Language, Diversity and Culturally Responsive Education

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Abstract

Advanced economies are experiencing demographic shifts brought about by increased immigration. There are more students in schools who speak a language other than English. This has placed dialogue with regards to language diversity at the center of educational discourse. This conceptual article examines notions of identity and language within a poststructural framework and explores strategies that culturally responsive and social justice educators can employ to support emerging bilinguals (EBs) in diverse contexts. Grounded within an equity and social justice framework this article suggests that teachers must be prepared to teach in culturally affirming and transformative ways to support emerging bilinguals.

Keywords: diversity, language, equity, culturally responsive pedagogy

Introduction

The population of immigrant students in schools in countries such as Canada, U.S. Australia and advanced economies in Europe is on the rise. Wars, political unrest and increased economic disparities have caused people to leave their homelands in search of peace and economic prosperity. The unprecedented movement of peoples around the world has created challenges for monolingual and monocultural school systems particularly in urban areas. This shift in demographic realities creates enormous challenges for educators and policy-makers (Cummins, 2000). In recent times we have seen increased migration to Europe, North America and other advanced economies from middle income countries. In Canada for example, in 2011 foreign born individuals represented 20.6% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2016) and according to Pew Research Center (2011) by 2055 the United States will not have a single racial or ethnic majority. This rise in immigration has sparked vigorous debates in these countries. There is no doubt that the social fabric of many countries is changing, and language is at the heart of the immigration debate as the number of people who speak a *language other than English* (LOTE) has increased. This has placed the dialogue with regards to language diversity at the center of educational discourse.

Educators and policy makers grapple with how to respond to this demographic shift, particularly in schools. For example, in the United States there are approximately 10 million Hispanic students and the number of Latino students in schools continue to increase (Haynes-Writer, Uribe-Florez & Arujo, 2018). In this article I will be using the term "emergent bilinguals" (EB) instead of English Language Learners. Many in educational circles refer to students whose first language is not English as English Language Learners (ELLs) or English Learners (ELs). However, Olivares-Orellana (2015) suggests that by referring to these students as ELLs or Els their potential to become fully bilingual is discounted:

> *...such terms and practices perpetuate the inequities and disadvantages that emergent bilinguals frequently encounter in their education because their home languages and cultural understandings are ignored when it is assumed that their educational needs are the same as those of a monolingual child.* (p. 163)

Social justice and critical educators see diversity as a strength and an asset and call for curriculum, pedagogy and educational policies to be reflective of the diversity in society and schools in terms of class, language, race, sexual identity and other forms of social identification. This is not an easy task. As Darling-Hammond (2011) suggests, addressing diversity in critical and proactive ways is one of the most important challenges facing educators in the twenty-first century. Many argue that school leaders and teachers are not as prepared as they should to meet the growing diversity represented in classrooms. This lack of preparation is a challenge that many educators face in providing equitable high-quality education for diverse students (Theoharis, 2009). Haynes-Writer, Uribe-Florez & Arujo (2018), suggest that while teachers are re responsible for providing effective and comprehensive instruction to EBs they do not receive appropriate in-service professional development in this area.

In this article I examine notions of identity and language within a poststructural framework and explore strategies that culturally responsive and social justice educators can employ to support EBs in diverse contexts. This paper is grounded in my experiences as a secondary classroom teacher, administrator, teacher educator, and researcher in Southern Ontario, Canada one of the most diverse places in the world. Students use language to exercise power and to enhance everyday life in school and challenge injustice (Love, 2008). As schools change some teachers and administrators see increasing diversity as a problem instead of an opportunity for growth (Howard, 2007). Nieto (2004) suggests that diverse communities do not have confidence that public schools are serving the needs of culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. Sixteen years later Nieto's observations about realities in the U.S. remain the same and is cause for concern in other advanced economies. It is important that emergent bilinguals are given the opportunity to use their cultural and linguistic resources to acquire new knowledge and language skills (Olivares-Orellana (2015).

Immigrant families and their children everywhere want to be successful. The place where most immigrant families look to in acquiring the social capital necessary to survive in their new contexts is schools. This places education at the forefront of the immigration and language debate in many countries. To achieve the education that emergent bilinguals require, need and have a right to, it is important that educators draw on their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005), which is the knowledge that they bring from home and their communities. Dewey (1938/1963) reminded us that it is the responsibility of educators to support students in achieving their educational goals, make education relevant to their lives, place value on their experiences taking into account the unique differences of each student in the teaching and learning process.

Research I conducted with secondary and elementary teacher candidates in a Bachelor of Education program in Southern Ontario, Canada parts of which have been published elsewhere (See Lopez, 2018), reveal that teacher candidates do not feel as prepared as they would like to enter diverse classrooms

and address of diversity, particularly issues of race and linguistic diversity. In that study teacher educators also indicated that they would benefit from more support in responding to the needs of diverse students. Gort, Glenn and Settlage (2010) suggest that teacher educators often do not possess the appropriate content, pedagogical and affective knowledge to adequately prepare teacher candidates to teach linguistically diverse students. Southern Ontario has the most culturally diverse population in Canada and receive almost half of all Canada's immigrants (Province of Ontario, 2016). People for Education (2017) reports that 63% of English language elementary schools and 58% of secondary schools in Ontario have emergent bilinguals some of whom are not well served. Hegemonic policies and practices that have contributed to the marginalization of EBs must be disrupted. Teachers of second languages should be unified in their roles as language advocates and be more sensitive to their position of privilege (Kelsey, Campuzano & Lopez, 2015; Muirhead, 2009).

Oxford (2010) suggests not all teachers embrace the same potential for teaching and learning of language and that we must begin to think more critically about curriculum, methodology, and assessments in the language classroom. Well known Canadian social justice educator Enid Lee (2008) who focuses on issues of equity in schools suggest that sometimes there is disconnect between pedagogy conceived by teachers in language classrooms and the practices they engage in. Despite the best intentions of teachers, classroom practices that are not culturally responsive can recreate marginalized student identities limiting their access not only to language learning opportunities, but other aspects of their identities (Norton, 2010). And as (Oxford, 2010) asserts second language education often lacks critical pedagogy, practical strategies and the resources to implement curricula that meet the needs of all learners, and in particular emergent bilinguals.

Language and identity – poststructural approach

Language education has been a site of struggle for educators advocating for greater equity and social justice in education. We have seen attacks on bilingual education in the U.S. fomented and supported by anti-immigration rhetoric, placing language as a central issue in the current immigration debate. As we pursue social justice for all in society, educators must take the lead in supporting all students to achieve their full potential and in particular those students who are marginalized by oppressive practices and a school system that do not meet their learning needs. Bogotch (2016) argues that educators have a responsibility to challenge inequities in education because we have access to power, and whether or not we use it is a question of courage and risk-taking. This access to power Bogotch asserts:

> *...provides opportunities for us to insert education into political, social, economic, philosophical and literary discourses and debates....we have to learn how to speak differently both within our profession and also with others from different professions and cultures. As educators, our audiences are not just our fellow or our students, but also the world's citizens, people from other cultures, religions, and ideologies (p.vii).*

Educators must develop new approaches to schooling that respond to diversity in meaningful and practical ways so that students from diverse backgrounds can experience schooling positively (Lopez, 2016). Critical educators in pursuit of social justice must challenge neo liberal and neo colonial polices based on meritocracy and competition.

This work is important to me as a critical social justice educator, Black woman, born and raised in Jamaica, and an immigrant to Canada. I speak English with an intonation that is different from what some might consider typical Canadian way of speaking. In addition to speaking English, I speak the Jamaican dialect called patois. I choose not to use the word "accent" as I find the term marginalizes some speakers of English and act as a site of language microaggressions. In other words, everyone has

an accent when they are in contexts in which they were not socialized. As an educator I have experienced racial microaggressions. My knowledge has been questioned and my intonation used to marginalize and "otherize." In addition to British colonial English the Jamaican dialect formed part of my language socialization in my early years Jamaica My grandmother understanding from her experiences the impact of British colonial customs and ways of knowing, and the privileging of this in schools and all aspects of Jamaican society insisted that English was spoken at home and what she called "that broken language" was not to be spoken. A firm grounding in English was needed to gain entrance to high school and was an important determinant in the kind of education that one could access. This was the experience of many who live in countries colonized by the British. Jamaicans who did not speak English well were seen as less educated. Nero (2015) argues that one of the legacies of British colonization is the prevailing discourse of the stigmatization of the dialects in the Caribbean as "broken English", positioned as the vernacular of the lower class and uneducated, who are often marginalized in school. Wa Thiongo (1986) suggests that colonialism brought with it erasure of Indigenous ways of knowing, customs and beliefs and this erasure local languages.

Nero posits what she describes as "both the felt and ascribed linguistics identities, historically and socially constructed" (p. 344). In other words, those who were socialized in spaces with the influence of colonization experience the local dialect in their daily lives, while at the same time benefitting from the social benefits of the ability to speak what some refer to in these spaces as the "Queen's English". Immigrants from Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean, who describe themselves as "English speaking" often find that self-identification as an "English speaker" does not guard against marginalization and "othering' based on one's home ethnicity and culture. Language is a part of who we are, an essential aspect of identity through which we experience oppression (Norton, 2000). Critical educators view language not as a deficit, but an important aspect of identity and a resource in creating positive learning outcomes.

The connection between language and identity is well established in the literature. Areas such as applied linguistics are immersed in examining identity issues related to bi/multilingualism, language in society, second language learning and language teacher development (Block, 2013). Poststructuralism is primarily a linguistic movement associated with the development of literacy, cultural and discourse theories and see language as providing us with our sense of self and how our identity is constructed and performed (Baxter, 2016). Poststructuralism questions oppositional binaries while advancing the notion that identity categories are discursively and socially constructed and are sites of struggle (Duff, 2012).

Language exist within discourse (Foucault, 1984) and these discourses are competing offering alternative versions of reality and provide a range of network by which dominant forms of social knowledge are produced, reinforced, contested or resisted (Baxter, 2016). Post structuralist theory of language, defines language as discourse, where language is not seen as a neutral medium of communication, but is understood within the context of its social meaning in a world where inequities abound (Block, 2013). Issues of diversity are about the ways in which aspects of our identities are read in the world around and how we navigate the world drawing on the various aspects of identities. How identity is understood has evolved overtime. Identity has been viewed from different perspectives by scholars since the emergence of the issue in the field of applied linguistics and throughout history has been defined differently and is an evolutionary process (Kouhpaeenejad & Gholaminejad, 2014). Norton (2000) for example, suggests that identity is how one understands their relationship to the world and how that relationship is constructed over time and in different contexts; while Wu (2011) suggests that identity is how we view ourselves and are viewed by others grounded in our social contexts. Self is seen as discursively produced, positioned in relation to others and the contexts in which we find ourselves, and how people understand their relationship to the world (Ige, 2010; Norton,

2000). One of the challenges for educators in today's sociocultural contexts is ensuring that students, particularly immigrant students see school as a place that value their multiple identities.

Poststructural theorists adapt a social constructivist perspective that contends that identity is about multiple ways in which people position themselves and are positioned within particular social, historical and cultural contexts (Block, 2007; Norton & Toohey, 2001). Our multiple identities – age, race, social class, language, sexual orientation and so on are not confined and examined in isolation, but instead in intersecting and interlocking ways. Identity is seen as contextually driven, emerging within interactions of a given discourse, a social and learning process, a confluence of different parts of self, informed by local and global factors (Miyaharay, 2010; Wenger, 1998). On a daily basis we navigate different aspects of our multiple and fluid identities – such as class, race, sexual orientation, language, religion, immigrant status and so on. For many, these varying aspects of their identities become sites of struggle for equity, peace and justice. Within the context of struggle for marginalized and oppressed peoples, identity is constructed not by the dominant and those who oppress, but by self. Self-identification is seen as liberatory. Individuals construct who they are and make choices on how they want to be recognized in certain contexts (Miyaharay, 2010). It is about respecting difference and diversity in the social worlds encountered by the individual on a moment-to-moment basis. Weedon (1997) suggests that it is through language that a person gains access to or is denied access to social networks, and as such has implications for teachers and learners.

Culturally responsive approaches to language education

Language learning and teaching highlight ways in which power in the wider society affect patterns of teacher-student interactions in the classroom, and teachers must develop pedagogy that will challenge and disrupt coercive power relations (Cummins, 2000). In addition to teaching content knowledge it is crucial that teachers promote the value of bilingualism and biculturalism to emergent bilinguals (Olivares-Orellana, 2015). Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) involves using the cultural and knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for students (Gay, 2013). Ladson-Billings (2014) suggests a new approach to understanding culture as a dynamic view that encompasses all aspects of emergent and global identities, multiplicities of identities, and experiences and important ontologies for immigrants as they navigate new spaces. Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically uses cultural references to support student learning. Ladson-Billings (1995a) posits three principles of culturally responsive teaching. Firstly, students experience academic success as CRT involves engaging students higher-order critical thinking skills, problem solving and creative activities that connect to identities and interests. Secondly, students develop cultural competence as a vehicle for learning, and thirdly they develop critical consciousness that allows them to critique cultural norms, value and institutions. CRT challenges students to critically, examine society and work for social change. In culturally responsive classrooms culture as a strength that supports students' learning where teaching approaches are grounded in students' backgrounds, funds of knowledge, and cultural experiences to create shared learning experiences. Issues of identity, oppression, power, and privilege are raised through dialogue in the culturally responsive classroom where students are encouraged to take action and a commitment to social justice (Mitchell, 2007). In many instances, immigrant youth have a relatively short amount of time to develop the complex literacy practices required for academic success. Because of this it is important and beneficial for educators of newcomer youths to make use of students' languaging practices (Olivares-Orellana, 2015).

Responding to diversity in the language classroom requires an imaginative assessment of what is possible as well as a critical assessment of what is desirable (McKinney & Norton, 2008). To this

Norton (2010) argues:

> *If we agree that diverse identity positions offer learners a range of positions from which to speak, listen, read, or write, the challenge for language educators is to explore which identity positions offer the greatest opportunity for social engagement ...also if there are identity positions that silence students, then teachers need to investigate and address these marginalization practices (p. 10).*

As critical educators seek to disrupt hegemonic practices in schools that marginalize students based on aspects of their identities and become more of power relations within classrooms and factors that constrain the conditions under which learners, speak, read or write; it is important that educators examine the social, historical and cultural contexts in which language learning takes place (Norton, 2010). In this regard Norton argues that language should be theorized as more than a linguistic system; it should be also theorized as a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated.

Drawing on de Jong (2013) notion of a pluralistic language discourse grounded in an overarching framework of *educational equity* I share CRT approaches to language education within the context of increasing diversity that connects theory to practice and offer workable strategies that educators can apply and use in their efforts to support diverse learners. My own scholarship, teaching and research is grounded in an equity and social justice framework. DeJong's pluralistic approach to supporting EBs values respect and fairness, examines how school policies and practices treat bilingual learners. This is in opposition to assimilationist approaches that strip students of their home language. De Jong suggests there is a need for alternative discourses to achieve educational equity and positive academic outcomes for EBs and urge educators to find more effective ways to create learning environments that take into consideration the linguistic and cultural strengths and needs of EBs. These strengths should also be considered in educational decision making at all levels. Given the documented cognitive, linguistic, cultural, and educational benefits of approaches that build on, validate and legitimize, and expand EBs' linguistic and cultural resources (rather than ignore, devalue, or neglect them), schools need to engage in policies and practices that reflect this additive stance (de Jong, 2011).

De Jong (2013) frames the pluralistic approach in terms of four core principles – (a) *educational equity*, (b) *affirming identities*, (c) *promoting additive bi/multilingualism* and (d) *structuring for integration* which has convergences with culturally responsive teaching. *Affirming identities* focus on how students learn, including their identities and knowledge. This increases student engagement and motivation for learning. When students' identities are affirmed through positive their interactions with teachers, they are more likely to apply themselves to academic effort and participate actively in instruction (Cummins, 2000). According to de Jong:

> *Affirming identities and providing spaces for identity negotiation in positive ways is fundamental to the academic success of culturally diverse students. This principle helps educators ensure that cultural differences in experiences in and outside school do not become a source of bias but are tapped into as a resource for learning. It avoids a "color-blind" approach that many educators believe allows them to remain neutral and objective in their practices (p.107).*

Affirming identities can be achieved through the use of texts that reflect the diversity of students and curricula that reflect multiple perspectives and issues relevant to students' cultural experiences. An example of this approach was observed in research that I conducted with inservice teachers in Southern Ontario, who were consciously implementing culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms

(Lopez, 2014). One approach was use alternative culturally responsive texts that represented the cultures of the students in the classroom. Instead of reading one of canons such as Shakespeare for the Grade 9 novel study unit, the class read *Shabanu Daughter of the Wind* a novel set in Pakistan. The text represented the diversity of the students in the school. In addition to using an alternative text that allowed the students to discuss critical issues within South Asian communities and families, it also supported students to develop critical cross-cultural understandings and created opportunities for students to share experiences from their cultures and challenge stereotypes. Freire (1998) suggested *conscientization*, the development of critical consciousness is achieved through dialogic process and critical reflection. In creating responsive and positive learning environments it is important to support students to develop critical consciousness—a tenet of CRT.

In addition to dialogue the students were taught the value of engaging in reflection, research skills and the norms of writing. An important aspect of their affirming identities was the space created for students to assert their own voices within the classroom be developing an environment of inquiry. In doing so teachers are encouraged to explore different forms of pedagogies and critical literacy where students can use their home language in the classroom. In what Garcia (2009) calls dynamic lingualism space is created that allows students with emerging language and needs to engage in complex language practices to construct new knowledge.

In developing culturally responsive pedagogies it important that teachers include students, drawing on the knowledge and experiences that they bring from home to the classroom and this includes language. Culturally responsive teachers relinquish some of their authority in the classroom in an effort to center the experiences of students. According to Lakoff (2004) these are two distinct ways of framing the role and place of linguistic and cultural diversity in schools and as de Jong argues not only shape how diversity is discussed in schools but also what is included and excluded in the discussion. Pluralist discourses position linguistic and cultural diversity as the norm within and across geographical borders where diversity is seen as a potential force for social change and take into account the cognitive, cultural, educational, and sociopolitical benefits of bi- and multilingualism (de Jong, 2013).

Promoting additive bi/multilingualism in schools require teachers to build on and add to students' existing linguistic repertoire. This can be achieved by teachers utilizing critical literacy. In research with inservice teachers in Southern Ontario critical literacy was used within a culturally responsive framework in a grade 12 media studies class (See Lopez, 2011). In this effort the teacher used performance poetry to develop the language skills of students as well as their critical consciousness. In addition to writing their own performance poetry the teacher guided students through a process of critical inquiry for deconstructing performance poetry. This included deconstructing, critiquing, collaboration, action and reflection. In the deconstructing phase, students examine their own biases and assumptions. Through critique students discussed the socio-cultural and socio-political contexts and examine multiple perspectives. Through collaboration students were encouraged to share ideas and tease out areas of cultural tension among different. Through action students recognized the importance action. Critical literacy provides an avenue for teachers who seek to develop culturally responsive and socially just pedagogies (Fisher (2005) and create space where teachers engage in situated learning that creates socially organized instruction such as creative writing, storytelling and other forms that support students on the development of students' identities (Wertsch, 2004). Becoming critically literate means that students have mastered the ability to read and critique messages and learn to "read" in a reflective manner (Coffey, 2011). By producing counter-texts, students can begin to examine how their cultures and identities are represented or mis-represented. This CRT approach offers students opportunities to speak from their point of view and also on behalf of those who are often silenced or marginalized.

Structuring for integration requires that all stakeholders in education —students, parents, and teachers, as well as programs and activities—connect, relate, and interact with each other and how these relations reflect respect and collaboration. In this regard, school improvement plans that have an equity focus take into account the impact of policies on linguistically and culturally diverse students and communities. Capper and Young (2015) suggest that equity audits help educators to assess how well schools area doing at creating equitable outcomes for students. They delineate "six phases they argue are important for effective equity audits: (1) identity integrated practices as proportional representation as the anchoring philosophy for equity audits; (2) establish the equity audit team; (3) design the audit; (4) collect and analyze data; (5) set and prioritize data-based goals; and (6) develop an equity implementation plan" (p. 187). As schools and educations systems respond to increasing student diversity, educational policies must be explicit in the preparation of teachers to support emerging bilinguals and remove barriers to their integration. As Lucas and Villegas (2011) argue being prepared to teach for diversity issues in general is not enough to address the needs of bilingual learners. They argue that critical teaching within a cultural diversity framework treats "linguistic and cultural diversity as one largely undifferentiated set of factors" or as "one of many aspects of culture" (p. 56). To be effective teachers require specific language-related preparation to teach EBs. Attention must be paid to diversity in critical ways where alternative epistemologies are engaged in to bring about change.

Conclusion

In these times of increased migration educators who believe that all children, regardless of any aspect of their social identity are entitled to quality education must take action. From my experience most teachers have a desire to make a difference in the lives of students. For new immigrant youths to thrive in schools, teachers must be supported so that they can deal with the challenges of schooling in current sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts. As the anti-immigrant rhetoric grows and language continues to be a site of struggle we must offer strategies that practitioners can draw from. Within a framework of equity and culturally responsive education teachers must become aware of additive approaches to support bilingual learners such as connecting with communities, setting high expectations for all students, ensuring high standards to achieve academic success, provide different forms of authentic assessments in students' language of choice and develop collaborative methods of support. Students will respond to positively when they believe that their teachers care about them and hold them to high standards (Olivares-Orellana, 2015). Language diversity is present in all aspect of society, not just schools. People who speak a language other than English (LOTE) are valuable in all aspects of society. Teachers must be transformative and agentive in their approach so that emergent bilinguals can truly feel a sense of belonging and their identities affirmed.

Supporting EBs and embracing language diversity as an asset within current sociopolitical contexts requires collaboration among those who advocate for equity and social justice. The environment facing educators seeking to bring critical perspectives to their work is difficult and hostile (Love, 2008). Taking up the challenges that diverse learners face must be a shared effort. Schools must develop high-quality and culturally responsive teaching that supports English learning through the curriculum and diverse strategies and create learning-centered environments that empower students and motivate learning, and where students bring their own rich linguistic resources (Oxford, 2010).

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