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Bilingual Education:

Bringing Together Two Languages

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Américo Paredes, the author of the novel *George Washington Gómez*, writes about a boy, Guálinto Gómez, and his journey through life as a foreigner in America during the 1930's in the newly Americanized state of Texas. Paredes details the struggles of Guálinto throughout his education, particularly in the beginning phases. Guálinto and his family speak Spanish only, having been residents of Mexico until the United States claimed Texas as part of its own territory. Jonesville, the place in which the Gómez family lives, differs from the rest of the towns regarding education. In this particular town, the schools fully integrate its students beginning with the first grade all of the way through high school. The grammar school divides the first and second grades into two sections, one *high* and one *low*. Bilingual teachers control these classes. The high sections contain the fortunate students who already knew English before entering the school. In third grade, the classroom fully integrates the two sections and begins teaching entirely in English. Low first and low second are in the same classroom with two teachers with underqualified teachers, teachers that have little or no education past grammar school, making them not much better off or intelligent than their students. This method supposedly gives the Mexicans the opportunity to learn English while simultaneously conforming to American ideals, but it is also easy on the school budget with little concern for the well-being of the Mexicans. Rarely do the students in low first make it through second grade. The school administration place little Guálinto into low first upon entering school, with Miss Cornelia as his teacher.

The schools in Jonesville attempt to instill a primitive form of a two-way immersion program. The programs in Jonesville have the ultimate goal of replacing Spanish with English, and sooner, rather than later, the student will obtain this goal; otherwise, they will fail out before they reach the third grade. Other, more effective two-way immersion programs integrate native

English speakers with native students of another language other than English, many times Spanish in the United States; these programs represent the languages as supplemental additions of each other (Serrano & Howard, 2007). One language does not replace another, and the teaching has the intention of reaching fluency in both of the languages rather than eliminating one of them in favor of another. All of the students have the same opportunity to develop and maintain language proficiency in a language foreign to them while simultaneously improving their native languages (Serrano & Howard, 2007).

These programs that attempt to develop concurrently language skills in two different languages consist of two different program regiments. The first program contains a classroom in which the teacher provides ninety percent of the instruction in the minority language while English covers the other ten percent of the time; by the fourth grade, the ratio of English to minority language balances out at fifty percent each (Serrano & Howard). The second method approaches bilingual education in a fifty-fifty manner right from the beginning, avoiding the gradual introduction of another language (Serrano & Howard). Both methods allow students to develop bilingualism, though, as well as achieve academic competence similar to those students in the American school systems that are not a part of bilingual programs (Serrano & Howard). Like Jonesville, these two-way immersion programs have two teachers working together; however, these teachers are comparably bilingual, and one person is responsible for English instruction while the other is responsible for Spanish (Serrano & Howard) whereas the English of some of the bilingual teachers in Jonesville is not near fluency.

For Guálinto, the bilingual teachers responsible for educating him Jonesville severely lack constructive criticism. His teacher, Miss Cornelia, is known for her harsh discipline rather than for her teaching. She has a particularly strong vendetta against Guálinto, quite possibly

because he threatens her intelligence, or at least her English competency. Her pedagogy consists of showing and memorizing. The low first graders were, one day, supposed to write the letters of the alphabet. Guálinto wondered why the *ch*, *ll*, and *ñ* were missing from the alphabet, so he wrote these down. When Miss Cornelia saw his extended alphabet, she said, "This is not a Mexican school. These letters do not belong in the American alphabet" (Paredes, 1990). Another time, Guálinto raised his hand to read "1+1=2." He said, "One plus one eckles two," (Paredes, 1990). In response to his mispronunciation, Miss Cornelia says, "ECKLES? Sit down, Eckles, and don't think you know everything. One plus one *is* two, Mr. Eckles" (Paredes, 1990).

It is not the fault of Guálinto that he answers the question incorrectly; limited responses to questions are not at the fault of the incompetence of a student but the failure of the teacher to ask questions that allow for much discussion (Hasan, 2006). The questions allow only very specific answers or a few particular words, making the interaction artificial and not much different from a standardized test in which the student has little freedom of expression, but the opportunity to ask questions and to have a class discussion is crucial in second language acquisition (Hasan, 2006). Miss Cornelia asks questions that she herself does not even know or cannot even say. Instead of correcting the mispronunciation of Guálinto with the word *equals*, she presents another, an easier, verb to say: *is* (Paredes, 1990).

Guálinto, however, is only transferring his knowledge of Spanish to his attempt to learn English because he knows that the *q* is pronounced as a *k*, such that the *qu* in *querer*, meaning to want or to love, is said as /k/ rather than /kwə/ like in *equal* for English. Miss Cornelia punishes him for this previous knowledge. Skills learned in the first language transfer to the second one, and these skills include isolating sounds, spelling, and recognizing words that are cognates; for optimal learning, teachers need to instruct these skills in a logical sequence rather than isolating

each one, removing any relevant reference to their meanings and functions (Culattal, Reese, & Setzer, 2006).

In addition, teachers sometimes might use repetition to evaluate the previously uttered responses from the student (Hasan, 2006). The teacher can enrich the learning of the students through this evaluation, transforming the students' responses into the appropriate and acceptable forms, as well as possibly contributing additional information (Hasan, 2006). This strategy helps to repair incomplete responses of the student and to help the development of the utterances of him or her (Hasan, 2006). In the case of Guálinto, Miss Cornelia uses repetition only to mock him for his speech error.

The teachers, especially in Jonesville, dominate most of the classroom discussions with their own voices, and when they are not speaking, they still make the decisions about whom will talk in class and about what they will speak; when a student wants to speak, he or she might or might now even have a chance to voice his or her opinion (Hasan, 2006). Miss Cornelia controls the classroom conversation, asking sparingly for volunteers. When students do volunteer and perhaps answer the question wrongly, Miss Cornelia seeks the chance to criticize them. She is very much in charge of the classroom.

Miss Cornelia demonstrates a teacher-centered oriented strategy. This practice limits the possibilities of spontaneous language interactions of the students and of allowing them to become comfortable in using the second language (Hasan, 2006). Initiating and asking questions allows learners to obtain a better comprehension of the content, and the quality and the content of the speech must be meaningful in order for students to achieve a new level of understanding in a second language (Hasan, 2006). Students need to have a comfortable situation in which they will freely express their opinions without being in constant fear of being monitored and judged

by their teachers. Their responses are a contribution to the classroom discussion and should thus not be judged based on bad form; the content is the essential part. When Guálinto answers a question, Miss Cornelia ridicules his efforts rather than encourages him to further his language development.

The most essential and basic tools involved in classroom discussions are questions; they allow teachers to elicit information from his or her students and to check the comprehension and understanding of the learners (Hasan, 2006). Questions are also a form of behavior control (Hasan, 2006). If the teachers can actively engage participation, the students are more likely to refrain from disrupting the class. Current research shows that the questions asked by the teachers control the course of the classroom discussion (Hasan, 2006). Although questions play such a major role in learning, teachers use questions inappropriately when it comes to non-native speakers. They tend to ask more questions that do not allow his or her students to give lengthy responses, diverting the current topic at hand into a more interesting or relevant one and not allowing the students to maintain an interest and the interactions (Hasan, 2006). Classroom discussions are vital to the learning and mastering of a language.

Effective teaching of English as a second language capitalizes on teaching in the native language of the child as much as possible (Culatta, Reese, & Setzer, 2006). This capitalization should include teaching skills systematically and explicitly, providing motivating and meaningful instruction, and providing instruction in phonological awareness, which is the ability of the children to recognize, analyze, and alter the phonological parts of the language that is spoken; higher phonological awareness results in higher reading proficiencies (Culatta, Reese, & Setzer, 2006). Teaching these skills comes successfully through interactive activities with the teacher and the peer group that encourage learning (Culatta, Reese, & Setzer).

A useful approach for the viewing of education for second language acquisition is to see it as a social process that relies on the building of the speech community surrounding it; the key to success includes not only the individual psycholinguistic processes of the students but also this second language acquisition in terms of a social process (García, 2007). Two-way immersion programs should take into account both the sociohistorical context of the current linguistic community and the sociolinguistic context of the community, too (García, 2007). Second language acquisition can be defined in terms of social aspects, such that it includes the process of language changing (García, 2007).

Several questions exist within bilingual education itself. It is not a perfect solution to the problem of how to educate those students for whom English is not their first languages. Deciding which form of English teachers should use comes with its own problems. To teach only a standard variety of English ignores and denies the fact that other ones such as African-American Vernacular English or other indigenous languages exist (Hornberger, 2004). The Hornberger (2004) article suggests that teachers should employ a continuum of English varieties, including both standard and non-standard forms to ensure a certain value to all of the different forms. This continuum allows learners to experience all of the possible linguistic resources while they are acquiring second languages, giving less consideration to formal and traditional ends of the spectrum so that their language knowledge is more applicable to everyday communication (Hornberger, 2004). Minority, vernacular, and contextualized languages are important to the language acquisition process (Hornberger, 2004) so that the learners experience a wide range of language possibilities. Miss Cornelia does not use this continuum in her teaching of English. She has step by step opinion of how the information should be taught, and

she will not allow any alterations, particularly with the *is* and *equals* incident. *Equals* was not in her lesson plan, so *equals* will not be used.

A reciprocal argument also exists. The language, for example Spanish, used in bilingual educational settings is not the colloquial language found in Hispanic communities; rather, it is the more standard form students find in foreign language classes (Hornberger, 2004). The concern is that no one is coming to bilingual education with the minority language in use (Hornberger, 2004). However, the English used in instructions generally is a standard form that most people do not actually speak in everyday conversations, and native English speakers usually understand just fine. The standard and non-standard Spanish should follow the same pattern with its native speakers; the knowledge of a standard language is there, even if it does not make its way into conversations.

The language used in the classroom also depends on various factors (Varghese, 2004), including the teacher, who is an important person, in any educational setting but particularly in bilingual ones. His or her experiences shape his or her teaching method. Gender, race, class, culture, and sexual orientation can all play a role in the educational process (Morgan, 2004). The rudeness of Miss Cornelia towards some of her students perhaps stems from her weak English skills and the superior knowledge of these students. The other teachers at the school in Jonesville often talk about her lack of education and knowledge (Paredes, 1990). Instead of trying to help her students reach their full potentials, Miss Cornelia, concerned with her influence of power and identity she is bestowing onto her students (Kenner, 2004), ridicules them, making the environment not conducive to learning, especially since the teacher should make the classroom an environment that encourages semi-autonomy, one that challenges or reproduces the

dominant power structures of society (Morgan, 2004). Teacher and student interactions influence and guide the identity of the student (Morgan, 2004).

A bilingual speaker has complete ownership over his or her languages; he or she can control the languages, code switching between them (Toribio, 2004). He or she is able to drawn upon each language depending on the speech situation in which he or she is present; the context, the pragmatics, the setting, and the participants influence the decision of the bilingual speaker about which language her or she will use (Toribio, 2004). Code switching does not occur because of a lack of a knowledge of the language from which or into which a person it switching but to fulfill a juxtaposition of two codes (Toribio, 2004). Rules control this switching between codes, and the code-switching is systematic, not a flawed system (Toribio, 2004).

Research surrounding bilingual education also has its faults. The research generally focuses mostly on reading, with little emphasis on writing, and they study the results through standardized testing, which has its own biases in and of itself (Serrano & Howard, 2007). Also confounding the research is the problem that it is hard to find one native speaker of English and one native speaker of Spanish that have the exact same previous exposure to the reverse language before receiving education for it. Non-native speakers of English in the United States generally have more exposure to English than monolingual speakers of English in the United States have to minority languages. With this previous knowledge, the proficiency of the educational strategies might be skewed, making it hard to judge how affective they are.

The goals of bilingual education are ambiguous, at best. The idea that the concept of a unified nation, achieved through English and only English exists. Some people believe that English is a symbol of national allegiance in the United States, and they struggle with the idea of a language other than English gaining authority in the country (García, 2007). They approach

bilingual education as a way for immigrants to eliminate their previous languages into order to assimilate completely into the culture of the United States, and they see this assimilation only possible through English monolingualism (García, 2007). Alternatively, the notion that the rights of linguistic minorities will be protected through dual language programs and policies also exists. These constructs are competing ideals, and no compromise exists to quell this battle. No discussion exits on what to expect from bilingual education as well as what the expectations of the bilingual teachers are. Perhaps it is this ambiguity and lack of discussion and common goals that create a national sense of discomfort when it comes to bilingual education.

Bilingual education is reliant on several outside factors. What little discourse that exists on bilingual education is dependent on political motivations. Immigration policies and the economic and sociopolitical conditions of the United States influence this education (Varghese, 2004). These constructs set the pace for bilingual education in America. At the time of *George Washington Gómez*, the Texas Revolution is not a too distant memory for the Americans. It is of the utmost importance for the new Americans to become assimilated to the culture as quickly as possible. In recent times, the United States is facing a similar sense of urgency with the terror problems of the world. Anyone that does not speak English is seen as a potential threat, their motivations possibly lying somewhere not belonging to the United States. Language is seen as a precursor to identity.

Thinking of language in terms of fluency and expertise rather than native or non-native status, some of the identifications with and attachments to a language might fade (Hornberger, 2004). When the personal identity to a language from a certain country loses its native or non-native status, the world is just left with fluent or not fluent speakers, perhaps creating a universal group feeling. The way in which bilingual education in American is currently approached

creates the idea that bilingual does not concern it with acquiring and developing the necessary skills and knowledge for a second language but that it involves negotiating the identities of each group (Hornberger, 2004). For Guálinto, English serves to make him American. The bilingual education that he is experiencing will eventually make him a fluent English speaker, ignoring his Mexican identity. The languages and the knowledge of the languages are not as important as the associations that come with them. One tells the world that Guálinto is a foreigner from across the border whereas the other one symbolizes his new American identity. It is also through school during which he drops his Hispanic name of *Guálinto* for the Americanized *George Washington*. The American education system, with the intention of turning Mexicans into Americans, succeeds with Guálinto.

For successful results to occur through bilingual education, interaction and engagement with other learners and teachers must happen because the primary mechanism through which learning occurs is through social interactions (Walqui, 2006). These activities are the most effective when they contain shared interests of the group (Walqui, 2006). These social interactions allow for the zone of proximal development, or the distance between the actual and the potential developmental levels, and the student reaches the potential level through guidance from adults or collaboration with peers (Walqui, 2006). Within the zone of proximal development, scaffolding, or providing a support structure that enables certain skills to develop through particular activities can occur (Walqui, 2006). Working in social situations help to increase learning because the students can receive immediate feedback from their teachers on the tasks; they can also imitate others, also called modeling, use previous knowledge as a jump start for new information, make new information more easily accessible, make connections from previous information to new, and develop metacognition through social interactions (Walqui,

2006). Scaffolding is particularly useful to non-native speakers of English because if provides challenging instructions in academic areas to them and allows them to collaborate with one another (Walqui, 2006).

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