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## Preparing bilingual teachers on the U.S./Mexico border: including the voices of emergent bilinguals

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## PREPARING BILINGUAL TEACHERS IN THE US/MEXICO BORDER: INCLUDING THE VOICES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

### **Abstract**

This study analyzes South Texas teacher candidates' perspectives on bilingual education (BE). They had experienced BE as schoolchildren in the borderlands. LatCrit Theory is used to analyze focus group and online discussions about linguistic development and teaching for social justice. Findings suggest Latinx educators' perspectives should inform the discourse and policy about appropriate pedagogy for Latinx children.

### **Introduction**

Language education policies have generally been based on ideologies and political agendas (Shohamy 2009), with little attention given to how they affect their recipients (Shohamy 2009b). In the U.S., hegemonic policies favor English in order to assimilate immigrants and their children. To address minority language students' equal opportunity rights, Lau vs. Nichols (1974) called for bilingual education (BE) for non-native English speakers (Ovando, 2003). Nevertheless, BE has not been consistently or adequately implemented (Blanton, 2007). Furthermore, subtractive practices have subordinated minority communities (Cummins 2009) and suppressed students' home language and culture.

Such conditions prevail in Texas, where BE has been impacted by a history of conquest, the ideology of Americanization, and the segregation of Mexican Americans. Transitional bilingual education (TBE), shown to be subtractive (Valenzuela, 2004) has predominated in

## VOICES OF EBs

Texas. We explore the views of Latinx teacher candidates, who experienced TBE as school children, and examine

1. their perspectives of language development, and
2. how these perspectives inform bilingual teacher preparation

### **Theoretical Framework**

Much research has examined the academic effects of English Only (EO) instruction for Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) (Baker, Basaraba and Polanco, 2016; Collier & Thomas, 2004; and Rolstad, Mahoney & Glass, 2005). Yet, few studies examine the long-term effects of EO programs on students' cultural identity and emotional development. Ek, Sanchez & Quijada Cerecer (2013) found that Latinx bilingual preservice teachers who had experienced subtractive schooling practices exhibited the effects of mother tongue language marginalization on their linguistic ideologies.

Thus, bilingual teacher preparation programs should clearly articulate the impact of subtractive issues in BE on Latinx EBs' language development, especially when teacher candidates had experienced bilingual development as children. For this purpose, Solórzano, & Delgado Bernal, (2001), Irizarry, and Raible, (2014), and Pearson, Wolgemuth, & Colomer, (2015) used Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). LatCrit evolved from critical race theory (CRT), which examines the marginalization of minority racial and ethnic groups, but focuses specifically on language policy, immigration, and culture. Our data analysis concentrates on two elements of LatCrit theory:

1. challenges to dominant ideology, including the critical examination the status quo, and
2. commitment to social justice, or the ability to resist oppression

## VOICES OF ELLs

Though context specific, the study has implications for language teacher preparation worldwide.

### **Method**

#### **Context of the Study**

The Rio Grande Valley of Texas (RGV) spans the southern boundary between the U.S. and Mexico. Borderland school districts differ significantly from others (Sloat, Makkonen and Koehler 2007), with more than 90% EB students. Latinx teachers are more prevalent than in most other Latinx majority school communities, which has the advantage of student-teacher ethnic compatibility (Ocasio 2014). However, a high proportion of borderlands teachers have less than seven years of professional experience. The preservice teachers in this study are familiar with the issues their students encounter and can provide culturally and linguistically supportive instruction. However, many of them had been pedagogically weakened by their repressive, retrograde K-12 schooling as EBs in TBE programs.

As teaching faculty, we began our research project by modifying the bilingual preservice curriculum so as to prepare more effective bilingual teachers to become change agents. We used a constructivist theoretical framework that valued student-centered instruction (Bodrova & Leong, 2007), a balanced reading curriculum to foster bilingualism/biliteracy development (Garcia, 2009. Thomas & Collier, 2002), and methods to facilitate additive ESL (Lambert, 1975; Valenzuela 2004).

Most of the local schools used teacher-centered, skills-based instruction; by contrast, we emphasized the cognitive and academic growth of elementary school students in dual language settings. Our curricular modifications focused on innovative instructional approaches and the creation of student support mechanisms. Through recorded focus group discussions, students

## VOICES OF EBs

provided feedback to the project faculty, which in turn led to further modifications in the curriculum. A more complete explanation of our modified curriculum is provided in the work of Authors (2014 and 2018).

### Participants

This article focuses on a subset of data collected from our first treatment cohort of 26 preservice teachers seeking bilingual certification in Texas to teach EB children in PK to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. All the participants were Mexican origin Latinx .

### Data Sources:

Though our project consisted of mixed-method research with various data sources, in this article we focus on the transcripts of eight end-of-term focus group discussions with the students, and several online asynchronous discussions with student teachers in the last semester of their studies. Our analysis of the teacher candidates' narratives illustrates their perspectives on pedagogical practices in the local schools related to their experiences both as students, and later as student teachers in TBEs.

### Analysis

In the present analysis, each of the two authors, applied qualitative content analysis (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009) within and across transcripts to find emerging themes, after which constructivist constant comparative analysis (Charmaz 2006) was used to streamline findings and focus on the most recurring issues and topics. Finally, we narrowed down to themes that were common in our joint analyses of the transcripts.

### Findings

Two overarching themes emerged in the CASSO students' focus groups and online discussions: **linguistic development** and **teaching for social justice**.

## VOICES OF ELLs

**Linguistic Development.** Students generally entered our preservice program devaluing their first language (Murillo 2009). Further, we found that they felt incompetent in Spanish, questioning their knowledge of academic Spanish. For example: "... I sometimes felt intimidated in talking in Spanish since I find myself being weaker in this area." And: "I personally do not feel sufficiently prepared to ... teach a lesson in Spanish." Our curriculum led students to value both Spanish and their cultural identity, as exemplified by these quotes:

"All of the professors are having us read, write, and talk more in Spanish as practice for when we teach ... how can we expect to meet our students' needs... if we don't know the academic Spanish ourselves?... so that practice has been perfectly beneficial."

"I like how we are given the opportunity to have instruction and assignments in Spanish. This helps me feel more confident in grasping the concept of teaching in a bilingual class."

".... most of us were trapped in a cancerous cycle ... You know, in elementary and middle school and high school,.... we've been trained to think that being monolingual is everything, and I feel like we're starting to understand ... that speaking two languages is something that is valuable and to be admired."

"... once you start school, your instruction is only in English and students that come from parents who only speak Spanish, tend to feel like it is the norm to speak only English. So, they start losing the Spanish slowly because they are at

## VOICES OF EBs

school longer, and practice it more often than Spanish, which is scary because then, it can cause them to not to communicate with their parents.”

“The teacher’s role is significant (for) Latino children because it is what develops their success. I think when the teacher can talk to the students in their native language it only makes their education richer by feeling accepted in their culture.”

Concepts taught in the coursework and opportunities for their application with real students gradually promoted a transformation towards a more critical stance. The statements above illustrate this transition from a feeling of inadequacy to a critical analysis of the value of bilingualism and commitment to social justice, a part of LatCrit.

### **Teaching for Social Justice**

The region’s EBs live in disempowered Latinx working class communities. Our students saw that our project curriculum stressed biliteracy and critical thinking, not test preparation. We emphasized meaning making, social interaction, and integrated curriculum, contrary to what the students saw in the schools. These contradictions helped them begin questioning the status quo, and develop a commitment to social justice, components of LatCrit, as illustrated in the following examples:

“...when I was in field experiences, ... the kids were just drilling, drilling, drilling, ..., and test, and test, it was horrible! And then, ..., they would have parties and ... pizza and I’m like “what is this? ... the kids are not doing anything to be educated.”

## VOICES OF ELLs

Another student observed:

“... they don’t really teach the students in a meaningful way, and as you go up in the upper grade levels, it is more drill on practicing (for) the ... test...”

Our students witnessed a combination of experiences. The preponderance of behaviorist, low-level skills teaching and teacher-centered classrooms during the early field experiences and student teaching, which atomized and inhibited children, and maintained the hegemony of an inequitable, white supremacist social class structure (Valenzuela 2004) was combined with a more spontaneous experience in a summer library program (before student teaching). As, our students implemented with real children during the summer, what they had learned in the CASSO project, they began to analyze and criticize what they had witnessed in the schools:

“We’ve been implementing all of our theories ... and it’s just been very natural. The children are learning, and ... our professor asks us to look at certain things... that the kids are doing how they are comprehending and ... we are implementing everything that they’ve showed us right now and it’s true...”

Another student said,

“... being at the library working with the kids ... has made me grow a lot, ... it makes me feel a lot more prepared for when I go into a classroom... we can never say “oh the kids don’t get it”, we have to stop and analyze ourselves what are we doing wrong ... but then we stop and say, “oh you know why they didn’t get it? Because of this, or because of that,” ... I think that the biggest growth that I’ve accomplished this time is to learn to critique myself...”



During their subsequent student teaching term, students spoke out more forcefully about the ineffective, hegemonic practices they witnessed each day:

“...they also do a lot of individual assignments, individual activities, and ... we need to make activities more interactive, ... so they have social interaction, ... in the classes they don’t permit it because they make too much noise.”

“... there’s no fun ... kids get frustrated when ... there’s no real learning going on..”

### **Conclusion**

Though context specific, this study has implications for bilingual teacher preparation across the U.S. It illustrates the negative influences of TBE practices on the cultural and professional identities of EBs who subsequently became BE teachers. In addition to considering their perspectives, BE teacher preparation needs to promote a critical stance towards bilingual education practices for EBs and to create spaces for reflection. The application of LatCrit principles is one way to break the cycle of oppression and promote the development of teachers as critical pedagogues. It creates opportunities for critical analysis of hegemonic practices and the deconstruction of theories and practices juxtaposed against their personal experiences as majority language learners.

In the case of our research, these EBs ultimately became bilingual educators. While at the preservice phase, they afforded us an insider’s view of effective, liberating

## VOICES OF ELLs

practices for linguistic minorities. The promotion of academic success for our nation's marginalized groups, like second language learners, requires a concerted effort by educators and policy makers to apply research-based effective pedagogy and educational curricula with a social justice orientation to reverse the cycle of underachievement.