

Diversifying Language Educators and Learners

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

In this issue we present articles on the Focus Topic “Diversifying Language Educators and Learners.” The submissions for this issue were blind reviewed by three education experts, in addition to staff from *The Language Educator* and ACTFL. We thank Uju Anya, Assistant Professor of Second Language Learning and Research Affiliate with the Center for the Study of Higher Education at The Pennsylvania State University College of Education, University Park, PA, and L. J. Randolph Jr., Associate Chair of the Department of World Languages and Cultures and Associate Professor of Spanish and Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, for writing an introduction to this important topic.

The word “diversity” is both necessary and challenging. It is necessary, because to ignore diversity is to reinforce legacies of inequity and exclusion upon which our educational institutions were built. However, if we set forth the goal of focusing on diversity, we put ourselves in the difficult position of defining what exactly diversity is, and, as Thomas (2016, p. 19) noted, “In a world where people self-identify on multiple levels—from race and religion to gender, sexuality, and even dietary choices—the word has become as muddled as it is mandatory.”

Since diversity covers a range of intersectional social identities, the various definitions of diversity are fluid, nuanced, subjective, political, and context dependent. For these reasons, we do not attempt to offer a concrete, all-encompassing definition of the term. Instead, we simply recognize that meaningful conversations about diversity can only happen when people of a variety of identities take part in framing and directing those conversations.



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Along with not limiting the definition of diversity to a single meaning, we also resist defining it as the mere presence of individuals with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities. Such an approach amounts to little more than tokenism, because it focuses on counting people from different social categories without much thought to their inclusion, impact, interactions, and contributions. Instead, we think of diversity in terms of equitable, meaningful representation and participation. This notion of diversity, as described by Fosslien and West Duffy (2019), is the difference between saying that everyone has a seat at the table, versus saying that everyone has a seat, a voice, opportunity, and enough time to speak. Thus, any discussion of diversity must include considerations of power, agency, and equity that are all implicated in meaningful representation and participation.

Representation Matters

Diversity among language educators and learners can refer to the representation of individuals of different race, gender, ethnic, linguistic, national, sexual, and social class identities. However, in this article, we have elected to focus on racial diversity and inclusion. Specifically, we discuss the underrepresentation of African Americans (see Figure 1) who do not participate in K–12 and postsecondary language education at rates

comparable to Whites and other students of color, especially after first or second year courses, when their presence drastically declines or they disappear entirely (Charle Poza, 2013; Schoener & McKenzie, 2016).

Black students at the K–12 level are more likely to attend schools or be tracked into programs in which foreign languages are not available; they complete the least number of high school credits in this subject; they earn only 4% of bachelor’s degrees conferred in the field of foreign languages; and Black teachers comprise just 6% of instructors in the humanities and a mere 3% of postsecondary foreign language faculty (Musu-Gillete, et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This underrepresentation, however, is not due to low interest or Black students’ lack of motivation to study languages (Glynn, 2012). It can be traced back to past and current segregation, inequitable distribution of resources, and the systemic exclusion and marginalization of African Americans in U.S. schools. For example, schools that many Black students attend also map onto indexes of broader socioeconomic disparities between neighborhoods and districts, and they typically struggle with the availability of funding for language programs. In schools that do offer these programs, Black students are frequently placed in academic tracks without them, and institutional gatekeepers (e.g. teachers, counselors, school leaders) with deficit

notions of their supposed linguistic and cultural disadvantages and their families’ purported lack of value for education encourage Black students to pursue “less intellectual” or “more practical” subjects (Schoener & McKenzie, 2016). Additionally, Black students report negative language classroom experiences, poor instructional environments, unfavorable (and racist) teacher and classmate attitudes and perceptions, apathy and low expectations from instructors, and language curriculum/learning materials that they find unappealing and irrelevant to their cultural identities (Davis & Markham, 1991; Gatlin, 2013; Pratt, 2012). As a result of these conditions, they are underrepresented in language education, and therefore do not realize all the benefits that our field can offer. Without intervention, the pattern will continue.

Representation matters in language education, and it goes beyond merely ticking demographic boxes on student and teacher diversity. To assure equity and meaningful participation of language educators and learners from minoritized racial backgrounds, we must openly address race and racism in language education policies, instructional practices, and curriculum, regardless of the arguments that some make alleging that such discussions court controversy or are “political,” and thus have no place in language education. Language educators and learners cannot leave racial differences and the social impact of these identities outside the classroom.

Therefore, supposedly positive mindsets such as colorblindness—which is a choice to deliberately ignore those differences and how they operate on individual, systemic, and institutional levels—are neither neutral nor apolitical. They involve an ideological decision to not acknowledge the importance of a fundamental aspect of our students’ identities, and also, to maintain the status quo that presents interests, experiences, and representation of certain populations (e.g., White, middle class, heterosexual) as the norm. Ignoring the impact of race, equitable representation, and meaningful participation of minoritized populations in language education negates how profound that impact can be.

For example, one study found that Black students who had at least one Black teacher by the third grade demonstrated an increased probability of attending college in part because of the experience of seeing themselves and their future prospects for education and career modeled by a successful Black adult (Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, & Papageorge, 2017). Hence, language educators should examine how we think about diversity and meaningful representation in our classrooms, instructional materials, and practice. We should question our assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs that contribute to the inequitable status quo and adopt perspectives of equity-mindedness and inclusivity, which are key to making positive change.



Figure 1. Factors contributing to the underrepresentation of Blacks in language education (based on research from Anya, 2017; Charle Poza, 2013; Davis & Markham, 1991; Gaitlin, 2013; Glynn, 2012; Pratt, 2012; Schoener & McKenzie, 2016)

Lines of Inquiry

A commitment to diversity in language education through meaningful representation and participation of teachers and students from minoritized backgrounds recognizes that language research, teaching, and institutional policies do not occur in a vacuum untouched by the challenges of our world. Our work in language education is influenced by sociopolitical contexts, structural realities, and inequity woven so deeply into our interactions and institutions that they appear natural, as coming from a “neutral” position, inevitable, or are simply regarded as the way things should be. To counter them, we must recognize their pervasiveness and impact, make active decisions, and take conscious steps to promote equity and inclusivity.

Researchers might engage in some of the following critical lines of inquiry to promote greater understanding and change:

- **Access, opportunity, and success.** At the heart of issues of diversity in our field lie critical considerations of how we might seek greater access, opportunity, and success for minoritized language learners and professionals. We can continue this work by pursuing the following questions:
 - What factors motivate learners and professionals from minoritized groups to participate in our field?
 - How does the promotion of sociolinguistic awareness (dialects, varieties, registers, etc.) impact the experience of heritage language learners?
 - How might we make the field more hospitable to minoritized educators and scholars in order to ensure a steady pipeline of professionals from diverse backgrounds?
- **Critical pedagogies.** Inquiry on the day-to-day learning experiences of language learners is an essential component of issues of diversity. Researchers in education have long been concerned with ways to challenge the banking model of education, in which students are passive learners in teacher-centered classrooms (see Freire, 2018), and incorporate more empowering, student-centered models of instruction. More recently, researchers of critical pedagogy have begun to examine what these look like specifically in the language classroom. Critical pedagogy includes instructional practices that “address difference, power, or social stratification” in the classroom, in the students’ communities, and in the world (Johnson & Randolph, 2015, p. 36). We can expand upon this work by asking:
 - How do we incorporate critical pedagogies at all levels of language learning (Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced)?
 - What types of training and professional development models—for preservice and in-service teachers alike—best empower teachers to enact critical pedagogy?
 - How do various critical theories (including, but not limited to, culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogy, critical race theory, queer theory, raciolinguistics, transformative learning, social justice, and intercultural communicative competence) intersect to enhance our understanding of critical pedagogy in the language classroom?
- **Language policy.** The practices and power structures in schools and classrooms are not confined to those specific contexts, because language learning, like other aspects of education, is political, connected to and influenced by greater sociopolitical realities (Nieto & Bode, 2018; Osborn, 2006). These realities include policies, laws, and dominant ideologies that can affect the language study options to which students have access, how teachers and students view various language communities (including their own), and even day-to-day instructional practices. Language educators and learners do not separate themselves from such influences when they enter the classroom. Instead, they become participants in “educational systems that have a history of racism, exclusion, and debilitating pedagogy” (Nieto & Bode, 2018, p. 7). Therefore, language education research cannot ignore trends and ideologies in the greater political and historical landscape and should consider:
 - How are language ideologies shifting in a variety of contemporary contexts?
 - What are the racialized dimensions of these language ideologies?
 - How do public perceptions and political rhetoric on certain minoritized communities (e.g., undocumented immigrants) influence attitudes, interactions, practices, and policies in language education?
- **Community engagement.** Successful language programs that promote diversity require buy-in and support from the communities of the language learners. This is especially true for schools that hope to build and sustain immersion programs, programs for heritage and native speakers, and programs in less commonly taught languages. When communities have access to information and agency, they can be powerful allies in ensuring the continued success of such programs. For example, Flores (2019) has argued that schools can eradicate “elite bilingualism” (in which robust language opportunities are disproportionately represented in affluent communities) by making more concerted efforts to promote bilingual

education in diverse communities and by partnering with local organizations that already have strong connections to those communities. Thus, it continues to be important that researchers and practitioners share research and case studies on successful community engagement models conducted in a variety of contexts.

Part of community engagement also involves language learners' connections and interactions with the diverse speech communities of the languages being studied (the "communities" component of the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*). This type of engagement often happens via service-learning, study abroad, and other experiences. Essential questions in this line of research include:

- How do language programs build successful partnerships with communities?
- What are successful approaches to service-learning and related experiences that challenge deficit models of community engagement?
- How do we ensure equitable access to traditionally prestigious forms of community engagement (e.g., study abroad)?

Enacting Diversity

The work of enacting diversity and equity is not limited to academic scholarship; it must also be ingrained in our daily practice as language professionals. Here are some practical, actionable steps that language educators can take to consistently promote diversity, meaningful representation, and participation of students from minoritized backgrounds:

- **Diversifying our curriculum.** To set the stage for this discussion, we call on the analogy of Bishop (1990), in which she posits that a diverse curriculum should be a window, a mirror, and a sliding glass door—a window through which students examine and learn from the perspectives of others, a mirror showing students their own experiences and cultures validated, and a sliding glass door through which students are able to enter into and experience the lives and perspectives of others. We would also add that a diverse curriculum should be the lens through which students apply a critical perspective to what they are studying. A diverse and meaningfully representative curriculum does not happen naturally. We must be intentional about finding and incorporating authentic resources that represent non-dominant target language and learner communities and cultural narratives (e.g., non-white, non-heterosexual, non-cisgender, non-male, non-middle/upper class, non-Eurocentric, non-English) so that these voices may be amplified in our courses and,

more importantly, so that our world and social realities can be more accurately and more completely represented.

- **Diversifying our knowledge.** There is a growing body of research focusing on critical and social justice-oriented approaches to language education. As part of our own professional development, language educators should explore articles and other texts on culturally responsive and culturally sustaining instructional practices. For example, ACTFL's publication *Words and Actions: Teaching Language Through the Lens of Social Justice* (2018) provides a good, practical framework for social justice-oriented pedagogy along with resources for further study.
- **Diversifying our networks.** Our contemporary professional networks have expanded beyond the confines of geography to include language professionals from all over the world. We have the means and the opportunity to build virtually limitless professional networks that enable sharing and learning from diverse colleagues (via podcasts, social media, conferences, etc.). In fact, the coauthors of this piece originally connected via Twitter. We encourage language educators to do an inventory of their professional connections via social media and other networks and ask: Are you following and connecting with colleagues who represent a variety of marginalized or minoritized groups?
- **Diversifying our outreach.** Promoting and sustaining a diverse community of language professionals and learners requires concerted efforts to recruit, motivate, and empower them. Administrators should consider ways to more actively recruit teachers of color by reaching out to diverse communities and institutions. Teachers can consider ways to collaborate with administrators, students, parents, school boards, and communities to support local and regional initiatives that promote language study for diverse students. This includes developing a sustainable heritage language program, recruiting language learners from diverse communities at all levels (K–16), and adapting national initiatives such as the Seal of Biliteracy (sealofbiliteracy.org) or Lead with Languages (leadwithlanguages.org) in accordance with institutional needs and goals. For example, the Foreign Language Association of North Carolina (FLANC) has used the Project C.A.F.E. (Calling All Future Educators) initiative (flanc.org/advocacy/project-c-a-f-e) to identify and encourage students from diverse backgrounds to consider a career in language education as early as middle school. Reflections and success stories on diversifying outreach and advocacy are very welcome, so please share!

Receipts

In the language communities of the coauthors of this article, the word “receipts” has multiple meanings. Of course, it is used to describe the document that one receives to confirm a transaction. However, it is also used colloquially to indicate that an individual has irrefutable proof to back up a claim, philosophy, or accusation.

In the field of language education, empathy, compassion, and well-worded position statements are nice, but it is time to “show the receipts.” It is time for schools, organizations, and communities to present irrefutable evidence that we are serious about dismantling barriers against justice and equity in our field.

Our language education profession has the potential to be on the forefront with regard to diversity in education, as linguistic and cultural diversity are already naturally embedded within the courses we teach and the philosophies we espouse. The articles in this special focus topic section paint an optimistic picture of the direction of the field. However, there is still much work to be done.

We look forward to a time when we can approach conversations about diversity and inclusion with a joyful, rather than a

skeptical tone and can celebrate the richness of the diversity that has permeated our institutions, not only in terms of philosophy, but also in terms of actual numbers and access to power.

ACTFL is dedicated to the ongoing work of making language learning accessible to and representative of all learners and educators. This commitment to practices that promote diversity and inclusion is communicated in ACTFL’s Position Statement on Diversity and Inclusion. This edition of *TLE* with its Diversifying Language Educators and Learners Focus Topic is further evidence of that commitment. The numerous suggestions contained in these articles are thought-provoking and deserving of serious consideration by our profession as a whole.

– ACTFL

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