Language, Space and Power: A Critical Look at Bilingual Education
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In light of the current political context surrounding language and immigration policy, it seems unlikely that bilingual education programs would be growing. Indeed, the passage of legislation in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts requiring English-only instruction in schools combined with the recent resurgence of Official English measures does not paint a welcoming picture for bilingual education. However, despite these initiatives dual immersion models of bilingual education appear to be thriving, the number of programs nationwide having increased nearly tenfold since the late 1980s. Part of their popularity stems from recent research citing the model’s success in closing the achievement gap between English language learners (ELLs) and their native English-speaking peers (Thomas & Collier, 2002; 2004). These programs are also a popular choice among parents and educators who recognize the value of cultivating bilingualism and biculturalism among the nation’s youth. In Language, Space and Power: A Critical Look at Bilingual Education, Samina Hadi-Tabassum examines one such fifth grade classroom in a dual immersion program.

The goal of this critical ethnography is to provide contextual, qualitative descriptions of daily discourse patterns in an effort to identify acts of resistance to linguistic boundaries and borders in a fifth grade Spanish/English 50/50 model dual immersion classroom. While the 50/50
model represents an attempt to provide equal representation of both languages, the reality for this classroom reflects a shifting boundary between the two languages that often resulted in the marginalization of Spanish. Hadi-Tabassum adopts a post-structuralist framework that challenges the strict binary nature of the dual immersion model that seeks to create distinct borders between the use of the two languages. The author sets out to locate specific classroom times and spaces where students “collectively voiced their resistance and counter discourse” (p. 2), effectively developing a critical consciousness regarding the relationship between the two languages. In these moments and spaces of resistance, Hadi-Tabassum suggests that this stance creates a metaphysical third space that exists in tension between the two languages. This postmodern third space, she argues, is “more open and inclusive of critical reflection regarding the linguistic borders”, and as a result creates greater possibility for empowering change to occur in the classroom (p. 18).

Throughout the course of the school year, Hadi-Tabassum uses social cartography to map out the specific places and moments that students appropriate the third space, creating a visual continuum of the metalinguistic discussions brought up by the students. This process revealed that the “rug area” where students gathered together on the floor turned out to be the area of the most frequent counter discourse. The rug area represented a more fluid space that allowed for more play, encouraging students to experiment with their new languages. Additionally, this area appeared to be an empowering space within the classroom, one that lacked a fixed center of power. As a result, it is in the rug area that students frequently initiated metalinguistic discussions and questioned the disproportionate use of English in the classroom. A district-wide Spanish spelling bee provides the context for one such incident.

In a classroom meeting on the rug area, students voiced their concern for the lack of attention and focus given in their classroom to the Spanish spelling bee. The discussions revealed the disproportionate amount of time spent on spelling Spanish words and a sense of frustration on the part of the students in not having sufficient time to prepare for the spelling bee. As a result of the discussions, the class and teacher negotiated the concerns and together developed a plan that validated the students’ interest and helped prepare them to participate in the spelling bee. This was a clear example of the third space where “attempts to mediate and resolve the contradictions, tensions,
digressions, deflections, displacements, deferrals and differences between the two languages” (p. 111) took place.

Another example of empowering metalinguistic discussions from the rug area involved a buddy-reading program. *Compañeros de Lectura*, or Reading Buddies, was a program that paired the fifth graders with second grade dual immersion students for focused Spanish literacy development activities. In this scenario, it was the teacher who noticed the hegemony of English beginning to dominate the *Compañeros de Lectura* activities. In the context of several class meetings conducted in the rug area, the class reviewed the purposes of the Reading Buddies program and worked together to create a list of rules to guide students’ behaviors during the *Compañeros de Lectura* time. The author notes the class “began talking about language with language as the object of their critical discussion…using metalanguage to articulate the conflicting development between Spanish and English” (p. 113).

In response to a “spirit contest”, all fifth grade classrooms were challenged to write and choreograph their own cheer to be performed in front of their peers. The classes were given four months to develop a cheer that best represented the identity of the class as a whole. Given that the task was to represent their collective identity, it is interesting to note that the class began work on the project as three separate groups, split along sociocultural lines. The first group, predominantly white males, developed a parody rap cheer of the theme song to the movie “Men in Black”. The second group was an all ethnic minority group that chose to write their cheer exclusively in Spanish and incorporated African-American step dance moves. The last group was predominantly comprised of white female students who created a traditional “all-American” cheer one would expect to see at a high-school football game.

The process of selecting one cheer to represent their class identity provides another instance where Spanish was subordinate to English. This process led to heated class discussions that “at times … created unbridgeable tensions and gaps among the students” (p.141). Additionally, a major factor in choosing their cheer was their collective minority status as a class of bilinguals among a school of majority monolingual students and teachers. The class gave significant consideration to the fact that their audience was predominantly monolingual and would thus be uncomfortable by the all-Spanish cheer. In the end, the power of negotiation was usurped by the
teacher’s authority. Influenced by their teacher, the students chose the “all-American” cheer, which wasn’t representative of the class, but instead acquiesced to the monolingual audience and also reflected the teacher’s personal experience as a cheerleader.

Another episode exploring the relationships between English and Spanish in the classroom involved a class production of a bilingual play. With the addition of a student teacher to the classroom came an emphasis to increase the level of exposure to authentic Spanish literature. This goal led to the class production of the Cuban folktale, *Jack, Su Mamá, Y el Burro*, which describes the follies of a young simpleton who interprets the world quite literally. Through their participation in the play, the students explored stereotypes of primitive characters like Jack and also challenged the language boundaries between English and Spanish by pushing for additional Spanish dialogue.

Regarding language use and boundaries, a few interesting issues emerged. First, the context of a play allowed several English-dominant students to come to terms with linguistic control of Spanish. Their Spanish-speaking roles in the play heightened their reflective analysis of intonation, rhythm, cadence and other features normally unattended to in the classroom setting. Secondly, several students questioned the amount of Spanish used in the play. In its design, *Jack, Su Mama, Y El Burro* repeats key comedic sections of Spanish dialogue in order to facilitate comprehension among monolinguals. A few students brought up concerns that the “play did not have enough emphasis on real Spanish and that there needed to be an increased number of Spanish words” used in the dialogue of the play. Eventually, this insight was validated, and students were permitted to add to their dialogue in ways that not only produced balance between the languages, but also influenced the nature and identity of their characters as well.

In *Language, Space and Power, A Critical Look at Bilingual Education*, Hadi-Tabassum challenges the reader to look past structuralist notions of dual immersion that attempt to define and restrict language usage and instead, consider the perspective that language use is a fluid and fundamentally unstable and shifting process. In doing so, the author employs several postmodern and poststructural concepts to craft and guide her analysis. At times, the content of the book is overwhelmed and subsumed by these theoretical constructs, perhaps restricting its readership to the
academic and research community. This text would be useful in an upper level graduate course on bilingualism and/or post-modern research and theory. Unlike other studies of dual immersion that focus on the growth and development of language proficiency, the focus here is on exposing the potential of dual immersion settings to become “decentered, fragmentary place[es] of conflicting voices that coexist and collide together” (p. 2). This perspective permits the type of reflexive, metalinguistic discussions that allow students to development a conscious awareness of how language(s) function within the context of their classroom.