Multilingual Students’ Language Learning in U.S. Classrooms

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Multilingual Students’ Language Learning in U.S. Classrooms

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Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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May 2023
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Key Words

Critical Pedagogy: an outlook on education that is meant to encourage students to question and criticize the power structure around them.

English Language Learner (Els): typically, a student whose first language is not English, therefore, they are unable to communicate and understand English effectively until they learn it.

Multicultural: refers to someone or something that has various cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities involved.

Language Acquisition: the way that humans obtain the ability to interpret, understand, and use language in their everyday lives to communicate with words, sentences, and stories.
Abstract

Over time, the United States (sometimes referred to as America) education system has shown inequality within its teaching methods, particularly in English classrooms from grades K-12. Despite the increase in diversity and English language learners in public schools, multicultural students have personally endured various forms of oppression in classrooms. Within this research, there will be an examination of the classroom setting from people who experienced their education in both their birth country, which happens to be Brazil in this particular research, as well as the United States. There is also additional research done from library databases, online sources, and readings by scholars who have argued for critical pedagogy. These firsthand experiences will create an enhanced understanding of the characteristics of the United States educational system within our K-12 English classrooms. Although everyone’s circumstances and environments may be different, prejudice and ignorance towards other cultures and languages are quite similar and very present throughout this education system. With this changing demographic of students, it is important to be aware of our diverse classrooms and who we are teaching to prepare our children to think critically in a complex world. In an attempt to find ways to create an improved and more inclusive learning environment for everyone, this examination will be focused on the following questions: how language acquisition impacts learning, how we learn what we learn, and what can be changed in the classroom.
Introduction

In the United States of America, a country where there is no official language, those who are bilingual or multilingual deal with being forced to learn English with little to no sympathy for the difficulties this type of learning can be. These people are the product of oppression in a country where pedagogy is aimed towards a specific type of person, which happens to be based on a white, heterosexual patriarchal system. In institutions such as schools, this specific group has the ability to control which beliefs, ideologies, values, and practices to use; therefore, the dominant culture persists and leads the subordinate cultures to an oppressive state. In the United States K-12 English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms specifically, multicultural students experience themes of oppression due to being English language learners (ELLs) rather than being native English speakers. This research will provide first hand experiences from Brazilian and American (USA) educated people. The three Brazilian/American (USA) interviewees (participants A-C) have answered questions pertaining to the comparison of their learning experiences in both Brazil and the United States of America. From the series of questions asked, the differences of experience with both language learning and classroom environment, the effects teachers caused, and the possible changes and improvements wished upon the American (USA) education system become clearer. Although students are what makes a classroom and are the cause of the education system existing, educators tend to not cater to the student's needs and issues, especially minorities such as those whose English is their second language. However, there are plenty of critical theories and ideologies that propose new, challenging, and thought-provoking ways to improve the USA’s education system. Scholars such as Paulo Freire, Antonia Darder, and Geneva Gay administer a significant and challenging point of view to the norms that are set in place in USA schools. These scholars challenge those in power, supply alternative
concepts and teaching styles, and inform their readers of the historic and current trends in the American (USA) education system, specifically aiming their attention towards language acquisition. This type of information provided from scholars, students with first-hand experience, and other sources can make people more aware about what is being taught in the classroom, and how the dominant culture has been making the subordinate culture learn. Also, there are suggestions for what we can change through the help of the educators and students working together. Due to the powerful nature of language and how it is essential to human development, cultural beliefs, practices, and more, it is especially important to how these pedagogical theories can be incorporated in the classroom. Since language has a significant impact to our learning, the complexity of language needs a safe space for monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual students in the United States English language learning classrooms.

How Language Acquisition Impacts Learning

Despite how complex language can be, especially with there being so many kinds, ranging from Chinese to German to Portuguese to sign language to English and more, it is quite critical and valuable to our lives. One of the ways in which students can observe, interpret, and understand language is through the education system. An education system has an obligation to prepare students for their future selves in the “real world.” In the USA, English is the predominant language of schooling, even though the USA has never adopted an official language. Without English, the ability to converse with impactful dialogue and communication will be more difficult in the “real world” of the U.S. and in many other countries where English has exerted its hegemony. Starting from kindergarten, English classrooms in the U.S. are supposed to provide students with the information that will allow them to be able to understand,
interpret, and communicate their ideas, beliefs, and themselves through the use of writing, reading, dialogue, and other forms of communication.

Language is much more than just a form of communication, but it is also a way for children to interact and understand concepts, themselves, and others on a deeper level. Language paves a way for “factual knowledge, social skills, moral development, or physical achievement” (Stephens). Without language, then there would be a lack of thoughts and ideas because language creates room for critical thinking skills due to its need for structure. As Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “Language cannot exist without thought and it cannot exist without a structure” (96). Besides language, another element of life and society that involves structure is culture, and culture needs language because humans need language. The connection between language and culture is quite significant and clear. They both are associated with how we interact with others, but culture is mostly based on traditions and family principles and then language helps us turn those aspects of our culture into behaviors. It is just as important to be aware of the ever-changing aspects of culture and language as it is important to learn about these parts of life. Both language and culture influence who we are, which makes it a significant factor in a classroom where students are developing physically and socially.

Since language and culture are significant, learning in a classroom setting where there is a diverse set of students in the most immigrated country is just as critical. According to Freire, the current state of education is suffering from narration sickness. This is when the teacher is the narrator, also known as the person in complete control of the classroom and leaves little to no room for students to have their voices heard. With this educational tactic, the teacher’s task is to “fill the students with the contents of [their] narration” (72) and then the students are expected to memorize the information given and to not question it. However, not all teachers have this
harmful mindset, and throughout time, it has been known that almost everyone has a positive experience with a teacher who left an impactful mark on their life. Without this positive impact of the teachers from many educational experiences, including my participant’s experiences, they would likely not be where they are today with the amount of success and knowledge they have. Although some of these participants turned out lucky with parts of their educational experience, not every multicultural student gets those types of opportunities. Additionally, when asking the participants about the kind of impact their teachers had on their learning experience with English, each participant only named one to two teachers in their whole educational experiences. Participant A’s and B’s teachers were from grades 4 and 6, whereas participant C’s teacher was from college but that is because they came to the states during their 20s. Some other stories of teacher experiences are shown throughout Teaching Writing through the Immigrant Story by Ostman, Tinberg, and Martinez. These stories prove that the persistent, dominant narrative leaves a negative view on immigrants by causing people to believe immigrants lack knowledge and the type of skills that would make them be seen as successful in the eyes of the dominant culture in USA’s society. These immigrant stories all have very similar experiences in the fact that Hispanic immigrants are labeled as “illegal,” people who have come to “take American jobs” and “to change [American] language and culture” (Ostman 47). This shows that the view on immigrants and others who are different from the dominant culture are viewed negatively and this is due to the fear of potential change towards the dominant culture no longer being in power. However, since critical thinking and care to different people and cultures are important to consider when it comes to comprehending and communicating with those around us, then the US’s education system should be changed accordingly. If these types of changes occur to the
curriculum standards, then these negative views on immigrants will eventually change for the better.

How We Learn What We Learn

Literacy is an essential practice that is used in everyday English classrooms. The purpose of teaching literacy is to provide students with the ability to communicate well, improve their capacity to analyze situations, and establish a deeper understanding of life in general. Reading and writing are just, if not more important than math, science, and other classes taught in typical public K-12 classrooms due to how it can also assist students with these other subjects and in life. However, not only does the way these educational aspects are learned differ between each student, but the way that reading and writing are taught shows how the U.S. education system aims their attention and care toward a privileged and often monolingual group of people. Therefore, the educational experience may lead to a divided classroom filled advantaged and disadvantaged students. Despite there being no national curriculum in the United States, school districts still have requirements, recommendations, and a standard curriculum to be met. In other words, common core standards differ with each state having a different curriculum based on the state’s governmental standards. All these standards vary depending on needs, location, environment, historical aspects, etc. For instance, students who live closer to the Mexican border will have more students who are either from Mexico or have ancestry from there, therefore, the historical aspects learned in those classrooms will differ from students in different areas of the states. We should be taught on the local histories, but it’s not always done. In a growing number of states if conservatives have their ways, no diversity would be taught at all. In fact, some school districts have banned teaching Mexican American history, such as the schools in Arizona, where “a judge has called the studies “biased, political, and emotionally charged” (Chen). While
aspects of reading and writing are taught throughout the K-12 experience with the practice of spelling, grammar, reading, communication, analyzation, writing, and standardized tests that review the students’ skills, most curricula are focused on the students from the dominant culture. In fact, the problems that Latinos/Hispanics face in the classrooms in the south is all too common and one of the issues is due to the “lack of instructors that are trained in bilingual education” (Ostman 53).

Despite being known as one of the countries with a better educational system, the United States of America can still learn a thing or two from other countries and the way they instruct their students. Also, the United States is known for having more immigrants than any other country, yet “children do not learn about their environment from the perspective of their own reality, but from the white wealthy view” (Darder 366). Although the USA is the most immigrated country, there are plenty of other countries where immigrants are part of the population such as Brazil. However, Brazil’s literacy rates compared to USA’s are better based off recent studies from Zauderer and Global Data. In fact, the literacy statistics in Brazil has reached 99.2 percent in 2021, whereas on average, U.S. adults are 79 percent literate. This means that more Brazilian citizens understand short, simple statements compared to Americans (USA). Additionally, Brazil is just as diverse with race and multilingualism as the USA is. In spite of these statistics, with some upgrades, slowly but surely the literacy rate in the USA can be better. The three interviewed participants in my study were from Brazil and moved to the United States during different parts of their lives, they all had interesting points to make about what they believe to be different in Brazilian education compared to American (USA). During my interview process, participants A and B both believe that the learning style in Brazil is a bit more advanced than American (USA) education. According to the participants and “Study in Brazil:
Language & Culture,” it is compulsory for Brazilian students to learn English and learning English is becoming more and more common. Younger Brazilians come to know and understand the basics of English, despite them not being fluent. Although English is learned among Brazilian students, it is not often spoken outside of the classroom. None the less, Brazil is becoming more and more bilingual, further catching up with the times and changes with the levels of diversity.

Another reason why my participants believe Brazil is a bit more advanced is due to the amount of reading materials and how there are reading sources from other countries, whereas “America acts like they’re the center of the world” (Participant A & B). In these participants experiences, they noticed that the American (USA) textbooks focused on the white patriarchic view rather than realizing and understanding that their classrooms are full of diverse students who need and want exposure to their and other cultures in their learning experience. On the contrary, Brazilian teaching methods include the teachers listening to their students wants and they have “multimedia materials and communication systems [where their] courses always include a wide range of social and cultural aspects” (BrazilLink).

Teachers are known to be influential in many aspects for a student’s life, especially involving their education and future goals, but some of the curriculum requirements can restrict how the teacher performs further impacting a student’s learning abilities, especially multilingual students. As mentioned earlier in this research, when asking the interviewed participants on the impact their teachers had on their learning experience, all three had at least one teacher they have encountered that positively affected their learning experience with English. For instance, participant B remembered at least two good teachers that used fun, creative methods to apply proper usages of language: one middle school teacher and the other was high school. These
creative methods included music and good, entertaining books, which helped keep the students, especially participant B intrigued. This is just an example of how many people have had an influential teacher in their life. Statistics prove that “88% of people say a teacher had a significant, positive impact on their life” (Tornio). Regardless of this fact, there are still some struggles for multilingual students. The lack of being able to see themselves in the enforced curriculum has been an issue historically and currently. Contrary to some popular beliefs, students learn better though connection more than just taking notes. It is important to recognize the prior knowledge of students. “Students learn by connecting new knowledge with knowledge and concepts that they already know” (“How Students Learn”). Therefore, multilingual students with distinct cultural backgrounds, traditions, beliefs, etc. can learn better being able to connect some of their cultural differences to the concepts being learned in a classroom and they can offer some of that knowledge to teachers and often students. Darder mentions that success should not be considered an individual responsibility, which is a view that the hierarchical structure in America (USA) has. Students, teachers, parents, and others are responsible for working together to create a more accessible and welcoming classroom.

**What We Can Change in The Classroom**

While the United States’ education system has been around for a long time, there is plenty of room for more changes and improvements. One of the most recent factors is the Common Core Standards, which took place around 2009 and was created to enhance the student learning experience and prepare students for their future college and career lives. This curriculum includes the use of certain textbooks, teaching materials and manuals, resources, and standardized tests. With the English Language Arts standards in particular, the standards to be met involve the student being able to write about the topics that they are reading. During this...
time, when the curriculum was changing and developing, so were the number of English language learners (Els) in the K-12 classrooms. In fact, from 2009-10- and 2014-15-time frame, there was an increase in English language learners “in more than half of the states” (“Our Nation's English Learners”). Since this time, ELs represent 10 percent of students in K-12 classrooms. Although most of these ELs consist of Hispanic and Latino heritage, there are around 400 different languages present in the United States public schools, ranging from German to Portuguese to Arabic to Chinese and many more (“Our Nation’s English Learners”). This leaves the question, what are the possible changes that can be made in the classroom for our diverse, multilingual students to be able to flourish just as well as native English speakers?

There are many approaches that a teacher can take in the classroom in order to connect with their students and to create a better learning environment for not only the student, but also the teacher. Scholars such as Paulo Freire highlight the importance of communication between the teachers and students. If teachers take on a more committed involvement early on and forward, then positive changes can take place. One of the ways for a teacher to practice this it by remembering what it was like when they were a student. Teachers need to learn from their students to connect with them on a deeper and more meaningful level. For a teacher to connect with their student in a more purposeful way, they should understand the value of communication and dialect by understanding cultural and linguistic differences. When interviewing multicultural, bilingual family members, I noticed some common traits between the two participants that arrived in the USA at an earlier age. For instance, they both attended Catholic and public schools at some points in their lives. Although these two types of schools were and still are distinct in their teaching habits and methods, there is a common practice, which is the
dedicated focus on math and science subjects. This attention on math and science has led both participants to believe that English language arts is undervalued in American (USA) schools.

Despite the focus on math and science subjects, participants A and B were not discouraged by the United States’ education system, but they still believe there are needed improvements and changes needed in K-12 English classes. When asked what improvements and changes they would like to see, their answers centered on the idea of teachers having a more dedicated attention towards writing and reading, such as reading aloud and in front of others so students can feel more comfortable with the language, using new, learned terms in a sentence, and practicing more writing. Changes like this can help students feel safer and not fear ridicule for not being able to understand and or speak as well as their English native speaking peers. Additionally, scholars such as Joe Kincheloe, who also uses Paulo Freire’s ideas and other scholars in their research, offers the concept of critical pedagogy, which concerns itself with “transforming oppressive relations of power in a variety of domains that lead to human oppression” (Kincheloe 45), also known as challenging the norm and modifying the curricula in a way that “is aware of many different perspectives” (Kincheloe 173). If this concept, along with “other diverse ways of seeing and making meaning” (Kincheloe 172), is used in schools, then students and teachers alike will benefit from the meaningful, significant, newfound knowledge and skills that they will gain.

Communication holds a lot of power and meaning, but not when that communication is only one sided, where the teacher is the only one allowed to communicate and the students are made to be quiet and compliant. Paulo Freire agrees when he states, “Only through communication can human life hold meaning” (Freire 77). Also, interactive communication allows room for critical thinking. Communication opens doors, opportunities of love, humility,
hope, and other kinds of positive aspects, therefore, making it necessary for a classroom setting. One of the main ways teachers can learn to communicate with their students is by learning about students’ preferences towards certain materials, activities, and resources. They can also learn about their student’s diverse backgrounds since many cultures offer various learning styles along with their distinct languages. This engagement with students helps teachers differentiate their lessons to accommodate the strengths of their students.

Rather than keeping a border between the English language and the multiple languages a student can speak, there can be a possibility of mixing these languages and learning abilities into the curricula. During my interview process with the Brazilian and American (USA) participants, both participant A and B learned English through the assistance of tv and media rather than an actual educational setting. Luckily, these two participants were young and between the ages of 1-5 years old when they came to the United States with their families, which made it easier for them to learn another language. However, participant C learned their English through the work force and environment, making it much harder in the beginning, especially since they moved to the US in their 20s. In combination with having bilingual and multilingual students rely on outside resources, they need to be provided with rich educational practices. Although participant A and B were both raised in a setting that had some Portuguese language speakers, English was the dominant language, and there even came to a point where one of my interviewed participants forgot how to speak their native language. Now that they are older, they have re-learned the language. This would have likely not happened if the school system supported their students linguistic and cultural differences. Despite there being some Portuguese speakers around the area, the language is not the exact same as Brazilian Portuguese. Also, generally, English language learners’ ability to learn other subjects are more impacted. Schools need to take on the
responsibility of hiring teachers with skill and training that makes the teacher more accepting to their diverse students and help make English more accessible.

Another way teachers can connect with their students’ diverse backgrounds and different learning styles is by offering updated textbooks that are not dominated by white European culture. While textbooks are a useful tool to teachers, they should include more representation and diversity in them. With the current state of the education system, teachers are and have been trying to create students that fit and adapt in the society and world that the oppressors created rather than give students more of a chance to be their true selves. This way of teaching is associated with the power dynamic in other aspects of USA’s lifestyle. This power is derived from the want for control over social structures and other parts that are an expression of the different habits, traditions, and practices from other cultures. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire mentions that this particular desire of control from the oppressors are due to their view of seeing the oppressed as things rather than as people. Due to this negative view, the oppressors “are fearful of changing the structure” (Freire 65) that they, their children, and their cultures benefit from. They do not want those that they believe to be less than to overpower them and to become the oppressed. There are many instances of this power shown through the US education system. One way it is present is the apparent lack of diversity and inclusion shown through the required textbooks for public school curriculum, further creating an excluded, unwelcoming environment for bilingual and multilingual students. This is because of the over representation of white authors, who create stories with more white characters and stories told from one perspective. Some evidence that proves this is “in the central text of the Core Knowledge curriculum that the NYE DOE recommends for Pre-K, 8 out of 10 stories are of European origin” (Hester). This is just one of the many examples that prove that the USA’s
curriculum and education system needs updating. According to scholars such as Darder, this connection between culture and power used in the classrooms needs to be challenged because of the harm it brings. If not, then students from the dominant culture (mainly consisting of European origin) will continually be placed at the top of the hierarchy, whereas those from the subordinate culture are placed at the bottom from just simply existing in social and material inferiority. Some of the results from this power-driven mentality and fear of diversity and change has led to the banning of diverse books. “There were at least 2,532 individual instances of book banning tracked from July 2021 to June 2022…the vast majority of these titles were written by or about LGBTQ people or people of color” (Alfonseca).

Textbooks are not the only issue as there are plenty of other ideas and concepts that play a role in. For instance, according to Freire, the banking concept of education benefits the oppressors’ interests. This concept essentially revolves around the idea that men and women are objects, and it is an attempt to control both the actions and thoughts of students. In this method, the teacher deposits knowledge and students are expected to learn by memorization. However, to challenge the banking concept, critical pedagogy can be offered instead in a way to change the basic structure of American (USA) education. One of the major tasks of this critical theory is to not only challenge the role schools play in student’s political, cultural, social lives but to also call out and reveal the reality of schools. This concept allows teachers to provide an environment where students are assisted in their learning and understanding and are no longer in an oppressive state of mind. For this to happen, students use their own voices to talk about their experiences and then they become more aware of their own thoughts, interpretations, and history. Some of the ways critical pedagogy can be practiced in the classroom is through the understanding of power dynamics, teachers practicing self-awareness of the type of control and
influence they have, all kinds of knowledge being open for critique and examination by the students and the teachers, and so on. It has been well-proven that students from the dominant culture and are raised in socially and economically achieving environments tend to score higher on the standardized exams that are enforced through the curriculum.

Conclusion

Although language is complex, it is a valuable characteristic that has been a part of our everyday lives since the beginning of time. The United States of America is known for many things, such as being the most immigrated country in the world and having one of the best education systems. These two factors help display USA as a place for multicultural, bilingual, diverse, and unique people to come to feel welcomed and find a successful education. However, despite these facts, America’s (USA) education system stays rooted with its old traditional values of viewing one culture as more dominant than the rest. Scholars such as Paulo Freire, Antonia Darder, and Geneva Gay, talk about the struggles the oppressed face throughout their lives, especially through their education. They then dig deeper into pedagogy and offer solutions to the problems faced in USA’s English classrooms. First-hand experiences are also considered from those who were born in Brazil, received some education there, then moved to the states and received further education. These experiences offer a reflection on the state of USA’s educational methods and offers renovation and revision, all in which are meant to strengthen the minds and hearts of students, which would then benefit the rest of society. Unfortunately, the current state of education in America (USA) forces multilingual students to work harder and smarter to get to their white counterparts’ higher positions. Due to these oppressive states that multilingual and or bilingual students have and continue to face, they lack the educational experience that should be implemented for all kinds of students. However, with the assistance of
self-aware teachers who enforce a better and improved curriculum that brings equal opportunities then all students will be able to flourish in many aspects and potentially increase America’s (USA) literary rates to reflect our good status on education compared to other countries in the process. Overall, this complex nature of language and culture can have a better space for students to be enlightened in USA’s English language learning classrooms.
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