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Centering Translanguaging and Critical Consciousness in Chinese/English Dual Language Bilingual Education Programs

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CENTERING TRANSLANGUAGING AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In Chinese/English Educational Programs

Abstract

Despite the prevalence of Chinese usage in the U.S. and in the world, Chinese language ranks low in K-12 language instruction. U.S. education policies and programs have historically excluded and disserved Chinese ancestry students. While the current research about language and literacy proficiency in Mandarin/English DLBE programs is warranted, areas of urgency for further examination include the development of critical consciousness and translanguaging pedagogy to educate for equity and justice.

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Centering Translanguaging and Critical Consciousness in Chinese/English Dual Language Bilingual Education Programs

Introduction

In the U.S., Chinese is the second most spoken language other than English following Spanish. The 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, estimated that 3,494,544 (1.1%) individuals 5 years or over spoke Chinese at home. According to the Center for Applied Linguistics, there are 14 major varieties of Chinese language with seven recognized by the Chinese government. We bring this to light because little attention is paid to the rich diversity among Chinese individuals including their language(s) spoken and sociocultural historical experiences. Relatedly, U.S. Census data do not require additional information beyond “Chinese” as a language indicator. In their analysis of 2016 ACS data, Cooc and Leung (2016) found that only about one-third of those who identified as Chinese speakers specified the Chinese variety they spoke. Cantonese and Mandarin speakers each accounted for 16% to 17% while 3% identified as speaking Formosan (Taiwanese variety), and even within these major language varieties, there are distinctive sub-varieties such as Taishanese related to Cantonese. Mandarin is estimated to be the most widely used language in the world.

K-12 Chinese Language Education in the U.S.

Despite the prevalence of Chinese usage in the U.S. and in the world, Chinese language instruction has continued to rank seventh in relation to other languages taught in K-12 schools with the top four languages being of European origin (Spanish, French, German, and Latin) (Xiao, 2016). According to the 2017 National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Report (American Councils for International Education), 46,272 students were enrolled in Chinese language instruction across 49 states with the highest concentration in California. In 2010, California and New York were home to over half of Chinese-born immigrants with 32% (577,745) in California and 20.8% in New York (McCabe, 2012).

Chinese immigration to the U.S. began in the 1840s, with people from Taishan in Southern China drawn to the Gold Rush in California. Mostly Cantonese-speaking, they began moving into cities after the Gold Rush. However, with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and related legislation from 1880-1924, Chinese families and community groups established language schools in Chinatowns for their children to learn their language and cultural practices--partly to prepare their children should they have to migrate to China. Chinese heritage language schools have since become established across the U.S. and remain one of the primary means available for children to learn Chinese. These grassroots, community-based schools faced many challenges including inadequate funding, curriculum, and teachers who are often untrained as teachers. National organizations have since been established to offer leadership and guidance for collaboration across these independent schools. In 2021, The National Chinese Language and Culture Coalition reported 250,000 students enrolled in 1000 heritage schools and a total of 320,000 students enrolled in Chinese language programs across the country including heritage, public, and private schools.

Historically, U.S. education policies and programs have excluded and disserved Chinese ancestry students. In the 1880s, Chinese children were not allowed to attend public schools. In 1885, the California Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Chinese parents who sued citing this exclusion was

unconstitutional. However, the court established that they could be educated in “separate but equal” Chinese schools. In 1971, Lee v. Johnson desegregated San Francisco schools.

However, approximately 2,800 Chinese students did not speak English and only 1,000 received supplemental English instruction in schools. These students brought a case against the school district, Lau v. Nichols (1974), citing they were not provided with equal educational opportunities in violation of their 14th Amendment rights. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Lau relying on Section 601 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits any federally funded program or activity from discriminating based on race, color, or national origin. The ruling drew on the Office of Civil Rights’ understanding that language could serve as a proxy for race, ethnicity, and national origin. As a result, school districts were mandated to provide equal educational access for non-English speakers but did not specify how (Moran, 2015).

During the period of 1960-2000, U.S. government initiatives supported the teaching of critical foreign languages including Mandarin. Private foundations and professional organizations such as the Chinese Language Teachers Association also supported this initiative contributing to the emergence of K-16 Chinese language programs in the U.S. The greatest expansion of these programs has occurred in recent years from 2000 to the present. The National Security Education Act of 1991, in response to the 9/11 attacks, expanded funding in 2004 for critical language learning including in K-6 programs. Additionally, the Chinese government has funded Chinese language education in the U.S. in recent decades.

K-12 Chinese/English Dual Language Bilingual Education Programs in the U.S.

China’s rise in prominence as a global power has accelerated the growth of Mandarin/English Dual Language Bilingual Education (DLBE) programs in the U.S. (Lü, 2020). Like all other DLBE programs Mandarin/English DLBE programs follow the conventional path, offering the teaching of core subject matter in two languages with strict separation of language use and a minimum of 50% of instruction in Mandarin (Howard et al., 2018). Specifically, such language allocation policy prescribes an exclusive space for English and another for Mandarin. Instructions in English and Mandarin may then alternate by certain subject matter, teacher, time, and/or place.

In 2019, the U.S. had 317 Mandarin/English DLBE programs, a dramatic increase from 61 programs in 2011. California is home to the largest concentration of Chinese/English DLBE programs with 79 (24.9%) followed by Utah with 66 programs (20.8%). Mandarin is taught in the majority of these programs that include both one-way and two-way immersion programs with about half of these programs using a 50/50 language instruction model. *One-way* immersion serves one specific target population, be it language-majorities speakers or language-minoritized speakers, while *two-way* immersion includes students who are native English-speakers as well as students for whom English is an additional language (Howard et al., 2018). Presently, the majority of Mandarin/English DLBE programs serve elementary students with increasing opportunities in secondary education (Lee & Wang, 2021).

Centering Translanguaging Pedagogy in Mandarin/English DLBE Programs

While the language separation policy in a DLBE program is seen as indispensable (e.g., to protect and develop the minoritized language), the separate and parallel linguistic worlds have come under criticism for reflecting a monoglossic ideology of bilingual development as “two solitudes” (Cummins, 2007) rather than a holistic understanding of bilingualism as an integrated system (Grosjean, 2010). The rigid adherence to one language or another at a time fails to recognize bilingual students’ dynamic, fluid linguistic practices in communicative contexts and may therefore restrict their learning and engagement (de Jong et al., 2019).

A group of researchers (e.g., de Jong, 2016; García & Lin, 2017; Somerville & Faltis, 2019; Hamman-Ortiz, 2019; Tian, 2021) have questioned the insistence on strictly monolingual approaches to instruction and instead called for adopting *translanguaging pedagogies*, which represent a flexible bilingual pedagogy to support what bilingual learners do with language and engages students in performing academic tasks utilizing their entire linguistic and semiotic repertoires in DLBE programs. Among them, Sánchez, García, and Solorza (2018) have further proposed a *translanguaging allocation policy* by calling upon teachers to strategically and purposefully incorporate translanguaging pedagogies in their English- and LOTE-use spaces.

They specifically highlight three parts of the translanguaging allocation policy that are essential to DLBE programs: “(1) **translanguaging documentation** helps teachers assess what students know and can do when they use all their linguistic resources together, giving them a fuller picture of the learner, (2) **translanguaging rings** are ways of scaffolding instruction that allow teachers to use students’ home languages as resources in learning the target language, and (3) **translanguaging transformation** means creating opportunities for bilingual students to use all their linguistic resources to read, write, and think in ways that challenge existing linguistic hierarchies in school and society overall” (Seltzer & García, 2020, p. 5). With these new components integrated in the traditional space for each of the named languages, a translanguaging allocation policy provides opportunities for bilingual students to not only hear and use one language or another exclusively (so that the minoritized language is protected), but also use all the features of their linguistic repertoire in strategic ways to deepen their understandings and enhance their linguistic and academic performances.

What may this translanguaging allocation policy look like in Mandarin/English DLBE programs? In Tian (2021), the researcher worked alongside a Mandarin teacher and they co-designed translanguaging documentation, translanguaging rings, and translanguaging transformation spaces in a Grade 3 Chinese Language Arts (CLA) class where the majority of the students were English-dominant speakers. For example,

- Translanguaging documentation aims to achieve a more holistic understanding of learners’ academic performance compared to monolingual assessments. In Tian (2021), the teacher purposefully invited students to use any languages they wanted (i.e., English, Mandarin, or both) in oral and written forms when the academic tasks focused on demonstrating students’ content comprehension of difficult Chinese words, texts, and abstract concepts.
- Translanguaging rings allow teachers to utilize students’ dominant/familiar languages as scaffolding in target language learning. In Tian (2021), the teacher intentionally juxtaposed English and Mandarin together to engage students in cross-linguistic analysis to facilitate transfer

of linguistic knowledge (e.g., phonology, morphology, syntax, grammar, and pragmatics) and raise students' metalinguistic awareness.

- Translanguaging transformation strives to create opportunities for students to bring their cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge into classrooms to foster their agency, creativity, and criticality. In Tian (2021), a literacy project "Culture Day Project" was designed to build a culturally and linguistically inclusive community, strengthen home-school relations, and foster students' positive identity development. This project involved multiple steps to guide students to explore and showcase their own culture and family holiday traditions: from interviewing their parents and gathering information in an English worksheet, to translating information into a Mandarin worksheet, and then to creating slides and giving oral presentations in Mandarin. Students were able to move across English, Mandarin, and different modalities flexibly during the complex and dynamic process of meaning making.

Meanwhile, we do recognize that implementing translanguaging pedagogy in minoritized language instructional contexts in DLBE programs is a complex proposition, fraught with apprehension and competing language spaces. To a certain extent, this translanguaging allocation policy may introduce "more English" into the language-minoritized space. Cenoz and Gorter (2017) remind us that it is necessary to soften the boundaries between languages, but this has to be achieved in a sustainable way where breathing spaces are maintained for using and developing the minoritized language. We therefore argue that both translanguaging and target language instructional spaces are needed and can and should co-exist in DLBE programs, as García and Kleifgen (2018) point out, "minoritized languages need to be protected, but they cannot be isolated" (p. 76). The key point lies in that translanguaging is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and it must be *strategically* and *purposefully* planned and adapted considering different situational factors, such as learning objectives, learning tasks, school grade, teacher and student background, and status of languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Zheng, 2019).

Developing Critical Consciousness in Mandarin/English DLBE Programs

Conventional DLBE program design includes three pillars: biliteracy and bilingualism in English and a minoritized language, high academic achievement in all content areas and sociocultural competence (Howard et al., 2018). While sociocultural competence aims at developing positive attitudes towards others and a positive academic and bilingual identity, a recent area of focus is the development of critical consciousness (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). A critically conscious pedagogy draws from a curriculum that examines social inequities that impact communities of color. Part of developing critical consciousness builds on the awareness about structural inequities that affect communities of color and includes students taking action in their local, national, or global communities. What may this look like in Mandarin/English DLBE programs?

A starting point for stakeholders of Mandarin/English DLBE programs is to *historicize* their community and DLBE program. Part of historicizing goes beyond examining the history of Chinese immersion programs in the U.S and builds from that to examine how a school community will promote *why* and *how* learning Chinese benefits immigrant and heritage speakers. The benefits should go beyond what is typically promoted such as cognitive, economic, and academic perspectives and include a familial, cultural, social, and political component; this includes the importance of sustaining intergenerational multilingualism. By *historicizing* Mandarin/English DLBE programs, school communities will also center

the experiences of language-minoritized students and families while creating awareness about social inequities that affect Asian Americans, both historically and today. This *awareness* is crucial as it is one of the first steps in developing *critical consciousness* which precedes *taking action* towards deconstructing social injustices that continue to affect people of color.

Furthermore, teachers play a significant role in fostering critical consciousness. A growing body of literature examines teacher's identities and positionalities (Cervantes-Soon, 2018; Fránquiz, Salazar, & DeNicolò, 2011; Palmer & Martinez, 2013; Sung & Tsai, 2019; Urrieta, 2007; Valenzuela, 2016) and how practitioners can draw from their experiences to promote equity and deconstruct racialized notions about communities of color in (gentrifying) DLBE programs. A teacher's role in promoting critical consciousness (Heiman & Yanes, 2018) in Mandarin/English DLBE programs may include developing an awareness about anti-Asian racism by creating opportunities for students to voice and name the racialized experiences of members from the Asian community. For example, using multilingual and multicultural children's literature can be used as a vehicle for young students to speak from the perspective of a character to discuss social inequities (Garcia-Mateus, 2021; Roser et al., 2015). Additionally, if students are given the opportunity to draw from the storyline of a children's book (Caldas, 2018), they will brainstorm about ways they can take action in their own classroom against social injustices (e.g., gendered biases).

Conclusion and Implications for the Field

While the current research about language and literacy proficiency in Mandarin/English DLBE programs is warranted, areas of urgency for further examination include the development of critical consciousness and translanguaging pedagogy to educate for equity and justice. Implications for teacher educators include expanding focus in course work and programs to examine linguistic diversity across ethnic groups with attention to historicizing language and cultural experiences within a sociopolitical context to foster critical consciousness for social justice. Additionally, we hope that educators will enact a more dynamic, holistic vision of bilingualism and bilingual education to infuse translanguaging into classroom spaces. Finally, we encourage both pre- and in-service teachers to experiment and implement translanguaging allocation policy strategically and purposefully in their school communities.

Positionalities

Our interdisciplinary backgrounds in bilingual/bicultural and TESOL education and personal experiences are intimately related to our investment and interest in this work. Zhongfeng identifies as a first-generation immigrant originally from China, and a multilingual speaker of Mandarin, English, and Cantonese. Joanna identifies as a multilingual second-generation Chinese American who experienced language loss of her primary Chinese languages with few opportunities to use her primary languages beyond the scope of her family. Suzanne identifies as a second-generation immigrant from Mexico, a Latina and bilingual from the U.S./Mexico borderlands raising multilingual children who have been a part of Spanish/English and Mandarin/English DLBE programs.

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