Better Spanish, Better English:
Native Language Literacy and Adult Education

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Abstract: Characteristics of the predominantly Hispanic community and native language usage in Miami are discussed in relation to poverty and common adult education programs. Native language literacy instruction is considered as an alternative offering to meet learners' needs.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of adult education as it relates to the predominantly Hispanic/Latino population in Miami-Dade County, Florida, given concerns about the poverty level in Miami. Native language literacy is explored as an underused option to develop Hispanic adult learners in Miami-Dade County and as a tool to combat poverty in this specific community.

Theoretical Framework

This paper was developed by first understanding the unique characteristics and dynamics of the Hispanic enclave in Miami, including important demographics. Secondly, the relation between language and poverty was acknowledged. Lastly, native language literacy as an approach to adult education in Miami-Dade County is considered as a possible resource to combat poverty in Miami's unique and predominantly Hispanic community.

The Hispanic Enclave in Miami

The history of the United States contains many stories of immigrants who have arrived searching for new lives and new opportunities. The Miami area has a history very different from other areas in the U.S. where clusters of co-ethnics have settled together creating small communities or enclaves. When immigrants have a limited ability to speak the language of the dominant group, in this context English, members of the ethnic minority group tend to bind together in residential enclaves where they use their native language to conduct everyday exchanges with members of their group (South, Crowder, & Chavez, 2005). With regards to the Cuban enclave in Miami specifically, the economic vitality of the community provides little incentive for Cubans to seek opportunities for economic mobility in mixed or white communities due to the majority Cuban presence, the high level of entrepreneurship, and the financial and social capital available (South et al., 2005).

According to Huntington (2004), Cubans, the predominant immigrant group responsible for the building of Miami during the latter 1900s, did not follow traditional patterns of other immigrant groups by creating an enclave neighborhood; rather, an enclave in the magnitude of a city was created that contained strong ties to the Cuban (and later Latin American) culture, thereby, making assimilation unnecessary. Assimilation is the process by which members of an ethnic or racial minority group take the attitudes, cultural traits, and ways of life from a dominant majority group and make it their own (South et al., 2005).

A byproduct of the Hispanic enclave in Miami is that the city has become a metropolitan area where Spanish and English compete with each other for dominance in society, politics, and economics (Lynch, 2000). Spanish has not only been used as the native language of many

immigrants from Latin America to preserve, transmit, and promote their culture, but Spanish has also been used widely in the workplace, government, and business (Lynch, 2000). For example, government officials frequently speak Spanish during press conferences to address the community; the Miami Herald publishes an entire Spanish version of it daily newspaper; Spanish language television and radio flood the media, and even mainstream American grocery chains contain extensive stock of Latino food products. The continuous entrance of Spanish-speaking immigrants to the Miami area helps sustain the viability of Spanish language usage and market. According to Lynch (2000), there is a high probability that Spanish monolingual immigrants will find "linguistic value" in Spanish through the development of social contacts with the already established Hispanic demographic majority and its use at the societal level (p. 279).

Members of the Hispanic enclave in Miami maintain strong connections with their homeland. Many immigrants today can be considered transnational, meaning immigrants in the United States who maintain strong ties to their homeland and resist assimilation into the dominant American culture (Alfred, 2005). Cuban flags abundantly fly alongside of the United States flag. Transnational immigrants regularly practice their customs from their homelands and are actively seeking involvement in the affairs of their native country, whether it is through keeping up with news, holding demonstrations, petitioning the United States government for intervention in matters pertaining to their native country, conducting trade or business, or frequently visiting relatives abroad. These strong ties to the native homeland, coupled with the economy of the Spanish language in Miami, do not create conditions that support assimilation.

Demographic Characteristics of Miami-Dade County Residents

The United States has witnessed an explosive growth of the Latino population. According to the U.S. Census (2000), between the years of 1990 and 2000, over 6.8 million foreign-born immigrants entered the United States from Latin America. Additionally, the United States Census provides useful information about the demographic landscape in Florida and Miami-Dade County. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), the population in Miami-Dade County was 2,253,362 in the year 2000, 57.3% of which were persons of Hispanic or Latino origin. Additionally, 50.9% of the population in Miami-Dade County is foreign born, 36.2% of which entered from the years 1990 to 2000 alone (US Census Bureau, 2000).

In regards to language use in the state of Florida, over 1.5 million residents speak little or no English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In Miami-Dade County, 67.9% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). For these individuals, everyday tasks such as filling out forms, reading important mail correspondence, reading restaurant menus, or communicating with non-Spanish speakers may prove difficult. Moreover, 12.4% of the population in Miami-Dade County report they do not speak English well and 8.7% reported they did not speak English at all (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

In general, the population of Miami-Dade County possesses lower education attainment levels as compared to state averages. In Miami-Dade County, 67.9% of the population has completed high school, compared to 79.9% in Florida (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

According to Alfred (2005), it is important for educators to be cognizant of the demographic characteristics of recent immigrants to the Unites States and understand their experiences with education here before they can be effective in their roles as educators to this population. Immigrants face many economic, social, and cultural adjustments when they reach the United States, and one of the biggest challenges is acquiring English language skills.

Relationship Between Language and Poverty

Since 1960, immigration to the United States has been mostly composed of poor people

with a considerably low level of education from countries in Central and South America, Asia, and Africa (Orem, 2000). The more wealth and education immigrants have, the easier their transition will be to the United States; the poorer and less educated immigrants are, the more they will need to rely on interventions for their transitions (Lee & Sheared, 2002). According to Orem (2000), adults with limited English proficiency are for the most part marginal members of the population. In Miami-Dade County, 14.5% of families are living below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Approaches to Immigrant Adult Education

In the United States, English for Speakers of Other Languages, commonly referred to as ESL, is a common offering in adult education programs. According to Orem (2000), the goals of adult ESL learners are to develop communication and cultural skills necessary to attain their personal, educational, employment, and other goals. ESL programs generally do not focus on developing the native language of the learner and do not discern between individual learners' abilities to read and write in their native language or their levels of formal education completion (Rivera, 1990). This is a common, functional approach to literacy that focuses on adult social roles and individual growth, determined by state and/or federal guidelines, and carried out through the use of decontextualized books and materials (Sparks, 2002).

General Education Development (GED) is another common program offering in adult education programs. Many cities across the United States, including Miami, offer GED in Spanish for speakers with limited English proficiency (Rivera, 1990).

Bilingual adult education programs are most commonly offered in Miami-Dade County through institutions of higher education, technical schools, proprietary schools, and the local public school system. The bilingual education approach is generally more effective than an English-only approach if learners are put into programs with comparable resources (Wiley, 1997). Bilingual programs are focused on developing English skills so learners may be able to transition into English-only classrooms (Colombi & Roca, 2003). However, the question remains if learners' previous education attainment and native language abilities will factor in on whether or not they will be successful in bilingual programs currently offered.

Native Language Literacy as an Option in Adult Education

As the demographics of the United States changes, so too should the field of adult education. Alfred (2005) states "this dramatic shift in the composition of today's population speaks to the urgency for educational institutions to address the needs of the ever-increasing number of newly arrived minorities in the United States" (p. 4). More and more, adult education programs need to better serve students whose native language is not English and who have varying levels of literacy in their native language.

According to Rivera (1999), research evidence suggests that literacy skills in a person's native language are likely to transfer to their second language. This means that people who are not literate in their own language should develop literacy in their native language first so they may be more likely to acquire literacy in a second language. Rivera (1999) states "when adults are taught to read in the language they already know, they can use the linguistic strengths they bring into the program and draw upon the knowledge and skills they have acquired in their first language" (p. 1). This approach is aligned with one of the common assumptions of adult education, which is that new skills and knowledge are best acquired when they build on the preexisting knowledge, skills, and abilities of the adult learner.

For the large majority of the poor in Miami-Dade County, native language literacy, rather than English, is a critical factor for Spanish speakers to participate in the local economy

(Bruthiaux, 2002). According to Colombi and Roca (2003), native Spanish language speakers face the most difficulty with the development of an academic register in Spanish, particularly in writing. Native Spanish language speakers in the United States most commonly use oral language strategies when they write (Colombi, 2000). Professional and academic writing demands a greater repertoire of skills of the language than everyday vernacular, particularly in a business or other work setting. An academic register requires Spanish speakers to go beyond the styles they are familiar with, which are limited to oral styles and registers, thereby not allowing enough flexibility to respond to the demands of academic and professional writing and what the external world may require of them (Colombi, 2000).

   According to LaLyre (1995), although some learners may have acquired some basic English skills, "they [candidates for native language literacy instruction] are overwhelmed by the difficulties or memories of negative experiences presented by a school-like environment and teaching which relies on the use of the blackboard, books, and grammatical explanations" (p. 19). In other words, even if Spanish speaking immigrants are able to participate in their community socially because the majority of its members speak Spanish, as is the case in Miami, the very same immigrants may not be able to access or persist in most ESL and adult basic education programs due to their previous negative experiences with education and their low level of educational attainment (Klassen, 1991). Essentially, this means learners may be enrolling in ESL programs with the odds of success already stacked against them.

   Efforts to address poverty issues and native language literacy, recognizing the role language education plays in the sustainability of poverty, have been developed through community based responses to the needs of ethnic communities (Bruthiaux, 2003; LaLyre, 1995). Bruthiaux (2002) states:

    The key process consists of identifying a narrow set of socioeconomic factors that has led to the perpetuation of poverty, proposing a specific remedy involving self-determination on the part of the poor themselves, specifying the part language education may play in this process, and finally making appropriate policy choices over which language is most likely to bring about a successful educational and economic outcome." (p. 279)

   Although different definitions exist for adult education, Sparks and Butterwick (2004) state it can be considered, in a practical sense, a way to enhance a person's skills, knowledge, understanding, or capabilities. Conversely, Sparks and Butterwick (2004) also say adult education "constrains choices, opportunities and achievements, relegating individuals to programs that do not meet their needs or preparing them with skills and capabilities that are limiting" (p. 276). If the poorer and uneducated segment of the immigrant population stands to benefit from native language literacy in the Miami economy, then their needs are not being met through adult education.

   Within the ESL classroom, students who need to develop their native language literacy are among the group of students who show little or no growth at the lower stages of ESL (LaLyre, 1995). Although these students may develop some skills in English to be able to communicate in certain situations, they are challenged in the process of understanding grammar and standard language usage in English. Native language literacy promotes learning to read in a language adults already know and helps them to use the knowledge and skills they have developed in their native language to learn English (Rivera, 1999). Generally, learners in native language literacy programs are adults who have attended up to 5 years of elementary school and who speak a language other than English (LaLyre, 1995).

Implications of Native Language Literacy

If adult education programs were to offer native language literacy instruction, adult educators would face the challenge of providing instruction in the multiple native languages needed in the area. In Miami, if native language literacy instruction were to be provided, programs would need to be offered in Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Portuguese. This can turn out to be a costly endeavor that will deter any program relying on a tight fiscal budget. Additionally, given the dominance of the English language in the United States, some adult education programs may not see the benefits of offering literacy programs in other languages as a means to help students survive and thrive in the United States (Rivera, 1990). Therefore, literacy in any language other than English will not be viewed as having any impact on the social or economic mobility of students.

However, in Miami, both English and Spanish are valuable language currencies socially and economically. Lynch (2000) writes "despite the unfounded beliefs held by some Americans outside of Miami, there is no empirical sociolinguistic evidence to suggest that English is either being socially lost, or is not being fully acquired by successive generations of Hispanic immigrants there" (p. 280). On the contrary, the Spanish language of Hispanics in Miami has been anglicized and distorted, especially of those who do not speak English or Spanish well (Varela, 2000). For recent Hispanic immigrants in Miami and those who have not had an opportunity or the ability to learn English, the use of their native Spanish language offers opportunity (Wiley, 1997).

Another characteristic of the field of adult education is its history and commitment to social justice (Sparks & Butterwick, 2004). This requires an examination and awareness of the factors that both hinder or enable people from full participation in society. These factors should be used in adult education settings and activities that work toward social justice (Sparks & Butterwick, 2004).

Bruthiaux (2002) points out that it is critical for professionals to recognize the English hegemony in the process of development and globalization and the role they play in continuing that hegemony. Wiley (1997) writes there is a myth in the United States that English is the only language of value and that diversity of languages is not a resource, but rather a problem that tends to divide. Unlike many Europeans nations, the United States is not tolerant of language diversity and looks for exclusive use of nonaccented English as a sign of assimilation and Americanization (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

One of the biggest challenges to promoting native language literacy is the notion that the growing number of Latinos in the United States and the rise of the prevalence of the Spanish language pose a threat to America and American culture. For example, Huntington (2004) considers the growing immigration from Latin America as the biggest threat to America's identity because of the population's resistance to assimilate, the formation of enclaves, and fertility rates that can potentially divide the country into two cultures and two languages. Opinions, such as this one, fuel efforts to maintain the English-only hegemony.

The field of adult education should further explore the feasibility of providing native language literacy programs in the Miami area and its benefits to native language speakers. Additionally, creative approaches to overcome obstacles created by the English only hegemony and American expectations of immigrants to assimilate should also be considered.

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