

Reflexiones Pedagógicas

CONSTRUCTING CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP: LATINO IMMIGRANT STUDENTS AND LEARNING ENGLISH

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Over the last 30 years, California has witnessed a dramatic demographic transformation with an increasingly Latino immigrant and foreign-born population. One of the symptoms of this transformation during the 1990s has been the flourishing of nativism – intense xenophobic attitudes towards those perceived as outsiders – producing a climate that has been distinctly hostile towards immigrants. Much of the hostility stems from the perception that immigrants threaten the integrity of the American nation-state because they are culturally different. This is clearly the case with the current antipathy towards the use of non-English languages, a sentiment that springs largely from the fear that linguistic differences are fragmenting the United States. One proposed solution is the elimination of bilingual education from California classrooms. This was the purpose of Proposition 227 championed by “English for the Children,” a grassroots initiative that came before the voters of California in June of 1998. The implicit promise of this initiative was to remove language barriers that prevent the proper assimilation of immigrants into “American” culture and keeps the nation disunited (One Nation/One California, 1998).

It is within this rancorous climate that Latino immigrant students attempt to make social and cultural spaces for themselves. One of the strategies they employ is to become *cultural citizens* (Rosaldo, 1994) of transnational spaces. This means that rather than simply acculturating to the dominant traditions of the US, immigrant students generally seek to acquire the cultural capital necessary to maneuver across national spaces – transnational spaces that connect the US and their homelands



both culturally and economically. Central to this process is the question of language; for it is only through becoming bilingual that Latino immigrants can better navigate those social and cultural spaces beyond the confines of the nation-state.

Santa Ana, California, a community of 300,000, can be considered one such transnational space – a place and space that forms part of a multitude of transnational networks. Santa Ana is situated in northern Orange County, a sprawling suburb of nearly three million people located 40 miles south of Los Angeles. Since 1970, the percentage of Latinos in Orange County has grown from 8 to 20 percent. In Santa Ana, where 69 percent of the population is Latino, these numbers are more dramatic. More than half of its current residents are foreign born, mostly from Mexico. Dubbed by the 1990 US Census as one of the most impoverished cities in the nation, Santa Ana has also been designated as one of the two “youth capitals” in the US, second only to a small enclave of El Paso, Texas. Approximately 26,000 youth, ages 18 and under, many of whom are undocumented residents, live in one square mile of the city alone (US Census, 1990). In effect, Santa Ana has become a young Latino enclave; people come here from communities all over Mexico and other parts of Latin America, reinventing their lives, along with the city.

In the summer of 1997, we conducted interviews with 12 students from two high schools in the Santa Ana Unified School district.¹ The students were all enrolled in a summer language assistance program for newly arrived immigrants. The interviews were conducted in Spanish² and audiotaped. Of the 12 students, seven were males and five were female students; 10 were from Mexico, one from Colombia, and another from Bolivia; five had been in the US from 1 to 3 years, while the other seven had been here from 1 to 6 months. In conducting these interviews, our intent was to collect “life stories” – “narratively shaped fragments of more comprehensive life histories” (Ginsburg, 1989, 153). We felt that through these shreds of life stories we might learn about the ways Latino immigrant students talk about themselves and their lives and how they articulate notions of who they are and where they belong. In so doing, we could potentially uncover narratives that might call into question, to some extent, political initiatives such as Proposition 227 (the California anti-bilingual education initiative), which aim to rigidly define people as strictly national subjects.

These life stories, then, are about bringing forth the voice of the students, in both a personal and political sense – for the personal and the political are seldom distinguishable. The opinions that engender voice often stem from personal experience steeped in political inflection. Such is the case with the voices of the immigrant students we interviewed. Their voices are personal in that they express the truth of their experience. But they are also political in that they swim, to some extent, against the tide of political opinion in California, particularly when it comes to the question of language.

1 The sample we are using is rather small. But given our informal interaction with other students, as well our experience in working with Mexican immigrants more generally, we feel that the information we gathered is representative of a much larger grouping.

2 The actual interviews were conducted by JoAnn Aguirre and Lewis Bratcher, both of whom are doctoral students at the University of California at Irvine. They are both bilingual.

About learning English

An overarching theme in the stories of the immigrant students is their belief in the importance of learning English. They identify English as not only the dominant language in the United States but as the leading language of the world. As such, English is regarded the language of social and economic advancement and opportunity. Moreover, English is seen as the medium for communicating with the wider US society, and thus for maneuvering in social and cultural spaces outside the Latino immigrant community. On the surface, then, it appears that these students would accept one basic precept of the “English for the Children” movement – the need for everyone living in the US to learn English. But, we shall argue below, things are not so simple. First, however, we would like to illustrate just how important English is for these students, by highlighting four students whose voices best reflect the views of the group.

Julio

Julio’s story began with his pronouncement “*Soy fugitivo, ya no soy legal, se me venció mi pasaporte.*”³ Equipped with a 3-month visitor’s passport, 17-year-old Julio, an only child, arrived in Santa Ana approximately 6 months ago from Morelos, Mexico where he had recently completed his second semester of *prepa* – the US equivalent of the sophomore year in high school. His mother, a single parent, stayed behind working long hours as owner of a *tortillería* to ensure her son’s education, preferably in the United States. Julio lives with his maternal aunt and her three children in Santa Ana. He would prefer to hold a part-time job to earn money, but his aunt is adamant that his real job is learning English.

By all standards in Mexico, Julio and his mother were economically stable and he was well educated in comparison to many immigrant students. This is evident by his mannerisms, his speech, and the way in which he articulates his thoughts. Julio is committed to staying in California, albeit illegally, at least until he receives a high school diploma.

Julio loves the English language because “knowing [English] gives you the upper edge” he notes. “For example,” he continues, “one can improve the overall quality of life, have a better job, earn higher wages, fit in socially in any kind of situation; well, there’s so much more.” Then with a wide, sheepish grin he admits innocently, “My girlfriend and I love to speak English around her parents and my aunt because they don’t understand, so you see, there are so many advantages!”

Beyond taking English classes, Julio feels that watching movies is the best way to learn both English and American culture. He is excited about having declared a “program major” at his high school that will guide him into the type of post-secondary program necessary to pursue his field of study. Already astute in navigating Spanglish, Julio declares, “*Me dieron un estudio de public service.*”

3 “I’m a fugitive, no longer legal, my passport expired.”

He feels certain that his placement in a public service program major will help him pursue a career in law or law enforcement here or in Mexico.

Javier

4 “One day I’m going to show my birth certificate to my classmates!”

5 “I could speak well with my brothers.”

6 “I arrived in Mexico hardly speaking Spanish.”

“*¡Un día les voy a enseñar mi acta de nacimiento!*”⁴ Javier’s inability to speak English belies his American citizenship. In sharp contrast to Julio, 14-year-old Javier, a ninth grader who was born in Chicago, IL, knows little English. At age 6 his family returned to Mexico where they remained until four months ago when they made their way to Santa Ana. “*Podía hablar bien con mis hermanos.*”⁵ Javier remembers a time before leaving for Mexico when he spoke English with his brothers. “*Llegué a México y casi no hablaba español.*”⁶ Recalling his arrival in Mexico knowing little Spanish, he points to the irony of finding himself in the same situation – this time in his place of birth – not knowing English. “*¡Se me olvido todo!*” He laments that he has forgotten it all.

Javier’s educational background has been inconsistent. He missed his entire eighth grade year due to a disciplinary expulsion from his Mexican school. His family has a history of traversing between Chicago, the home of his maternal grandparents, and Mexico, the birthplace of his parents. Typical of many immigrant families, Javier and two of his siblings were born in the US while two others were born in Mexico.

His immediate goal is to learn English following the lead of his two older brothers who have excelled in their studies here. He thinks that he too can be successful if he tries hard “...*hechándole muchas ganas.*” Although he finds English difficult to learn, he points out that it is not because immigrants are *flojos* (lazy) as Americans would believe, but because one gets desperate, “...*no se les pega el inglés y se desesperan y tiran el inglés, entonces prefieren trabajar.*”⁷ This feeling is familiar to Javier who after 2 hours per week of English instruction found it too difficult. The exasperating challenge of learning English contributed to his acting out in class, for which he was ultimately expelled. He will not fail this time he assures us. Javier recognizes that he needs to learn English not only because it is necessary, but also, as he points out, because one can get a better job.

7 “English is so difficult that sometimes it just doesn’t stick and they lose patience. Many immigrants just give up and go to work.”

Galia

Like Javier, 14-year-old Galia is a legal resident. In Santa Ana since April, Galia was quick to point out that in Bolivia she was far more advanced educationally. In fact, she was ready to enter the ninth grade in March, the beginning of the school year in Bolivia, but instead moved to Santa Ana. Because of her inability to speak English, she was placed in the eighth grade in a Santa Ana intermediate school from which she graduated in June. Galia will be a ninth grader in September.

In addition to her struggle to learn English, Galia finds herself immersed in an environment where culture, food, dress, and customs differ remarkably from

her native Bolivia. The challenge to learn English is compounded by the need to learn what she calls *español Chicano*, a perplexing mix of English and Spanish, formal as well as slang. “*El primer día y el segundo sufría mucho porque decía ¡¿Qué quiere decir eso?!¿*” Galia recalls how she suffered those first few days of school constantly asking “What does that mean?” Now she prides herself in having learned many of the expressions and being able to talk *como los mexicanos* (like Mexicans) at school and in the larger society, while reverting to formal Spanish with family and friends. Her desire to speak English like *los americanos* remains her foremost goal.

Although Galia feels that the greatest barrier to living in the US is not being able to speak English, she admits that her school does the best to make immigrant students feel accepted by teaching them English and including them in many other ways. “*Siempre me han dado la palabra; me dan de valer.*”⁸ She feels compassion for immigrants, both legal and illegal who come to the U.S. “*Vienen a sufrir mucho por el inglés.*”⁹

Enthusiastic about her future prospects in the US and how advantaged she will be by learning English, Galia nevertheless recognizes the great sacrifices her parents have made so that she and her sister may learn English. Reflecting on her parents’ situation, Galia achingly wonders out loud, “*Si tú vienes de otro país y eres profesional, no te toman mucho en cuenta ¿verdad?*”¹⁰ This accurate but painful assessment reflects a similar sentiment of most immigrants: without English one is nothing.

Adriana

An aspiring nurse, Adriana, a painfully shy 15-year-old ninth grader from Guadalajara, Mexico, is constantly aware of her limited English skills. In stark contrast to the more economically privileged Julio and Galia, Adriana represents the overwhelmingly typical immigrant student from Mexico. Her educational background is weak, she is poor, and, along with her family, she is struggling to find her place in the US. In spite of her desire to learn English, she exudes an uncertainty about reaching that goal, not due to lack of *ganas*,¹¹ but economics.

Fearful that we were *la migra*,¹² Adriana was initially hesitant in telling her story. Adriana immigrated to Santa Ana with her three sisters and mother three months ago. Back in Mexico, she and her family heard nothing but the wonders of life in *el norte* from her aunt. But now, she and her family find that same life a double-edged sword. With surprising candor and a touch of embarrassment, Adriana explained the paradox: “*La familia de mi mamá le decía que podíamos estar mejor que allá pero no estamos bien. Entonces en una parte se me parece mejor aquí y en otras no. La primera porque aquí aprendo más con el inglés y la otra porque no estamos bien por falta del dinero. Allá teníamos casa propia y aquí no.*”¹³ Herein lies the dilemma of most immigrant students: to learn English, they must go without the comforts of all that is familiar and secure in their home countries.

8 “They’ve always given me a voice; they value me.”

9 “How they suffer because of English.”

10 “If you come from another country as a professional, you aren’t really given much due, are you?”

11 “desire.”

12 Immigration officials.

13 “My mother’s family told us we would be better off here than

in Mexico, but we are not. So on the one hand it is better here, but on the other it isn't. One because here I can learn English, but we are not well for lack of money. There we had our own home and here we do not."

14 "There is nothing like one's own country."

15 "Every day you fear that *la migra* will get you."

16 "This is what I thought when you came to my classroom."

17 "Wetback": a derogatory term used to refer to Mexican immigrants, which makes reference to crossing the Rio Grande river to enter illegally into the United States.

18 "Yes, I'm going to learn English and have a better future because we can't continue all our life with what we have, nothing to eat."

Adriana notes wryly that her experience in crossing the border alone should have been an indication of the struggles that would lie ahead. Although her mother and sisters all crossed the border with other relatives' birth certificates, she was hidden in the car. Adriana remembers feeling nervous, but not fearful. She admits harboring a secret desire of being found out and returned to her home in Guadalajara. And forego learning English? We asked. She responds "*Es que no hay como la tierra de uno.*"¹⁴ Her undocumented status is a source of deep consternation, embarrassment, and fear. She is haunted daily by the fear of being exposed and returned to Mexico – "*diario estás con el miedo de que te agarre la migra.*"¹⁵ Laughing nervously, she affirms her fear of *la migra*, "*Y eso pensaba cuando ustedes vinieron al salón.*"¹⁶

Adriana is convinced that she must learn English in order to attend college. But she is finding that English is not easily learned. Of course, she believes anyone can learn—that is not the difficult part. It is the social barriers that make learning English such a challenge. Adriana describes her insecurity and internal conflict about speaking both English and Spanish, worried that if she speaks Spanish in front of her English-speaking counterparts they will call her a *mojada*.¹⁷ And although Adriana is very self-conscious about speaking in English, she ends her story assuredly, "*Sí, voy a aprender el inglés y lograr un futuro mejor porque no toda la vida vamos a seguir siempre con que hay, no tenemos que comer.*"¹⁸

On speaking Spanish

As reflected in these bits of immigrant stories, the students we worked with place much faith in English as a means for economic betterment. We interpret this desire as a link to constructing cultural citizenship. In this sense, it is part of their efforts to make a place for themselves within the US by acquiring, at least to some extent, the cultural currency necessary to maneuver within this national space. This refers to a form of citizenship that is not acquired through legal means, but rather through their daily experience of survival. Yet, since these students are enrolled in public schools, it does encompass a dimension of inclusiveness – highlighting a disjunction between the form and substance of how we traditionally think about citizenship. It is this disjunction that allows even the undocumented to receive some benefits of the welfare state. In other words, one can become a cultural citizen, that is, culturally enfranchised, regardless of one's legal status, if one can become competent, to some degree, in the dominant culture and language of the host nation.

Another interesting note is that if these immigrant students express a zeal to learn English, then they too would agree with the dictates of the "English for the Children" movement – for these students also talk about English as "being the language of economic opportunity," one which allows immigrants "to fully

participate in the American Dream of economic and social advancement” (Unz and Matta-Tuchman, 1998). However, this is as far as the consensus goes.

“English for the Children” and other English-only movements work under the assumption that the United States can properly be bounded, stopping any unwanted influences at its borders. The role of these nativist movements is to regulate the conduct of subjects in the interests of ensuring security and prosperity of the nation-state. By so doing, they seek to eliminate the use of Spanish for fear that it is fragmenting the American nation-state. But the immigrant students in this study do not live in a neatly bounded world. They live in Santa Ana, a transnational space – a space at once in and beyond the nation, a space traversed continuously by immigrants coming and going. Hence, all those who reside there, regardless of their actual ties to an elsewhere, effectively become *transnationalized*.

If this is the case, then it may not be in the best interest of these immigrant students to fully acculturate to the dominant culture of the US. In other words, since the space that they occupy is not just national, to exclusively acculturate to US traditions, as the “English for the Children” advocates would have immigrants do, simply is not sufficient. What they must do, instead, is acquire the cultural repertoire necessary to maneuver in a transnational space. Practically speaking, in order to become cultural citizens of a transnational place such as Santa Ana, in addition to those spaces to which it is connected beyond the US, these immigrant students must maintain their use of Spanish – thus, becoming cultural citizens who are fluent bilinguals.

This is precisely what the students we interviewed are striving to become; for not only is English important to them, but Spanish as well. This was strongly reflected in the following statements:

Adriana: I’m going to try my best to learn English, but I can’t stop speaking Spanish because I’ve always spoken it. It is important to maintain Spanish because there are times when a friend visits who does not understand English, so I have to speak with him in Spanish. The same is true in some stores or other places. I can write and read Spanish well. It is important to be bilingual here as in Mexico because in Guadalajara there are jobs in the airport and in large hotels who need bilinguals.

Javier: It is important to be bilingual because here almost all the elderly people [of Latino origin] don’t speak English. So if one speaks only English, those who speak Spanish won’t understand.

Bertha: It is important to maintain Spanish because I can be bilingual here as in Mexico, because in Mexico there are also places where English is spoken, so I can be a bilingual nurse here or there.

Maria: Yes, it’s important if I speak both languages because I can get a better job since I can speak in Spanish to those people who don’t speak English.

Being bilingual is very important in Mexico as well because over there, there are tourists or whatever, and one must communicate with them.

Constructing cultural citizens in a transnational space

Implicit in the stories of these immigrant students are two realizations. The first is that they live in a transnational space. This means that they live in a space that, at any given time, will be occupied not only by people who are not acculturated to the norms of the US, but also by people who are strictly national subjects. As such, it behooves these students to maintain their use of Spanish while at the same time learning English, for it allows them to form bonds with a multitude of subjects, whether national or not. It also gives them an advantage in the marketplace because they can occupy more than one cultural niche at the same time.

The second realization is that they do not have to confine their lives and future aspirations to living solely in one national space. In other words, because these students, at least some of them, are tied to networks that link the US to their homelands, they see themselves as operating across national borders. In this case, being bilingual is even more advantageous, making it possible for them to move back and forth with relative ease, as well as allowing them the flexibility to take advantage of job opportunities wherever they may become available. The upshot here, then, is that in order for immigrant students to achieve some form of cultural citizenship, it is not enough for them to simply acculturate to US norms. This is so because they do not live in a space that is strictly national, but one that cuts across and reaches beyond the nation-state. Hence, in order to navigate this space effectively, they will have to undergo the process of both local and transnational integration.

The stories related here speak to the language issues and concerns faced by immigrant students within the context of current immigration debates. More than a social indicator, these students recognize that English is the defining characteristic of a global, economic society. They are painfully aware that, unfortunate as it may be, people draw conclusions about how others use language to communicate, and if they cannot use the dominant language, they are not valued. In other words, there is a lot of pressure from the dominant society for immigrants to learn English. On the surface, then, it may not appear that the students' desires to learn English necessarily contradict the goals of the English-only movements. But, unfortunately, such movements advocate the use of English while denigrating the primary language and culture of immigrant populations. It is as if the "national community...imagines that language is a finite good—one citizen, one language, no more, no less. The notion of the monolingual citizen implies a hydraulic model in which the more Spanish one speaks, the less English, and vice versa" (Rosaldo, 1994, 403). From the view of the immigrant students we interviewed, it is unlikely they will discard their mother tongue. For them, knowing both languages is perceived as a definite plus. Javier, for example, has no

doubt that the ability to speak both English and Spanish will enhance his opportunities of employment, both in Mexico and the US.

We argue then that Latino immigrants who manage to learn English today are less likely than their predecessors to abandon Spanish after integrating knowledge of the US linguistic and cultural system. This change is likely to lead to the increasing formation of bilingual cultural citizens living in this country, which seems to reflect Javier's ideal. More importantly, such citizens can be considered to work with "another linguistic economy, one where language is an expandable good, not a finite one. In certain cases, the more Spanish one speaks, the better one's knowledge of English, and vice versa" (Rosaldo, 1994, 403).

The upshot of all this is that, by claiming the right to learn English, the students we interviewed are striving toward a transnational identity and, as Rosaldo argues, cultural citizenship. It is part of their struggle to enfranchise themselves. It is part of their search for social and cultural space in America. As such, they are claiming the right to be different, to be bilingual cultural citizens, without compromising their right to belong. Unfortunately, the dominant society views such difference as a threat. We would suggest, instead, that a bilingual cultural citizen should be seen as a benefit to the US. If the current economic globalization of the world continues apace, where nations are each day more and more interconnected, it is just such transnational citizens that are going to give the US a competitive edge. It would behoove us all to see language as an expandable good, rather than a nation-binding truth.

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