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Reconciling the Past: Language Validation in a First-Year Experience Course at a Border

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Abstract

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) has made part of its mission to become a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate public institution. Established in 2015 on two legacy institutions, The University of Texas-Pan American and The University of Texas Brownsville, it must reconcile a past that was not always welcoming of its students' bilingualism. This article examines one instructor's experience taking one of the university's signature first-year experience courses and creating a class that is welcoming and supportive of the students' bilingualism while also reconciling his own educational experiences with language.

Keywords: translanguaging, bilingualism, linguistic terrorism, first-year experience, retention, belonging, autoethnography

Introduction

My parents were educated in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s. They grew up not far from, Hargill, the hometown of famed Chicana author, Gloria Anzaldua. Like Anzaldua, my parents witnessed language shaming and linguistic terrorism, which Anzaldua characterized as the repeated attacks on one's native tongue by the dominant group (Anzaldua, 1987) in their schools. This was common practice at the time and took on many forms including punishing students for speaking Spanish by not allowing them to participate in recess, the break students have after lunch. Extreme examples of linguistic terrorism included physically punishing students by hitting them across their knuckles with a ruler or yard stick. These examples of linguistic terrorism were not isolated to my parents' communities, but was characteristic of the educational experiences for Latinos throughout the country (Hurtado & Rodriguez, 1989). Anzaldua in her work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), reflects on her experiences with language, including her experience in college; a college that sought to "get rid," of the local Mexican American students' accents (Anzaldua, 1987, p.76) My parents' experiences my parents' and Anzaldua's, and the language policies that supported language shaming and linguistic terrorism would be long lasting, and would continue to impact the educational experiences of linguistic minorities today (Christoffersen, 2019; Ramirez & Saldivar, 2020). I find myself in a unique position as a college faculty member with the power to help students find their voices as they navigate their post-secondary journey at the 2nd largest Hispanic Serving Institution in the United States, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, located along the U.S.-Mexico border.

I am choosing to deliberately center myself within the discussion of language policy and a legacy of language shaming. Therefore, I will be utilizing an autoethnographic lens to examine my educational experiences and the impact linguistic terrorism had in my life and on my teaching. Autoethnography allows the author to critically analyze one's relationship to their subject (Bochner, 2012; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). It recognizes that while it is important to be able to step back and take a more objective view of a subject, it is also important that we recognize when our hands are dirty and we have a personal relationship to the subject. In my case, my entire educational journey has been defined by my experiences with linguistic terrorism and language shaming.

My Linguistic Journey

My parents did not teach me Spanish; the only Spanish I learned came from my fraternal grandmother, whose house I stayed at after school, and from my bilingual friends who at an early age were already comfortable speaking both English and Spanish. I fumbled with the language and did my best to fit in with my bilingual friends. In school, I excelled, which is what my parents hoped would happen if I didn't have the 'burden' of managing a second language. They would later tell me they did not want to teach me Spanish because they feared I might be punished if I was caught speaking Spanish in school. That was their reality growing up, and they wanted to shield me from it. In their experience, speaking Spanish often meant one's educational opportunities would be limited. They saw it with their peers, and they did not want me to have limited opportunities.

I would go through my primary and secondary schooling only taking one Spanish class and two German classes. I was told that if I wanted honors credit for my language classes, then I should take German. And so, I did. I fulfilled my parents' hopes by excelling in school and

graduating near the top of my class. In spite of my academic success, I felt like I was missing something. In college, I would come to realize that for all of my academic achievements, I knew very little of my Mexican American culture, heritage, history or my language. I also learned that while I was trying to be the best student I could be, mastering the English language, excelling in most subjects, I had to ask myself, what had I given up and what had I lost along the way (Carrillo, 2007).

In my first semester of college at Stanford University, I learned that my peers knew much more than I did regardless of the subject. They had learned the ‘master narrative’ or the dominant ideology that informs what and how we teach our children (Valenzuela, 2005). If the history of south Texas, including the people who long inhabited the area, were not in my junior high Texas History textbook, that was not an accident. The history of the conquered is seldom taught, passed over for the history of the conquerors. I began to wonder, could I excel in knowing a history that was not mine?

By the end of my freshman year, I began to find my footing and my edge. I figured out what I knew that my peers didn’t know and how I could compete and possibly get ahead. My peers knew more American history, they could recite lines of poetry and could analyze Shakespeare. What my peers didn’t know was south Texas. They didn’t know what it was like to live along the U.S.-Mexico border or the rich tapestry of cultures that exists along the Rio Grande nor did they know about the linguistic and cultural contributions made by authors who were originally from south Texas.

The challenge for me was that I didn’t necessarily know much about my part of the world, at least not yet. I knew there was richness there, because I was exposed to it at Stanford. It was at Stanford where I learned of Americo Paredes and Gloria Anzaldúa and others who wrote about growing up along the Rio Grande. So, while I didn’t know very much about where I was from, I knew enough and, more importantly, knew how to learn more.

My early academic papers were about growing up along the border and about the communities and people who called the border home. My papers were different, and they gave me a perspective absent from the work others were turning in. My parents and my K-12 education did what they could to discourage me from speaking Spanish and learning about my culture. It was only in leaving that I was able to find home.

Mastering the Master’s Tools

Upon completing my undergraduate and Master’s degrees, I returned home to a job at the local university. The same university Anzaldúa wrote about. The same institution that sought to erase its local students’ accents (Anzaldúa, 1987). I approached the job with a sense of purpose. I wanted to teach my students everything I learned while I was in college. I wanted to open their minds, give them the tools necessary for combating racism and discrimination, and help them create a more just world.

After six months at the university, I was given an opportunity to teach a new course. The course, I was told, was created to help first-year students transition to the university. I was excited for the opportunity, but not long after piloting what would become a university-wide initiative, I found myself in a very familiar position.

A year after I piloted the first section, the course became a requirement for all students and a centerpiece of the university’s attempt to address its abysmal first-year retention rate. At the time, the university was retaining a little over half of its first-year students. This was below the national average and became a priority. Something needed to be done, and it needed to be big.

A mandatory course for all incoming students was big. After all, research shows that students who complete a first-year experience seminar or similar style course are more likely to be retained beyond their first year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Our monthly faculty meetings began taking on a familiar tone. Instructors all talked about their students as if the problem for the low first-year retention rate rested solely on the students and not on the instructor or the institution. Instructors lamented students' lack of motivation and the drive to be successful. Others spouted that our students lacked the time management skills or couldn't balance their social life with their academics. And others said that our students lacked the English language proficiency they needed to be successful.

And there it was. The same sort of thinking that led to the institution working to erase students' accents, was still working to silence students and rid them of their "deficiencies." Instead of speaking up and questioning my colleagues, I sat silently and did nothing to challenge them.

My colleagues' words should not have come as a surprise. At the core of our first-year experience course, and many like it, is the idea that 1) our students lack the necessary tools and motivation to be successful college students, and 2) only by taking such a course could they compensate for their knowledge gaps. Critics of retention studies argue that the earliest literature on student retention and completion examined traditional college students (Cabrera, 2019). Our students were largely non-traditional students; they were commuters and first-generation students. My colleagues' thinking reinforced a longstanding, yet misinformed idea that Latino students lacked the ability and skills necessary to succeed in higher education (Valencia & Black, 2002; Valencia, 2010).

As an undergraduate, I had learned about what I had not been taught, and I embodied an entire generation's experience with linguistic terrorism when my parents did not encourage me to learn Spanish. Here I was, Richard Rodriguez's Scholarship Boy, and I was reinforcing what I had worked so hard to undo as an undergraduate (Rodriguez, 1974-75). This realization only crystalized in me when working on my doctorate; I sent one of my professors what I was thinking about for my dissertation. I was so proud, sending her pages of work on Latino student retention at a Hispanic Serving Institution along the U.S.-Mexico border. I waited in anticipation.

After a few days I received an email from the professor. She didn't respond to the questions I sent her. Instead, her email began with, "Jose, have you ever thought of looking at Latino student retention via a critical race theory lens?" That alone was enough to remind me of my own experience as an undergraduate and what I learned about the educational experiences of other linguistic and ethnic minorities. Her email reminded me that just as I had come to embody the legacy of linguistic terrorism and language shaming experienced by so many, I had now come to reinforce that legacy.

Changing Course

After the email, I changed how I taught my course and changed direction in the midst of my dissertation. In my course, I no longer required the standard text and instead began incorporating more culturally relevant articles and resources (Saldivar, 2014). Students began reading articles on 'ganas,' and autobiographical works by Latino authors and authors of color, whose educational experiences my students could relate to (Cabrera, et. al. 2012). I encouraged students to share their experiences, and I sought to remake the course so that it no longer viewed my students as deficient, but rather, helped students recognized the countless assets they brought with them and build on them (Gonzalez, et. al. 2006). Recent research on first-year courses now

shows that minority students can benefit from these courses when they incorporate socio-cultural elements to which the students can relate (Oxendine, 2020; Mendez et. al., 2020).

Changing my course was only the first step. There were other instructors also teaching the course with whom I needed to share my work. This would be a slow process, but over time I shared assignments and articles and some of the pedagogical practices I had incorporated in my sections.

A New Way Forward

In 2015, the institution that worked to erase its students' accents ceased to exist. In its place, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley was created and with it came a new vision of higher education for south Texas. As part of its vision, the new institution was committed to being the first bilingual, bicultural and biliterate public university in the country. The vision was bold, but becoming B3 is easier said than done. The new university was operating in the footprint of the old one, with nearly all of the instructional, administrative and support staff continuing with the newly established institution. Changing years of practice would be difficult.

In the summer of 2016, we were asked to offer our first-year experience course in a bilingual format. Our course had been carried over to the new university because we had helped improve the university's first-year retention. Many of my colleagues were already offering instruction in a mix of English and Spanish, and some accepted assignments in the student's native language. There was nothing formal about what we were doing. Countless articles demonstrate that student success depends on students' sense of belonging and feeling a part of a community of learners (Means & Pyne, 2017; Cortez, L. J., 2011). What better way to do that than to encourage students to use the language they're most comfortable using as a bridge to building their college literacy and awareness? We did that, only we did it without anyone knowing. The instructors who accepted work in the students' native language and encouraged the use of Spanish in class, had created an informal agreement with their students. We didn't seek permission from anyone. We knew we needed to do it; we just didn't ask anyone. Making the class an institutionalized bilingual classroom now meant we could do so formally, with the support of the institution.

But sir, we don't sound like you

During one of my first, class sessions, I asked my student why they were so hesitant to participate. One of the students bravely spoke up:

"Sir it's 'cause we don't sound like our professors. We weren't allowed to use our Spanish in high school and we were always told our English wasn't good enough."

The specter of the linguistic terrorism and shaming experienced by Anzaldua and my parents continued to impact the lives of students, generations later. I quickly realized my task: to help my students recognize that their voice, regardless of the language, mattered and that there was no one right way to speak. I also recognized that while I was discouraged from speaking Spanish when I was a child, I was fully committed to English and I never doubted my command of the English language. My students, on the other hand, did not feel confident in either language in a university setting. They were somewhere in the middle; they were in the borderlands of language.

The classroom became a safe space for my students, a place where they could speak about their educational experiences, their hopes, their challenges, and their goals. I was there to reassure them and remind them that they belonged at the university. It was a role no different from the role many of my instructors served for me as an undergraduate. Unlike my students, as an undergraduate I was surrounded by students who were not from south Texas. It was out of fear that I approached my professors and asked for help. I told them who I was, where I was coming from, and I told them I was not sure I belonged. Every instructor I saw reassured me. They guided me, they supported me, and they encouraged me. And while it was years before the classroom felt safe, I was able to find a safe space in the offices of most of my professors. For my students, I wanted the classroom to be that safe space, and I wanted them to know they belonged.

On the first day of class, I explained to them that the course would be taught bilingually, with me translanguaging, shifting from English to Spanish. Only a few of the students knew beforehand that the class was going to be bilingual. At the conclusion of our initial class meeting, one of the students stayed after class to tell me he did not know Spanish. I reassured him and told him I would do my best to translate and encouraged him to ask questions if he did not understand. My attention had been on my bilingual students, I had forgotten about my monolingual students, but I knew I could create a space that supported both.

Un ambiente mas comodo y libre de expresarse

Students were separated into base groups. These would serve as their main groups throughout the semester. It was in the small base groups where I could hear the students comfortably moving between English and Spanish. During the early part of the semester, the larger class discussions took place in English with a few students speaking Spanish, but as the semester progressed more students felt comfortable using both English and Spanish, seamlessly transitioning between the two.

At the conclusion of the first semester offering the institutionalized bilingual first-year experience course, we surveyed our students and asked them to provide feedback on the experience. It was overwhelmingly positive. The students felt validated and supported. They were confident and free to speak in the language of their choice. Below are a few of my students' responses to the question, "How does this bilingual UNIV 1301 course differ from your other courses this semester and/or other courses from other semesters?"

"It was an easier class speaking the language I speak and understand the most. It was very different to my other classes because I felt that no matter what I was thinking, English or Spanish, I could still speak my mind about it."

"Te hace sentir en un ambiente mas comodo y libre de expresarse sin ningun temor a que los demas hagan comentarios malos de ti por tu preferencia de idioma."

"It allowed me to be free to express myself even though sometimes it was hard to find my words in English, I knew I could say it in Spanish."

"This course in specific made the best of me come out. It allowed me to speak my mind to never hold back of anything I have to say. It proved to me that no what other people say, my culture is awesome and that I have nothing to be ashamed, it made me who I am today and I am proud of that."

"This course differs in the way that it was okay to speak Spanish in the class and not only English. Also, student participation was really important in this class and a lot of discussions happened whereas in my other classes there would not be student discussions as often."

Students were also asked if they were, "...more comfortable or less comfortable participating in general discussions in this bilingual UNIV 1301 course compared to other courses? Why?" Here are a sample of their responses.

"I am more comfortable participating in general discussions. My professor along with my peers were extremely welcoming when we would have in class discussions."

"I can honestly say that I do feel more comfortable participating in class discussion during my bilingual UNIV 1301 course compared to any courses. Reason being that I knew that whenever I ran out of words in English, I was able to talk in Spanish and the overall environment of the class made it easier for you to speak out your thoughts without being judged."

"I am more comfortable participating in general discussion in this bilingual course compared to others because in this class everyone speaks with an open mind."

The overwhelming majority of the responses were consistent with the sample responses shared here. In fact, the only negative response came from a student who wanted more assignments in Spanish. Students had a positive experience and based on the responses recognized that this course was different, because they were able to speak in English or Spanish and were also more comfortable participating in the class due to the bilingual format.

Conclusion

Today, as I reflect on our course, the students' responses on the survey, and my experience taking the course from one that focused on the students' deficiencies to one that helped students build on their considerable assets, I can see that my journey has come full circle. I had been taught to rely on the English language in order to excel in school. I did not have to manage two languages because my knowledge of the Spanish language was limited and I never fully acquired even basic Spanish or basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) as a child (Cummins, 1999). It was not until I was in college that I was able to develop my Spanish language skills. Yet, like my students, I struggled to find my voice. One could argue that in committing to the English language, I was able to have the educational success my parents hoped I would have, but what if I had learned the second language? What if I had learned my parents' language? I often tell my students that it was not until I was an undergraduate student that I truly fell in love with learning. I would often spend countless hours at the library or the university bookstore, flipping through books, even buying books for classes for which I was not enrolled. My journey for self, for language, for my heritage in college introduced me to a love of learning that I can only imagine was like learning as a young child, when we hunger to learn so much that it is almost overwhelming. Today, I can give my students the space to find their voice and hopefully ignite the same love of learning I gained searching for my voice. More importantly, I can reassure them that they do not have to choose just one language in which to speak.

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