
Multilingualism in the United States: Where We've Been and Where We Are

By Leslie Grant

Language, whether our first or second, whether spoken or signed, enables us as humans to communicate our needs, wishes, concerns, and dreams. It is the vehicle by which we interact with one another to establish relationships, reach goals, and question the status quo; it is inseparable from our culture and identity. Language is, in a real sense, who we are and how we identify ourselves. While their discourse patterns may vary by age, gender, ethnic group, region, socioeconomic class, and so on, all children, barring developmental issues, acquire the ability to communicate. In fact, children are masterful users of their native tongues. Anyone who has interacted with a persistent five-year-old can attest to sophisticated grammar usage, intentional vocabulary decisions, and carefully determined intonation patterns that amaze and purposefully manipulate the listener. Interestingly enough, that savvy young communicator has yet to master many other skills, such as learning to tie her shoes or whistle. These contrasts have led some linguists who study child language acquisition to refer to our ability to acquire language as an “instinct” or “biological programming” of sorts.¹

Language acquisition does not happen in a vacuum, however. This important aspect of our identity is grounded in our social context and is shaped by political forces; these factors, and their influence on language policy, change, and use by individuals and groups of individuals are the focus of this paper and lesson.

As an instructor of in-service and pre-service educators, I find that most of my students are unaware of how language figures into the history of the United States. Most of my students think that English has always been the language of government, business, and education, so they are always surprised and often quite upset when they learn about the twists and turns of our language history. Throughout U.S. history, a pattern became evident: there seem to be periods of openness and excitement about multiple languages and cultures followed by periods of restrictiveness and “English Only” types of discussions. In general, the trend throughout our history has been one of not valuing languages other than English; however, statements during the political campaign by President Barack Obama are encouraging in terms of valuing a multilingual future.

Early accounts of the languages and cultures found in the New World are, at first glance, encouraging. Numerous indigenous groups, representing large numbers of languages, lived throughout the country at the time when the first immigrants, which includes those who chose to come as well as those who were forced to come, brought their cultures and languages. These changes resulted in multiculturalism and multilingualism being commonplace. Linguistic diversity was found in the earliest schools.² Many groups provided education in the native language, with one of the first German-language schools being established in Pennsylvania in 1694. A number of states passed legislation that approved bilingual education or native language education: German-English bilingual schools were found in Wisconsin, Ohio, Missouri, and Maryland; French-English schools were common in Louisiana; and Spanish and Spanish-English schools were found in New Mexico and other parts of the southwest. Other states such as Michigan, Iowa, Minnesota, and Texas offered education in Dutch, Czech, and Norwegian, to name a few other languages.



While some scholars refer to this period of time as being “permissive” in terms of the coexistence of multiple languages and cultures, this was hardly the case for Africans who were forced to come to the New World. Even though many came from western

Africa, there were still numerous language groups in that area (e.g. Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fula, etc.); thus, just being from a particular region did not necessarily translate into sharing a mother tongue. Add to this the tumultuous events that occurred from being kidnapped to forced passage on the ocean to sale at auction. Through the course of these events, it became highly unlikely that the Africans would come into contact with individuals who shared their first languages. Moreover, slaves who shared a common language were not allowed to work together, due to the fear that the ability to communicate without barriers

might lead to rebellion. Along the same lines, slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write, something scholars refer to as “compulsory ignorance.”³ These language “policies” contrast sharply with the linguistic and cultural freedoms described above for other groups of immigrants.

Similar restrictive decisions were made beginning in the 1800s. Paramount among these were the legislative decisions designed to “civilize” the American Indians, from the removal of Native American peoples from their lands in the early 1830s to the government decisions in the late 1870s to take Indian children from their families and coerce them to attend Indian boarding schools, where they forced them to adopt “American” ways of speaking, dressing, and behaving. Children were punished for speaking their native tongues.

This systematic oppression also affected the immigrant populations as assimilation became the focus. The Naturalization Act of 1906 insisted that immigrants speak English in order to become naturalized citizens. World War I resulted in anti-German-American sentiment: German was eliminated from schools and public meetings, books were burned, and individuals were fined for speaking German. The year after the war ended, some 15 states passed laws indicating that English be the medium of instruction in schools. These restrictive measures were finally

halted by the Supreme Court in 1923 with the case of *Meyer v. Nebraska*. In this case, a teacher had been charged with the “crime” of reading in German to a child. The court found this to be unconstitutional; they said that all are protected by the Constitution, no matter what language they speak.

The shift from this restrictive period to a more open period occurred first with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, outlawing segregated schools, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting discrimination based on race, sex, and national origin. Effects of this legislation were widespread, and for second language learners in this country, became key. In San Francisco, Lau and some 1700 other Chinese students were unable to understand instruction provided in English in their classrooms. In the influential 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* case, the Supreme Court found that simply providing students with books, teachers, and curricula in English did not enable them to take part in schooling if they did not understand the language. Today, as a result of this decision, all students who speak a language other than English are entitled to support.

The issue of access to equal education is also relevant for speakers of variations of standard English, including Appalachian English, Chicano English, African American Vernacular English (sometimes referred to as Ebonics), and Navajo English, to name

a few variations or dialects. Shirley Brice Heath's now classic ethnographic research⁴ conducted in the Piedmont Carolinas illustrated the connection between home linguistic and cultural experiences and the lack of connection often found for children whose dialects and experiences varied from the language valued at school; this school language is usually referred to as "standard English." Recent discussions of teaching in a culturally responsive way⁵ or using transformational pedagogy are at the forefront of addressing how teachers can recognize, value, and draw on what all students bring to the classroom, whether their early linguistic experiences were in Kiswahili, Spanish, Mandarin, or a dialect of English. Students need to be able to access content presented in standard English via texts, teaching, and tests, and most importantly, they need to be able to make connections to their lives and experiences. In light of the recent resurgence of language policies tied to immigration concerns, it is critical that future teachers understand the rights of our students and the need to respect and reinforce these aspects that are so strongly linked to their identities.

The lesson included here is for pre-service teachers. The purpose is to raise these future teachers' awareness of linguistic differences and the challenges imposed on second language and dialect speakers by social and political forces.

Notes

1. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).
2. James Crawford, *Educating English Language Learners* (Los Angeles, CA: Bilingual Education Services, 2004).
3. Terrence G. Wiley and Wayne E. Wright, "Against the Undertow: Language-Minority Education and Politics in the 'Age of Accountability,'" *Education Policy 18, no.1* (2004), 144.
4. Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).



Leslie Grant is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. Dr. Grant earned her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Northern Arizona University in 1994. She teaches courses in the Linguistically Diverse Education Program and the Teacher Education Program. Email: lgrant@uccs.edu

LESSON PLAN

Multilingualism in the United States: Where We've Been and Where We Are

By Leslie Grant

Goals of the Lesson

Teacher candidates will select an individual or group of individuals for whom English is a second (or third or fourth) language or who speak a dialect of English. Students will situate their study of second language/dialect use within a time frame appropriate to that individual or group of individuals and examine the political and social context of their language/dialect use. These activities will culminate in a presentation to the class regarding their findings. This presentation will result in a deeper understanding of the politics, policies, and challenges confronted by speakers of second languages and dialects of English.

Objective

Teacher candidates will choose an individual or group of individuals for whom English is a second language or dialect to develop an oral presentation. They will discuss the speakers' linguistic practices framed in the social and political contexts in which they live. In class, they will present their findings about the practices and policies of the United States and how they affect the language and dialects spoken.

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards

Culture and Cultural Diversity

- Assist learners to understand and apply the concept of culture as an integrated whole that governs the functions and interaction of language, literature, arts, traditions, beliefs, values, and behavior patterns
- Enable learners to analyze and explain how groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns
- Have learners interpret patterns of behavior as reflecting values and attitudes, which contribute to or pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding
- Guide learners as they construct reasoned judgments about specific cultural responses to persistent human issues

History

- Help learners to identify issues and problems in the past, recognize factors contributing to such problems, identify and analyze alternative courses of action, formulate a position or course of action, and evaluate the implementation of that decision

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

- Assist learners in identifying and analyzing examples of tensions between expressions of individuality and efforts used to promote social conformity by groups and institutions

Warm-Up (Anticipatory Set)

Begin lesson by presenting information in a language other than English (could be information about the course, the weather, or where the instructor is from; the point is to have the students experience some discomfort hearing unfamiliar sounds). If instructor does not speak a second language, bring in a recording or a guest speaker to illustrate sounds of another language, preferably one that is not known to the students. After approximately 5-10 minutes of continuous input, stop the lesson and switch to English to probe how the teachers felt. Record feelings described by teachers.

Activity (Instructional Input)

Discuss how language is an integral part of our identity, and discuss how second languages have been devalued in numerous contexts over time. Discuss the early history of the country, and share primary documents that indicate increasing restriction of second languages and a focus on assimilation. For example, “The Children of the Crucible” by Theodore Roosevelt, 1917, is a good example of assimilation arguments of the time. Discuss legislation that has supported second-language speakers: for example, include court decisions for *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 1923 and *Lau v. Nichols*, 1974. Finally, include recent state propositions for “English only” legislation: Proposition 227 (passed) in California and Amendment 36 (not passed) in Colorado.

1. Using a timeline, describe general periods of language diversity and restrictiveness outlined by Carlos J. Ovando:
 - Permissive Period (1700s-1880s)
 - Restrictive Period (1880s-1960s)
 - Opportunist Period (1960s-1980s)
 - Dismissive Period (1980s-present)

Periods from Carlos J. Ovando, “Bilingual Education in the United States: Historical Development and Current Issues,” *Bilingual Research Journal* 27, no. 1 (2003), 4-14.

2. Brainstorm a list of second language/dialect users that are of interest to the class (include historical figures, contemporary artists, musicians, actors, political figures, scientists, authors, social activists, etc.).
3. Have each student choose one group or an individual and determine where they fit in the time periods described above.
4. Research the language background and the practices and policies of that time period.

Prepare and present PowerPoint presentation to the class:

- Include group or individual studied
- Background regarding time period
- Language practices
- Social and political influences
- Conclude with discussion of how this research can influence teaching students from diverse language and dialect backgrounds in the schools

Presentation Rubric

Performance	Exemplary	Proficient	Developing
Identification of Language Users	Individual or group clearly and concisely identified and language use described.	Individual or group identified, and some aspects of language use described.	Individual or group not clearly identified; language use discussed, but not clear.
Context of Language Choices	Details regarding social and political forces included and tied clearly to language usage.	Some discussion of social and political forces and their connections to language use.	Little discussion of social and political influences on language use.
Implications for Teaching Students	Presentation includes clear implications for teaching students in a culturally responsive way.	Presentation includes some reference to implications for teaching students in a culturally responsive way.	Presentation includes very little discussion of implications for teaching students in a culturally responsive way.
Incorporation of Sources	Presentation includes excellent use of outside sources.	Presentation includes some use of outside sources.	Presentation includes no outside sources.
Expression of Ideas and Language Conventions	Expression of ideas is clear and concise. Writing and speaking conventions demonstrate excellent command of language.	Expression of ideas is mostly clear with some areas of confusion. Writing and speaking reflect minor language convention errors.	Several instances where expression of ideas is unclear. Speech and/or writing reflects several language convention errors.
Timing and Slide Limit of Presentation	Presentation presented comfortably within time limit and slide limit.	Presentation within time limit and slide limits, but some material rushed or talked about too long.	Presentation significantly off in terms of timing and slide limits.

Resources

The Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) is part of the U.S. Office of Education that is dedicated to English Language Learners. Formerly the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA).

<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/index.html>

The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition is a valuable resource with a very large database with information on language research and language policy.

<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/>

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is a website that has a great deal of research on many areas in language education.

<http://www.cal.org/>

The Institute for Language and Education Policy is a newly formed nonprofit organization. It is dedicated to promoting research-based policies in serving English and heritage language learners.

<http://www.elladvocates.org/index.html>

James Crawford's Language Policy Website is a website by the former director of the National Association of Bilingual Education.

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCrawford/>

The Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning is a nonprofit organization founded in 2003 and based in Inglewood, California. The center is a leader in meeting the challenge of designing schools, classrooms, and learning experiences that result in academic success for diverse learners.

<http://www.culturallyresponsive.org/index.html>

Books

Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives for a New Century by Sonia Nieto

The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language by Stephen Pinker

Educating English Learners: Language Diversity in the Classroom by James Crawford

At War with Diversity: U.S. Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety by James Crawford

Culturally Responsive Teaching by Geneva Gay