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# Minority language education reform from the bottom: two-way immersion education for new immigrant populations in the United States

Carla Paciotto, Gloria Delany-Barmann

*Western Illinois University, 1 University Circle, Macomb, Il, 61455, USA*

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of personal, educational, and socio-cultural contexts influencing the creation and implementation of a two-way immersion program in a rural district in the U.S. It centers on White teacher transformation into microlevel language policy (LP) reformers and the processes involved in their reinterpretation and “correction” of top-down LPs for inclusive, enriching, and equitable educational reform for English language learners and mainstream students. The study asks: how educators contested monolingual or remedial bilingual education to promote enrichment bilingual programs and policies, and what contexts fostered and constrained teachers’ role as microlevel LP reformers.

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*Keywords:* two-way immersion, bilingual education, minority language education, language education policy;

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## Introduction

In the U.S., since 1973 the state of Illinois has mandated minimum requirement K-12 Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) regulations. Mirroring the national trend, TBE and other remedial approaches remain the most widespread in Illinois. In the last decade, multiple school districts have challenged the top-down LP by negotiating spaces for enrichment bilingual educational programs in the form of one-way and two-way immersion programs (CAL, 2011). Rural school districts experiencing an increase of Spanish-speaking, English language learners, due to the expansion of the Latino Diaspora to non-metropolitan areas, represent a salient new context for the enactment of language education policies.

This paper focuses on the role of personal, educational, and socio-cultural contexts that have influenced the creation and implementation of a two-way immersion program in a rural district. It centers on White teacher transformation into microlevel language policy reformers and the processes involved in their reinterpretation and “correction” of top-down language policies for inclusive, enriching, and equitable educational reform for English language learners and mainstream students. The study asks (1) how educators contested monolingual or remedial bilingual education to promote enrichment bilingual programs and policies, and (2) what contexts fostered and constrained teachers’ role as microlevel LP reformers in a rural context. This work adds to the field of microlevel LP studies, investigating how teachers respond to unfitting macrolevel LPs by becoming conscious agents of localized LP reform.

## Literature review

Traditionally conceptualized as the study of national and supranational policy discourse and actions (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997), language policy (LP) research has been reframed to include the study of microlevel LP within local contexts, as either a localized enactment of a macrolevel policy or a locally conceived and implemented policy (Baldauf, 2008). Such reframing is grounded in the observation of the discontinuities between intentions and mandates of macrolevel LPs and the forms they take in the real contexts. Decision-making power is not exclusive to state level institutions, as typical promulgators of LPs, but ultimately lies in the local communities, as final LP enactors (Liddicoat and Baldauf, 2008). Therefore, a microlevel research focus should not be limited to investigating the discrepancies between top-down LP and local practices (Du Plessis, 2010). It should also examine the multilayered processes characterizing LP enactments, as shaped by multiple stakeholders' interpretation and negotiation of macrolevel policies (Shohamy, 2006) and resulting from a fluid interaction of top-down mandates and local decision-making processes. The field of language education policy study has been a central focus of such theoretical reframing, as formal education has been the target of top-down LPs in countries with centralized educational systems and the investigation of the microlevel processes of LP implementation in educational contexts has been scarce (Corson, 1999; Menken and García, 2010). Microlevel school policies, classroom practices, and teachers' roles as policy enactors should become a central part of language education policy study and ultimately inform macrolevel LPs (Hélot and de Mejía, 2008; Ricento and Hornberger, 1996).

A microlevel LP approach recognizes that educators and their classrooms can become agents and loci of resistance to ideologically hegemonic LPs and practices. Educators can engage in the negotiation of "ideological and implementational spaces" (Hornberger and Johnson, 2007) to meet the needs of their microcontexts (Baldauf, 2008) and create more equitable multilingual educational practices. The ambiguity of many states LP texts leaves spaces open for multilayered and unpredictable LP interpretations by individual stakeholders at the local level. Johnson and Freeman (2010) studied LP negotiation processes among stakeholders in a Philadelphia school district, showing that the study of how power is distributed among local policy makers and how educators can take ownership of the policy processes becomes central in unveiling processes of (un)democratic LP enactment from the bottom.

A microlevel LP framework interconnects with a sociocultural approach to investigating local educational policy implementation and reform, as sociocultural theory (Levinson and Holland, 1996; Tharp and Gallimore, 1991) views educators as agents of change, whose choices are driven by their personal and professional histories (Varghese and Stritikus, 2005), and define their identities and ideologies individually and collectively (Cummins in Freeman, 2004). Hélot and Young's (2006) study of the Didenheim project in France provides a case of teachers' successful resistance of top-down monolingual education policy perpetuating the hegemonic role of French silencing cultural and linguistic diversity in schools.

While teacher-driven LP efforts result from a symbiotic and recursive interaction of personal histories, ideological choices and ever-changing educational realities, their actions and programmatic choices are constrained by wider social contexts (Skilton-Sylvester 2003). Shohamy (2010) highlights how *de facto* LPs have to be analyzed as "situated within social, economic and political contexts" (p. 183). She illustrates three locally created language education policies that resisted centralized monolingual educational mandates in Israel. During favorable sociopolitical and economic times, educational spaces can be identified for opposing educational mandates perpetuating the hegemonic role of dominant language groups.

Teacher language education policymaking then is conceptualized as resulting from the interaction of a complex set of sociocultural and economic factors, where program implementation is not a byproduct of top-down LPs, but an integral part of policymaking in itself (Sutton and Levinson 2001). Because of the preponderance of ineffective language education policies for minority language children in most countries (Skutnabb 2004), investigating what contexts constrain and authorize teachers' contextualized microlevel policy responses and transformations toward equitable and enriching multilingual education for all children becomes primary.

For the first time in U.S. immigration history, Latino and other immigrant groups are settling in non-metropolitan regions in great numbers and, in the last decade, Illinois has seen a 125% growth of Latino immigrants in rural

areas. Latino students exhibit the lowest academic attainment level and an alarming high school drop out rate—43.4% for foreign-born Latinos—along with the lowest growth in college degree attainment in the last 20 years (US Dept. of Education 2011). Because of the urgency to solve the Latino education crisis, it is important to identify what unique characteristics and challenges rural contexts present for Spanish-speaking ELLs (Quality Counts 2009). TWI holds promise for replacing segregated, assimilationist, and academically ineffective education in schools with many Spanish-speaking ELLs.

Two-way immersion (TWI) education is designed to rebalance coercive power relations (Cummins 2000) between minority and majority language groups in classrooms and schools. TWI has taken the form of local language education reform from below, initiated by parents, administrators or teachers (Freeman 2004). While some scholars use the term dual language (DL) and TWI instruction interchangeably (e.g., Lindholm-Leary 2001, 2005), DL is increasingly conceived as encompassing four different program models aiming at bilingual enrichment instruction (Christian forthcoming; Howard et al. 2003). Developmental bilingual/one-way, two-way, heritage language, and foreign language immersion education employ two languages for content and literacy instruction aiming at high bilingual proficiency, at/above grade level academic performance in both languages, and positive cross-cultural attitudes and behaviors. Programs vary in terms of language allocation across the curriculum—50/50, 80/20 or 90/10—but provide no less than 50% of content-instruction in the minority language. TWI has taken the form of local language education reform from below, initiated by parents, administrators or teachers (Freeman 2004; McCollum 1994). What distinguishes TWI from other bilingual programs is the integration of native speakers of a majority and a minority language for content and literacy instruction in two languages and the use of pedagogical approaches fostering student cross-cultural cooperation.

## Methods

This case study explored teachers' reinterpretation and transformation of state mandated LPs for equitable educational reform for all students in Rivertown, IL, a rural school district. Qualitative and ethnographic studies of language education policy enactments are essential for capturing the multilayered reality of LP in educational contexts and the processes of "creation, interpretation and appropriation of language policy development" (Johnson 2010, p. 28). Employing an ethnographic approach (Spradley 1979; Wolcott 1999), the data presented were collected in 2008-2010 through in-depth interviews eliciting personal narratives (Riessman 2003) from 17 TWI teachers, two Title I reading instructors, five mainstream teachers and six administrators. We also conducted participant observations in classrooms and school-wide contexts, faculty and parents meetings and family events.

A personal narrative analysis framework (Riessman 2003) was employed to analyze and interpret the interview data. Autobiographical narratives provide a vantage point for "accessing motivation, emotion, imagination, subjectivity, and action in ways less available to other sources" (Laslett 1999, p. 392). Because personal narratives are inherently shaped by temporality, they provide ways to comprehend history. Here, personal narratives were analyzed by identifying meaning-making segments (Riessman 2001) in the description of past experiences and events relative to LPs and program shifts, highlighting personal and collective motives and perspectives. Meaningful narrative fragments within individual interviews were also analyzed for teacher subjectivity, positionality, and identity construction in relation to salient events and collective actions. While not generalizable, this case study presents in close detail an innovating and telling case.

## Findings

The evolution of Rivertown language education policy highlights the dynamic interaction of macro and microlevel LPs in a rural school district experiencing unexpected immigration flows. The development of teacher agency in LP originated from an individual and genuine sense of care toward newly arrived ELL students. Teachers' personal interaction with ELLs produced a renewed sense of professional purpose and motivation that determined their radical professional shift. It was a personal disposition of a few teachers to determine their first steps toward serving ELLs in a responsive manner. Macrolevel policies mediated the teachers' subsequent classroom experiences, when novice ELL teachers were pressed by state laws to implement programs specifically addressing

ELLs' needs and the importance of minority language as instructional resource in a transitional/remedial perspective. The teachers' LP reforming action ultimately resulted from the impact of macrolevel minimum requirement laws on the local school reality. The observed fallacies of TBE, ELL teachers' exposure to enrichment BE literature in state mandated professional development, and their sense of justice for all children, made them appropriate the mandated law in an unpredictable way (Johnson and Freeman 2010). While this is a hopeful process of transformation from below, valuable for similar contexts, these teachers' struggles raise questions about how to facilitate the development of LP agency from the bottom in a more efficient way.

Because of the lack of financial resources and ELL education knowledge, and geographic isolation, rural districts have to "adapt" their preexistent human resources to fit the needs of changing demographic contexts. In Rivertown, mainstream educators struggled through phases of instructional inefficiency and error and trial with little guidance, but were motivated to become effective educators by their personal dedication toward ELLs. With the spread of the New Latino Diaspora to rural regions, implementation of efficient LPs for language minority children cannot rest on the shoulders of a few dedicated teachers. Teaching effectiveness, positive attitudes, sense of responsibility and mission toward language minority children need to be cultivated in every teacher and teacher candidate. Teacher education institutions should require the development of "knowledge, skills and dispositions" (Gonzalez and Darling-Hammond 1997), emphasizing the study and practice of LP for language minority children ELLs to all teacher candidates, which is still a rare occurrence.

## Conclusions

While Illinois' ELL top-down education regulations are non-restrictive, the state offers little to no incentive for developing enriching dual language education. The lack of preparation of most teachers and administrators, state financial support for enrichment LP implementation, and bilingual education teachers in isolated immigration gateways make the potential transition from minimum requirement to equitable LPs rare or painstaking, with many odds to fight. Even where the administrator and teacher ideological base might be conducive to need-based LP transformation from the bottom, the current socioeconomic climate and underfunding of rural districts, whose budgets are hampered by a property tax-based formula, makes attracting credentialed teachers from outside and providing needed professional development arduous. While top-down regulations might "pry open ... ideological ones" (Hornberger and Johnson 2007), fostering more efficient and equitable LPs, socioeconomic variables might impede their implementation. As rural areas have become growing centers of economic development and multilingual/cultural microcosms, resources need to be allocated to deal with multilingual educational realities and provide new models of multilingual instruction.

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