

Overgeneralization in Bilingual Education and the Dual Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Education of English Language Learner (ELL) students in the United States focuses significantly on the Spanish-speaking population. The bulk of training materials and resources place English and Spanish together in the dual language classroom. Though this is highly appropriate for the majority of students, the following will explain why this standard overgeneralizes the approach to bilingual education leading to misperceptions and a lack of support for non-Spanish-speaking ELL students. These issues should be addressed proactively and at the administrative level. Similarly, the idea of multiculturalism within the Spanish-speaking community and the importance of recognizing indigenous languages will be explored. Particular emphasis will be given to assumptions made concerning ethnic background, cultural overlap, and family literacy. This review will consider not only the pedagogical implications of the current dual language rhetoric, but also its sociocultural ramifications. While examples will mainly come from United States sources, the notions in this essay can be readily applied to other bilingual and dual language education settings.

INTRODUCTION

Bilingual education in the United States caters almost exclusively to the Spanish-speaking population. While Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language in the country, it is not the only language spoken by immigrants and other non-English speakers. The use of Spanish as means of communication is enduringly tied to the culture of many of the people who identify or are identified as Latinx, but this term does encompass a multitude of different national and

cultural identities. Additionally, there is a significant number of individuals in the United States whose heritage stems from Central and Southern America, but whose native language is not Spanish. Even with best interests in mind, overgeneralizing in the bilingual classroom can cause an increased sense of otherness felt by some students and a lack of cultural competency felt by others.

The following will explain how these overgeneralizations in the dual language classroom can inhibit the success of students from a multitude of backgrounds. The term *ELL* (English Language Learner) will be used to describe students whose native language is not English and are in need of extra support in school. The term *Latinx* will be used as a gender-neutral or alternative to Latino or Latina, describing the peoples of Central and South America, although some of the issues surrounding this term will also be discussed. The terms *bilingual* and *dual language* will be used interchangeably in reference to education to describe settings in which students are instructed in more than one language. The main focus of this article is on elementary education, though the pedagogical implications resonate in secondary and adult education.

SPANISH-SPEAKING FOCUS

An overwhelming amount of literature concerning bilingual education in the United States focuses on the use of both Spanish and English in the classroom. Books, courses, and training manuals discuss dual language education in the abstract, but almost all examples provided concern English and Spanish in the classroom. This is understandable as the majority of dual language programs in the United States utilize these two languages. The studies and examples presented in texts about dual language instruction tend to include only US programs that conduct their lessons in Spanish and English. Interestingly enough, these texts do include information on dual language programs from other countries that have more varied examples. The reasoning behind this is that there are significantly fewer dual language programs in the US that have been designed for non-Spanish speakers. However, there are such programs across the country, including schools that deliver instruction in French (Bosman, 2007), Hawaiian (Luning & Yamauchi, 2010), and Yiddish (Avineri & Verschik, 2017). This is far more representative of the true nature of linguistic diversity in the US rather than the dichotomy presented by texts.

The issue presents itself mainly as teachers and schools prepare to instruct students in a dual language setting. With minority language students already facing significant barriers (Wheeler &

Swords, 2004), it is crucial for schools to do whatever they can to provide effective support. This can include not only instruction and resources available in a student's native language, but also assistance with food, healthcare, and general access to utilities. When a school district incorrectly assumes that all or most of the non-native English speakers in its classrooms will be proficient in Spanish, a tendency develops to ignore the possibility of the contrary. This means that enrolling students who lack proficiency in both Spanish and English, such as refugee children or those who have recently left Native American reservations, can require a school to clamber as it searches for resources that will allow such students to learn effectively. Essentially, students whose commutative skills would have benefited from early exposure to a multilingual environment (Fan, Libeman, Keysar, & Kinsler, 2015), have missed significant opportunities.

Besides the logistical issues this presents, there can be profound impacts on a student's self-esteem and sense of otherness when they are presented as a veritable problem in dual language instruction. It has been shown that “[dual language] programs may enhance reading and math skills in both minority-language and majority-language elementary school children” (Shook & Schroeder, 2013, p. 176), but the same cannot be said when a student speaks neither language. If a district has innumerable resources for Spanish-speaking ELL students but struggles to instruct students whose native language is something else, this lessens the likelihood of such students succeeding academically and developing proficiency in English. Students develop their identity through participating (Ryu, 2015), and anything that hinders them from participating can be severely detrimental to their development.

It would not be prudent or even feasible for a school to have the same amount of resources available for ELL students who speak any language or even the most broadly spoken languages. As Spanish is the most common, by far, language spoken by ELL students, tailoring programs to fit their needs makes the most sense. However, school districts need to be prepared for students who speak neither English nor Spanish so that a crisis does not occur when one enrolls. There is significant evidence that these students are at risk in many facets of education (Hoff, Core, Place, & Rumiche, 2012), so any efforts to mitigate these risks would not be wasted. With online resources and inter-district collaboration available, schools do not need to think too creatively to ensure that their non-Spanish-speaking ELL students have adequate resources and opportunities to succeed.

PERCEIVED LATINX IDENTITY

In tandem with dual language instruction, schools with large Latinx populations will often endeavor to include cultural lessons and activities to make non-native English speakers feel more welcome and introduce native speakers to another culture. The underlying issue here is that not all Latinx families prescribe to the same cultural practices. Latinx individuals come from myriad ethnic and national groups whose identities comprise many different psychosocial and geopolitical factors (Comas-Díaz, 2001). While there are certainly similarities between the peoples of Mexico and Guatemala or Peru and Columbia, each country has its own history and distinct individuality. Latin America does not have a homogenous population. There are many different Latin American subcultural types, and numerous anthropological studies have revealed their distinctions (Wagley & Harris, 1955). In as much, there are also some contradictory beliefs between the peoples of Latin America; attempts to define general Latinx culture either ignore or exacerbate these.

Inappropriate presumptions concerning groups of students can have significant ramifications on many fronts. When Latinx students are considered to be part of a homogenous group, they are stripped of their ability to develop an individual identity and celebrate their differences. Similar to the self-esteem issues that surface when non-Spanish speaking ELL students are ostracized in the classroom, Latinx students who have been subject to predispositions and incorrect labeling will suffer in their social and educational development (Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002). Considering such students as one and the same may lead to unfair practices regarding discipline and privileges. This may also lead to in-fighting within the general student population or the Latinx subset (Tafoya, 2004). Just as we cannot assume that all of our ELL students speak Spanish, we cannot assume that all of our Spanish-speaking students come from the same cultural background.

There is some merit in teachers familiarizing themselves with some commonly held practices and beliefs of the people of Central and South America. In fact, creating ethnic socialization settings for ELL students “might help them feel reassured [about] aspects of their own ethnic identity” (Quintana & Scull, 2009, p. 93). ELL students' sense of otherness can be significantly reduced if they become aware of more students who are in a similar situation. Furthermore, “the Latino identity in the United States is far from static” (Johnson, 1998, p. 199), which means there is always something for the class to learn and discuss. The problem comes when this leads to

assumptions about religion, citizenship, and family background. This notion should be applied to all students but is of particular importance when considering minority and underrepresented groups.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE CONCERNS

A commonly incorrect assumption is that people from Central and South America all speak Spanish. Aside from the generally known fact that Portuguese is the official language of Brazil, individual people, school districts, and even the government of the United States often fail to recognize the myriad unique native languages that are spoken throughout these regions. Recent figures show that there are over eight hundred different languages spoken throughout the countries that comprise Latin America (Davis-Castro, 2020), though a notable amount of these may be mutually intelligible. Statistically, almost thirty percent of indigenous speakers in these regions claim to lack proficiency in Spanish (Pentón Herrera, 2018). It cannot be assumed that an ELL student who comes from Central or South America speaks Spanish. This is especially true when considering the fact that many of the indigenous groups that inhabit these region suffer from persecution and discrimination, which leads to a higher likelihood that they will emigrate and seek sanctuary in the United States.

A culturally competent instructor should understand how the assumption that everyone from Latin America speaks Spanish actually continues the effects of the oppression felt by natives of that region. For many indigenous groups, the idea that they do or should all speak Spanish, which is the language of the conquistadors who ravaged their land, proves ignorant and substantially inconsiderate. Even in a world that has seen significant decolonization and reparations (LeBaron, 2012), the impact of Spanish rule over the region is still a sore subject for many indigenous and national groups. Moreover, these populations “continue to experience marginalization and seclusion from the dominant culture... in their native countries” (Pentón Herrera, p. 11). Many of them do not appreciate being labeled under the moniker Latino, Latinx, or any variation thereof, because this in and of itself implies that they speak an Indo-European language of the Romance family.

One unique occurrence in this population is where the children speak Spanish but their parents do not. This is similar to something that frequently happens with immigrant families around the world; children are able to learn the dominant language of their new home because

they attend school while parents are able to find employment without learning a new language. Similarly, in some Latin American countries, children will attend school and learn Spanish while their parents work and perform their daily lives entirely in an indigenous language. Therefore, just as we should not assume that a child from a Latin American home speaks Spanish, we cannot immediately assume that a child who possesses basic communication skills in Spanish comes from a home where the parents are fluent.

CONCLUSION

The majority of materials available to dual language educators concern Spanish-speaking students learning to operate in an English-speaking environment. In the United States, this is proportional to the demographic of ELL students, but there are still a significant number of ELL students who do not speak Spanish. It is not feasible for schools to have the same amount of resources for non-Spanish-speaking ELL students, but complete lack of preparation for such students can have a profound impact on their classroom success and overall self-esteem.

Within the Spanish-speaking ELL population in the United States, a multitude of different cultures abound. There are certain approaches to bilingual education that overlook these differences and apply a general Latinx label to all Spanish-speaking students. Again, this is not beneficial to student success and will inevitably lead to issues both in and out of the classroom.

Often overlooked, the indigenous peoples of Central and South America have their own languages, histories, and cultural practice. Since many of these groups comprise the immigrant and refugee populations in the United States, understanding that indigenous children and families may not be fluent or even conversant in Spanish is of paramount importance.

The plethora of resources available to Spanish-speaking ELL students are remarkable and the product of years of compassionate work. However, dual language educators and administrators need to remember the individuality that exists in their student population. While the majority of ELL students would be categorized as Latinx, there are plenty of students in ELL classrooms who come from different parts of the world. Including lessons and activities on Latinx culture is a good way to boost inclusion, but there are many different cultures to be found in Latin America with their own unique histories and practices. Within these many cultures, there are numerous languages spoken, so we cannot automatically assume that a child is proficient in Spanish.

Remembering these generalizations and addressing them before they become problematic will only strengthen the efficacy of a dual language classroom.

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