

Community Voices and The Problem of English

Rethinking Language Practices

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Purpose of Presentation

- Drawing on focus group interviews with members of the refugee & immigrant community in central North Carolina, we examine the perceptions of immigrant and refugee community members' school experiences, especially as they relate to language and literacy practices.
- How these “community voices” might offer educators new insights to the language and literacy instruction for immigrant and refugee students.

The problem of English

- Practices that
 - define the purpose of language education in deficit terms;
 - enact the teaching of English in ways that disregard the specific language and cultural practices of immigrant communities, including speakers of World Englishes
 - promulgate privileged forms of English as simultaneously the most important path to success an obstacle to academic achievement (Hakuta, 2011; Luke, 2003; Pyon, 2009; Ricento, 2005).

Background

- In the past decade, the number of school-aged students who spoke a language other than English at home nearly doubled (Aud et al., 2010).
- In addition, the US experiences immigration from a number of countries whose first or well-developed second language is English, also known as World Englishes.
- Consistent global immigration and the continuing achievement gap between many of these students and their conventional US English-speaking peers suggests that current policies and practices have yet to ensure equitable and accessible education.

Challenges to Educational Access

- Educational policies are tied to the social, political, cultural, and linguistic marginalization of immigrant youth.
 - Learning specific forms of English is linked to American identity (Luke, 2003; Schildkraut, 2005).
 - Students' proficiency in conventional American English attaches identities to students as English learners or speakers of less privileged forms of English
 - These identities also mask immigrant youth's various experiences as both language learners and members of specific cultural groups.

Methods

- We examined data from four focus groups (Sudanese, Chinese, Latino/as, and Liberian).
- Focus group interviews within participants' community
 - open-ended
 - asked questions that elicited conversation about participants' school experiences in their native country and the school experiences of their children in the US.
 - typically ended with a conversation about what U.S. educators could do to improve education for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Analysis

- Phase I:
 - Entire research team (6 members) open-coded the interviews.
 - Created broad codes for organization (e.g., overall school experiences in native country and US).
- Phase II:
 - Research group divided into three groups.
 - We created the following refined categories: language and literacy practices AND social/cultural practices.
 - Each of us coded the focus groups based on these categories and organized the information into charts.
- Phase II:
 - Cross-case analysis
 - Paid particular attention to the similarities and differences across groups.
 - We developed sub-categories and used evidence from the focus group transcripts to illustrate these categories.

Language & Literacy Practices

- Experiences related to learning and speaking English and/or enhancing their first language.
- Language learning experiences of the participants' children in this theme.
 - Each group experienced this issue in different and complex ways.

Placement in ESL Programs

- “Second language students try to enroll in [the local community college]. When they go there, they just taking English 60 after they did the placement test. [...] Even after they finish English 60, 70, 80, and then they pass English 101, they graduate. Even they still don't know how to speak. They still don't know how to communicate. They still they do not know how to write, like letter of intent, cover letter, resume” (Sudanese).

Discrimination based on accented English

- “They just don’t give us the respect because of our accent. They don’t want to make us boss. [...] So I ask my supervisor, I say, ‘Okay, can we do this in writing? If you cannot understand what I am saying, I can write it. It will be better for you, but you have me do all the technical jobs and you don’t understand me.’ [...] If you think that you don’t understand me why keep me on the job for eight years” (Liberian)?

Development of multiple languages

- One mother noted, “I worry about myself. I know I have to learn English and if I think about [my daughter], so I can teach her both languages at home. I don’t want to confuse my daughter, but that’s the way it is.” Another Latina mother of a young elementary student shared that her son “Every time he comes home from school, he says, ‘I’m going to read a book to you so you can learn English, too.’” Even as parents grapple with learning English, their children often are motivated to maintain their Spanish heritage language. One parent reported her son “is also trying to read in Spanish by himself, nobody’s pushing him... I always read the newspaper in Spanish and he is always like, ‘Don’t tell me, Mama, what it says, I will tell you because I understand Spanish, too’” (Latinas).

Social & Cultural Practices

- Unofficial norms for parent/teacher interaction, parent/child interaction, teacher/child interaction, and maintenance of cultural values that are manifest through dress, discipline, and communication styles.
- Yielded insights into the ways in which cultural and social practices shape understanding of and participation in the school experience.

Interactions between parents and teachers

- “I always try to be in contact with the teacher so the teacher knows that I am concerned and want to support my children because as parents we have the responsibility to encourage our children to study” (Latinas).
- When summer school ended, the teacher, “wrote a note for my daughter telling her something like ‘Have a wonderful summer vacation,’” and I thought that was making fun of us because the summer was over and she had to study during the whole summer” (Latinas).

Interactions between parents and children

- “Our children come here and they are read their rights. [...] In our culture it is one of the greatest sins for you to call police or take parents to court. Then we come here and see our children call the police on their parents, call 9-1-1 on their parents. We see our children come from school out of control” (Liberian).

Norms for teacher/child interactions

- “The positive side of it is that most of the students do better, because they feel like, ‘O.K., I’m really given the freedom to just do my best!’ That is one side. But on the negative side of it is that some of the students might just abuse that freedom, [...] some of them will end up taking drugs [...], they ended up just falling into the hands of, I would say, probably, not the right people” (Sudanese).
- “The good thing about the U.S. is if you are a good person, you get appreciated. But in China, you don’t have to have anything, if you have a good grade, that’s everything. Everyone says you are good” (Chinese).

Maintenance of Home Culture

- “I remember, like it would be blazing hot outside, and I’m in long sleeves and pants and everybody is looking at me like, ‘Aren’t you hot? It’s hot outside. Now why are you wearing this?’ There is no understanding. And that affects a lot. Some students kind of get affected and go with the flow, and the newcomers, we just have difficulties trying to explain, ‘This is our dress code,’ or ‘This is our culture, our religion’” (Sudanese).
- “Cultural value is important too. Each culture has its good point and bad one... I want to provide my son the chance to learn Chinese culture and also to learn American culture and background. I try my best to have him both, to have the good points of both cultures” (Chinese).

Implications

- Division of those as English-speaking and English-learning minimizes heritage language and culture AND masks the diversity in our classrooms and communities.
- Teaching English to speakers of other languages requires that we listen and learn about students' histories, their values, their language, their interests .
 - As Stevens (2011) points out, teachers (and students) need to “become sociologists of their own back yards” (p. 139).