

Targeting Diversity: A Critical Account of Language Policy and Public Education

by Eric J. Johnson and Elizabeth A. Brandt

Eric J. Johnson is an Assistant Professor of Bilingual/ESL Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Washington State University. His training is in sociocultural anthropology and linguistics. Dr. Johnson specializes in ethnographic approaches to language-minority education programs and language policies in public schools. His interests include language policy and planning, the application of policy as practice, immigrant communities, and the effects of bilingual education programs on Latino students.

Elizabeth A. Brandt is a Professor of Anthropology in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University. Her training is in sociocultural anthropology and linguistics. Dr. Brandt specializes in collaborative work with Native American communities in the U.S. Southwest. She also works with language policies and Spanish colonial history using primary texts on the pueblos and oral history with communities. Much of her research is strongly focused to applied community needs and environmental issues.

The Pragmatics of Bilingual Education

For non-English-speaking students, negotiating language barriers in the classroom can be an exasperating process. Without adequate resources, these language-minority students easily fall behind their peers and are often classified as having learning disabilities. To address this issue, schools have adopted a variety of language-assistance programs. How these programs are implemented has a profound effect on the scholastic achievement, language-acquisition, and identity of immigrant students. Unfortunately, schools that service communities with high immigrant populations are often faced with a severe lack of resources (Johnson 2008b).

In the United States, the enrollment of all students in bilingual education programs rose from 2.1 million in the 1990-1991 academic year to more than 5 million in 2003 (Flannery 2006). A 2000 congressionally mandated study found that students in bilingual programs receive lower grades, are judged by their teachers to have lower academic abilities, and score below their classmates on standardized tests of reading and math. Furthermore, with respect to the immigrant students to whom a majority of these language-minority programs are targeted, the dropout rate for foreign-born Latino students between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four is an astonishing 36.5 percent, as compared to 4.7 percent of non-Latino immigrants (U.S. Department of Education 2007). In response to these types of educational trends, many people (e.g., English for the Children, see Johnson 2008a) have pointed the finger at bilingual education programs as the cause of such widespread failure.

The debate surrounding bilingual education has many facets. From a pedagogical perspective, researchers and educators work vigorously to determine the most efficient methodologies. In addition to multiple other challenges educators experience

in the public school system, teachers are faced with a lack of resources and the support necessary for educating language-minority students. With more than 425 first languages spoken by immigrant students in the United States, teachers and administrators can only rarely provide native-language instruction (Flannery 2006). Even when language services are provided, many people still blame bilingual education programs for low achievement and high dropout rates. Furthermore, from a mainstream social standpoint, using foreign languages in the classroom commonly is seen as a threat to the vitality of English.

Before pigeonholing bilingual education programs as the determinant of underachievement, social views toward immigrants and broader educational practices must be addressed. First, public schools emphasize English as an indispensable skill for achievement. While it is understandable that public schools prioritize English for the sake of academic achievement, such prioritizing is frequently done in such a way that immigrant languages are discredited or devalued. Advocates of English-only programs equate conformity to success and promote linguistic diversity as social degradation and deviation. In programs where English is used as the sole medium of instruction, native speakers are automatically accorded higher levels of power and influence (Tollefson and Tsui 2004). This automatically relegates minority languages to an inferior position. Often, bilingual education programs are defamed as inhibiting the acquisition of English and denying access to the American Dream (Johnson 2006). Hidden behind this negative facade, however, is the true goal of bilingual education: to cultivate multilingualism and multiliteracy.

Accountability in Arizona

Drawing from the surge of anti-bilingual education sentiments at the turn of the millennium, Ron Unz and the program he initiated, English for the Children, promoted Proposition 203 to dismantle bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) programs in Arizona's public schools (Johnson 2008a). According to Unz's initiative, language-minority students were to be placed in "Sheltered English Immersion" (a term coined by the English for the Children movement) for a period usually not to exceed one year before being mainstreamed into the regular education classroom. Not only does this methodology contradict the research on the most effective bilingual education methodologies and language acquisition models, but it is culturally insensitive, and its subtractive nature disregards the inherent value of bilingualism (Baker 2006; Crawford 1999; Cummins 1996; Faltis 2000; Krashen 1996; Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998).

In spite of the imploring cries of educators, researchers, and community organizations around Arizona denouncing Proposition 203, the pro-203 community was able to reinforce its position through a well-funded and well-organized media campaign (Johnson 2005a; 2005b; 2006; 2007; 2008a) and convinced 64 percent of Arizona's voters to limit the educational services that language-minority students receive. At best, voters may not have realized that they were doing away with all of Arizona's bilingual education and ESL programs in favor of sink-or-swim immersion. While Unz decried bilingual education as perpetuating academic failure, in reality, only 30 percent of students eligible for language services in

Arizona were involved in true bilingual education programs (MacSwan 2000); most language-minority students were either in ESL programs or not receiving any services at all.

Contributing to these legal challenges facing language-minority students, state and federal accountability measures were instituted during the same time period. In November 2001, voters in Arizona endorsed Proposition 301, which allotted funds to the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) to design a “system to measure school performance based on student achievement, including student performance on the AIMS [Arizona’s Instrument for Measuring Standards] test” (Franciosi 2007, 4). The actual legal stipulations for the accountability system are stated in section 15-241 of the Arizona Revised Statutes (ARS 15-241). The system developed by the ADE is referred to as Arizona (AZ) LEARNS. The assessment of each school provided by the ADE is referred to as the school’s Achievement Profile (for examples, see www.ade.az.gov/azlearns).

As part of this assessment, the ADE assigns each school a profile ranking. Schools are categorized as either: (1) Excelling; (2) Highly Performing; (3) Performing Plus; (4) Performing; or (5) Underperforming. Schools that are designated as “Underperforming” for three consecutive years are labeled as “Failing to Meet Academic Standards” and are subject to a school improvement plan. Furthermore, in accordance with Section 1116 of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), any school receiving Title I funds will be designated “Federal School Improvement Status” after failing to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measurement defined by NCLB for a second consecutive year. If AYP is not met during the following year(s), schools, administrators, and teachers are subject to harsh penalties (see www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg2.html#sec1116). This intense focus on accountability and standards-based education restricts educators from adapting to diverse local contexts and cultivates anxiety among administrators. Confounding this situation, the guidelines set by state and federal agencies can be convoluted and opaque.

While this process of gauging school achievement and accountability can be considered convoluted and drawn out, it is important to underscore the emphasis placed on Arizona’s high stakes accountability assessment—the AIMS. Scores on the AIMS test are the most influential factor in assessing student, school, and district achievement for state and federal designation purposes. Considering the immense pressure on schools to perform, the situation facing schools with a high language-minority student population is exacerbated under the imposed guidelines of Proposition 203 and the ongoing legal battles in the legislature. In order to understand how this context is translated into the everyday experiences of students and educators, the current study focuses on a school district that serves a predominantly language-minority community.

Milagros School District

In order to better understand how federal and state policies affect local schools, a three-year ethnographic project was carried out in the Milagros School District in Phoenix, Arizona (Johnson 2008b). All four K-8 schools in the Milagros district are nestled in an industrial sector of west Phoenix. This area is made up of a large

immigrant population, both documented and undocumented—predominantly of Mexican descent—with Spanish as the primary home and community language. The focus of the overall investigation elaborated on the ways in which language policies are implemented in the classroom and their resulting effects on language use outside of school. The arguments posed in this article are supported by multiple in-depth interviews with educators that participated in the study.

The current condition of the Milagros district is defined by its distinct academic and demographic features. According to the ADE, the four Milagros schools serviced 2,919 students during the 2007-2008 school year. More than 90 percent of the student population is Latino, and while 60 percent is *officially* classified as English language learner (ELL), very few do not speak Spanish (~5 percent). Socially, most of the students come from impoverished households. Recent assessments estimate approximately 35-40 percent of families within the district live in extreme poverty. Due to this stressed socioeconomic situation, Milagros is identified as a Title I school district. A significant contribution of Title I funds make up the Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program. The Milagros district has a 100 percent participation in Arizona's Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program. This index traditionally represents the percentage of students that comes from economically stressed families.

Academically, the Milagros district has struggled to meet the standards established by NCLB and AZ LEARNS. On the federal level, Milagros has failed to meet AYP as a district for the past three years (2005, 2006, and 2007). Of the four schools in the district, one is currently in "School Improvement Status" and the other three schools are under official warning. Even more disturbing, approximately 40 percent of the students from the Milagros district do not finish high school. Underlying the achievement challenges facing the Milagros schools is the general theme of language. While 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. Considering that every qualifying language-minority student is required to receive (at least) one year of Structured English Immersion (SEI—the new name of the "Sheltered English Immersion" identified above), the reality of implementing such a program in a district in which more than 60 percent are (officially) classified as ELL is fraught with complications.

On the ground level, the district has a variety of specific methods for resolving discrepancies with the ADE. First, as required by the ADE, the district is proactive about making sure that all teachers are either endorsed in SEI or are taking the proper courses to earn their endorsement. This strategy allows them to report that *all* classes are considered SEI—regardless of the actual methods being used in the classrooms. Second, teachers are trained in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol model for planning and implementing sheltered content lessons (for examples, see www.siopinstitute.net). Finally, facing such a large number of students who are reclassified as ELL, the district offers a variety of compensatory education services (e.g., tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school).

Although this approach might seem to incorporate all of the requirements of Proposition 203, the actual application of these strategies varies greatly.

Moreover, claiming that every class is SEI assumes that every teacher is qualified to implement the appropriate methodology. On the contrary, even veteran teachers struggle with this responsibility. As reported by one teacher, “the only thing I’ve received from the district is my fifteen hours of SEI. I don’t feel that I’ve had any staff development in dealing with, or how to teach to, the ELL students.” Another teacher confessed, “I don’t think that, in order to meet the needs of my students that come from, you know, speaking a-whole-other language, I don’t think I’m qualified.” In addition to teachers feeling unprepared to meet the needs of their language-minority students, the implementation of SEI is neither monitored nor regulated by school administrators.

Responding to the SEI training, a well-respected Latino educator explained that “the teacher may take it [SEI training], but they’re not really enforcing it or implementing it in the classroom.” Without the financial resources and overall educational infrastructure (e.g., classrooms, more teachers, additional instructional assistants, and administrative guidance), it is seemingly impossible to adequately implement an effective SEI program in the Milagros district. The educators’ comments reflect the unsound nature of considering all classes as SEI classrooms. Most significantly, the district, administrators, and teachers are all under such an extreme amount of pressure to meet federal and state standards that they cannot afford to dedicate the appropriate amount of time to develop SEI lessons around the AIMS requirements.

Another way to see how NCLB and Proposition 203 have affected the everyday responsibilities of classroom teachers is to examine how things have changed since the law was passed in 2000. On a philosophical level, a school counselor commented:

There used to be an emphasis on the value of being biliterate and bilingual, being a true biliterate. The focus now is on let’s get these kids, you know, able to read English and function in English and take a test in English.

So, how is Proposition 203 implemented in the Milagros district? As far as maintaining English as the principal medium of instruction, it is adhering to the law. Unfortunately, though, the district does not have the resources to structure an adequate SEI system. With so many language-minority students, ensuring that all teachers are trained—or being trained—in SEI is the district’s *official* strategy for complying with Proposition 203. On the ground level, though, the most essential resource available to teachers is their students.

By far, the most common and consistently utilized linguistic resource in the Milagros district is the use of bilingual peers to translate and teach classroom materials to Spanish-speaking students. While 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 2008b). In this context, peerlingual education refers to all instances where language-minority students rely on peers to translate and/or teach classroom material to them—either

at the request of an educator or as an individual request. Applying this peerlingual education strategy 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 indicated relying on other students as peer assistants (or coaches, buddies, helpers, tutors, translators). While useful, this method does not take into consideration multiple educational factors (e.g., level of comprehension of the tutor or his or her ability to explain the material) or the interpersonal and social dynamics involved between different students. Unfortunately, the peerlingual tutors are placed in these situations without any type of formal training and are expected to simultaneously learn and teach. Essentially, untrained students—not trained teachers—are teaching students.

Regrettably, the overwhelming emphasis on standards-based instruction and assessment precludes a strategy to ensure that students are actually receiving adequate official services and/or the training for unofficial methods. Consequently, districts like Milagros are caught within the larger struggle for linguistic superiority and must scramble to meet decontextualized prescriptive expectations. Apparently, the architects of Proposition 203 did not foresee the intense complexity of implementing a program with such a narrow focus in a district with so many language-minority students (in spite of the high number of Spanish speakers in cities like Phoenix, Mesa, and Tucson).

Discussion

As cultural constructs, language policies are created, promoted, and implemented to accomplish ideologically motivated objectives (McCarty 2004; 2005). Unfortunately, many subtractive language policies have been successfully promoted behind a thin veil of good intentions. Whereas the individuals and agencies that promote these types of ethnocentric policies assert their sensitivity to cultural diversity, their underlying ideologies frequently surface in public discussions. Maria Mendoza, chairwoman of Arizona's branch of English for the Children, clearly articulated her language orientation by asking the voting public, "Why do they [proponents of bilingual services] want to keep them [minority students] as prisoners in their culture and their heritage?" (Gonzalez 2000). Obviously, these organizations clearly understand the direct link between language maintenance and the promotion of cultural diversity. It can be assumed, then, that language planning can essentially be reduced to "an extension of social policy aimed at behavior modification" (Williams 2003, 1).

While the general educational goals of policies like NCLB, AZ LEARNS, and Proposition 203 are not inherently bad (i.e., that students learn English so that they have access to dominant class social institutions), the harmful effects emerge out of how language use is characterized and treated in general. On the one hand, language policies set parameters for how language-minority students are supposed to use language in a school setting. On the other hand, students are rarely conscious of such policies. Instead, they are aware that their teachers do not want them to speak Spanish in the classroom, and they know that English is associated with education and success. Finally, they are very conscious of the current social

issues that surround them and their families: immigrants speak Spanish, and mainstream America supports the deportation of undocumented immigrants (Johnson 2008b).

There are two major features of language policies that deeply affect language-minority students. First, how these policies are understood and implemented by people in positions of power (e.g., educators) determines the way students view the value of languages. Speaking, teaching, and honoring English are all fine, but prohibiting, devaluing, and ignoring native-language abilities can be detrimental to a student's self-esteem and the development of his or her worldview. Instilling in students that Spanish is inferior shapes the way they view their families and communities. Second, the way the students' native-language abilities are treated determines the perception of their own proficiencies. Developing English proficiency and literacy skills without providing supplemental Spanish language development strategies relegates the students' native-language abilities to a lesser position. All of these issues are exacerbated when the English education services are mis-implemented, leaving students with English skills that are not valued on an academic level and Spanish skills that are not valued on a social level.

In the Milagros district, many students have achieved a high level of balanced oral bilingualism. While some advocates of SEI might look at this fact and tout the positive effects of Proposition 203, this linguistic trend actually stems from natural exposure to English-speaking educators and peers, as well as living in an English-dominant society over many years. Considering that Proposition 203 is not being implemented with any consistency in the Milagros district, it should not be seen as accelerating English acquisition. In reality, the Milagros context epitomizes how Proposition 203 severely limits the resources available to schools with a high number of language-minority students, ultimately resulting in high levels of academic underachievement founded on English literacy abilities. Even though administrators in the Milagros district permit the use of Spanish instruction and pull-out programs (in which students spend part of the school day in a mainstream classroom but are pulled out for a portion of each day to receive instruction in ESL), they do not have the funding to adequately develop such strategies.

Instead of considering native-language skills as a tool to help develop English competencies, Spanish is implicated in the overwhelming rate of academic underachievement in the Milagros district (Johnson 2008b). Blaming parents, students, and the community for academic failure ignores the significance of not using native-language abilities to develop academic literacy abilities in both languages. The social and cultural pressures surrounding the acquisition of second-language literacy skills for language-minority students are considerably more intense than for language-majority students (Cummins 1981; Bialystok 2001). Even though developing literacy in the native language first provides a solid cognitive platform for students to explore and acquire literacy skills in a second language (Bialystok 2001; Krashen 2003), educators in the Milagros district lack the adequate resources to implement this strategy. While many students in the Milagros district might develop high levels of oral proficiency in both languages, their academic literacy development is slowed by a lack of native language support. Without realizing this, educators become frustrated with their students' underachievement and

struggle to explain why the majority of seventh and eighth graders read at a third- or fourth-grade level.

Even in a context where language is such a dominant issue, the most overriding theme throughout the Milagros schools is meeting federal and state accountability standards. Since this is heavily influenced by high-stakes testing, the curricula are specifically designed around passing the AIMS test. 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—relegating language assistance to peerlingual approaches. Even though “there is no consistent evidence that high-stakes testing works to increase achievement,” such methods for assessing schools persist as a dominant force in the structure of public education under NCLB (Nichols, Glass, and Berliner 2005, 10). Additionally, the negative effects of standardized testing are more apparent in school districts like Milagros that service high poverty communities (Krashen 2002).

Not only are language-minority students in the Milagros district confronted with varying degrees of SEI implementation, inconsistent native-language support, impoverished home contexts, and social issues surrounding immigration, they are surrounded by educators who face unfair pressures from government education agencies. While all schools are held to the same standards, educators in the Milagros district are forced to deal with many social and linguistic issues that are absent in other schools. Furthermore, teachers in the Milagros district are amongst the lowest paid in Arizona. The combination of all of these factors has produced high teacher-turnover rates and schools that are seriously understaffed. At the center of this complex situation are students who sincerely want to go to high school, graduate, and achieve financial success to improve their living conditions. 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.

Targeting schools as sites of assimilation while simultaneously limiting the necessary resources to accommodate a diverse student population places an immense burden on educators. When language competency and academic literacy skills are packaged as underachievement, students develop an identity intimately tied to failure. The process involved in negotiating such a rigid institutional structure has an indelible effect on the identity of language-minority students. Viewing identity as “an outcome of cultural semiotics that is accomplished through the production of contextually relevant sociopolitical relations of similarity and difference, authenticity and inauthenticity, and legitimacy and illegitimacy” underscores the vital role that language plays in the development of individual and group identities (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 382). Speakers of minority languages are identified by their lack of knowledge of the majority language—and, thus, targeted for assimilation. When policies are aimed at controlling a language, the identities of speakers of that language are profoundly affected.

Language-minority students in schools like those in the Milagros district are caught in a complicated situation. They operate in spaces in which federal, state, and district standards intersect with ideologically promoted patterns of social interaction. Clearly, in Arizona and other immigrant-rich communities, politicians

and the voting public consider the regular use of languages other than English as a “problem” (Ruiz 1984). Instead of punishing schools, educators, or students, it is necessary to understand that the authority hierarchy in public schools reflects broader socio-ethnic power structures. Highlighting—rather than deprecating—the students’ cultural backgrounds enhances the potential for alternative educational accommodations. Until we, as a society, begin to celebrate language-minority students and the diversity that they bring to the classroom, schools will continue to be used as tools to perpetuate ethnic inequality and discrimination.

Resources

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