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Labeling English Learners: Teachers' Perceptions and Implications

Lavern Byfield*

Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education and Human Services, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 625 Wham Drive, MC 4610, Carbondale, IL U.S.

Corresponding author: Lavern Byfield, E-mail: byfield2@siu.edu

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ABSTRACT

In the U. S., given the growing number of students who are speakers of languages other than English, this article brings attention to a need for a nuanced perspective on the definition of English learners. The study was designed to investigate teachers' perceptions of English learners and the implications for classroom instruction. Teachers classified English learners as Latinos and conflated race and ethnicity with language proficiency. Although Amish students were included on classroom demographic forms, race/ethnicity and language were confused in teachers' explanations of their accommodations for linguistically diverse students. In conflating language with race/ethnicity there are several implications for the Latina/o community and likewise for White bilingual communities with mostly deficit frames that are enacted in pedagogy for Latinos.

Key words: Teachers' Perceptions, English Learners, Labeling

INTRODUCTION

Language and literacy practices that occur in classrooms are shaped by broader sociocultural and political contexts. Given the current demographic trend in U.S. schools and the growing number of students who are speakers of languages other than English, meeting the language and academic needs of linguistically diverse students is a major cause of anxiety for educators (Commins & Miramontes, 2005; Lessow-Hurley, 2013). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) states that between 2008 and 2009, 21% of the 49, 487, 174 students enrolled in K-12 schools, in the U.S., spoke a language other than English. The rapid increase of students from diverse backgrounds is also depicted in the U. S. Department projection that Latinos will account for 60% of the population by 2050 (U. S. Department of Education, 2011). Across the U. S., there has been a dramatic increase in "minority-student enrollment" according to the U. S. Census Bureau (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). With these demographic trends, there is increasing agreement among educators that the one-size-fits-all approach, traditionally implemented, in K-12 classrooms is theoretically flawed and impractical (Diaz-Rico, 2014; Ovando, Combs & Collier, 2006; Reyes, 1992).

Given the continuous achievement gap between English learners (ELs) and native English speakers, as reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2011 report (NCES, 2013), several scholars discuss the implications of narrowing this achievement gap (Bielenberg & Wong Fillmore, 2005; Garcia & Bauer, 2009; McCarthey, 2008). With the burgeoning EL population, the disparity in academic achievement is a matter of public debate with several policies and laws enacted at the federal and state levels to address the needs of these learners.

Many studies focus on the implications of accountability measures on instruction for minority students (Pacheco, 2010; Valenzuela, 2005). However, few studies have investigated mainstream teachers' perceptions regarding bilingualism and language minority students, and the impact of those perceptions on English language pedagogy (Greenfield, 2013). According to Greenfield, studies on mainstream teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding language and culturally and linguistically diverse students are sparse and of the studies found, they were mainly quantitative. Therefore, a clear gap exists in existing qualitative research on how teachers' perceptions of linguistic diversity may impact the teaching of ELs.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

In this study, a sociocultural theoretical framework is used to investigate how teachers' perceptions may impact classroom pedagogy. A sociocultural framework takes into account the complex intersection of race, ethnicity, identity, class, and power and is relevant in examining pedagogy, especially for ELs. The use of a sociocultural theoretical framework that investigates pedagogy as informed by ideology is powerful and relevant in exploring the teaching of language minority students; other scholars have used this frame to examine classroom pedagogy for marginalized students (Delpit, 1995; Lee, 2006; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005).

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Within the frame of a sociocultural approach, I have adopted the funds of knowledge framework (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005) and the cultural modeling framework (Lee, 2006) to support building on students' backgrounds to improve the teaching-learning process in culturally relevant ways (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009). The funds of knowledge operates on the assumption that students come from households and communities in which there are varied resources that can positively impact the teaching-learning process. The cultural modeling framework focuses on African American youth culture and aims at connecting this knowledge with learning the academic disciplines (Lee, 2006; Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003). Both frameworks take into account the intersection of race, class, and culture on literacy access as well as the impact of teachers' ideologies on pedagogy. In this paper, both frameworks are used to discuss how educators may capitalize on the lived experiences of minority students.

Subscribing to the notion that the social, historical, and political contexts of schools and households, equally, are of critical importance in understanding pedagogy, both frameworks highlight the significance of understanding students' lived experiences in the knowledge construction process. The correspondence between knowledge and power, as espoused by Foucault (1977), is constructed, through discourse, within the ambit of a socio-political landscape and there are several implications for classroom interaction, particularly for language minority students. Traditionally, white mainstream values and discourse are promoted in classrooms. Given that the cultural experiences of a number of minority students are not always viewed favorably in mainstream society coupled with many speaking languages or dialects other than Standard American English, they often occupy marginalized spaces due to the mismatch between home and school. However, the funds of knowledge and cultural modeling frameworks promote inclusion of minority students' lived experiences with the goal of developing bicultural and biliterate identities.

In a bid to detangle the power relations and issues pertaining to naming and identity, theorists such as Stuart Hall (1996) and literary icon, Virginia Hamilton (2001), have interrogated the power relations between dominant and non-dominant cultures and identity. Hall (1996) argues that there is fluidity of identities within contemporary societies. Hall contends that identification is the process whereby individuals are situated within symbolic boundaries for allocation of resources, regulation or even the withdrawal of resources. He maintains that another way to think of identity and its production is with regard to stories that people tell of who they are and where they are from. Hall asserts that identity formation in relation to racism was or is a symbolic way of including and excluding individuals.

It is crucial that teachers understand that students come from diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds and consequently have different styles and mannerisms that can affect teaching the English language (Diaz-Rico, 2014). Cultures are heterogeneous and no one description can encapsulate any given culture. In the U. S., the terms bilingualism and bidialectalism are used to describe speakers of two languages and dialects, respectively. Bilinguals speak two languages while students who speak Standard American English and another variety are called bidialectals; the terms bidialectalism and bidialectism which both mean using two dialects of the same language, are used interchangeably in the discourse on linguistic diversity.

Method

As a former elementary teacher and immigrant to the U. S., for more than a decade, I was interested in the complexities associated with teaching diverse populations. As a black female who grew up in Jamaica, I had to query how my "overlapping identities" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 57) influenced data collection and analysis. For this study, I used a qualitative approach to understand teachers' perceptions and the implications for literacy instruction. I drew data from a larger data set of a study that I conducted in three phases. In the original study, I designed the research to answer three questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of bilingualism and bidialectalism?
2. How do teachers' practices address the needs of bilinguals and bidialectals in language arts pedagogy?
3. How do social, cultural, and political factors influence teachers' perceptions and practices?

However, for the purpose of this paper, I have focused on the first question, explored in phase one of the study, which examined teachers' perceptions of bilingualism and bidialectalism. I sought to acquire an understanding of elementary teachers' perceptions of language minority students, linguistic diversity, and the implications for language arts pedagogy. I investigated teachers' overall experiences with these students, languages and dialects represented in their classes, how they assessed and accommodated them, goals and objectives, role of the native language, activities they believed promoted language development, and influence of their (teachers') backgrounds on classroom activities/experiences. Since the qualitative case study approach encourages the researcher to focus on meaning-making processes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), I investigated the meanings that participants associated with teaching the English language arts. I explored teachers' perceptions of the role of the native language or dialect in learning English, accommodating and adapting instruction for ELs, activities that promote language development, and how they perceived their background influencing teaching methods. I examined these perceptions as understood and constructed by these teachers in their social contexts (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Erickson, 1987; Stake, 1995, 2005).

Data Sources

I collected data in a Midwestern school, Winifred Elementary, in a small town (Winifred) that is considered an entrance to Amish country (names of town, school, and participants used are pseudonyms). This rural community is regarded as multicultural with the rapidly growing Latino population,

45%, and the Amish, nearly 10%. This school was selected because of the growing number of ELs and the need for research about ELs in non-urban areas. Four hundred and thirty (430) students were enrolled at this K-6 school. The only public elementary school in the township, there were 36 teachers on staff including Title I, bilingual, and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. Considering that the U. S. population is racially and ethnically diverse, groups are officially categorized into different ethnic and racial groups: White, Black or African American, Native American and Alaska Native, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and or Pacific Islander, and Multiracial. The Census Bureau also includes "Hispanic or Latino" or "Not Hispanic or Latino" to identify Hispanic and Latino Americans, as an ethnic minority who may fall within any racial category. Based on the school's report card, students represented are White (56.3%), Hispanic (40.3%), Multiracial/Ethnic (1.8%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1.0%), and Black (0.6%). With a 36.6% low-income rate, the school served 7.9% students with Limited-English Proficiency and 22.9% received Individualized Education Programs/Plans (IEPs).

At the time of the study, the German ancestry in the town was reported at 17.3% and Rose, the principal, indicated that Spanish, Indian (Hindi), Dutch and German were languages spoken by students at her school. However, due to the race- and language-based categories on the school report card, it would appear that the Amish students were only accounted for in terms of language on the principal's demographic data sheet. The principal also pointed out that having being raised in this community, she had several friends who spoke Spanish and transitioned into English, and in high school and college she learned Spanish as a second language. She had also been an educator in this district for 20 years but has recently learned more about the standards for ELs.

Nine teachers and the principal completed a teacher demographic form and survey in phase one of the study although all 36 teachers were invited to participate. Teachers who could not participate explained their myriad responsibilities that precluded them from completing surveys and responding to interview questions. Participants answered open-ended questions on a demographic form and a survey of 9 questions (see appendix). I developed questions to gather information about their education, professional experience, perceptions of linguistic diversity, and teaching goals. The goal was to get a general understanding of classroom demographics; languages and dialects spoken by students; ways language minority students were assessed and accommodated; and general instructional activities. The time taken for survey completion was at the teachers' discretion and surveys were returned within a two- week time frame.

Data Analysis

Using a constant comparative method (Patton, 1990), I conducted a cross-case analysis of the surveys to "group answers… to common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues," (p. 376). I read through the surveys multiple times, while searching for emerging patterns and categories relevant to answering the first research question. The next level of analysis was to identify categories to demonstrate similarities and differences among teachers' responses. For this analysis, I looked at the teachers' responses to their goals and objectives for the English language arts, how they were influenced by state standards and standards for ELs, teaching methods, assessment of language competence, materials used, and accommodations for language minority students. Examples of categories are (a) emphasis on speaking and writing in English for Latinos, (b) promotion of a skills-based approach in the language arts, (c) reinforcement of reading and writing strategies, and (d) support of oral language development through exposure to both English and Spanish.

Having refined the recurrent patterns into categories and subcategories that answered the research question and were in alignment with the theoretical orientation that underpinned this study, I expanded the categories into themes and assertions. To ensure the themes represented the data, I triangulated by revisiting the data, looking for confirming and disconfirming evidence across the surveys (Erickson, 1987). Wide-spread evidence on the particular theme across multiple participants suggested that assertions fairly represented the data collected. Within categories "a" and "b" described above, data emerged that revealed that teachers spoke extensively about the needs of ELs by using Latino or Hispanic interchangeably with ELs.

Findings and Discussion

My findings brought to the forefront the complexity associated with labeling and identifying ELs. These are discussed using the following major subheadings: Labeling of ELs and white ELs are not always considered ELs.

Labeling of ELs

Data revealed that teachers identified ELs as Latinos/Hispanic almost exclusive of the Amish (it must be noted that the Amish were identified as bilinguals in a school report). Latino and Hispanic were used interchangeably by teachers and were almost evenly split across all nine participants. Most teachers spoke at length about the Latino students and used the word Latino or Hispanic as a synonym for ELs. Barbara, one of the teachers who completed the survey, explained how students were assessed for language competence by stating that "Assessment for Hispanic students is done through the EL program. They have to take a test and pass with mastery. If they can do that they do not get put into the EL program because they are showing competence." Her use of the term Hispanic in response to assessment for ELs suggests that she assumes that Hispanic students are ELs and therefore need testing, and regards only Hispanic students as ELs. ELs can come from any language group, including the Amish students who attended this school. Many students of Spanish descent are native English speakers and Mahon (2006) explains that "the Hispanic category includes both ELs and English-only Hispanics" (p. 481); therefore, it is erroneous to use the terms Hispanic and Latino in defining ELs. Nancy (Response to Intervention [RTI] teacher) also conflated race/ethnicity and language in describing her expe-

rience teaching students who are non-native English speakers. Although she included on her classroom demographic sheet that "I have had children of the Amish faith who speak an 'Old German,'" she confused race/ethnicity with language in explaining how she tried to accommodate for linguistically diverse students. She stated:

> I do not adapt (instruction) but I do explain the meanings of words more than I would to a white population. Even the smallest vocabulary words should not be taken for granted they know the meaning... most of the time they do not know the meaning and they do not ask for clarification.

Her statement implies that even though she identified Amish students as language minority students, she did not need to accommodate for them as much as she would "non white" students. For Nancy, Hispanics might automatically be perceived as needing intervention while white ELs may not be viewed as requiring help. In this scenario, she made a concerted effort to teach vocabulary words that Hispanic students would find challenging, but Amish students who are also ELs might be overlooked in the process. Her statement alludes to the reality that she had no conception that Hispanics may be classified as white, brown, or black. It seemed she was mistakenly categorizing students based on markers other than language or academic competence.

Interestingly, in responding to teaching students from other races and language backgrounds, teachers also focused on race and not language. Nancy and Katie spoke at length about their experiences with Latinos dating back to the 1960s. Nancy explained that she was not sure how her background has affected her interaction with students from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Nancy was raised in Winifred and attended this elementary school. She recounted "I was in third grade when our first Hispanic family moved to town and one of their five children was in my class." She used this example to talk about meeting students and people who are from different backgrounds. She elaborated that "Our Spanish community has been here for a while and some students are second generation and have grown up with dual language." What she failed to highlight is the constant presence of the Amish predating the Spanish-speaking community and that Winifred is considered an entrance to Amish country.

Katie's experience with non-native English speakers came about when her mother taught English to Mexican workers in the 1960s and she explained that her family has been immersed in the Mexican culture. She recalled that in the 1960s her family had close ties with many Mexican workers who migrated to the area. In the initial stage these were only males, and after they were settled they sent for their families to join them. Her mother was instrumental in teaching them English and in the process of interacting with the families, she learned Spanish while the children learned English. As with the case of Nancy, Katie was also raised in Winifred and the needs of Latinos dominated the conversation about ELs.

White ELs are not always Considered ELs

This complication in naming and identity for the Amish was also illustrated by Lori and Kelly. Lori, a classroom teacher for 32 years, described her classroom demographics as "40% Hispanic, 5% Amish, 5% Asian, and 50% white" and explained that she assessed her students through speaking and reading their written work. She made accommodations automatically and believed that having a firm foundation in the native language would enhance students' ability to excel academically. Kelly, having taught for 12 years, had Asians, African Americans, Whites, and Latinos and explained that the languages represented were English, Spanish, and German. Articulating the challenge in teaching ELs she mentioned "It can be challenging (teaching ELs) but the students help with translating" and she also had Spanish translators come in to facilitate the process.

Therefore, even though the language, and culture of the Amish were categorized by some teachers, other than being identified by teachers and the principal, the lack of attention to their language needs was consistent with a 2004 report by a teacher on staff who was enrolled at a nearby university, revealing that even though there was "Improving knowledge of Hispanic and Amish cultures... no one on staff speaks Dutch to help communicate with in-coming Amish kindergarteners who at times speak little English" (School Profile Report, 2004). It was highlighted in the report that even though the number of Spanish speaking teachers was growing, and there was improving knowledge of both the Hispanic and Amish cultures, the emphasis was on the Hispanic population.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The complex power relations, in schools, within a socio-historical and socio-political context can be understood when mainstream educators grapple with the privilege and power of dominant groups and the impact on instruction for students from diverse backgrounds. The border between knowledge and power can be crossed when educators engage in reflective discourse that seeks to interrogate how their perceptions may impact classroom interaction.

As revealed in the findings, the Amish students are white and German-speaking but not perceived as ELs. Latinos, on the other hand, were almost unanimously identified as such. There are two major problems with these perceptions and identification of students. The first is the underlying assumption that whites automatically fall within the purview of English-speaking and Latinos non-English-speaking. As emphasized by Mahon (2006), teachers should be careful not to equate English-speaking with white or non-English-speaking with Latino. The second is that instruction may be tailored for a specific race and not necessarily academic achievement as evident in Nancy's response about lesson adaptation.

Capitalizing on the linguistic assets that students bring to the teaching/learning process, particularly immigrant students is paramount. However, such a statement might explain why the Amish students at Winifred were not considered ELs because they were not identified as immigrant or even non-white. On Winifred's report card students were categorized based on race, language, and income level, and the Amish students were in a unique category in that they are white but speakers of a language other than English. Hence, even

though they were accounted for in terms of language, they might have been overlooked by virtue of the reality that they are white. Even though the language and culture of the Amish were categorized by some teachers, the focus was on Latinos.

Identifying ELs may be imbued by pre-conceived notions of labeling native and non-native speakers based on physical markers, such as skin color. Delpit (1995) argues that daily interactions are filled with assumptions made by educators and mainstream society about the abilities of low-income students and students of color. She brings to the forefront the notion that the power disparity within classrooms occur at a broader societal level that "nurtures and maintains" stereotypes (p. xii). Delpit conveys that the resistance of people with power and privilege to "perceive those different from themselves except through their culturally clouded vision" is detrimental (p. xiv). This is especially detrimental in classrooms where educators view low-income and minority students as deficient.

Examination of teachers' perceptions through a sociocultural lens is beneficial in that it sheds light on how ideology may impact pedagogy for language minority students. The funds of knowledge phenomenon calls for a critical redefinition of how educators perceive these students and the intellectual resources found in their communities (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005). The undergirding premise is that minority students come from households abundant in social and intellectual resources. Interacting with these families provides teachers with an appreciation of different cultural systems and an understanding that cultures are heterogeneous and that even practices within a group will vary. Additionally, empowering parents of multicultural backgrounds by having parents participate in class activities also builds the home-school connection. Students' perceptions of their own parents as well as themselves improve when teachers extol the skills and knowledge of their parents.

Complementary is the cultural modeling framework which calls for a careful examination of students' daily activities and an investigation of the modes of reasoning, thoughts, and tendencies in daily problem-solving (Lee, 2006). The goal of this framework is to scrutinize points of compatibility and differences between problem-solving in everyday settings and problem-solving in academic disciplines and the implications for working with diverse populations. Lee argues that this requires an analysis of key concepts and strategies most generative for problem-solving in ways that are developmentally appropriate.

In summary, the Amish students were sidelined in the conversation about language minority students. Even though teachers and the principal indicated that there were Amish students at the school, the conversation about the needs of ELs was based on Latinos and the Amish students who are white but also ELs were virtually excluded. To a certain extent, teachers associated ELs with Spanish speaking students, and this association had implications for both Latinos and Amish students.

CONCLUSION

Research on the experiences of the growing population of Latinos in non-urban environments is lacking, and, therefore, this study provides much needed insight. The use of a sociocultural theoretical framework, that investigates the implications of perceptions, in defining language minority students, is relevant because ideologies can negatively impact youth of disenfranchised communities. The data generated shed some light on the extent to which perceptions may affect classroom experiences. It is imperative that educators reflect on their own social status and native language and how these can influence how they interact with language minority students. Reflective teachers can support the language learning of these diverse students and improve teaching as a practice. The onus is on educators to broaden their views regarding students and reflect on how their perceptions of students' identities may affect classroom instruction.

Many scholars have argued that race, ethnicity, and class determine, to a great extent, the type and quality of literacy experiences to which students are exposed (Jimenez & Teague, 2009). Students from white-middle class backgrounds are often situated at an advantage while the opposite is true of students from working class or linguistically diverse backgrounds. Nonetheless, it must be understood that cultures, races, and ethnicities are not monolithic and the onus is therefore on educators to understand their students' backgrounds and interrogate the perceptions and assumptions that may impede/interfere with the teaching-learning process.

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APPENDIX A: TEACHER DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

Name_____
Address_____
School_____
Grade Level_____
Email_____
Highest degree obtained_____
How many years teaching experience? _____
How many years teaching at this school? _____

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Do you currently teach language minority students? How would you characterize your current classroom demographics? (Asian, African American, Latino, White)
2. What languages do the students in your class speak? Are there dialect speakers in your class? How many students in your class speak another language and/or dialect?
3. What are your goals and objectives for language arts? How much are you influenced by the Illinois standards? If there are non-native speakers, how much are you influenced by the standards for English language learners?
4. How do you assess students' language competence? In what ways do you accommodate for non-native speakers?
5. What activities do you think promote language development?
6. Do you feel you need to adapt any materials or means of instruction to meet the needs of your linguistically diverse students?
7. Describe your experience teaching students who are non-native English speakers. How do you feel your own background affects your teaching of students who are not from your racial and language background?
8. As students are learning English, what do you see as the role of their native language (or dialect) in learning English (e.g., is it important to maintain it, allow students to use it when needed? Learn English as the most important aspect?)
9. How do you hope to make a difference in the lives of your students? What do you hope your students will remember after they have left your class?