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Linguistic Apartheid: *Testimonios* of Immigration, Labor, Socialization and Schooling Along the Community College Pathway

Jesus Jaime-Diaz, Colorado State University Pueblo
Kevan Kiser-Chuc, Tucson Unified School District

Abstract

This study examines the community college experience of Mexican American students as a pivotal step in higher education for minoritized individuals. It critiques deficit views on language, culture, and identity in U.S. education, particularly for English Language Learners. Through qualitative research at an Oregon community college, participants' *testimonios* in *pláticas* reveal themes of laying *raices* in *el norte*, schooling socialization, and navigating English in a dominant culture. The findings highlight the need for culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies that integrate students' lived experiences, challenging language ideologies that shape bicultural bilingual learners' educational paths.

Keywords: community college, Mexican American Students, immigrant experience, *testimonio*, *pláticas*, language ideologies.

Mexican American[45] students have historically faced negative early schooling experiences in the U.S., shaped by cultural, identity-based, and linguistic prejudices (Spring, 2022). In-school challenges include excessive remediation, a lack of bilingual educators and support staff, in addition to external factors like migrant family poverty and rising xenophobia adding to the struggle. Rooted in European colonialism, raciolinguistic ideologies uphold white supremacy by imposing a monolingual standard on Mexican-origin students, framing their language practices as deficient.

These challenges often push them out of school, relegating them to a permanent underclass. Many also leave community college early, raising ongoing concerns (Peña, 2013). Institutional inconsistencies in academic expectations and college readiness create vulnerabilities that derail

[45] Mexican American in this article is in reference to students born in the U.S. of Mexican descent, or born in Mexico and raised in the U.S. at a young age.
Chicana/o is a person of Mexican origin or descent, but it also can refer to a social consciousness where a person is never closer to themselves than when they are to their community.
Latina/o is a pan -ethnic identity of solidarity amongst people of Latin American origin or descent.
Latinx refers to people of Latin American origin or descent and the term is used as gender neutral.

their educational progress (Smedley et al., 1993). Research highlights the need to examine geographic barriers and social inequalities that limit Mexican American students' access to higher education (Ferrin, 1972).

For Latino students, community college is often their first and last chance at higher education. Studies show that bicultural bilingual curricula—integrating language, culture, and identity—effectively improve retention and transfer rates. A responsive curriculum adapts pedagogy to students' cultural backgrounds, fostering agency and knowledge production (Garcia et al., 2004). Ethnic studies pedagogy further enhances learning by incorporating culturally relevant teaching, nurturing critical consciousness, and fostering supportive academic environments (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). De La Riva (2012) found that when community college curricula value and bridge students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they facilitate educational success. She also advises educators to recognize ideological barriers that discourage students from seeking help. The social context of learning influences how instructors relate to minoritized students, and by serving as advocates, they provide critical mentorship. Hodara (2012) suggests that community colleges balance their open enrollment admission with academic standards for language minority students.

Linguistic Ideologies and white Hegemony

Linguistic ideologies[46] shape beliefs about language use and ability, often serving to justify existing power structures (Silverstein, 1979). Language ideologies reinforce dominant discourses, distorting perceptions of language legitimacy and usage. Mayo (1999) describes hegemony as a social reality enforced by dominant groups through coercion and consent. Regarding language hegemony, Mayo (2014) argues that while a dominant language should be taught, instruction must also address its sociohistorical role in power and knowledge.

Deficit-based views of culture impact how Latinx immigrant students are perceived in schools and communities, undermining their sense of belonging and educational aspirations. These ideologies stereotype Latino students as unmotivated, low-achieving, and lacking basic skills, leading to disproportionate placement in special education (Allard et al., 2014). Research on language testing policies in community colleges indicates that second-language learners are often pushed toward monolingual instruction without opportunities to develop their heritage language (Bunch & Panayotova, 2008). Hill (2008) examines how language perpetuates white dominance in workplaces, media, and public discourse. Hill highlights the intersection of race, power, and language, exposing how everyday speech reinforces racial hierarchies and calling for critical analysis to challenge linguistic racism.

English Language Learners (ELL) and immigrant students face racism in the U.S., particularly targeting their use of the Spanish language, imposed through colonization in the Americas. Dominant white language discourses label certain dialects as unsophisticated, grammatically deficient, and incapable of expressing complex ideas. These ideologies also stigmatize speakers of these dialects, leading Mexican-origin students to internalize negative perceptions, affecting their confidence in communication (Murillo & Schall, 2016). Roth-Gordon (2011) examines “Mock Spanish,” where white speakers incorporate Spanish words into English in ways that reinforce racial

[46] Linguistic and language ideologies are interchangeable within the folk theory of racism where they are both visible and invisible in forms and functions of text and talk (Hill, 2008).

stereotypes and uphold white dominance. She argues that this practice allows white speakers to control linguistic and racial boundaries while simultaneously devaluing and appropriating Latinx culture. Flores (2015) explores how hegemonic whiteness shapes bilingual education policies, either reinforcing or challenging dominant norms. As a privileged racial category, whiteness sets standards for what is considered normal, proper, and desirable, influencing language use and ideologies. As a result, language becomes a tool to sustain racial stereotypes and inequalities, marginalizing non-white communities.

Raciolinguistics

Raciolinguistics examines how colonial histories link language and race, positioning non-white linguistic practices as inferior. In the 21st century, whiteness continues to privilege certain languages, varieties, and pronunciation patterns (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Deficit views of language learners persist, portraying them as linguistically deficient. Rosa (2016) defines "racialized ideologies of languagelessness" as assessing language proficiency through a monolingual, standardized lens. For Latinas/os in the U.S., bilingual education exists within a restrictive framework. Subtractive bilingualism erases Spanish, while additive bilingualism promotes English—both aiming for mastery of academic English. Failure to achieve this proficiency excludes Latinas/os from national belonging and deepens their struggle due to racial positioning (Flores, 2019). Hill (2008) highlights linguistic inequalities as central to white racism and the maintenance of white public space. Empirical evidence has supported and validated dual-language education. However, dominant discourses often dismiss it, reinforcing standardized English as the norm (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

For Latinx and ESL students in community colleges, instructors and staff must embrace all forms of English as equal and use asset-based pedagogies to expand linguistic repertoires and empower students. This begins with acknowledging that language and its speakers are never viewed neutrally. To dismantle standard language ideologies, anti-racist linguistic and literacy practices must be integrated into curricula (Lawton & de Kleine, 2020). Educators and researchers must also address the political and economic challenges racialized communities face by challenging raciolinguistic ideologies and modifying language practices (Flores, 2020).

Theory, Data, and Methods

This study applies "linguistic apartheid" as a theoretical framework to examine how language ideologies normalize social stratification in education. Ethnic studies further contextualizes power through race, class, and gender (Hu-DeHart, 1993). Many minoritized groups experience oppression through language, a practice rooted in colonialism. The term linguistic apartheid originates from South Africa's segregation policies, which denied native populations access to formal English education, ensuring their economic and social subjugation (Bobda, 2004; Reagan, 1987).

Colonial legacies of linguistic trauma continue to shape modern language ideologies (Greenfield, 2010). However, education has long served as a form of resistance. In South Africa, linguistic co-habitation has elevated marginalized languages, countering the remnants of linguistic apartheid (Kamwangamalu, 2008). In the U.S., linguistic apartheid explains the language subordination of Mexican American students, particularly in Arizona. Isolating English learners in schools reinforces

social stratification both in education and society (Combs et al., 2014). This study explores how language ideologies reproduce social stratification and how linguistic domination in the U.S. is tied to whiteness and institutional racism. It draws from a qualitative case study at A Gathering Place of Peace Community College (pseudonym) in Santiam, Oregon, focusing on 15 Mexican American students. Three students' *testimonios* inform this analysis. The overarching research questions for this study address students' family experiences immigrating to the U.S., and memories of their early schooling and language experiences.

Methodology

Using critical ethnographic methods (Creswell, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), this research takes an emancipatory, self-reflexive approach, valuing students' lived experiences as critical knowledge for social change (Cervantes-Soon, 2014; Duncan, 2005). *Pláticas*, a culturally rooted conversational method in Mexican culture, foster trust and community engagement (Fierros & Delgado-Bernal, 2016; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). Pláticas differ from traditional research practices such as focus group interviews, where exploratory data is sought through multiple participant interviews to triangulate for validity (Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2011). As a research methodology, Pláticas are centered upon reciprocal dialogues where relationships are foundational for cultivating authentic relationships through *confianza*, self-reflexivity, and vulnerability (Flores & Morales, 2021). Pláticas are also culturally effective in humanizing the research experience and strategically pivoting interculturally while engaged in traditional research methods such as semi-structured interviews. It is while participating in a plática that a testimonio can emerge. Chicana feminist methodologies frame testimonio as a dialogical process that allows students to voice their experiences, particularly structural violence against marginalized communities (Martínez et al., 2017). Testimonio has recently emerged as a valuable tool for studying Latina leadership in community colleges (Elenes, 2020).

The researcher (first author) was introduced to students at a brown bag lunch held at the community college's multicultural center and provided his testimonio about growing up in rural northeastern Oregon, and the hardships faced by the working poor Mexican community. In addition, they highlighted the importance of community college and how it is a bridge to higher education. Such vulnerability created trust and respect among the students, where pláticas emerged with students interested in voicing their experiences by participating in the study.

Research was collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes. Sub-questions asked of the student participants were:

1) What is your parents' country of origin, and what was the reason they migrated to the United States?
2) What were your family's socio-economic conditions in your early years in the United States?
3) What kind of work did your parents do?
4) How would you describe your living conditions growing up?
5) What was your experience in learning the English language?

Interviews were recorded and transcribed (Richards, 2014; Seidman, 2006). All transcripts were read three times and holistically coded to capture key themes and concepts providing a broad

overview of the data. Such an approach enabled the identification of emerging themes while maintaining the authenticity of student testimonios (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saldaña, 2015).

Findings

Analysis of interviews, pláticas, and testimonios revealed three key themes:

1) Laying *Raíces*/Roots in El Norte – Students recounted struggles their families faced establishing themselves in the U.S.
2) Schooling Socialization – Students described experiences of inclusion or exclusion in early education.
3) Navigating English In a Dominant Culture – Students reflected on the significance of English proficiency in shaping their identities and opportunities.

Laying *Raíces* in *El Norte*

Language plays a concrete role in the political economy, shaping economic transactions and political interests (Irvine, 1989). Its commodification is tied to neoliberal capitalism, where language is integral to labor and the worker's place in a capitalist system. Understanding "the language part of work" requires considering both the worker and the social structures they navigate. Language is often framed through the lens of the nation-state, even within globalized industries (Urciuoli & LaDousa, 2013). Participants shared the hardships their families endured as immigrants. Many hesitated to vocalize their struggles, expressing embarrassment over financial hardships and cultural barriers. Flor del Rio recounted her family's difficulties:

> When we arrived in Santiam, my dad was the only one working. My brother was hospitalized for three years, and we drove back and forth from Santiam to Portland. My dad's boss provided unstable housing on a dairy farm, and when my brother's doctors urged us to move, his boss refused. My dad quit, and we relocated. We had no money—everything went to hospital bills, medicine, and gas. Sometimes, we had nothing to eat. But gracias a Dios, things got better. My dad found a stable, better-paying job.

Chicano scholars have documented the historical exploitation of Mexican immigrant workers. Often treated as disposable labor (Menchaca, 1995), these communities endure economic hardships that remain invisible to those with class privilege. Their resilience highlights the broader struggle against social exclusion driven by ethnocentrism and systemic inequities (Healey & Stepnick, 2022). Esperanza, another participant, described her parents' perseverance:

> My parents have always worked in the fields. My dad came to Oregon first, sending money to us in Tijuana. My mom takes seasonal jobs in restaurants and fields and sells Mary Kay to help. We've been lucky, but when my dad is out of work for months, things get tough. Now, he has a stable job in a dairy, and it's getting better.

Despite financial struggles, Esperanza saw hope in her community college education, recognizing her parents' sacrifices. Valente, another participant, reflected on his family's journey:

> When my mom arrived here from Sinaloa, Mexico, she wanted her family to have the American Dream. My dad is from Michoacán, Mexico I don't know much about him [my mom is a single mother they separated here in the U.S]. My mom is a cannery worker and works long hours to provide for her children as best as she can. My mom would provide food on the table as a laborer. But at times we lacked food and clothing, and at times I wore different shoes from goodwill. It was really humiliating as I would get made fun of. Inside of me I would get mad at my mom and wonder why we got born into this lifestyle. I became very resentful towards her, but now I know it was not her fault and she did the best she could to raise us.

Valente's awareness of historical migration trends contextualized his family's experiences, illustrating how Mexican immigrants have long contributed to Oregon's labor force while facing systemic barriers. According to Garcia (2023), Latinos in Oregon increased significantly between 1950 and 1980, particularly in agriculture and service sectors. Between 1980 and 1990, the Latino population grew by 70%, with 33% residing in rural areas. His story highlights the resilience of Mexican immigrant mothers and challenges deficit views that portray them as disengaged from their children's education. Nativist discourses in the U.S. often dehumanize immigrants and fail to acknowledge their labor contributions and sacrifices (Orosco, 2016).

Schooling Socialization

In schools, ethnic identities are socially constructed, evolving through classroom practices, stereotypes, and language use (McGroarty, 2010). Nationalist ideology in language and politics hinders multilingualism and ethnic struggles. Language differences can challenge perceptions of nationhood within social structures (Woolard, 2021). These barriers reinforce dominant linguistic norms, limiting inclusion.Participants reflected on their schooling experiences and how they shaped their sense of belonging. Flor del Rio described feeling unsupported as a Mexican student:

> I always felt that teachers didn't see my potential because I was Mexican. They assumed I wouldn't succeed like white middle-class students. In elementary school, I exited the ESL program in third grade, but middle school was tough—I was often the only Mexicana in class. Teachers treated me differently, almost frustrated with how I spoke. I was relieved when I was no longer labeled an ESL student.

Her experience reveals how racialized language biases limited her educational opportunities. In contrast, Esperanza recalled a more inclusive experience:

> I don't remember any negative experiences—my teachers encouraged me and told me I would do great things. I attended diverse schools with students from many backgrounds. I loved sharing my culture, like food, music, and language.

Her experience underscores the importance of diverse, integrated schools that value students' cultural and linguistic identities (Grant & Sleeter, 2012). Valente reflected on racialized class ideologies in school:

> Learning to read early helped me understand the world. But in third grade, I began experiencing racism. By middle school, teachers labeled me a gang member because of my

> brown skin and the way I dressed. I wasn't in a gang—I just wore the same style as others. But after being labeled, I eventually joined one out of anger. I felt alienated—why try in school if I was already judged? Still, my struggles shaped who I am today. Now, I want to help Chicanas/os and immigrant students because I understand their experiences.

Valente's story illustrates how racial biases and deficit perspectives push Mexican American students toward school disengagement, reinforcing a self-fulfilling prophecy (Valenzuela, 1999). His resilience, however, turned hardship into a commitment to support others facing similar challenges.

Navigating English in a Dominant Culture

Mexican immigrants' educational and occupational outcomes vary by age of arrival, with younger arrivals more likely to succeed. Schools play a key role in immigrant integration, serving as primary points of contact with society (Allard et al., 2014; Morales et al., 2012). Nativist rhetoric has long shaped debates on Mexican immigration, linking language ability to immigrant identity. This framing influences public perception and treatment of immigrants (Gallo et al., 2014).This article attempts to holistically highlight the impact of language ideologies on ELL in community college, aiming to dismantle biases that hinder Mexican immigrant students. Through testimonios, participants reveal internalized linguistic and cultural biases in education.
Flor del Rio a community college student, recalled:

> I started learning English in first grade in Mexico. When we moved to the U.S., I quickly became the family translator. By third grade, I was out of ESL and in "normal" classes—I never wanted to go back because ESL[47] students were seen as slow.

Her experience reflects the burden of language brokering and the stigma attached to ESL programs, which she distanced herself from to be perceived as a "normal" student. Esperanza shared, "I don't really remember learning English—it just happened naturally through TV. It seemed easy for me, but I saw many Mexican students struggle in middle and high school." Her testimonio underlines the difference between acquiring social English and mastering academic English, a challenge often overlooked in schools (Ovando & Combs, 2018). She also noted how Mexican students were ridiculed for struggling with English. Valente recalled, "Spanish was my first language, but I picked up English quickly from cartoons and my cousins from California. English was 'cool'—I wanted to speak it right, like in the movies." His experience reflects internalized language ideologies, where speaking English "correctly" became a marker of status, reinforcing social distance between U.S.-born and immigrant Mexicans. This normalized linguistic divide in schools went unaddressed, creating a hidden form of exclusion.

Discussion

The testimonios reveal the struggles of Mexican American students in community colleges, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive education. These institutions must move beyond

[47] In the United States, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are designed to teach a variety of language skills to non-native English speakers (also known as English language learners). ESL classes are for the most part English only classes where English language learners (ELL's) are segregated into two- or four-hour blocks of time in a school day (Combs et al., 2014; Ovando & Combs, 2018).

deficit views of language, culture, and immigration by fostering inclusive environments. This includes diversifying curricula, hosting culturally relevant events, and increasing representation among faculty, staff, and administrators. Bridging the social gap between colleges and immigrant communities is crucial to recognizing their dignity and contributions.

Students saw their education as part of a collective struggle rooted in family and community resilience. Their experiences highlight the need to integrate lived realities into education to foster resistance and intercultural awareness (Campa, 2017, 2013, 2010). *Conocimiento*, or self-reflexive knowledge, requires engaging with oneself and others. This means meeting students where they are and challenging internalized prejudices shaped by early socialization around immigration, language, work, religion, education, and class (Jaime-Diaz, 2023; Jaime-Diaz & Dubkin-Lee, 2023; Jaime-Diaz & Ramos, 2023; Jaime-Diaz & Méndez-Negrete, 2021).

Conclusion

By humanizing learning, educators can build trust, validate students' linguistic assets, and challenge internalized biases (Ovando & Combs, 2018). Language ideologies in community colleges have lasting effects on bilingual students' sense of belonging. Such ideologies, shaped by family and society, can undermine self-esteem and reinforce deficit perspectives (Arâgao, 2011; Bornstein et al., 2013). Internalized linguistic biases subject English learners to unrealistic monolingual standards, reinforcing exclusion. Developing critical language awareness enables students to see language's social and political dimensions and empowers educators to challenge linguistic hierarchies (Molina, 2023).

Recognizing bilingualism as a strength rather than a problem shifts perspectives, affirming students' cultural and linguistic identities (Ruiz, 1984; 2010). Inclusive pedagogy dismantles rigid language norms, valuing linguistic diversity over prescriptive rules (Kiser-Chuc, 2022a, 2022b, 2025). Students often enter school with ideological views of "the other" shaped by media and family influences. Teachers play a crucial role in either reinforcing or challenging these hegemonic ideologies (Darder, 2012; Ricklefs, 2021).

Community colleges, serving immigrants and marginalized students, must embrace systemic change to dismantle deficit ideologies, ensuring education becomes a tool for social mobility and justice (Rendon & Valadez, 1993). There is a pressing need for institutional systemic change for the inclusivity of the diverse community within vocational and academic institutions. The training of personnel in being responsive to deficit ideologies of language and learning, and how such views impact and limit social mobility through education need to be further problematized and addressed. The hope is that intersectional realities be considered in serving minoritized students in the pursuit of self-fulfillment along the community college pathway. By being aware and upholding the dignity of minoritized students and honoring their language, culture, and identity through the content in which they are learning, may very well serve as a catalyst for empowering them to go on to pursue a higher education in the spirit of social justice for the common good.

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