The Power of Words: Examining Linguistic Minoritization in Educational Settings

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Professional Practice and Minoritized Populations

This literature review takes linguistic minoritization within educational settings as the main problem of practice and examines the extent to which language expression plays a role in marginalizing students at K-12 and Higher Education institutions in North America. Some individuals within this population may identify as immigrants and/or descendants of immigrants, and they may also speak one or more languages—with English as their second, third, or even fourth language. The difficulties they experience in their formal education appear to stem from a number of factors, including the divergent linguistic practices they choose to engage in outside of the classroom (Rosa & Flores, 2017); their perceived nonconformity to Standard American English in both spoken and written forms (Savini, 2021); and their likelihood for becoming targets of racially motivated rhetoric or hate speech based upon their physical appearance, national origins, divergent accents, and/or cultural norms (Borja et al., 2020). Current social and geopolitical issues may also enforce the status of these populations as little more than "diversity signifiers"—hollow symbols of diversity—such as in the case of international university students navigating racialized academic and social spaces within predominantly white institutions (Jiang, 2021).

Furthermore, the year 2020 onwards has seen an increase in the number of news reports containing anti-China rhetoric, which suggests the thoroughness with which Sinophobia has become embedded within the psyche of Western thought and the way such discriminatory ways of thinking have slowly gained steam as U.S.-China relations have worsened over the past few years (Borja et. al, 2020). Biases and deeply held prejudices, when given credence on the national level by high-profile political figures such as former President Donald Trump, have only emerged even more virulently in the present and has generated negative perceptions of entire

Asian-presenting communities. These have enabled the conditions for xenophobic nativism and acts of violence towards certain members of these communities, prompting calls to actively counter such acts of verbal and physical harassment towards Asian Americans (Stop AAPI Hate, 2020).

When the March 2021 shooting tragedy happened in Atlanta at three massage parlors that ended in 8 deaths, 6 of whom were Asian women, author Roxanne Gay almost immediately afterwards calls out the Cherokee County Sheriff's Department for centering the story of the suspect rather than those of the women he killed and dismissing this act of violence as the result of a "really bad day". Gay's intent focus on the propagation of hateful rhetoric during the Donald Trump administration demonstrates the ways in which this damaging language could influence linguistically minoritized populations in educational settings. Now and in the past, when those in positions of authority refuse to acknowledge hate crimes as hate crimes and racist acts remain unpunished with no consequences, such omissions set the tone for further devaluation of human lives and enable debasing rhetoric—"Wuhan virus", "China virus", "kung flu"—to persist both on the streets, in online virtual spaces, and within classrooms as institutionally sanctioned language. This contemporary example and Gay's poignant commentary foretell the far-reaching negative consequences that linguistic (and racial) profiling could have, especially upon the development of youth and college-aged students. And as it stands, these ongoing challenges have made it imperative for education policymakers and school leaders to develop actionable strategies and to enact purposeful incremental change so that respect for the linguistic diversity and divergent language backgrounds of minoritized communities can flourish within traditionally English-speaking educational settings.

Examination of Challenging Issues for Minoritized Populations

In their article on how culturally sustaining pedagogies might help counteract the linguistic profiling of Latinx students and other students of color, Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores (2017) establish the "need for new educational approaches in response to dramatic demographic shifts that have transformed [America's] ethnoracial makeup" (p. 175). They also highlight the connections between race and language, providing critical context surrounding the development of hegemonic perspectives towards students of color within the classroom and analyzing what it meant for them to navigate spaces dominated by "White, middle-class social norms and identity representations" (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 176). The categorical devaluation and 'mishearing' of these students' natural linguistic practices can increase pressure upon their parts to learn, adopt, and ultimately produce the 'appropriate' academic codes in order to fit in. Linguistic profiling in classrooms curtails minoritized students' ability to safely express themselves and becomes a stringent mechanism with which to regulate their academic experiences. These deficit-oriented attitudes have often evolved based upon the ways in which students choose to speak and/or write, leading Rosa and Flores to reassert the urgency of "disrupt[ing] appropriateness-based approaches to language education" and "challeng[ing] the racial status quo" (p. 187).

Nikolay Slavkov, an associate professor and Director of the Canadian Center for Studies and Research on Bilingualism and Language Planning (CCERBAL), positions his study within the context of public education in Ontario, Canada. As reported by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2010, this region contains one of the "most multilingual student populations in the world" and has "about 20% of children registered in English schools as having another 'first' language" (Slavkov, 2016, p. 23). This complex linguistic landscape means that the processes

that go into creating student language profiles become even more critical in terms of how schools determine resource distribution and the effectiveness of the services they provide to these students. Slavkov (2016) argues for the need to re-evaluate terms such as “native language” or “monolingualism” and expand traditional definitions to go beyond the restrictive confines of an occidental worldview. In studying language profiling practices of Ontario public schools, the Slavkov examines the potential assumptions that both parents and school boards might make when providing information in language background registration forms. The findings suggest that while school boards in the collected sample did demonstrate a high degree of awareness towards the complexities of bilingualism and multilingualism, many of them still lack the theoretical and methodological tools that would allow the creation of more “accurate, thorough, and consistent student language profiles” (Slavkov, 2016, p. 38). While language profiling processes at the Ontario public education institutions seem to perform at a higher level than originally expected, Slavkov posits that this continuing trend away from traditional monolinguistic attitudes towards bilingual and multilingual world views necessitates more research to parse out the subtleties.

Contemporary geopolitical tensions and social issues can also impact the experiences of minoritized students within classroom settings at all levels. A Stop AAPI Hate Report on “Anti-Chinese Rhetoric Tied to Racism Against Asian Americans” by Melissa Borja et al. (2020) found that anti-Asian hate incidents have taken shape in content analysis through “virulent animosity,” “scapegoating of China,” “anti-immigrant nationalism,” declarations of “China as the Enemy,” “parroting of ‘Chinese virus’ term,” and “Orientalist depictions of Chinese culture, dietary habits, and language.” These findings represent only a few of the almost 2,000 incident reports collected by the team of researchers, activists, and leaders since March of 2020.

Debasing, racially fueled hate rhetoric may seep into all dimensions of Asian-presenting community members' lives, including in the education sector. As schools and universities in the U.S. have begun reopening amidst continuing vaccine distribution efforts, Asian American and Pacific Islander students may find themselves targeted, profiled, and harassed due to a combination of factors, including their physical appearance, national origins, and linguistic features such as accents or non-SAE modes of expression. University administration and policymakers must double down on efforts to counter such racially and culturally insensitive rhetoric on school campuses. Otherwise, tacit enablement and silence could exacerbate the situation and render such students more vulnerable by inviting them into physically and psychologically unsafe environments in which they have few other choices.

As more recent literature has emerged on the ties between race and language, a scholar in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison by the name of Shanshan Jiang (2021) frames the challenges faced by international students on the campus of a predominantly white Midwestern university within the complex contexts of globalized higher education. Adjusting to new social norms and life in the U.S. while speaking their second language (English), these international students experience exclusion of a particular nature, namely that from an institutional perspective, they often get aggregated under sweeping categories such as "alien" or "non-citizen" in official academic records (Jiang, 2021, p. 37). The author acknowledges openly that the existence of anti-Black perspectives as well as an adherence to a longstanding "Han ethnocentrism" has only led these international students to "isolate from [both] Black and Asian American communities" (Jiang, 2021, p. 33). The prevalence of "racially coded language" to describe "image[s] of Blackness" may not only influence these students' choices in romantic relationships and social networks, but also manifest in contradictory ways

such as an interest in learning about hip-hop, rap, and other elements deriving from African American culture (Jiang, 2021, p. 40). On the other end international students view their Asian American counterparts through the lens of what they perceive as "lacking", i.e., judging Asian American peers by their inability to "speak Asian languages", use "Asian social media on their phone[s]", "eat Asian food", or conform to other indicators of so-called cultural authenticity (Jiang, 2021, p. 41). Caught in the middle, international students—particularly those originating from China—remain excluded and "oftentimes objectified as economic capital and diversity signifier[s]" (Jiang, 20201, p. 43). Existing intergroup tensions could mount, while a lack of mutual understanding and exposure might contribute to even worse relations between domestic/native-born individuals and international/foreign-born individuals. Jiang's seminal research demonstrates that discrimination based upon linguistic and racial characteristics can indeed happen multi-directionally, as minoritized populations internalize stereotypical or discriminatory rhetoric about themselves as they simultaneously externalize it to others.

Finally, Aydin Bal, a professor in rehabilitation psychology and special education at the University of Wisconsin Madison, has conducted studies examining an oft-understudied demographic group: newly arrived Muslim Turk refugee students at an urban charter school in the Southwestern United States. Within the American educational context, the automatic categorization of these students into the "English Language Learner" (ELL) label can impose barriers to their participation in multiple cultural worlds and also produce stigmatized identifications resulting in the exclusion of these students from general education (GE) classrooms. In his research, Bal uses a collective case study methodology with a purposeful sampling approach (N=24) and draws upon a group of participants comprised of 6 Ahıska students, 12 Ahıska parents, and 6 educators. This ethnography surfaces a difference-as-deficit

cultural model and generic prototypes derived from institutionally sanctioned terminologies such as ELL, which serve to influence educators' perceptions of these students and can lead to the formation of "racialized learner identities" and/or inappropriately assigned special education identifications (Bal, 2014, p. 281). Until both K-12 schools and higher education institutions recognize the complexity and fluidity of how linguistically minoritized students navigate their individual identities in learning environments, systemic transformation would remain difficult to achieve for both the learners and educators.

Recommendations for Addressing Issues of Power, Access, Inclusion, and Equity

The work of such scholars in studies on race, identity, politics, and global education systems can afford educational professionals some preliminary recommendations for institutions to address issues of linguistic profiling within English-speaking classrooms and to create more equitable learning environments for linguistically minoritized students. University of Washington's Director of the Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity (CCDE) Ralina Joseph (2017) has spoken in her public lecture series about the linguistic dimensions of history and politics and traced these changing discourses through time, arguing for more "equitable universities" and "a politics of difference that is unutterable without demands for equity" (p. 3306). As she examines descriptors of difference such as "tolerance", "diversity", and "multiculturalism", she emphasizes the need for a greater focus upon equity beyond simply having "more or different words" to characterize the "process of change-making" (p. 3306). Joseph's (2017) linguistic meta-analysis highlights the need to interrogate emerging streams of academic discourse in which the "right words" easily became "tokens" with which institutions "stave[d] off allegations of racism" (p. 3306), while unearthing previously overlooked power dynamics in the use and overuse of certain phrases in both formal dialogue and everyday

conversations. Language matters and the way educators speak about difference matters. However, Joseph (2017) cautions against falling into the tempting pitfalls of inaction and empty words, warning that an overemphasis upon using "appropriate language…in the absence of other action" would in fact undermine the aims of creating equitable educational environments (p. 3321). Given this careful analysis into the nature and development of lexicon in DEI, any discussions surrounding difference that fail to center equity would render even the most well-intentioned words susceptible to co-optation.

Addressing issues of power and equity also necessarily involve examining the role that citizenship, politics, and cultural identity play in the lives of minoritized populations such as immigrant youths. Arshad I. Ali, an associate professor of educational research at the George Washington University, has performed research centered around how Muslim youth navigate their relationship to broader American culture through lenses of domestic and international state policies, media representations, and cultural production—with a particular focus on the impacts of the 9/11 attack upon development of these youths' personal identities in public social spaces. The perspectives of the 24 Muslim students interviewed in the study reflect both prescriptive and performative dimensions, and the use of language ideology to frame their experiences demonstrates that language becomes not "simply a signifier of the physical word, but… [also] a manifestation of the political world" (Ali, 2009, p. 22). However, language also has the power to "create counter-hegemonic discourse and alter power relations," especially in an educational setting such as the college campus (Ali, 2009, p. 28). Ali calls for more active efforts to protect individuals such as Muslim students on college campuses, critically evaluate acceptable versus unacceptable speech on those campuses, engage minoritized student populations so that they may express their concerns and fears regarding freedom of speech, and continually interrogate

and reassess what diversity really means at respective university campuses in order to ensure equitable, diverse student support services and programming.

Following along the same thread, Director of the Westfield State University Reading and Writing Center Catherine Savini (2021) writes in a recent *Inside Higher Ed* article that instead of pushing students to engage in "code-switching" as a way of conforming to Standard American English (SAE), instructors should encourage students to "code-mesh" by "weav[ing] multiple dialects" and choosing their own modes of self-expression as they fulfill the requirements of their degrees. Savini's proposed recommendations uplift the legitimacy of varied linguistic practices and grammar structures, even going so far as to recommend allowing students to "freewrite in their native language" when they visit their university writing centers (Savini, 2021).

Academic instructors and administrators who can understand, respect, and honor these students' linguistic practices would thus spearhead efforts to combat linguistic profiling. Doing so could positively influence individuals' beliefs in their self-efficacy, help them shape their own goal-orientations, enhance their attributions related to success or failure, and incorporate a mastery approach towards the subjects they choose to study. Ultimately, the implementation of such practices in U.S. classroom settings at both the K-12 and higher education levels could provide linguistically minoritized students the freedom and creativity to bring their culture more fully with them into their learning.

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