



The sociolinguist and language educator as agent of change

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Transcending the classroom

In this essay, I argue that our work as educators transcends published articles, books and conferences, and that the classroom is one of the sites where the seeds of change in attitudes can be planted.

The role of educators in students' lives and the importance of creating an environment in which students can develop their critical thinking is well documented (Charity 2008; Bucholtz et al. 2018). This work is particularly relevant and imperative in the language and linguistics classrooms. Language and linguistic classes have been thought of and conceptualized to be apolitical spaces where language is taught in a cultural setting devoid of any legislative or civic connection.

It is extremely important to recognize the value of an inclusive education, one that respects and empowers all the diverse voices, languages, cultures and races, yet our current educational system believes in a one-size-fits-all curriculum with “English-only policy policies; narrow, decontextualized language and literacy programs in poor communities of color ... [and] explicit ban[s] on studying the histories, literatures, and struggles of particular ethnic groups” (Paris 2012), with the clear intention of pushing a monolingual white, middle-class model. This whitening of the curriculum is not beneficial to students of color. On the contrary, the curriculum and materials do not have at their center the cultural and linguistic needs of students of color; they are diluted. The culture that is so essential in the classroom curriculum is instead otherized and exoticized, evidence that the classroom is a battleground for power and politics.

Language educators and linguists have the responsibility to develop students' critical thinking in such a way that disparities in language use and accessibility are obvious. The educator needs to be an engaging figure that captures the students' attention and encourages active student participation, an activist who questions and discusses the legislative and civic consequences of decisions made at the micro and

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macro levels. Students of color and white students alike need to be exposed to socio-linguistic variation. The exposure needs to go in tandem with an analysis of what is entailed in learning, maintaining and sustaining different linguistic varieties with pride and respect.

Language, privilege and a color-blind curriculum

In sociology, racialization is the process of ascribing racial identities to a relationship, social practice, or group. Racial categories have historically been used as a way to allow an oppressive figure or group to discriminate against other groups or individuals seen as different from the oppressor (Omi and Winant 1986). These processes of racialization organize the relationship between ideologies of language standardization. Rosa (2016) proposes the concept of “languagelessness,” in other words, using the idea of a standard language to call into question the linguistic competence of certain speakers—namely, speakers whose language is their heritage and who have not had the privilege of accessing it in all different contexts, particularly in not having received their formal education in the language. The questioning of linguistic competence goes hand in hand with legitimizing personhood altogether (Rosa 2016).

Drawing on Yosso’s cultural wealth model (2005), I shift the traditional focus away from deficiencies and burdens in our communities, learning instead from an array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, resources and contacts that cultures and groups already have. The wealth of resources to be nurtured and mobilized in each community are recognized and acknowledged. One valuable resource is *linguistic capital*, or various language and communication skills people possess that can be used as solid foundations for successful community outreach.

Students who grew up in Spanish-speaking communities in the United States have experienced a suppression of their cultural and linguistic identity. The overt absence of Mexican–American, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Native American, Black, LGBTQ, and Womxn histories in schools emphasizes their unequal status in society. Institutions in society such as public schools work to “divest youth of their Mexican identities and to impede the prospects for fully vested bilingualism and biculturalism” (Valenzuela 1999, p. 172). For some, Spanish fluency is a hurdle that needs to be overcome before college. Their “cultural identities have, in many cases, systematically derogated and diminished” (Valenzuela 1999, p. 173). I have observed students who are proud of their Spanish-speaking identity, but who are otherwise ashamed of displaying this linguistic identity in the classroom, or plainly reject the idea of their linguistic identity as material worth in writing and researching.

Consequently, students demonstrate resistance to the curriculum with their disengagement; oftentimes students can be doubtful and defensive when faced with the possibility of exploring their own culture and language as research topics. Even when faced with the opportunity of “questioning their sociolinguistic, sociocultural, ideological, and political contexts surrounding prestige and stigmatized varieties of the HL so that learners understand that language is not neutral” (Helmer 2013, p. 269), students will resist instruction and participation in research



projects. Resistance can be the result of a multiplicity of interpretations of the context (Helmer 2013): oppositional educational strategies (Ogbu 2003), self-defeating resistance (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001), or performance strike (Shor 1992)—that is, when students on their own individual accord refuse collectively to perform well, as a way to resist symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1991).

The case in question for this project aligns with the experience Helmer (2013) discusses, wherein students' resistance originated on the idea that their teacher did not understand their linguistic and social identities and mischaracterized them, the result of students' limited imaginings of Spanish-language discourse communities.

By shifting away from a color-blind curriculum with a neutral assimilation process, toward the inclusion and active implementation of culture and language, we defy prior notions of inequality. As Toni Morrison taught us, we have stories to tell that are worthy of telling (Sacks 2019). I add that our experiences are worth being researched and documented within a curriculum that includes research projects on language use in the local community employing the cultural wealth students already possess (Yosso 2005) to counter racialization and languagelessness (Rosa 2016). I consider how data collection of the linguistic landscape helps counteract the effects of languagelessness and linguistic racialization among the most recent generation of college students, many of whom are first generation in college.

Initial concerns and implementation of research project

Implementing new perspectives into one's curriculum is fraught with challenges that balance guidance with autonomy in helping students personalize their authentic experiences. The project described below is part of the course requirements for Spanish Sociolinguistics and the seminar Spanish in the US Southwest. Students had to document the linguistic landscape of their communities through the use of photos. One hundred undergraduate students and three graduate students participated.

Description of classroom activity

I engage students in data collection in the community using methodology from sociolinguistics to explore topics relevant to the discipline, heighten their awareness of their community and affirm their linguistic and cultural heritage. The concept of experiential learning provides the foundational support for these projects, defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb 1984, p. 41). Combined with students' cultural wealth model (Yosso 2005), it is a perfect framework within which students can apply their background and understand our surrounding linguistic diversity.

The study of the linguistic landscape considers the use of language in signage: commercial and traffic signs, official notes, graffiti, posters. Language use in these contexts tells us about the vitality of language(s). We hear language everywhere, but we are normally not aware of the prevalence of language in the written form.



Because of the ubiquitous presence of language in the public space, its study is very accessible. Students can engage in exploring languages used in the region, evaluate their effectiveness at communicating services and information, and challenge the idea that local language users do not know how to speak Spanish, as racialization theorizes.

Students collected a total of 503 photos of signs and advertisements in different cities in North County San Diego and Riverside County. The data were collected using cell phone cameras. We used the mapping software ArcGIS for the spatial and location analysis of each signage collected. Using the app Survey123, students catalogued each photo (e.g. bottom-up or top-down).

I observed an initial resistance from students. Some students questioned the reasons for the interest in the use of Spanish, or any other language, in signage. Students reasoned that the Spanish used in the community is not that good and questioned its documentation. Others found it hard to believe that “language on signs” is an object for studying.

To address these issues, I created a repository of pictures in GIS, and showed the map whenever I introduced the project. Data collection started early, scaffolding each stage through the semester. We discussed data collected, and at every stage of the research project, we considered the reasons to look at language use in our community and its importance. We spent time deconstructing the meaning of an empirical project on language and linguistics for students who had trouble understanding how something as simple, evident, and ubiquitous can be the subject of serious empirical research work. The resistance is another reason to include this type of research work in classes. We research data that is taken for granted!

Students reactions and testimonies

The intellectual connections that students make, the awareness that is awakened, the feelings that these experiences evoke are signs of discovery and learning. In this section, I reflect on the impact of the research on students’ experiences and testimonies I observed. The comments offer an insight into the effects the documenting and analyzing of our language use in our community has in students’ lives.

Students experienced the importance of maintaining the different varieties of the Spanish language, going beyond the research articles in class,

- (1) “esta experiencia fue importante para mí. Aprendí lo importante que es mantener nuestra lengua y todas las variaciones que existen.” (VB)
 “this experience was important for me. I learned the importance of maintaining our language and other variations that exist.” (VB)
- (2) “Demuestra de donde venimos y la cultura, las experiencias, y origen que hemos pasado y sobrevivido.” (BV)
 “It shows where we come from and the culture, the experiences, and the origin that we have experienced and survived.” (BV)



It is important to note the use of the plural form for the word “varieties” in example 1. As students explore language use, they realize different varieties of Spanish are used in the region: Spanish varieties in Mexico and Central America are transported and maintained here in the United States. Language shows where we come from, our culture, past experiences, origins, experiences of survival, our connections. We should question, then, what would happen if we do not tap into the wealth of knowledge our students bring into our classrooms, challenge ideas about negative linguistic ideologies, and facilitate the exploration and expansion of the knowledge they already have of language use in their communities of practice.

- (3) “mientras se mantenga del español eso ya es una ganancia en la comunidad latina y vemos como el español se va evolucionando.” (CH)
“while Spanish is maintained that is already a gain in the Latino community and we see how Spanish is evolving.” (CH)

Language change entails that linguistic diversity students observe contributes to the community’s linguistic richness:

- (4) “Cada lugar tiene una forma diferente de hablar, al ser expuestos a ciertas poblaciones, la comunidad empieza adoptar ciertos rasgos de los diferentes idiomas.” (VL)
“Each area has a different way of speaking, when one is exposed to certain populations, the community starts adopting certain traits from the different languages.” (VL)

Students observe and appreciate the linguistic diversity present in the community. In other words, they witness the reasons to study our Spanish locally, not in the abstract.

VC’s experiences encapsulate the main idea of the research project:

- (5) El español en los E.E.U.U. ha crecido y se ha vuelto muy importnate [*sic*] para la comunidad latina que vive aquí. Atreves [*sic*] del semestre hemos aprendido sobre las distintas variaciones del español que encontramos en el sur de california especialmente aquí en el condado norte de San Diego. Después de haber trabajado en el proyecto de GIS y leído las varias lecturas en la clase me doy cuenta que hay diferencias en el español de los latinos. Que depende de muchas cosas como la región, la cultura, las generaciones y otras cosas. El proyecto del paisaje lingüístico muestra que, aunque el español no sea el idioma oficial del país, es importante para la comunidad latina y se ve en todas partes de la vida cotidiana. (VC)

The Spanish of the United States has grown and has become very important to the Latino community that lives here. Through the semester we have learned about the different Spanish variations that we find in the south of California specially here in North County San Diego. After having worked in the GIS project and having read the various readings in class, I realize that there are differences



in the Spanish of the Latinos, that depends on many things like the region, the culture, the generations and other things. The project of the linguistic landscape shows that, even when Spanish is not the official language of the country, it is important for the Latino community and it is seen in all areas of the daily life. (VC)

Experiential learning facilitates the engagement students need to raise awareness of the linguistic vitality in our community by tapping into their wealth of knowledge and questioning preconceived ideas about languagelessness and racialized use of language to bring pride and engage in putting sociolinguistics into action.

The language classroom as a transformative space

I have argued that language educators ought to play an engaging role in the classroom, challenging students, other educators and the educational system itself to implement critical analyses of sociolinguistic issues. The language classroom is a transformative space where the linguistic is political and where educators engage students in a meaningful curriculum relevant to their historical, social and linguistic realities that defies and questions the one-size-fits-all model. I was motivated to write this essay by the need to raise even more awareness on the importance of a curriculum that serves the needs of our students of color as a way to counteract the linguistic pressures of the dominant culture working against our many communities of color.

I have discussed and reflected on practices such as data collection of the linguistic landscape. Incorporating these research practices as part of our class requirements, combining models of experiential learning (Kolb 1984) and cultural wealth of knowledge (Yosso 2005), we can encourage our students to explore our valuable linguistic capital as a resource that provides a solid foundation for understanding, respecting and reaching out to our communities. Such exercises serve as antidote to counteract the particular poisons of languagelessness and linguistic racialization. Given the current state of affairs of our nation, it is extremely important to incorporate similar practices in our language and linguistics classrooms, sites long argued to be apolitical, but in which many of our students are heritage speakers and are, at least in my case, the first generation in their families to attend college. Students deserve to have language educators and linguists who understand their responsibility in bringing to the classroom discussions that include the linguistic disparities in use and accessibility that we find in our communities. The language educator is an engaged figure that questions the linguistic status quo and discusses the consequences of decision making at all levels of our society.

Although there are always complications in data collection and analysis, overall the gains surpass the hurdles. Students learn about the use of Spanish in their communities in signage, and the maintenance and transmission of their linguistic traditions. Students also learned that Spanish is everywhere! Students gained a deeper comprehension of how we use Spanglish, and that language changes thanks in part to language and dialect contact. Students discussed the creation of a different



linguistic variety that can properly be identified as US Spanish, important in supporting the connection between culture and identity, and that California Spanish is not one variety but many, depending on generation, geography, and other factors.

Shifting away from a color-blind curriculum with a neutral assimilation process and toward the inclusion and active implementation of culture and language is the way educators can interrupt and resist the idea of Spanish language loss and so-called lack of interest in its use. We defy prior notions of linguistic inequality and instill in students the interest in researching, documenting and telling their own stories, as Toni Morrison (Sacks 2019) has encouraged us to do. By creating the space in which to tell our own stories, to research our own linguistic and language experiences, educators can also raise awareness of the value that Spanish as a language has in our own community by referring to the wealth of knowledge (Yosso 2005) already in existence in our own community members.

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Michelle F. Ramos Pellicia is interested in heritage language learning, language contact, linguistic attitudes and identity, and linguistic landscaping in Spanish-speaking communities. She uses a combined methods approach to study the linguistic ideological differences among Latinxs of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent in the Midwest, Southwest and Puerto Rico. She is working with Sharon Elise on race, culture and identity in Puerto Rico pre- and post-Hurricanes Irma and María, the earthquakes of 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

