

Beyond English hegemony: language, migration and Appalachian schools

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Co-authored by an academic who has worked in ESL teacher improvement programmes under the No Child Left Behind Act, an assistant director of an Appalachian school district, and a trilingual translator and teacher who works with indigenous Mexican populations, this article is narrated in the voice of the first author. The essay addresses how teachers in a Tennessee school district have learned to engage new English speakers and how existing ‘English only’ law affects the process. Contrasting today’s immigrants with those of the past, the narrator relates her experience of working with Purépecha children in Morristown and considers the perils of stereotyping others’ literacy. The children’s comfort with speaking English is affected by their awareness that, as undocumented people, they and their families do not enjoy full citizenship.

The root function of language is to control the universe by describing it.
(James Baldwin)

Never impose your language on people you wish to reach. (Abbie Hoffman)

We meet on Mondays at four o’clock. The postgraduate course, Content Area Reading in ESL, is funded by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), which in the state administers funds allocated under the No Child Left Behind Act, a far reaching programme of US school reform, enacted during the Bush Administration and involving massive standardised testing. Another less publicised aspect of the reform is improved teacher preparation. This course is designed for K–12 Anglophone teachers encountering new English speakers in their classes. Working with the 23 participating teachers is a high point of my week and makes the 90-mile drive from East Tennessee State University to Morristown in Hamblen County worthwhile. Today, a student I shall call Sam is holding forth on one of his favourite topics—the acceptance this district offers to children who speak languages other than English:

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How are they gonna learn English when we keep letting them speak Spanish? You hear Spanish all over the place—in the lunchroom, on the playground, in the halls. Sometimes you wonder what country you're visiting. We have no idea what they're saying. They could be talking about us. Wouldn't they learn English faster if we made them speak English?

I inquire how we might accomplish this. Sam presents his modest proposal:

Give 'em a three-hour detention every time they use Spanish. At the detention make 'em watch English movies. We could show things like *The Three Stooges*. We don't have to be mean about this. Heck, we could give the kids ice cream during the movies. They're sweet kids. Think about it. What kind of lives will they have if they don't learn English?

This method of coping with native language, aside from the movies and ice cream, is uncomfortably similar to a strategy adopted by the US government from 1870 to 1928 in its boarding schools for Native American children. In the heyday of assimilationist education, the intent was to weaken the children's ties to their native communities and to suppress or eradicate Native American tongues. The reasoning was that Indian language and culture were inferior to those of the settlers in every respect, and that in aggressively eliminating their language and culture, government educators were doing these children a favour (Keohane, 2005). Fortunately, Sam's classmates do not consider coercive pedagogy of this sort an option. They are comfortable with polyglot playgrounds and multilingual hallways, but as monolinguals their instruction is entirely in English. Sam is a second-generation American and an unabashed supporter of English hegemony (see Macedo *et al.*, 2003), but he is also a conscientious teacher, well-liked by his students and concerned about their future in the United States. Sam's proposal to restrict children's use of their native language is consistent with the spirit of Tennessee State law, which reads:

English is hereby established as the official and legal language of Tennessee. All communications and publications, including ballots, produced by governmental entities in Tennessee shall be in English, and instruction in public schools and colleges of Tennessee shall be conducted in English unless the nature of the course would require otherwise. (Tennessee Code Annotated, Section 4-1-404)

Twenty-three states in the US have such laws. Often, English only laws are inconsistent with those federal statutes which require that federal documents be written in a language comprehensible to the reader. The English only movement is touted as having a unifying effect on US culture. Quite the opposite occurs when, instead of being eased into the use of English, immigrants are expected to communicate in a language they do not understand or control. Because English is the discourse of power in the US, it is the responsibility of American schools to make certain that children learn to write, read and speak English, and do so well (Delpit, 1995). In the THEC grant class, and in other projects initiated by the Hamblen County Schools, we have sought ways to entice immigrant children to join the literate English world rather than to compel participation punitively.

Linguistic change has come quickly to this Tennessee community of 25,000 residents. Until a decade ago, the linguistic diversity of the Hamblen County Schools was confined to various forms of English related to each other along a creole

continuum. These ranged from a decorous Southern Mountain ‘Standard English’ spoken by college-educated school personnel to a robust form of Appalachian English used by many of the students. While a consistent 6% of the school community has always been African American, this group speaks a Southern Mountain English indistinguishable from that of other Morristown residents, rather than African American English. A constant 1% of the school population identifies itself as Native American and speaks this same Southern Mountain English. Another 1% of the district’s minority population is from Asia; some of these children are recent arrivals requiring instruction in English.

Change arrived eleven years ago in 1994 when a newly built chicken processing plant began to require low-wage personnel. Morristown’s undocumented immigrant population soared almost overnight. The new workers—chiefly from Mexico—brought their children with them, and their presence has posed a challenge for a school system which, until this point, had been predominantly white and virtually monolingual. While Karen Spangenberg-Urbschat and Robert Pritchard (1994) remind us that ‘children come in all languages’, the languages these newcomers brought were largely unfamiliar to the staff of the Hamblen County Schools.

Most of the immigrants are Spanish-speaking, and pidgin Spanish functions as a *lingua franca* among Morristown’s Mexican immigrants. We estimate that as many as 10% of the Hamblen County immigrants may be native speakers of Mexico’s indigenous languages, such as Purépecha and Mixtec. A few are native speakers of Asian languages. The newcomer population is not evenly distributed; thus some Hamblen County elementary schools are as much as one-third immigrant. The polyglot nature of such schools is disorienting: is this monolingual East Tennessee, or has one been magically transported to California or New York?

Under current US law, children, regardless of national origin, must be admitted to the local public school. Before the inception of the first THEC grant in 2003, few Morristown teachers had studied a foreign language, as it is not required of teachers in this state. There were few certified English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Learning (ELL) teachers in the region when the influx of children from Mexico began. Federal and state law mandates daily ELL instruction for each newcomer. The rest of the time, the child may be in an immersion classroom. How constructive this experience will be depends on the skill of the immersion teacher in communicating across the language barrier and in encouraging the newly arrived child to learn English. Strong pragmatic language skills are required to teach someone who does not know one’s language (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). Gestures and drawing aid communication, while studying the learner’s facial expressions checks understanding. A teacher who has not been formally trained in ELL may have acquired strong pragmatic skills through experiences in a multilingual family or community or through international travel.

The Morristown teachers’ task of welcoming several hundred students into the community of English speakers has at times seemed daunting. Yet historically, American school teachers have achieved this before. The Homestead Act of 1862 provided that persons settling western lands and working them for a period of five

years would own them. People flocked to America from many parts of the world to obtain their 'free' farms. While the immigration laws at the time discriminated in favour of those coming from Europe, people came from all over the world to take advantage of the opportunity (Nebraskastudies.org, 2005). In that era as now, many of the new arrivals did not speak English. While public education was rudimentary in those times, it was required in most localities, and homesteaders settled a full 10% of United States farmland. Whatever one's view of the desirability of English hegemony, the descendants of immigrant pioneers obviously became English users.

As the nineteenth century became the twentieth, the US needed more factory workers. These opportunities and Europe's inhospitality to Jews led my grandparents to immigrate to America when they could—hence my own empathic connection to new generations of immigrants. I teach ELL methods, reading education and reading linguistics, and I founded and was the assistant director of a freestanding ELL centre in Cincinnati for five years. I have also taught EFL abroad. When I demonstrate to in-service teachers how to help a non-English speaker who arrives in their classroom, I am apt to say something like this:

Put a paper on the child's desk. Say, 'Here, Juan, here is a *paper*.'
 Hand the child a pencil. Say, 'Here, Juan, here is a *pencil*!'
 Demonstrate: 'We *write* with a *pencil*.'

I have always had the ability to encourage others in learning English. It is not something I learned in graduate school. It was the reverse. I took ELL training because I was good at communicating across language barriers. In the Brooklyn community where I was raised, it seemed as if everyone's family came from some other country. The people upstairs were Chinese. Those down the block were Greek. My own grandparents were from four different countries: Austria, Latvia, Romania and Poland. They learned English in evening classes for immigrants in New York during the early 1900s. My grandparents never acquired native-like fluency, and as a child, I was asked to 'speak for' my grandmother when we shopped. My father learned German at home and Yiddish in the streets. English, he learned at school. My mother's first language was Yiddish. Before school, she was Rifka. But she received a new name—Sara—at school. Having read about the eradication of diverse cultures, I asked my mother if she had approved the name change: 'Of course!' she exploded. 'With a name like Rifka, I would have been a joke.'

Increasingly, she transacted her life in English. She had no desire to speak Yiddish in later life, except to converse with older people in her family. The term 'English for specific purposes' connotes English used for discrete goals such as running computers or flying airplanes. For my mother, Yiddish became a language of specific purpose—to communicate with family members who did not control English well. I learned little Yiddish at home; my children speak none. Even more dramatically, my father cut his connection with German, which he had spoken as a child and learned to read and write in high school, because of the association with Hitler. My father would deny he remembered it, though I observed him read and speak German fluently when called upon to translate for a refugee. My parents had little interest in Europe, which they understood to be a bad place overrun by

anti-Semitism. When their parents spoke English poorly and were slow to acquire the new customs, they cringed. They eschewed their ethnic-sounding names in favour of English ones and dismissed the charming artefacts their elders had brought from Europe. America was their country; it had welcomed their families. English was their language of choice. They embraced the language of Shakespeare as their own.

This generation of immigrants—the children we teach in Hamblen County—is differently linked to the culture of origin than the immigrant generations of the early 1900s. Today's immigrants place a different value on original names and native languages and have a different approach to English language and culture. Many keep their original names. Mateo does not call himself Matthew. Veronica will not respond unless you pronounce her name 'Beronica'. In time, they will speak English in class, but prefer Spanish when conversing with friends in the corridors. They do not surrender the first language as my parents once did. Why not?

The world is smaller than before. In earlier generations, immigrants separated from the home country more radically. Ford Maddox Brown's 1855 painting *The Last of England* depicts the trauma of nineteenth-century immigrants, sailing from a native shore as they view the home community for the last time. By contrast, this generation of immigrants remains intimately tied to home. Today's immigrants use cell phones and the Internet; they listen to broadcasts in the native language via satellite. Money crosses borders via Western Union. The severe break from home that earlier immigrants made is not necessary. Typically, Morristown's immigrants flee economic hardship, rather than political persecution. They come not out of love for US institutions, but because of their desperate need for employment. Overwhelmingly, new immigrant families are in Hamblen County because parents find tough, underpaid jobs in East Tennessee, and their labour is vital to the economy. That they are mostly undocumented workers is an open secret. Families cross the US border on foot and are met by a *coyote* or guide, who hides them as they drive to East Tennessee. During their first fearful journey to the US in a canvas-covered truck, the children become outlaws, wary of law enforcement. It is hardly surprising that these children waver in their views of America and resist giving up their native language.

While Morristown was a site of significant conflict during the American Civil War (Morristown Chamber of Commerce, 2005), it has long been homogeneous in the linguistic sense. The Cherokee Indian population was forcibly uprooted in 1838, and since that time, a single linguistic code—English—has been dominant (Trail of Tears, 2005). Most of the grant teachers had never been outside the US, and some had not travelled beyond the Appalachians. Some reported having to expend energy to understand my New York accent; comprehending a second-language speaker would have been even more difficult. This educational community could have found many reasons for failing to teach the immigrant children streaming into their schools.

Yet, cognisant that the district was undergoing a profound cultural metamorphosis, Dr Dale Lynch, director of Hamblen County Schools, and Dr Brenda Dean, the assistant director and co-author of this article, sought multiple ways to address

the challenge. They began with a small corps of ESL teachers who trudged from school to school, a summer programme of 40 elementary students and a Twenty-First Century Technology grant. Eventually, they found additional resources. ESL services are now offered daily and, wherever possible, ESL practitioners are assigned to only one or two schools. The K-8 summer programme has grown to 130 students, and after-school tutoring and mentoring programmes are on offer. Much of the district's staff has received Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) training, a recognised method of ESL practice. From 2002 to 2005, I conducted a weekly postgraduate seminar during the spring semester, under a No Child Left Behind grant from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. These efforts have borne fruit. For the past two years, Hamblen County has met its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals under the No Child Left Behind Act, even though Hamblen County has the highest number of migrant children in Tennessee.

The THEC grant class has had a different emphasis each year: linguistics, reading improvement in ELL, content area reading. The participants are teachers new to ELL, but highly experienced in their teaching areas. Many hold masters degrees and higher. Classroom practitioners are extraordinarily busy. Often, they identify complex teaching problems behind the closed doors of their classrooms and address them with innovative learning materials, but rarely write up what they have done (Stephens, 1998). The professional community and the public at large do not always realise how inventive classroom teachers are. The THEC class provides a space where participating teachers carry out classroom-based research and reflect and write about effective new strategies in their work with ELL students. The grant gives modest assistance for teachers to try out classroom literacy projects, and several teachers have gone on to present their findings at professional conferences.

The schools within Hamblen County have some autonomy in implementing district goals. One elementary school uses an extremely structured method of rote learning to teach English vocabulary to kindergarteners, based on the Direct Instruction model (Carnine *et al.*, 2004). Another takes a more relaxed approach in keeping with what language educators have defined as 'authentic instruction' (Hurley & Tinajero, 2001). I have undertaken a comparative study of the reading development of the students in two schools. Initial data from this study suggest that some kindergarteners made very large gains between data gathering visits. When I asked the children if they were practising their reading outside school, they said their parents worked with them at home by reading *in Spanish*. Apparently literacy is literacy, regardless of language, and having a parent take interest in reading is what counts.

Literacy seems to function as a cross-linguistic semiotic, and experience in the THEC class shows that one needs to learn to read and write only once. Pressure to use English exclusively would most likely slow the process of English literacy acquisition. T. Luke reports working with a Japanese student who knew no English at the start of first grade; however, the child was able to read and write some Japanese (Coates *et al.*, 2004). She gave the child a blank notebook and numerous picture books in English. She then instructed the child to draw or write in his language of choice. On the wall of his first grade classroom was the English alphabet.

Early in the year, he drew pictures and wrote in Japanese, which his teacher did not understand. Midway through the year, he switched to English in his journal. By the end of first grade, his English writing was fully appropriate for a child his age. Another child learned English vocabulary with bilingual flashcards. The teacher knew the child read Spanish. She was surprised when he flipped the cards over and read the English backs of the cards. His Spanish literacy had transferred to English. Grant teachers offered children books in their home language during periods of sustained silent reading. Some may question this use of foreign language materials in an 'English-only' reading pedagogy, but we have found that their use hastens the acquisition of English literacy for bilingual children (Coates *et al.*, 2004).

Scholars of literacy have long recognised that communities use literacy in many ways (Heath, 1983). There is a sharp divide between the way urban-technological peoples use literacy, in a host of daily activities, and the way traditional agrarian societies use it. In contemporary society, literacy is embedded in food preparation, shopping, communication and occupations. This is not the case in some of the cultures from which Morristown's immigrants come. We initially believed that the children from Mexico's Tarascan Mountains had grown up without written language. Having read outdated information about their society, we mistakenly attributed their difficulties to unfamiliarity with print, rather than to minority language status or cultural discontinuity. The children spoke some Spanish, but their native language was Purépecha, which none of us understood. Some teachers advocated placing them in special education, but that was contrary to federal law. The children were placed in ESL and immersion classes. Meanwhile, I began to do some research on the Internet.

One cannot always wait for current information. As grant administrator, I wanted to understand the instructional issues that teachers in the group found most difficult. I therefore began working with four of the low-achieving Purépecha middle school students. While only one of the students was a non-reader, all were at least four years below grade level, and none read above a primary level. Generally, their literacy lagged two grade levels behind that of other ELL children. Working on the assumption that these teenagers had had little exposure to literacy prior to encountering American culture, I reasoned that they would benefit from a constructivist approach to reading where they could expand their understandings of print and its multiple functions (*Constructivism in education: opinions and second opinions on controversial issues*, 2000). We worked on craft projects and simple science experiments, and took digital photos, creating collateral text. When the students made progress, I congratulated myself, though it dawned on me that for emergent literates, their progress was rather rapid.

The following summer, I worked with eight Purépecha teenagers—including the three boys with whom I had previously worked. Taking my cues from the students, I now used a more structured approach. I am not an unmitigated proponent of phonics, but these children found the alphabetic generalisations in CAT, PAT and HAT simply intriguing. English idioms, such as 'it's raining cats and dogs', made them laugh. We practised cursive writing, not ordinarily one of my priorities; but for

teenagers, cursive writing denotes status. Linda Storm, who taught these students the following year, told me they were progressing well.

My Internet inquiries were beginning to pay off. In the Fall of 2004, I received a tactfully worded email from Kari Ranta, a Wycliffe Bible translator who had been working in the Purépecha community for six years. He pointed out that the information with which I had been working was about 30 years out of date. No one likes to be wrong, but I was delighted to have contact with a compassionate linguist familiar with this community. Soon, I heard that a small group of US teachers would be touring the Tarascan region of Mexico to learn about Purépecha education. ETSU funded my participation.

Travel sharpens awareness of one's own literacy and culture. Upon encountering the Purépecha, one of Mexico's 66 indigenous populations, I was reminded anew that no society is uniformly literate or lacking in literacy; rather, literacy penetrates different strata of a society where it is used in different ways. Among the Purépecha, adult literacy is estimated to be 60% (INEGI). But how much do such statistics tell us? Uniform Purépecha writing has existed since the 1950s, but dissemination has been a problem, largely because of the preference of the Mexican government for an overarching Spanish literacy in the Tarascans (Jacinto-Zavala, 2005). Endeavours to create a writing system for Purépecha are not new. The sixteenth and nineteenth centuries also saw attempts to develop a written language for this language (Giberti, 2004). Purépecha villages have a largely pre-industrial agrarian and crafts-based economy. Some indigenous people who hawk home-grown produce and intricate needlework at outdoor markets discern banknotes and make change, but are otherwise unable to read. Colegio de Michoacan is located in the Tarascans, and its scholars, many of them ethnic Purépechas, hold advanced degrees and are literate in several languages. While Americans embed literacy in technology to a much greater extent than do the people of this region, the Internet is available in Tarascan cities such as Uruapan and Patzcuaro where there is an Internet café every third block. I was reminded that literacy is not uniformly disseminated in any society, and that in East Tennessee, where my own university is located, functional illiteracy is high (American Guide Series, 1996).

Working with students from other parts of the world is complex. One cannot always wait for data from an international trip when a new immigrant group needs to learn the language. When we visited the renowned Purépecha bilingual school in the village of San Isidro, I learned that they used constructivist modes of instruction (*Constructivism in education: opinions and second opinions on controversial issues*, 2000). The school had piloted techniques of literacy enhancement that involved listening, drawing pictures and essay writing; computers, though far from state of the art, were used. Students were encouraged to construct their own definitions of words. The St. Isidro School had the highest scores of any Purépecha school on Mexico's national exams. In working with Purépecha youth in Morristown, I had used similar techniques with my digital camera and accompanying text. One can speculate that constructivist literacy methods work well for this population because they allow learners to make personal connections with print. Purépecha children, while aware

of print, grow up in a culture that does not embed it in the round of daily existence. Constructivist methods encourage students to build personal connections to literacy. Though my assumptions about their home community had been off base, my intervention with the Purépecha in Morristown had been appropriate. I flattered myself that teaching experience and personal sensitivity had allowed me to infer 'best practices'. However, my co-author, Brenda reminded me that 'even a blind hog finds an acorn now and then'.

To be effective teachers, we should put down the curriculum guides and syllabi and take a look at our students. This is particularly important in immigrant education where the students' social position is different from ours. It is difficult for most American citizens, even with recent immigrants in the family, to appreciate the shadow status of the new arrivals in our schools. Since they were not born here, they will not be eligible for government grants or loans in paying for college; thus education will stop with high school. Their parents pay into social security using bogus numbers and thus never draw benefits. Beginning in 2006, communities such as Hamblen County can no longer qualify for No Child Left Behind funding because the 2000 census does not list this region as 'High Poverty' (THEC, 2005). Assuredly, high poverty exists; however, undocumented immigrants are notoriously fearful of government agents and duck the census taker. Fortunately, Hamblen County is meeting its AYP goals under the No Child Left Behind Act. We are grateful that Hamblen County received a No Child Left Behind grant when it did; that it would be ineligible today highlights immigrants' shadow status and the ways it affects linguistic choices.

Newly arrived children will be, at best, ambivalent about the host language if their parents work in brutal conditions, cannot legally obtain a driver's license, much less citizenship and the right to vote. Children will not develop an unqualified love of English if they are denied access to college scholarships through this linguistic code. Earlier generations of immigrants were offered naturalisation and chose to conduct increasingly larger portions of their lives in English. Today, many immigrants are neither resident aliens nor citizens. They play a role in the economy, by filling minimum-wage jobs, but have no rights. Now, No Child Left Behind funding has been eliminated from their children's schools. Few areas have been as fortunate as Morristown, where a three-year grant helped teachers work with multilingual classrooms.

Today's immigrants may not choose to learn English except as an academic language or a language of specific purpose. While unifying a nation through a single language may have its benefits, this will certainly not occur with a spate of 'English only' laws such as those in Tennessee. A language is freely chosen as an expression of the self. Newcomers to our classrooms will not choose English until they and their parents are equal to other citizens under American law.

Notes on contributors

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Joaquín Márquez is a teacher and trilingual translator who has lived in the United States. A member of the Purépecha community, he is active in efforts to augment literacy in the Purépecha community. Born in Cheranastico, he now resides in Paracho and teaches at Paracho internado indigena, Michoacan.

Note

1. While three writers contributed to this article, it is written in the voice of the first writer, Rosalind Raymond Gann.

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