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

**Intro**

Latin@s have been entering higher education at larger rates in the last few years. However, institutional changes in higher education to address these changing demographics are not keeping up. However, at the University of Texas at El Paso, the changing demographics are already a part of the university since it is located on the U.S. and Mexico border.

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. Latinos are entering higher education, but only about 11% of those that enter college actually earn a bachelor’s degree.

**Part 1: (History with language)**
Language ideologies inculcated in us by our families, and how this differed from those ideologies we learned 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.

**Jenn -** 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.

**Liz-**

“No Ingles en la casa,” or, iconically, “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 whatever crop was in season, did not need to know English. My mom decided to start her own housekeeping business, and at the age of six years old, my brother and I became her translators. I recall having a hard time translating from English to Spanish or vice versa. These instances of translating are what prompted me to start code meshing and eventually using Spanglish.

Grandmas opinion about going to college- dad defending my choice to go into higher ed. **Part 2:(Undergrad experiences**
**Part 3: (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 also 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. Initially,

having MAs outside of RWS - mimicry, outsiders to RWS, Other-cloak

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. We are constantly having to explain to relatives and others what we are studying without them ever really comprehending why this is of value or how it will help “la Raza.” One of the reactions we usually get from others is why we are not in a discipline such as Chican@s Studies. Not only do we have to defend our career choices, but we constantly have to explain to people the power of language, whether it be relatives or students. As dominant of a position oral practices have in the Latin@ culture, …..

**Part 4: (UTEP)**

El Paso, Texas is in a very unique location. It is located north of the U.S./Mexico border, and it has very close ties to its sister city, 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 (U.S Census). \*\*\*not sure if this paragraph would be needed\*\*\*

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) has an estimated 23,000 students, and it is located on the U.S./Mexico border. 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 Cuidad 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 are 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. Roberge, Siegal, and Harklau (2009) identify Generation 1.5 students as “English language learners who arrive in the U.S. at an early age, obtain much or all of their education in U.S. K-12 settings, and arrive in college with various patterns of language and literacy that don’t fit the traditional, ‘institutionally constructed’ profiles of Developmental Writing, College ESL, or Freshman Composition” (p. vii). 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 students still enroll in the course. The focus of this course is to discuss global cultural flows as described by Appardurai to the more local issues presented in Chavez’s *Latino Threat*.

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 along 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.

We do not place a great deal of importance on grammar.

community based pedagogy- class rubrics as a way to question dominant discourse

**Conclusion**

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