No pride in prejudice: pedagogy and one experiment in the deconstruction of anti-immigration sentiment

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Abstract

We implemented and evaluated a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning project in which forty-nine college students worked at a local elementary school with children who live in households where Spanish is the primary spoken language. We measured the college students’ attitudes toward Hispanics and learning Spanish both before and after participating in the project. Students who participated in this project expressed more positive attitudes toward Hispanics at the end of the project than at the beginning in contrast to 23 students in a comparison group who did not participate in the project. Surprisingly, participation in this project was not associated with more positive attitudes toward learning Spanish.
Interpersonal communication has changed in the last twenty years in the United States because of the influx of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, and has thereby challenged extant cultural norms. Emerging intersubjective difficulties wrought by linguistic obstacles in social, medical, and law enforcement services have created burdens on personnel working in these fields; policy makers working in these respective professions have duly begun to see that the disorder created by the linguistic divide has become an urgent priority. While we acknowledge that this problem has emerged as a distinctly American phenomenon, trans-group contention caused by language barriers certainly exists elsewhere. It is our hope that scholars in other countries comparably affected by such translinguistic strife may discover parallels in our research that could mitigate similar cultural hostilities that impede social understanding, and, by extension, teaching and learning itself.

In the United States, the mounting resistance to diversity, strident defenses of monolingualism, and, particularly in the wake of 9/11, the renaissance of ethnocentricity as a culturally desirable American value, may currently be complicating transitions towards more effective and reciprocal communication. While certain proactive individuals have scrambled nonetheless to invent solutions to compensate for such lacunae in language in the aforementioned professions where clarity in communication is of utmost and dire necessity, the complexities of deconstructing linguistic and ethnic prejudice continue to stymie their efforts.

A parallel problem also exists in the public schools with regards to the education of the children of Spanish speakers. There is an expectation that Spanish-speaking children will acquire English merely through exposure and absorption, and many children with minimal English language skills are placed haphazardly into classrooms in which they are taught by teachers with no specialized training in educating limited English proficiency (LEP) students. Although ESL initiatives have purported to lessen the trauma of confusion and displacement experienced by these children, the management of language acquisition for each individual student remains a daunting challenge in rural communities, for example,
that often cannot circumvent the limitations imposed by sparse instructional and personnel resources and insufficient funding.

While we cannot with any authority diagnose the specific reasons that there exists a paucity of interest in the welfare of this special population of children, we suspect that, at least on certain levels, the same ethnocentrism that informs a general social perception that Hispanics are undesirable may figure into policies regarding their education (Armendariz 2000). In our own experiences, after having taught Spanish in numerous post-secondary institutions, we have frequently pondered to what degree this same cultural resistance persists in our students. We theorized that student ethnocentrism and resistance to bilingualism might be positively modulated by exposing students to a real-world application of language skills. Duly, in light of these observations, and Jeffrey C. Dixon’s assertion that “by facilitating knowledge of minority groups, contact may help majority group members develop more favorable views of minority groups” (Dixon 2004), we sought to investigate the extent to which engagement in a SoTL project could alter the stereotypes of Hispanic persons that could hinder Anglophone students’ desire to learn Spanish. The underlying hypothesis of the project was that participating university students would develop more positive attitudes toward Hispanics and learning Spanish at the end of the project than at the beginning.

As we have both taught at a university in the rural southern United States and ruminated about these problems as issues relevant to the scholarship of teaching and learning, we posited that there were certain obstacles to language acquisition that could be circumvented or altered by exposing undergraduate students to contact with individuals from other cultures, primarily Hispanic. These were: ethnocentrism, xenophobia, lack of opportunities for real-world application of language skills, and the perceived irrelevance of studying abroad, exacerbated by a depressed rural economy. With the assumption that minimizing racial tensions could result in more productive learning environments, we therefore sought to explore the use of contact theory as a means of testing our hypothesis.

**Method**

We paired 59 students from our university with numerous students in local elementary schools. The elementary school students were in grades K-8, and all came from households in which English was not the primary language spoken at home. The children had been identified by licensed Title III LEP
coordinators as deficient in some aspect of English communication, and their proficiencies in language encompassed a gamut that ranged from a total deficiency in English language skills to highly functional communicative ability. Twenty three students enrolled in a different Spanish class did not participate in the project and served as a comparison group. The total number of participants was 72.

The college students were initially instructed to spend time working with the children to bolster literary proficiency. All college students taking part in this program had to undergo a rigorous criminal background investigation in order to participate in the program and also were required to receive training in teaching reading skills prior to placement in the public schools. Each student was assigned to one child for an entire semester. As the project evolved and time passed, the responsibilities of the students expanded to include tutoring in school subjects ranging from basic math to elementary science to assistance with time management skills. In addition, the college students were also to read elementary texts in Spanish (where applicable) to the children.

All of the students were given the opportunity to opt out of this program by conducting alternate research, but a vast majority of our students (59 in total) elected to be paired with one of the children at the local elementary schools. In addition, the college students were informed formally of the purview of our research at the beginning of the semester, and consent was obtained formally in writing. At the beginning of the semester, all 72 student participants completed a 49-item questionnaire designed to measure attitudes toward Hispanics and attitudes toward learning Spanish. The 49 items emerged from a larger set of items through confirmatory factor analyses and reliability analyses based on an independent sample of 68 students who had completed this exact same project the previous semester. The survey is included in this article as Appendix A. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with pro or con attitude statements using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). After reverse-scoring appropriate items, higher scores indicated more positive attitudes.

We sought to examine particular areas of concern to language educators. While we hoped to establish correlations between such experiences and positive changes in attitudes towards immigration, Spanish language learning, and Hispanics in the United States, our findings only revealed demonstrable variations in students' opinions towards Hispanics as an ethnic group. The "Hispanic attitudes and stereotypes" subscale consisted of 24 items (e.g. "I avoid Hispanics whenever possible," "Hispanics tend
to be dirty”). In this subscale, Cronbach’s alpha was .90. The “attitudes toward learning Spanish” subscale consisted of seven items (e.g. “I look for opportunities to practice my Spanish,” “I am only taking Spanish because it is required”), and for this particular subscale, Cronbach’s alpha was .88.

At the end of the semester, participants in both the project group and the comparison group completed the 49-item questionnaire for a second time.

Results

For each of the subscales in the 49-item questionnaire, we tested our hypotheses about the effects of participating in a contact project. To accomplish this, we compared the pre- and post- scores on each of the subscales for participants in the project group and in the comparison group. We anticipated that there would be positive changes on each of the subscales in the project group, but not in the comparison group.

We postulated that participation in this project would bring about more positive attitudes toward Hispanics and fewer negative stereotypical beliefs about Hispanics. In keeping with this hypothesis, we found that participants scored significantly higher on the “Hispanic attitudes and stereotypes” subscale after completing the project (M = 3.96, SD = .50) than they did before starting the project (M = 3.73, SD = .51), t (48) = 4.23, p < .01. In contrast, participants in the comparison group did not report a significant difference in their attitudes toward Hispanics at the end of the semester (M = 3.46, SD = .44) compared to the beginning (M = 3.41, SD = .41), t (22) < 1. Finally, the attitude change among participants in the project (M = .22, SD = .38) was significantly more positive than the attitude change among participants in the comparison group (M = .05, SD = .26), t (70) = 2.00, p < .05.

We also hypothesized that participation in such a project would generate more positive attitudes toward learning Spanish. Contrary to this hypothesis, participants reported less positive attitudes toward learning Spanish after completing the project (M = 3.85, SD = .45) than they did before commencing their work with the children (M = 4.03), t (48) = 2.29, p < .05. Participants in the comparison group also reported less positive attitudes toward learning Spanish at the end of the semester (M = 3.53, SD = .49) than they did at the beginning (M = 3.73, SD = .49), t (22) = 2.12, p < .05. Furthermore, the negative attitude change was not different between participants in the project (M = -.18, SD = .55) and participants
in the comparison group (M = .19, SD = .45), t (70) < 1. This finding suggests that students’ attitudes toward learning Spanish became more negative over the course of the semester, and participation in the project did not curb this trend. While this data came as a surprise to us given the positive alterations in attitudes towards Hispanics and our expectation that enthusiasm for language learning would accompany such a course, we have hypothesized that this data may be attributable, among other factors, to student fatigue at the end of an academic year.

Conclusion

The results of the study support our first hypothesis: that students who participated in the tutoring project would express more positive attitudes toward Hispanics at the end of the project than at the beginning in relation to the students from the comparison group.

The association of more positive attitudes towards Hispanics with participation in this project is consistent with research on the “contact hypothesis” on reducing prejudice (Allport 1954). Researchers have discovered a number of conditions under which intergroup contact fosters more positive intergroup attitudes and relations (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami 2003). Our project inherently created such favorable conditions in two ways.

First, research has shown that prejudice is more likely to change as a result of contact that gives people an opportunity to be involved and interact with members of other ethnic groups (Amir 1998; Dovidio et al. 2003). This project fostered the development of close relationships between the college student participants and the Hispanic elementary school children. The evolution of this bonding is plainly discernible through anecdotal evidence we gathered as part of our research. In comments submitted in conjunction with the second survey, students articulated their clear investment in the relationships with their pupils:

- “I had gone into this project believing that I was going to be stuck […]. Boy, was I surprised! What I got was a bundle of joy. […] I felt so needed and loved.”
- “I feel like my child began to look up to me as her role model.”
- “I had a great time with the project and felt like I bonded well with my child. I hope to be able to continue doing work like this in the future.”
“I brought her a slinky and a yo-yo and she was very grateful for the gifts I had given her. After I gave her the gifts, however, she said […] ‘Thank you. My mommy can’t afford to get me presents like these.’ The statement she made moved me deeply.”

“Teaching my child how to read has given me a sense of accomplishment. […] I taught her life skills that she will always be able to use.”

Secondly, Pettigrew argued that developing such inter-group relationships is important in reducing prejudice for two reasons: close inter-group relationships allow people to empathize and identify with out-group members rather than simply learning about them, and inter-group relationships lead to a reappraisal of the in-group. One particularly compelling anecdotal example collected from the post-experiential survey demonstrates Pettigrew’s premise cogently: “I went into this project thinking that Mexicans need to go back to where they came from and saying things like, ‘You are in America, learn the damn language.’ Coming out of this project, however, has made me see things in a totally new and different perspective. Now I do not agree that we should send this child’s family back to Mexico.”

Such processes provide information about the in-group as well as the out-group and lead specifically to “deprovincialization,” a phenomenon in which individuals begin to see that the customs, cultural norms, and worldviews of the in-group are not the sole and exclusive ways of managing the social world, thereby developing a less insular perspective with respect to other groups in general. As this applies to the scholarship of teaching and learning, we contend that microsocial contacts such as those forged in their project ultimately foster more constructive macrosocial changes in pedagogical practices given the extent to which such endeavors diminish the agency of ethnicity.

While it is indubitable that demographics in the United States and elsewhere in the world are constantly shifting and will continue to change, studies such as this one may help educators ease the transition to multilingual culture by exposing their charges to circumstances that allow them to reflect on their own prejudices, confront them, and develop therefore a greater sensitivity to the turbulence that has historically accompanied ethnic transformations in societies. When students become part of a solution and do not perceive difference as threatening to their own cultural status quo, ethnocentrism may eventually cease to function as a barrier to learning.
References


Appendix A

SURVEY

Please circle the response that best corresponds to your personal opinions. Please be as truthful as possible according to your OWN beliefs when you answer.

1. Most Americans feel like Hispanics need to go back to their own countries.
   Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

2. I resent seeing signs in Spanish in public places.
   Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

3. Most individuals in this country feel that Americans need to learn Spanish as much as Mexicans need to learn English.
   Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

4. Lots of people appreciate the cultural diversity that Hispanics bring to the United States.
   Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

5. I look for opportunities outside class to practice my Spanish.
   Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

6. My friends and family have positive opinions of Hispanics.
   Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

7. I think Hispanics are burdens on America because they don't pay taxes.
   Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

8. People appreciate the hard work that Hispanics do.
   Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

9. U.S. citizens think that English is a part of American culture and needs to be protected as the official language.
   Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

10. I am trying to become fluent in Spanish
    Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree

11. Hispanics place a higher value on education than most ethnic groups.
    Strongly agree          Agree          Neutral          Disagree     Strongly disagree
12. If a baby is born to immigrants who are here illegally, that child should be granted U.S. citizenship.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

13. Most people have at least one good friend who is Hispanic.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

14. The ideas of the “great American melting pot” and “give us your poor, your tired, your huddled masses longing to be free” are still the proper notions about immigration in America.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

15. Hispanics tend to be less concerned with personal hygiene than other races.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

16. Studying Spanish helps me with other aspects of my learning.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

17. I avoid Hispanics whenever possible.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

18. Hispanic people are a viable part of our society.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

19. I feel guilty about my real attitudes about Hispanics because of my religion.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

20. Hispanics care a lot about their living environments.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

21. Hispanics love their children and pay attention to their needs as much as any other race does.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

22. I think most Hispanics place a low value on education.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

23. I am glad I took Spanish.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

24. Hispanics are less concerned with the welfare of their children than other races are.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

25. Most people think that Hispanics are peaceful and gentle.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree
26. Hispanics show little concern for their homes and yards.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

27. I feel better about Spanish than I feel about other required classes.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

28. The government should do a lot more to control immigration.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

29. I try not to be around Hispanic or Spanish-speaking people if I can help it.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

30. It gets on my nerves when I see things written in Spanish.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

31. The majority of Americans think that bilingualism is a responsibility that should be shared by English-speakers and Spanish-speakers.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

32. There are all sorts of moral justifications that make it okay to hop the border without papers to come into the United States to work and live.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

33. Listening to people speak Spanish when I’m out and about makes me feel weird.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

34. I enjoy speaking in Spanish in class.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

35. In most communities, there is a general sense that life is enriched by the cultural differences that Hispanics bring to them.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

36. Lots of parents encourage their children to learn both Spanish and English.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

37. I’m only taking Spanish because it’s required.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

38. Hispanics are not afraid of hard work and that is why people appreciate them.

   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree
39. People think that it does not matter what language is spoken in the United States as long as people can find ways to communicate with each other.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

40. Since Hispanics have poor health care systems in their own countries, I fear I might get sick from them somehow.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

41. Anyone who wants to move into the United States should be allowed to do so without any problems because this country was founded on that idea.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

42. Hispanics tend to be dirty.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

43. In my opinion, we end up having to pay more for all services and goods because Hispanics get out of paying taxes.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

44. There is really no justifiable reason for anyone to be in this country without proper documentation.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

45. All children born on United States soil deserve American citizenship regardless of their parents’ nationality.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

46. My morals obligate me to love all people, including Hispanics, but I still feel some negative feelings toward them anyway and I feel bad about this.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

47. I am afraid that I might get a tropical disease from a Hispanic person.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

48. If I heard that a mother who was here illegally had to leave her child behind in the country and be deported, I would feel bad for her because she has a right to be with her child.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

49. People want their children to grow up being able to speak both Spanish and English.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree