

Invited Commentary

Combatting Marginalized Spaces in Education through Language Architecture

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Schools have always been a primary site where the language practices of language-minoritized students who come from homes where non-standardized varieties of English and languages other than English are spoken have been marginalized. When we consider this history, discussions of “Marginalized Spaces in Education” may seem redundant. After all, a primary function of US schools has always been to fix the so-called linguistic deficiencies of these students and the education of these students has been marginalizing by design. This marginalization has come in many forms ranging from labeling the home language practices of language-minoritized students as incorrect or not appropriate for the classroom to the complete segregation of these students into remedial classrooms. Yet, while in some ways it may be redundant to discuss marginalized spaces in education, it is essential to continue to name the ways that schools have historically and continue to marginalize the language practices of these students. This is because a failure to do so may make us complacent in accepting the marginalizing of language-minoritized students as inevitable or even necessary. It may also distort our perception of the progress schools have made in creating more empowering spaces for language-minoritized students.

On one level, US schools have indeed made progress in making schools more hospitable to language-minoritized students. No longer is it acceptable for teachers to engage in corporal punishment in response to students speaking languages other than English. There are now laws that mandate that districts and schools provide language services to students who are in the process of learning English. Bilingual education programs exist in many states. In some circles, bilingual education is also being expanded to include children from monolingual English-speaking homes with the idea that bilingualism should be a goal for all children. This progress was made possible by the tireless activism of language-minoritized communities and their allies and has certainly improved the education of language-minoritized students.

Yet, it is one thing to make schools more hospitable for language-minoritized students and another thing to make schools sites of empowerment for these students. This second task has been hampered by the fact that the deficit framework that undergirds the approach that US schools take to educating language-minoritized students has remained essentially the same. Historically this deficit framing was overt, with the language practices of language-minoritized children seen as a barrier to learning that needed to be systematically eradicated. The most extreme example of such systematic eradication was the government-sponsored campaign

to send indigenous children to boarding schools where they were forbidden from using indigenous languages with one another. In our contemporary context this deficit framing has become more covert with schools framing the language-practices of these students as appropriate for outside of school but not appropriate for academic tasks that they are expected to complete in school. Though certainly friendlier in its approach, the language policing function of schools remains intact.

This friendly language policing provides the foundation of most programs designed to meet the needs of language-minoritized children. It can be found in English-Only policies of many ESL programs, in the move toward English-Only that informs transitional bilingual education programs, and the strict separation of languages that lie at the core of dual language bilingual education programs. It can even be found in language intervention programs for monolingual English speakers who come from homes where non-standardized varieties of English are spoken. All of these programs in their own way seek to monitor and control the language practices of language-minoritized students.

What might it look like to develop programs and pedagogies for language-minoritized students that resist this language policing? In such a classroom the role of the teacher would no longer be to control students' language practices. Instead, their role would be to support these students in language exploration. This language exploration would entail engaging students in metalinguistic conversations that support students in reflecting on the different ways that they currently use language to discuss particular topics as well as in exploring other ways that language is used to explore these topics. Instead of analyzing class texts for their correctness teachers would push students to critically analyze the affordances made possible by the language choices of particular texts. They would interrogate with students the rhetorical choices of different authors and encourage students to experiment with similar rhetorical styles in their own writing.

Perhaps a spatial metaphor of language would help us envision the ultimate objective of such a classroom. In this classroom the teacher would support students in becoming language architects. An architect takes what they know about general design principles in order to create their own unique designs. In a similar vein, a language architect takes what they know about general principles of language use in order to create their own unique voice in both their speaking and writing. This shift in objective may seem small but it has radical implications. Specifically, it moves away from efforts to police the language practices of language-minoritized students in favor of a more collaborative engagement in language exploration that brings attention to the diversity of ways that one can explore a particular topic and the rhetorical and political effects of each. The ultimate objective is no longer for students to follow rules imposed by the teacher but rather for students to design language in ways that meet their purposes and reflect their voices.

I have presented the framework of language architecture in many different contexts. The first question that I often receive is from somebody who is concerned about the political implications of what I am proposing. Even as they acknowledge the power relations that I am pointing to they argue that pragmatically there is no choice but for teachers to be friendly language police in order to teach language-minoritized students the "codes of power." As somebody who used to make this exact argument I completely understand where it is coming from. Aware of the barriers that language-minoritized students will confront it is understandable that

somebody would want to provide them with as many tools as possible to defend themselves. At the same time I have become increasingly dissatisfied with relying on marginalizing the language practices of language-minoritized students in the name of challenging their marginalization.

Language policing traps language-minoritized students in the position of having to reject their home language practices as inferior to the language practices of schooling. Language-minoritized students who are unable or unwilling to conform to these expectations are placed in the solitary confinement of remediation programs thereby continuing the cycle of the miseducation of communities of color. In contrast, language exploration supports language-minoritized students in becoming language architects who are able to apply the knowledge that they gained through their critical inquiry to design language in their own terms and for their own purposes. Supporting language-minoritized students in becoming language architects would be an important first step in combatting marginalizing spaces that continue to persist in US classrooms.

Dr. Flores is an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania. His research involves the study of the historical and contemporary instantiations of raciolinguistic ideologies, where language and race are co-constructed in ways that marginalize racialized communities.

Additional Resources

The Educational Linguist

<https://educationallinguist.wordpress.com/>

On this blog I offer monthly thoughts on language education. This includes topics ranging from broad political and economic discussions to the nature of everyday classroom interaction.

CUNY-New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals

www.cuny-nysieb.org

This website is for a New York State Education funded project led by Ricardo Otheguy, Ofelia García, and Kate Menken at the CUNY Graduate Center. It includes a range of resources for teachers and administrators interested in further developing pedagogical approaches that position bilingualism as a resource.

Language and Equity

<http://languageandequity.org/>

This is the blog of Luis Poza, a professor at the University of Colorado-Denver, who has a feature article in this issue. It includes a useful unpacking of dominant framings of the concept of academic language and offers an alternative more nuanced perspective.

Citizen Sociolinguistics

<https://citizensociolinguistics.com/>

This is the blog of Betsy Rymes, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. It explores a range of topics related to the complexities of social interactions that offer a useful starting point for metalinguistic conversations and language architecture.