Interrogating the "Language Gap"

M. Beatriz Arias, PhD

Background

The term "Language Gap" has been used since 1995 as a way to characterize the difference in linguistic environments between wealthier families and those who live in poverty (Avineri & Johnson, 2015). This terminology has been challenged by linguists and sociolinguists who prefer to take a language socialization lens to better understand the role that language plays in schools. Nevertheless, the concept of an educational "gap" has been prevalent since the 1957 Sputnik launch where the perceived gap was in science education between US and Russian students. "Gap" discourse evolved over the decades as it intertwined with the Culture of Poverty theory and ESEA authorization which constructed poverty as individual failure of deficient parents unable to provide their children with the intellectual, moral and financial resources to succeed academically (McCarty, 2015). This CAL Commentary highlights the work of Professor Jonathan Rosa at Stanford University, who provides a sociolinguistic critique on the terminology used to define emergent bilinguals and introduces a raciolinguistic framework as a way to interrogate the language gap and other deficit perspectives.

The "gap" mentality is provided in the portrayal of poor and minoritized families and children as illiterate; this includes the definition of children who enter school speaking a language other than English as limited and lacking. The "gap" metaphor has fostered development of educational approaches which attempt to mediate academic disparities by encouraging parents to alter the way they use language with their children to resemble the linguistic environment in school. For example, the "word gap" literature (Hart & Risley, 1995) suggests that by the age of three, children from affluent households are exposed to approximately 30 million more words than children from families on welfare. To ameliorate these perceived linguistic deficits, many educational remedies focus on providing emergent bilinguals reductive, scripted curricula which emphasize decontextualized language learning.

A key mechanism of the "gap" discourse is its reliance on government-mandated achievement measures, which rely exclusively on English standardized tests. English Learners are particularly disadvantaged by these tests which are not universally valid, lacking representation of ELs in the norming sample. Thus the "gap" mentality reproduces disparities between ELs and non-ELs.

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Alternative perspectives to the gap metaphor

Sociolinguists and other researchers have systematically challenged deficit perspectives and Rosa and Flores (2017) continue in this tradition, providing an alternative framework which recognizes the richness and complexity of the language of minoritized communities. They disrupt the common sense surrounding the "language gap" by *focusing on the listener rather than the speaker*. They suggest an approach which focuses on the "listening subject" as a way of understanding how linguistic perception is shaped, proposing that the language gap emerges from the racially and socioeconomically stigmatizing language ideologies that guide the ears of *listening subjects* (Rosa & Flores, 2015). This perspective is applied to analyze teachers' perceptions of "Spanglish" and to interrogate norms of correctness.

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Raciolinguistic ideologies in education

Alim, Rickford, and Ball (2016) defines raciolinguistics as an umbrella term to refer to an emerging field "dedicated to bringing to bear the diverse methods of linguistic analysis—discourse analysis, ethnographic linguistics studies, applied linguistics and language educational analysis—to ask and answer critical questions about the relations between language, race, and power across diverse ethnoracial contexts and societies" (p. 6). Raciolinguistics "has in fact built a multiracial coalition of scholars who are committed to antiracist research and analysis" (Alim et al., 2016).

Flores and Rosa (2015), as pioneers in this interdisciplinary field of "language and race," focus on the racial positioning of the listener in their critique of "appropriateness" in language education, and define the term raciolinguistic ideologies to describe ideologies that "produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects" (p. 150). For example, "US Latinx [1] are often depicted as lacking full proficiency in either English or Spanish and in need of linguistic remediation to provide them with access to the so-called 'academic language' required for complex thinking process and successful engagement in the global economy" (Flores, 2017, p. 627). Flores and Aneja (2017) extend this critique to note how native speaker ideologies continue to be privileged. They focus on teacher preparation programs and find that native speaker ideologies "continue to permeate teacher education programs that prepare future nonnative English-speaking TESOL professionals" (p. 442).

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[1] Rosa and Flores use the term Latinx as a gender non-binary label for US-based persons of Latin American descent (2017).

Flores and Rosa apply a raciolinguistic framework to define the education of students in three different linguistic categories: Long-term English Learners (LTELs), Heritage Language Learners (HLLs) and Standard English learners (SELs). For them, the commonality between Long-Term English Learners, Heritage Learners and Standard English Learners is not so much their language proficiency, but rather their racial positioning.

"We examine the raciolinguistic ideologies that connect additive education approaches to teaching Long-term English learners, Heritage Language learners and Standard English learners. We argue that what links members of these three different groups is not their lack of proficiency...but their racial positioning in society...and how this affects how their linguistic practices are *heard*" (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 167). In this vein they promote the study of racialized language perception which includes not only individuals, but also nonhuman entities such as policies, technologies and assessments associated with valuing racialized subjects' language practices.

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Long term English learners

Educators working with emergent bilinguals in schools will be familiar with the term "Long-term English Learners" (LTEL). These students are usually defined as students who have been designated as English learners by an English language proficiency test for seven or more years (Menken & Kleyn, 2010). LTELs are seen as deficient in the academic language they need to achieve in school: "high functioning social language, very weak academic language and significant deficits in reading and writing skills" (Olsen, 2010). However, Flores and Rosa argue that educators should shift their gaze from attempting to change LTELs linguistic practices to examine LTELs' language, noting that they use their bilingualism in "strategic and innovative ways" (p. 157). They stress that additive, appropriateness-based solutions place the burden of change on language minoritized students rather than focusing on the raciolinguistic ideologies held by the listener.

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Heritage Language Learners

The definition for Heritage Language Learners (HLLs) is broad, ranging from membership in a particular linguistic community to specific kinds of language proficiency. For example, Fishman (2001) defines US Heritage Language Learners to include people indigenous to the Americas, language used by European groups that colonized the Americas (e.g. German) and languages used by immigrants arriving in the US (e.g. Spanish and Korean). Valdés (2001) notes that foreign language educators use the term Heritage Language Learner to refer to a language student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English (p. 38). In general, the goal of many Heritage Language Programs is to build the learner's repertoire to include the academic language proficiency in the "native language."

With this as the goal, there is an emphasis on "academic language" which creates a dichotomy between formal school language and "social" language. Flores and Rosa redirect our attention from a focus on empirical linguistic practices (e.g. teaching "academic" language or the prestige language) to "speakers' shared, racialized positions of enunciation and particular listeners' hegemonic positions of reception" (p. 162).

Standard English Learners

The discussion of how to teach Standard English to "non-standard" English speakers relates closely to the raciolinguistic ideology for LTELs and HLLs. While sociolinguists have historically valued non-standard varieties of English, Flores and Rosa demonstrate the powerful ways that "raciolinguistic ideologies of the white listening subject can stigmatize language use regardless of one's empirical linguistic practices...even when Standard English learners use forms that seem to correspond to Standard English, they can still be construed as using nonstandard form from the perspective of the white listening subject" (p. 166).

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Undoing Appropriateness in Language Education

Alim et al. (2016) argue that "raciolinguistics can be more than just an academic field of inquiry, but also a critical, progressive linguistic movement that exposes how language is used as a means of social, political and economic oppression." As educators, Rosa (2016) encourages us to use a raciolinguistic lens to interrogate labels used to identify emergent bilinguals and be vigilant of attempts to define students with terms rooted in negative stereotypes. As educators we can advocate to support and value the translingual practices of communities of Color, and push for bilingual and multilingual education that values, supports and sustains diverse (e.g. Spanish, Korean) linguistic and cultural practices. In this manner, we can all begin to disrupt the "ideologies that frame diversity as suspect and problematic" (Alim et al., 2016).

Professor Jonathan Rosa is the 2018 winner of the Center for Applied Linguistics Charles A. Ferguson award for Outstanding Scholarship.

Connecting Research to Practice: Using a Raciolinguistic lens

How can educators begin to use a raciolinguistic lens? A first step would be to interrogate the labels used to describe emergent bilinguals and their linguistic practices. Indeed, we have witnessed the gradual official attempt over the last two decades to clarify these deficit labels which began with Non-English Speaker (NES) and Limited English Speaker (LES), progressed to Non-English Proficient (NEP) and Limited English Proficient (LEP) and currently to English Language Learner (ELL) and Long-Term English Learner (LTEL). These labels all focus on the limitations of emergent bilinguals, casting them in a deficit perspective. As educators, it is important to understand how this label comes to be reified through the use of language proficiency measures and then how this label comes to be enacted in educational practices through the use of scripted curricula. Here are a few suggestions about what you can do:

- Raise awareness of the impact of linguistic labeling with your faculty peers. Examine the consequences of using language proficiency tests: how long do students remain identified as ELs? As LTELs?

- Extend the impact of linguistic labeling to the teaching staff: Who are the EL teachers? Are they "those" teachers?

- Discuss with your faculty the norms of correctness they hold for English, Spanish and other languages in the school.

- Discuss with your faculty the role of codeswitching and translanguaging. Conduct a self-survey of teachers to determine if they provide instructional "safe spaces" for students to explore the varieties of their linguistic repertoire.

- Promote the linguistics practices of your students and support their creative and innovative use of language in their writing.

- Create a "third space" (Moje et al., 2004) in your classroom where students can safely explore, compare and contrast their Discourse communities.

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About the Author

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About CAL

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is a non-profit organization founded in 1959. Headquartered in Washington DC, CAL has earned an international reputation for its contributions to the fields of bilingual and dual language education, English as a second language, world languages education, language policy, assessment, immigrant and refugee integration, literacy, dialect studies, and the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children. The mission of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is to promote language learning and cultural understanding by serving as a trusted resource for research, services, and policy analysis. Through its work, CAL seeks solutions to issues involving language and culture as they relate to access and equity in education and society around the globe.

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