Pushing the Field & Practice: Ofelia García's Reflective and Responsive Approach to Educational Innovation

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Cover Page Footnote

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> Ofelia García's vision for educational equity for emergent bilinguals has always put children and their agency within social contexts at its heart. This essay draws upon her own writing and the experiences of the authors -- a current and a former student of hers -- to explore how centering people's dynamic bilingual practices has been a source of innovation for bilingual education theory and practice.

If we were to ask Ofelia García to describe herself in three words, "innovator" probably would not make the cut. Of course, her humility would preclude her from recognizing her achievements in that way. Also, given that the word "innovation" has become synonymous in recent years with technological advancement, she might deny the title, pointing to her perennial challenges getting her MacBook to work the way she wants it to. However, looking at her theories and body of work, it is impossible not to recognize her role as an innovator in the fields of sociolinguistics and bilingual education. Her advocacy for a simple and elegant idea -- that people and their diverse languaging practices, rather than standard languages, should be at the heart of teaching and learning -- is a break with past lenses on bilingual education. As we argue in this article, this idea has also empowered scholars, educators, and communities across geographical borders, and research and practice disciplines to reimagine education, and to take their own innovative risks for the benefit of multilingual people around the world.

In this essay, we trace how García's work innovated the field of bilingual education in ways that center learners' and educators' agency. We provide examples of how those innovations catalyzed new practices in education in spaces in which we -- a current and a former student of hers -- have participated. The first example describes

how an educator took up her theories and made them their own through the City University of New York-New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals (CUNY-NYSIEB) project. The last two examples illustrate how ideas from her work have been applied to recast learning with and through technology, especially in multilingual environments.

Ofelia García as Innovator

When we say that Ofelia García is an innovator, we do not mean of the type that is too often celebrated in the media today -- the solo entrepreneur who follows the "move fast and break things" mantra of Silicon Valley. We mean the type of innovator who builds on the work of others and with others to seed incremental, but ultimately transformational ideas in education. The process by which she innovates is reflective, responsive, and embedded in communities of scholars from around the world, parents and families, educators, and of course, her students. She often uses the verb "pushing" to describe what she does: pushing the field, her students, and broader society to be advocates for emergent bilinguals and social justice in education.

Her ideas are innovative in that they break with calcified and standardized practices in education that have marginalized students based on how they communicate, their race, their gender, and other aspects of their identities within education settings. Those traditional practices included imposing monolingual curriculum and assessment for emergent bilinguals, silencing students' home language practices, promoting language separation and policing, and fostering monocultural school environments (García & Li Wei, 2011; García, 2009). In these writings, she recognized that those ways of educating were not consistent with our multilingual times. They led to low quality, and ultimately detrimental, educational environments for children, and indeed constrained and stunted the work of teachers.

Inspired by her experiences in multilingual classrooms and her reading of Mikhail Bahktin, Walter Mignolo, Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook, Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Carini and many others, she along with collaborators, began to view those traditional ways of teaching and learning with emergent bilinguals as symptomatic of a larger issue: society's fundamental relationship with language, particularly the historical and social construction of language categories. In her influential book, *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective* (2009), she breaks with the idea that languages are discrete, state-sanctioned, bounded wholes that can be *added* or *subtracted*, preferring to use the word *dynamic* to describe how language is used and learned:

> ...the world's globalization is increasingly calling on people to interact with others in ways that defy traditional categories. In the linguistic complexity of the twenty-first century, bilingualism involves a much more **dynamic** cycle where language practices are multiple and ever adjusting to the multilingual multimodal terrain of the communicative act (p. 53, our emphasis).

The theory of dynamic bilingualism privileges people's language practices over the standard rules and grammars of named languages. This perspective is also at the heart of *translanguaging theory* (García & Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy, García & Reid, 2015; Vogel & García, 2018) and *translanguaging pedagogy* (García & Kleyn, 2016; García,

Ibarra Johnson & Seltzer, 2017), conceptualizations that García has developed with her colleagues over her long career. These theories view *language* as a verb -- practices people do, rather than as static linguistic objects people should measure themselves against. These concepts also view bilinguals' language practices not as problematic, but as opportunities to build on. In recognizing that language is learned in social context, these theories also highlight the key role of relationships in teaching and learning.

Inspiring Innovation by Centering People's Agency

By centering relationships and people's diverse languaging practices in education, García's innovative lenses also restore agency[i] to students, school leaders, and educators, empowering them to reenvision and remake their schools and classrooms. García and Li Wei explain the importance of documenting students' language practices in their volume *Translanguaging: Languaging, Bilingualism, and Education* (2014):

> All teachers need to be able to observe bilingual children closely and describe them as they are engaged in meaningful learning activities and interacting in different settings. Teachers need, in other words, to be aware of language diversity and to see their students as *people*, not just numbers. But beyond linguistic and cultural information, teachers need to develop a critical sociopolitical consciousness about the linguistic diversity of children, and in the case of bilingual teachers, the historical glottopolitics of the languages they're trying to develop. Teachers then need to *act* on all of this information by constructing curricula and pedagogies that build on the sociopolitical, sociohistorical and sociolinguistic profiles of the bilingual children in question (p. 123, our emphasis).

By calling on education professionals to take risks and to be innovators themselves, these ideas follow in a progressive educational tradition. Ofelia García was deeply impacted by her study of the Prospect Center's Descriptive Review Process alongside Cecelia Traugh. The Descriptive Review Process is premised on the idea that educators could, "generate knowledge of children, of curriculum, of learning and teaching" (Carini, 2000, p. 9; Traugh, 2000). By bringing the Descriptive Review Process to bilingual education, García opened up a space where educators and scholars could carefully analyze how learning was attuned to the multilingual learner. In an educational context where teachers and school leaders' autonomy has been chipped away at by standardized policies and assessments, García's work challenges them to come up with their own ways of implementing responsive educational environments, rooted in children's unique characteristics, and multiple and dynamic needs. At the same time, these theories do not give educators easy answers. Rather, they empower people to accept how they and their students, *language*, while exhorting them to support students as they expand their repertoires and learn new ways of expression. That includes learning society's "codes or rules of power" (Delpit, 1988, p. 283) but also questioning, resisting, and recasting those codes.

Our experience working within bilingual education in New York has exposed us to countless examples of teachers, school leaders, and researchers taking up and innovating on ideas developed in Ofelia García's work. In what follows, we describe two

ways that her work has inspired innovation. First, we consider the case of a teacher who, drawing on theories of translanguaging learned through CUNY-NYSIEB, reimagined literacy assessment at her school. Second, we examine how we, along with other colleagues, used theories developed in García's work to catalyze innovations in teaching and learning with and through digital technologies.

From Teacher Agency to Teacher Innovation in CUNY-NYSIEB: Ella's Story

Teacher innovation and agency are key tenets of CUNY-NYSIEB, a project that Ofelia García developed along with Drs. Ricardo Otheguy and Kate Menken, and carried out with dozens of other CUNY professors and research assistants from 2011-2019. The CUNY-NYSIEB project centered around two core principles: (1) bilingualism as a resource; and (2) the development of a multilingual ecology. These principles were framed by the larger understanding that through educators' development of a deep knowledge of bilingualism and language use, instruction could be improved and radically transformed to meet the educational needs of multilingual students.

Through the CUNY-NYSIEB project, many school administrators and teachers were introduced to translanguaging and translanguaging pedagogy for the first time. Translanguaging theory describes the practices of multilingual people as they draw upon the full span of their linguistic and social repertoire (García & Li Wei, 2014). Translanguaging pedagogy, in turn, is the translation of translanguaging theory into practice and describes a range of classroom engagements that value and encourage students' leveraging of their linguistic and semiotic repertoire (Celic & Seltzer, 2013). Different from many other professional development opportunities, participants in the CUNY-NYSIEB project were not expected to faithfully implement a program or set of activities, but to rather engage in the development and generation of practices to match the unique needs of their students. The researchers in this project placed an emphasis on educators and leaders generating innovative knowledge and practices to fit their local needs. For this, a range of school staff including administration and teachers were key agents in shaping and implementing changes in local bilingual education policies and practices. We now turn to an example of how the CUNY NYSIEB project influenced teachers' stances and practices with emergent bilinguals. We use pseudonyms to identify all teachers and schools.

Ella, an English as a New Language (ENL) teacher who worked with CUNY-NYSIEB, drew from translanguaging theory to innovate her reading assessment practices at the Willow School, a K-5 elementary school in a suburb of New York City. The Willow School (pseudonym) had experienced a steady increase in the number of Spanish speaking emergent bilinguals at the school. Schools participating in the CUNY-NYSIEB project were required to form an Emergent Bilingual Leadership Team (EBLT). The purpose of the EBLT was to study and formulate goals related to the emergent bilingual students at the school. Ella was part of this team and played an important role in both voicing the needs of the emergent bilingual students as well as developing new practices that impacted how emergent bilinguals were educated at the school. For Ella, the CUNY-NYSIEB project at the school shifted her role from a teacher working with emergent bilinguals on the fringes to a central player in leading fellow teachers to recognize the importance of home language for emergent bilinguals. In an interview

with the Willow School's EBLT, Ella said that participating in CUNY-NYSIEB's professional development about translanguaging and translanguaging pedagogy,

> opened up a dialogue [at the school]. As we continue to talk about it [translanguaging pedagogy], people are becoming more comfortable so that we are trying to bring in other languages. As we think about the practicalities, it's getting better. We are moving towards a philosophy shift" (Personal communication, June 10, 2015).

This philosophy shift that Ella expressed was grounded in a holistic understanding of multilingual students. Translanguaging as a lens encouraged teachers to view their students' language practices as valid and essential to their learning. Ella participated in a year-long research project alongside Laura in which they studied how reading assessments could be adapted to capture emergent bilinguals' reading abilities. As a result, Ella began to create spaces for translanguaging within reading assessments -- a radical idea, since the realm of state assessment remains steadfastly monolingual in English. In a reflective memo about her inquiry on reading assessments, Ella wrote,

> Since the purpose of the comprehension section of the assessment is to determine how well a student understands what she read, we can give students explicit permission to translanguage during the retell. We can translanguage with students when we ask questions and tell them they can translanguage when they respond. By doing this, we focus on students' reading comprehension, not their developing language abilities in English (June 19, 2017).

Ella's innovations in her reading assessments were framed by a commitment to understanding students as people with valid language practices. Incorporating opportunities for translanguaging is possible when teachers view students' entire linguistic repertoire as dynamic, valid, and essential to learning. As García advocates, teachers must also *act* on the information that they have about children and bilingualism. Ella presented the ideas about opening up spaces for translanguaging within reading assessment to the rest of the Willow School staff and thus moved from action with her own students to advocacy across the school. She wrote in her reflective memo the following:

> I believe we can assess students from a strengths-based perspective, valuing their emerging bilingualism, instead of using a deficit perspective where we only consider what they don't know and can't yet do. A one size fits all practice for assessing reading does not create a level playing field for emergent bilingual students. Our building should examine current assessment practices, especially for entering and emerging [levels of English language proficiency] students, and encourage staff to make adaptations inclusive of students' bilingualism. I will discuss these ideas with my colleagues and administration, and jointly decide on next steps at the building level for future practice. June 19, 2017

The story of Ella's innovations, while her own, was deeply influenced by the type of pushing for educational change that Ofelia García tirelessly worked for during her entire professional career, and in particular through the CUNY-NYSIEB project. It is reflective of the type of change in stance that occurred from being part of the CUNY-NYSIEB project (García, Ibarra-Johnson & Seltzer, 2017). As a result of Ella's work with

her emergent bilinguals, she worked with other school faculty at the school to bring these ideas into their own practices (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018). For García, the struggle for improvement in the education of emergent bilinguals was always and necessarily connected to the struggle for teachers to understand their students holistically and to generate flexible strategies to meet their needs.

Beyond Bilingualism: Centering Diverse Meaning-making Practices

A core part of the innovation inspired by Ofelia García's work has originated with teachers, as they make space for practices that consider their students' dynamic languaging. At the same time, García herself is always pushing her own work to new geographical, social, and intellectual spaces. One strand of her scholarship has considered how translanguaging relates to multimodal meaning-making and communication through digital technologies, especially in multilingual classrooms. Collaborating with Lesley Bartlett and JoAnne Kliefgen in 2007, García posited the pluriliteracies approach to unite research in the field of multiliteracies -- at that point, much of it focused on learning with and through multimodal technologies -- with growing understandings of bilingual language and literacy development and plurilingualism (García, Bartlett. & Kleifgen, 2007). They predicted that new pedagogies for literacy practices would emerge out of "the linguistically integrated space of the classroom, coupled with the possibilities afforded to all new languages by new technologies" in order to "increase the potential for communication, knowledge and understandings among all participants" (p. 218).

Along with her students and colleagues, she has stewarded these ideas, theorizing their development over time, and documenting trends in pluriliteracies as they have taken shape. In the new edition of *Educating Emergent Bilinguals*, her book with Kleifgen first published in 2010, a chapter is dedicated to language and technology in which they discuss the affordances of technology in language teaching and learning with emergent bilinguals. They set out a theoretical framework that posits an expansive definition of "languaging" which goes beyond how people use language features (like lexicon, syntax, and morphology) to include "those that they embody (e.g., their gestures, their posture), as well as those outside of themselves, which through use become part of their bodily memory (e.g. computer technology)" (2018, p. 93). Including these kinds of languaging in their theoretical framework helps them amplify and sensitize the lenses through which educators and researchers view student meaning-making practices. They argue: "The fact that technology has transformed the ways in which we use multiple modes to communicate and learn means that students' full-semiotic repertoire has to be taken into account in teaching and learning" (2018, p. 93). As a former and current student of Ofelia García, we have benefited from her encouragement to explore how different modalities and literacies that make up part of students' creative remixing pushes the boundaries of what is considered language and expression and how teachers can both acknowledge and incorporate these into their teaching practices.

This more expansive view on translanguaging gave us the theoretical tools needed to view seemingly common, everyday practices of students and teachers with technology in classrooms in new lights. As we worked with a CUNY-NYSIEB middle

school partner-teacher to provide spaces for translanguaging in his classroom, we found that a newcomer student from China student was engaging in meaning-making through use of Google Translate. We brought that aspect of his learning process to the fore, and collaborated with García in a case study of a teacher and student as they used machine translation software as part of translanguaging practices (Vogel, Ascenzi-Moreno, & García, 2018). Through observations of the student at work, analysis of his classwork, and an interview with the middle school student, we found out that the student was engaged in biliteracy instances (Hornberger, 2003) that were only possible through his creative and agentive use of machine translation software. He was involved in tinkering with machine translation software to produce, using his own evaluative skills of English, translations from Chinese to English.

In an interview, the student conveyed that he experimented with placing texts of differing lengths into Google Translate and then evaluated the quality of the translations based on the amount of text that was inputted into the software. He used his evaluative skills to measure each text produced by Google Translate and to tweak them according to his knowledge of English, explaining "it will have more nonsense when connecting more sentences, but it's better to translate the word only" (Vogel, Ascenzi-Moreno, & García, 2018, p. 101, translated from Mandarin). The student's engagements with machine translation were key languaging practices -- he used the software in ways that supported and furthered his development as a writer. Through our close study of this student's use of machine translation software, we advocated for a broader working definition of translanguaging that incorporates people's semiotic repertoire in addition to their linguistic resources (Vogel, Ascenzi-Moreno, & García, 2018).

We have also drawn heavily from Ofelia García's body of work in multimodal languaging (e.g. García, Bartlett. & Kleifgen, 2007; García & Kleifgen, 2018) as we currently posit new approaches to the teaching and learning of computer science. Along with professors Christopher Hoadley and Kate Menken, and teachers from three public bilingual middle schools, we developed a National Science Foundation-funded research-practice partnership called Participating in Literacies and Computer Science (PiLaCS). Translanguaging theory and pedagogy are core tenets of this project, helping us conceive of the relationship between computer programming, computer science, and language, in ways that enable us to generate new kinds of computer science education pedagogies.

Casting a translanguaging lens onto computing education has helped us recognize the range of human meaning-making and communication practices involved in computing activities like working collaboratively to plan new digital projects, programming computers, troubleshooting bugs, and presenting new work. Translanguaging attunes us to additionally notice the dynamic ways that emergent bilingual students use and learn new computing concepts with and through language. Translanguaging lenses from Ofelia García's work, described previously, have supported us in co-designing PILaCS learning environments in ways that highlight social meaning-making in computing and leverage students' diverse languaging practices.

Conclusion

The narratives of educational innovation presented in this essay attest to the idea that although we, as educators, have our own stories and trajectories, they have been enabled and enhanced by Ofelia García's advocacy and vision for the idea that people and their diverse languaging practices should be at the heart of teaching and learning. Through this lens, García's push for educators to see students through their language practices has reframed and extended our understanding of how multilingual students learn. She has also reasserted the importance of educators' work as steeped in inquiry and advocacy as we strive towards educational innovation and equity for multilingual children.

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End Note

[i] As used in this article, agency refers to the ability to be actors in our educational contexts, and not passive objects to be acted on by policy.