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Silencing Students' Voices in an Era of Academic Language

Cover Page Footnote

Aida A. Nevárez-La Torre, EdD, is the Senior Editor of the Journal of Multilingual Education Research (JMER) and an associate professor at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education. For several years she worked as an ESL and bilingual education teacher in Puerto Rico and the United States as well as a bilingual reading clinician in the United States. She authored the first Professional Standards for Bilingual Educators for the New York Association for Bilingual Education (2015/2018). Her current scholarship focuses on multilingual literacy education, metalinguistic awareness, and the intersection of language and content development in multilingual classrooms.

Editorial

Silencing Students' Voices in an Era of Academic Language

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Keywords: academic language, bilingual education, linguism, linguistic marginalization, silencing of students

In one of my professional development sessions on academic language to teachers who work in multilingual public schools, I encountered the following response:

- + **PD facilitator:** *The academic language function serves to identify how students learn in content lessons and how they can use language to learn. Thus, it is important to listen to what students say during lessons.*
- + **Ms. L:** *My 5th graders do not know how to talk. I rather they just listen to me.*

As the presentation continued, my thoughts focused on what I heard the teacher say. To me the phrase *My 5th graders do not know how to talk*, reflected a teacher's theory of practice that devalued not only students' ways of talking but students' ways of thinking. It supported a *silencing* of students voices that countered what we know about the role of language in content learning, in building the academic repertoire of students, and in molding students self-concept as thinkers and knowledgeable learners (Fine, 1987; Solorza, 2019).

Language's role in learning has been underscored in the scholarly literature in recent years. For instance, education in the 21st century calls for the negotiation of multiple forms of information in contemporary societies which requires an enhancement of communication skills (Acedo & Hughes, 2014). Moreover, it is argued that language, both oral and in writing, is central to learning (Lahey, 2017) in an increasingly globalized and digitalized world (de Oliveira & Smith, 2019). Some scholars also explain that the Common Core State Standards focus on developing academic language across core content areas to negotiate the requirements for deeper comprehension of text that are of increasing complexity (Fu et al., 2019; Lesaux & Harris, 2015; O'Hara et al., 2012).

Cognitivism and constructivism theoretical perspectives stress talking and dialogue as key to learning (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2019). They contend that interactions between teachers and learners and among student peers where they

provide one another feedback as well as receive it, promote brain development, enhance metacognitive skills, and offer an increase of opportunities to strengthen learners' self-concept and stimulate their socio-emotional maturity.

Learning in contemporary classrooms should build all students capacities to communicate academic knowledge and understanding in English as well as in students' full range of their linguistic repertoire (García et al., 2017; Jacobson, 2010; Lahey, 2017). As Solorza (2019) argued,

How we structure the use of language while teaching content in classrooms determines a student's language output. Although such a declaration seems obvious, it highlights the power we hold as teachers, the power to deliberately *invite* or *silence* features from our students' linguistic repertoire as they interact with curricular content (p. 99).

Unfortunately, the power that Ms. L. exerted in judging her multicultural and multilingual students' language that limits their opportunities to think and share their thoughts in her classroom, is not an isolated observation. This form of power, where what is voiced in classrooms is at the expense of the silence of some students, is what Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson (1989) denoted as *linguism*, that is the unequal division of power and resources on the basis of language. Also relevant is the construct of *linguistic marginalization* which has been documented as a form of educational oppression (Flores, 2019), that denotes dynamics in multilingual classrooms which promote silencing over valuing students voicing their knowledge. Others connect these constructs to language oppression as a tool to erase minoritized languages from society within and outside the United States (Hartman, 2003; Roche, 2019).

Using a raciolinguistic theoretical lens (Flores & Rosa, 2015) the silencing of students across different content lessons which promotes a loss of learning (Fu et al., 2019) in multilingual classrooms must be contested. The research literature offers some suggestions about what teachers could do to break the silencing of students in learning content through language. For instance, Anstrom's et al. (2010) research review, showed that students need practice using language that speaks from a less personal to a more public perspective. Teachers should involve students in discussions concerning the identification and uses of academic English in various genres and in recognizing the value of using different *Englishes* to communicate knowledge (Canagarajah, 2013).

Specifically, educators should acquire linguistic knowledge, understand the role of language in learning academic knowledge and language, and develop knowledge in designing instruction that validates the rich and diverse linguistic repertoire of students while augmenting their fluency in acquiring the academic register (Dutro & Moran, 2003; Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Halliday, 1993). Thus, not surprisingly, international researchers as well from the United States call for innovation in the pre-service and in-service of all teachers which should add content and practical experiences in how language supports learning of content. For instance, researchers in Australia have advocated for education and professional development of teachers that focus on Knowledge About Language (KAL) across different content areas (Gleeson & Davidson, 2018). Focusing on the preparation of educators in this nation, Bailey et al. (2007)

argued that teachers need to learn how to *think linguistically*, in order to appreciate the many ways that teaching and learning are embedded in language use. Lindahl & Watkins (2015) proposed the development of *teachers' language awareness*, that is, the enactment of a lens that teachers may use to filter the design of instruction where language is both the medium and the object of instruction. In other words, teachers should be clear about the role of language in creating meaning as it is used to teach content (Fillmore & Snow, 2000).

To counter the oppressive silencing of students voicing of their knowledge several researchers offer instructional strategies for teachers *to listen* (Canagarajah, 2013; de Oliveira & Smith, 2019; Fu et al., 2019; García, 2009; Solorza, 2019). In multilingual classrooms voicing of knowledge could happen in a variety of ways allowing for the rich linguistic repertoires of students. For example, monolingual English speakers as well as emergent bilinguals, may communicate their knowledge or make inquiries using conversational structures in their home languages. When students share ideas about concepts, they may use a combination of conversational and academic language, orally or in writing. Of course, for emergent bilinguals their use of academic language may also happen in any single or combination of the named languages (Otheguy et al., 2015) they know and use to communicate. Thus, to reframe language use to learn content in multilingual classrooms equitably, educators, both teachers and administrators, must assume a language-as-a-resource ideology, that views language as a human right and as an asset to the learning process (Daly & Sharma, 2018; de Jong, 2011; Goldenberg, 2008; Hammer et al., 2020; Planas & Setati-Phakeng, 2014; Ruíz, 1984).

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