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CHAPTER

Rethinking linguistic deficits, differences, and dominance: Language learning beyond conceptual and communicative borders

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Abstract

This chapter examines language learning through language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics, and foregrounds how cultural context, power, and history shape linguistic practices, policies, and assessments. It challenges deficit-based perspectives by reframing differences in relation to the forms of dominance through which they are (re)produced. By extension, it demonstrates how multilingual repertoires emerge through situated social processes while mainstream schooling often replicates hierarchies that marginalize racialized and minoritized learners. Drawing on ethnographic cases from a dual-language elementary school in Arizona and a California high school, the chapter analyses tensions between community practices and institutional norms, including monoglossic policies, standardized testing, and restrictive language learning classifications. It reconceptualizes language learning by highlighting translanguaging, code-switching, and learner agency, while exposing how assessments and labels such as Long-Term English Learner construct enduring novicehood and obscure linguistic dexterity. Finally, the chapter advocates systemic change to challenge linguistic domination.

Keywords: [language socialization](#), [educational linguistics](#), [applied linguistics](#), [cultural context](#), [translanguaging](#), [dominance](#), [monoglossic policies](#), [racialization](#), [multilingualism](#)

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Scholarly accounts of language learning include attention to developmental, educational, cultural, and broader societal dynamics, at once positioning language as a deeply pragmatic and existential phenomenon. We see this in debates about language practices, pedagogies, and policies across contexts, particularly in discussions surrounding multilingual education (García et al. 2021), assessments and classifications of linguistic proficiencies (Avineri et al. 2015), and the societal implications of linguistic diversity (Rosa and Flores 2023).

Frameworks and fields including language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics provide crucial insights into these various dimensions of language in society, drawing attention to the roles played by history and power in organizing how language practices are reproduced and transformed.

By demonstrating the culturally mediated nature of linguistic structures and the learning thereof across societal contexts, language socialization research challenges strict divides between theoretical and applied linguistics, as well as universalizing assumptions about language learning trajectories and experiences. Scholarship in educational linguistics and applied linguistics has also challenged disciplinary boundaries and generalizing accounts of language development through studies focused on how schooling becomes a key site for the (re)production of dominant power structures. In conjunction with language socialization research, which contests universalizing assumptions about language norms by attending to *differences* across contexts, educational linguistics and applied linguistics scholarship focusing on *dominance* seeks to track systematic patterns of linguistic marginalization. Thus, difference and dominance can be understood as alternative frames for challenging deficit-based linguistic perspectives that often ascribe communicative incapacities to populations marginalized in relation to societal hierarchies including race, class, and gender (Heller and McElhinny 2017). The analysis of cultural differences has informed the promotion of asset-based linguistic perspectives as a counter to ascribed deficits, often with an emphasis on the potential for inclusion of marginalized populations by building bridges between minoritized and privileged communicative practices. However, research focused on dominance has suggested the limitations of approaches narrowly focused on affirmation and inclusion of linguistically minoritized populations, and instead advocated for connecting struggles over language to broader political struggles for systemic social change (Flores and Rosa 2015; Rosa and Flores 2017).

This chapter explores how synthesizing insights from language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics can productively unsettle borders demarcating scholarly fields, linguistic varieties, and societal contexts. We focus specifically on comparative ethnographic analysis of two US educational contexts serving predominantly Latinx students. We examine a dual-language elementary school where educators seek to resist monolingual hegemony, on the one hand, and stigmatizing classifications of multilingual students in a mainstream public high school, on the other. In the former context, administrators, teachers, students, and families navigate a shifting ideological terrain in which prior English-only policies have given way to the affirmation of multilingualism, creating new opportunities for language learning and necessitating new strategies for building on and sustaining students' multilingual repertoires. In the latter context, policies associated with purported commitments to supporting students' language learning become institutionalized through stigmatizing classifications that presume English language deficiency and perpetually relegate some students to remedial classrooms in ways that profoundly limit their broader life opportunities.

Through this comparative analysis, we aim to rethink language learning as a site of sociolinguistic mediation, institutional reproduction and transformation, and transdisciplinary conceptualization. By extension, we show how approaches within language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics research have forged alternative directions to the analysis of educational language learning and language in society more broadly. Whereas universalizing prescriptive assumptions about language are often taken for granted in mainstream institutional settings, language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics offer insights for rethinking linguistic deficits, differences, and dominance. Section 1 situates these insights within various language learning literatures, focusing specifically on reconceptualizations of linguistic competence, diversity, and inequality.

1 Transdisciplinary approaches to challenging deficit-based perspectives on language learning

By rethinking dominant assumptions about linguistic competence, diversity, and inequality, researchers have developed generative insights into the importance of approaching educational language learning from transdisciplinary, multilingual, global, and interinstitutional perspectives (Burdelski and Howard 2020; Wolfram, Charity Hudley, and Valdés 2023). Perspectives from language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics underscore the significance of pluralizing language learning competencies and trajectories, unsettling monolingual and monolectal norms, and challenging proposed linguistic solutions to societal challenges.

Mainstream US educational language learning policies and practices are often shaped by assumptions about cognitive and linguistic development as universal human processes that can and should be structured, measured, and assessed in the same ways across different societal contexts. Language socialization research emerged as an important challenge to these assumptions, demonstrating that many purportedly objective statements about human linguistic and cognitive development in fact reflect deeply ethnocentric perspectives associated with “WEIRD” (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) societies (García-Sánchez and Avineri forthcoming). Initial language socialization research sought to systematically demonstrate how linguistic structures and cultural norms take shape jointly in distinctive yet no less complex ways in Global South as compared to Global North contexts. Specifically, Ochs and Schieffelin’s (1984) landmark studies in Samoa and Papua New Guinea challenged universalizing assumptions about language learning based on research conducted primarily in Global North contexts. Whereas Global North contexts characteristically privilege “child-centered” approaches to socialization organized around caregivers’ interactional accommodation of children, many Global South contexts favor “situation-centered” approaches to socialization in which children learn to adapt to cultural contexts through observation and participation rather than caregivers’ didactic instruction. Ochs and Schieffelin showed how children become meaningful communicative participants across these contexts in ways that contradict universalizing ideas about cultural and linguistic development.

Early language socialization scholarship also focused on racially minoritized and colonized populations in US educational settings. Heath (1983) and Philips (1983) powerfully demonstrated how African American and Native American children’s language skills have been systematically misrecognized as problems. In each of these cases, the assumption of a unidirectional trajectory of language development led to the systematic marginalization and stigmatization of African American and Native American children. This research was part of broader efforts toward challenging deficit paradigms in language and education, and shifting instead to a focus on cultural differences and multiple competencies.

In addition to pluralizing linguistic competencies and broadening ideas about cultural practices through which language learning takes place, language socialization research has demonstrated the deeply situated ways in which language structures take on particular meanings, as well as the importance of understanding developmental trajectories in context. This includes “the socializing affordances of grammar (e.g. evidentials), lexicon (e.g. kinship terms), phonology (e.g. exaggerated intonation), speech acts (e.g. directives), conversational sequences, genres, registers, channels (e.g. written, oral), and codes,” as well as “other expressive forms (e.g. gesture, corporeal demeanor and positioning, figurative representation)” (Ochs and Schieffelin 2011: 11). By drawing attention to the inseparability of linguistic structures and cultural contexts, language socialization becomes a framework that moves beyond the nature/nurture dichotomy, on the one hand, and disciplinary distinctions between theoretical, applied, and sociolinguistics, on the other.

Transdisciplinary attention to the interplay between social and linguistic structures has contributed important insights into communicative and cultural diversity. The aforementioned pluralization of linguistic

competencies dovetails with research challenging monolingual and monolectal assumptions that exceptionalize and stigmatize multilingual and multilectal experiences (Zentella 2005). Whereas dominant US-based Chomskyan linguistic theories position monolingualism as the normative reference point for language structures and practices, educational linguistics and applied linguistics scholarship demonstrates the ubiquity of linguistic heterogeneity and the complexity of intergenerational language learning across contexts (García 2009).

In everyday schools and classrooms, approaches to educational language learning are often rooted in and reproductive of dichotomous orientations to language, as well as ideologies that privilege dominant assumptions about monolingualism and multilingualism (García and Torres Guevara 2009; García et al. 2021). One such dichotomy is L1/L2, or the ubiquitous notion that people normatively learn one language initially and then potentially learn another in some subsequent life stage. However, this belies widespread experiences of multilingualism across the lifespan, which arguably characterize the language learning of the majority of the world's populations. Critiques of other dichotomies include standard/nonstandard language (Milroy 2002), social/academic language (Rhodes, Clonan-Roy, and Wortham 2021), competence/limited proficiency (Flores and Rosa 2023), and full/truncated bilingualism (Auer 2007). When presented as straightforward facts about language, these dichotomies obscure the ideological perspectives and power-laden contexts through which their boundaries are (re)produced (Gal and Irvine 2019).

Widespread linguistic diversity beyond binaries coincides with fraught power dynamics that shape experiences and perceptions of cultural and linguistic continuity and change (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002). Analyses of linguistic diversity and power have included careful attention to migration (García-Sánchez 2014; Mangual Figueroa 2024); multilingual and multilectal language use across school, home, and community contexts (Zentella 1997; Orellana 2009; Paris 2012); and institutional access to language learning opportunities (Baugh 1999; Valdés 2001). This scholarship has presented important challenges to assumptions about interrelated borders demarcating language practices, trajectories of learning, identities, and geographies (Valdés 2020; Arnold 2024).

Reconceptualizations of multilingualism and linguistic diversity can push beyond framings of language as either the cause of or solution to broader societal challenges. Many mainstream scholarly and popular ideologies attribute disparities in educational achievement to racially and socioeconomically marginalized populations' perceived failure to master standardized language practices. In contrast, language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics research has challenged conventional thinking about relationships between linguistic structures and societal structures. This includes scholarship refuting widely circulated claims that low-income, racialized, and/or immigrant families suffer from a "language gap" (Avineri et al. 2015) or a fundamental lack of "academic language" (Martínez and Mejía 2020; Rhodes, Clonan-Roy, and Wortham 2021), as well as attributions of linguistic deficiency to dynamically multilingual students, families, and communities (García et al. 2021).

These critical approaches to language learning urge educational scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to move beyond the search for magic linguistic interventions through which minoritized language users will purportedly overcome the marginalization they face (Avineri et al. 2015), as well as to refuse quick fixes in efforts toward facilitating language learning (Muñoz-Muñoz, Martínez, and Rosa 2024). These approaches to challenging deficit-based perspectives on educational language learning reflect efforts to affirm the legitimacy of cultural and linguistic differences, as well as to connect struggles against linguistic stigmatization to the contestation of broader dominant power structures. Section 2 illustrates these dynamics in an ethnographic examination of efforts toward facilitating language learning in the context of a predominantly Latinx dual-language elementary school in Arizona. It points to tensions between dichotomized orientations to language and the everyday reality of multilingual life in this context, while also emphasizing the role of long-standing power structures in shaping monolingual norms as well as attempts to unsettle them.

2 Reconsidering multilingual competencies in dual-language education

In educational settings, restrictive framings of linguistic and broader communicative competence negatively influence students' participation in school as well as their academic success by failing to recognize these students' linguistic dexterity (Martínez 2017; De León and García-Sánchez 2021), and by discouraging the use and development of their full linguistic repertoires. To this end, Garrett and Baquedano-López (2002, 346) pose this question: "How is competence evaluated and by whom?"

If linguistic and cultural knowledges and practices are constructed together and through each other (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986; Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen 2003), and inform and are informed by the identities of language users, then processes of language socialization and evaluations of language competence cannot be examined in a vacuum or as separate from the specific contexts in which these language practices emerge. This section explores the notion of communicative competence through examples from a dual-language school in Tucson, Arizona, demonstrating the dichotomy between community norms and understandings of competence, and mainstream institutional norms and understandings of competence. Furthermore, this section examines the importance of situating language learning and socialization within local contexts and communities of practice to re-evaluate notions of competence to take into account dimensions of power and identity that contribute to the heterogeneity and fluidity of cultural practices, including language practices (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002).

Situated in a historic barrio in Tucson, Arizona, Desert Bilingual Elementary School¹ is a public K–5 dual-language school that aims to graduate students who are bilingual and biliterate in Spanish and English. This school serves the Mexican American students of the neighborhood and students throughout the school district with a curriculum grounded in a Mexican American ethnic studies framework. Despite policies limiting bilingual education statewide and banning ethnic studies, this school has continued its commitment to Spanish-speaking and bilingual education, and is recognized as the heart of the bilingual education movement in Tucson. Despite recent setbacks due to an increase in standardized testing, attempts to limit access to dual-language education, and the COVID-19 pandemic that have resulted in district and statewide attempts to curricularize language in a way that feels unnatural to students and teachers, this school continues to be a beacon of hope for Mexican American families in the district. The following discussion and examples are drawn from a larger ethnographic study conducted at Desert Bilingual during the 2022–23 academic year.

At Desert Bilingual, students in grades 3–5 take standardized tests multiple times each year. These assessments consist of district standardized tests in Spanish three times per year to examine Spanish reading comprehension and mathematics ability, and statewide standardized tests in English once per year. Teachers and administrators discuss the difficulty of balancing language learning in a way that is authentic to the communities served by the school while also ensuring that students are able to pass these standardized tests so that the school does not lose its funding and is able to continue its mission. For example, in fifth grade, the curriculum is meant to be "50–50," whereby half of the instructional time is in Spanish for certain content areas and the other half is in English for other content areas, and there is no overlap between these content areas and therefore between these languages, reflecting a growing trend of language separation in dual-language education. However, the reality of working with an already multilingual student population wherein students have varying skills and needs across languages and subject areas is very different from this idealized curricular model. For example, when asked about her language practices in the classroom, one fifth-grade teacher stated:

So in [the school district], we're really pushed to stick to one or the other. And so being a rule follower, I very much followed that the first couple of years teaching ... and [then] I said, wait, I'm a professional. I know how kids are gonna respond better, I know what produces better results, not on

tests, necessarily, but as whole students, and what makes kids feel seen. And language barriers are huge, if I am teaching in a language that a student does not feel successful in, why would they pay attention? Why would they care? And that's just a fact. That's the reality of it ... So I give myself more permission to code switch if it means that students get subjects. So for example, the writing. If you can't write in Spanish right now, okay, do it in English. That will be our goal, but it's acceptable to be flexible, 'cause that's what kids thrive under. Not just throwing a high expectation at them and they're magically gonna get there ... And that's normal. That's life. That's how bilingual people speak.

The teacher emphasized that although the expectation is to stick to only one language during the designated time and subject area, in her classroom it did not make sense to do this if it meant that students would not understand or be able to fully engage with what was being taught. Instead, she opted to “code switch,” and to give students the opportunity to demonstrate their bilingual competence. Additionally, by allowing students to utilize their full linguistic repertoire, which at times meant using English during “Spanish time” (and Spanish during “English time”), this teacher problematized the traditional notion of novicehood (Berman and Smith 2021), providing opportunities for students to display their linguistic and academic expertise in various ways, and not tied to a singular linguistic form, academic subject, or time period.

Moreover, this teacher's statements demonstrate the potential consequences of adhering to a model of language separation that may be at odds with students' language practices and conceptualizations of language. Although dual-language programs are meant to promote bilingualism, the language separation approach is based on a conceptualization of bilingualism as “double monolingualism” (García 2009: 52), which may be conducive to second-language acquisition for monolinguals, but does not represent the way that bi/multilinguals use language, and can result in the marginalization of fluid language practices (Flores and Beardsmore 2015).

However, in discussing her language practices, the teacher recognized that her “code switching” and allowing students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire may not necessarily result in “better results” on tests, which evaluate students on their so-called “mastery” of one language. Despite this, she continued this practice because she wanted to ensure that her students “feel seen,” and her responsibility was to nurture them as “whole students,” therefore acknowledging that tests were only one measure of students' knowledge and skills, and that not all elements of a student's education can be evaluated. This example raises questions about the extent to which it is possible, or even desirable, to socialize students to an imagined norm of language use that adheres to a monolingual standard in a context where multilingual and translingual language practices are the norm.

Given this apparent disconnect, teachers and students were grappling with different understandings of students' communicative competence, wherein teachers accepted and welcomed multilingual language practices, and engaged in these practices themselves, but also recognized that within a standardized testing regime, students had to demonstrate their competence in specific ways that often adhered to monolingual conceptualizations of language competence. This led to the fifth-grade teacher feeling the need to talk to her students about “academic language”:

[W]e talk a lot about when we're writing academic language and then just social language. Just today I was reading an essay and I was like ... “ser bilingüe te da una chanza.” And I started cracking up, because I'm like, yes, I love it. Like chanza spelled it C-H-A-N-C-A, like chance. I'm not gonna mark them wrong for that. I don't care. It made me laugh. But I'm like you get it. You know what I mean? You understand, your ideas are there. But I do talk to them, and I'll be like “that's wonderful.” When you're talking with your friends, yes, una chanza. But when we're writing our essays, es “una oportunidad,” you know? And not saying “that's not the right way.”

For this teacher, it was important for her students to recognize that there was a distinction between “academic language” and “social language,” particularly with regard to their writing. In the excerpt above, it is clear to the teacher that in trying to spell “chanza,” the student was transferring their literacy skills from English to Spanish, therefore spelling it with a “c” instead of a “z.” This example of translanguaging in the writing of multilingual students demonstrates the importance of drawing on one’s entire linguistic repertoire when engaging in the writing process (Edelsky 1986; Lanauze and Snow 1989; Velasco and García 2014). Furthermore, because the word “chanza” was used often by this teacher and others, as well as by students and parents, the student’s use of this word instead of “una oportunidad” was typical, and, by this community’s cultural understandings of Spanish competence, a “correct” form. However, this teacher also recognized that although this community recognizes “chanza” as a Spanish word, unfortunately standardized test graders would not, instead writing it off as “interference” from English which would then be interpreted as the student’s failure to learn and use Spanish. Given this reality, the teacher provided the student with an alternative, “una oportunidad,” to use on standardized assessments of their writing.

In this example, it is clear that conceptualizations of academic language that adhere to a standardized, monolingual conceptualization of language call for demonstrations of language competence that are often at odds with community understandings of language competence. Furthermore, conceptualizations of academic language that only accept one language variety as “correct” and discount translanguaging practices devalue and stigmatize language varieties perceived as deviating from a mythical “standard” while furthering racialized ideologies of languagelessness which frame particular populations as incapable of communicating legitimately in any language (Rosa 2016). For anyone rooted in local cultural and linguistic perspectives and interacting with these students on a daily basis, it was clear that they were bilingual and demonstrated their bilingual language competence in various ways. However, monolingual conceptualizations of language, particularly those that impose prescriptive norms regarding language use, such as notions of standard language and academic language, ascribe deficiency to these students’ bilingual language practices (Urciuoli 1996; Zentella 2007; Rosa 2016).

Additionally, many “academic” and assessment-based displays of language competence require students to demonstrate skills that have little to do with actually using language. In another example, while fifth-grade students were taking a practice test for their upcoming Spanish reading comprehension exam, one of the students approached the teacher and me and asked, “What is a diptongo?” The question presented the student with a list of five words and asked her to identify which of the words did not contain a diphthong. The teacher quickly told her not to worry about it, and that she would later talk to the class about diptongos (and “hiatos” or hiatuses: words in which combinations of vowels are pronounced in separate syllables, such as “maíz”). Once the student walked away, the teacher turned to me in shock, stating “Why do they have to know what a diptongo is? I didn’t learn that ’til high school! In a Spanish [grammar] class ... They don’t need to know that.”

In this example, the teacher was grappling with understanding why students needed to be able to identify words containing a diphthong to be deemed proficient users of Spanish, illustrated by her statement “they don’t need to know that.” She further emphasized this by later stating that being able to identify a diphthong in a normative assessment “doesn’t help them speak in Spanish or understand it.” From language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics perspectives, assessments that evaluate racialized students’ multilingual proficiencies based on their normative knowledge of abstract linguistic patterns often devalue or erase their capacity for dexterous multilingual communication throughout their everyday lives (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002; Reder and Davila 2005).

These examples emphasize problems with decontextualized assessments of language learning. Devoid of context, the dexterous language practices of racialized bi/multilinguals, like the students in these examples, can be misunderstood as a failure to acquire and use Spanish and English, in turn denigrating their skillful language practices, their broader academic abilities, and the communities of which they are a part. Ascribed language incompetence has been weaponized against racialized populations throughout the history of

compulsory schooling in the US, relegating them to a status as inferior, second-class citizens in need of remediation to be considered competent members of society. Through the Americanization movement of the twentieth century, indigenous populations, immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and Latin America, and Spanish-speaking citizens in the Southwest were subject to an education system that attempted to strip them of their cultural practices, including their language (Crawford 2004; Dinnerstein and Reimers 2009). Throughout the American Southwest, eugenicist ideologies dominated society and schooling, asserting that Mexican children's use of Spanish meant that they were intellectually inferior to white, English-speaking children (Perez 1993; Valencia 2012; Vélez-Ibáñez 2017).

The examples in this section demonstrate how institutional norms and assessments based on monolingual ideas about language learning and linguistic practices maintain these ideologies by forcing students to perform language in a way that is inconsistent with their everyday communicative norms. These assessments often frame students' skillful multilingual practices as a failure to acquire language instead of a demonstration of linguistic dexterity, upholding the perspective that minoritized language users are somehow incompetent. In a context like Southern Arizona, where Spanish has been a local language for centuries, and has been consistently denigrated and legislated against since the annexation of Northern Mexico to form the American Southwest, Western, white, and monolingual notions of language competence must be uprooted if we are to understand this community's use of Spanish and dynamic multilingual practices. Moreover, these examples illustrate a broader tension in education: policy mandates contributing to the proliferation of standardized curricula and assessments do not include the experiences and knowledge of racialized bi/multilingual students (López 2005; Gándara and Escamilla 2017). As such, regardless of students' mastery of so-called "academic" language or grammatical knowledge separate from language use, such policies and processes will perpetually locate deficiency in racialized bi/multilinguals (Flores and Rosa 2023). Efforts toward challenging this linguistic stigmatization must move beyond affirming diversity and promoting inclusion, and instead emphasize the importance of policy and broader systemic change. Section 3 examines a related context of language hegemony and stigmatization faced by Latinx students in a California high school who navigate perpetual attributions of linguistic incompetence.

3 Contradictory trajectories of language classification and use in contexts of monoglot standardization

Language socialization research examines how, through language, children and novices are socialized to become meaningful participants in their communities and simultaneously become users of their languages (Ochs and Schieffelin 2008). In recent decades, some scholars have contended that, in earlier research, attention to experts' efforts to socialize novices has framed novices as the "grammatical subject of some passive voice construction," thereby limiting attention to their active role in socialization (He 2003, 128). In this way, "first" language acquisition is portrayed as a linear process in which novices are presumed as "passive, ready, and uniform recipients of socialization," with the process itself characterized as "smooth and seamless" (He 2003, 128). At the same time, language socialization scholars have documented the experiences of students in "second" language acquisition scholarship by demarcating multidirectionality in experiences of socialization. As a result, many have challenged earlier constructs that positioned socialization as static and unidirectional (Talmy 2008; Schecter and Bayley 2004; He 2003). This research emphasizes the "unpredictability, contestedness, and fluidity of socialization as it is or is not achieved" in anticipated or unanticipated ways (Talmy 2008: 640). Meanwhile, some have disputed the characterization of novices as passive recipients in foundational language socialization research, examining how early work established the agency, creativity, and resistance of novices (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002; Talmy 2008).

Despite its central role in language socialization research, Berman and Smith (2021) argue that the conceptualization of the novice is undertheorized. They assert that novicehood is an ideological category, a

“status that is socially imposed, produced, and (sometimes) overcome, rather than naturally inhabited” (2021: 591). Therefore, novice status is an ideological attribution which can be ascribed, contested, and renegotiated. In this framework, language socialization is not how novices transition through “forms of being and knowing”; instead, it explores “how and why some agents are produced and produce themselves as able or unable, as well as how they move out of that subject position” (2021: 591). While much of language socialization research has documented a universal capacity for various forms of language learning that take shape distinctively depending on the context, with a primary focus on social and linguistic development across the lifespan, it is imperative to examine the particular ways in which learners from racialized communities are constructed as permanent or failed learners altogether. Attention to racialized attributions of linguistic incapacity is especially important in societal contexts characterized by monoglot standardization (Silverstein 1996) such as the US, where ideologies of linguistic legitimacy and competence play a central role in the reproduction of social, political, and economic hierarchies. Monoglot standardization not only involves the promotion and/or imposition of national languages, but also the projection of an idealized standard variety. Thus, in US schools, simply learning English is insufficient. One can in fact use English as a primary language for navigating everyday life and yet still be positioned as an English learner—that is, a perpetual novice—throughout the entirety of one’s mainstream educational experiences. Assessments and classifications of English language (il)legitimacy are often implemented in ways that jointly reproduce racial and class stratification.

This section examines the institutional enactment of novicehood and the educational experiences of racialized youth. It shows how for some students novicehood is not the beginning of a trajectory toward institutionally recognized language competence, but rather a state of permanence or ascribed languagelessness (Rosa 2016). The following examples draw from research conducted in predominantly Latinx California schools and communities in 2023–2024. Participants in the study include both current high school students and recent high school graduates. The participants in the study had all been designated as English learners across their academic trajectories. More specifically, they were classified as Long-Term English Learners (LTEL), a designation that functions as an add-on definition to California’s English Learner classification. The designation serves the purpose of identifying, monitoring, and assessing the English proficiency of students who have been institutionally designated as English Learners for at least six years. Importantly, the LTEL designation assumes that students designated as such are struggling English learners and, by extension, perpetual novices. However, the status of novicehood, which is purportedly rooted in language abilities, emerges from perceptions of students rather than their linguistic practices.

In the first example, Veronica, an eleventh-grade student, discusses her confidence in English, her language use across home and school settings, and her current English learner designation as a result of not having passed the state English proficiency assessment:

Oh yeah! I like to think – I feel pretty confident just because like um I’ve known English for like a while. That’s all I speak with my siblings mostly, but with my mom I speak Spanish. [...] But then I haven’t passed, so I don’t know. But, I feel like if you’re in IB courses, like you must know some type of English, no?

In this example, Veronica describes her experience with English, stating that she has “known English for a while.” At home, Veronica is a bilingual speaker choosing to use English primarily with her older siblings and Spanish with her mother. More importantly, and despite initial feelings of confidence with English, Veronica wonders how her participation in her school’s “IB” (International Baccalaureate) system, a selective enrichment program, must signal her knowledge of at least “some type of English.” Here, Veronica suggests that enrollment in IB is predicated upon English competence. As an eleventh-grade student, Veronica enrolled in IB English, IB Spanish, and IB History. We might wonder, along with Veronica, how a student can be simultaneously designated as an English learner and as an IB participant since these classifications are

stereotypically associated with contrasting typologies of English competence. This dynamic points to the importance of understanding socialization to the status of an LTEL as a reflection of institutional hierarchies rather than linguistic competencies.

The second example illustrates the experience of Julia, a recent high school graduate. Julia was designated as an LTEL throughout her academic trajectory. In this example, Julia reflects on her bilingualism, specifically as she notes the advantages to being bilingual in the job market.

In high school, sometimes there were meetings for parents or school nights, and they would ask me if I would be able to translate in Spanish since I speak Spanish and English. So, I feel like that also helped me a lot because it helped me work on my Spanish even more and now whenever I go somewhere and people need me to translate I am able to. I feel like if I am going into an interview and the other person that is also going to interview only speaks one language, I think it is a good thing for me to be bilingual because I have a higher chance of getting hired.

In this example, Julia reflects on her experience of being recruited to provide bilingual interpreting skills as a child language broker (Orellana 2009). Crucially, she engaged in these practices at the same time that she was institutionally designated as lacking English abilities. Salient in the excerpt is that, for Julia, these interpreting experiences served as an opportunity to practice her Spanish, underscoring Spanish as the language she perceived as necessitating sharpening. Later in the interview, she went on to explain that these experiences helped her with public speaking, especially as she now holds jobs that require speaking to customers using English and Spanish every day. In previous interviews, she referenced public speaking as a talent that stemmed from her bilingual interpreting experiences. As an interpreter at her school, Julia's bilingualism was not only recognized, but celebrated during official school functions. These experiences demonstrate conflicting attributions of competence at the school level and advantageous bilingualism in the service sector job market.

These two examples illustrate the contradictory experiences of many students who are designated as English Learners and LTELs in US schools despite being born and/or primarily raised in the US and effectively using English to navigate their everyday lives. These ascriptions of novicehood reflect how an ideologically constituted category can adhere tenaciously to students across the trajectory of their schooling experiences. For Veronica, her English Learner designation was a reminder of an institutional framing situating her as a fragmental or incomplete learner and user of English. Julia received partial recognition of her English proficiency during school events. Even these small sites of recognition built confidence in her public speaking and the broader communicative skills she uses in her current job. While Julia's school relied on her bilingualism, she did not have access to robust academic opportunities due to her English Learner designation. After high school, her linguistic skills were marketable to her employers, but only in the service labor industry, for which she was competitive based on her academic credentials. Arguably, Veronica's and Julia's educational experiences and broader life opportunities may have been fundamentally different if their schools had affirmed their bilingualism throughout their educational trajectories. To honor these multilingual realities and skills, assessments of language competence must move beyond prescriptive notions of academic language in favor of understanding language as reflective of larger community language practices and norms.

The students presented above are skillful bilinguals who recognize their bilingualism despite being designated as linguistically deficient (Martínez 2017). Their framing as permanent language learners suggests that the ideological attribution of linguistic novicehood cannot be reduced to characteristics of language use. Instead, classifications such as LTEL rationalize and naturalize the subjugation of racialized students' place in specific educational trajectories, which, in turn, profoundly impact their broader lived experiences and life chances. Attention to differences in these students' linguistic repertoires and experiences of language socialization cannot account for the perpetual marginalization they face. This reflects the importance of combining empirical analysis of language learning with careful consideration of historical and contemporary power structures that shape systematic attributions of linguistic deficiency and experiences of marginalization.

4. From pluralizing to undoing language learning competencies and classifications

These accounts of educational experiences in Arizona and California demonstrate how Latinx students, educators, and communities are faced with the challenge of affirming their multilingual dexterity in the context of US language policies and classifications which contradict their everyday lives and cultural knowledges. For dual-language elementary teachers in Arizona, these efforts toward affirmation require critical engagement with policies informed by the assumption that languages are discrete entities that can be strictly separated from one another and used dichotomously in varying percentages to produce “balanced” bilingual students. Bilingualism is a fundamental feature of everyday school and community life, such that separating languages in accordance with monoglossic policies violates core cultural norms in this context. Monoglossic policies and ideologies which reproduce assumptions about boundaries between languages work in concert with monoglot ideologies which privilege standardizing assumptions about which features and varieties of a given language are legitimately academic. These ideologies often frame multilingualism in minoritized communities as primarily social rather than academic. Yet, insofar as such multilingualism is central to practicing and sustaining intergenerational community knowledge, it is a profoundly academic practice. Careful attention to experiences of language socialization in this context serves as a crucial window into the limitations of dichotomous framings of language, as well as minoritized multilingual communities’ forging of worlds beyond these borders.

While we have illustrated how dual-language educators in Arizona push back against monoglossic and monoglot policies and ideologies to affirm their students’ multilingual competencies, our related analysis of California high school students classified as LTELs shows how these language users challenge their designation as perpetual linguistic novices by asserting and redefining the value of their multilingual skills in school, home, and work contexts. The LTEL classification purports to recognize limited English language proficiency among students formally designated as English Learners for six years or more. Yet, the same students who are identified as perpetual English language novices demonstrate extensive English language skills through their engagement in language brokering practices on behalf of their families and various interlocutors in school and community settings, their successful participation in advanced courses which presume English language expertise, and their sought-after performances of English–Spanish bilingualism in the workplace. These enactments of English language expertise alongside perpetual ascriptions of English language novicehood point to the importance of reconsidering constructions, assessments, and classifications of language socialization experiences in theory and practice.

In this discussion of Latinx educational language learning experiences in Arizona and California, as well as in broader US and global contexts of political, economic, sociocultural, and linguistic minoritization, language socialization emerges as an important framework for challenging linguistic hegemony by pluralizing definitions of competence and drawing attention to the situated nature of language learning. Rather than presuming that minoritized populations suffer from linguistic deficits, language socialization emphasizes the importance of recognizing and affirming cultural differences in how linguistic competence is developed and displayed. However, the examples throughout this chapter demonstrate that despite minoritized language users’ widespread display of dexterous multilingual skills and decades of language socialization research affirming their abilities, linguistic stigmatization and marginalization persist (Rosa and Flores 2017). This insight has informed our focus on not only *difference* but also *dominance* in efforts to challenge deficit perspectives on educational language learning, emphasizing the role of power in shaping experiences of linguistic stigmatization and the contestation thereof (Heller and McElhinny 2017). This shift is particularly important in societal contexts shaped by colonial, imperial, and racialized stratification. These endemic power structures perpetually subordinate, exploit, and marginalize particular populations and their language practices. We see this in the case of the aforementioned California youth who are positioned as linguistically

deficient throughout the entirety of their public school experiences, only to then have their bilingualism embraced in marginalized service sector employment contexts. While attention to language socialization can help us to make sense of the multiple linguistic competencies that are learned and performed across these contexts, analysis of historically anchored power structures is essential for understanding how these language learning experiences and practices come to be hierarchically positioned in relation to one another, and with what consequences.

5. Paths forward for challenging and uprooting marginalization in educational language learning

Understandings of linguistic practices, policies, and ideologies in schools and societies have been strengthened by scholarship focused on the culturally situated nature of language learning, which challenges universalizing assumptions about human development. Liberal multicultural educational approaches might tend to orient language as an object to be acted upon in efforts to facilitate language learning, affirm communicative diversity, and promote equitable access to linguistic resources. Language socialization research focusing on different ways of defining and practicing linguistic competence has often dovetailed with liberal multicultural affirmations of diversity and advocacy for equity. In line with our discussion of a shift from a focus on difference to dominance, recent language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics scholarship moves beyond affirmations of diversity by emphasizing the importance of situating struggles over language in relation to broader social justice struggles (Wolfram, Charity Hudley, and Valdés 2023; Avineri and Baquedano-López 2024). Thus, the enactment of pluralistic language policies must engage with endemic linguistic and societal marginalization to disrupt the privileging of particular practices and populations over others. And the identification of areas for language development and support must be designed in ways that combat the institutionalization of stigmatizing language learning classifications which participate in the reproduction of societal hierarchies. These insights reflect the importance of demonstrating the legitimacy of linguistic and cultural differences as well as challenging dominant power structures in efforts to uproot marginalization in educational language learning.

Insofar as language socialization research has unsettled disciplinary borders between theoretical and applied linguistics, it serves as a crucial space for contemporary and future analyses of language learning across broader borders demarcating communicative modalities and technologies, language varieties, institutional contexts, and global social relations. Through attention to the culturally situated nature of language learning in each of these contexts, as well as careful engagement with historical and contemporary power structures that link experiences across contexts, scholarship combining insights from language socialization, educational linguistics, and applied linguistics can simultaneously challenge deficit assumptions, document profound human communicative differences, and contribute to efforts toward challenging dominance. Synthesizing these various intellectual and political commitments is key to theory and practice beyond communicative, conceptual, and societal borders in educational language learning.

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Notes

- 1 The name of the school is a pseudonym.