



An Honest Discussion about Learning as a Bilingual Person in American Schools

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Abstract

Bilingual students are a distinctive portion of the population of American schools. While encountering these students is not a rare occurrence, the type of instruction and assistance that is provided varies greatly from district to district. This professional memo highlights a series of open conversations with an adult bilingual learner. One is able to see the impact of school-related responses (or lack thereof) from his youth upon his later life.

Introduction

Ranjero is an adult learner, who attends collegiate night classes while working a full-time job during the day. Over the course of about a week, Ranjero and I spoke for three 15-20 minute sessions about his life in both his birth nation (Ecuador) and the United States. He is a thirty-three year old male, who is married, and has one child (another is on the way). Ranjero currently resides on Long Island, where he has just purchased his first home. He has lived in Suffolk County for most of his life but spent a small portion of his youth in Texas, after the family moved to this country. Ranjero completed high school at the age of 18 and attempted to attend college directly afterwards before "running out of cash and feeling overwhelmed". He has repeatedly stressed his will to finish college this time around. Ranjero has indicated that his wife is very supportive of this goal, and is a source of motivation. Although he grew up in a Spanish-speaking household, he has noted that he does not speak Spanish in his own home because his wife is monolingual, and only speaks English.

Keywords: Bilingual Education; Translanguaging; Foreign Language

Discussion

Ranjero was born in a rural farming community in Ecuador. His older sister, Karol was also born at this location, but his younger sister, Julia, was born after the family was settled in the United States. He indicated during our discussions that he does not recall very much from this time due to his age, but he has many vivid memories of his visits to the family farm every summer of his childhood. Ranjero noted that most of his stories from his life as an Ecuadorian were told to him by Karol or his mother, and they are not his own first-hand memories. Although this is true, Ranjero says that there are many times that he wonders about what life might be like for the people in that town. "It's hard to say. There are some days that I really think a lot about that place, and other times where I just go about my day. I can't explain why certain days make me think about Ecuador, but they do." He has discussed this with his older sister who

feels the same way at times. Julia, his younger sister, has told Ranjero that she sometimes feels a sense of being "left out" when the family discusses life in Ecuador, and other times when she finds the family's attachment to their homeland to be "too over the top".

Ranjero's father left Ecuador to find a new job, and to leave an unsettling situation with his ex-wife. He brought the family to Texas where he had set up some work. Unfortunately, after a few years, he was unable to find enough hours at work and the family was forced to move to a very small apartment complex in suburban New York. Karol was already in third grade and Ranjero began his formal school as kindergartener here. His parents did not know the area well and were concerned that Ranjero would have trouble fitting in. They told him to use the name "Danny" in school, and his mother began calling him this name almost exclusively. He stated, "It was a like a light switch with my mom. All of a sudden, Ranjero was gone, and I was Danny. My dad still calls me Ranjero to this day though. I had trouble in school with this at first. The teacher thought I wasn't listening when she called me, but I didn't think of myself as Danny at the time." There was certainly a conflict within Ranjero about being forced to make changes for his new linguistic environment. "However, not only is it impossible to be neutral in language use, it is unnecessary to suppress identity for the sake of contact relations" (Canagarajah, p.68, 2012). Ranjero felt like he was in a difficult scenario, as he wanted to listen to his parents, but also did not want to give up his name so easily. Igoa (1995) discusses the idea that students who are uprooted will frequently be conflicted between a wide range of emotions. (p.57)

Ranjero told me that he was excited to find that many students in his town spoke Spanish as well. He indicated that this was a great help to him socially. Making friends and socializing became an effortless process with these children. However, he felt this was a bittersweet item as well. "I did great with the Spanish kids, but I realize that my first English friend didn't come until I was much older and worked at a Target store in a different community. It's almost like I isolated myself without meaning it." While making friends was not a problem, school was a different story. "School was weird because you had a white teacher speaking English to a bunch of Spanish kids who really didn't know the language that well. I don't remember ESL or anything like that. That doesn't mean they didn't have it, but I don't remember it. I was never a part of it." It appears that Ranjero and his classmates were placed in a submersion setup. "In the first approach, known as submersion or sink or swim programs, schools and educators provide emergent bilinguals with exactly the same educational services provided to monolingual English speakers" (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010, p. 23). From his statement, it appears that no special accommodations were made for the students' knowledge and usage of Spanish. When asked if he thought that they were being pushed towards English-only learning experiences, Ranjero quickly replied in the affirmative. "Schools having the opportunity to create models of multi-literacy and transculturalism often opt to develop practices with an exclusive linguistic code: English." (Rodriguez-Valls, 2009, p.132)

Ranjero also talked about the exhaustion that exists not only within the walls of a school, but also inside of the confines of his own home. "My older sister took to things right away. She joined like a hundred clubs and was always doing some activity or something after school. This meant that I was left to translate for my parents. I was handling phone calls that dealt with banking and health care when I was real young. I spoke better English than they did, so it fell on me most of the time. "Language brokers, as these interpreters and translators are called, do far more than transmit information. In many cases, they take on the responsibility in making educational and other decisions for themselves and their family decisions normally made by their parents" (Se, 1996, p.485-496). Ranjero appeared to be a default "language broker" for his parents because of his older sister's absence from the home because of her extracurricular work. It's clear that Ranjero's language work with those who dealt with his parents is not unique to his household. One can infer that the stress of school for an immigrant child extends far beyond six hours and in some cases, the exhaustion can be a ubiquitous problem in their lives. "A recurring theme of the inner world of the immigrant child is a feeling of exhaustion" (Igoa, 1995, p.67). This mental weariness shows itself clearly in Ranjero's discussion of his vast amount of accountability to both school and home sources.

Ranjero also talked about the ways in which his younger sister's upbringing solely in the United States created conflicts with his parents. He stated, "My younger sister had no attachment to Ecuador because she only knew things here. She would do things like roll her eyes when my folks would say

something was better back home." Here we see a hint of Igoa's (1995) concept of acculturation vs. assimilation. Ranjero's parents obviously kept vestiges of their former land with them as they made their move to this country, and felt that they were Ecuadorians in America, but Ranjero's sister felt that she was an American by birth and culture. It appears through her gesture in the above quote that she felt a sense of disconnection with her parents' occasional preferences for the place they called "back home". However, this is juxtaposed interestingly with Ranjero's mother and her insistence upon the name, "Danny" as a means of assimilating in school.

Implications

Ranjero's story yields a great deal of information for educators to consider. His early experiences in school appear to stand out quite a bit. Although it is clear that there were many students who, like Ranjero, were at some stage of bilingual development, he recalled little to no effort by the school to accommodate this situation. Though he is now in his thirties, he still was able to detail the impact that his school's "sink or swim" approach to immigrant students left on him. There was a certain discomfort or detachment that was felt, and he did not mention forming bonds with his teachers or finding a topic that he loved during that early time. Igoa (1995) recognizes, "Rapport with students is very important" (p.26). Ranjero appeared to bond easily with his peers through their common language, as well as perhaps their shared experience in this "submersion" program, but never his instructors. When Ranjero indicated that he felt that he and his classmates were being pushed towards an English-only communication system in his class, it also shows a bit of disregard for the unique cultural capital that each immigrant student can possess. This was basically a wasted and untapped resource that was sacrificed due to the dominant philosophy in that school setting. Perhaps, Ranjero would have avoided these negative feelings in a classroom that valued biliteracy and translanguaging experiences. "Translanguaging is the norm used to teach and learn in communities, extending participants's sociocritical literacy." (Garcia & Li, 2013, p.122)

An item that appears to be overlooked in many situations is the de facto translator or "language broker" role that many students fall into during their time at home. In many ways, they could potentially have a harder time completing things like reports and homework assignments for reason that go far beyond their own linguistic skill set. When Ranjero said that he was prematurely placed in an adult role due because of his parents' struggles with English, it places the spotlight on a broader expectation issue that can sometimes occur in schools. Brian Street (2002) reiterated many times that school is not a neutral experience. One could imagine that Ranjero had to take time out of studies to suddenly deal with incoming phone calls or to run errands where English was going to be needed. This is far from the scenario faced by a student who is not an immigrant and can spend as much time as they need on simply doing their schoolwork correctly, without the interference of adult-related issues or the distraction of creating extra time for translation-related tasks. Perhaps, part of becoming a successful educator of bilingual students is not only adapting practices within the school setting, but also shifting towards a more accepting mentality to items completed outside of school.

The case of Ranjero's older sister deserves further exploration. He said that she was consistently involved in some type of extra-curricular activity and was rarely home. Could this serve as a message to teachers of immigrant students? Teachers might consider creating an after or before school homework club to assist students in their area of need. This might alleviate some of the stress that parents feel when working through their own linguistic appropriations. It may also be a more simplistic reminder to encourage students of all backgrounds to become more heavily involved in the activities that the district has to offer. Ranjero's sister appeared to find her identity as a "joiner" and was likely able to make social connections in these settings as well.

The utter confusion that Ranjero felt over his name change reveals that sometimes the students are actually uncomfortable conforming to a new identity that someone in their family would be closer to the norm. There are students who do bear preference for one name over another, and responsible teachers must be sensitive to this issue and adapt accordingly. This incident also stresses the need for an accepting and open classroom environment. "To me, the most humbling part of observing accomplished teachers is seeing the subtle ways in which they build emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities"

(Johnson, 2004, p.2). Educators need to work from day one to ensure their rooms are safe areas for children. In the classroom environment, students should never fear ridicule from others over their name or cultural identity.

Ranjero's personal story, family dynamic, and perception of school encapsulate the immigrant experience of just one person in what could be a class of many students. His tale is evidence that every child comes to school from variant perspectives that are formed over the course of the events in his or her life. Schools must shift away from a homogenized, blanket style approach to learning, and move towards a more personalized stance on the way each student should be treated. "If we cannot now end our differences, we must make the world safe for diversity" (Kennedy, 1963). When everyone's story is honored and recognized, true progress can be made.

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