



A publication of the
New York State Association
for Bilingual Education

Journal of Multilingual Education Research

Volume 9 *The Power of Voice: Contributions of
Ofelia García to Language Education*


Article 14

2019

Critical Research with an Eye on Monday Morning: La Investigación Comprometida de Ofelia García

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Recommended Citation

Valdés, Guadalupe (2019) "Critical Research with an Eye on Monday Morning: La Investigación Comprometida de Ofelia García," *Journal of Multilingual Education Research*: Vol. 9 , Article 14. Available at: <https://research.library.fordham.edu/jmer/vol9/iss1/14>

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Critical Research with an Eye on Monday Morning: La Investigación Comprometida de Ofelia García

Cover Page Footnote

Guadalupe Valdés, PhD, serves as Member of College Bound national advisory board at GreatSchools, Inc. Dr. Valdés is the Bonnie Katz Tenenbaum Professor of Education at Stanford University and specializes in language pedagogy and applied linguistics, focusing on the English-Spanish bilingualism of U.S. Latinos. Her research on Latino students and families has led to five books and more than 70 articles. She serves on the editorial boards of several journals including *Review of Educational Research*, *The Modern Language Journal*, and *Hispanic Journal of the Behavioral Sciences*. She holds a BA from the University of West Florida and an MA and PhD from Florida State University.

Erratum

Correction to footer

Critical Research with an Eye on Monday Morning: La Investigación Comprometida de Ofelia García

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Guadalupe Valdés, in this essay, reflects on the “engaged research” of Ofelia García, which has profoundly influenced the field of bilingual education.

Keywords: bilingual education, critical research, Ofelia García, translanguaging,

I am delighted to have been invited to submit an essay for this important volume honoring the work of Ofelia García. I am an ardent fan of Ofelia García, an enthusiastic reader and indebted user of her work, and an admirer of her unwavering commitment to social justice. She is quite possibly the researcher who has most contributed to our knowledge about the educational challenges faced by emergent bilingual children around the world. Indeed, the very term *emergent bilingual* was proposed by García, Kleifgen, & Falchi (2007) and García (2009b) as an alternative to commonly used deficit labels such as limited English proficient (LEP) and English language learners (ELLS). She argued that both of those labels and others like them ignore the bilingualism that “can and must—develop through schooling in the United States” (García, 2009b, p. 322). Her focus on bilingualism and her insistence on its value in the lives of minoritized youngsters all over the world is both a central and a driving theme in her research, her writing, and her work with scholars, teachers, and students.

I first met Ofelia García in the early eighties at the *Symposium for Spanish and Portuguese Bilingualism* held in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. The yearly symposium (established by the late Juan C. Zamora, a professor of Spanish linguistics at UMass, Amherst) brought together scholars focusing on the study of bilingualism from a variety of perspectives. I remember being impressed with a young scholar who could so clearly examine what bilingual education in Miami ethnic schools could and could not tell us about the education of non-elite children. Listening to her talk, I discovered that we had much in common. Spanish and its place in the world mattered to both of us, and we were both influenced by the work of Joshua Fishman and by the, then, current work in the sociolinguistic study of bilingualism.

In the years that followed, I drew from García’s work on Spanish in the United States, on bilingualism and multilingualism, and on bilingual education. Our paths crossed occasionally at various conferences and our articles were often published in the same volumes (e.g., in the following volumes: C. Faltis & P. Wolfe (Eds.), *So much to say:*

Adolescents, bilingualism, and ESL in the secondary school (García, 1999); M. C. Colombi & F. Alarcón (Eds.), *La enseñanza del español a hispanohablantes: Praxis y teoría* (García & Otheguy, 1997), and H. Byrnes (Ed.), *Languages for a multicultural world in transition: 1993 Northeast Conference Reports* (García, 1992). From Fishman, who spent winter quarters at Stanford during many years, I heard a lot about Ofelia García. He praised her often and, at times, made me aware of work they were involved in together. I valued such recommendations immensely.

One such example of their collaborative work is the volume titled *The Multilingual Apple: Languages in New York City* (García & Fishman, 1997). For many years I assigned her article from that volume “New York’s multilingualism: World languages and their role in a U.S. city” in my yearly seminar on bilingualism at Stanford. The article documents, describes, and analyzes New York’s multilingualism arguing that it deserves its rightful title as the most multilingual city in the world. For my students, it has served as a rich example of the ways in which historical evidence, census data, and anecdotes can be used in scholarly research on the presence and use of non-societal languages in cities across the world. In my view, the article remains a very discerning example of fine-grained sociolinguistic research. Specifically, it provides important data about language policies over time in large urban areas such as New York and examines businesses, government institutions, and schools. Today, more than 20 years after it was published, the article offers answers to questions that we are currently asking as a society about the place of native and foreign-born Americans in our society. Ofelia García concludes the article (García, 1997, p. 44) by saying:

More than any other nation in the world, the United States has the world and its languages within its territory. The potential for bilingual and multilingual Americans is in our midst. To activate this potential, we would need to understand that English monolingualism can no longer be the sole holder of our economic and social stability. We would need to trust the LOTEs of our bilingual citizens, and to understand that LOTEs can be valuable resources to negotiate our national and international welfare and to protect our interests.

In the 1990s and 2000’s, García’s scholarly voice provided important examples for my students of ways that *investigadoras comprometidas* (the feminine is deliberate here) [engaged female investigators] can contribute to both theory and practice by engaging in critical scholarship and in what some (e.g., Grace, 2002) would term humane scholarship and inquiry. A cursory look at her CV makes clear that even the titles of her articles were provocative, for example, “From Goya portraits to Goya beans: Elite traditions and popular streams in U.S. Spanish language policy” (García, 1993), and “Que todo el pluralismo es sueño, y los sueños, vida son: Ethnolinguistic dreams and reality: A response to John Edwards” (García, 1994), and “Livin’ and teachin’ la lengua loca: Glocalizing U.S. Spanish ideologies and practices” (García, 2009c).

The themes on which García’s writing has focused include: New York City and its students and teachers, bilingualism/multilingualism in the world, and the education of disadvantaged, minoritized populations. Over the years, my students and I read her work on bilingual education, the teaching of Spanish in the United States, the

preparation of teachers, and the labeling of minoritized learners of the societal language. We learned much from her writings on language and identity, language and ethnicity, and toward the end of the 2000's about *translanguaging*, the topic for which she is currently most well-known. In the last ten years, moreover, we have benefited greatly from her work as the editor of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* and as a first editor of numerous edited volumes on key issues. The volumes have provided us with a body of work that made legitimate the work of young scholars (some of whom were her own students) who strongly and courageously are now interrogating the racialization of language.

What is especially outstanding about García's work is her tireless commitment to working through important ideas that have the potential of changing educational practice in fundamental ways. As I have pointed out in the title of this essay, she has her eye on *Monday morning*, that is, she is deeply concerned about teaching and learning in classroom settings. Her work with CUNY-NYSIEB on the Translanguaging Guides is one example. Another is her recent volume *The Translanguaging Classroom: Leveraging Student Bilingualism for Learning* (García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2016) for which I wrote the forward. In that forward, I pointed out that in the case of teacher preparation, theoretical and research articles may do little to help teachers change what they do in their classrooms. While teachers may read about new perspectives and transformative practices, the translation of theory to pedagogy is a difficult one. Teachers cannot imagine what they have not seen. They cannot change their practice unless they have a solid understanding of the alternatives. They may agree that what we have done to date has not been effective, but moving from that conclusion to a clear understanding of what to do and how to do it requires detailed descriptions of steps to take as well as models of actual practice accompanied by commentaries relating particular pedagogies to the broader beliefs about children's abilities, curricular demands, policy expectations, and assessment challenges.

The book provides precisely this important link between new theoretical perspectives on bilingualism and actual classroom practice. I have predicted, moreover, that, because of this book, the ways in which both researchers and educators view the use and role of language in the education of all children, and especially minoritized children, will change dramatically as the ideas and practices presented are discussed, debated, and implemented. I refer to the book as both ground-breaking and daring because the conceptualizations of language that underlie the pedagogical practices presented in the book draw from García's work on translanguaging, and they are both new and unprecedented for many educators. Moreover, views and perspectives on linguistic multicompetence that support the use of translanguaging in classrooms directly challenge established orthodoxies about bilingualism, bilingual children, and the use of two languages in education. Quite simply, Ofelia García with her work on translanguaging, has revolutionized the ways that language and language instruction is now being talked about around the world. Importantly, she continues to revise, redefine, and rethink fundamental issues that surround the practice and theory of translanguaging and to engage in challenging and important conversations and debates about the ideologies that are uniquely present in this very important work.

As a consumer of García's writings and publications, I have profited much from her work and from her thinking. I have also been fortunate in the last several years to interact with her frequently as a board member of two organizations on which we both have served. In those two contexts, I have seen, not only Ofelia García the scholar and advocate about whom I already knew a great deal, but also Ofelia García the warm human being whose quiet power can influence the most resistant of individuals. A smile and a hug from her can move mountains, but when they do not, when deeply ingrained ideologies prevent others from engaging sincerely with her theoretical and pedagogical vision, she stands her ground. *Sabe quien es y sabe lo que sabe*. [She knows who she is and what she knows.] Her integrity and her commitment to equity and excellence and to the future of multilingual youngsters around the world is unassailable.

In 2017, I had the pleasure of chairing the committee that selected the recipient of the lifetime achievement award for the Bilingual Education SIG for AERA. In introducing García as the recipient of the award, I pointed out that she has written 24 books (authored or edited) and over 162 articles or book chapters. Her book *Bilingual Education in the 21st century: A global perspective* (García, 2009a) is a key contribution to our knowledge about bilingual education and has had a huge impact on a new generation of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners world-wide. I also pointed out her central role in pushing the profession to rethink *language*. As Li Wei pointed out in his Keynote presentation at AAAL in 2017, this rethinking has the potential of focusing attention on the "entirety of the learner's linguistic repertoire, rather than knowledge of specific structures of specific languages separately" (Li Wei, 2017). García, in numerous keynote talks, articles, and now books, makes the case for replacing monoglossic language ideologies with heteroglossic language ideologies that treat bi/multilingualism as the norm. Most notably she argues for moving away from the strict separation of language toward embracing translanguaging as a pedagogical tool that both affirms and builds on the fluid language practices that characterize bi/multilingual communities.

I feel confident that as she moves on to life's third act, we will continue to learn much from her and from her students whom she has prepared well to follow in her footsteps. In these brief comments, I have wanted to communicate that in my contact with Ofelia García and her scholarship, both from afar and at a closer distance, I have felt a deep sense of gratitude for what she has done for the profession, for teachers, and for children. I also feel great pride, *un orgullo profundo de que se reconozca y se valore mundialmente a una Latina estadounidense* [a profound pride, that around the world a Latina from the United States, is recognized and valued] who is both a distinguished scholar and a champion of underserved children, a dedicated teacher and mentor, and to me personally, an exceptional colleague and friend.

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