

Jennifer Falcon
Lizbett Tinoco
English 6320
Dr. Mangelsdorf

Tenemos que hacer la lucha: Reflections of Latinas in Rhetoric and Writing Studies

Introduction

In recent years Latin@s are entering higher education at larger rates. According to the Pew Hispanic Center's study (2013), "a record seven-in-ten (69%) Hispanic high school graduates in the class of 2012 enrolled in college that fall, two percentage points higher than the rate (67%) among their white counterparts" (p. 4). Although the education gap between high school and higher education appears to be narrowing, the study also claims that Hispanic students are not enrolling in four-year colleges. Latin@s may be entering higher education, but only about 11% of those that enter college actually earn a bachelor's degree. However, at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), the changing demographics do not make much of a difference because we already have a large Latino@ student population. Approximately 80% of the students are Latin@s. Compared to other campuses, UTEP has a high number of Latin@ faculty, but like many other schools, our Rhetoric and Composition Department does not reflect our student population. As of now, our department comprises of all women tenured professors, but only one of these professors is Latina. Our professors opened up a space for us to critically think and embrace our positions as future Latina scholars by discussing topics such as hegemony, symbolic violence, mimicry, and language ideologies, to list a few, in our classes. This affords us the opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice by using what we discuss, and learn in class in our own classrooms. We can open up a space in our classrooms for our students to incorporate some of their language practices into their work. Our experiences,

and these practices, we hope, will not only help shift some of dominant standard language ideologies, but help raise the retention rates of Latin@ students.

Histories with Languages

Language ideologies inculcated in us by our families, and how this differed from those ideologies we learned at school at a young age, are what drive our positions as young Latina scholars in Rhetoric and Composition Studies. Yosso (2006) uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) to critique Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital by stating that his ideas "expose White, middle class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of 'culture' are judged in comparison to this 'norm'" (p. 76). As a result, Yosso argues that CRT shifts the focus from the dominant White, middle class culture to the cultures of Communities of color. Because the number of Latin@ scholars in our field is very small, it's important for the two of us to share how our experiences are somewhat similar to those of our students.

Jennifer:

Spanish was spoken in my house as a child, but it was never directed at me. My parents are products of an era when "English Only" was enforced with corporal punishment. They spoke English to my siblings and I, and often used their first language of Spanish only when talking to my grandparents. My grandfather only spoke Spanish, and many of my earliest memories revolve around conversations with him where my bilingual grandmother acted as our translator. These experiences of needing a translator, or simply not fully understanding what was said around me happened often throughout my childhood. I was born and raised in Los Angeles, a melting pot of cultural and linguistic practices, where hearing not only Spanish, but many other languages everywhere I went was a common occurrence. It was equally common to witness

people struggling to communicate with teachers, cashiers, gas attendants, etc. I grew up comfortable seeing signs, and store fronts displaying text that I could not read. My knowledge of the existence of many languages manifests itself in my teaching pedagogies, which specifically encourage my students to see the value in, make use of all of their linguistic capital.

Lizbett:

“No Ingles en la casa,” or, ironically, “Spanish only” were phrases I heard plenty of times throughout my childhood. My parents, more specifically my dad, would scold my sisters and I if we spoke English at home. As a result, Spanish became a language we only used at home and to communicate with family in order to develop familial capital, as Yosso refers to it. As soon as I got home from school, I had to speak Spanish. To this day, I only speak Spanish with my dad because he never learned how to speak English. At times, my dad regrets not allowing us to speak English at home because he believes that would have helped him learn the language.

I grew up in Oxnard, CA, an agricultural town, so my parents, while picking strawberries, celery, or whichever crop was in season, did not need to know English. Tired of the back breaking work, my mom decided to start her own housekeeping business, and my older brother, and I--only six years old--became her translators. My siblings and I would always translate, whether it was ordering for our parents at fast food restaurants or reading school notes written in English to our parents. I recall having a hard time translating from English to Spanish or vice versa. Plenty of times I did not know the Spanish version of words in English. These instances of translating are essentially what prompted me to start code switching and eventually using Spanglish to communicate with my parents.

In regards to language, second grade stands out for me. My teacher sent a note home recommending that I take speech classes, classes to help remediate my language skills. At that age, I probably did not know how to translate and relate the message of the note to my parents, so they just signed it. As a result, every week, I would get pulled into a small room with a few other students and we would get drilled on vocabulary. We were constantly reminded that we needed to speak English only at school if we wanted to “properly” learn the language. It was this year in grade school that impacted my relationship with the English language. I was a timid child, but speaking English terrified me. Not only was I terrified that I would say something wrong, I was also concerned that I would say something in English with a Spanish accent. Not only was I scolded at home for speaking English, but I was scared of speaking English in the one location where I knew it was acceptable.

Experiences as Undergraduates

Not only did our childhood experiences shape our language ideologies, but our experiences as undergraduate students did as well. The two of us attended universities in different regions of the country with very different academic cultures.

Jennifer:

Attending a four-year university was not presented as an option to me when I was a child. There were no discussions about if I would go to college. There were only expectations. I was told from a young age that after high school I would attend a university and earn my BA. This was, of course, not something I understood fully at a young age, but it was as present in my life as the sunshine of Southern California. During my senior year of high school I applied to many schools, but one visit to The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio and I knew where I would

be spending my undergraduate years. However, earning acceptance to OSU, and learning to adjust and transition to living in the Midwest were two completely different battles.

OSU is one of the largest universities in the country. It boasts close to 50,000 students on the main campus. That's about 44,000 undergraduates and roughly 13,000 graduate students. Flyers and recruitment videos mention the academic programs, the campus lifestyle, and the university's commitment to diversity.

During my time at OSU the university did what they could to fulfill this promise building a more diverse experience for its students. The office of First Year Experience (FYE) puts on several programs throughout the school year. Each event is geared towards helping students' transition successfully from high school to college. During my freshman year FYE brought authors to campus, and held lectures at night that addressed such topics as time-management, study skills, and various other programs aimed at helping students. There was a short summer reading list passed out during orientation, and some of these programs revolved around the short summer reading list given to incoming freshman.

One of the books on the summer reading list was Julia Alvarez's "In the Time of the Butterflies." I eagerly read it, and looked forward to her visit to the university. I genuinely hoped that discussing her book in class would make me feel at home in a place so different from where I was born and raised. Unfortunately, this book was never discussed in any of my classes. I was able to attend a talk and book signing with Julia Alvarez. There weren't any other programs put on that year that were obviously catered to the Latino student population. In fact, for all their talk of diversity the numbers were quite low. On average, from 2002 to 2014, 2.5 to 2.9% ("Highlights") overall undergraduate population are Latino students. The talk of diversity is not

only talk. There are numerous student groups that receive support from the university. The Alpha chapter of Alpha Psi Lambda, the nation's first co-ed Latino fraternity, often co-hosts events with the university, so the support is there for the students, but in my experience the talk of diversity only includes programs that bring minority authors, scholars, and activists to campus. The initiatives and diversity programming don't address language. Outside of a Spanish language class, the issue of bilingualism, or multilingualism does not come up. The programs that FYE hosted focused on helping students succeed at OSU, but these programs never veered outside the world pushing students to develop good study habits, and making positive lifestyle choices. The percentage of international students, and Latino students suggest that these discussions should take place, and that many of the students enrolled at OSU possess language practices that aren't often recognized as valuable in Standard Edited American English (SEAE).

Despite the focus of FYE programs on students making a successful transition from high school to college, I was able to adapt to life in Ohio quickly thanks to their programs despite the extreme culture shock I experienced moving from Los Angeles to Columbus, Ohio. However, what I learned early on was that my peers expectations of me were based on what they saw in mainstream media. When they would ask to practice their Spanish with me I couldn't help them. When my friends were surprised at how well I spoke English, or how well written my papers were I understood that the common narrative of Latino students was that we struggle with language. That dominant image of our struggles will continue to hinder us at the university level unless we find ways to demonstrate the value and advantages of bilingual speakers in the composition classroom. My experiences at OSU, and with the FYE programs demonstrated the lack of discussion, or inclusion, of language practices outside of SEAE. If FYE, or similar

programs at other universities, could incorporate some of these ideas into their programming, then perhaps there could be a shift in the ways in which the next generation of scholars, and professionals that graduate from OSU, or other universities will be part of the dismantling of these standard language ideologies.

Lizbett:

According to Yosso, “*Familial capital* refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (p. 79). Familial capital is strong among Latin@ families. Many Latin@ students attend college close to home because there is a sense of responsibility and desire to keep familial bonds strong. As a result, choosing where to attend college was not an easy decision for me. As a young teen, I wanted to be as far away from home as possible. However, I was greatly influenced by my parents. I almost did not apply to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) because it was too close to home, but my mom would always bring up the fact that when she was growing up in Mexico, UCLA was a name she always heard. I knew how competitive UCLA was, and continues to be, so I applied without ever thinking I would be accepted. When I heard back from all the schools I was admitted to, I had to make the decision of either moving up to Northern California to attend my dream school, UC Berkeley, or stay close to home and attend UCLA. I decided to stay close to home because of the close relationship I have with my family. Most of my mom’s family lives in Oxnard, but my abuelos and some tias and tios live on the same street as my parents. I did not want to miss out on family events--baptisms, birthdays, BBQs or other celebrations.

I have never once regretted attending UCLA, and I take pride in being a part of the Bruin family. However, my experiences there as a Latina student were a bit rough. From day one, I did not feel like I belonged. Going from a community and high school with predominantly Latinos and feeling like an outsider at UCLA was shocking. UCLA, a school that prides itself in being one of the best public research universities in the world, had a student population of approximately 25,000 students in 2004, the year I entered. Of those students, 3,821 were Hispanic and only 517 were first-time, first-year Hispanic students (“Common Data”). I was fortunate to be one of the 517, but it was rare to see any of the 516 other Hispanic students on campus.

If it were not for the Academic Advancement Program (AAP), a program for many first-generation, underrepresented students, I do not know if I would have graduated from UCLA. AAP offers peer tutoring throughout the year in many subject matters. I received one on one tutoring for my English Composition 3 course, which I later learned most students at UCLA test out of. It was not labeled a remedial writing course, but reflecting back with what I now know as a scholar, it definitely felt like one. This classroom introduced me to students of very diverse backgrounds since a lot of the students in my course that semester were international students who wanted to learn English. However, it was not only the AAP tutoring that occurred at Campbell Hall, it was the space and location that allowed me to engage with the few minority students on campus. Walking into Campbell Hall for tutoring was always something I looked forward to because it felt like a safe place and much like home on a campus where I felt like a stranger.

Although I went into UCLA as a Pre-Med student, it was not until my second year that I made the switch to English. My experience in the English Composition course, along with some Comparative Literature courses, made me realize the power of language. Although UCLA, like many other universities, places emphasis on Standard Academic English, I always felt out of place. As a Latina on campus, I never felt like I was at UCLA due to my academic ability, but I always felt like a statistic to boost the university's minority numbers. I can now see how UCLA and the capital that is associated with the institution instills hegemonic discourses, but interacting with the people I did in Campbell Hall made me realize I could make a difference in changing these hegemonic discourses by pursuing a degree that would give me access to higher education. As a result of my time at UCLA, I came to understand how language ideologies form, which has led me to be interested in basic writing and language practices in RWS.

Outsiders to RWS

Each one of us arrived at UTEP with undergraduate backgrounds in English Literature, without much knowledge in the field of Rhetoric and Composition Studies. Our graduate degrees are not in Rhetoric and Composition. Between us, we have an MA in English Literature, and an MFA in Creative Writing. As a result of our previous school experiences we found ourselves very much outside Rhetoric and Composition when we began PhD coursework.

Not only are we outsiders to the field of Rhetoric and Composition, but we have also joined a discipline where there are not very minority scholars, especially Latinas. In this respect, despite our academic success, we find ourselves feeling very much outside of our academic field. This disconnection does not only occur within our field, but it is felt in our personal lives as well. We constantly explain to relatives and others the nature of our field, and research interests,

without them fully comprehending why this is of value, or how it will help “la Raza.” One of the reactions we commonly encounter from others is why we are not in a discipline such as Chicana@s Studies. Not only do we have to defend our career choices, but we must constantly explain to people the power of language, whether it be relatives or students. As dominant of a position oral practices have in the Latina@ culture, not many students take composition courses because they enjoy it, but rather because it is a requirement.

UTEP as Contact Zone

Although the two of us have different background and attended different universities, what ties us together was our choice to move to El Paso, TX. For the two of us, this city provides some of the comforts of home, but it also took some adjusting. El Paso, Texas is in a very unique location. It finds itself right on the U.S./Mexico border. El Paso is a city with very close ties to its sister city of Ciudad Juárez located in Chihuahua, Mexico. According to the U.S. Census, about 81% of the population in El Paso County are Hispanic or Latino. The data also shows that 73% of the population speaks a language other than English at home. Of the people that speak another language at home, 71.6% of these people speak Spanish (“El Paso County”).

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) has an estimated 23,000 students. About 78% of the student body population identify as Hispanic, and about 5% of students are international students from Mexico (“UTEP Quick Facts”). Many students cross the border on a daily basis from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico to attend UTEP. Most of the students attending UTEP are from the El Paso or Juárez region, with very few students from out of state or other countries. Because only a highway and a border wall separate UTEP from Juárez, Spanish is heard everywhere on campus. The linguistic complexities of students at UTEP is very rich. Plenty of

Latino/as students at UTEP do not speak Spanish at all. However, many students are fully bilingual in Spanish and English, and are thus as proficient in English as monolingual speakers of English. There are also many students on campus that speak English fluently but show Generation 1.5 characteristics, which are very complex. Students at UTEP identify with multiple cultures and multiple languages; hence, neither English as a Second Language or “mainstream” FYC curriculum serve the student body at UTEP.

Due to the diverse student body population and the scholars in our program, one of the required courses for the PhD in Rhetoric and Composition is Advanced Critical Theory. Unlike other PhD programs, Advanced Critical Theory is not a special topics course offered periodically to students. This course focuses on everything from Critical Theory to Critical Race Theory to Global Englishes, and language policies in RWS. The importance of this course lies within the topics discussed, such as racial formations, whiteness studies, and Latin@ studies, and the very real possibility of implicating a new learned theory or approach immediately into the classroom. The student population of UTEP allows PhD students that also teach to begin to close the gap between theory and practice. A considerable amount of coursework addresses the issue of Standard Language Ideologies (SLI). The reading material forced us to consciously come to terms with the ways in which SLI has shaped our own language practices in the classroom, but more importantly it affords us the time to work through how we, as Latin@ instructors, can challenge and change some of these SLI practices in our classrooms.

Another course that discusses language ideologies, but with a global focus is Global Rhetorics. Although this is not a required course for the PhD program, many graduate students enroll. The focus of this course is to discuss global cultural flows as described by Appadurai to

more local issues presented in Chavez's *Latino Threat*. Students in this class have the opportunity to discuss Global Englishes and how language ideologies can construct certain identity narratives for groups of people, and examine transnational literacies, specifically how Global Englishes are transforming educational practices. Like the Advance Critical Theory course, this class allows students to critically analyze language practices.

According to Beatrice Méndez -Newman (2007), "Compositionists with little or no experience at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) quickly discover that traditional training in rhetoric and composition inadequately addressed the impact of many Hispanic students' sociocultural, socioeconomic, and ethnolinguistic makeup on performance in the writing class and on acculturation into the larger academic community" (p. 17). When a large number of students in First-Year Composition (FYC) have different academic preparation and perspectives than the fictional "mainstream" student, classroom dynamics alter; this is where instructors at these institutions need to take into account the linguistic complexities at HSIs. "Compositionists at an HSI does not have to be Hispanic to be an effective in the writing classroom. However, awareness of Hispanic students' cultural and ethnolinguistics identities should figure prominently in the construction of the writing classroom" (19) states Méndez-Newman. In addition, Kells, Balester, and Villanueva (2004) write, "We know. We know of the Latinos and Latinas in our classroom. We know of their linguistic complexity, but we haven't found ways to translate this knowledge into classroom practices that aren't still founded on an assimilationist set of assumptions" (p. 2)

One of the elective courses the two of us enrolled in was an Ethnographic study on our First-Year Composition Program. This course focused on the literacies/biliteracies practices of

first semester composition students and instructors. One of the things we quickly learned is that literacy practices are so ingrained with language ideologies and identities. While conducting research, our class observed that some instructors were adamant about not allowing students to speak Spanish in the classroom. However, the two instructors we both observed were welcoming of students using Spanish, Spanglish, or use of other languages in their classes. However, both of the instructors did not make it explicitly clear that these language practices were allowed in their classrooms, but welcomed even though these instructors did not speak Spanish.

Interestingly, we found that despite the instructors' openness to students using other languages in their writing or class discussions students did not often take advantage of this opportunity to make use of the linguistic capital they possess as a result of their bilingualism. Students we interviewed expressed to us that they often use Spanish, Spanglish, and other languages outside the classroom. It was quite common that students speak Spanish, or Spanglish, at home, with friends, and in text message conversations. However, one of the students we interviewed made it clear that speaking Spanish was something he only did at home and not at school. Most students we interviewed expressed that Spanish was an "insiders" language, a language only practiced among family and friends, and not shared among academic settings. Based on the interviews conducted with students we quickly realized how detrimental the dominant English standard language ideologies are to students. We found that even when given the option to make use of their varied language practices, they chose not to based on their assumptions and/or experiences about what is, and is not allowed in an English Composition classroom.

One student expressed during an interview that he understood he could use Spanish in his writing, or a source from a Spanish academic journal, but chose not to do so. He informed us that he felt comfortable in his knowledge that his instructor would not be opposed to him doing this, but that he would not use Spanish, or any other language in his research, or writing. When prompted to explain this, the student did not have a clear answer as to why he would not use Spanish when his instructor was open to this. It is important to note that while most students are bilingual they may not have a lot of experience writing in Spanish. We understand that this could be one reason as to why some students, despite knowing they can integrate Spanish into their work, choose not to do so.

As a result of our coursework, we have learned how the classroom can serve as a contact zone. Pratt (1991) defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 34). Not only are we confronted with our own language ideologies but with student language ideologies as well. After examining our own language practices and the practices we discovered when interviewing students, we have come to realize that as instructors we will constantly be grappling with these issues. Fortunately, the unique location and student body population at UTEP gives us the opportunity to not just read theory, but actually put it into practice.

Each of us is committed to taking action by attempting to dismantle SLI. We understand that SLI has a long history in and outside of the classroom, but we see our positions as scholars and instructors as an opportunity to continue to do research in this area of RWS, and encourage inclusion of language practices that exist outside SLI in the classroom. It’s not enough for us to

know that we are okay with student speaking Spanish. We need to explicitly let them know that they are welcomed to make use of any, and all of their linguistic capital in the classroom.

As a result, each of us take on different pedagogical approaches to make sure that our classroom are linguistically diverse. For example, we allow students to use sources in Spanish when conducting research. We invite students to communicate amongst each other in Spanish, Spanglish, or other languages as long as they are learning the rhetorical practices they need in order to communicate effectively. Several of the assignments in our writing courses and writing program allow our students to move away from using alphabetic Standard Academic English practices and move into visual composition. This documentary project allows students to see that they can be rhetorically effective without relying on alphabetic text in English.

Students are allowed to use sources printed in Spanish. They are encouraged to use Spanish in the classroom amongst each other. We find this helps students understand the assignment guidelines easier. If students are more comfortable talking to each other in Spanish, or Spanglish, then we see no reason to stop this. We encourage that they use the language, and language practices that they feel most comfortable using. We do everything we can to let students know that we do not have a specific policy against them incorporating Spanish into the classroom. If students wish not to take advantage of this, then we encourage that they make use of all of their language skills. This may result in students using Spanish throughout their writing process.

Conclusion

Like many of our Latin@ students at UTEP, we both know what it is like to navigate through unfamiliar territory when entering college. Our experiences as undergraduates, and now as PhD students who also teach college level composition courses that have a nontraditional

curriculum that incorporates more rhetoric than traditional composition courses allow us the opportunity to incorporate language practices that exist outside of SLI. As a result, we are able to encourage our students in our first year composition courses to use the languages they know in order to communicate effectively with their peers, and us. We are both aware that change does not occur from one day to another, but we are hopeful that the small changes we make in our classrooms will have an even greater impact on our students in and out of our classes.

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