

Linguistic Identities and Pedagogical Practices: Transnational Bilingual Teachers

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This ethnographic study explored how the linguistic practices of seven bilingual transnational teachers shape their pedagogy within public education on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, the frontera (Anzaldúa, 1987; Staudt, 2008). Within a transnational context, the histories of teachers' multiple identities were analyzed drawing from theories of Funds of Knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), which value the historically and culturally developed pedagogies of the home. Data included interviews, observations, and artifacts. Findings showed the intertwining of language and identity in practitioners' narratives and practices. Within the borderlands, bilingualism and biliteracy practices illustrate both structure and agency. Intersections between language, culture, and identity were central to the study. Bilingual educators benefit from practice that incorporates the full range of linguistic repertoires.

Keywords: Ethnography, bilingual teachers, transnational teachers, borderlands, identity

Este estudio etnográfico exploró cómo las prácticas lingüísticas de siete maestras bilingües transnacionales dan forma a su pedagogía dentro de la educación pública en la frontera México-Estados Unidos, la frontera (Anzaldúa, 1987; Staudt, 2008). Situadas en un contexto transnacional, se analizaron las historias e identidades de las docentes, considerando un marco teórico de capital cultural (Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992; González y Moll, Amanti, 2005) que valora los conocimientos históricamente y culturalmente desarrollados en el hogar. La recolección de datos incluyó entrevistas, observaciones y artefactos. Los resultados demostraron el entrelazamiento del lenguaje e identidad en las narrativas y en la práctica docente. Dentro de las zonas fronterizas, el bilingüismo y la lectoescritura en dos idiomas ilustran tanto estructura como capacidad de desplazamiento. Las conexiones entre lengua, cultura e identidad fueron fundamentales en este estudio. Los educadores bilingües se benefician de una práctica docente que incorpore toda la gama de sus repertorios lingüísticos.

Palabras clave: Etnografía, maestros bilingües, maestros transnacionales, la frontera, identidad

Purpose

The rationale for this study was to investigate how bilingual practitioners' linguistic profiles influence their pedagogical practice. This ethnographic study aimed to discover how dual language teachers developed self-knowledge and views about

learning and teaching. Extensive interviews and observational data were explored in order to understand how linguistic repertoires shaped K-2 bilingual educators' pedagogy. The focus was on practitioners who are bilingual/biliterate in English and Spanish and teach in the context of public education at the elementary level on the U.S.-Mexico border region.

This research is situated in a U.S.-based context where Latinos are the largest minority public school population (K-12) and Spanish is the most common language other than English (Prieto, 2009). Educating Latino children is a pressing issue as this population is expanding in the U.S. (Rong & Preissle, 2009). García and Kleifgen (2010) convey that, since 80% of emergent bilinguals are Latinos, the meeting point of language use and educational opportunities should be addressed. Regarding language use, analysis of census data showed that most Latinos have lost fluency in Spanish by the third generation (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Bilingual education is a useful pedagogical tool that addresses the learning needs of diverse student populations (García, 2009; Hornberger, 2004; Pérez, 2004).

There is a recent trend in U.S. bilingual education to encourage dual language instruction, pushing teachers to follow an agenda which promotes bilingualism and biliteracy (Palmer & Martínez, 2013). Dual language programs integrate native English speakers and speakers of another language, providing instruction in both languages for all students; two-way immersion programs promote bilingualism and biliteracy, grade-level academic achievement, and positive cross-cultural attitudes and behaviors in all students (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2013; Christian, Montone, Lindholm, & Carranza, 1997; Lucero, 2010). Collier and Thomas (2009) describe that in dual language programs, teachers support their students socioculturally through a bilingual/bicultural curriculum, providing a context for students to develop cognitively, linguistically, and academically through both languages for at least six elementary school years.

Theoretical Framework

Adopting a sociocultural approach to understand the formation of identities, literacy practices (NLG, 1996; Street, 1984; 1993), and the continua of biliteracy (Hornberger, 2004), this study examined the social identities of Latina bilingual-certified teachers and their pedagogical practices along the U.S.-Mexico border. Teachers' linguistic repertoires were positioned within a Funds of Knowledge perspective (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). The focus was to explore how female bilingual-certified educators experienced the relationship between their identities and agency as bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural professionals teaching in dual language programs within the U.S.-Mexico border context.

Linguistic Identities and Pedagogical Practices

The following overarching research question is addressed: What are the linguistic identities and pedagogical practices of female Latina K-2 dual language teachers along the U.S.-Mexico *frontera*? The subquestions include:

- Linguistic Identities:
 - (1) What are the linguistic backgrounds of Dual Language (DL) teachers on the border?
 - (2) How do DL teachers use their bilingualism/biliteracy in the elementary classroom?
- Pedagogical Practice:
 - (3) What is the preferred language of instruction for Latina DL teachers?
 - (4) Why do DL teachers prefer to teach in Spanish, English or both?

Methodology

Research Design

The research design of this study is ethnography (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). This methodology is appropriate to examine the linguistic identities of teachers since ethnographic work focuses on the everyday meanings and uses of literacy in specific cultural contexts. According to Heath & Street (2008), in language and literacy studies, ethnographers most often choose classrooms as their focus. Ethnography is suitable to examine how teachers' identity and language practices are intertwined. Dyson and Genishi (2005) articulate that in language and literacy studies in the interpretive tradition, researchers are interested in how teaching and learning happen through social participation. Moreover, many contextual actors matter in language use, among them the purpose for communicating, the language being used, and the demographic qualities of participants including age, gender, culture, and social class.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of ethnographic methods which included life history interviews with each participating teacher, and classroom observations in all seven K-2 dual language classrooms. These observations were documented by writing extensive field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), integrating thick description. Following Seidman's (2006) three-interview series as a guide, interview one was focused on the life history to establish the context of the participants' experience; interview two focused on the details of the teaching experience to allow participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs; interview three was about the reflection on the meaning of their teaching experience. Three in-depth semi-structured life history interviews were conducted with each teacher; the focus was the linguistic profiles of bilingual teachers. The interviews were audio recorded for analysis purposes.

Data collection consisted of (a) 21 in-depth interviews with the dual language teachers; (b) classroom observations focusing mainly on teachers' language use; and

(c) collection of artifacts/documents (e.g., photographs; school newsletters, brochures, newspapers, flyers, schedules, advertisements for school events). Weekly classroom observations lasted 15 weeks, the seven classrooms were observed periodically, once a week on average. This time in the field during the fall semester of 2013 was dedicated to participant observation, informal interviewing, artifact collection. The focus of the spring semester of 2014 was member checking with the seven participating teachers.

Data Analysis

Dyson and Genishi (2005) describe data analysis as the process in which one transforms data including field notes, interviews, and artifacts into findings. I began such process by closely reading the transcribed interviews to write reflective memos, which led to preliminary coding of all data, as I thought about how the literature related the data. The twenty-one interviews were transcribed using software (Gear Player), and I translated interview and observational data from Spanish to English as needed. After the initial open coding, analytic codes were developed to group pieces of data into categories of relevant information in order to address the overarching research question guiding the study. When many examples are analyzed, common threads or themes are found, meaning some of the categories and subcategories frequently recur (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) Themes were identified by using a manual color-coding process of data. Data were analyzed in light of the research questions and theoretical framework guiding this study.

Context and Participants

This study took place among K-2 dual language teachers in a public school district in Texas. This is a small local district, consisting of five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school; some of these schools are located in semi-rural areas. The teachers in this study work in the smallest elementary K-5 school, *La Escuelita* (all names are pseudonyms), where there is one strand of the dual language program model. The school district is located in a *colonia*, which implies its location on the outskirts of town, with a high level of poverty and a high presence of immigrants, although the majority of the children are U.S. citizens. The U.S. Census Bureau (2013) provides the following demographic data about *Desierto Esperanza* (pseudonym), the small Texas city where the research was conducted: of 6,321 persons, 90.8% are of Latina/o origin; furthermore, 80% of the population speaks a language other than English at home, mostly Spanish. The persons who are living below the poverty level comprise 24% of the community. The purposeful sample included seven participants who were selected because they were Mexican-origin Latinas, Spanish-English speakers, DL educators at the early elementary levels (K-2) in a small school district in the El Paso region. For each grade level, two teachers were partnered, one teacher provided instruction in Spanish while another one taught in English.

Findings

Key findings showed the intertwining of language and identity in practitioners' narratives and practices. This piece explored the linguistic backgrounds of DL teachers on the borderlands which were shaped by country of origin and languages, schooling experiences, and transnationalism. Data illustrated how teachers constructed different identities for themselves when they used language in different contexts. The national origin of the seven teachers was divided between Mexico and the U.S. Four teachers were born in the U.S., three in El Paso and one in California, while three of them were born in Mexico, two teachers in the border town of Ciudad Juárez and one in Acapulco, México. When the teachers talked about their country of origin and the languages they grew up with, they also self-identified as Mexican or Mexican-American. Three teachers, Miranda, Felicity, and Marisol described themselves as Mexicans, two of them having been raised and schooled entirely in Mexico and one schooled in the U.S. who communicated in Spanish at home. The four teachers who self-identified as Mexican-Americans, Andrea, Diana, Cassandra, and Marissa had Mexican parents and had been schooled in the U.S., and for two of them the language of communication at home was Spanish; for the other two it was English.

Regarding schooling experiences, three of the seven participating teachers, Andrea, Diana, and Miranda were enrolled in transitional bilingual education programs in the U.S. during elementary school. There were two U.S.-based teachers, Cassandra and Marissa, who did not receive any type of bilingual education instruction. Felicity and Marisol received their elementary and secondary education entirely in Spanish in Mexico. Transnational teachers have the ability to go back and forth to the country of origin. In Jiménez's (2000) study about how identity influences language and literacy development, results indicated transnational students and teachers were influenced by their borderland experiences; their identities were connected to their status as bicultural, bilingual, and biliterate persons. Two focal teachers were part of cross-border families (Vélez-Ibáñez & Grenberg, 1992) themselves. Andrea as a child lived in Juárez and would come to school to El Paso during her early schooling years; her family moved to El Paso thereafter. Marisol was also part of a cross-border family as an adult; she would cross from Juárez to El Paso to attend English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at a community college. In this study, the bilingual teachers' linguistic resources included varieties of Spanish and English.

Situated in sociocultural theory, this research explored the identities and practices of bilingual Latina teachers working with young Mexican American children. We can learn from the individual and collective stories with the ultimate goal of identifying strengths that can better inform bilingual teacher preparation and practice by paying particular attention to the linguistic histories of bilingual teachers' multiple identities. Language learning, language use, and ideas about speakers of a given language are strongly shaped by the family environment, and schooling, and whether one has a closer connection to Mexico or the U.S., or easily navigates between both worlds. The levels of bilingualism in the seven teachers covered a broad range, even

when they taught at the same public school with the same Texas issued credentials. González (2005) also found that within the borderlands, ideas about languages are neither uniform nor fixed. Drawing on teachers' personal and professional biographies, as well as institutional and cultural values and attitudes, identity offers a more complex way of thinking about teaching (Benson & Cooker, 2013).

Teachers' linguistic identities were not limited to being Mexican or Mexican Americans, their identities proved multiple and constantly negotiated as their linguistic repertoires in English and Spanish varied widely. The teachers ranged from being closely tied to Spanish and Mexico to being more identified with the U.S. and English. Within the context of the U.S.-Mexico border, varying degrees of bilingualism and biliteracy development result from constant meaningful experiences with two languages. Furthermore, the *frontera* provided ample opportunities to engage in two languages throughout the community. Language learning, language use, and language ideologies were shaped by the family environment, schooling experiences, and transnational trajectories. The levels of bilingualism and biliteracy in the seven teachers covered a broad spectrum, although they held the same teaching credentials. Identity development is closely tied to the context of language learning.

Discussion

This study generated important findings applicable to dual language programs and classrooms. The importance of adhering to a structure program model (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; 2005) presupposes the equal distribution of time and resources are determining factors in student learning. In practice, DL teachers negotiated and decided the distribution for time; at the same time, they were language resources. In some cases, the DL program showed limitations in teachers' proficiency of Spanish because Spanish was being spoken with mispronunciations or limited vocabulary. Although most participating teachers agreed upon the goal of biliteracy, there may have not been enough opportunities for all students to become biliterate, due in part to the lack of materials and the interpretation of the program at *La Escuelita*.

García (2009) discusses that communicative practice of U.S. Latino communities draw on both their linguistic knowledge of the Spanish language and their cultural knowledge of the U.S. The narratives and pedagogies implemented by the bilingual teachers in this study exemplify this merging of linguistic and cultural knowledge to inform teaching culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. It's significant to consider these bilingual-certified teachers received very limited coursework or professional development on how to develop their biliteracy skills; participants reported not having received specific courses for learning or teaching Spanish literacy in their teaching preparation programs in the U.S. (Fuentes, 2015). Researchers and advocates in the field of bilingual education have voiced the need for specific development and research in biliteracy in the U.S. (Flores, Hernández Sheets, & Riojas Clark, 2011). It seems that teacher preparation programs do not recognize the importance of biliteracy and Spanish skills and these areas get insufficient attention

in the preparation and development of bilingual teachers. Biliteracy development for teachers is also an important step for preparing and retaining qualified teachers (Flores et al., 2011).

Based on the findings, it is argued that within the context of the U.S.-Mexico border, bilingualism and biliteracy are the result of countless meaningful experiences with two languages. Some of the meaningful experiences that are particular to border residents and were embedded in the participants' linguistic identities included having and visiting Spanish-speaking family members living in Mexico, namely grandparents and siblings, like in the case of Diana, Andrea, and Cassandra. Another common practice was to live on the Mexican side of the border and attend school in the U.S., either as a child or as an adult, as experienced by Andrea, Felicity, and Marisol. In the case of Marisol, for a period of time she lived in the U.S., but kept commuting to Mexico to work as a school teacher. Most of the participating teachers, six out of seven, had a concern for raising bilingual children to varying degrees; they ultimately saw bilingualism as an asset. Furthermore, the *frontera* (Staudt, 2008) is fertile ground for bilingualism and biliteracy to develop since there are ample opportunities to engage in two languages.

Conclusion

Language learning and language use are strongly shaped by the family environment and schooling, whether one has a closer connection to Mexico or the U.S., or easily navigates between both worlds. The levels of bilingualism in the seven participating teachers covered a broad range, even when they taught at the same public school with the same Texas-issued credentials. González (2005) also found that within the borderlands, ideas about languages are neither uniform nor fixed. The linguistic practices of Mexican-origin Latina dual language teachers on the border illustrated the dynamics of structure and agency. Social approaches to language education research have reconceptualized language identities as multiple, dynamic, and contested. For women of Mexican-origin, including the participants, negotiating multiple identities is embedded in the continuum of daily life (González, 2005). The participating teachers illustrated how identity development is an important outcome of language learning, and the context where this learning takes place. The linguistic identities of the seven bilingual teachers were reflected in their pedagogical practice within a dual language setting. The findings were helpful to expand our vision about how teachers construct different identities for themselves when they use language in different contexts. The intersections between language, literacy, and identity were central to the study, thus, suggesting that bilingual educators benefit from preparation and practice that incorporates the full range of teachers' language and literacy repertoires.

This inquiry provides the basis to argue that both future bilingual teachers and practitioners should be encouraged and supported to discover and research the Funds of Knowledge found in bilingual borderland communities. This study shed light on in-service bilingual teachers' identity and practice and strongly identifies ample

opportunities to contribute to both preparation and practice that integrates identity formation, access to developing academic Spanish skills, and deep understanding of the structure and implementation of bilingual education models. This research drew from self-reported data and the observations of teachers' practice in DL classroom which are complex learning environments. Although the participants taught in English-Spanish bilingual programs, findings from this study could reflect the experiences of DL teachers who work in other languages besides Spanish and English. This scholarly work aimed to understand teaching practices, with the goal of contributing to the reframing of bilingual education, and the preparation and retention of teachers.

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