Chapter 4
Hybrid Language Practices for English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

English Language Learners (ELLs) form a growing segment of the U.S. population. Macro-level policies have been established to accommodate the needs of minority groups of language learners. Educational institutions have implemented these policies at the micro-level through diverse bilingual education programs. This chapter examines educational approaches that promote social and academic achievement for ELLs and those initiatives that may further marginalize learners. The reasoning behind the practices in each approach is examined through a theoretical and empirical lens to find effective pedagogical practices. As a student and a former educator in a transitional bilingual program in a border city, I will begin with my perspective on a program that focuses on assimilation into the mainstream culture through the dominant language. Best practices for ELLs, as perceived through personal experiences, empirical and theoretical evidence, embrace an educational space where primary and secondary discourses can coexist in a hybrid environment of multivoicedness.

INTRODUCTION

Miss Herrera! Miss Herrera! Karla is reading in English!

These words have been deep-rooted in my mind for years, as they encompass the rewarding and, at the same time, exhausting work of a teacher in a transitional bilingual setting in a border city. They are words of excitement that reflect a student's joy of hearing her classmate, a recent immigrant from Mexico, finally able to read a few words in the mainstream language. Teaching students whose primary language is not the dominant language can be a challenge for teachers. This is especially true in contexts where the only discursive practices valued are those that reflect dominant views and ideologies. Working in an early-exit bilingual setting opened my mind to the various limitations students and educators face as they integrate themselves into a mainstream culture that isolates and oppresses them. Students labeled as

"at risk," "bilingual," "Limited English Proficient," etc. are marginalized because their home language does not match the dominant language of the United States. This mismatch of primary and secondary discourses (Gee, 1991) is perceived as a burden and not as an attribute to the school's cultural versatility. This is the type of environment I perceived during my experience as a fourth-grade bilingual teacher.

The early-exit bilingual program focused on providing support for students in their primary language and transitioning them into the mainstream curriculum as early as one year after being enrolled in the program. Students who exited the program sooner were perceived as brighter than those who exited later. Therefore, most students in my fourth-grade bilingual classroom were considered low achievers by school standards. Many of them were aware of their low academic performance and, needless to say, their self-image was affected by it. However, numerous instructional interventions and strategies, such as small group activities, one-on-one instruction, and focused centers were utilized daily in an effort to close achievement gaps between bilingual and monolingual students within my classroom and the school. Arduous efforts led to remarkable results as students succeeded in all subject areas and even in state assessments that were evidently not catered for minority groups' cultural experiences and backgrounds.

As a student in graduate school, I was enlightened by the different ways students can succeed even when their home language is not English. The benefits of being academically fluent in two languages became apparent. I felt a major discrepancy between my work environment and the courses I was taking. It seemed as though the school environment was a world where Spanish speaking groups were seen as "low achievers" while, on the other hand, research and course instruction revealed how speaking two languages can be tremendously advantageous. Even though research has shown the effectiveness of learning two languages at academic levels (Valenzuela, 1999; Barlett, 2007; Yoon, 2007; Cummins, 2005; Dworin, 2006; Fuller, 2007; Borland, 2015; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Maloof, Rubin, & Miller, 2006; Moje et al., 2004), schools frequently adopt an educational ideology that tracks and marginalizes minority groups (Valenzuela, 1999).

As a bilingual student from kinder through 4th grade myself, I knew I was different from monolingual students. It was apparent that they were the "advanced" students while we were labeled the "low" or "Spanish" kids. These labels derived from a deficit perspective attributed to students whose primary language was not the dominant language (Valencia & Solorzano, 2004). The differences were apparent, but I continued to work towards my parents' dream, which was to provide a brighter future for their children. My parents immigrated to the United States when I was 4 years old in an effort to provide better opportunities for their children. I had this notion impregnated in my mind; I was in this colorful, beautiful new country to excel and take advantage of the multitude of opportunities that I had in front of me, according to my parents' views. It was not until recent years that I have discovered this was not exactly the case. It seems that minimal opportunities are presented to bilingual students in transitional programs. They are often in a tracking system that leads them to low achievement. I am able to recognize this as a teacher.

My experiences with the deficits of bilingual programs are what motivate me to find effective learning strategies aimed at equitable education regardless of language, culture, or race to promote intellectual development of linguistically and culturally diverse learners. Although different schools implement various learning settings for English learners, research has shown culturally sensitive spaces promote equity, diversity, and academic growth.

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