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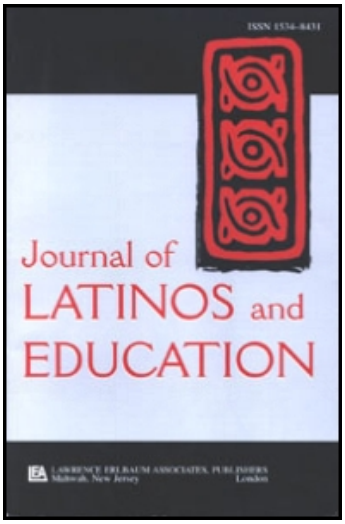


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Eric J. Johnson[a]
[a] Department of Teaching & Learning, Washington State University, Tri-Cities

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# Peerlingual Education: A Socioeducational Reaction to Structured English Immersion

Eric J. Johnson
*Department of Teaching & Learning*
*Washington State University, Tri-Cities*

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This discussion emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning methods to compensate for the legal restrictions placed on school districts by Arizona's anti-bilingual education law, Proposition 203. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning, peerlingual education is described as an invaluable resource based on the linguistic competencies of Latino students in Phoenix, Arizona. Although this collaborative approach is portrayed by educators and students as the primary strategy for classroom language assistance, the current implementation lacks structure and cultural sensitivity. Based on ethnographic inquiry, conceptual and methodological suggestions are offered to strengthen the effectiveness of peerlingual education in underresourced contexts.

Key words: bilingual education, language policy, language ideology, Proposition 203, English for the Children

## CONTEXTUAL STAGE

In the wake of the recent English for the Children movement that passed anti-bilingual education referenda in California (Proposition 227), Arizona (Proposition 203), and Massachusetts (Question 2) during the past decade, state education agencies, school districts, and educators have been limited by Structured English Immersion (SEI) requirements (Johnson, 2008a; Johnson & Brandt, 2009). Under these laws, language-minority students are given a time

Correspondence should be addressed to Eric J. Johnson, Department of Teaching & Learning, College of Education, Washington State University, 2710 University Drive, Richland, WA 99354. E-mail: ejj@tricity.wsu.edu

period, usually not to exceed 180 days, in which to learn English before being placed in mainstream classrooms. In tandem with the emphasis placed on the rapid acquisition of English under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the English for the Children policies have severely constricted the options available to linguistically rich minority communities. Given that the English for the Children policies constitute—and advocate—a *subtractive* approach to bilingualism (Crawford, 2004), the current political orientation toward education demands a better understanding of the resulting effects on language-minority students.

Although in certain contexts a well-implemented SEI program might encourage language acquisition, such a monolithic approach to English-language education contributes to widespread academic underachievement in schools that lack adequate resources (Johnson, 2008b). In addition, Title I schools that service a high population of immigrant and language-minority students face different challenges than other schools. Educators in these legally confining situations are forced to rely on creative measures to reach their developing multilingual students.

The goal of this discussion is to demonstrate one of the most common strategies implemented by educators who work with students learning English as a second language. Whether bilingual students are referred to as *student coaches*, *language buddies*, or *classroom tutors* (as well as multiple other descriptors), the utilization of a collaborative learning approach to facilitate linguistic (and social) assimilation in classrooms is widespread. This methodological adaptation to language education is so commonplace that its significance is often overlooked. The ubiquity of such a strategy necessitates a thorough characterization to better understand how it is affecting the educational achievement of language-minority students.

Peer learning methods are viewed through an ethnographic lens as they are described by educators and students in a predominantly Latino, immigrant school district in Phoenix, Arizona. The observations and descriptions provided in this article demonstrate the fundamental role that collaborative learning methods play in school districts fettered by anti-bilingual education laws like Arizona's Proposition 203 (Arizona Department of Education, 2000). From this platform, the present discussion examines the educational, linguistic, and cultural underpinnings of collaborative education strategies by demonstrating how they are implemented in contexts in which other native-language support systems have been eliminated.

## Milagros School District

All four K–8 schools in the Milagros School District are nestled in an industrial sector of western Phoenix. This area is composed of a large immigrant population (both documented and undocumented)—predominantly of Mexican descent—and Spanish is the primary home and community language. The current

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condition of the Milagros district is defined by its distinctive academic and demographic characteristics. According to the Arizona Department of Education, the four Milagros schools serviced 2,919 students during the 2007–2008 school year. More than 90% of the student population is Latino, and although 60% are *officially* classified as English language learners, very few (∼5%) do not speak Spanish. Socially speaking, most of the students come from impoverished households. Because of this stressed socioeconomic situation, Milagros is identified as a Title I school district. A significant contribution of Title I funds is applied toward the free and reduced price lunch program. The Milagros district has a 100% participation in Arizona's free and reduced price lunch program. This index traditionally represents the percentage of students who come from economically impoverished families. Furthermore, recent assessments estimate that approximately 35% to 40% of families within the district live in *extreme* poverty (i.e., they lack enough resources to secure basic life necessities).

Academically speaking, the Milagros district has struggled to meet the standards established by NCLB and Arizona's official school accountability system, AZ LEARNS. On the federal level, Milagros failed to meet the requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (see www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/ayp/edpicks.jhtml) as a district for 4 years (2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008). Of the four schools in the district, one is currently in "School Improvement Status," and the other three are under official warning. Even more disturbing, approximately 50% of the male students from the Milagros district do not finish high school.

Underlying the achievement challenges facing the Milagros schools is the general theme of language. Although implementing the guidelines of Proposition 203 within the Arizona Department of Education's assessment matrix might be feasible in some districts, the Milagros schools are faced with serving a high language-minority student population with limited resources. Moreover, considering the fact that every qualifying language-minority student is required to receive (at least) 1 year of SEI, the reality of implementing such a program in a district in which more than 60% of students are (officially) classified as English language learners is logistically complicated. As a reaction to the environment created by Proposition 203, educators in the Milagros district are compelled to rely on their students as classroom language brokers (Johnson & Brandt, 2009). The remainder of this discussion focuses on the nature of collaborative learning strategies and suggests avenues for improving their implementation in the Milagros schools.

## THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF COLLABORATIVE EDUCATION

### Sociocultural Learning

For the purpose of this discussion, collaborative learning strategies are best described within the framework of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky

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(1978) understood social interaction as the foundation for cognitive development. He explained the process involved in the child's cultural development as appearing

> first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (p. 57)

In their description of Vygotsky's social constructivism in an educational context, Thurston et al. (2007) emphasized "the role of social interaction, language, and discourse in the development of understanding, to allow children to scaffold each other's learning and co-construct" (p. 479).

The notion of children coconstructing meaning and scaffolding each other's leaning is the underlying premise of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) explicated the ZPD as "the distance between the actual development levels as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Lending credence to the application of cooperative strategies between students, the ZPD supports "collaboration with one another that which they have not mastered independently" (p. 87). Thurston et al. (2007) clarified that

> in this context the peers will still be at different stages of development, but their relative levels will be closer together. This allows them to co-construct new meaning and cognitive structures from learning experiences. They combine and splice ideas together. (p. 479)

Vygotsky's work allows learning to be viewed as a negotiated process achieved through social interaction. This point commands a better understanding of the contextual factors that structure social interactions within schools.

Building on Vygotsky's concept of socially negotiated learning, Bicais and Correia (2008) highlighted the linguistically rich environments inherent in classrooms with high language-minority student populations and posited "peer-learning spaces" as invaluable resources for developing language and literacy. *Peer-learning spaces*—defined as "learning-oriented talk that children have with each other" (Bicais & Correia, 2008, p. 363)—occur outside of teacher-initiated discourse patterns and provide educationally valuable opportunities for authentic student interaction. Establishing a sociocultural focus on writing and language use in the classroom grounds academic activities within a meaningful context and facilitates the negotiation of cultural discrepancies. Bicais and Correia stressed that a "sociocultural perspective on writing situates reading and writing within a social event that is grounded in the language and culture of the child" (p. 364).

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Crediting the educational interactions that take place outside of structured classroom activities underscores the nature of social learning and the value of student dialogue. Thus, a more comprehensive portrayal of collaborative learning must also include the interactions that take place within peer-learning spaces.

Although Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective provides a useful framework for implementing cooperative education strategies, there are some noticeable lacunae. As Le (2007) specified,

> Vygotsky proposed the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) but did not elaborate the concept of "peer," leaving open the question of how capable a peer should be and how practice or outcome might differ according to a peer's level of capability. (p. 333)

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In addition to the range of content comprehension inherent in any given classroom, this point is especially relevant to contexts in which there is a disparity in the levels of English competencies. In addition, Le pointed out that "Vygotsky developed the ZPD, but his work does not explain how a learner moves through the ZPD, beyond referring to the agency of more knowledgeable others who are either their peers or their teachers" (p. 334). This leaves much room to discuss how learners are influenced by outside factors as well as how those factors vary across different individuals.

## Collaborative Learning Strategies

The implementation of peer-based collaborative methods takes many different forms and is widely applied across all levels of education. In general, the fundamental characteristic of these methods involves using student groupings for educational purposes. There are multiple approaches to collaborative learning, which has resulted in a deluge of names for these strategies. Discussing peer education methods, Kalkowski (2001) drew attention to the overlap between the actual techniques and the multiple titles for them. In addition to peer and cross-age tutoring, Kalkowski explained that collaborative methods are also referred to as partner learning, peer learning, child-teach-child, learning through teaching, and cooperative learning. Other collaborative education contexts have recently been mentioned as peer tutoring (Gisbert & Monereo, 2008; Oortwijn, Boekaerts, Vedder, & Strijbos, 2007), peer education (Backett-Milburn & Wilson, 2000), peer teaching and near-peer instruction (Lockspeiser, O'Sullivan, Teherani, & Muller, 2008), learning networks (van Rosmalen et al., 2008), peer response groups (Prater & Bermúdez, 1993), peer collaborative methods (Shamir, Zion, & Spector-Levi, 2008), peer learning and collaborative learning (Thurston et al., 2007), peer-mediated instruction (Maheady, 2001), peer education (Campbell & Mzaidume, 2001), and Peer Mediation for Young Children (Shamir et al., 2008).

Contributing to this list of peer-mediated approaches, Eberlein et al. (2008) added that "problem-based learning (PBL), process-oriented guided inquiry learning (POGIL), and peer-led team learning (PLTL) represent three student-centered pedagogies in science that have received wide attention and [National Science Foundation] support in the past two decades" (p. 262). Whereas the PBL and POGIL methods are designed as in-class strategies, PLTL is generally used to supplement—not replace—lecture time with group sessions called "workshops" that take place outside of the regular class. As reported by Eberlein et al. in the PLTL model, "Undergraduate students who have done well in the class previously are recruited and trained as workshop leaders—"peer leaders"—who guide the efforts of a group of six to eight students" (p. 266). The peer leaders usually guide group sessions by facilitating discussions and answering questions. Because of the nature of the scheduling, this method is primarily used in postsecondary contexts.

Similar to the PLTL supplemental design is the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) program described by Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, and Simmons (1997). Whereas the PLTL model excludes the direct participation of the instructor, PALS is intended to complement regular classroom activities with brief tutoring sessions 2 or 3 days a week (Fuchs et al., 1997). Another well-documented method is ClassWide Peer Tutoring (Kamps, Barbetta, Leonard, & Delquadri, 1994; Kamps et al., 2008). CWPT programs ensure that all students work together in tutor–learner pairs on a class-wide basis. Kamps et al. (1994) explained that CWPT strategies "include alternating tutor-learner roles, verbal and written practice of skills (e.g., reading aloud, writing spelling words, reciting math facts), praise and awarding of points for correct responses, and announcing winning teams" (p. 50). The CWPT and PALS approaches have been especially effective in diverse classrooms and special education programs (Fuchs et al., 1997; Kamps et al., 1994).

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## Effects of Collaborative Strategies

Collaborative learning methods can be especially effective in culturally diverse contexts. Allison and Rehm (2007) pointed out that placing

> students from different cultural backgrounds into heterogeneous groups and instructing them to collaborate and cooperate with each other on activities and problem-solving tasks has been found to promote inter-ethnic friendships, develop cross-cultural understandings, and build teamwork while also enhancing literacy and language acquisition among linguistically diverse students. (p. 16)

Focusing exclusively on differing language abilities in the classroom, it can be argued that highlighting differences between students makes peer tutoring an

influential tactic for attending to diversity in such a way that student differences—of both language and of curricular knowledge—are positioned as a resource to drive pedagogical decisions instead of as a problem that confines them (Gisbert & Monereo, 2008). Collaborative strategies have also been shown to help language-minority students with writing skills (Prater & Bermúdez, 1993) and to increase their opportunities to respond and participate in classroom activities (Kamps et al., 2008).

Although it is easy to focus on the role of the teacher in structuring activities such that everyone has the opportunity to participate, many other sociocultural factors influence a student's motivation to contribute to classroom dialogue. Oortwijn et al. (2007) contended that immigrant students incorporate less verbal communication in group work because of lower linguistic proficiency. Even though students might appear engaged in a collaborative activity, interpersonal and linguistic processes greatly contribute to the depth of conceptual attainment of the tutee. In this light, "a learner who is explaining a concept to another learner has to 'tune' the help to the cognitive level of the receiver," asserted Oortwijn et al., but ultimately "the most accurate predictor of learning gains is whether or not the help receiver applies the help that is given" (p. 147). As argued by Olmedo (2003), "Even children as young as kindergarteners make judgements about the lingual proficiency of their peers, monitor each other's comprehension and production skills, and provide scaffolds to maximize the comprehension and communication of their classmates" (p. 143).

Noting the significance of the interpersonal communication dynamics involved in collaborative instruction contexts, Oortwijn et al. (2007) called for an

> increased interest in mechanisms that bring about effective peer interactions, that is, the constituents of peer interactions that are related to higher learning gains, the context factors that affect peer interactions, and the relation of peer interactions with learning gains. (p. 146)

Thus, it can be suggested that improving the "mechanisms that bring about effective peer interactions" requires a better understanding of the sociocultural dynamics involved in the communicative negotiations that occur within collaborative learning contexts.

## METHODS

This discussion stems from a 3-year ethnographic project in the Milagros School District in Phoenix, Arizona (Johnson, 2008b). Whereas the larger investigation elaborates on the ways in which language policies are implemented the Milagros schools and the resulting effects they have on language use in general, this

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discussion focuses on the specific strategies applied to accommodate language-minority students in all-English classrooms. Using Wolcott's (2008) account of using ethnography as a "way of seeing," I collected the data described in this article through participant observations and structured interviews with students and educators from all four schools . As a participant observer, I was involved with the Milagros schools in a variety of different capacities (e.g., instructional assistant, after-school program instructor, substitute teacher, and summer school teacher).

I am certain that being involved with the Milagros district in these capacities was critical for developing so many authentic relationships with students and educators. After 2 years of working in the Milagros schools, I was able to recruit multiple volunteers who eagerly agreed to participate in my project. In total, 30 students and 10 educators were interviewed (along with 10 additional students who contributed by writing personal ethnographic journals over a span of 13 months). To complement the viewpoints provided by classroom teachers, I was also able to recruit an administrator (a principal) and a school counselor to participate. For privacy purposes, the names of all individuals and schools mentioned in this project are pseudonyms.

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## ANALYSIS

### District Policy

To concisely sum up the official language policy of the Milagros School District would be very difficult. Discussing how the Milagros schools meet the state SEI requirements, the district's multicultural director emphasized that because of their large population of English language learner students, all classes are considered SEI. This might be true from an administrative/district level, but very few teachers actually have a full SEI endorsement. Even those who do have the full endorsement are not explicitly directed to structure their classes around a true SEI model. The following exchange with a veteran classroom teacher illustrates a popular view of how SEI is applied in the district:

> What I do see is that there's some more accountability from the district, that they have to have their teachers trained in SEI. But as far as, you know, how good it is, you know, I think provisional SEI is only 6 hours that are needed, or 45, I'm not sure. So the teacher may not, they may take it, but they're not really enforcing it or implementing it in the classroom. (Mr. Jiménez, sixth-grade teacher)

Mr. Jiménez's testimony demonstrates that although teachers have been trained in SEI, they are not necessarily applying it as their primary teaching methodology. Other teachers openly admitted feelings of inadequate preparation in spite of receiving SEI training:

> I don't think that, in order to meet the needs of my students that come from, you know speaking a whole nother language, I don't think I'm qualified . . . I'm hired to meet those needs [but] I don't feel personally I'm qualified to do it. (Ms. Atwell, sixth-grade teacher)

Ultimately, the district's description of all classes being SEI classes simply means that all teachers either are certified in SEI methods or are working on their certification.

Another strategy mentioned by the district's multicultural director is allowing teachers to rephrase in Spanish—although Proposition 203 explicitly states that teachers may only use "a minimal amount of the child's native language when necessary" (Arizona Department of Education, 2000, Section 15–751, Paragraph 5). Knowing that the majority of teachers in the district speak only English, I asked an administrator how many of her teachers were able to communicate in Spanish. She replied,

> Sometimes you have classrooms with teachers that don't have that primary language knowledge . . . they may have some working knowledge of it, but they don't have the instructional knowledge and sometimes you depend on other students in the classroom to implement that. (Ms. Castillo, principal)

This was the first time that an educator had openly described students as in-class resources for both the teachers and other students. Considering the implicit expectations placed on students to act as language *and* education brokers, this trend becomes even more significant.

## Peerlingual Education

The most common and consistently utilized linguistic resource in the Milagros district is that of bilingual peers to translate and teach classroom materials to Spanish-speaking students. Although having students help each other is common practice in education, the schools in the Milagros district have established the unofficial—but widespread—practice of peerlingual education to compensate for the lack of official language-based resources (Johnson & Brandt, 2009). In this context, *peerlingual education* refers to all instances in which language-minority students rely on peers to translate and/or teach classroom material to them—either at the request of an educator or in response to an individual request for assistance. This approach differs from the collaborative strategies mentioned previously in that peerlingual education applications focus primarily on language negotiation and do not usually take into consideration the structural designs of more established methods (e.g., PALS or CWPT). In addition, the peerlingual approach is distinct in that it encompasses educational dialogue both in the classroom as well

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as outside of an official education setting (e.g., during lunch or at home). It also includes the types of student-to-student interactions outlined in the peer-learning spaces framework (Bicais & Correia, 2008).

Utilizing peerlingual education has obvious benefits and is revered by many teachers as invaluable. When asked how they were able to communicate to students who do not understand English, *all* of the (non-Spanish-speaking) educators mentioned depending on other students as peer assistants, peer coaches, student buddies, classroom helpers, peer tutors, or student translators. For example:

- "I rely heavily on my Spanish-speaking students." (Ms. Atwell, sixth-grade teacher)
- "My first instance is to grab another student, peer education type thing." (Ms. Lang, third-grade teacher)
- "I rely almost completely on student translators." (Ms. Walters, seventh-grade teacher)
- "Children peers can coach each other, help each other." (Ms. Sandoval, school counselor)

This strategy is so commonplace and expected that teachers reported that students will often automatically initiate their language services without being prompted:

- "Have other kids help other kids, and most of them like to help so I don't even need to ask. Most of the time, somebody will just jump in 'cause they can tell if I know what's going on or not." (Mr. Powers, sixth-grade teacher)
- "Oh yeah, I'll ask students to explain it and the students actually will automatically do it . . . So as soon as I'm talking the other kids are like [makes a jabbering sound], you know, speaking to them in Spanish. So they'll translate it for them." (Ms. McDonald, physical education teacher)

As efficient and accessible as this is, none of the teachers mentioned a systematic strategy for training students on how to work with others in this capacity. Ms. King's system for assigning peer assistants demonstrates the randomness involved:

> Ms. King: (We have, we call them, like, buddies who will translate for us if we need it, or students are partnered up in class. The kiddos who are predominantly Spanish speakers are . . . they sit next to someone who is seen as almost as a peer leader and who won't enable them but will do it in English and Spanish for them.
>
> Eric: And have they been trained or have you taught them how to do that, interpret or teach?

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Ms. King: Not official training. They're the kids, the students who stand out as, like who you would see as a teacher or not see as a teacher but . . . and who are proficient in both languages. Even the kids who are coming out, who are emerging in their English, they make great translators too 'cause it only helps them. (Ms. King, fifth-grade teacher)

Basically, if students are seen as socially and linguistically competent, they are asked to work with the Spanish-speaking students. Even the "emerging" (i.e., not fully proficient in English) students, as Ms. King called them, are placed in this demanding situation.

As is, the current application of peerlingual education is generally seen as something outside of—or supplemental to—intentionally planned cooperative methodologies (i.e., instead of constituting the rationale for implementing them). Teachers plan classroom activities—both individual and cooperative—as part of their regular instruction, but peerlingual strategies are not explicitly incorporated into the preparation of lessons. Instead, peerlingual tactics are applied as an adjustment to the dynamics of regular classroom contexts.

In addition to the disconnect between cooperative methodologies and peerlingual strategies, there is also an underlying lack of appreciation for the intricacy involved in being a peerlingual tutor. This is not to say that educators do not recognize the importance of peerlingual tutors; rather, they did not express an understanding of the multiple social, linguistic, and educational factors involved in the process. Given the predominance of peerlingual education, it is unfortunate that a formal system for training or working with the tutors does not exist. As stated in the district office's school guidelines, "student groupings" are to be used as part of the official language policy—yet how this is specifically implemented is not outlined. I asked Ms. Walters how she understood the district's policy:

I was panicking . . . I can understand a lot of Spanish, but I can't speak it, and so they [school administrators] said the kids will help each other to translate. And that's kind of what saves us, 'cause if the kids couldn't translate I don't know what we'd do. (Ms. Walters, seventh-grade teacher)

Not only is it expected that students will translate, but Ms. Walters suggested that teachers would be lost without their help. Ms. Castillo commented from administrator's perspective on her expectations for how teachers use peers for language support:

Eric: Is there any type of training for students, like a here's how you tutor or mentor your classmates?

Ms. Castillo: No . . . no . . . we basically, as teachers, you know, I think we all learn and we all adjust with what it is that we're doing with our kids . . .

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and I think now that they're using a lot more visuals, graphic organizers, teachers are using more SIOP [Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol] strategies and whatnot, so it's allowing them to be more successful in the classroom. Because by doing it in that mannerism, you're teaching all the different modes of working with kids . . . So by doing SIOP methodologies, you, you hit more kids in more, more areas and by doing that you're also training your kids that are actually getting it on how to develop more modes of working with other kids.

Eric: Some of them do a great job.

Ms. Castillo: Yeah, sometimes they do a better job than the teachers. (Ms. Castillo, principal)

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According to Ms. Castillo, the immense responsibility placed on peerlingual tutors (and tutees) is justified by assuming that students will learn how to tutor other students by observing their instructors' teaching methods. Thus, students are expected to simultaneously learn the material and teach what they have learned according to teaching methods they have internalized during their short student careers.

Although many students do a fantastic job of helping one another, this philosophy ignores multiple problems. For example, peerlingual tutors might not understand—or might misunderstand—the information they are expected to teach. Thurston et al. (2007) cautioned that "there is a danger of 'pooling of ignorance' or even 'meta-ignorance' where the helper might not know that they do not know the correct facts" (p. 490). Furthermore, what happens when there are social issues between the peerlingual assistant and the tutee? Like all children and adolescents, peer tutors have bad days because of outside influences and might not feel like bearing the responsibility of teaching that day. Moreover, what if the teacher did not do a sufficient job explaining and nobody in the class understands? How about the students' constant exposure to inexperienced or undertrained educators? Unlike most educators in the Milagros district, Mr. Jiménez empathized with students who are expected to act as classroom language brokers:

> I do see the importance of that, but at the same time, it's the hardest thing for me, at least for, that is finding a child who is, has a personality and the willingness to do it. 'Cause a lot of them, you take, you can have the brightest kid and they can be bilingual . . . and they just don't like to translate, and they shouldn't be forced into that situation just because they speak two languages . . . So now you have two kids that are upset in the classroom, one 'cause they don't understand what's going on, and the other one because they're being forced to translate and work with this other student . . . You know, they're trying to grasp a concept and it's just added stress on them. (Mr. Jiménez, sixth-grade teacher)

Although other teachers and administrators automatically expect students to be willing to help out, Mr. Jiménez's comments validate the increased anxiety this can cause. Like in any peer or cooperative learning atmosphere, multiple factors must be considered when planning and delivering lessons. When one relies on a peerlingual approach, these factors are intensified, and planning must be even more thorough. In the case of the Milagros district, it is easy for some teachers to overlook these factors when confronted with a language barrier, causing them to lose sight of the individual needs of their peerlingual assistants.

## Student Perspectives

In order to understand the students' perceptions of the linguistic resources provided at school, I asked my consultants to tell me what they relied on for help when they did not understand something in class. The majority of students singled out their friends or classmates as the biggest help. This trend corresponds with the district's emphasis on peerlingual strategies. Students portrayed this process in various ways. Maritza explained that her peerlingual tutors tend to focus on the importance of understanding the English:

> *Más me ayuda la Yovani y la Gloria. Me hablan en inglés para que lo entieda, y si no lo . . . entiendo, ellas me vuelven a repetir y repetir hasta que yo entienda.* (Yovani and Gloria help me the most. They speak to me in English so that I'll understand, and if I don't understand, they keep repeating and repeating until I understand.) (Maritza, fifth grade)

In a time crunch, though, some peerlingual tutors find that it is much more efficient to simply provide the answer:

> Marta: . . . Most of the time they're copying my work, 'cause I'm the smart one, well they're smart too but they copy me all the time [giggling].
> Eric: So they just copy and you don't have to explain it to them?
> Marta: Well yeah, they like, they're like, please help me understand 'cause I don't get it, and if they don't get it in English then Spanish. Then they're like, ahh, just let me copy 'cause you're seriously speaking Chinese to me. But yeah, they tell me to explain it first. (Marta, eighth grade)

Although most students credit their peerlingual tutors for explaining the assignments, others admit that copying the answer is just as common (if not more common):

> Eric: Do they explain directions and stuff like that?
> Fabi: Um no. They would, well sometimes, but some mostly they would just go like, okay this is the answer and do it. (Fabi, sixth grade)

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The previous two examples demonstrate what Nelson-Le Gall and Glor-Scheib (1985) distinguished as *executive help seeking* (i.e., asking for an answer) from *instrumental help seeking* (i.e., asking for an explanation). From my observations, executive help seeking pervaded most peerlingual contexts, especially when explicit directions were not provided (or understood).

Finally, it can be assumed that the mere accessibility of peerlingual education in the Milagros district has established it as the norm. In the eyes of educators, it might appear natural for students to ask their peers for help. In some cases, though, students feel obligated to ask their classmates instead of "bothering" the teacher:

Ricardo: *Pregunto a otros compañeros.* (I ask my classmates.)
Eric: *¿Y tus maestros hablan español?* (And do your teachers speak Spanish?)
Ricardo: *No más Ms. Rosa.* (Just Ms. Rosa.)
Eric: *¿Y ella te habla en español?* (And does she speak to you in Spanish?)
Ricardo: *Sí, a veces.* (Yes, sometimes.)
Eric: *¿Te ayuda en español?* (Does she help you in Spanish?)
Ricardo: *No, sólo me dice cosas, nada más.* (No, she only says things to me, nothing else.)
Eric: *Nunca te explica la . . .* (She doesn't ever explain the . . .)
Ricardo: *No. Dice que no tiene tiempo . . . explicar en inglés y español.* (No. She says that she doesn't have time to explain in English and Spanish.) (Ricardo, seventh grade)

Even though the district's policy allows teachers to explain and reinforce in Spanish, some educators apparently perceive this strategy as too time consuming. It is unfortunate that students like Ricardo are placed in such a compromising situation. On the one hand, they have limited access to the language of instruction—as well as all of the stress that accompanies being in that situation—and on the other, they feel bad for wasting the teacher's time.

## (Re)Conceptualizing Peerlingual Education

Although the effectiveness and theoretical underpinnings of collaborative learning have been demonstrated, there are multiple reasons to critique the current implementation of peerlingual education in the Milagros schools. First, instead of being an ad hoc reaction to language diversity in the classroom, there needs to be a wider recognition of peerlingual education as an official strategy (i.e., instead of just expecting students to simultaneously act as language brokers and teachers). Second, considering the magnitude of the role that peerlingual tutors play in the micro context (e.g., the classroom education of their peers) and the macro context (e.g., the resulting standardized test scores of tutees that are incorporated

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into state and federal assessments of the school), everyone involved would benefit from a systematic approach to training students to be effective peerlingual tutors. This could be as basic as adapting a training and implementation model based on already well-established collaborative methods like CWPT, PALS, or PLTL.

Finally, if using students as peerlingual assistants is to be a viable and effective strategy, more emphasis needs to be placed on how to group students, with extra importance placed on the socioeducational dynamics involved in this strategy. This also necessitates a broader understanding of the multidimensional nature of peerlingual education. To enhance the ways in which language-minority students teach one another, educators must consider the educational, sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of peerlingual strategies. Figure 1 lists the different types of factors that constitute each dimension.

Viewing peerlingual education within this four-dimensional framework draws attention to the manifold nature of collaborative student interactions. Although the educational dimension might be the most apparent to teachers, consideration of the other three dimensions is equally critical for the success of an effective peerlingual education program. In the present study, ignoring—or being unaware of—the influence of the sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions has contributed to the overall ethos of underachievement in the Milagros district. Although in no way would any educator ever attribute the endemic underachievement in the Milagros district to the peerlingual tutors, the fact that peerlingual education is applied as such a pervasive—and integral—strategy indicates that its implementation needs to be reconceptualized. Obviously, the peerlingual approach in the Milagros schools would benefit from a well-structured cooperative learning methodology in addition to a system for training students on how to tutor (and be tutored). However, without an understanding how these four dimensions affect the context of student interactions, the architecture for social scaffolding is easily dismantled.

In spite of this critical assessment of peerlingual education, it must be stressed that the Milagros educators' fundamental view of their students' linguistic abilities as a *resource* (Ruiz, 1984) is, above all, a very progressive shift toward a more tolerant and appreciative paradigm of diversity. It must also be stated that this proposed framework for understanding peerlingual education is incomplete. The factors listed are merely representative of the general characteristics of each dimension. Even though these factors establish a solid platform from which each dimension can be described, they will vary across different contexts of time and place. Because an expanded list of these dimensional factors would benefit everyone involved in education, any additional contributions shall be well received and appreciated.

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| Educational | Sociocultural |
|---|---|
| 1. Effectiveness of educator instruction | 1. Ability to translate concepts |
| 2. Level of PLT and SL comprehension | 2. SL schooling experiences in home country |
| 3. Teaching/explaining ability of PLT | 3. PLT schooling experiences (in both countries) |
| 4. L1 literacy abilities of PLT | 4. SL and PLT language/dialect congruence |
| 5. L1 literacy abilities of SL | 5. Cultural congruence between students |
| 6. L2 literacy abilities of PLT | 6. Socioeconomic status disparities |
| 7. L2 literacy abilities of SL | 7. Students' perceptions of ethnicity |
| 8. Spatial orientation of classroom | 8. Social perceptions of minority ethnic groups |
| 9. Educator pedagogy/methodology | 9. Immigration status |
| 10. Standards-based curriculum | 10. Social language policy |
| 11. Workload and time constraints | |
| 12. Teacher's expectations | |
| 13. School and classroom language policy | |
| **Interpersonal** | **Intrapersonal** |
| 1. Teacher rapport with class | 1. View of school |
| 2. Teacher rapport with PLT | 2. Level of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation |
| 3. Teacher rapport with SL | 3. Home life context |
| 4. PLT–SL rapport | 4. Peer influences |
| 5. Friendship affiliations of PLT and SL | 5. Outside resources |
| 6. Gender/sex tension | 6. Self-esteem |
| 7. Perceived social/popularity status | 7. Perception of L1 |
| 8. Affective level of PLT and SL | 8. Perception of English |
| 9. PLT and SL view of school/grades | 9. Emotional stability |

FIGURE 1 Dimensions of peerlingual education. PLT = peerlingual tutor, SL = student learner, L1 = first language, L2 = second language.

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## CONCLUSIONS

Although the lens of this discussion has focused on the application of peerlingual education to overcome the limitations placed on educators by anti-bilingual education laws, the larger issue permeating this position involves the ongoing struggle for the educational equity of language-minority students. From a Bakhtinian perspective, educational policies like Proposition 203 are *monologic* in the sense that they impose a single authoritative voice or perspective (Shields, 2007). In reality, though, Proposition 203 was neither passed nor implemented within a vacuum. McCarty (2002) noted that "local meanings cannot be divorced from the larger network of power relations in which they reside" (p. xvii). Instead of recognizing the forces that produce culturally and academically marginalizing policies, educational agencies (at all levels) prefer to fault students, educators, and parents for underachievement.

Even in a context in which language is such a dominant issue, the most overriding theme throughout the Milagros district is meeting federal and state accountability standards. Because this is heavily influenced by high-stakes testing, the curricula are specifically designed around passing standardized tests. In the face of punitive measures and harsh classifications by federal and state education agencies, language issues in the classroom have become a secondary concern and have been relegated to peerlingual assistants. Even though "there is no consistent evidence that high-stakes testing works to increase achievement" (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2005, p. 10), such methods for assessing schools persist as a dominant force in the structure of public education under NCLB. Unfortunately, the negative effects of standardized testing are more apparent in school districts like Milagros that service high-poverty communities (Johnson, 2008b).

Instead of blaming language-minority students and communities for academic underachievement, it is time to focus on the policies and agencies that structure such failure. When school systems downplay native-language abilities and focus on academic underachievement in English, they miss the opportunity to engage language-minority students on a more profound and beneficial level. By welcoming and incorporating the cultural capital that these students bring to school with them every day, teachers can construct educational environments that enable rather than inhibit—which, after all, should be the primary goal of everyone involved in education.

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