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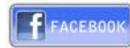
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Language Is Not the Only Barrier (Unless It Is): An Essay Review

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Kanno, Yasuko & Harklau, Linda (Eds.) (2012) *Linguistic Minority Students Go to College: Preparation, Access, and Persistence*. New York & London: Routledge.

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If demography is destiny, then the future of American higher education is linguistically diverse. Nationally, 21% of K-12 school children live in a home where a language other than English is spoken, and these linguistic-minority (LM) children are the fastest growing segment of the American school population; but in postsecondary

education, this proportion drops to 11%. These are the bare facts driving Kanno and Harklau's edited volume, which examines which linguistic minority students go to college, how they get there, why they sometimes cannot get there, and what happens once they are there. The quantitative data alone in this collection should give

school and university administrators pause for thought. Either large numbers of LM children are being denied access to higher education, or a flood of them is about to hit college and university campuses. Or perhaps both.

However, this important collection of research papers does not stop there but includes qualitative research highlighting high school and higher education policies as well as the individual and group characteristics of LM students that affect their preparation for, access to, and persistence in postsecondary education. Far from simplifying and explaining the statistics, these voices from students, faculty, and advisors bring to light “the complexity and instability of the factors that lead to college-going in linguistic minority students over time” (Harklau & McClanahan, p. 88). As the editors note in the preface, “there is a curious void in our knowledge about linguistic minority students’ placement and participation in college” (p. vii), and in attempting to address this gap, scholars from around the country and across the field offer few answers but raise many important questions.

Since the “language” component of LM students’ college-going experience has already been studied to some extent, including two important books co-authored by Harklau herself, this volume focuses on the “minority” rather than the “linguistic.” The thirteen empirical studies represent an impressive range of disciplines and research paradigms, written by scholars from the fields of education, literacy, applied linguistics, sociology, and demography as well as administrators, advocates, and doctoral

students. The book is divided into three sections and begins with a sequence of four studies that investigate college preparation for LM students in high school. Whereas previous research has limited itself to immigrant children’s language development and graduation rates, these chapters ask whether and how America’s high schools are providing realistic and attainable routes to college for linguistic minorities. The results are highly critical: English-language learners are often unable to access the courses they need for college preparation (Callahan & Shifrer), especially advanced mathematics (Mosqueda), with Latino children (both immigrants and U.S.-born) at a particular disadvantage. Success is possible but, in Harklau and McClanahan’s words, “unlikely” (p. 74), and stories of LM students who make it to college show how fraught the process is due in part to the complexity of factors that affect immigrant children as well as institutional bureaucracy and discriminatory policies. Even interventions that are shown to work, such as the open-access International Baccalaureate Diploma Program described by Mayer, are threatened by funding and the drive towards test-based standardization.

Part Two follows LM students as they make the transition from secondary to higher education, and once more this section is equally divided between quantitative and qualitative research. Nuñez and Sparks analyze the national picture using data from the 2004 Beginning Postsecondary Students Study. They compared enrollment at selective universities, nonselective four-year institutions, and community colleges, and found that LM students are “evenly

distributed across the sectors.” However, compared to non-LM peers, they are overrepresented in community colleges and underrepresented in nonselective four-year institutions, which the authors suggest may be an economic decision (choosing the cheaper two-year college as a stepping stone to a bachelor’s degree rather than studying all four years at a nonselective university). It must be remembered, however, that the overall participation of LM students in higher education is very low, so the largest group of LM high-school students do not enter the tertiary level at all. The authors further categorized their variables using Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of capital and habitus, which effectively explains the patterns in this large data set. They conclude that “it is not being of LM background per se that determines where one begins college” (p. 123); rather, access to cultural and economic capital and sharing the habitus of the mainstream tertiary population are significant factors.

One way to attract those immigrant students who lack the cultural and social capital to navigate their way to college is the contentious policy of affirmative action. Rodriguez describes the impact of the Texan plan to automatically admit the top 10% of all high school classes to its public universities. Since high schools in the state are highly segregated, this dramatically increased the number of LM students in higher education. However, matriculation does not imply graduation, and more LM than non-LM students do not complete their degrees within six years (37% versus 23%). There are also differences in enrollment patterns between the state’s top-tier schools and other public

universities, with English/Spanish bilinguals less likely to attend the most prestigious universities and then graduating at lower rates than monolinguals.

Issues related to access and retention are explored in the remaining chapters of this section, two of the four in the book which discuss the pseudonymous Northern Green University (NGU), a research-intensive, flagship “public Ivy” on the west coast with competitive admissions and high academic standards. Kanno and Grosik compare the support (or hindrance) NGU provides its ESL students with a less selective East coast university. Although they do not use Bourdieu’s terms, it is clear that both cultural and linguistic capital mediate LM students’ experiences at these universities. Two students from the NGU data are analyzed as case studies in Varghese’s chapter in Part Two and Fuentes’s chapter in Part Three, and the final chapter of the book, by Shawna Shapiro, reviews and further critiques NGU’s programs and policies: more will be said about these later.

Part Three of the volume concerns “college experience and persistence.” In addition to the two chapters about NGU, there are two studies about LM students in community colleges (Almon; Bunch & Endris) and an ethnographic case study of participants in scholarships based on the BESITOS model (Bilingual/Bicultural Education Students Interacting to Obtain Success), a federally-funded program to train culturally diverse teachers (Holmes et al.). Several themes emerge from this section: the tendency of the mainstream educational system to devalue

bilingualism and consequently marginalize linguistic minorities, even when their English is fluent; the potential linguistic capital that bilinguals possess, which may not always be recognized and celebrated; the problems of sheltered ESL classes that profess to prepare students for college coursework but sometimes serve to exclude their students from high status academic paths; and the importance and costs of student agency.

Before examining these issues further, a few words about the title are necessary: who are “linguistic minority” students? Any attempt to discuss, or indeed teach, students from non-English speaking backgrounds invariably becomes mired in an alphabet soup of terminology, each with the power to label and potentially discriminate against a particular group: ESL (English as a Second Language), ELL (English Language Learner), EAL (English as an Additional Language), NNES (Non-native English Speaker), and NELB (Non-English Language Background), to name but a few. To this mix now must be added LM (linguistic minority), with sub-categories of EL (English Learners) and EP (English Proficient) students, as opposed to EM (monolingual English) students. The challenge is more than semantic: as this book shows, the labels attached to school children and later university students can affect their access to academic content, to advanced courses, and even to the university curriculum. The nomenclature proposed by Kanno, Harklau, and their authors is valuable, if somewhat vertiginous, because it attempts to parse out the different effects of immigration status (first or second generation), ethnicity (not all Latinos are

linguistic minorities), and English proficiency (not all immigrants lack English language proficiency). Unfortunately, the large-scale data sets available for analysis do not always allow these distinctions to be maintained, which confuses the constructs in some of the quantitative studies here. Nonetheless, in at least attempting to establish these important distinctions, these chapters should guide administrators and teachers as they try to understand a new generation of students who do not always look, sound, and write like their predecessors.

A linguistic-minority student is defined here as one who speaks a language other than English at home (p. 1). However, not all LM children are English-language learners. In a typical immigration pattern to the U.S., the first generation comprises ELs with a non-English native language; their children, the second generation, often speak both English and their parents’ language fluently, but are still considered LM (but not EL) since they primarily speak the other language at home; meanwhile, the third generation is essentially monolingual in English, speaking it both at home and in school. This categorization works well in K-12 contexts but becomes somewhat problematic in college: at what point does the language spoken in one’s childhood home cease to label the linguistic status of an adult? Furthermore, LM status is determined by students’ self-report on admissions forms and thus may be both over- and underreported strategically by students who believe bilingualism is an asset or an impediment to admissions. For instance, in Rodriguez’s study of LM students in Texas, only 5% of the students enrolling from the

top 10% of their high-school class admitted to speaking “English only,” while 84% declined to answer the question but were presumably also monolinguals. Rodridguez reasonably assumes that in this context, monolinguals might consider bilingualism an advantage for admissions to the top-tier schools (a form of affirmative action), so they would be harming their chances by admitting their lack of Spanish proficiency. This is interesting because throughout most of this book, LM status is a disadvantage, so the Texan case is a reminder of the importance of delving into the local context rather than generalizing from large-scale data sets.

There are moments in the book where the LM label slips. One of the most important is the story of Paula, a Latina high-school student who overcame significant obstacles to enroll in and ultimately complete an associate’s degree (Harklau & McCalanagan). Paula was a first-generation immigrant who moved to Georgia from Mexico in kindergarten. We presume that Spanish was spoken in her home, but no mention is made in this chapter either of Paula’s home language or indeed the role of English proficiency in her school career. In fact, her diagnosis with a learning disability had a far greater impact on Paula’s access to college-preparatory classes than her LM and/or EL status did. Furthermore, Paula was an undocumented immigrant, although she would have been eligible for naturalization had her family possessed the financial resources to navigate the expensive immigration process. As a result, Paula’s case should not be seen as in any way representative of LM students more broadly.

However, the description of Paula is interesting because of one label which is conspicuous by its absence from this chapter and most of the volume: Generation 1.5, that is, students who moved to the U.S. at a young enough age (no later than the first few grades of formal schooling) to acquire more-or-less native oral English proficiency. The label would appear to fit Paula perfectly, especially since one of the authors of the book that highlighted the plight of Generation 1.5 was Harklau herself (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). Harklau has since expressed concerns that the term is being “reified” (Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, & Warschauer, 2003, p. 155) and could lead to a “discourse of need” (p. 156), a concern which—with or without the Generation 1.5 label—appears from this volume to be well founded.

However, it would be an equal disservice to students such as Paola to assume that they are all English proficient and no longer “active learners of English (Matsuda et al., 2003, p. 155): their oral fluency may mask non-nativelike features in writing and difficulties with academic reading that may hinder their success in secondary and higher education (Harklau et al., 1999).

Paula’s case exemplifies one of the central conflicts in this book: do LM students benefit from English language support, or is EL designation—including related labels such as Generation 1.5—a stigma that blocks such students from higher education? The evidence is sobering for the ESL profession. In their review of a series of five recent studies, Callahan and Shifrer conclude that “the academic achievement of ELs remains significantly behind that of comparable

linguistic minority students not placed in ESL, suggesting that they leave U.S. high schools lacking the academic preparation necessary to enter, much less compete in higher education” (p. 30). Even worse, the longer LM students stay in ESL classes, the less prepared they are at graduation. The same patterns are reported in community colleges: Almon found that “the lower the level of ESL in which students began, the poorer they performed in every area” (p. 190); in fact students placed in the lowest levels were “five times less likely to complete the ESL program” (p. 197), presumably in comparison to those who began at higher levels. That said, the community college data in particular are limited in their explanatory power since the regressions explain only small portions of the variance, and many other factors, including English language proficiency (as opposed to placement) could not be included due to the nature of the data available.

Callahan and Shiffner lay a good deal of the blame on the mismatch between ESL program goals and exit-testing criteria, arguing that “ESL programs focus on language at the expense of academic [content] mastery” (p. 30-31), while the criteria for full mainstreaming include grade-level performance in content areas. The authors’ generalizations about ESL support should be treated with caution since provisions vary widely between states, districts, and even schools. However, their hypothesis that ESL teachers are—with the best of intentions—“watering down” curricula designed around content-based pedagogies is worth taking very seriously.

This presumed mismatch between ESL programs and academic requirements may extend to the university level. This is the argument advanced by the chapters which focus on the case of Northern Green University. Like many U.S. universities, NGU has struggled to define which students need language support, and the editors do not doubt that academic literacy is important for college success, although they rightly note that it is also not sufficient (p. 12). However, NGU’s approach was to require all non-native English speaking students who were also non-U.S. citizens to take an ESL placement test unless they had achieved threshold scores on standardized tests (p. 139). This is at best a blunt instrument to identify students who may struggle with academic English, and at worse, it is outright discriminatory. As students there were quick to realize, naturalization carried an automatic exemption from ESL placement, regardless of language proficiency. The reverse might also be said (but is not): ELs who were citizens were denied ESL support.

It is regrettable that the editors chose to end the book with Shapiro’s chapter, which provides the background information summarized above necessary to understand the three earlier chapters that deal in whole or in part with NGU. Shapiro usefully asks to what extent programs such as the one at NGU are “student advocates or institutional ‘border control’” (p. 240). Her implication, though, that ESL classes can only be one or the other is misleading: what better advocacy for students than preparing them to succeed in a competitive university environment?

Admittedly, I do not write from an entirely disinterested position: as a faculty member in a somewhat similar program (albeit one designed for international students and not U.S. high school graduates), I dispute the implication that all or even most English for academic purposes programs are “remedial,” designed to protect the interests of the institution more than the students. The only evidence supporting this claim in Shapiro’s chapter comes from surveys conducted in 1995, and the field has grown substantially since then.

NGU’s ESL program seems to border on the unethical in its design, assessment, and exit criteria, and here all the authors have good reason to criticize it. For instance, its “Operations Manual” describes one of the unit’s goals as to ensure that students “do not pose an excessive burden to instructors” (p. 246); this is setting the bar rather low and phrasing the mission in unacceptably negative terms. Furthermore, the curriculum at that time did not include “any extensive reading or writing, and no direct instruction in speaking” (p. 247), which, to an ESL professional, seems extraordinary and unconscionable. The department had thus reduced academic language proficiency to grammar alone, an untenable position in the light of decades of research into second language acquisition and second language writing. In its ESL provisions, the university managed to produce the same effect that the landmark *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) ruling set out to rectify by creating a program which discriminated against students on the basis of national origin, albeit with the expressed interest of supporting them. In fact, NGU has learned

from the critical research of Shapiro and others and has since revised its placement procedures, curricula, and assessments, a fact which is only hinted at once in this book (and then parenthetically; Shapiro, p. 241). It is unfortunate, therefore, that the editors attempt to generalize from NGU describing it as “rather typical” (p. viii). The case of NGU should have been treated as the exception and not the rule.

Nonetheless, this extreme case still usefully highlights the challenges that face all of us in the field of academic preparatory ESL: on the one hand, Kanno and Grosvic acknowledge that students’ “limited English proficiency negatively affected their performance on college entrance exams such as the SAT and hence, their acceptance to selective institutions” (p. 135). Even after matriculation, “they continued to encounter difficulties with academic reading and writing throughout their coursework” (p. 135). However, at the same time, they validate NGU students’ “resentment” at being required to develop their English proficiency before beginning university coursework as “punitive and costly” (p. 144). This is not to defend NGU’s weak program model, but it would be wrong for readers to rush to judgment over all academic ESL programs on the basis of this one institution. While in an ideal world, universities would be adapting faster to the needs of LM students, both domestic and international, Shapiro’s interviews with faculty suggest that many (not all) professors are reluctant to change their teaching and assessment to accommodate non-native speakers of English. Thus, far from alienating students, a good ESL program

should be equipping them with the skills Shapiro highlights that are needed for integration and success, but these must include language proficiency. With that caveat, I concur with Shapiro's clarion call: "not remediation, but mediation" (p. 252).

NGU's failure to provide such mediation is illustrated in Fuentes's year-long case study of an LM student at NGU. Nassim was a 21-year-old Iranian refugee who had lived in the U.S. for five years when the study began. After completing the last two grades of high school with ESL support, she studied at a community college for a further two years, taking one ESL course. However, when she transferred to NGU, she was required to take classes in the now notorious academic ESL program. Her ultimate goal was to train as an optometrist, and she treated her entire NGU experience as a nuisance to be overcome en route to her career aspirations.

Fuentes analyzes Nassim's situation using Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), a framework which reveals the often hidden ways in which educational institutions reproduce the social structure around them. In this case, Nassim views NGU's policies and campus ethos as furthering her home society's attempts to exclude her from her intended career and presumably concomitant social position: as a Baha'i woman in Iran, higher education was out of the question. Although the university granted Nassim admission, it did so in such a way as to create academic, social, and financial obstacles by placing her (rightly or wrongly) in the academic English program; the university is

"condemned to disappoint in some the aspirations it encourages in all" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 210). Furthermore, the pressure of this elite university's high academic standards alienated Nassim and led her to a path of passive resistance in which she effectively gamed the system in order to maintain a high GPA without submitting to the challenges of the more demanding science classes (she took those at a local community college) in order to protect her dream of attending optometry school.

While her success is laudable, readers who teach in higher education may be uncomfortable with the implications of her strategy. This chapter seems to suggest that academically rigorous universities like NGU should not require all students to engage in extensive reading, writing, or speaking as part of their undergraduate degrees in order not to marginalize LM students. If "some students such as native-English speakers could more easily meet the university's high academic standards because they are more likely to possess the cultural and linguistic capital to do so" (p. 227), then surely the solution is, as Shapiro suggests, to share this capital with LM students through mediating programs. Viewed through Bourdieu's lens, however, this is fraught with difficulty. Nassim's resistance to both her ESL classes and the university itself stems as much from her habitus (her disposition towards the campus, the educational system, and the whole of American culture) as from her lack of linguistic and cultural capital. For example, she complains about the campus's monolingualism, a criticism which the author appears to endorse, noting that "the absence

of displays [meaning signs on campus] in languages besides English reinforced the dominant position of English at NGU” (p. 228). It seems unfair to criticize the university for not displaying signage in Farsi or any other language, but the point here is that Nassim’s habitus is both a cause and an effect of her struggles with academic English: that is, because she did not believe in the value of her ESL classes (“I just need to practice more and I’m not going to learn it in three months, so just leave me alone,” p. 229), she developed a negative disposition toward the university, and because of her habitus, she was not able to acquire the “educationally profitable linguistic capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 116) required to succeed in a traditional sense.

The critique of poorly conceived academic English programs is well intentioned and effective, but the book loses some credibility by not considering any alternative models at NGU’s peer institutions. The only comparison is with a less competitive and less prestigious university with a much larger multicultural population, for whom an ESL section of first-year composition is sufficient. While such a course may be desirable in itself, it cannot be expected to serve all LM students in all universities. As an example of one solution that takes the mediating role of ESL programs seriously, my colleagues at the University of Delaware are piloting an innovative cohort program which aims to increase international ESL students’ cultural and social capital alongside their linguistic proficiency in order to help them succeed academically at, integrate socially in, and contribute positively to the larger university.

Four chapters was rather too much real estate to spend berating an atypical program which no longer exists in the form described. Another question which could have been addressed is whether college should even be the aspiration for all LM students. This line of thinking may not be popular among ESL faculty and immigrant advocates, but it is nonetheless worth asking. Marsh (2011) has called for a reexamination of the delusion that a college degree in itself will guarantee a well-paying job and a middle-class lifestyle. While he concedes that the advice to attend postsecondary education may benefit an individual student, it cannot help an entire social group, such as immigrant or LM students, because the number of individuals far exceeds the jobs available. Kanno and Harklau open their book with this statistic: “by 2018 it is estimated that 63% of new job openings will require at least some level of postsecondary education” (p. 1). However, Marsh re-analyzes these data and finds that the economy “will generate more jobs that do *not* require a college degree than jobs that do” (p. 71). While it is certainly possible to earn a degree and find a better-paying job, the more college graduates there are competing for these jobs, the more Macdonald’s cooks and cab drivers there will be with bachelor’s degrees. And these jobs will not pay any more than they do today, however qualified the worker is. Thus, the economic reality actually supports the trend that some of the authors in this book decry: LM students are being prepared for workplaces not university places (Callahan & Shifrer; Mosqueda).

This analysis is consistent with Bourdieu, who argues that a large increase in the numbers of a disadvantaged group (for him, the working class) in higher education would in fact reduce their success on average since admission would necessarily be less selective, meaning there would be more students with a greater gap between their capital and habitus and those of the academy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 76). In encouraging LM students to go to college, then, teachers may be unintentionally setting many of them up for failure.

This way depression lies for educators, and the tone of this book, although critical of current policies, is more optimistic than this. It is still possible for linguistic minority students to buck the trend and enter, survive, and succeed in higher education. Mayer's chapter, for example, shows how the International Baccalaureate's challenging, language-focused curriculum can provide the skills and capital immigrants need in the U.S. education system. It is noteworthy that the IB Diploma program described here was not a silver bullet for all students: many did not complete it, causing the district to judge the program a failure and divert resources towards programs directly aimed at improving standardized test scores. This only strengthens Marsh's argument, implicit in Bourdieu: there should be pathways to higher education for some, but not a forced march to college for all.

Administrators and policy makers at the high-school and college levels can do more to open these pathways for LM students, while also strengthening vocational training

opportunities. Supporting sound, evidence-based programs such as the IB Diploma is a positive step. Discriminatory policies about ESL placement and testing that are not supported by any scholarship let alone logic must be repealed. Weak curricula and badly designed college ESL programs can be reformed, and best practices from universities with successful LM populations, both domestic and international, should be shared and adapted to fit local conditions. And above all, language needs to take its rightful place front and center in the preparation of all students—LM or otherwise—for college, if that is to be the goal, since “University French [read, English] has never been anyone's mother tongue” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 116). *Linguistic Minority Students Go to College* can read as both an imperative and a bald statement of fact: (some) LM students will go to college, and higher education needs to know who they are, what they need, and how to support them.

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