

10 Misma Dirección, Distinto Sentido: Reconceptualizing Problems and Possibilities in Educational Language Learning

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A Humble and Necessary Introductory Declaration

Valdés's *magisterio* continues to leave an indelible mark in the frame of our thinking, through its conceptual richness and the radical commitment to improving the educational experiences of minoritized populations. This chapter is a testimony to this committed imprint. Throughout the trajectory of her scholarly work, we have identified unique qualities that we try to encapsulate (and live up to) in our praxis, but one in particular has unified our reflections in this collaborative work: a composed and unwavering resistance to hard-and-fast fixes to educational inequities. Valdés's conceptual and empirical work is always on guard against shortcuts, promised time-saving alleyways, or heaven-on-earth educational promises that ignore unintended consequences or betray the essence of their mission. Accordingly, her work is often in the *misma dirección* (same direction) as many in the field of language education, but with a *distinto sentido* (a different way or meaning), a distinct critical and inquisitive stance toward unanticipated challenges and unintended consequences. Hence, when we face educational conundrums, we, blessed with her mentorship, hear in our heads a softly-spoken '*no tan rápido*' (not so fast).

Our meetings in the preparation of this chapter were filled with the fine details of our memorable encounters with Dr Valdés, resembling

the complex and nuanced forces of the vignettes in her ethnographically inspired work; except that in these moments, the vignettes evoked in our dialogues were inhabited by us at different stages of intellectual evolution, presenting, molding, and adjusting the ideas to the unique listening of our common mentor. When ideas seemed to click together, we felt the ‘not so fast’ call, the intellectual prod to think with an even more probing scope and ambition to the deeper substance behind the perceived problem, resisting the inertia toward solutions at first sight. Essentially, this call consistently had a humanizing urge to never forget that, in the end, behind beautiful intellectual schemes, our cause is about people, their history and identity, and their lived experiences.

This chapter includes three collective reflections about the mark that Valdés leaves in our scholarly work, from reflection on teacher preparation to the categorization of students to the systemic arrangement of dual-language immersion as an educational model. They gravitate around the ontology of language while they are firmly anchored in the awareness of consequences for minoritized communities. As we have engaged with these matters in our intellectual growth thus far, we have often started to feel that increased motion, a build-up of speed toward the vision of appealing solutions. However, we have also felt the call to go ‘not so fast’ and to advocate with precise attention to the different senses and angles in the words. The direction of our cause has not changed, but the senses have multiplied kaleidoscopically. This is the present legacy of intellectual rigor that Dr Valdés has bestowed on us, and it is a steadfast commitment that we look up to.

Locating Teacher Preparation in the Curricularizing Process

With the concept of *curricularization*, Valdés pushed the educational field to revisit its deeply seated array of assumptions around language, lest it leads to unintended consequences for minoritized, and all, children in schools. In 2016, Kibler and Valdés defined curricularization minimalistically as ‘the process of “teaching” additional languages to learners in classroom settings’ (Kibler & Valdés, 2016: 96), or, ‘Put simply, “curricularization” can be defined as the design and implementation of language teaching programs: When language is taught in classroom settings, it is “curricularized”’ (2016: 97). This is an invitation to defamiliarize language teaching and learning and revisit unchecked assumptions in our field. As a concept and process, curricularization stresses the interconnectedness and mutual reinforcement of multiple interacting levels (e.g. policy, organizations, advocates, administrators, educators) in the reification of language, and calls for an examination of the reproductive inertia around language conceptions (e.g. inherited and purportedly self-evident notions such as standard and academic language). Valdés’s multilayered analytical framework triggers a question: What is the

role of teacher preparation, beyond its traditional conceptualization as an applied discipline, in the curricularizing of a linguistic status quo and its potential transformation?

Stepping into language teaching and learning presumes the need for a compromise: a certain objectification and ‘packaging’ of language, so that educators can manipulate it, discuss it and sequence it. It is an epistemological compact. In 2018 Valdés elaborated on the implicit nuances of the process:

When language is curricularized, it is treated not as a communicative system acquired naturally in the process of primary socialization but as a subject or a skill the elements of which can be developed through specific types of curricula and controlled experiences. (Valdés, 2018: 393)

Concerns should arise as the hegemonic inertia of this ontological flattening (that is, the unquestioned confounding of analytical and pedagogical categories with language itself, much like a vessel can be confounded with its contents) has direct consequences for how schools’ ‘controlled experiences’ uncritically reproduce language ideologies, privilege some students over others, and stigmatize minoritized populations. Teacher preparation can play a critical role in the amplification of this vessel/content mistaking, while also presenting possibilities to deconstruct and reconstruct approaches to language prevailing in education today.

Valdés’s evolving presentations of curricularization suggest a process of symbiosis and mutual reinforcement in which some of the processes are macro processes and others, closer to the act of teaching and learning, can be seen as micro and fine-grained. Thus, core program elements, encompassing goal setting, learner categorizations, assessment or professional development, are immediate to the daily visible practice of education. However, these elements are directly conditioned by meso overarching policies, contexts and traditions, which are, in turn, enveloped by theoretical and ideological mechanisms. This matryoshka-style framework (Valdés, 2018) evinces how futile a simplistic approach to language in education is.

How does teacher preparation interact with these curricularizing levels? Due to structural conditions, teacher preparation characteristically feeds indiscriminately from curricularized program elements (methods, activities, assessments, and categories at a micro level, closer to daily learning activities), often paying no more than superficial attention to elements such as policies, traditions, theoretical and ideological mechanisms (macro-societal levels of curricularization) when developing teacher capacity (e.g. BICS and CALP, Cummins, 2008; *Lau v. Nichols*, 1974). These macro structures and processes in the curricularization model are simplified (e.g. language learning theories) or often ignored (e.g. ideologies). This could be partly attributed to a

generalized conceptualization of teacher preparation as an application of received knowledge, less so a knowledge-generation enterprise in universities. No less relevant to the root cause of these issues is the subjection of the teacher pipeline to neoliberal market discourse (e.g. the teacher shortage) and bureaucratic processes (e.g. credentialing), which dramatically condition the content and duration of teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2018; Rodríguez & Magill, 2016; Rojo & Del Percio, 2019). Consider, for example, if a teacher preparation program decided to extend its duration or course load to delve deeper into language, with its corresponding programmatic, structural and economic implications. Such a decision could not be made without considering the length and cost of other options in the teacher preparation market.

Accordingly, in this state of constant emergency besieging teacher preparation, there is an inertia, felt by instructors and students alike and particularly in foundations courses, to demand ‘instructional whats and how-tos’ (Kraemer-Holland, 2022) that simplify the craft of teaching to scripted moves and denaturalized language. These pulsing urges for what Galguera called a ‘bag of teaching tricks’ (personal communication, 2015) bypass critically how the ‘what’ under study became such through history. Most importantly, they ignore the ‘whys’, or how curricularization works around us to define the teaching profession. By virtue of this emphasis on fast, context-proof, universalizing pedagogical formulae, language diversity seems to demand hard-and-fast language solutions, which de facto imply the acceptance of language as a problem, not a right or an asset (Ruiz, 1984). The system’s response is to feed student teachers with what we call doubly or triply curricularized models – that is, their learning is fundamentally the consumption of packaged curricular formulae, which themselves are products from the digestion of meso policies and macro conceptions of language. This market-driven model of teacher preparation, whose engagement with curricularized language is limited to the core program elements, is, in essence, analogous to a drive-thru catering linguistic fast food, with all its systemic health implications.

For long we have argued about the need to increase the prominence of educational linguistics in teacher preparation as a conceptual foundation with cross-curricular ramifications that bears promise to improve the instruction of all students, not just minoritized children. It needs to be said, though, that at a time when our colleagues at California universities wonder about how to adjust coursework to encompass new state requirements, our request may seem out of touch with reality. The issue may be just the focus on the simple and appealing notion of merely ‘adjusting’, as opposed to a radical overhauling of teacher preparation as we know it. In this regard, the interconnected multidimensionality of Valdés’s curricularization model, which highlights the fallacy of language as a ‘purely’ linguistic or discrete subject matter, is a substantive and meritorious call to action. While Critical Language

Awareness as defined by Fairclough (2014) or Alim (2010) may not be the panacea to resolve educational inequities, which mirror our larger society's racial and socioeconomic imbalances, it is indeed a promising beginning to unravel the intricacies of teaching and learning as culturally and linguistically mediated processes where language plays a symbolic and structuring role.

The Danger of Making Students into Deficient Language Learning Categories

Critical examinations of assumptions about the curricularization of language in the context of teacher education are closely connected to what Valdés has conceptualized as the broader politics of language borderization processes (Valdés, 2020a). We might think about this in terms of the felt need to create distinctions between language varieties (e.g. Spanish, English, Spanglish), classifications of language learners (e.g. heritage learner, English learner, Standard English learner), and linguistic competencies (e.g. 'full' versus 'truncated' bilingualism and biliteracy, 'academic' versus 'social' language proficiency) in efforts to design meaningful learning opportunities, as well as the danger of reinscribing borders that correspond to dominant power interests and that have contributed to the marginalization of various communities. By attending to linguistic and political border-making processes jointly, we can take seriously the pressing needs and concerns of educators, administrators, policymakers, students, families and communities while also situating language learning within broader historical and societal contexts and mitigating against the harm that has been caused in the name of designing immediate practical interventions. Valdés's joint attention to the strategic use of educational language learning classifications and the pitfalls associated with emergent category-making practices is characteristic of her refusal of educational quick fixes.

Analysis of the relationship between linguistic and political borders can challenge conventional thinking about how language proficiencies and thresholds are assessed and defined. Longstanding public debates about linguistic diversity in the US and the educational management thereof have in recent years increasingly focused on students who remain classified as English Learners for longer than anticipated and who are unable to pass the English language proficiency assessment for reclassification. This observation has led some advocates to develop the label 'Long-Term English Learner' (LTEL) in reference to students who remain classified as English Learners for six years or more (Olsen, 2010). This label, which was developed in California and has since been taken up in contexts throughout the US, emerged alongside calls to address the ascribed linguistic challenges and shortcomings of English Learners who remain perpetually designated as such. Advocates of the LTEL

label often take these ascribed linguistic challenges and shortcomings as their starting point and seek to identify the specific linguistic difficulties and limitations that make some 'English Learners' into 'Long Term English Learners'. Specifically, proponents of the LTEL label rationalize the inability of LTEL-classified students to pass the reclassification assessment for English language proficiency despite their effective use of English to navigate their everyday lives, by positing the aforementioned distinction between 'social' and 'academic' language (Cummins, 2008). The suggestion is that, while LTEL-classified students might have developed proficiency in the social uses of English needed to navigate extracurricular experiences, they purportedly lack proficiency in the academic uses of English needed to navigate mainstream classroom-based learning experiences.

Readers well versed in language ideologies research might immediately recognize the production of a linguistic boundary between 'social' and 'academic' language, as well as the rationalization of institutional and broader societal dynamics and hierarchies in terms of purported language (in)abilities (Flores & Rosa, 2015; García *et al.*, 2021; Rosa & Burdick, 2016). In response to the emergence of the LTEL label and its reliance on these boundaries and rationalizations, Valdés has developed careful conceptual and empirical insights that raise significant questions about how such labels become institutionalized in punitive ways that stifle rather than support language learning and learning more broadly. Valdés (2015) conceptualizes how language borders and ascribed proficiencies become institutionalized through processes of language curricularization, which, as described above, involve the development of classifications, pedagogies and content development based on linguistic distinctions. Valdés (2016, 2020a) further conceptualizes language 'borderization' as a process of constituting linguistic boundaries in education alongside racialized (im)migrant border imposition and management regimes. Language borderization is a scalar phenomenon that often draws rigid distinctions between named languages such as English and Spanish and delineates among language varieties such as 'social' and 'academic' English and Spanish, while also stipulating when, where, how and by whom, these languages and varieties are to be used. Crucially, by linking educational approaches, language ideologies, and histories and contemporary realities of border making, as a sociopolitical phenomenon, Valdés challenges scholars of educational language learning to reconsider narrow linguistic orientations to understanding achievement.

Narrow linguistic orientations to understanding educational language learning might focus primarily on defining and assessing proficiency levels for target languages and developing curricular and pedagogical strategies to facilitate students' reclassification from language learners to proficient users. In contrast, Valdés (1996, 2001) emphasizes the importance of attending to the specific historical and sociopolitical contexts of transnational migration and multilingualism that play profound roles in

shaping different populations' and communities' experiences of language learning and mainstream institutions more broadly. Drawing from Valdés's insights, we might note that the institutionalization of educational language learning has often functioned as a site of stigmatization and containment for US Latinx populations and US Mexican populations specifically (Cabral, 2022). Valdés's attention to linguistic border making is thus not simply metaphorical but, rather, emphasizes the significance of the sociopolitical context in which different communities are experiencing language learning. By taking into account these contexts, Valdés critically rethinks the utility of distinctions between 'academic' and 'social' language, as well as those between 'English Learners' and 'Long-Term English Learners'. As a result, it becomes possible to develop strategies for identifying concrete language learning needs in consultation and collaboration with community-based learners, educators, families and leaders. Valdés's approach points to the possibilities for language learning and broader societal transformation that emerge when we avoid the pitfalls of categorical quick fixes and organize learning opportunities by attending to and extending communities' skills and aspirations.

Rethinking Dual Language Education as the Solution

Valdés's commitment to interrogating facile solutions is perhaps best reflected in her prescient commentary on the potential pitfalls of dual language education and her subsequent critique of related educational trends such as the Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL) award and translanguaging pedagogies. Dual language education is an umbrella term that refers to any bilingual program that 'provides literacy and content instruction to all students through two languages, and that promotes bilingualism and biliteracy' (Howard *et al.*, 2007: 1). The most popular form of dual language education is two-way immersion (sometimes referred to as dual immersion), in which roughly half the students are classified as 'native English speakers' and half are classified as 'native speakers' of the target language (usually a minoritized language). A quarter century ago, when this approach to dual language education was still in its infancy, Valdés forewarned that we might end up further marginalizing Latinx students classified as 'English Learners' if we rushed to embrace dual language education without foregrounding issues of equity and access (Valdés, 1997). In this foundational publication, she urged the field to consider how marginalized students would fare if their interests were subordinated to those of white, wealthier and monolingual students. Beyond informing policy, practice and scholarship at the time, Valdés's intervention has directly inspired more recent scholarly critiques of dual language education (Cervantes-Soon *et al.*, 2017; Flores, 2016; Valdez *et al.*, 2016), including some of our own work (Martínez, 2017; Martínez *et al.*, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017).

While dual language education certainly represents a promising educational policy trend, most of the bilingual children and youth with whom we have worked in our respective research and teaching over the past two decades have not had access to dual language education. How does an exclusive focus on dual language education shift scholarly attention away from those kids and their educational opportunities? And what about working-class students of color who do have access to dual language education but end up getting marginalized by policies and practices that privilege white, wealthy and monolingual students and that reproduce idealized notions of elite sequential bilingualism (referring to those who grow up as monolinguals and only later learn an additional language)? We feel inspired by Valdés to continue posing these types of questions to those who champion the possibilities inherent in dual language education. To be clear, it is not our contention that dual language education is not or cannot be part of a broader, multifaceted approach to addressing problems related to the education of bilingual students, but rather that dual language education alone should not be seen or mobilized as if it were a panacea. Valdés inspires us not to deny the possibilities of dual language education but, rather, to interrogate the romanticization of those possibilities.

Related to dual language education is the SoBL, an award meant to officially recognize students who have attained proficiency in two or more languages by the time they graduate from high school. Awarded by a school, district and/or state, the SoBL is intended to incentivize and reward the development of bilingual reading, writing, listening and speaking skills as a core part of preparation for educational and career success. Having now been adopted by 49 states (South Dakota is the lone exception) and the District of Columbia, the SoBL is often heralded as a concrete and necessary step towards promoting equity and access for multilingual learners. But is the SoBL necessarily or categorically beneficial for multilingual students?

As with her earlier critique of dual language education more generally, Valdés has infused the scholarly conversation around the SoBL with necessary skepticism (Valdés, 2020b). Again, she urges us to consider very carefully how a policy solution that sounds promising on paper might end up having negative consequences when put into practice. In particular, she articulates concerns around how this policy trend might impact marginalized student populations. By emphasizing reading and writing skills over spoken and broader multimodal expressions of bilingualism, Valdés argues, the SoBL may have the effect of privileging wealthier sequential bilinguals while further marginalizing working-class students of color, including the many children of immigrants in US schools who grow up using non-standardized and other stigmatized varieties of those languages. In addition, she suggests, this policy may further marginalize students whose everyday bilingualism involves mixing those languages,

students who are not necessarily provided with access to meaningful mainstream educational opportunities in their home or heritage language(s), and students who speak less widely spoken/written languages. Rather than do away with a policy that has already gained tremendous nationwide momentum, however, Valdés has sought instead to speak into the scholarly conversation in ways that urge caution and that foreground equity. In her own words, she seeks to ‘contribute to the redirection of the SoBL so that it can embrace the rich multilingualism of minoritized students’ (2020b: 178).

Speaking of the ‘rich multilingualism of minoritized students’ (Valdés, 2020b: 178), Valdés has also made an important contribution to the scholarly conversation around translanguaging – a perspective from which bilingual speakers’ apparent blurring of linguistic boundaries in their everyday speech is reflective of the inherently heterogeneous nature of language use, rather than an exceptional problem to be remediated. Through its reframing of highly stigmatized and marginalized language practices, both historically and currently, translanguaging has gained a great deal of scholarly attention over the past decade or so, due, in large part, to the groundbreaking work of Ofelia García (2009). Ensuing discussions and debates around translanguaging have generated tremendous excitement in the field, with many scholars examining and theorizing about the transformative pedagogical potential of translanguaging pedagogies in classroom settings.

With respect to the scholarship on translanguaging, Valdés has very actively and strategically intervened yet again to caution us against moving too quickly to embrace facile solutions (Valdés, 2022). *Don’t get too excited about the possibilities – don’t get ahead of yourselves*, she seems to warn us. Indeed, she has pushed us as a field to look at the issue of translanguaging from all angles, to anticipate possible pitfalls, and to foreground issues of equity and access. And she has pushed us in our own work to resist the tendency to romanticize the possibilities related to translanguaging. Inspired by her work and by her example, we seek to call attention to the student populations that get left behind when we move too quickly to embrace facile solutions; to highlight what gets missed when we romanticize possibilities. In this regard, we find inspiration in that which seems to undergird and motivate Valdés’s astute skepticism – a fierce and tireless commitment to advocating for marginalized communities.

Against Quick Fixes across Language Learning Contexts

The scholarly legacy that Valdés leaves us is characterized by a powerful combination of robust theorizing and precisely timed scholarly interventions into discussions and debates around key policy and scholarly trends. With respect to the former, we have highlighted the impact of her theorizing around the notion of curricularization.

Through this important conceptual work, Valdés has given a name to a phenomenon that needed to be named, and she has provided a framework for critically apprehending and interrogating how this phenomenon operates in educational contexts. Her theorizing around curricularization helps us think about not only the labels we construct, invoke and reproduce to categorize learners and learning, but also the ways in which we prepare teachers to perceive and work with racialized and marginalized learners.

Valdés has had the foresight to anticipate and recognize scholarly and policy trends that tend towards romanticization, as reflected in her writing around dual-language education, the SoBL, and translanguaging pedagogies. Rather than simply critiquing the proliferation of buzzwords and sloganeering that often characterize such trends, she has engaged in a more substantive examination of underlying ideas and possible repercussions. Valdés has taken pains to highlight the potential for further marginalizing racialized and minoritized populations of learners if scholars allow themselves to get caught up in a wave of unbridled enthusiasm for new ideas and solutions.

Taken together, her theorizing and her related scholarly interventions push us to refuse simple solutions to complex educational problems, to systematically interrogate educational quick fixes, to always consider longer histories and broader social contexts, and to engage in a sober reflection on the possible negative repercussions of scholarly and policy trends on those most marginalized.

Forging Critical and Collaborative Paths Forward

As we reflect on the scholarly legacy of Valdés, we are struck by the ways in which her various theoretical contributions and strategic scholarly interventions at key historical moments have converged to form a sort of navigational system for critical scholars who would seek to advocate on behalf of marginalized learners and communities. Crucially, Valdés has consistently collaborated and engaged with multiple research partners, communities and audiences, including policymakers and advocates, school leaders, teachers, students, families, and interdisciplinary scholars. At every turn over the course of her long career, Valdés has left key signposts for those who share her commitment to language learning and broader societal opportunities for marginalized communities, cautioning us not to rush too quickly down any single road or path, and urging us to anticipate potential dangers that may lurk just around the bend. Crucially, she has never sought to mandate a single path, nor has she discouraged us from heading off the beaten path from time to time in pursuit of empirical or conceptual insights. Instead, what she has done consistently by leaving these signposts along the way is to flag for us what we should be looking out for as we chart our own

scholarly paths. *The hazards will always be there*, she seems to warn us. *Be ready for them, know what to look out for*. We are profoundly indebted to her for forging a path, for shining a light as we chart our own paths, and for modeling an approach to scholarship rooted in deeper commitments to promoting educational justice for marginalized communities.

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