. The last question was about application, and its purpose was to see if this activity had any impact on the pre-service teachers' view on teaching literacy to language minority students. The questionnaire was designed with two objectives in mind. First, all of the questions targeted the politics of language, so that the pre-service teachers were invited to reflect specifically on it. This allowed us to learn whether the questionnaire was instrumental in raising their awareness of the politics of language. Second, despite their focus on the politics of language, the questions were also exploratory in nature. They allowed the pre-service teachers to comment freely on the activity as long as their comments were relevant.

Data Collection: Northwest University

Twelve students in the fall 2009 participated in the study on this site.[2] The participants were the MAT students from the Teaching Language Arts to Middle School/High School Students class. The data were collected without specific questions asked to guide the participants. Right after the linguistic activity, the participants were invited to write down their reflections. They did not put their names on the reflections. We then had a couple of students volunteer to read the reflections out loud to the class. It was a way to honor differing voices and for students to reflect on the diverse experiences of the same activity. This was followed by a group discussion.

During the next week, we read through all of the reflections and saw the following themes: focus on the activity as group process rather than on the politics of language, focus on teaching English (i.e., grammar rules), and focus on how language develops over time. We coded the narrative data by using highlighters. We used yellow to highlight the theme of group process. For example, "there was a lot of 'concessions' in the end of the process," "negotiation was interesting," "the end was a compromise for everyone," and "it appeared to me that everyone's aim was to include all languages through conversation and compromise." It seemed as though many students thought this was a group activity to learn how

to compromise, work together, and be inclusive. This was not surprising because the program puts a big emphasis on building learning communities. Pink highlighted the second theme, teaching English. For example, "realized I hadn't paid any attention to grammar rules," "this would be a fun way to teach about grammar, after some modifications as needed," and "I was surprised there were so few grammatical changes through the process." Purple highlighted the politics of language development. For example, "could see potential use of this activity to draw attention to various types of social dynamics," "the person with the pen rules," "more dominant personalities are going to have the largest impact on the final result," "I can see how the dominant part of the group controlled how the language was changed because they exerted more power and control," and "I began to disengage when my culture was being largely ignored."

After coding in this manner, we began the process of comparing the experiences at the two universities. It was difficult to compare because the data set at Northwest University had not been guided by questions. However, the narrative analysis of the data at Midwest University was presented as analyses of the responses to the questions. Therefore, to make the comparison possible, we decided to analyze the data at Northwest University by using the questions on the questionnaire administered at Midwest University as guidelines. Specifically, the themes that emerged from the data at Northwest University were analyzed to see if they address the questions on the questionnaire. In the following section, we will discuss our findings on these two research sites in detail.

Data Analysis

In this section, we organize and report the findings from both research sites through the questions on the questionnaire. This allows us to compare and contrast the findings from these two groups of participants. It also helps us find out whether exposure to critical literature and guided reflection have an effect on the participants' awareness of the politics of language.

Question 1: Was the language the class decided to adopt the same as the language of your first group?

Midwest University. This question was intended to find out how many participants had gone through the experience of having their language changed as they changed groups. The experience was designed to imitate how people feel when their native language is deprived of them. Most of the participants used the English alphabet, numbers, pictures, and other symbols to create their languages. For example, some used the digit "1" to stand for the letter "a," "2" for "b," "3" for "c," and so on. Then they replaced all the letters in the statement, "I enjoy this class; it is critical," with their corresponding numbers. Some drew pictures such as a heart to stand for "enjoy" and a few desks to stand for "class." In the

second round of the activity, the groups that used different symbolic systems (e.g., numbers and pictures) were combined intentionally into a bigger group to increase the difficulty of reaching a consensus on the language they tried to create. The process was repeated until the entire class came up with one language. The results showed that only two out of 30 participants reported that their language was not changed. Yet the remaining 28 participants said that the language they created in their first group was changed. Through this activity, most of the pre-service teachers had the opportunity to relate, however remotely, to what it is like to have their language taken away from them.

Northwest University. Only one out of the 12 participants at Northwest University experienced having his/her language survive. The student reflected:

> It was interesting to reflect that in a sense, this is how language evolves. It was interesting to see that everyone had something different and thought different elements were important. My piece of the language survived the entire way through. I think that may be because it was so 'out there' no one else wanted to tackle it. (5-Fall-2009)[3]

The remaining 11 participants indicated in some way that the language they created in their first round was changed. Similar to what was found at Midwest University, the results showed that, through this activity, most of the pre-service teachers had the opportunity to connect to what it is like to have their language taken away from them.

Question 2: How did you feel when your language was changed or even not adopted at all as you changed groups?

Midwest University. This question followed up on the first question in asking participants to reflect on how they felt when their language was changed. Approximately half (16) of the participants said that they felt frustrated, upset, irritated, overwhelmed, etc. One of them, for example, wrote, "When our language was not adopted, I felt more confused and overwhelmed. I learned my group's language and was forced to learn a whole new concept" (15-Fall-2009). Another participant commented that their "story was lost" when some of their words were changed (3-Spring-2010). There were various reasons for those (a total of 14 participants) who did not seem to feel upset about their language being changed. Some were happy with the fact that part of their language was incorporated into the final version; some thought that other people's language seemed more organized and were willing to compromise; others did not care or did not feel attached to their own language as it was created only in minutes (e.g., 2-Spring-2010).

Northwest University. Three of the 12 participants at Northwest University said that they felt disappointed, bummed, no real ownership. One of them, for example, wrote, "I felt disappointed about the end result because it didn't really resemble my first language at all" (8-Fall-2009). Another participant commented, "I did not feel pressure on any level and actually encountered compromise in almost every interaction. I think I felt this was because I had no real ownership of this language and did not care if it was lost or eradicated" (11-Fall-2009). One participant reported feeling glad, "My language died in the 3rd round and I was glad because I didn't have to keep pronouncing it and the replacing language was a really fun idea. So, I happily adopted that new language" (4-Fall-2009).

Question 3: Did you feel power and politics involved in language development? Why? In what way(s)?

Midwest University. Question 3 was more specific, compared to question 2, in soliciting participants' opinions on the political aspects of this activity. It is interesting to note that while only half of them felt upset about their language being changed, the majority (25) felt politics involved in the process. That is, no matter how they felt (upset or not) when their language was changed, most of the participants thought the process was political. In fact, even the only one whose language was kept admitted to the fact that the process was political. He said, "I became a representative for my language and had to pressure the other groups to agree, get the people 'on the fence' on my side, and then overwhelm opponents by numbers" (14-Fall-2009). This is consistent with Carspecken's (1999) argument that not only those against whom power is exercised but those who exercise power over others know when the ideal speech situation (where coercion is free) is violated. The responses to this question confirmed that our linguistic activity was helpful in bringing the political aspects of language to our pre-service teachers' attention.

Northwest University. While only one-fourth of the participants at Northwest University felt upset about their language being changed, 10 used words that are indicative of power and politics involved in the process, i.e., concessions, negotiation, rules, dominant, rallied, involved, and the more vocal people. One participant, reflecting on the final, whole group round of the process, stated, "What a mess. The language lost a lot of meaning here. The person with the pen rules" (3-Fall-2009). Another participant pointed out that this activity provided an "interesting way to look at the pros/cons of group project—more dominant personalities are going to have the largest impact on the final result" (6-Fall-2009). Still another participant found it "fun to see how people rallied for their language and became so attached so quickly" (10-Fall-2009). The responses and use of their conventional language in the reflections confirmed the political aspects of language even if the Northwest students were not conscious of the implications of the politics in terms of our linguistic activity. The focused question used at

Midwest University may have contributed positively to the Midwest students' greater consciousness of the political aspects.

Question 4: Did you feel marginalized? Or was your voice ignored or silenced? How?

Midwest University. Half of the participants felt that their voices or opinions were neglected while the other half did not. Among the latter group, most of them thought that their voices were heard even though their languages were not chosen. Some of them felt their voices were included due to the fact that parts of their languages were incorporated into the final version. It is important to note that the number of participants in a class seemed to be related to whether they felt their voices were heard. Specifically, in the fall 2009, there were 20 participants, and as many as 13 said that their voices were marginalized. In contrast, in the spring 2010, we had only 10 participants, and only two commented that their voices were marginalized. It makes sense that the more people we have, the more difficult it is to hear and include everyone's opinion. This finding shows that the activity may lead to different results, depending on the number of participants.

Northwest University. Only three of the 12 participants' words indicated marginalization. One participant reflected, "If I didn't speak up to defend my language, it could have been easily wiped out. As it was, I felt disappointed because it didn't really resemble my first language at all. I can see how the dominant part of the group controlled how the language was changed because they exerted more power and control" (8-Fall-2009). One student felt included through the first three revisions, "Many of my original ideas survived through the first three revisions, which was empowering. I felt included in the new language." The same participant experienced a shift from empowerment to marginalization. "When it came to the final version, few of my groups' words survived. That was difficult. I began to disengage when my culture was being largely ignored" (9-Fall-2009). This reflection might indicate that no matter how many or few participants, some will feel marginalized when their language loses ground.

Question 5: How did you feel throughout the entire process?

Midwest University. This question was supposed to capture any other feelings not addressed by the previous questions, including those not directly related to the politics of language but important to our study. According to our data, there were not significant patterns shown in the responses to this question. A mixture of positive and negative feelings about the activity was found in their responses. Some commented that the activity was creative and would like to use it with their future students; others thought it was overwhelming going through several group discussions before the final language was determined.

Northwest University. Participants on this site had a mixture of feelings from "glad" to "hard" to "disengaged" and feeling that "the process became more difficult." One student explained, "What we previously had was rewritten with different characters. Also easy, but we left one language out. This is where it seemed hard. We already had symbols and resisted making changes" (3-Fall-2009). There also appeared to be a gradual shift from inclusion to disengagement, "When it came to the final version, few of my group's words survived. That was difficult. I began to disengage when my culture was being largely ignored" (9-Fall-2009). It appears that complexity evolved when another student responded that the process became more difficult, "I felt that meshing the languages became ever more difficult with the more people that became involved" (12-Fall-2009). To show the diversity in their responses, one student concluded, "Things that I create are not and never will be permanent, so as my original language merged, perhaps disappeared into others, I felt none the worse" (7-Fall-2009).

Question 6: What do you think or learn about "Standard English" through this activity?

Midwest University. Before the activity, the participants were assigned to read critical literature. One of the main issues discussed in the literature is about Standard English and its relationship to other dialects such as Ebonics. For example, following Fishman (1972, 1980), Smitherman (2002) proposes that we should use the terminology "the language of wider communication" to refer to Standard English because it is difficult to define what we mean by "Standard." Consequently, question 6 was designed to see if the participants could make a connection between this activity and the concept of Standard English discussed in their readings. Not surprisingly, most of the participants thought that Standard English was an elusive concept to pin down. For example, they wrote, "Standard English is just the result of historical conventions" (1-Fall-2009); "Standard English is difficult for everyone to agree on and accept. Everyone has different views on languages" (8-Fall-2009); "I've learned this semester more about the many languages that make up the words in Standard English (that they're borrowed from many languages)" (16-Fall-2009); and "It should be questioned! We should know why things are the way they are" (8-Spring-2010). We were happy to see that this activity reinforced what they read about Standard English and that they began to see it through a critical lens.

Northwest University. None of the specified critical texts were assigned as they were at Midwest University. The course focused on the methods needed to teach Language Arts in middle school and high school. The students never even thought about relating the activity to "Standard English." However, a few did reflect about a way to incorporate the activity into their future teaching of Language Arts as stated by this student, "This would be a fun way to teach about

grammar, after some modifications as needed" (4-Fall-2009). Another participant attempted to compare the written form of language to speech, "I thought of a language that only worked in written form but not in speech" (10-Fall-2009). A lack of tolerance for other languages was even voiced by one student, "I felt that meshing the languages became ever more difficult, with the more people that became involved. It was interesting to have parts of your language left out. I felt that those who used a coding system, A = #, B = O, and such, did it the wrong way and should have been discarded" (12-Fall-2009).

Question 7: Based on what you have learned from this activity, how can you empower your students, especially language minority students, through literacy education?

Midwest University. This question was designed to find out how this activity helped the pre-service teachers teach language minority students. Overall, their responses could be grouped into two broad categories. On the one hand, they wanted to acknowledge students' home languages. On the other hand, they (a total of 20 participants) insisted on the importance of teaching Standard English to help language minority students succeed. In what follows, we would like to present two quotations and point out the difficulty of eradicating the myth of Standard English:

> It is important to educate them in the *correct* manner, while maintaining the students' individual and cultural values. (6-Fall-2009)

> I can show them that their language is not always *incorrect*. They can place value on it. However, they need to appreciate Standard English because it is the language of power and is necessary to be advanced by the rules of our society. (2-Spring-2010)

The above two quotations are representative of many participants' responses to this question. It has two agendas: to promote home language/culture and Standard English. At first glance, they seem reasonable. However, a critical examination reveals their fallacy. They imply that there is a correct language, which is Standard English, versus other dialects, which are incorrect, and that teaching Standard English is equivalent to educating students in the correct manner and should be promoted according to the rules of our society. While their responses to question 6 show that Standard English is a misnomer and should be questioned, here they do not seem to question it. Instead, it is believed to be correct and should be taught. Additionally, the second quotation also betrays the fallacy of equating "what is" with "what should be." Specifically, "by the rules of our society," Standard English should be taught. Yet the rules of our society are not questioned but taken for granted. This mentality is in direct contrast to the

central belief of critical literacy that literacy/language is connected with politics and power. Similarly, the second quotation also shows that just because most of the people do it, it "should" be right, and we should do it, too: "Because 'Standard English' is used so widely, language minority students really need to learn it" (10-Fall-2009). It can be inferred that, despite their awareness of the politics of language, the participants still had difficulty transferring this awareness into practice and that they still subscribed implicitly to the myth of Standard English. It is ironic that what they believed could be used to empower their students might be misused to oppress them as literacy can be both empowering and oppressive (Lee, 2009).

Here is another quotation that echoes again the ingrained belief about the myth: "The biggest thing that I can do is not simply dismiss their language or force them to speak Standard English. I should be *tolerant* of other languages and realize that these students are not doing anything wrong by speaking them" (5-Fall-2009). We are tolerant of something usually because it is detestable or sometimes because it is simply different. Instead of appreciating other languages, this participant seemed to imply that their languages are different from Standard English or his language, but he is willing to bear with them. This attitude is reminiscent of McIntyre's (1997) comment about how we (middle-class whites in her study) usually judge things from our own perspective, and, with little knowledge about the lived experiences of our students (students of color in her study), we tend to reify the myth that "difference means deficiency" (p. 9).

Northwest University. This question was never contemplated by the participants. None of their responses indicated that empowering language minority students was even in their radar.

Implications

A comparison of the findings from both research sites allows us to reflect not only on our research methodology, which in turn informs our study as a continuous endeavor, but also on our pedagogy with predominately white pre-service teachers. In what follows, the issues with regard to research methods and pedagogy are discussed in detail.

Methodological Issues

Time. Our data show that some of the participants did not feel attached to the language they created (see question 2 previously). Therefore, they did not have the sense of deprivation when their language was changed. Yet the purpose of the activity was to help the participants relate to what it is like to have their native tongue taken away or silenced. To avoid this problem in the future, we suggest giving them more time, especially in the first round, to come up with their

language. If time permits, we can even let our students do it as a group homework assignment. Then they can come back to present their language to the entire class and explain how and why they have developed such a language. With more time and effort given to their language, our students will have a stronger sense of ownership of their language. Consequently, when their language is changed, they are more likely to feel marginalized.

Number. Another issue worth noting (see question 4 previously) is that the number of participants does have an impact on how they respond to question 4, i.e., whether their voices are ignored or silenced. Specifically, the more the participants, the more likely that they feel their voices are not heard. Even though this is consistent with our intuition and not difficult to imagine, it should be taken into account in conducting a study similar to ours. We found that our students did not feel their voices were ignored in a group of approximately 10. However, as the number of participants increases, for example, up to 20 at Midwest University in the fall 2009, an indication of marginalization becomes more evident. Consequently, it seems that a reasonably large number of participants work better than do a small number of participants.

Method. Finally, our data show similar responses to the first five questions on both research sites, but on the last two questions (regarding issues on "Standard English" and empowering language minority students) there is little in common. A critical difference is that, unlike students at Midwest University, those at Northwest University were not given critical literature to read and guiding questions to focus their thinking. As a result, though the same activity was implemented on both sites, methods did play an important role in producing different research findings.

Pedagogical Issues

Making social justice issues explicit. Again, while students at Midwest University were given critical literature to read in their Critical Reading class, those at Northwest University were not in their Language Arts class. The pedagogical implication is that if teacher educators do not focus students' thinking on social justice issues, many students are unlikely to be exposed to and reflect on such issues. This can be seen in the students at Northwest University who were preparing to teach English to middle school and high school students. Some reflections on the activity seemed to be biased by their preparation to teach English. For example, they thought it was a good activity to use to teach grammar rules. Yet this was antithetical to the purpose of the activity and might contribute to the perpetuation of the dominant ideologies. As a result, social justice issues related specifically to the politics of language should be incorporated to curriculum. It is also helpful to develop in the beginning of the course, for example, a

survey to gauge where students are in their thinking about social justice issues. The linguistic activity can be implemented at the end to indicate to what degree the impact of the curriculum and instruction has on students' thinking about those issues.

Being empowered to be language creators. Our last question invited pre-service teachers to think about how to empower language minority students through literacy education. A common response was that Standard English should be taught to empower them. The pre-service teachers felt that they possessed the literacy skills their students needed. And they were willing to pass the skills on to their students to empower them. This attitude toward literacy education is similar to the banking education that Freire (1984) criticizes. Students are considered depositories who receive, file, and store the deposits (knowledge) made by the teachers. This is also parallel to deficit-based instruction where students are positioned as "receivers (and victims) of knowledge, not creators" (Campano, 2008, p. 145). Consequently, it is in direct contrast to empowerment. To empower our students is to regard them as equal peers/co-inquirers in a setting where power relations are equalized (Lee, 2010). Their strengths instead of weaknesses should be identified and linked to a broader social and cultural dimension where they are able to connect academic literacy to their daily lives and examine it from multiple socio-political perspectives. Merely filling our students with the dominant literacy without questioning its underlying ideologies will not empower them but reproduce the status quo that marginalizes them.

Teaching and learning "Standard English" critically. It should be clarified that it is never our intent to argue against the importance of teaching Standard English to language minority students. We agree that the instruction of Standard English is crucial to empowering language minority students. Yet it is how it is instructed traditionally that we take issue with. Specifically, teaching Standard English as if it were superior to other dialects will reproduce rather than reverse linguistic oppression. We argue that Standard English should be taught critically. We can invite our students, especially language minority students, to examine it closely and understand that it can be used to position one group in opposition to another (Leland & Harste, 2008). We believe that our students need to have a good command of Standard English as a tool to critique the politics of the language. Learning Standard English through a critical lens avoids the risk of taking for granted the illegitimate, oppressive ideologies conveyed, knowingly or not, through Standard English.

Final Note

Our study showed that explicit instruction of critical literature and guided reflection on critical questions are helpful in raising pre-service teachers' awareness

of the politics of language. However, we also found that this awareness did not necessarily lead to practice that we also hoped would occur. According to their responses (to the last two questions), it seems that something needs to be done to bridge the gap between what our pre-service teachers know about the nature of language and what they can do with their curriculum and students. This is the gap we would like to investigate in the next stage of our continuous effort. We also hope that our study will serve to provoke more critical thinking and dialogue among researchers and educators in this area. The issue we have encountered may not change in the near future, but a willingness to confront and dialogue about it is a surely good start.

Notes

[1] At Northwest University, there were only 12 participants. Therefore, some of the participants worked individually while others worked in pairs in the first round of the activity.

[2] All of the pre-service teachers at Northwest University student-teach in the spring while taking academic classes in the fall. Therefore, data on this site were collected only in the fall 2009.

[3] 5-Fall-2009 stands for student #5 in the fall 2009. This notation system is used throughout this paper in denoting quotations from participants.

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