Note From the Field

What Is Normal in Educational Linguistics?

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In this note from the field, I explore what is considered normal in educational linguistics when considering language in special education contexts through a Disability Studies in Education perspective. In highlighting theoretical perspectives that simultaneously complement and complicate one another, I argue that our field should more carefully consider processes of ableism and racism in issues of language and education.

As a doctoral student and early-career researcher in educational linguistics, I often wonder how to situate my work in our field. Drawing from a long tradition of ethnographers in my department, I am currently exploring how teachers collaborate and work together to make sense of the intersection of race, language, and disability in bilingual special education. This involves spending my days at Dual Language Charter School (DLCS),[1] a bilingual English–Spanish charter school, listening to teachers plan instruction and debrief about their days, particularly as they figure out how to best meet the needs of different types of learners, including students with disabilities, English Learners (ELs), as well as students who are identified as both (colloquially referred to as SpELs[2]). Our field offers the methodological and theoretical tools to begin exploring these issues; however, because I am also focused on special education and disability, I still question whether my research is squarely within our field. This questioning manifests in insecurities in calling what I do educational linguistics, which is in large part due to a lack of robust research about special education within educational linguistics, as well as the undertheorization of disability and ableism in considering issues of language. The converse is true as well, with language often being undertheorized within Disability Studies in Education.

Broadly speaking, educational linguistics focuses on language in teaching and learning, ranging from transnational spaces and policies to inside specific classrooms (e.g., Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). Bernard Spolsky (1974) is credited as the first scholar to introduce the term *educational linguistics* in order "to show how linguistics and its various fields can help define and solve problems that reflect the centrality of language in the educational process" (p. 2024). Educational linguistics is often conceived of a trans- or interdisciplinary field that is oriented to social justice and identifying and addressing social problems (Hult, 2008; King, 2016).

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[1] This is a pseudonym.

[2] A term teachers at the school use, which is a portmanteau of special education and English Learner.

To address racism and ableism as social problems, I draw from DisCrit, which Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013) describe as "a framework that theorizes about the ways in which race, racism, dis/ability and ableism are built into the interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education, which affect students of color with dis/abilities qualitatively differently than white students with dis/abilities" (p. 7). As a subfield of Critical Race Theory, DisCrit emphasizes that a) racism and ableism interdependently construct notions of normalcy and that b) racism and ableism are *normal* and inherently part of educational structures. Both race and disability are socially mediated categories that are constantly in flux and constructed in tandem with environments and contexts, rather than static or fixed categories. While much DisCrit research is focused on K–12 settings, like my own ethnographic study, this framework also pushes me to turn my eye towards my own department and field; therefore, I ask *what is normal in educational linguistics*, particularly how norms and and normalcy are constructed and upheld in our field, as I think through my own project.

In many ways, my dissertation project is one of many within our field that is problem-oriented (e.g., ableism and racism in U.S. K–12 school settings through language) and relies on interdisciplinary frameworks (e.g., disability studies in education, educational linguistics). In highlighting the aforementioned "centrality of language," emphasizing differences and diversity, specifically linguistic diversity, within educational linguistics is very common in the field (Spolsky, 1974, p. 2024). For example, in discussing communicative competence and ethnography of communication, important concepts within our field, Hornberger (2009) argues that "the goal in seeking to uncover patterns and functions of language use in context is to understand, not the replication of uniformity, but the organization of diversity" (p. 350). Even though this diversity is acknowledged, we must also attend to the specific ways in which diversity itself is conceptualized and organized, taking processes and systems of oppression into consideration, and, in my work, namely race and disability. In the U.S. context, terms like diverse are often used to describe communities and individuals who deviate from a white, male, middle-class, and English-speaking norm (Ahmed, 2012; Annamma, Boelé, Moore & Klingner, 2013) without explicitly naming this as the norm. For example, some may use the term diverse or culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) to describe the student population of the DLCS, where 86% of the students are identified as Hispanic (of any race), 9% African American (non-Hispanic), and 5% bi- or multi-racial, and approximately 20% of the students are identified as ELs and 25% as disabled.[3] Many of the students use Spanish outside of school as well, but do not receive any institutional designations. A more precise term than CLD then would be to name that the student population is comprised mostly of students of color who are not monolingual English speakers.

In my work at DLCS, I draw from methodological tools and epistemological stances in our field that include studying norms in different communities and identifying normative language practices that children or language learners are

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[3] These racial categories are those used by the school district where DLCS is located. Data is unavailable for students who are dual-identified as an EL and as having a disability.

Throughout this essay, I alternate between person-first and identify-first language. Even though person-first language is common within education, it may not be the preference of every person with a disability (Collier 2012). Furthermore, person-first language has been to found to further stigmatize disabled people (Gernsbacher, 2017).

socialized into as they enter new spaces. This approach relies on the idea that there is some norm against which particular practices are evaluated. Scholars like Shuman (2015) critique notions like communicative competence and ethnography of communication that rely on single normativities that inevitably marginalize language practices that deviate from those norms. Similarly, Dindar, Lindblom, and Kärnä (2017) explore how research methodologies and epistemologies can shape the pathologization of particular forms of communication, such as silence and echolalia, in the case of children with autism. They argue that research can reify categories of disability like autism instead of critically examining how these categories are socially constructed and used to presume in/competence. Rather than simply stating that specific categories of disability exist when discussing language practices, we must specifically examine what social meanings are attributed to perceived differences from some norm, as well as the material effects of those differences in educational settings (Gabel, 2016). In doing so, as researchers, we can be more attuned to social constructions of norms both in our fieldsites and in our theoretical and methodological frameworks.

In order to explore those social meanings at DLCS, I also draw from what Rosa and Flores (2017) call a *white perceiving subject* that reflects ideological and structural positions that racialize the language practices of people of color. A raciolinguistic analysis foregrounds the role of a perceiver of language and the ways that language practices are understood within social contexts, which include ableist and racist histories in educational institutions and structures. When I hear teachers talk about differences in behavior between urban and suburban students, proxies for race, a raciolinguistic standpoint allows me to focus not on individual teachers, but on how teachers inhabit an *institutional perceiving subject* to evaluate their students (e.g., based on standardized test scores and monoglossic ideas of bilingualism and language proficiency; Flores, Lewis, & Phuong, 2018).

A raciolinguistic perspective also allows for the foregrounding of processes of racialization of different categories of learners, as scholars have done with the EL category (e.g., Flores, Kleyn, & Menken, 2015). In examining institutions, then, I foreground how ableism and racism converge to produce such categories as ELs with disabilities, and how different institutional designations have material effects on students who are categorized as such. For example, a Spanish teacher expressed shock that a class with several ELs with disabilities (SpELs) is less proficient in Spanish than a class with students with disabilities who are not ELs (sped; fieldnotes, 09/06/2018, 10/29/2018). This reveals the underlying assumption that SpELs should be more proficient in Spanish because of their EL label as compared to the sped class. Since the SpEL class defies expectations, their continuing positioning as less proficient and less able in Spanish class as opposed to English class compounds their already presumed lack of competence in English due to the EL designation. This instance reveals the ways that institutional categories like EL and disability impact assessments of linguistic ability, as well as how they influence how entire classes are described, even for students who don't have such institutional designations. These types of evaluations have implications for the instruction and assessments that are made available for these students.

Rosa and Flores (2017) also emphasize the intersectional ways that a raciolinguistic perspective can and should be taken up, offering space for including analyses of disability. Some research exists that considers students who

are dual-identified as EL and as disabled, especially as this category pertains to disproportionality and special education policies, particularly the classification process (e.g., Klingner, Artiles, & Méndez Barletta, 2006; Schissel & Kangas, 2018; Umansky, Thompson, & Díaz, 2017). While studies have focused on the policies concerning and experiences of Latinx ELs with disabilities in particular (e.g., Tefera, Gonzalez, & Artiles, 2017), it is also imperative to emphasize how processes of racism and ableism impact the ways (language) ability is assessed. These processes of racialization must also be contextualized, such as DLCS's situation as a charter school in a *de facto* racially segregated community. Rather than seeing *EL* or *student with disability* as static categories that students inhabit, the focus becomes the contexts and institutional mechanisms that allow for these categories to emerge.

The research above on ELs with disabilities can also be further disentangled by considering different categories of disability in K–12 settings. High-incidence categories of disability include specific learning disability and speech-language impairment, which comprise over 50% of all students aged 3–21 receiving special education services in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). These are often considered so-called soft categories that rely on more subjective evaluation (e.g., teacher anecdotes, intelligence testing, rather than physical or sensory categories of disability), and students of color tend to be overrepresented in these categories of disability (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Moreover, both specific learning disability and speech-languaeg impairment rely on so-called objective assessments of language use as part of the diagnostic criteria (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). At DLCS, and most public schools, students classified as having a high-incidence disability represent the majority of students with disabilities, which points to the importance of disentangling and deconstructing the category of ELs with disabilities, particularly when considering children of color. Different categories of disability elicit different models of personhood for the teachers at DLCS, with teachers having a variety of expectations for appropriate behavior and academic performance depending on the classification (e.g., students with emotional disturbances having outbursts or learning disabled students as so-called "truly sped," fieldnotes, 02/12/2019, 02/26/2019). These differences often become flattened when broadly examining ELs with disabilities.

Focusing on the interconnectedness and ubiquity of racism and ableism also calls for examining the ways that these processes do *not* necessarily converge into categories of disability, but other categories of learners that are not formalized. When teachers discuss their frustrations about working with students who are "high," "medium," or "low" (fieldnotes, 10/23/2018, 12/04/2018, 01/04/2019, 04/16/2019) for example, they are relying on standardized reading assessments that are often ableist and racist in how they purport to objectively evaluate the literacy practices of students of color. Standardized testing and its importance in establishing educational and social policy has roots in eugenics, during which testing was used to reify normative and racialized ideas of intelligence and to seek out those who deviated from a historically and socially constructed norm (Crawford & Bartolomé, 2010; Osgood, 2000). Francis Galton, a well-known eugenicist, was one of the first to apply the normal or bell curve from statistics to human populations, thereby creating a dichotomy between who is or is not normal, particularly

through intelligence testing (Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010). In considering what is normal in educational linguistics, I may hesitate to consider this observation and insight as falling neatly under the umbrella of educational linguistics, particularly because this framing of students' ability exists in monolingual schools or even without considering students who are identified as EL. However, even without institutionalized linguistic diversity (e.g., bilingual programming, ELs), language is integral in considering disability and race in educational institutions.

Foregrounding these systems of oppression in educational linguistics allows scholars to address social inequities not only in our fieldsites (in my case, K–12 U.S. education), but also within our field and academia itself. In order to conduct research that speaks truth to power, we must consider the material conditions and social contexts of language use, rather than privileging language (e.g., Flores & Chaparro, 2017). Furthermore, in explicitly identifying underlying assumptions about what is considered normal in our field, we can more carefully and thoughtfully engage with issues of race and disability to (re)construct more equitable teaching and learning conditions.

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