



Competence as linguistic alignment: Linguistic diversities, affinity groups, and the politics of educational success

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the need for both a theoretical and a practical way to understand the construction of linguistic and social competence as perceived by emergent bilingual and multilingual students of color in an American urban elementary school. In doing so, it employs Critical Narrative Analysis to look at how linguistic (mis)alignments and institutional discourses of school success in the US shape the ways in which these children made sense of their schooling experiences through co-constructed narratives. Findings pinpoint children's perceptions of academic success being closely linked to communicative practices in Mainstream American English. Beyond academic success, findings highlight the social exclusion of children from play and affinity groups based on Mainstream American English linguistic competence and performance. Implications point toward the need to create spaces in which language (mis)alignments are acknowledged, (re)positioned at the center of the curriculum, and positively reframed.

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1. Introduction

"I like talking to Rabbit. He talks about sensible things. He doesn't use long, difficult words, like Owl. He uses short, easy words, like 'What about lunch?'" (Milne, 1928, p. 58)

In this quote, Winnie-the-Pooh, a central character in Milne's English tales, speaks of language alignment and affinity. His quote speaks to individuals' preferences to talk with other individuals who don't use long, difficult words but rather short, easy words closely aligned to their own familiar practices and based on their own linguistic competence and performance. This preference aligns with an ethnocentric perspective—the "view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated in reference to it" (Sumner, 1906, p. 12). Winnie-the-Pooh gives an example that would be problematic without contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1977), extralinguistic features employed to understand how words function. Without such cues, it is impossible to know for sure the meaning of utterances. Thus, "What about lunch?" could easily be understood as an invitation, a complaint, or a demand. This example illustrates the importance of recognizing that language is affected by the context of its use (Rymes, 2009) and that language alignment is linked to competent identities and affinity group membership (Souto-Manning, 2010a; Gee, 2003).

In the opening quote, Pooh wanted to go see Rabbit who spoke like him, and not play with Owl who (from Pooh's perspective) spoke in long sentences and complicated words. While not referring to easy words and shorter sentences specifically, but rather the familiarity of communicative practices and linguistic alignment, young children in early educational settings often prefer to play and associate with those who, in addition to having common interests, being "associated with a

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given semiotic domain” (Gee, 2003, p. 27) with shared social practices and identities, also have common linguistic practices (Souto-Manning, 2010a). After all, as Nieto (2010) noted, “[h]ome cultures and native languages sometimes get in the way of student learning not because of the nature of the home cultures or native languages themselves but rather because they do not conform to the way that schools define learning” (p. 96).

As it explores issues of language and identity from the perspective of emergent bi/multilingual children of color¹ in an American urban elementary school, this article makes the case that school success is based on a politics of linguistic alignment. Thus, the number of monolingual White teachers in today’s schools may significantly disadvantage the futures of bi/multilingual² students of color if such teachers take ethnocentric rather than critical anthropological perspectives which question normative and taken-for-granted practices and behaviors.

2. Background of the problem

The rapidly shifting demographics of school-aged children, as well as continuing projections for the future (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006), suggest that the enrollment of children who are culturally and linguistically different from the historically overprivileged and socially-constructed White middle class monolingual “norm³” in the U.S. (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008) will continue to increase. These students are likely to differ from their teachers in race, ethnicity, primary language spoken at home, and family income (Au & Raphael, 2000). This is especially the case in early childhood education, where 3/4 of all teachers are White, female, middle class, and monolingual speakers of Mainstream American English⁴ (Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Research, 2008), being part of the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1988, p. 282). This disconnect can have serious repercussions for the educational futures of culturally and linguistically diverse children as White teachers’ expectations tend to be measured against their own raced, cultured, and linguistically-specific practices as if their own experiences were the norm against which *all* children’s performances were to be measured and evaluated (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011)—and for 75% of them, their own experiences greatly align with larger normative discourses.

Cross, Devaney, and Jones (2001) have shown that many pre-service teachers in the US have negative attitudes and are more critical toward languages and dialects other than Mainstream American English (MAE), considering MAE the correct, desired, and successful language. In their research, pre-service teachers listened to five different dialectic recordings and rated the speaker according to qualities such as intelligence, education, consideration, friendliness, honesty, trustworthiness, ambition, and social status. Results showed that just in listening to someone speak there were clear notions of that speaker’s qualities, heavily aligned with the so-called “norm.” While this study revealed that teachers need to be aware of those misalignments (and the disadvantaging of children whose linguistic and cultural practices are misaligned with the “norm”), it also revealed negative perceptions pre-service teachers had of students who spoke differently from them.

Dooly (2005) has shown that teacher mindset can negatively affect the performance of linguistically diverse students, influencing the education these students receive and impacting the way they experience schooling. Fogel and Ehri (2006) documented how monolingual teachers’ lack of knowledge regarding different linguistic structures and communicative practices may lead to constant correction and make linguistically diverse students feel “linguistically inadequate, insecure, and confused” (p. 466). Further, they asserted that negative teacher attitudes toward students using non-normative languages and dialects can lead to those students being misdiagnosed as having language disorders (Fogel & Ehri, 2006). Many of these deficit-ridden attitudes have been linked to linguistic and communicative practices (Souto-Manning, 2010a).

This article responds to the “great urgency for rethinking our understandings and practices of diversity in the current climate of standardization, test scores, and scientifically based research set against the backdrop of social inequities” (Goodwin et al., 2008, p. 6). In doing so, it investigates the need for a theoretical and a practical way to understand the construction of competence as perceived by six- to eight-year-old emergent bilingual and multilingual students of color in an American urban elementary school, specifically pertaining to linguistic (mis)alignments (Souto-Manning, 2010a). This inquiry is important because we must understand the construction of competence with regard to students of color who are primary speakers of languages other than MAE in order to disrupt the cycle of failure imposed upon culturally and linguistically diverse students (Haddix, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009).

¹ The term “of color” is employed to signify non-White persons. The term has deep historical roots—not to be confused with “colored” (Sen, 2012). “People of color” was first used in the French West Indies to refer to people of African descent who were not enslaved—who were “free people of color.” References to the term date back to the early 1800s. Today, it is a preferred and commonly used term, rather than minority, as people of color are no longer the minority in many US settings.

² The term bi/multilingual signifies a hybrid of bilingual and multilingual.

³ By deeming knowledge culture-free, a norm is established based on the dominant culture and discourse, on the “culture of power” or “the culture of those who have power” (Delpit, 1988, p. 282). Thus, the values teachers most commonly associate with success and hard work are those colored through a White supremacy perspective (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011)—e.g., most White people do not think to describe themselves as “White” when listing descriptive terms about themselves, whereas people of color usually use racial and/or ethnic identity descriptors. Tatum (1999) suggested this is because the elements of one’s identity that are congruent with the dominant culture are so normalized and reflected back that one is apt to take such traits for granted.

⁴ Mainstream American English (MAE) is the variety of English spoken in the United States considered by most Americans to be correct. MAE is the English variety that is predominantly taught in US schools. It is considered necessary for participation and success in American society. Some refer to it as “Standard English.” Because I do not believe in the notion of a standard language, I prefer to employ the term MAE.

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