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Recommended Citation

Hornberger, N. H. (2002). Biliteracy and Schooling for Multilingual Populations. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2002 (155-156), 137-142. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2002.020>

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Biliteracy and Schooling for Multilingual Populations

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**Biliteracy and schooling for
multilingual populations**

NANCY H. HORNBERGER

Eugene Garcia's essay provides a very useful compendium of research findings on effective instructional practices with Hispanic/Latino populations in the United States. His well-informed and well-organized presentation, rooted in and informed by his own considerable research and policy-making experience in this field, offers a valuable resource for educators and policymakers at all levels of the educational system, from classroom practitioners to state and federal legislators.

His Latino focus and policy-making experience are strengths that also account for what might be seen as weaknesses in the essay. The coverage is thorough and informative on Latino schooling but offers very little on other multilingual populations in the US. There are short sections on African-American Vernacular English, on speakers of indigenous languages (but here too the emphasis is on one group, the Navajo), and on the Deaf, but virtually nothing, for example, on the many speakers of Asian and European languages who contribute to the United States linguistic landscape. Similarly, from someone so versed in policy matters, who directed the US Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs from 1993–1995 and currently heads up a leading Graduate School of Education in the policy-rich state of California, I would have liked to see a more detailed, insider perspective on language-education policy. The short section on policy is concise and clear, but, for example, the account of the uptake on Proposition 227 by California's schools and school districts appears oversimplified.

Nevertheless, I found nothing to disagree with and in particular applaud Garcia's stance on three significant matters relating to the education of language minorities in the United States, stances that I believe are also relevant for multilingual populations the world over. These concern educational practice, research, and theory, respectively.

First, he suggests at the outset of his section on "Educational programs that serve these students" that program staff might do well to reject program and model labels and instead set about designing their programs

based on three questions, essentially about the language characteristics of the students and their families and communities; about how to use and teach the native language and English as media and subjects of instruction; and about what staff and resources are needed to do this. I too have suggested that once there is clarity on the goals a particular program is set to achieve (the program model), it is more useful to design the program in terms of a series of characteristics relating to the student population, the teaching staff, and the allocation of languages in the curriculum and the classroom, rather than to get bogged down in assigning a program label, which in any case means different things to different people (Hornberger 1991).

Second, I agree on the need, enunciated in “A responsive research agenda,” for long-term, contextualized research to answer the fundamental questions as to *which* educational practices are best for particular multilingual learners, *whether* the gains are long-term, and *why*. In this regard, I would like to highlight here some areas of research that were not brought out in Garcia’s essay, which I believe address this need in ways that complement but also go beyond the work he cites by Olsen (1997), Romo and Falbo (1996), and Valdés (1996, 1998). I have in mind here classroom-, school-, and community-level ethnographic studies of bilingual education that offer richly contextualized insights into which educational practices work for particular multilingual learners and why, including such studies as Edelsky (1986), Delgado-Gaitan (1990), and Freeman (1998) on US Latino populations; Guthrie (1985), Trueba et al. (1990), Hornberger (1990), and Skilton-Sylvester (1997, forthcoming) on US Asian populations; McCarty (1984, 2002), Leap (1991), and McLaughlin (1992) on US indigenous populations; as well as ethnographic studies outside the US such as Hornberger (1988) on Quechua bilingual education in Peru, Watson-Gegeo (1992) on Kwara’ae language socialization and education in the Solomon Islands, May (1994) on multicultural education in New Zealand, Heller (1999) on French-medium education in Canada, King (2000) on Quichua bilingual education in Ecuador, and others. There is an emerging rich international literature on bilingual classroom discourse that provides telling insight into actual classroom language practices in multilingual settings, revealing striking commonalities across the developing and developed world (Martin-Jones and Heller 1996, 2001). Another related area is the international ethnographic work on social literacies (Garcia alludes to the changing conceptions of literacy in his section on academic English, but without reference to any literature, e.g. Street 1995). There is long-term, contextualized research on literacies, discourses, and identities among multilingual populations, such as the work collected in Skutnabb-Kangas and

Cummins (1988), Hornberger (1996), and Martin-Jones and Jones (2000). All of this work sheds much light on the questions of what works, whether it lasts, and why.

Finally, I strongly agree with Garcia's repeated assertion that "We need a set of theories or constructs that help us to better understand why some interventions work and others do not for the diverse populations being served" (from the section entitled "A responsive research agenda"). Skilton-Sylvester and I have proposed a theoretical framework, the continua of biliteracy, which we suggest can serve to situate research, teaching, and language planning in multilingual settings. The continua-of-biliteracy model uses the notion of intersecting and nested continua to demonstrate the multiple and complex interrelationships between bilingualism and literacy and the importance of the contexts, media, and content through which biliteracy develops. Specifically, it depicts the development of biliteracy along intersecting first language–second language, receptive–productive, and oral-written language-skills continua; through the medium of two (or more) languages and literacies whose linguistic structures vary from similar to dissimilar, whose scripts range from convergent to divergent, and to which the developing biliterate individual's exposure varies from simultaneous to successive; in contexts that encompass micro to macro levels and are characterized by varying mixes along the monolingual–bilingual and oral–literate continua; and with content that ranges from majority to minority perspectives and experiences, literacy to vernacular styles and genres, and decontextualized to contextualized language texts (Hornberger 1989, forthcoming; Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000).

Biliteracy, in this model, refers to "any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing" (Hornberger 1990: 213). In order to understand any particular instance of biliteracy — be it an individual biliterate actor, interaction, practice, program, situation, or society — we as educators, researchers, community members or policy makers need to take account of all dimensions represented by the continua. At the same time, the advantage of the model is that it allows us to focus for pedagogical, analytical, activist, or policy purposes on one or selected continua and their dimensions without ignoring the importance of the others.

The notion of continuum is intended to convey that what's in between the endpoints is as important as, or more important than, the endpoints themselves: "There are infinitely many points on the continuum; any single point is inevitably and inextricably related to all other points" (Hornberger 1989: 274–275). The essential argument from the model is that the more their learning contexts allow learners to draw on all points

of the continua, the greater are the chances for their full biliterate development (1989: 289). Implicit in that argument is a recognition that there has usually *not* been attention to all points.

Garcia presents a series of insights that are interpretable within the continua of biliteracy model. For example,

1. Garcia highlights the following finding from a series of case studies of exemplary schools (McCleod 1996): "Foster English acquisition and the development of mature literacy. Schools utilized native language abilities to develop literacy that promoted English literacy development. Schools were more interested in this mature development than transitioning students quickly into English language instruction" (from the section entitled "What works"). These relationships between L1 and L2, oral and written, receptive and productive development are depicted in the continua of biliterate development.

2. Garcia concludes his section on "Dialects and bilingualism" with the statement, "In these additive responses to language variation, we are building on the language the children already have to help them acquire the language and the subject matter they need to succeed in school." This corresponds to the continua of biliterate media, which highlight the need to be able to draw on knowledge of one language structure and literacy script while learning the other.

3. In his concluding paragraphs on "Language, cognition, and culture," Garcia tells us, "When the educational focus is on transitioning culturally diverse students to a mainstream culture rather than building on what they already know the students are forced to change in order to meet the needs of the classroom." The continua of biliterate content are about building on the ways of knowing, being, seeing, thinking, expressing, etc., that biliterate learners bring with them.

4. Summarizing his review of the literature on the "Language of bilinguals," Garcia emphasizes the need to consider linguistic, cognitive, and social attributes: "The interactive conceptualization is meant to reflect the interrelationship among linguistic, cognitive, and social aspects of development often missing in educational programming for this population." The continua of biliterate contexts call for attention to all contextual aspects, linguistic and sociolinguistic, cultural and socio-cultural, economic and socioeconomic, political and sociopolitical, etc., from macro to micro in every domain of human life.

In investigating the complexity of biliteracy and schooling for multilingual populations, using the continua as a theoretical framework, one sees the ways in which certain practices, varieties, contextual features, and instructional strategies have been tools for gaining and/or sustaining

power, while others have not. There has tended to be an implicit privileging of one end of the continua over the other such that one end of each continuum is associated with more power than the other (e.g. written development over oral development). The model points to the need to contest the traditional power weighting in multilingual-education policy and practice by paying attention to and granting agency and voice to actors and practices at what have traditionally been the less powerful ends of the continua (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000: 98–99).

This is similar to Garcia's theoretical stance in "A responsive pedagogy" that "the more compatibly the organization of instruction mirrors the organization of instruction in the home, the more likely school can enhance learning for students." Garcia highlights home-school continuity; the continua model brings to light this and several other continuities that must be attended to. The continua-of-biliteracy model thus provides a theoretical framework within which to construct the responsive pedagogy and research agenda (and policy) that Garcia proposes in his concluding section, which are so urgently needed in the US and in multilingual educational settings everywhere.

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