

Language and Identity in a Dual Immersion School

Kim Potowski. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. 2007. Pp. v +224

In her close analysis of language use and investment in a dual language immersion school in *Language Identity in a Dual Immersion School*, Potowski aims to provide systematic documentation of how students and teachers actually use language in immersion classrooms, adding to a small number of studies of such practices in different dual language contexts. She also seeks to understand students' own perspectives regarding language use. Based on systematic observations accompanied by (a) audio and video recordings of naturally occurring speech in the classroom, (b) student, parent, and educator interviews, and (c) a combination of standardized and researcher designed language proficiency measures, Potowski paints a deep and complex portrait of English and Spanish language use at the Inter American Magnet School (IAMS) PK-8 grade school in Chicago. The author expertly utilizes ethnographic research methods with quantification of students' language production, which is not an easy feat. She focuses on oral language and uses the construct of *investment* to examine why and how students create and resist opportunities to use either Spanish or English at the school.

The introduction describes language immersion programs and the evolution of programs in North America, beginning with French immersion in Canada. Next, the author briefly outlines one-way and two-way (i.e., dual language) immersion programs in the United States. An in-depth review of research on both kinds of immersion programs follows in chapter 2. Topics covered include academic achievement, classroom language use, and students' language proficiency. Potowski then outlines her research questions and methodology. She describes her interest in students' motivation to use language, but recognizes the limitations of the concept of motivation—primarily due to its static and binary nature—and instead mentions her choice of Norton's (2000) construct of investment, which allows for interpretations of individual behavior in specific situations and contexts. Although it is central to her study, unfortunately, the author did not provide the reader with more examples and detailed descriptions of this construct. Furthermore, investment was utilized as the primary means to describe students' motivations for using Spanish; however, absent is a discussion of the view that language *is* identity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Gee, 1996; González, 2001). If identities must be understood with reference to the larger social structure in which we live (Norton, 2000), it appears that a discussion of the sociohistorical treatment of Spanish and Spanish speakers would be important, as well as a review of important research by Latina/o scholars in the area of language and identity.

After providing a rationale, research on dual language immersion, and her chosen methodologies, Potowski provides a detailed description of the context of her study—Inter-American Magnet School—in chapter 3. She describes Chicago public schools and key characteristics of the magnet school, including that it operates on a lottery system based on ethnicity rather than neighborhood boundaries. The school was founded in 1975 by two mothers who wanted a social justice-based language immersion alternative for their own children as well as those in the larger community. The mission statement has remained consistent since the founding, emphasizing “academic excellence, celebrating the cultures and languages of the students in the school, a commitment to social justice, and the importance of parents and teachers working together” (p. 38). It is a highly sought after program, with more than 1100 applications per year for only 65 slots. Currently, it is the oldest dual language immersion program in the Midwest and the

second longest running program in the country. The school serves approximately 670 students in grades pre-kindergarten (PK) through 8 and is a variation of the more common 90/10 dual language model. The model created at IAMS consists of 80% Spanish instruction in grades PK-fourth grade and 20% English. Grades 5 and 6 are taught with a 60/40 distribution and grades 7 and 8 are taught half in Spanish, half in English. Officially, Spanish is the dominant language of the school; however, as in most schools with minority language immersion programs, English is the language of prestige and peer talk (Heller, 1999) and of standardized tests, pressuring teachers and students alike to use more English than is officially stated.

Chapter 4 focuses on one fifth grade classroom, where the author conducted her research for the first year. Although English was used more often than Spanish in this classroom, there was more consistent use of Spanish here than in the other fifth grade classes. The makeup of the class was also conducive to the author's aim, as there was a total of twenty students, divided evenly between boys and girls, eleven of whom were classified as Spanish dominant and nine who were classified as English dominant. After observing students for 10 weeks, she chose four focal students. Two came from Spanish-speaking homes (Carolina and Matt) and two came from English-speaking homes (Melissa and Otto). In her analysis of language use in the classroom, the author examined speech and the *turn*, which is defined as the moment "when an interlocutor stops talking and thus enables another interlocutor to initiate a turn, or when the interlocutor is interrupted by another who initiates another turn" (p. 59). Here the output of students' Spanish is quantified, in regard to use according to interlocutor and functions. Detailed examples and accounts of each type of oral language use and turns are provided. This chapter effectively sets the stage for chapter 5, which takes the quantified language data and adds qualitative data to the analysis, as well as in-depth descriptions of each focal student to explore how investment, identity, and power relations may have contributed to the two native English speakers' Spanish language use and the two heritage Spanish speakers' continued use and development of their first language (L1). In this way, the author successfully links students' classroom language use to the ongoing production of their identities. Potowski describes four dimensions that emerged as relevant to students' investments as (a) home language use and support for Spanish, (b) student attitudes towards the school and target language, (c) the teachers' positioning of the students, and (d) the students' position within his or her peer group. As would be expected, each of the four focal students brought different historical, social, and linguistic relationships to Spanish, and each had unique reasons for investing in the language. By using Spanish with the teacher, Carolina received favor beyond what her academic output alone might have earned, Melissa strengthened her identity as a Spanish speaker and an academically focused student, and Matt was able to stay out of trouble. Otto experienced a conflict, struggling to appear knowledgeable, but, in the end, being accepted by his peers proved more important than developing Spanish proficiency.

The subsequent three chapters address the students' eighth grade year. In chapter 6, the author problematizes the use of Spanish at this level and shows how teachers are not adhering to the stated language policy. She describes differences in school structure and teaching in the upper grades of the school and concludes that the students' motivations to use Spanish were not strong enough and some students resisted through complaints while others chose to simply remain silent. The quantitative data are explained in chapter 7. The findings from the Language Assessment Scale—Oral (LAS-O), Foreign Language Oral Skills Evaluation Matrix (FLOSEM), the Logramos test (a norm-referenced achievement test that assesses the academic progress of Spanish speaking

students), and writing samples were discussed for all students in the eighth grade. The findings indicated that students' performance on tests of grammatical and sociolinguistic production was relatively low after nine years in a dual language school and students' English was far stronger than their Spanish. This chapter is designed to give the reader an overall picture of language use at school. It is the first time the author includes reading and writing proficiencies in the discussion, a welcome inclusion. Unfortunately, the impact is lost because the author attempts to show data regarding the entire group of students, rather than for the individuals in question. Chapter 8 returns to the four focal students and addresses their language use in eighth grade and how their patterns of discourse had changed, if at all, from fifth grade. Carolina appeared to be content with her identity as an English-dominant Latina and experienced pressure from her parents to perform well academically and in English. Melissa remained highly motivated academically, but was not as strict about her own Spanish use in class. She did not seem as concerned with speaking the language as she had been three years earlier. Matt self-identified as Hispanic but like Carolina, did not think Spanish was necessarily a part of his ethnic identity. His more pressing investments in music, skateboarding, and girls did not call for any interest in Spanish. Otto did not have a lot of support in Spanish nor investments in it. He may not have seen a need for it in his life, for at home he did not use it, and in most classes the use of it was not required. The author also interviewed other students in eighth grade and concluded that the majority of students at IAMS developed positive attitudes toward Spanish despite the fact that they strongly resisted using it in the classroom. She reiterates that we must recognize language learning as a complex social practice that engages the identities of language learners in different ways depending on their unique cultural, familial, and contextual factors.

The final and ninth chapter begins on a positive note, outlining that, in general, the school is highly successful in numerous ways, through their innovative "Curriculum of the Americas," the social justice orientation, the high performance of students on standardized tests, and the students' relatively high levels of Spanish proficiency and investment in the language. Yet this study also shows that currently, graduates of IAMS do not achieve the school's stated goals of balanced bilingualism. However, given the dominance of English at all levels of society, it is not surprising that students' English would be stronger, and the author laments that the goal of balanced bilingualism is likely unattainable in a dual language context in the United States. She concludes with some recommendations for strengthening the minority language component of immersion programs. These include school-wide policies and activities to promote Spanish, high expectations of Spanish proficiency incorporated into the grading system, supporting all school members in their attainment of bilingual proficiency, encouraging students' social use and investments in the minority language, and increasing the proportion of Spanish-dominant students attending the school.

This book ambitiously tackles many complex issues in language acquisition and is overall an excellent description and analysis of oral language use in a dual immersion program. It provides a rich portrait of students' language experiences in a highly successful and long running dual language immersion school with a strong social justice component. The descriptions of students' oral language use at the school in fifth and eighth grades as well as family language practices are very successful. Less convincing are the author's interpretations of identity as investment taken in part from one-dimensional accounts of turn taking during classroom events (Bloome et al, 2005). Although Potowski combines turn taking counts with ethnographic data, identities are much more

complex than an analysis of turn taking might imply. Her analysis is very thorough and the argument seductive; questionable is whether the quantity of discourse and turns taken in a classroom are truly indicative of one's investment in a language and therefore one's identity. Notably absent is reference to work in language and identity by important Latina/o scholars (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; González, 2001), which is ironic since Potowski's study foregrounds identity and language in a Spanish/English bilingual education model which includes Latina/o students. Virtually nonexistent in this account is a description of the literacy development of the students, arguably an inseparable component of language analysis (Gee, 2001). Despite these shortcomings, this book is a very important contribution to the literature on bilingual education and language use. Educators and academics interested in second language education and dual language immersion would benefit from a close read of this book, particularly those with a Spanish language background, as many of the examples are not translated into English.

MINDA LOPEZ

University of Texas, San Antonio

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