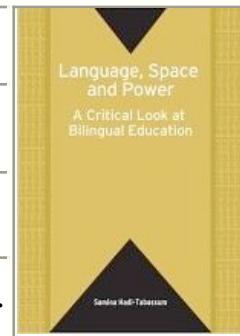


***Language, Space and Power:
A Critical Look at Bilingual Education***

Author:	Samina Hadi-Tabassum (2006)	
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Language, Space and Power: A Critical Look at Bilingual Education is a recent entry in the Bilingual Education and Bilingualism series edited by Nancy Hornberger and Colin Baker. The author, Samina Hadi-Tabassum, has based this book on her Ph.D. dissertation from Columbia University. Her book is introduced as a critical ethnographic study of a fifth grade dual immersion Spanish-English program at an urban public elementary school. As she states at the outset, "I hope to fill a gap in qualitative research focusing on bilingual education" by studying the students' day-to-day classroom discourse surrounding "linguistic differentiation and inequities" between Spanish and English (pp. 1-2).

Hadi-Tabassum proposes to study classroom discourse using a post-structuralist framework "that abandons the quest for a structural theory of language learning and its discrete analysis of language proficiency and acquisition" (p. 9). Her theoretical framework casts a critical eye on the organization and structuralist assumptions of a 50:50 dual immersion program. Specifically, this framework offers a critique of the binary opposition between Spanish and English that ensues when the languages are separated into units of classroom space and time. Attempts to divide the two languages into separate but equal units in a bilingual program can fail to address differences in power and status between Spanish and English. The author states that she will focus on the "conflict-ridden metalinguistic discussions" (p. 15) that arise in the bilingual classroom and that serve to construct a metaphysical third space where students are free "to voice their concerns about language use and linguistic borders and boundaries" (p.19).

Chapter One outlines the research setting of PS 2000, a high-ranking, progressive

elementary school with active parent involvement, and introduces the dual language parent association and Roberta, the classroom teacher featured in this study. Two Spanish- and four English-dominant students are also introduced as "border crossers" who will be prominent in this study. However, I did not feel that the book gave a full picture of these students' individual personalities and involvement in the bilingual classroom. A greater use of the thick descriptions that are a hallmark of ethnographic research would have been welcome, especially since the book is most vivid and readable when the author discusses the school setting, its events and players.

Chapter Two delves further into the theoretical groundings of the dual immersion model. Provocatively, Hadi-Tabassum links the organization of the dual language program into separate time slots and contexts involving separate teaching staff members to Cummins' (2001) separate underlying proficiency (SUP) model of bilingualism. In the SUP model--refuted by other empirical studies of bilingual education (e.g., Ramírez, 1992; Thomas & Collier, 1997) first and second language proficiencies are separate from each other and bilingual students need to develop separate mental representational systems for each language. The SUP model also seems to underlie the dual immersion model's disapproval of code-switching by bilingual students, despite arguments made by other researchers that these students' language mixing is a normal behaviour. The theoretical assumptions underlying the dual immersion model and other bilingual education programs, including their implied reliance on monolingual norms for each language, are vital matters for educators and researchers. I would have liked to see more critical discussion of these issues by the author, especially as they may relate to the eventual success of PS 2000's dual language program.

In contrast, the book relies heavily on outlines of various theoretical constructs that seem less relevant to the author's goal of depicting bilingual students' metalinguistic discussions of language separation and the marginalization of Spanish. Chapter Two includes a lengthy section on Lefebvre's and other theorists' depiction of space and power. Since the author's overriding point seems to be that the grade five students felt more comfortable discussing metalinguistic conflicts when seated in the rug area of the classroom instead of at their desks, this extended theoretical prologue felt tedious. I also thought at times that the researcher's data was being overshadowed by her focus on theory. For instance, this chapter briefly describes an optional Spanish spelling bee where the language's status was downgraded by the lack of time and preparation afforded to the bilingual students. I wished for more concrete descriptions of episodes like this one, where the students pointed out the arbitrary treatment of Spanish in their classroom.

Similarly, Chapter Three's depiction of the dual language classroom's struggle to produce and perform a cheerleading routine for their monolingual peers is prefaced by a discussion of aesthetics and cheerleading in American schools. The grade five class' attempts to produce a multidimensional, bilingual cheer were undercut by their teacher Roberta's insistence on a more traditional, English-only cheerleading routine. The poignancy of this episode, and the contradictions inherent in the bilingual teacher's preference for a monolingual cheer, raise compelling questions for other dual language programs.

Chapter Four also raises important issues about the lack of Spanish-language

children's texts for bilingual programs in the U.S.A., and how this scarcity may discourage a critical reading of the few resources that exist. In this chapter, the students practice and perform a bilingual play based in part on an audiotape of a Cuban-American narrator's childhood. Here the Spanish-dominant students succeed in their efforts to add more Spanish to a mostly English play. Hadi-Tabassum also points out the teacher's failure to lead her students toward developing a critical reading of the play's portrayal of class and cultural background. As she writes, "The subtle and hidden oppression within Spanish folk dramas . . . often go undetected and remain repressed unless time and space are provided for students to critically analyze the historical and cultural context of the script and realize what was hidden in the cultural codes that they were reproducing and performing on stage" (p. 212). Fostering this kind of analysis will allow students to develop the critical literacy so often given lip service by educators and administrators, and that seems crucial for teachers and learners in a dual language program.

I found Chapter Five the most successful chapter of the book. In it theory and data are nicely interwoven, as the author discusses multicultural music education and the implications of music education for second language learning. The Spanish folk music program at PS 2000, led by a newly arrived immigrant teacher from Puerto Rico, allows for "a space of excess for the Spanish language" (p. 268).

Hadi-Tabassum describes a program that "reinforced the dual immersion identity of this classroom" (p. 227) and strengthened a feeling of classroom solidarity. The Spanish-dominant students felt empowered to share their background knowledge with English-dominant students, who in turn were provided with authentic second language learning experiences in a relaxed, communal environment. The rich accounts and examples of classroom dialogue that surface in this chapter are a powerful testimonial to alternate ways of bilingual teaching and learning often overlooked.

In the book's conclusion, we learn that PS 2000's program will change from a dual immersion to a Spanish enrichment model where Spanish will be taught for one hour each day. According to the author, the rationale for this decision stems in part from an ongoing lack of Spanish-speaking teachers and in part from the dual immersion program's persistent difficulties with balancing Spanish and English instruction. The author is critical of the lack of administrative leadership in addressing the inequities between Spanish and English that surface in the dual immersion classroom, and calls for "increased dialogue and debate between the national and local levels to ensure greater accountability for the Spanish language" (p. 284). This poignant close to the book and PS 2000's dual immersion program point to the ways in which bilingual education policy sometimes is not attentive enough to the realities of language learning in a local context

Hadi-Tabassum's work is a valuable contribution to bilingual education research and will be of particular interest to other students and researchers in sociolinguistics and ethnography.

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