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The Discourse of Transition: Teachers’ Language Ideologies Within Transitional Bilingual Education Programs

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Transitional bilingual education (TBE), the most common form of bilingual education in the United States, is too often entrenched in a subtractive, English-dominant ideology. This article explores the conflicting language ideologies of teachers in TBE programs, posing the question, “In what way do TBE teachers’ discourses reflect/reinforce and simultaneously confront/counter the ideology of the program model within which they operate?” The article draws on two datasets: interviews with 16 TBE teachers at 6 schools in a large, urban school district in Texas and participant observations; and interviews of 2 TBE teachers as they struggled to move their classrooms away from English dominance and toward a more balanced, additive bilingual space. Based on Bourdieu’s conception of legitimate language and Bakhtin’s conception of dialogue, the article argues that TBE teachers demonstrate a tension between their stated positive orientations toward bilingualism and the restrictive influences of what is termed the “discourse of transition” as they talk about their students, about their classrooms, and about their own decision-making in TBE programs. Essentially, teachers practicing under the structures of a TBE program struggle to simultaneously offer children a “transitional” and a “bilingual” education.

Keywords: english dominance, language ideology, teacher beliefs, transitional bilingual education

Public conversations around language issues in the United States tend to draw from a “language as a problem” discourse (Ruiz, 1984). Given the monolingual English paradigm that dominates the country, this is not surprising. Perhaps, then, it should not be surprising to realize that so-called “bilingual” programs in many places in the United States, in reality, operate as spaces in which to help children overcome their bilingualism “problem” to “become” monolingual English-speaking Americans (Olsen, 1997). In particular, the ideology of transitional bilingual education (TBE) is problematic (Crawford, 2004).

TBE has evolved to be the preferred and, by far, the most common model for bilingual services in the United States (Crawford, 2004). The stated goal of TBE programs is to help English language learner (ELL) students learn English while supporting them in core subjects in their primary language. Ultimately, children are expected to make a “transition” from primary-language

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instruction into English-language instruction, leaving their primary language behind, at least at school. Language education policy in the United States has undergone multiple shifts back and forth, favoring and then not favoring minority language maintenance (Wiese & Garcia, 1998). Although, at times, federal education policy has seemed to promote multiculturalism and multilingualism, for the most part funding has been provided to support programs that would promote the learning of English (Crawford, 2004; Petrovic, 2010).

The struggle for bilingual education began, at least for some, as a means of affirming Chicano/Latino cultural and linguistic identities (Blanton, 2005). However, to gain and maintain national and mainstream support, the backers of the *Bilingual Education Act* (1968) found themselves arguing for bilingual support as compensatory education to address the “problem” of children’s language differences (Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000; Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003; Wiese & Garcia, 1998). It is this rationale that has led to the promotion of TBE. English is clearly positioned as the legitimate language in this hegemonic system, whereas Spanish and other minority languages are subordinate (Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999; Moraes, 1996). Yet, at the same time, TBE is undeniably bilingual education: It uses minority languages for instruction in public school classrooms; and this, to a greater or lesser extent, legitimizes these languages in an official space.

The consensus in the research on bilingual programs is that TBE does a better job at preparing ELL students for long-term academic success than most models of English as a second language (ESL) or “sheltered immersion” instruction (i.e., instruction that does not draw on students’ primary languages). However, TBE pales in comparison to the more powerful additive models of bilingual education, such as dual-language or maintenance bilingual programs (Collier & Thomas, 2004; Ramirez, 1992; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). For a wide variety of reasons, mainly political and ideological, TBE is highly controversial. It has been the target of the English-only movement in recent decades (Unz & Tuchman, 1997; Wright, 2005). Meanwhile, dual-language education has met with the approval of even some ardent opponents of TBE (Glenn, 1990 as cited in Cummins, 2001, p. 276).

Despite the problematic ideology behind TBE, there are many superb instructors in TBE programs who view children’s primary languages as valuable resources—not just for learning English, but for maintaining access to their heritage, helping develop problem-solving skills, and opening doors to opportunities globally. Many educators within TBE programs develop strategies for helping children sustain Spanish while simultaneously developing English. Yet, even when TBE teachers have strong and intentional additive bilingual goals for their students, the ideology of the transitional program has a way of invading the spaces around their discourses.

Through examining the ideologies of teachers working within TBE programs in one city in Texas, this article complicates the political debate surrounding bilingual education in the United States. Often framed as a simple dichotomy between assimilationism to the English majority and pluralism through minority language and cultural maintenance (for an analysis of this dichotomy, see Varghese, 2008), the bilingual education debate shows its complexity when teachers working within TBE programs are asked about their own beliefs, and about their practices, as they work to carry out the simultaneous (but, in some ways, mutually exclusive) goals of transition and bilingualism.

For my purposes, ideologies are beliefs held as truths, most often unconsciously, and rooted in one’s social position. Ideologies can be directly stated as beliefs or revealed in practices. They are beliefs that are generally linked with positions of power within a culture or community and, for that reason, may distort reality in favor of those in power (Kroskerty, 2000; Macedo & Bartolomé,
This is not to imply that only those in power can have ideologies; quite the contrary: We all hold a wide range of beliefs to be truths, often regardless of our own position within them. For example, often individuals who are members of undervalued ethnic and linguistic communities carry ideologies of self-hatred or self-oppression (Anzaldúa, 1987). At the same time, people and groups in all social positions can nurture and develop empowering and liberating ideologies about themselves and others.

Language ideologies, in particular, or people’s unstated, often unconscious beliefs about language implicate politics and identities. In other words, linguistic ideologies are intimately linked with cultural identities and understandings and with group and national politics (Anzaldúa, 1987; Irvine & Gal, 2000). According to Woolard (1998), language ideology has been the object of study in several distinct disciplines, all of which I draw on for this analysis. First, linguistic anthropologists are concerned with the relation between linguistic ideologies and linguistic structures (Wortham, 2001). Second, language ideology is discussed in relation to contact between languages or language varieties, such as the contact between Spanish and English in a bilingual classroom. Finally, ideologies have emerged in the study of public discourses on language and language policy (Wiley, 2000; Wright, 2005). Ultimately, it is the larger policy of TBE programs that I aim to examine through exploring the tension between conflicting linguistic ideologies asserted by teachers working in TBE programs.

The research question that guides this analysis is, “In what way do TBE teachers’ discourses reflect/reinforce and simultaneously confront/counter the ideology of the program model within which they operate?” To fulfill the expectations laid on them as TBE teachers, educators with expressed positive orientations toward bilingualism and the role of Spanish in their students’ lives enact practices that undermine their students’ identities and Spanish language development in favor of assimilation to the dominant language and culture. I argue that there is a specific set of “discourses,” or linguistic and cultural practices, that dominate the TBE program. Although teachers always retain agency within the structures of their bilingual programs, in many instances, their choices for their students are limited by the TBE program and its concomitant discourses. This tension between teachers’ stated positive orientations toward bilingualism and the restrictive influences of what I term the “discourse of transition” surfaces in teachers’ ways of talking about their students, about their classrooms, and about their own decision-making; and ultimately determines the ways in which teachers open and limit opportunities for their bilingual students to succeed in school.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Three conceptual tools inform this analysis: the link between language ideologies and teacher beliefs, Bourdieu’s (1991) framing of legitimate language, and Bakhtin’s (1998) conception of dialogue.

Research on teacher beliefs, in general, has pointed to the fact that teaching is a highly complex and unpredictable endeavor, rife with ill-defined problems and a large number of interwoven influences. For this reason, teachers are likely to draw on belief systems rather than other, perhaps more rationally based, forms of knowledge (Nespor, 1987). Pajares (1992) further elaborated on the distinction between beliefs and knowledge, reinforcing the idea that beliefs are based on personal evaluation and judgment. Given the complexity of the teaching task and the tendency
of teachers to draw from personal beliefs as they teach, it is not surprising that more and more research is emerging that underlines the importance of teachers’ beliefs and orientations in the implementation of new policy or reform in schools. Although a traditional view of policy implementation places teachers in a passive role as receivers or conduits of policy reform (Fullan, 1991; Stritikus & Garcia, 2000), research continues to emerge, reinforcing the powerful role teachers play in this process (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Maxwell-Jolly, 2000; Olson, 2009; Valdiviezo, 2009; Varghese & Stritikus, 2005).

Some studies have directly examined teachers’ attitudes toward bilingual children and bilingual education (Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Ramos, 2001; Shin & Krashen, 1996). When examining bilingual teachers’ beliefs, Flores (2001) related their attitudes to self-reported practices; this study found that prior experiences influenced bilingual teachers’ beliefs about how their students learn. Varghese (2008) argued that bilingual teachers’ beliefs about teaching and language emerged within the cultural worlds in which they were embedded, thus inseparable from their lives and their practices. In a sense, teachers’ ideologies about language and teaching were co-constructed through interactions throughout their lives and within their school contexts, district contexts, and state policy contexts. Their practice as bilingual teachers (e.g., their enactment of the policies carried down from their districts and schools) was intimately tied to their own beliefs. Other research supports this interactive co-construction of teacher ideologies and policy implementation (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Asato, 2000; Olson, 2009; Skilton-Sylvester, 2003).

In a study conducted in an ESL high school classroom, Olivo (2003) examined the result of tensions between conflicting ideologies. He argued that ideology emerges not only in teachers’ stated beliefs, but more saliently in their actual daily practices in teaching and discussing their students. In this study, I too operate under the assumption that both stated beliefs and self-described practices can reveal ideologies.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991) adeptly described the dynamic of language dominance: “All language practices are measured against the legitimate practices, i.e. the practices of those who are dominant” (p. 53). According to Bourdieu, a society’s hierarchies of power are reflected in, and simultaneously reinforced by, the status of the languages of different groups who live within that society. Much of the energy we spend communicating is expended in working to maximize our “linguistic capital” through careful choice of language and use of accent or affect. Those who are in possession of the dominant language are apt to maintain their symbolic dominance, whereas speakers of secondary, minority, or local languages are symbolically silenced (Foucault, 1981; Lippi-Green, 1997), which Irvine and Gal (2000) described as “erased.”

Bakhtin (1998) asserted that individuals both construct (through their own contributions to the world of ideas) and are constructed by the world around them (because of their need to rely on a shared discourse in order to communicate). This “dialogic” relation is reflected in teachers’ enactment of TBE. Teachers’ unspoken and often unconscious assumptions about language can have a tremendous influence on the kinds of learning opportunities they make available to their linguistically diverse students (Olivo, 2003; Skilton-Sylvester, 2003; Varghese & Stritikus, 2005).

**METHOD**

In Texas, where this study was conducted, state law mandates the use of TBE for speakers of languages other than English in the elementary grades, provided there are 20 or more such speakers
in one language at a grade level in a district. In other words, if a district serves 20 or more students at a grade level, who speak any single non-English language, then the district is expected to provide a TBE program for those students. Texas law does allow districts to provide a bilingual education program that focuses not only on the acquisition on English, but also on primary-language maintenance or bilingual or biliterate development, such as a dual-language program. However, the requirement is TBE (Texas Education Code, 1995).

This analysis draws on two separate datasets: a set of open-ended interviews of 16 third-through fifth-grade bilingual teachers at six schools, and participant observations and interviews of two primary-grade bilingual teachers. All data were collected in the same urban school district in central Texas, where TBE is a loosely defined policy and early-exit TBE programs are the norm. In the following, I further describe the methods employed in data collection and analysis for each dataset.

**Bilingual Teacher Interview Data**

In the Winter of 2006 we (myself and several graduate student assistants) interviewed 16 bilingual teachers at third-, fourth,- and fifth-grade levels in six schools in a large, urban school district in central Texas. I purposively selected schools to reflect a wide range of administrator orientations toward bilingual education. Two of the schools had principals who were strong supporters of bilingual education, two schools were led by principals who were opposed to the district’s and state’s TBE policy, and two of the principals stood in the middle of these stances. Principals were interviewed in each school, and were asked at the end of their interviews to identify third-through fifth-grade bilingual teachers for participation in the study.

In open-ended, ethnographic interviews, we asked teachers about the different policies that impact their classrooms, and about their own beliefs, pedagogy, and decision-making processes for their students. With open-ended, semi-structured interviews, we were aiming to understand participants’ framing of the events and realities under study (Mischler, 1991; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). A protocol was used (see the Appendix), although participants were encouraged to elaborate and move the interview in the direction of their choice. Interviews were audiotape recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis for the 16 teacher interviews occurred in two stages. First, after a preliminary read-through for the purposes of generating some starting codes, all teacher interview transcripts were coded using the TAMS (Text Analysis Markup System) Analyzer (Weinstein, 2006) for any moments in which teachers’ beliefs about language and the status of Spanish versus English appeared to emerge in their discourse (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Codes emerged throughout the process, requiring a significant amount of backtracking and recoding to ensure that the entire dataset was reflected. Then, gathering together all the different segments of talk coded under language-related categories, teachers’ discourse was examined within these segments. Approaching the talk segments as discourse, I looked for patterns in language use (Wortham, 2001), using the TAMS Analyzer whenever necessary to confirm or deny hunches.

There are limitations to this particular dataset. With only one interview per participant, contact was brief with each individual teacher; and, although teacher background data were collected, there was not enough of a sample size of teachers or sampling of each teacher to draw any reasonable conclusions connecting teachers’ backgrounds to their beliefs or to their self-described practices. Furthermore, although we had planned to conduct classroom observations in representative third- and fifth-grade classrooms at each of the six schools, the schools never
permitted observations due to constraints caused by the high-stakes testing expectations placed on teachers. Thus, in a sense, these data merely provide a sampling of a range of TBE teachers’ talk within the context of one school district about their students and their pedagogical and policy-related decision-making. To more thoroughly address the research question, I brought in a second dataset: participant observations and interviews of two primary-grade bilingual teachers. These data were collected in the same district and state policy contexts, although at two additional schools not included in the first dataset.

Classroom Observation Data

Marta and Lupe were recent graduates of the master’s degree program in bilingual education at the researcher’s institution, who were making attempts within a TBE program to move their classrooms toward a more additive orientation regarding bilingualism. After having extensively dialogued with both teachers in a collaborative research context during their master’s degree program (Palmer, Chavez, & Cancino-Johnson, 2006), I spent 25 to 30 hr in each classroom over the course of 4 months in the Spring of 2007. I observed lessons in various subject areas taught in English and in Spanish, and documented both the ways the teachers organized the classroom and educational materials and structured activities for children—more specifically, the ways the teachers drew on language strengths and referenced children’s bilingualism during instruction. Both teachers were formally interviewed toward the end of the observation period; these interviews were open-ended, and they were recorded and transcribed. Informal interviews and conversations with the teachers occurred during every observation and were documented, along with the observations themselves, in detailed ethnographic field notes (Geertz, 1973).

In the Spring of 2007, Lupe Chavez was in her 9th year of teaching bilingual kindergarten in a medium-sized, urban elementary school in central Texas. Having grown up an immigrant from Mexico in nearby San Antonio, Lupe had vivid memories of the racism and anti-Spanish attitudes she struggled against as a child. As she developed her unique management styles in her linguistically diverse bilingual classroom (which regularly includes at least some English-only speaking children), she was determined to provide her students with a different kind of experience—one that would offer them a positive sense of self and pride in their heritage. Lupe taught both English- and Spanish-speaking children in a TBE setting and, therefore, taught all subjects in both English and Spanish.

Similarly, Marta Cancino-Johnson, in her 6th year of teaching bilingual primary students in a small, public, urban school in central Texas, had a strong desire to help her students frame more positive identities of themselves as Spanish speakers and Latinos than she had formed, having grown up ashamed of her immigrant grandfather’s accented English. Marta team-taught a mixed-language group of first-grade students with an English-only speaking teacher; therefore, her instruction was primarily in Spanish, whereas her team partner’s was entirely in English. Both teachers taught all subject areas to different groups at different times.

I conducted a thematic content analysis of data, including field notes and interview transcriptions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). For this analysis, I was particularly interested in instances related to language ideologies. When I located instances in field notes or interview transcriptions in which language choice or language beliefs became salient in the teachers’ stated beliefs or observed practices, I would highlight and code these. Although coding for this dataset was by
hand (using Microsoft® Word) and these data were not examined as discourse, similar codes emerged in this dataset as in the interview dataset—particularly, codes related to using and valuing English and Spanish in different contexts, to relating English and Spanish to academic ability or achievement, and to legitimacy of languages for official purposes (such as testing). Coding was regressive; I read through data multiple times as I came to an understanding of themes that best represented the entire dataset.

Putting Two Datasets Together

Each of these datasets contributes a different piece of the puzzle in answer to the research question. The teacher interview data illustrate the “discourse of transition” and draw out several ways that the TBE program’s implementation places overt limitations on teachers’ ways of talking about their students. In other words, teachers in the interviews talked about their students in highly subtractive and negative ways as these teachers discussed their decision-making with regards to the program’s expected “transition” from Spanish into English instruction. At the same time, the vast majority of the teachers interviewed asserted explicit, positive orientations toward multilingualism and toward their students’ development of strong bilingual and bicultural identities. The interview data allow for an examination of these tensions.

Meanwhile, the classroom observation data not only reinforce the existence of similar tensions in the actual practice of teachers in two primary-grade bilingual classrooms, but allow for an exploration of the kinds of agency teachers have or can claim within the structures of the TBE program and its discourses. The two datasets are not comparable; each illustrates something very different. Yet, when put together, these two datasets can help us better understand the dynamics of discourse and the complexities of contradictory teacher ideologies in TBE programs. In a sense, they afford “descriptive complementarity,” allowing me to more thoroughly address the research question by offering a range of lenses for viewing the phenomenon while sharing enough context and theoretical framework to contribute to the same analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003).

FINDINGS

Interviews: Holding Onto Spanish and Transitioning to English

In this section, I demonstrate a tension present in the 16 intermediate-grade teacher interviews, between the teachers’ self-asserted beliefs about language and their patterns of talk as they described their teaching practice—in particular, as they described the practice of “transitioning” children into English instruction. Teachers’ language ideologies, as demonstrated both in their beliefs and in their practices in a TBE context, are shown to be complicated and often contradictory as they attempt to make real both the “transitional” and the “bilingual” pieces of the programs within which they practice. The way teachers choose to resolve this tension is critical in terms of the opportunities for academic and linguistic development that teachers are then able to offer their bilingual students. It is hoped that through revealing discourse patterns that reinforce assimilationist language ideologies, this investigation can contribute to teachers’ and
teacher educators’ efforts to support additive bilingualism and to open opportunities to bilingual children in school.

I elaborate on three distinct discourse features that revealed teachers’ subtractive ideologies as they discussed the practice of transition: equating English proficiency with intelligence, affiliating the terms ready with English and need with Spanish, and suggesting that students eventually need to “move on” and leave Spanish behind. It is interesting to note that, although we did ask teachers to speak directly about the process of transitioning children to English instruction (see the Appendix), we found that these teachers who teach children in the “transition years” talked about this process throughout the interviews. It was relevant to their literacy instruction, to their choices for language of instruction and organization of instruction, and to their descriptions of the influence of various policy initiatives.

**Strong English implies smarter students.** There is a whole host of language throughout the institution of schooling that has been pressed into service to indicate children’s academic prowess, or lack thereof, particularly in relation to one another (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). In the TBE setting, a child’s language proficiencies get factored into their intelligence in ways that reflect the ideology of English dominance. In other words, strength in English is often equated with intelligence, whereas a lack of English is equated with a general academic slowness, or “low” intelligence. This is indicated throughout the data by teachers’ describing English proficiency and intelligence in close succession or even confusing the two skills in an utterance; I have underlined relevant passages in the interview excerpts quoted in the following. One fifth-grade teacher, implying that her “lowest” children might be the ones who had acquired less English, stated, “Most of my kids, even [italics added] my lowest kid, can understand English and can speak a little bit.” Later, she made the equation of “conceptual strength” with English competency even more explicit:

> The reality is I have a class with an amazing range of differentiated instruction. Some have been in the program for three or four years and they’re going to transition out this year for sure. I know for a fact. So they’re very high English. They are also conceptually strong. I have the other gamut of children who can barely speak any English or are struggling.

A third-grade teacher offered a surprisingly blunt assessment, implying that her Spanish-dominant children lacked math skills, and that perhaps this was “not a coincidence”:

> It just was a coincidence, or maybe not a coincidence that the kids who really lack the foundation and who needed like extra manipulative use were the dominant Spanish-speakers.

Even more blunt was this teacher’s explanation of how it is decided who will go into the transition classroom at third grade: “We choose children out of second grade to transition. Those are usually the students who are brighter.” This teacher’s children appeared to get the message as well, as evidenced by her description of her Spanish reading group:

> Most of my students will qualify for the English. I had five students this year that did not. Those students spent all year like hating being in the Spanish group because they thought they were the stupid kids because they were still in Spanish.

Other teachers, as well, described their students’ negative attitudes toward Spanish. They appeared, at times, to sympathize. Spanish was, it seemed, a language everyone was encouraging
the children to leave behind. One third-grade teacher reported a parent’s comment: “She is like, ‘he doesn’t want to speak, he doesn’t want to do anything in Spanish anymore’,” and explained that, for this reason, she moved the child completely over into English instruction. She ended with, “It worked for him.”

A third-grade teacher at a different school explained how they sorted children into classes each year by their English levels to facilitate the transition process. He described the “problem” that emerged when his class had been made up of only the children who had the strongest English skills:

But in the past, the danger has been these kids, who by third grade have picked up English . . . tended to be really, really just bright, you know.

Essentially, he was arguing that sorting children by English skills had the same impact as tracking children by academic level. Yet, this teacher immediately noticed that his comment could be construed to imply that English speakers were smarter than Spanish speakers, and followed it with this qualification:

And there’re bright monolingual English kids and there’re bright monolingual Spanish kids, but these ones who tended to be bilingual and really solidly bilingual in three years, and I’m just talking about just spoken, you know, what ends up happening I would have a class year after year of like amazingly gifted kids.

Although this rarely happened, occasionally a teacher did notice on his or her own that they had just equated English with smarts. The dance they did to recover, like the previously mentioned teacher did, illustrates the complexity of managing the discourse of transition while attempting to maintain an equitable stance toward Spanish in their classrooms.

Some students still “need” Spanish, some are “ready” for English

My job is to get them where they need [italics added] to be in Spanish so that next year they’ll be ready [italics added] to transition in English. (third-grade teacher)

. . . He needs [italics added] to build more proficiency in academic Spanish before I feel like he’s ready [italics added] to transition to take the test in English. (fifth-grade teacher)

Teachers frequently talked about whether children were ready for English or whether they still needed Spanish support, thus shifting emphasis from the transition to the languages themselves. This shift is certainly comprehensible, as children are generally moving from a linguistic and academic base in Spanish into increasing instruction in English. Yet, this also reveals an ideological assumption: English is a language a child has to be ready for, whereas Spanish is a language they may still need for support.

In the interview data, when the words need and ready referenced Spanish or English, they were markedly modifying different languages. Most often, need was associated with Spanish, as in the following third-grade teacher’s comment: “Some kids do most of the day in Spanish because they need [italics added] it”; or, as in this description offered by a different third-grade teacher:

I have a small group that I was working with doing more English at the beginning, but I saw that they still needed [italics added] a lot of Spanish support so we went back to doing it entirely in Spanish.
Every once in awhile, a teacher would mention that the children need to learn English, as in the following comment by a fifth-grade teacher, struggling with the challenge of preparing recent immigrant students for the English-only setting they would face in middle school: “When do I start pushing them into English? Because they need [italics added] English.” Similarly, the following comment from a third-grade teacher asserts the necessity of learning English:

Nothing’s happening with this child, you know. What do you do? I feel . . . I say “well you know what, we need [italics added] English,” and change just like that, at that point.

Meanwhile, the term ready was exclusively associated with English, as in this fifth-grade teacher’s question to her students: “Are you ready [italics added] to speak English?”; and, as in this fourth-grade teacher’s comment, “I think with some of the parents I had to say, ‘Well they’re not ready [italics added] for English yet’.” Spanish, even an academic register of Spanish, was never talked about as a language that children were ready for. This reveals the ideology of English dominance. It becomes difficult for teachers to articulate their more additive visions of their students, their desires to see children draw on their strong Spanish language backgrounds, without tripping on their own words, such as in the following example in which a third-grade teacher asserted both that students are “stronger” in Spanish than in English and that they still “need” Spanish “support”:

They’re not all ready [italics added] to read, or do their work in English, but they just have a stronger basis in Spanish and still need [italics added] that support.

Moreover, this dichotomy opens up spaces for teachers, using the same discourse of readiness and need, to frame extremely subtractive comments about children’s language development. Take, for example, one experienced fifth-grade teacher in our sample, who used the language of need to express the following:

However, I did see pockets of kids that needed [italics added] it all [science instruction] in Spanish because they just didn’t have the English. It was going over their heads. But also, I’m one for pushing the English, because I feel that every minute that they’re working in Spanish, they’re losing out on a minute of learning in English. . . .

Later in her interview, as she struggled to explain her urgency to move them into English instruction, this teacher asserted, “They’ll get to sixth grade and they’ll be a non-Spanish, non-English speaker.”

The discourse of need versus readiness, along with the pressures of a transitional program that removes access to the primary language after fifth grade, allowed this teacher to assert that her bilingual students could not speak either Spanish or English; that because they needed both languages, they were masters of neither. This teacher has fallen into a common misinterpretation of Cummins’s (2000) Threshold Hypothesis, seeing her students as “semilingual.” Cummins’s theory of bilingual development is often drawn on to support TBE. This teacher’s willingness to label her bilingual children with language deficiencies points to the lack of linguistic capital many bilingual students suffer from. This lends credence to MacSwan’s (2000) and others’ critiques of Cummins’s theory (Aukerman, 2007; Dworin, 2003) as a potential danger point, leading teachers to deeply misconstrue bilingual students’ language-learning processes and capabilities.
Eventually, students have to “move on” into English-only. The structure of the transitional program in this district forces children to move into all-English instruction by the sixth grade, at the latest; there is no primary-language support for bilingual students in the district’s middle schools. This leads to two unspoken assumptions that drive teachers to make quite subtractive comments and decisions about their children. First, it leads to a sort of push-down effect in which teachers as early as third grade, aware of the absence of Spanish in middle schools, try to phase it out so that children do not become “dependent” on it. A third-grade teacher illustrated this when she commented, “I know that these kids have to go eventually to an English class . . .,” by way of explaining her efforts to teach in “English, English, English.” Fifth-grade bilingual teachers with new immigrants in their classes spoke of mainly instructing in English, justifying their decisions with the fact that once the children reach middle school, they will have no support in their primary language; so it is better that they get used to it.

The second assumption is more subtle: Teachers use language in such a way as to build a picture of children leaving Spanish behind in order to move forward; or, as several teachers termed it, “move on” in English. In fact, the discourse feature “move on” appeared in a number of comments. This is clear in the following third-grade teacher’s comment about her impatience with waiting for children’s Spanish to grow strong enough to transition: “Some kids just never master the Spanish. Now I have to say, ‘Oh they’re done with Spanish.’” The same assumption is implied in this fifth-grade teacher’s comment about a child who should continue studying Spanish due to a low benchmark test score: “When they see that score . . . then that’s a little red flag that’s saying well maybe that child isn’t ready to move on.” This third-grade teacher also used the term “move on” to talk about children leaving Spanish behind and embracing English-only:

I just felt like, especially because they never communicated or with anyone else in Spanish. It was almost as if they really wanted to move on.

Then, realizing what she had just said, the teacher immediately qualified her statement:

Not that they didn’t like the Spanish because they communicated at home with it, but that English was just basically what they were working in. So well like, I think they’re ready to move on.

Again, this teacher engaged in the transitional discourse (and an essentially assimilationist ideology) while simultaneously attempting to maintain a more equitable stance toward the two languages that inhabit her classroom. This is the dominant assimilationist ideology about minority languages in the United States: To acquire English and become American, one must leave behind the vestiges of the home country, including language (Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999; Olsen, 1997; Wiley, 2000). English is the “legitimate language” in the United States; and, as Bourdieu (1991) asserted, it is to be expected (essentially, demanded by the system that authorizes schooling) that teachers’ language ideologies align with this ideology.

Yet, nearly all of the teachers we interviewed explicitly stated their opposing beliefs. The following are some examples of teachers’ explicitly stated positive orientations toward their students’ bilingualism.

Students should be bilingual and bicultural. Teachers asserted the importance of bilingual education, the economic and personal value of being bilingual and maintaining ties with one’s heritage language and culture, and the academic advantage of having access to curriculum
through two languages. The following examples (and there are many more) illustrate a common thread of heartfelt support for bilingual education and bilingualism throughout the interviews:

I think it’s really important that the kids preserve one heritage while learning another. I think bilingual education promotes that because they keep their native language while also learning a second one. And it shows that both are equally important. (third-grade teacher)

I truly think all education should be bilingual. I think all students from you know early childhood on should be taught academic English and Spanish. I think that in an ideal program everybody would at least graduate from high school and be academically fluent in two languages. (fifth-grade teacher)

Interviewer: When would you say that a child is totally transitioned?
Fourth-grade teacher: Never. . . . Because you don’t go from one to the other. I mean these children think and will always think in English and Spanish. I don’t look at it as a transition from Spanish to English but rather acquisition of English.

Although the teachers sincerely expressed these beliefs about their own and their students’ bilingualism, they nonetheless engaged in the discourse of transition.

Language ideology plays out in complex and often unexpected ways in multilingual communities (Ricento, 2000). These TBE teachers were not uncomplicatedly creating subtractive spaces for bilingual children. In fact, they articulated strong support for bilingualism and for the power of bilingual education to reinforce children’s bilingual identities and provide children with their first academic toolkit in their primary language. Yet, at the same time, they employed a discourse that implied English dominance when talking about their decision-making around children’s transition to English—a decision with which all the teachers struggled, and one that they all deemed of utmost importance. The teachers expressed both sets of beliefs within the same conversation, frequently shifting from additive to subtractive orientations toward their bilingual students as they articulated their perspectives about their positions as teachers within a TBE program. At times during interviews, teachers appeared to become briefly aware of the apparent contradictions between their theoretical support for bilingual education and their practical discourses that undermined it (Ramos, 2001; Shin & Krashen, 1996). Regardless of their awareness of the tension, it was present and clearly influenced the ways in which they practiced bilingual education in their classrooms. This, in turn, influenced the opportunities available for bilingual and biliterate development for the students they served.

Our understanding of reality can be largely structured by the discourses available to us (Bourdieu, 1991). Because of its limiting goal—English fluency and academic success in English-only—the “discourse of transition” (i.e., the ways in which TBE teachers are required to talk about their students in order to carry out the practice of transition) appears in several ways to constrain teachers, limiting them to making certain kinds of choices that can result in subtractive experiences for children, despite their own stated ideologies valuing multilingualism.

Yet, it is critical not to underestimate teachers’ power of agency within their classrooms as they interpret policy and program models (Gutierrez et al., 2000; Stritikus, 2003; Valdiviezo, 2009). The next section takes a closer look at two teachers’ attempts to break out of the discourse of transition while still remaining within the structure of a larger TBE program, and explores the limitations and possibilities for their success at creating more additive spaces for
bilingual children in their classrooms. Specifically, I attempt to address the sub-question, “How are language ideology tensions negotiated in classroom practice?”

Observations: Conflicting Ideologies in TBE Classrooms

Lupe Chavez’s and Marta Cancino-Johnson’s classrooms were very different: Lupe taught kindergarten, and Marta taught first grade. Lupe shared some planning and materials with her neighboring English-only teacher, but did not share students or team-teach in any substantive way; however, within her transitional bilingual classroom, she had always had both Spanish- and English-speaking children, and she worked hard to manage these two language communities in equitable ways. Marta and her neighboring English-only teacher had always taught their classes separately: Marta had the Spanish speakers, and her neighbor had the English speakers. However, after much deliberation, they decided to try something new in the 2006 through 2007 school year. They began the year by opening the foldable wall between their classrooms, mixing up their class rosters, and teaching their nearly 40 students together all day long.

Lupe and Marta had one important characteristic in common: They were both explicitly trying to articulate a shift in their classrooms from what they saw as a subtractive norm at their schools toward a more additive orientation toward bilingualism. They were making these efforts to better meet the academic needs of all their students; and, just as important, to address what they saw as the affective needs of the two language communities in their classrooms (English and Spanish speakers) to learn to communicate and share space as one. In other words, as caring teachers (Valenzuela, 1999), both Lupe and Martha worked to counter the discourses of English dominance because they saw this as an important piece of developing equitable learning spaces for all their students. In both schools, they had the implicit support of their principals, although many colleagues, especially those in the upper elementary grades, threw doubt and incomprehension in their direction.

Struggle and tension. The most powerful theme across the data from both teachers’ classrooms was a sense of struggle as they worked hard to learn new patterns and to be open to the unexpected in the interactions among their students. Their classrooms were places of contention: Lupe and Marta (and Marta’s English-only speaking teaching partner, also a participant in the study due to her close partnership with Marta) were constantly negotiating with their students and other members of the school community for equitable spaces for the Spanish language and for Spanish-speaking children.

This struggle most clearly manifested in their ongoing efforts to find equitable ways to instruct their two language groups. In a TBE context, unlike a dual-language or two-way immersion context, they could not assume that English speakers would make any efforts to learn Spanish. They could encourage, attempt, cajole, and even build an expectation, but they could not assume; and, in the end, they were still responsible for ensuring that both English- and Spanish-speaking children received academic content in their primary language. Lupe explained in an interview:

Academically, I do teach language arts in English to who’s supposed to get it, in Spanish to who needs to, but then I also observe and if they’re doing well and they’re where they’re supposed to be then I encourage . . . crossing over to either, whichever one they want.
Therefore, although they both took on strategies popular in dual-language contexts, they found themselves still constantly struggling.

Lupe had an “alternate days” strategy. On English days, the majority of her whole-group instruction and informal talk with students was in English, with the exception of small-group reading time with her Spanish “Green Group.” She did make occasional exceptions, but tended to explicitly mark them as exceptions. On Spanish days, she similarly made a sincere attempt to maintain Spanish with her whole group, although some of her informal talk with English-speaking students tended to remain in English, and some instructions would be given in both languages. She acknowledged that the two languages did not receive the same treatment in this way, and expressed her regrets. This was because she had English-speaking children who did not understand much Spanish; her classroom had to remain dominated by English in order to meet the academic needs of the English-speaking students. Although Lupe was aware of this imbalance, she considered it unavoidable given the structural expectations of the TBE program within which her classroom was situated. Lupe made much more of an effort at equity between languages than her counterparts in other bilingual classrooms at her school, and her children’s parents in both language groups appeared to appreciate it. In fact, she related that some English-speaking parents were requesting her as a teacher for their children—definitely an unusual occurrence for a TBE teacher.

Marta and her partner employed the “one teacher one language” strategy, along with a “language of the day.” However, this was especially challenging because the other teacher in the classroom spoke only English, whereas Marta spoke both; and nearly all of the Spanish-dominant children could understand some English, whereas almost none of the English-speaking children could understand any Spanish when the school year began. Thus, the common classroom language was English, and Marta’s tendency was to default to English in the classroom discourse. In other words, when something important had to be said, or when children were appearing not to understand, she resorted to English or repeated herself in English. Therefore, whereas English lessons were generally conducted in English with a few Spanish words thrown in for clarity, Spanish lessons tended to be more bilingual. This imbalance was clearly a reflection of the ideology of the dominance of English, despite explicit efforts on the part of the teachers to create a learning space that was more linguistically balanced.

A fascinating aspect of this classroom, however, was the English-only teacher’s deliberate efforts to engage the children in Spanish. One day, for instance, when Marta was out of the classroom for a few hours and the English teacher was conducting the math lesson by herself, she held an entire discussion with the children about “things that come in pairs,” brainstorming a list on a piece of butcher paper, asking the class for the Spanish translations and Spanish-spelling assistance for every idea they generated, and recording English and Spanish side by side. She proudly offered the ones she knew, and she asked the bilingual children to help with pronunciation and spelling for the ones she did not know, engaging English-speaking children as her fellow learners (field notes, March 29, 2007). The teacher’s openness, her willingness to let her students be her teachers, and her honest interest in the children’s different languages and cultures came through loud and clear. Thus, although Spanish was still a secondary language in the classroom, it was centered and respected as much as both teachers could make it.

Caring multilingual and multicultural communities. This example also illustrates the second major theme evident in the field-note data from Marta’s and Lupe’s classrooms. Both Lupe
and Marta worked extremely hard to build understanding among their students across language and cultural barriers. Although it was not always within their control to actually counteract the dominance of English and allow equal status for Spanish in all teaching and learning activities, it was definitely a part of their explicit discourse in the classroom to respect linguistic differences and to value the strengths of all class members (Valenzuela, 1999). Thus, they not only set up structures to explicitly create spaces for Spanish (e.g., alternating language use for calendar and other daily routines and specific activities or centers in Spanish and English), but they engaged children in explicit community-building across language groups. Their classrooms were well-developed communities, places of mutual love and respect: They nurtured children and taught children to nurture each other.

Marta and her team partner, Tana, explained during their interview that one of their primary goals for their students is “having the kids see themselves as one group . . . rather than two distinctive groups of students.” Marta and Tana had an easy comfort with one another, which spilled over into the students’ interactions. Their classroom was a happy, active place where children, following their teachers’ examples, felt safe to experiment with learning a new language and playing with friends they might not immediately understand.

Lupe’s classroom, too, had an extraordinary sense of community. When asked in an interview, “What is going well in your classroom,” the first thing she described was the strong sense of community:

... I like the way we bond. The children and I, we really do, I truly do bond with my students and I think it’s because I truly respect them. All of them and they do me. . . . I know academics is the focus, it’s a school, that’s what I’m supposed to be teaching but if everything else is in place, the way we get along and the respect and the excitement about learning each other’s language then the academic part is easy.

Almost all instruction and activity in her classroom occurred on the carpet, with children spread out around Lupe like a mother hen with her chicks. While Lupe worked with one small group in an inner circle, children worked independently or in small clumps in a larger outer circle. They brought hard writing surfaces, pencils, scissors, glue, and even paint to the carpet to work in close proximity with one another and with their teacher, rather than spreading out to one of the other centers or tables (field notes, numerous occasions).

Lupe regularly asked her students for help in making decisions about everything from how to best release the butterfly that hatched (field notes, April 20, 2007), to how to solve the problem of not enough Spanish in their classroom (informal interview, April 13, 2007). Her students rose to her challenge and engaged with her in mature and authentic ways. Lupe also shared personal stories and information with them, beginning with the story of how she came to the United States when she was 4 years old and entered kindergarten not understanding a word of English. She shared stories about her own three children and the days when she had been a parent at the same elementary school where she was now a teacher (informal interview, April 13, 2007).

Aware of the tension between a transitional ideology and their own desires to value Spanish and English equally in their classrooms, Lupe and Marta struggled to balance the two languages and to offer safe and loving spaces for both English- and Spanish-speaking children to learn. Of course, teaching non-transition grades (and non high-stakes testing grades) offered Lupe and Marta spaces in their discourses that their third- through fifth-grade counterparts in the interview
data truly did not have. In fact, a recent e-mail exchange with Marta (March 22, 2009), now teaching third grade, confirmed this. She stated:

Teaching 3rd grade makes the pressure about language [i.e., to get children to transition into English] that much worse. I feel like such a hypocrite teaching the way I do. I have wanted to quit this year because I feel so torn between what I believe in and what I have to do.

There are tensions and ambiguities between theory and practice for transitional bilingual teachers no matter the “ideological clarity” of the teachers in question (Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001). Particularly when they face the pressures of high-stakes testing and the reality of decreasing presence of the primary language in the classroom, bilingual teachers struggle.

CONCLUSION

Third- through fifth-grade bilingual teachers in TBE settings in Texas engage in what can be termed a “discourse of transition.” In the way they talk about their children’s language learning, they tend to equate strong English skills with intelligence while dismissing or ignoring strong Spanish skills, and they tend to frame Spanish as a crutch for children that must be left behind to achieve school success. At the same time, they express their belief in additive bilingualism for their students.

Meanwhile, two early-childhood TBE teachers, having gone through a process together of making visible the invisible language ideologies that surround them, struggle to find ways to create more equitable spaces for bilingual learners within an English-dominant TBE context. Ultimately, their strongest tool appears to be to develop in their young students an ethic of caring and cross-cultural understanding that explicitly introduces new, more equitable ways of interacting and of talking about Spanish and Spanish-speaking children. In this way, it appears that there is agency within the structure of TBE for a teacher who explicitly seeks it out. As for whether teachers at the transition grades in a TBE program can assert similar agency, this is a question begging to be explored through more in-depth ethnographic study. It is my suspicion, however, that teachers generally do find a way to assert their agency within the structures of any given policy.

TBE has been the most frequently mandated model of a relatively politically unpopular educational program for the past 30 years in the United States. In no way is this analysis intended to suggest that TBE should not be offered to English-learning students. It is clear in the research literature that children benefit from any amount of use of their primary language in the classroom as they are learning English (Rolstad et al., 2005). Yet, the political battle seems to draw the conversation over and over into a morass of debate around language of instruction, away from the real issue of how best to provide a strong and empowering education for bilingual children (Cummins, 2000). Educators, including teachers, those who prepare teachers, and those who develop educational policies for them to “follow” need to be talking not just about which language children receive instruction in “while they learn English,” but about whose identities are reinforced in the classroom and whose cultural and linguistic resources are valued over the long term. The discourse of transition, an apparently necessary evil of many TBE classrooms and programs by the third grade, does little to reinforce children’s bilingual or transcultural identities (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Even teachers who articulate and develop clear plans
for moving their classrooms and schools into more additive bilingual models, and even teachers who are working with children long before the “transition years,” struggle with the ideology of transition when it engulfs their schools and districts.

Despite the challenges, teachers in transitional bilingual programs might take from this analysis a modicum of encouragement. Just as it was for Marta and for Lupe, the process of recognizing, naming, and understanding the discourses that trap us can be an empowering experience. Although we may still find ourselves getting caught in the same traps, we are more likely to catch ourselves before we are too deeply entrenched, and to seek alternative ways to express ourselves. In so doing, we can create new realities for ourselves and for our students.

I also hope this research might push the field of preservice and in-service teacher education in the direction of helping teachers grapple more realistically with the contradictions they face between the ideologies they may want to hold and follow and those they find themselves reflecting as they engage in their practice. We, as teacher educators, need to keep in mind the realities of teachers’ policy contexts and support them not only in negotiating these realities, but also in challenging them, when necessary, to maintain their professional integrity and the cultural and linguistic identities of their students.

Bilingual programs are not just about acquiring languages; they are spaces in which bilingual learners need to be able to develop transcultural and multilingual, academically oriented identities (Palmer, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Excellent and high-quality language and academic instruction is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the long-term academic success of ELLs. In addition, they require additive, enriching, bilingual learning spaces that allow them to draw on their resources to become academic achievers and leaders in our increasingly globalized society. Ultimately, all learners in U.S. schools should be offered the opportunity to develop multilingual, multicultural skills and identities; and with their head start in this area, ELL students should come to be viewed not as the fastest-growing burden on our nation’s schools, but as our most important asset for a rich and competitive future.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX
TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

General:
1. Do you believe that bilingual education is an effective way to teach English Language Learners? Why/why not? (What do you see as its strengths/weaknesses?)
2. In what ways does your school support or not support bilingual education?
3. In which language do you instruct reading? Does it vary by student? How do you decide which language to use?
4. Do you have any strategies that support reading instruction in both languages (English and Spanish)?
5. Schedule: How do you fit primary and second language instruction throughout the day? How is this determined?
6. Tell me specifically about the components of your reading instruction. Do you do, for example, shared reading, read-alouds, guided reading? What else? What materials do you use most?
7. How do you teach students to read in English?
8. How do you decide when your second language learners are ready to transfer to an all-English classroom?

Policy-specific:
9. Tell me about RISE (Rigorous Instruction in Spanish and English; district early-exit TBE model). What is your understanding of what it is, what it’s for, how it works/doesn’t work, who came up with it, etc.?
10. What has RISE meant for you and your students? E.g. has RISE changed the way you teach? Has it had positive/negative effects on student learning?
11. Tell me about the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) reading test. What is your understanding of what it is, what it’s for, how it works/doesn’t work, who came up with it, etc.?
12. What has TAKS reading meant for you and your students? E.g. has TAKS changed the way you teach? Has it had positive/negative effects on student learning?
13. How do you determine what language your students take the TAKS reading test in?
14. Tell me about Accountable Talk (district initiative meant to stimulate rigorous conversation in classrooms). What is your understanding of what it is, what it’s for, how it works/doesn’t work, who came up with it, etc.?
15. What has Accountable Talk meant for you and your students? E.g. Has Accountable Talk changed the way you teach? Has it had positive/negative effects on student learning?
16. How do you use Accountable Talk within your reading block?
17. Do you use Accountable Talk in English, Spanish, or both?