

Aquí No Se Habla Español: Stories of Linguistic Repression in Southwest Schools

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Abstract

For some Americans, the growing number of heritage language speakers in the United States signals a threat to the cultural fabric of U.S. society. For these individuals, English is the only language that is appropriate for the indoctrination of youth into our nation's social order. Recent events in the United States' political landscape, such as the passage of California's Proposition 227 and Arizona's Proposition 203, attest to the notion that schools remain one of the most ardent battlegrounds for the English language policy debate. Nonetheless, school-based language policy decisions have been made too hastily, often relying on rash assessments of public opinion or personal biases. What school language policymakers have failed to consider are the potential long-term consequences to the social, academic, or linguistic development of heritage language speakers these policies affect. In the present paper, several accounts of Spanish speakers whose heritage language clashed on school grounds are provided. The stark memories from their youth reveal that the establishment of formal or informal English-only policies at school, and the manner in which those policies were enforced, often did shape their personal, scholastic, and language development over time.

Introduction

According to the latest figures from the U.S. Census Bureau (2000, 2001), the United States is home to an estimated 283,500,000 people who speak over 350 non-English heritage languages. Many of the United States' heritage languages represent tongues spoken by newcomers. Nonetheless, the existence of Native American languages and Spanish, on what is now U.S. soil, predates that of English by several hundred to several thousand years. However, a language's primacy does not guarantee its survival when placed in contact with a distinct linguistic community. As is often the case with

cultures that meet, either through conflict or commerce, the language of individuals with political power and/or social prestige is the one that is eventually adopted and propagated by a society's majority.

In the United States, heritage language communities are often comprised of members who have traditionally occupied positions of little political power or social prestige. In general, members of these communities are either immigrants or ethnic minorities who have suffered a history of political discrimination and abuse, or other groups whose numbers are perceived by the mainstream to be insufficient to warrant any threat to the majority's established language, values, and social structure. Because of their link to communities that are of diminished political standing, heritage languages are often considered by majority communities to be obstacles to the effective assimilation of heritage speakers to the mainstream society.

Historically, schools have been the primary vehicle for the assimilation of peoples of various backgrounds and for the promotion of mainstream cultural and linguistic norms and values. In the case of the southwestern United States, schools regularly segregated Mexican children from Anglo populations on the basis of race and language up to the middle of the 20th century to aid in the integration of Spanish-speaking children. The establishment of separate "Mexican schools" had been predicated on the notion that the children would be able to learn English "easier" and thereby become better citizens, although little regard had been given to other formal educational content (Menchaca & Valencia, 1990; Moore & Pachón, 1985).

This practice of segregated schooling was officially discontinued when the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 ruled that separate schools did not constitute equal education under the law and thus dissolved the basis for separate institutions in the entire nation. Yet, despite the legal dismantling of segregated schools, the seeds of isolation sown by school officials and politicians in the Southwest during the early part of this century have succeeded in keeping Mexican students separated from Anglos even to this day (Menchaca & Valencia, 1990).

For more than two decades subsequent to the dissolution of separate schools, many educational institutions in the Southwest continued to overtly stress the acquisition of English for Spanish-speaking students as a means of the assimilation of American values. To affect this philosophy many schools espoused (formally or informally) "No Spanish Rules" in which the use of Spanish in the classrooms, at lunch time, and on the playgrounds was strictly prohibited (Acuña, 1988). Spanish-speaking children were thus placed in the difficult position of having to bridge the linguistic and cultural divide between their home and school.

Little formal documentation exists on the experiences of Spanish-speaking children who attended school in the Southwest who were subject to these

rules. One of the few sources, a report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1972), noted various instances of physical punishments as well as verbal admonishments and disciplinary measures that were reported by Mexican American students. School officials, on the other hand, frequently denied the existence of a formal policy and were reluctant to confirm any instances of physical punishment or even verbal censure. More recently, Hurtado and Rodríguez (1989) interviewed over 500 Spanish-speaking college students in Texas and found that over 40% had experienced some form of recrimination for speaking Spanish while attending primary or secondary school.

Despite the existence of a relatively small amount of formal documentation on punishment for speaking Spanish at school, anecdotal reports abound. In 1970, journalist Ruben Salazar interviewed a man named Edgar regarding his experiences. Edgar recalled that the usual punishment for speaking Spanish in school was being beaten with a stick. Even more injurious, however, were the lasting psychological effects of the admonishments Edgar received from his teachers:

I mean, how would you like for somebody to come up to you and tell you what you speak is a dirty language? You know, what your mother speaks is a dirty language. . . . A teacher comes up to you and tells you, "No, no. You know that is a filthy language, nothing but bad words and bad thoughts in that language." I mean they are telling you that your language is bad . . . Your mother and father speak a bad language, you speak a bad language. I mean, you communicate with dirty words, and nasty ideas . . . That really stuck to my mind. (Salazar, 1992, p. 330)

Methodology

Recently, in the Las Cruces, New Mexico community, efforts have been made to bring more school experiences of Spanish speakers to light. This article will address the preliminary findings of this work as reported by students conducting a field research assignment for sociolinguistics classes (cf. MacGregor-Mendoza, 1999). Students were given the task of interviewing three to five adult Spanish-speaking friends and family members about their school memories. Informants were to reflect on their experiences in school as Spanish speakers and recount what events, if any, they experienced or witnessed that exemplified their school's language policy and to relate how their school experiences affected them then and now. What follows is a synthesis of the experiences of over 100 informants. The excerpts were taken directly from the students' writing assignments; thus, no efforts were made to correct spelling or punctuation in either Spanish or English.

Findings

A great majority of those interviewed did experience some form of punishment; however, to be fair, not all informants reported suffering physically or emotionally as a result of speaking Spanish in school. A few informants even recalled they were allowed to speak Spanish freely. In these cases, however, informants generally indicated that they lived in a small, rural community where Spanish was the primary language for nearly all of the residents and/or that there were too many Spanish speakers in the school to even consider enforcing an English-only language policy. Other informants interviewed stated that while no specific punishment was exacted for speaking Spanish during school, the practice was discouraged or “frowned upon.” One informant explained that the principal admonished that it was “impolite to speak in Spanish because the Anglo students couldn’t understand them and thought that they were saying bad things” (Trina P., unedited student writing).

However, punishment for speaking Spanish was common, particularly in the early grades. Surprisingly, even after three decades or more these informants were able to recall vivid, often painful memories of being mistreated for speaking Spanish.

When disciplinary measures were utilized, much of the punishment inflicted upon the students for speaking even one word of Spanish was physical. Among the most frequently reported forms of corporal punishment were students being smacked on the hand with a ruler, paddled, pinched, pulled by the ear, having their mouths washed out with soap, or being forced to engage in some test of physical endurance. Ironically, one informant hypothesized that “he would get hit across the hands by teachers who wanted to instill in him a deeper understanding for the need to learn, know, respect, and love the English language” (Roberto P., unedited student writing). Other informants typically recalled a range of experiences, similar to the following, which ranged from mildly abusive to malicious:

[One informant] told me that if they spoke in Spanish the teacher would trim the finger nails of a hand down low, almost making them bleed, and if that wasn’t enough the teacher would hit the students with a ruler right on the tips of these fingers. (Sylvia G., unedited student writing)

During my elementary years *no nos dejavan hablar nada de spanish* inside the classroom we knew that if (we) were caught talking spanish *nos ivan a cuerear o darnos una paliza. A mi me toco algunas veses me davan con una* wooden paddle 10 spankings and if we were caught talking Spanish more than one time our parents were called in to the school.

[During my elementary years *they didn’t let us speak any* Spanish inside the classroom we knew that if (we) were caught talking Spanish

they were going to tan our hides or beat us. It happened to me a few times, they gave me 10 spankings with a wooden paddle and if we were caught talking Spanish more than one time our parents were called in to the school.] (Sylvia N., unedited student writing, italics added)

If they were caught speaking Spanish [in high school], they would get detention, have their mouths washed out with soap, have to run around the track for hours and/or be sent home until they were ready to be a “true Tiger” (which was the school mascot). There was one punishment that left a lasting impression for both my aunt and my mom. To understand the seriousness of this punishment, you need to be familiar with the architecture of the school. The school was built to resemble a Roman Coliseum, with many steep steps leading into a pit in the very bottom. It was not strange to see ten to twenty Mexican students running up and down those stairs at all hours of the day, and in whatever weather. Needless to say, both my aunt and my mom as well as the other Spanish speaking students cringed at the sight of the much admired architectural style. (Sandra L., unedited student writing)

If they spoke Spanish in the class, the teacher would tie their hands with a rope under the desk and then he would get a piece of water hose and hit them. He mentioned, “Don’t think he would hit us a little bit. He would hit us about 15, 16 times with the piece of *mangera* [hose] . . . and he wanted to hear us cry.” (Rosie C., unedited student writing, italics added)

Physical punishment was also inflicted upon those who made imperfect attempts to use their developing English skills or those who attempted to assert their rights to speak Spanish. A student described one informant who stated that, in addition to getting hit with a ruler for uttering even a single word in Spanish, “she would even get smacked if she pronounced an English word with a Spanish accent (/sh/ for /ch/ and vice versa)” (Ida H., unedited student writing). Another student reported an incident in which the informant challenged his teacher’s insistence they speak only in English:

If we tried to speak Spanish our teachers would tell us, “Speak English dammit, this is America.” Well, one day, don’t think I got fed up with it, and I told her, “You’re the one in my country, you should learn my language.” You should of seen her face, she got so angry. She went to pick up a ruler and she hit me in the face with it. (Rosie C., unedited student writing)

Although several informants suggested that racial differences between the largely Anglo teachers and the Hispanic students was a cause for the application of the punishments, reports of Hispanic teachers carrying out the same measures were not uncommon, however, they did cause confusion in the young minds of the informants:

Lady Y recalls another incident in second grade. Her teacher, who was Hispanic also, washed Lady Y's mouth with soap for speaking Spanish. Lady Y thought that this lady would be understanding considering that she was Hispanic. (Connie J., unedited student writing)

She remembers witnessing some of the other children getting paddled because they were speaking Spanish at the playground. The principal heard them and he lined them all up and paddled one by one. She found this ironic because the principal was a Spanish speaker. She could never understand why a Spanish speaker would punish others for speaking the language. (Cruzita S., unedited student writing)

Spanish-speaking informants also report being subjected to other non-corporal penalties that indicated speaking Spanish on school grounds was considered a form of misconduct. Although these punishments did not take a physical toll on the interviewees, the experiences have nonetheless left an impact. Many informants stated that for "getting caught" speaking Spanish at school, they were given detention, demerits, extra homework, sent to the principal's office, or sent home. Others were required to write line after line of sentences promising to amend their supposedly offensive behavior. One informant, Miguel, related to a student that:

Whenever he understood what the teacher was asking and tried to respond with the answer, if it wasn't in English, the teacher would tell him the correct answer had to be in English and that he was wrong. Many times he was placed in a corner or the teacher would look at him and refuse to call on him. (Gayle L., unedited student writing)

Another individual told a student of an incident in the school cafeteria in which a student effectively "disappeared" for requesting milk in Spanish:

At lunch time all of the kids had to stay quiet at the lunch table because the teachers did not want to hear any Spanish being spoken. She says that the whole cafeteria would be very quiet. One time Samuel says he remembers one kid who was always getting in trouble. Well this kid yelled out during lunchtime "*quiero mas leche!*" [I want more milk!] He was never seen in the cafeteria again. (Gladys C., unedited student writing, italics added)

At times, non-corporal forms of punishment were thrust in a public spotlight within the classroom to embarrass the child who had spoken Spanish, as well as to provide an example for other students who might dare to commit a similar indiscretion. Several informants told of being assessed a fine with fees ranging from pennies to nickels to dimes to quarters for each word of Spanish uttered. Informants also recalled being made to stand in a corner, sometimes facing the wall, sometimes facing the class, sometimes wearing a

dunde cap. Another informant told a student that whenever she spoke Spanish “she would get put into the closet to ‘reflect’ on her bad behavior” (Vanessa G., unedited student writing).

Other informants reported incidents in which they were verbally berated for speaking Spanish, events that underscored some teachers’ contempt for the language. One informant, Mr. Jiménez, recalled to a student that his seventh grade teacher overheard him speaking Spanish and scolded him, “‘Stop that shit!’ She said, loudly. . . . ‘If you don’t stop that I’m going to send you to the office, and you’re going to be in trouble!’” (Yolanda S., unedited student writing).

Contempt for the language often extended to contempt for the ethnic and cultural heritage of the students. In one account, two young girls were chastised in front of the class for speaking Spanish by their teacher: “When are you Mexicans going to learn? This is America!” (Yolanda S., unedited student writing). Another informant related to a student a much more chilling tale of his principal’s disdain for the Mexican children’s language, culture, and food:

They would hide in the corner because “they were ashamed of having to eat bean or cactus burritos instead of sandwiches with white bread like the rich kids.” He said that they were teasing one of the boys in the group because he had *carne* [meat] in his burrito and if he could afford that he would soon be eating baloney sandwiches with the rich kids. In their happy mood they forgot to their “manners” and started to speak in Spanish. He said another Mexican girl who was a wanna-be white overheard them and ran to get the principal. Just as the principal arrived this man’s current-day wife was caught saying “*hoy cactus con carne, mañana baloney con los gringos*” [today cactus with meat, tomorrow, baloney with the gringos]. He said that the principal grabbed her up by the arm, snatched her burrito and slapped her in the mouth with the burrito. The principal then called her a stupid wet-back and told her that maybe if she were to start putting good food like sandwiches into her mouth bad words would stop coming out and that she should not make [fun] of other people’s food when her’s was just “Mexican garbage.” (Laurie C., unedited student writing)

Public humiliation for speaking Spanish, or for simply not speaking enough English to satisfy the teachers, was also cruelly carried out by denying students access to the bathroom until they could state their needs clearly in English. Some informants reported instances similar to the following:

I remember one day when I needed to go to the restroom so bad, but I did not know how to ask in English, so I said “*¿Maestra me da permiso para ir al baño?*” [Teacher, will you give me permission

to go to the bathroom?] Right away she went up to me and asked me to put my hand out. I did not understand what she was saying and just stood quietly looking up at her. She got so upset that she grabbed my hand and hit it once very hard. She then told me that if she would hear me speak Spanish again she was going to whip my hand twice and harder. Other than hurting me, she humiliated me in front of all my other classmates. (Claudia B., unedited student writing, italics added)

Another woman related a similar incident regarding her sister, a recent arrival from Mexico:

Una ves me acuerdo que (ella) tenia que ir al bano y la maestra no le hacia caso la pobre casi se salia de la silla levantando la mano pero no le hacia caso. Luego levante yo la mano y le dije que mi sister needed to go to the restroom pero me dijo I know I just want her to tell me not you. Pues yo me enoje y me levante y la agarre de la mano y me la lleve al bano.

[I recall one time that (she) had to go to the bathroom and the teacher ignored her, the poor thing was almost falling out of her chair raising her hand but she just ignored her. So I raised my hand and I told her that my sister needed to go to the restroom but she told me I know I just want her to tell me not you. Well, I got mad and got up and grabbed her by the hand and I took her to the bathroom.] (Sylvia N., unedited student writing)

Rescuing her sister from her predicament did not come without a price for this last informant. When she returned, she was made to stand with her face to the wall for half an hour and was forced to wear a hat labeled "Disobedient." Her sister was so traumatized by the incident that soon after, her parents returned her to Mexico to continue her schooling there.

In many of the informants' recollections of bathroom incidents, the punishment was meted out without regard to the students' obvious efforts to comply with school rules of requesting permission. The teachers likewise ignored the students' discomfort or immediate physical needs. The degree to which the teachers would allow the students to suffer in these cases underscores the precedence that learning English took over all other aspects of classroom life for Spanish-speaking students.

Aside from the various forms of punishments endured by Spanish speakers, the often drastic shift between the children's largely Spanish-speaking home environments to the school setting where English was often preferred or overtly required often placed them at an emotional crossroads where their loyalty to friends and family were put to the test. Such a trial was evident in Rebecca's story:

Rebecca remembers that the teacher would always assign a student that would be a monitor during lunch. The student would have to write down the names of those students who were speaking Spanish during lunch or recess. The teacher would place Rebecca as a monitor once every two weeks, but she says she never wrote down any names. She was afraid of losing friends. Rebecca thinks that the teacher knew that she did not write down the names even if someone did speak Spanish. "I do not know why she never told me anything. I know she noticed that I never wrote down any names and other monitors did," she said. (Liz G., unedited student writing)

Rebecca, placed unwillingly in a role of authority over her peers, chose to resist passively rather than betray loyalties of her friends and enforce a rule she did not believe in. Young Albert's dilemma is even more revealing of the internal conflict caused by the dissonance between home and school life:

Albert was not allowed to speak Spanish during school. He never witnessed anyone getting disciplined for speaking Spanish. "It was just understood that while in school we spoke English and at home we spoke Spanish." Though, Albert spoke English prior to entering school he was very aware of the no Spanish speaking rule during school. He remembers one incident when he was in first grade that he was asked what his mother's name was, that his fear of knowing the rule and yet not knowing the consequences for breaking it, prompted him to respond "Betty" instead of his mom's Spanish name Carlota. (Lidia T., unedited student writing)

Here, the strength and pervasiveness of the "No Spanish" dictum in schools is evident even when it had not been explicitly stated. Young Albert, in his strong desire to comply with the school's unwritten yet well-understood rules, felt it easier to invent an anglicized name that bore no resemblance to his mother's true name than to suffer the unknown consequences for speaking Spanish. Thus, 6-year-old Albert, in choosing to not reveal his mother's true name, willingly erased even the smallest indication of his Spanish-speaking heritage in order to save face and get along in school.

While it may be easy to dismiss these experiences as part of the trials and tribulations of childhood, we cannot ignore the impact that such occurrences potentially have had on an individual's academic progress and personal development. Many informants reported they became shy, withdrawn, and hesitant to participate in class and that they continue to display these behaviors today. One student researcher wrote her informant "always kept to herself and seldom spoke up in class. Now she has a hard time expressing herself verbally." (Maggie S., unedited student writing). Another informant reported to a student, "For fear of getting punished my husband chose not to participate in class. He was embarrassed to speak English and he wasn't

allowed to speak Spanish. So, his only other choice was to sit quietly and avoid shame or punishment” (Lydia S., unedited student writing). A few informants stated that the negative attitudes they developed toward school grew to the point that they simply just dropped out.

In addition to affecting their behavior toward school, several informants reported feeling ashamed of their home language, parents, culture, and heritage due to the punishments received for speaking Spanish in school. One informant, a 55-year-old seventh-generation New Mexican whose first exposure to English was in school, explained that “he was not only ridiculed for speaking Spanish, but severely punished to the point that he was completely traumatized and to this day he feels very uncomfortable around ‘Anglos’” (Gerard G., unedited student writing). Another informant, interviewed by the same researcher, felt victimized as a child and “as an adult she finally realized she was not ‘dumb’ as she had been led to believe in school” (Gerard G., unedited student writing).

A common reaction to the punishment the children received was to simply disassociate themselves with their Spanish-speaking heritage. One researcher wrote that after her informant, “Lady X,” was grabbed and spanked by a teacher for speaking Spanish to the friend in front of her while on the playground one day, the incident “made her wish she did not even know Spanish. . . . As a result, Lady X forgot most of her Spanish and lost her culture as well” (Connie J., unedited student writing). Another informant stated, “Well, then I was ashamed, and I also blamed my parents for not teaching me English. For a long time I lost my identity. I didn’t want anyone to know that I could speak Spanish” (Eva R., unedited student writing).

For some informants, the lesson they learned from their experiences was to not speak Spanish at all. Miguel, who earlier had been trained by his teacher that his answers were only correct in English, adopted a self-imposed English-only policy at home as well. His interviewer wrote, “Much to his parents regret, he stopped speaking Spanish at home and responded using his limited English skills or didn’t respond at all. . . . As the years passed, although he understood his parents, and they gradually started speaking more and more English, his home language disappeared” (Gayle L., unedited student writing).

The effects of these experiences have carried over to later generations as well. Many informants suggested that because of the unfavorable experiences they had had at school for speaking Spanish, they opted not to use the language with their own children in hopes of eliminating what they viewed had been an obstacle to their own education, as the following examples illustrate:

Keeping my native language has not been important to me, because I learned early on, that kids who speak English have a better chance. They are not mistreated by teachers and White kids in school. My

sons understand very little Spanish, and can't speak it all, but they don't need it anyway. (Yolanda S., unedited student writing)

Since Emma was reprimanded for speaking Spanish in school, she made her children speak only English at home "so they would get good grades." (Barbie B., unedited student writing)

He didn't teach his children the Spanish language because he didn't want them to have to put that extra effort that he did into having to learn English. (Carla B., unedited student writing)

Schecter and Bayley (1998) found a similar pattern of language choice in a recent study. Many of their parent informants reported that their decision to not teach Spanish to their children had been influenced by their own negative school experiences as Spanish speakers. The parents feared that the recrimination they had experienced would be repeated if they taught their children Spanish.

Conclusion

While the stories of the incidents presented here are of historical interest, they also have bearing on current educational practices. Even today many teachers shun the use of heritage languages in the classroom without fully considering the impact of their decisions and in spite of the infusion of multicultural perspectives in many teacher preparation curricula. Rumberger and Larson (1998) confirm that there continues to exist "a widespread belief among educators, policymakers, and the public at large that English-language proficiency is the key to improving the educational achievement of immigrant and language-minority students" (p. 68). Indeed, the 1998 passage of California's Proposition 227, and the 2000 passage of Arizona's Proposition 203 demonstrates both the public's insensitivity to heritage language issues as well as its impulsiveness to act on them. The propositions, which effectively eliminated bilingual programs and other school services in non-English languages, reveals that politicians and large sections of the public are not only willing to implement sweeping language policies in schools that exclusively promote the acquisition of English for heritage language students, but moreover, they are inclined to do so without questioning what potential short and long term consequences these policies might have on individuals and the community as a whole. Nonetheless, the accounts presented here point to the detrimental effects that rash decisions regarding the use of language in schools can have on the overall progress of individual learners as well as that of the community at large.

Since schools are one of the first places where heritage language students come into prolonged contact with the majority language, these institutions can play a key role in either the prosperity or the demise of the nation's

heritage languages. As has been presented here, for many heritage language students, the quest just to fit in to the school environment, if not to also succeed in it, often overtakes the desire or even the will to strengthen or retain the ties to one's linguistic heritage. A lack of institutional support for heritage languages, taking the form of either overt punishment, explicit intimidation, or simple indifference, further loosens the ties between the child's identity with the heritage language and culture. Such misguided policies, whether formally or informally executed, can have a deep and long lasting impact on the psychological and academic growth of an individual and threatens the overall welfare of the heritage language community.

In order to move beyond this shortcoming, school administrators and public policymakers need to look upon heritage languages as a national resource in need of cultivation rather than as an obstacle to overcome. By schools taking a more active role in acknowledging and even strengthening a child's ties to his/her heritage language, they contribute to the growth of the linguistic and cultural knowledge that the child already brings to the school setting, they promote a more culturally tolerant environment for all students and they allow for the diverse members of the community to have a place in the school. The more closely integrated the community and the school are, the better able they are to progress together.

In summary, educators, public officials, and community members at large must ensure that the price for learning English does not result in the loss of anyone's heritage language, culture, self-esteem, and academic drive. More importantly, as the population of speakers of heritage languages continues to grow within the United States, and as our nation's social, commercial, and political ties continue to extend beyond our own borders, we, as a nation, must further guarantee that all heritage language children are allowed to reach their full potential as scholars, as individuals, and as members of a thriving multilingual community.

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