Nuestra América

in the Transnational South

The Bilingual Crisis in Living Color

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Since I began doing ethnographic research among Latino immigrants in North Carolina and Oklahoma in 2001, a shortage of bilingual professionals has reached crisis proportions in both states.Planning for solutions to this crisis has been hampered in part by an ingrained tendency to think about cultural difference terms of black-and-white, particularly in North Carolina. Because of increased immigration, however, southerners are being challenged to revise their self-concept and to recognize that they are in fact a part of what José Martí called "nuestra América," our America, which is a continental and indeed hemispheric perspective.

A central issue in this transformation of the American South is the learning and teaching of languages. News reports, for example, make it clear that the absence of interpreters and bilingual professionals have caused widespread human suffering and misunderstanding. Many municipalities have been struggling to post new bilingual signs and in other ways accommodate this new demographic. But strategies have been often been insufficient and at times even legally suspect. Maria Palmer, a member of the North Carolina Board of Education, told me, for example, that she witnessed a county district attorney announcing in court that he would cut a deal with anyone who could serve as a translator.

Such desperate measures have drawn federal attention. In January 2002, federal civil rights enforcers told North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services that the state's shortage of interpreters violates the Civil Rights Act of 1964. State health care and social service agencies were told that they must employ more interpreters or risk losing federal money, or even face the possibility of discrimination lawsuits.

To explore this language problem, my research has focused on a comparative study of the implementation of Dual Language Programs (DLP) in North Carolina and Oklahoma. I have used DLP as a window on larger debates about language. I argue that a bilingual or multilingual workforce must be central component transnational south that is prepared for economic, political, and cultural exchanges of a global market.

Latinos in North Carolina have grown 394 percent in the last decade, Mexicans in the state growing 655 percent. North Carolina has the nation's highest proportion of low-English proficiency immigrants. According to Nolo Martinez, Governor Mike Easley's director of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, the proportion of growth of monolingual Spanish immigrants is higher in North Carolina than in any other state.

Nationally, the number of foreign-born residents and children of immigrants has reached the highest level in history, million, or one out of five residents. Mexico alone accounts for more than quarter of all the foreign-born residents, according to an analysis the Census Bureau's March 2000 Current Population Survey. Only 34 percent of residents age 25 and born in Mexico had completed high school (compared to 95 percent those from Africa). Low-English proficiency immigrants from Mexico present special challenge for educators in places like North Carolina and Oklahoma.

North American language minority students are growing more quickly than any other "special group." They are expected to double from 20 percent (as 1997) to 40 percent of the school age population sometime between 2020 2030. This is causing a nation-wide in school district test scores. It threatens national productivity as under-prepared language minority students replace babyboomers in the workforce. Local demographic changes are often astonishing. The percentage of Latinos in Oklahoma City Public Schools has doubled in less than four years to 26 percent as of January 2002. Their percentage is expected to pass 50 percent within this decade.

Schools are under pressure because they also face loss of federal dollars if they do not close the "minority achievement gap." The North Carolina Board of Education's Commission on Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps reported in early 2002 that 80 percent of the state's Euro-American and Asian students score at grade level, compared with 60 percent of Latino and American Indian children and only 52 percent of Afro-Americans. In Oklahoma City, Raul Font, who has overseen English as a Second Language ESL) programs at both the state and city level, emphasizes a carrot-and-stick approach. "The more Hispanic kids that come to this district unprepared, they're going to continue to pull your scores down. We're going to give you federal dollars, and you have to show us that you're going to [close the achievement gap]. I'm telling schools: you're going to serve these kids, or you're going to be shut down."

Everyone agrees on the goal of teaching these students to be fluent in English. What politicizes the issue, noted Font, is "in what capacity and to what extent we use the native language of the child" to achieve this transition. DLP are still not widely known, but they generate enthusiasm in part because of a perceived failure of ESL programs and a general perception of bilingual education as watered down English."

Even the word "bilingual" has become taboo. Ryuko Kubota, who trains ESL teachers at the UNC-Chapel Hill, speaks elliptically of "the B-word." Font has seen an English only environment in which the very words bilingual or multicultural "make people sweat." Since ESL programs do not use native languages in the classroom, they are safe politically. Most school districts with a large percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) have invested heavily in ESL teachers. Yet research shows that ESL students continue to perform far below district norms. Nolo Martinez expresses dismay at how states and districts continue to "throw money" at ESL, which he sees as a band-aid approach that does not address the underlying problem.

According to a longitudinal study by George Mason University language learning researchers Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas, ESL students score at between 24 to 34 percent of district norms. “Research has shown that postponing or interrupting academic development while students learn second language is likely to promote longterm academic failure,” they write. Students in Transitional Bilingual Education programs do not fare much better, scoring between 35 to 40 percent of district norms. By contrast, DLP students have scored above district norms, 61 percent according to Thomas and Collier. A range of other studies from around the country has consistently shown DLP students scoring at or above district norms (including preliminary test results from the Oklahoma City DLP that I am studying at Shidler Elementary School).

Among the core differences between DLP and other programs designed for ELL, such as ESL, and Transitional Bilingual Education, are:

• an *additive* rather than a *subtractive* approach to English language learning. In Jim Cummings’ suggestive metaphor, many people conceive of dual languages as like two balloons in our head. It is supposed that you have to decrease the size of one to increase the size of the other. Cummings suggests the image of an iceberg instead, where a foundation of cognitive development supports development in both languages.

• an *integrative* rather than a *segregated* approach to language learning. DLP students interact in a “cooperative learning” context in which they learn more easily from their peers than in a traditional teacher-controlled class. DLP classes are ideally composed of about 50 percent native English speakers.

• a move away from focusing on *remediation* (fixing what is seen as a problem) toward *enrichment* (adding to what students already know). In ESL and bilingual programs, students with native fluency in a language other than English are typically treated as if they have a “problem” that needs to be “fixed.” DLP treats native languages as a resource for learning and builds on cognitive development in the child’s native language, while gradually transferring an at least equal part of this development to English.

Aside from the economic benefits of bilingualism, speaking more than one language also offers a sort of checks-and-balances to guard against the ideological blind spots (and political isolation) that can result from monolingualism. Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes once remarked, tongue-incheek, that “monolingualism is a treatable disease.” North Americans (and southerners) have long expected the rest of the world to speak to us in English, not only in the United States, but all too often even abroad. Even progressive educational leaders, for the most part, still frame bilingualism as a “problem.” Fuentes is suggesting that in a hemispheric and global context monolingualism is really the problem. Monolingualism is in fact a form of “linguicism,” a sort of ethnocentrism, argues Skutnabbs-Kangas *in Minority Education*. It is a worldview that enforces domination of one language at the expense of another, along with a devaluation of the linguistic resources and cultural capital of that language.

Devaluing other languages also has negative economic consequences. Many business leaders in the region have already taken the lead in beginning to make a "valueadded" argument about the advantages of a bilingual workforce.

As a southwesterner, when I first moved to North Carolina, I was impressed by the fact that my colleagues here thought about "the border" as the Mason-Dixon line. The border I grew up facing with Mexico and Latin America still seems mostly out of view here, even though Latinos are now in fact the largest minority in the United States.

Demographic changes mean that we are going to have to re-examine what we think of as our borders, our neighbors, and indeed, our kin. There is a need for new paradigms of intercultural and international relations. One part of this process is coming to understand that we live in a region in which most people do not speak English, and most people do not think about cultural difference in the language of black and white.

A transnational view requires us to realize that North Americans cannot continue to consider ourselves as co-extensive with "America." America is a continent and indeed a hemisphere, not just a nation, the United States. This was part of what José Martí meant by the concept "nuestra América." Within our America, a majority speak Spanish or Portuguese. In the south, we are also part of what José Limón has referred to as a "Greater Mexico" — a region with a long history of inter-penetration between peoples of the United States and Mexico that includes many parallels between southern history and Mexican history. We are not as distant from each other as language differences might suggest. This greater Mexico — as the largest component of "our America" in the transnational south— is now among us, here to stay. What will be our relationship with them? How can we teach them our language and our culture? Just as important, to what degree are we willing to re-educate ourselves about theirs?

"The presence of large proportions of Asians, Latinos, and black immigrants are changing Americans' notions of race," notes Nancy Foner, author of *From Ellis Island to JFK*. Dual language programs offer a model that de-centers binary notions of "race." Rather than being classed by phenotype, DLP students are classified by language. Thus, the "English Speakers" category includes not only Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans, but also Latinos whose first language is English. Spanish-speakers are also an inclusive group that "can be of any race." Most people of African descent in "our America" speak Spanish or Portuguese, not English, for instance. The structure of DLP programs I have witnessed facilitates great deal of interchange without regard to race. This seems to me to be a model worth replicating, and a good foundation from which to begin imagining "our America," and the transnational south, in living color**.** •

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