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Psychedelic Tongues: Storytelling and Unearthing the English Language Learner

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Abstract:

My hypothesis is that the way in which ELL students are educated is poorly informed by a body of research that does not capture the whole picture of language learning. Due to this, ELLs are at higher risk of being failed both in their language competence and in their confidence and sense of identity. This paper proposes how we might conceive of the lives and minds of ELL students, and hopes to chart a new way of thinking through this problem. The stories contained throughout this paper will speak for themselves. While this project is rooted in the values of social science and hopes to one day be useful in bite-sized conclusions, it takes an ethnographic, anthropological, and journalistic approach as opposed to having a particular policy agenda.

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**PSYCHEDELIC TONGUES:
STORYTELLING AND UNEARTHING
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER**

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*Take the reading test over,
at the psychiatrist's office.
Diagnosis: psychedelic, psycholinguistic
genius survives the warring factions
of cultural schizophrenia.¹*

¹ "A Puerto Rican Girl's Sentimental Education," Johanna Vega, *Cool Salsa*

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I. Preface

Bella's first day of school in America was a whirlwind of confusion. She had arrived from Italy only a few months before starting sixth grade, and spoke less words of English than her four-year-old sister spoke in total. She was placed in an English Language Learner (ELL) classroom at Greene Intermediate School, where she was the only Italian student in a room of 20. Half of the class had a Spanish-speaking background, and the other half came from a mix of East Asian or European languages. The teacher — who had meandered throughout the district as a gym teacher, librarian, health teacher, and finally ELL teacher as of a year before — spoke only English.

Bella tells me that the classroom posters were all in Spanish, which she could decipher with her romance language background. But she had no way of decrypting her teacher's feeble attempts to speak broken Spanish to her. Over time, she started gathering English vocabulary that would get her through recess and lunch time, and used her ELL period to look up words she had heard throughout the day in the pocket translator that her parents had given her. Bella was a slow typer, but a fast learner. When she wasn't listening intently for context clues in her classes, she was patiently looking up words in her device. But her teachers were not as patient. "There was a day when my Social Studies teacher ripped my translator from my hands as I was trying to answer a question," she tells me. "She said I was being too slow and needed to 'learn English already.'"

Back in her ELL classroom, Bella felt at times under-stimulated and at others rushed and misunderstood. Her textbooks and activities were for the most part irrelevant to her life, which made it hard to pay attention and retain. But at the same time, there was always an underlying frustration on the part of her teacher that she was not learning fast enough. "Even though she

wasn't tearing things out of my hands, I could tell that she wished she could. It sometimes felt like I was the one comforting her and keeping her calm by doing my work diligently.”

Eventually, Bella did master English, and went on to excel in AP Literature in her senior year. She is now in the Honors Program at Loyola University in Chicago, majoring in Visual Communication. But she still carries her experience in that ELL classroom nearly 10 years ago to this day. Despite having perfect English, her Italian accent causes problems for her in public presentations and job interviews, and gets her typecast in every production she auditions for (sometimes as an Italian, sometimes as a Latina). She tells me that she feels like she's still that 12-year-old with the pocket translator, waiting for it to get torn out of her hands. Despite her increased agency in her higher education, a part of her still waits for the rug to get pulled out from beneath her feet.

II. Objectives

A. THE PROBLEM

I first told Bella's story when we were both seniors in high school, for an article in my school newspaper. The article interrogated some of the shortcomings that I had witnessed in my district's ELL classes, in both resources and pedagogy, and discussed some of their unintended consequences. The day before going to print, my adviser pulled the article from the paper — and instead ran a piece on gluten-free options in our cafeteria. *There are more people at this school with a gluten allergy than there are ELL students*, she told me. I remember how intimidating that statement felt, because it carried two very powerful messages. In one sentence, she reminded me of the steep statistical insignificance of the ELL population at my Midwest, majority-white high school, and also clarified a hierarchy of priorities — journalistic and otherwise — where a rare

food allergy required more coverage than a group of English learners. Whether my adviser made that call based on fact or opinion is beside the point. At the end of the day, none of our 3,000 readers had an opportunity to hear from their English learning classmates and experiences.

But however isolated my adviser made me feel, I was not off the mark with my interest in this group. ELLs are the fastest growing population in U.S. public schools (NEA Education Policy and Practice Department, 2008), and it is estimated that one in four students are English language learners. Unfortunately, these students are also at the highest risk of dropping out of school or of facing serious knowledge gaps than any other student demographic in this country (K.G. Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). The most recent *National Report Card* data shows that 76% of native English-speaking eighth graders were reading at or above grade level, compared to 30% of ELLs (Samson, Collins, & Center for American Progress, 2012). This data is especially concerning because 75% of ELLs are American-born, and the study surveyed students in grades K-8 — which means we are not only failing our recent newcomers, but also our long-term language learners. There is also a national shortage of qualified English Language teachers, and the United States does not currently have any national standards for teacher preparation or instruction of ELLs (Horwitz, Uro, & Simon, 2009). The sentiment that teachers are not prepared to teach ELLs is echoed over and over again throughout the literature.

As a result, my approach to this project involves a deep concern about the visibility of this student population in the field of education, for both practical and existential reasons. As I will discuss throughout this paper, understandings of immigrants and their linguistic lives rely heavily on the lenses of media, politics, and psychology. And because of their geographic and cultural expanse, it is hard to pin down any facet of the so-called “immigrant experience” without making broad assumptions or relying on stereotypes. While the fact of encountering a

foreign language when migrating to the United States is universal to most immigrants, their experience within that is shaped by an unlimited number of factors — like age, race, neighborhood, generation, or country of origin — that are difficult to control for when doing research. But engaging with those complex factors is critical in the realm of education. When we don't, we are doing a great injustice to those students who already find themselves in a precarious position.

Because of this complexity, storytelling is key to this project. My research will first lay out the main disciplines and lenses that are traditionally used to study issues in ELL. In particular, it will look at the fields of politics, psycholinguistics, and emerging literature in critical race theory. However, it will ultimately demonstrate that there are serious shortcomings in the ways that ELL students and their lives are understood and interpreted today. As will become evident, political and psycholinguistic scholarship on this population is primarily concerned with improving language competence, always with a quantitative and even clinical vision toward accuracy and fluency. This approach successfully maps onto the American education system, which is also driven by quantitative standards and benchmarks.

B. THESIS

With this perspective, my hypothesis is that the way in which ELL students are educated is poorly informed by a body of research that does not capture the whole picture of language learning. Due to this, ELLs are at higher risk of being failed both in their language competence and in their confidence and sense of identity. This paper proposes how we might conceive of the lives and minds of ELL students, and hopes to chart a new way of thinking through this problem.

As an aide in helping me explore the limits of these perspectives, I draw from critical race theory, which reaches a lot of the more existential questions that I believe are missing from traditional literature. In particular, this field connects the politics of language in the United States with systems of power, and mounts critiques against the frameworks most commonly used to evaluate and study verbal fluency and successful articulation. For now, this field has primarily focused on the language politics of Black Americans, especially through the lens of sociocultural anthropology. But despite having a different focus than my project on ELL students, the methodology and vocabulary used by critical race theorists who focus on language politics is a valuable frame of reference for this research. The latter part of my literature review will further address the value of this scholarship as well as its limitations.

In contrast and response to the traditional interpretations of ELL lives and needs, my project proposes a more holistic method. By interviewing college students directly, my project hears from those who have successfully — according to mainstream measurable standards — achieved accuracy and fluency in English, which is required for higher education. These are the “good language learners”; those who by all counts realize the goals set for them by politicians and linguists. With this in mind, this anthropological project asks these students to reflect on their own full-body experience of learning language.

When I embarked on this project, I wanted to know how ELL students negotiated their English language education with their cultural identity, even once they reached fluency. In particular, I was interested in seeing whether those two things were necessarily implicated and antagonistic to each other — as they were for me and for Bella — or whether they were able exist on separate developmental tracks. I also wondered if, like me, these students were raised with an understanding of the high-stakes politics of language fluency in the professional and

social world. If so, how did they now reflect on the adaptive strategies that they adopted while in school, and how did those strategies affect them today? Finally, as an educator, I wanted to understand the role of teachers and administrators in crafting the framework through which ELL students come to understand themselves and their language education.

These questions are not meant to identify a *single* problem within the field of ELL and its possible solutions. Instead, they are meant to guide a broader conversation about the intricacies of language learning, and hopefully shift the methodological direction of the current research landscape. The stories contained throughout this paper will speak for themselves. While this project is rooted in the values of social science and hopes to one day be useful in bite-sized conclusions, it takes an ethnographic, anthropological, and journalistic approach as opposed to having a particular policy agenda. This is because, especially for highly-politicized but understudied groups like immigrants and language learners, there is still no substitute for a good story, well told (Harrison & Association of Black Anthropologists, 1997). Above all, this paper seeks to make readers understand how these students think and feel about their lives.

III. On Methodology

The methodology of this project involves two steps. The first, which is achieved through a literature review, comprises a macro-level analysis of the disciplines that are currently used to interpret and understand ELL needs. As alluded to above, two of those lenses — politics and psycholinguistics—construct the way that immigrants and English learners exist in the American imaginary, both in education and in society. The third lens, critical race theory, in a lot of ways parses out important power dynamics embedded in the first two. However, these three fields will ultimately prove limited in their ability to get at what I see as the core of English learning in the

United States. And this will form the backbone of my primary argument in this paper: the need for visibility on the microscopic, personal experience of English language learning in American schools is urgent. In response, the second step of this project will be to fill those gaps with ethnography, which will primarily take place through one-on-one interviews with former ELL students themselves, interpolated with my own analysis.

The three lenses explored in my literature review were selected for their ubiquity as well as their explanatory power. I began my research by reading *TESOL Quarterly*, the major journal dedicated to ESL and ELL issues, and identified the two most common themes in their articles: cognitive science and education policy. According to a meta-analysis of *TESOL Quarterly* conducted in 2008, one third of all of its articles came from the field of psychology, and psycholinguistics specifically (Athanases & Heath, 1995). I then asked how those two themes may contribute to broader research on ELL, and as a result, how they impact the way that issues surrounding English language education are studied and understood. From this came the first half of my literature review, in which I highlight the biggest points of contention in ELL education, and contextualize how we've gotten to the point in which we find ourselves today. And finally, I looked for ways in which critical race theory may help to answer some of those questions. While I read a substantial expanse of the literature, from academics like Gloria Ladson-Billings on culturally responsive pedagogy to literary products like Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, I became fascinated with works that dealt specifically with the connections between race, power, and language. The latter half of my literature review will utilize one book that does this particularly well in order to frame the remainder of the project.

As stated above, the primary research method in this paper is ethnographic, through in-person, semi-structured interviews. Through snowball sampling, I identified eight individuals

across three universities who had gone through formal ELL classes at some point in their K-12 careers. The selection of this particular set of criteria — college-educated students who learned English in formal programs within their schools — has an existential justification, as explained in the previous section, as well as a methodological intention. Because of the hundreds of factors that go into a particular person’s experience as an immigrant learning English in the United States, it was difficult to identify a starting point for a relatively short research paper.

However, these two data points are extremely important to the aims of this project, for several reasons. First, by setting the parameters for study participants to the realm of K-12 and higher education, I am able to make certain necessary assumptions about their environments based on my own knowledge of these fields. If I were looking at special ELL programs outside of schools, the wide range of options would not allow me to do so. Second, by setting the requirement that participants be college educated, I create a kind of control variable — English fluency — with a benchmark or cutoff that is already embedded in the system. I neutralize the question of language competence, which is central to most studies in this field, and allow for the question to become: *what is missing?* So while this project does and should critique the origins and implementation of such a system, it also benefits from an existing and relatively clear-cut definition of English competence and fluency. Therefore, the decision to interview students who are considered ‘successful’ language learners allows for a critical interrogation of both publicly and privately-held beliefs about the social and political status of this group.

Finally, these variables were selected because of my own positionality within this research. Anthropology has a deeply problematic history of perpetuating cultural assumptions and judgments about study subjects, especially when their realities are foreign to the researcher (Cole, 1988). Therefore, the anthropologist who is rooted in a relationship of “organic cohesion”

(Harrison & Association of Black Anthropologists, 1997) with the studied population is better equipped to establish more equal relations with her participants, as well as to construct valid, reliable, and moral representations of the community's sociocultural life. Although I completed an ELL program outside of the United States, I am deeply embedded in multicultural communities at home and at school, and feel compelled to give voice and validity to the stories that I hear at coffee shops and dining hall tables. In this way, I am uniquely positioned to be both a researcher and a benefactor of that research.

In conclusion, this paper reveals how studying the larger webs of politics, economics, and developmental biology can be important, but also how doing that puts us in the relatively comfortable seat of being *observers*. In order to adequately and fully serve the intricate inner worlds of our students and their communities and aspirations, we need to understand and in some way *participate* in their lives and emotions. In other words, this is not a paper about language competence; it is about biographies. It contextualizes why it is that we think about English learners in the way that we do, and relocates the locus of research to the students' own critical process.

IV. Literature Review

The following literature review will introduce the three lenses through which language education and language learners are predominantly studied. While they do not fulfill a comprehensive overview of the existing field of ELL scholarship, these categories, in my view, throw into relief the complex history of American beliefs and attitudes towards English language learners. They also highlight links between language education and identity formation, both personal and political, which many may take for granted. And finally, this literature review will

frame not only the importance of a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of English Language Learners, but also the backdrop against which conversations surrounding their educations are currently set.

I call each section a “story” intentionally. All research, at its core, is about telling stories in order to ask and answer certain questions. However, there are few opportunities for immigrants — and language learners especially — to take the reins of telling their own narratives. Therefore, I find it important to point out that these perspectives amount to stories told *about* them rather than *by* them. As will become clear, this project is situated at the intersection of these stories, but also eventually allows their subjects to respond to them, and to tell their own.

A. THE POLITICAL STORY — OR, ‘WHO GETS TO BE AMERICAN?’

This section will present a series of historical, political, and anthropological perspectives on the question of English learning and education in the United States. By first understanding the way that national identity, citizenship, and language are intertwined in the United States on a macro level, we can more easily understand how language learners engage with these ideologies throughout their lives and educations. This section will also lay out some of the consequences of looking at English education from a purely political perspective. As will become clear, the lens of politics can easily conflate difference with deficiency and threat, which has dangerous effects on education policy, as well as on long-term identity-building for language learners.

The political identity of the migrant in the United States is fraught and precarious, subject not only to broad public opinion and policy trends, but also to interpersonal and intergroup politics in different communities. As a result, their identities are complex and dynamic. The very

act of migration implies the confrontation of a new set of norms and expectations that shape how immigrants see themselves and, consequently, how they act (Garcia-Rios & Barreto, 2016). And within the fabric of American society, immigrants hold a very turbulent position. Not only do they constantly confront and negotiate their own status, but they also push and challenge Americans to define their own identity. They say, “if I am not American, then who is?” In a country built by immigrants, it is hard to identify any one feature of an ‘American character’ that transcends large areas of difference. But over time, a major piece of that answer has come down to language. Even though the United States does not have a national language, the ability to speak fluent standard English not only says who is already American, but also who is allowed to *become* American (Haugen, 1972).

A1. Why does language matter?

For individuals who grew up in monolingual American households, it is difficult to see what all the fuss is about. America is predominantly English-speaking, and therefore it is rightfully expected that all newcomers adopt the English language as quickly as possible for perfectly rational and logistical reasons. However, language is anything but neutral; rather, it is often socially charged, loaded with issues of race, class, citizenship, and other forms of social identification (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). Language does not just communicate and articulate thoughts and ideas, but also says something about who we are — and are not — as people and, more broadly, as a nation.

In linguistic anthropological terms, language is, at its most basic level, an infrastructure for social institutions and social formations. It has a functional role, mediating interactions between economic and political organizations, as well as a subjective role, creating an ethos of

unity between members of a particular linguistic group. The former fosters ‘nationalism’ — horizontal politico-geographic integration — and the latter, nationalism (Fishman, 2000). The question of what language is spoken within a nation, then, is not just about standardizing everyday transactions between economic and political actors, but also says something about the nature of those individuals’ shared experiences and identities. The primary significance of having a shared language is “what it signals about *who* one is, rather than *what* one has to say” (Woolard, 2016). The language becomes a form of ‘identity signaling,’ which contains its own message outside of that which is being said. Because of this, it is inevitable that the very character and selfhood of a country becomes dependent on having a common language — it demarcates a community that is understood to be the “in-group” within and without the national borders (Haugen, 1972).

Outside of the technicalities of linguistic anthropology, there is also a much more personal side to this story. At the micro level, language is a mode of existential ‘sharedness’ across time and space. It gives us the ability to pass down knowledge through generations, and increasingly through territories and borders. As you grow, there is a sense that your language is inside of you before you even know you’re ‘you.’ And this transcendence that we feel is what eventually makes nationalism possible; it all starts with language (Anderson, 2016). With this perspective, it is easy to see how rising linguistic diversity within a country can make individuals feel that the country is losing its “authentic voice” (Haugen, 1972). In fact, any destabilization of the status quo can feel threatening to the very survival of a nation (Olsen, 2000).

A2. Language and education policy: a historical review

The United States is certainly not exempt from these insecurities — in fact, American history is riddled with doubts and questions about the social and political status of the non-native English speaker. Using the previous section as context, this portion of the literature review will show how the monolingual ideology of American politics translates into concrete policies that have affected generations of ELLs.

Benjamin Franklin once warned about the overrunning of German immigrants in America, and in particular the inconvenience of their language difference to the sale of newspapers:

“Those who come hither are generally of the most ignorant Stupid Sort of their own Nation...and as few of the English understand the German Language, and so cannot address them either from the Press or Pulpit, 'tis almost impossible to remove any prejudices they once... they will soon so out number us... all the advantages we have will not in My Opinion be able to preserve our language, and even our Government will become precarious.”

(Benjamin Franklin, personal communication, 1753)

Similarly, in a 1919 letter, President Teddy Roosevelt wrote: “We have room but for one language here, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house” (Simon, 1992).

With every new wave of immigration, public anxieties get raised over the possibility of immigrants' integration into the American way of life. The most recent wave came about in the 1960s, which ushered in new scholarship on bilingualism as well as public pressure for monolingual standardization. In response to this, Congress approved the Bilingual Education Act (BEA) in 1968, which aimed at removing the language barrier to an equal education. Filed by

Senator Ralph Yarborough (R-TX), the bill was an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which sought to help low-income Mexican-American children learn English. It came as a response to a major influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants, primarily from Mexico, whose abysmal drop-out rates from public middle and high schools had become a matter of primary concern to the Chicano civil rights movement (First, 1988).

Six years later, in 1974, the Supreme Court mandated in the case *Lau v. Nichols* that schools must provide services to help language minority students overcome the language barriers to education. Along with the BEA, the landmark case helped undergird a major civil rights framework for the incorporation of immigrants into American society (Olsen, 2000). However, in an interview, Sen. Yarborough clarified that the goal of the bill was “not to keep any specific language alive. It is not the purpose of the bill to create pockets of different languages through the country ... but just to try to make those children fully literate in English” (Pedalino Porter, 1998). Similarly, *Lau v. Nichols* was not intended to protect minority language rights — it focused on protecting the individual choices of parents and students, with little attention to the social forces that may pressure families to drop their children’s native language education.

Around this time, semanticist and then-senator from California S. I. Hayakawa proposed the English Language Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1981, which would make official English as the national language of the United States. It would establish once and for all the primacy of English and requiring that all immigrants learn English (Baron, 1991). The amendment never passed on the national level, but it brought to the fore an assemblage of national attitudes and beliefs about the need for a single official language, and by extension, the immigrants who this bill targeted.

As do most of these issues, the proposal of the ELA attracted a fringe of bigots and opponents of immigration, who expressed resentment toward “aliens perceived to be illegal, intrusive, excessively fertile, and overly dependent on social services”(Baron, 1991); such has been the case with all nativist movements in American history. However, most importantly, the ELA also appealed to middle-of-the-road Americans, for whom the issue occupied little thought or concern — “most people in the United States either speak English or feel a need to learn it, and many view [a law like the ELA] as a simple reflex issue, like voting for apple pie” (Baron, 1991). It struck a chord with the broader American public, who, like Sen. Hayakawa, had witnessed “a time of unprecedented immigration — not only speakers of Spanish, but speakers of Cantonese... Thai... Vietnamese... a variety of European languages, speakers of Mandarin — who are coming from all over the world and joining us in our society” (Hayakawa, 1982), and wondered what would happen to that society now that it was so rapidly diversifying.

Here, education and the politics of language met with full force: despite the failure of the ELA in the national political stage, the English Only movement sparked and fed an underlying interest in bilingualism and second language education, and their roles within the process of scaffolding immigrants into mainstream America. “How quickly, how well, and in what manner immigrants learn English became the major public issue in the socialization of immigrant children in the United States” (Olsen, 2000)— and rarely with the intention of preserving any previous social and cultural practices. Today, ELL classes serve a dark purpose of segregating and structuring difference out of fear and containment, fueled by the beliefs embedded in longstanding American political ideology (Olsen, 2000).

The bills and court cases above form only a small fragment of American legislation and doctrine surrounding language education that support this point. However, these examples are

helpful in elucidating trends in American politics and their effect on the lives and educations of English language learners. As has become clear, education policy in this particular field is heavily affected by existential questions about American identity and authenticity. These are questions which, with a degree in political philosophy, are extremely important and fascinating to me. However, especially in the West, they can often blind us to the nuance of ethnic and cultural identities, and to the deeply painful effects of forcing strict standards of social membership on multicultural groups (Von Vacano, n.d.). Despite having the greatest direct access to multicultural communities, ELL education is does not successfully respond to varying cultural needs. The following section will demonstrate this further.

B. THE PSYCHOLINGUISTIC STORY — OR, ‘THE GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER’

Despite its deeply political roots, most scholarship on ELL has stayed within the world of psycholinguistics, which examines language learning as a purely cognitive process. Because of this, the psycholinguistic perspective is crucial to understanding how ELL students are most commonly studied, even if the methodology is remarkably different from that of my research. It is helpful not just in situating my research as a conversation with and a response to a formidable bulk of existing ELL scholarship, but also in framing the predominant portrayal of English Language Learners in Education Studies.

A survey of the main articles in the largest American journal on ELL issues, *TESOL Quarterly*, shows a significant number of writers and experts coming from the fields of psychology and linguistics, and their articles reflect these perspectives. Similarly, the leading report of the 20th century, *The Good Language Learner* (Brown, 1997) tracks the characteristics and learning strategies of successful language learners. Examining the experiences of adults and

children defined as good language learners by themselves, by their teachers, or by performance on language proficiency measures, the intent of *The Good Language Learner* was to discover if successful learners had particular constellations of personality characteristics, cognitive styles, attitudes, motivations, or past learning experiences that were different from those of less successful learners (Brown, 1997). The study, which evaluated various dimensions of an adults-only class and an elementary school class, enumerated a list of strategies for effective language acquisition:

1. Good language learners find an appropriate style of learning.
2. Good language learners involve themselves in the language-learning process.
3. Good language learners develop an awareness of language as both system and communication.
4. Good language learners pay constant attention to expanding their language knowledge.
5. Good language learners develop the second language as a separate system.
6. Good language learners take into account the demands that second language learning imposes.

(Brown, 1997)

The most prominent of its kind, this report set the tone for future studies on English Language Learning for the following two decades. In particular, it centered the process of language learning around cognitive capabilities and quantitative processes of language acquisition, rather than the situated experience of the learner. While *The Good Language Learner* was published 40 years ago and its popularity waned after the 1990s, it is part of an academic trend that continues to this day, which sees language learning as a purely mental process of inputs and outputs.

The most recent influence of the psycholinguistic approach on language education has been the adoption of medical or scientific vocabulary to describe and evaluate student performance. Reports and papers use words such as “diagnosis” and “treatment” when writing

about teaching and testing methods, and psychosocial concepts like ‘intrinsic motivation’ and ‘discipline’ are used to explain the speed at which different students develop their language skills (Richards & Renandya, 2013). While these terms seem commonplace in a pedagogical discussion, the adoption of medical concepts in a study of language acquisition is not accidental; it belongs to an ecosystem of research that sees deep connections between English proficiency and overall intelligence: “For many, knowledge of a language other than English marks them as unassimilated and educationally deficient, not as scholars or national assets” (Baron, 1991).

That being said, recent psychological research has also sought to understand the social and emotional dimensions of language learning, and especially the difference in how multilingual speakers express emotions in their native versus acquired language. These studies, such as the work of Jean-Marc Dewaele of Birbeck College, draw from values of sociocultural critical theory to bridge traditional psycholinguistic research to epistemological and ethical questions of identity. In *Investigating the Psychological and Emotional Dimensions in Instructed Language*, Dewaele interrogates the tension between the qualitative-quantitative divide within the field of psychology, and argues for a combination of different research methodologies in order to answer common research questions (Dewaele, 2005).

C. THE RACE STORY — OR, ‘ARTICULATE WHILE BLACK’

The final section of this literature review requires a personal anecdote. As a recent immigrant and a Latina, perhaps the most common compliment I receive from strangers — from Uber drivers to waiters to colleagues — is, “wow, but your English is so good.” For a long time, I took that as a compliment. It was a confirmation that the many years I had spent studying English and watching American television had paid off in perfecting a seamless American

accent. But as I got older, the compliments started to feel less like praise and more like pleasant surprise, like I was overcoming a series of expectations that were somehow only set for someone like me. And those compliments are only ever directed towards my English abilities; despite Spanish also being a non-native language for me, no one is ever as impressed by my ability to speak it fluently as they are by my English. Over time, I have come to understand this as a form of exceptionalism — in which my ability to speak clear, unaccented English, despite my darker complexion and double-r in my last name, makes me a welcome exception to the perceived rule when it comes to other Latin immigrants. This only gets compounded when people hear about my Yale degree. In African American Studies, this phenomenon is referred to as, “Articulate While Black.”

Studies surrounding the politics of Black English are extremely helpful in framing the way that ELL students become classified and racialized throughout their language learning process. While Black English, or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), is not an entirely different language in the way that Spanish or Chinese are, scholarship on the Articulate While Black (A.W.B.) phenomenon elucidates clear parallels in the expectations and subsequent experiences of both groups within a larger narrative of race and language — namely, the connection between a person’s fluency in a ‘standard’ register of English and their perceived Whiteness.

In a book titled, *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.*, co-authors H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman track the historical uses of the word “articulate” in reference to people of color, and question its particular prevalence during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign. They argue that it was not simply race that led to Obama’s election; it was his ability to shift between Black English and the “language of wider

communication” (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). They explain that Obama’s seamless transitions in and out of American Standard English were primarily attractive to White voters because it allowed them to see him as being an exception to the typical Black stereotypes. “Because he’s not like ‘those other Blacks,’ he must be the exception to the rule that frames all Black people as lazy, dumb, and/or criminal. Thus, according to this thinking, because of his difference, he should be rewarded — even elected — for being ‘better’ than most of his people” (Alim & Smitherman, 2012).

These kinds of exceptionalizing discourses are not only used against Blacks; they often appear in conversations about immigrants, and especially undocumented immigrants. In July 2011, NPR host Terry Gross spoke about undocumented Filipino immigrant and Pulitzer prize winning *Washington Post* writer Jose Antonio Vargas. Many well-intentioned people exceptionalize Vargas, arguing that he should have a pathway to citizenship because he is “the kind” of immigrant that we should be helping become an American. They often point to the “articulate,” “bright,” and “hardworking” undocumented immigrants (especially the DREAMers), exceptionalizing them compared to their presumed unintelligent and lazy counterparts who speak a variety of English accented by their primary languages. In short, the use of ‘articulate’ plays well into exceptionalizing discourses of race and other marginalized social and linguistic identities (Alim & Smitherman, 2012).

The most important lesson to be learned from raciolinguistic theory in Black communities is that, in the United States, powerful language ideologies link articulateness in “standard” English with Whiteness. This occurs largely because race and class inequality overlap to the point at which the language variety that we often think of as “standard” English is straightforwardly (and problematically) constructed as “White English.” As a result, the fluent,

and *good*, language learner takes on a similar coded identity as that of the articulate Black individual. This affects not only recent immigrants who are still learning English and encountering the pressure to standardize their dialect, but also those long-term language learners who are alienated for their accents despite having full proficiency in English.

Compounding this problem are deficit theories, which pervade many ideologies of social scientists and policymakers who attempt to study why certain racial and ethnic groups fail at higher rates than the dominant social group in academics and economics. These explanations tend to be founded on the assumption that the primary blame for underachievement or maladjustment should be placed on the racial or ethnic group in question — in essence, deficit theories locate the source of inequality within the bicultural or low-income individual herself. It is through this perspective that we see how educators' honest attempts to help children can be tainted by cultural and historical myths, and manifest in low expectations of minority children. These attempts are rooted in “the belief that culturally diverse communities are deficient in one way or another and must be provided compensation to make up for these deficiencies” (Olivos, 2006).

With all of that said, the field of critical race theory is still very new to the subject of ELL specifically. While it is extremely helpful in teasing out ideologies that govern the power structures of language more broadly, it does not necessarily personalize the experiences of individual students based on their particular communities. Section V will demonstrate how work in critical theory can both inform ELL studies, and be pushed further to better understand and serve the complex realities of English learning.

D. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this literature review offers a possible answer to the question: *how did we get here?* It sketches a birds-eye-view of three mainstream perspectives on English and the learning of English in America, which work together to construct priorities in the education space. And it also elucidates their limits as coherent and holistic sources of understanding in this field.

The political lens shows us how legislative and judicial agendas are set by deeply existential questions about American identity and nationhood. It also shows how the American imaginary is easily threatened by the idea of multilingual enclaves scattered throughout the country. These things, in turn, inform historical and contemporary policy priorities surrounding English education, which largely ignore the costs of cultural and language shift. Politicians' primary concerns when it comes to English language education in this country has always been to segregate and structure difference — with intent to eliminate that difference — and this is clearly manifested in 20th century policies and court rulings.

The psycholinguistic lens lays out a methodology that focuses primarily on cognitive function, and puts language competence at the center of pedagogical recommendations. This literature review shows us the way that language learning can be pathologized and structured to become a one-size-fits-all model. It also betrays a strain of deficit thinking that is particularly dangerous: it allows for the slippery argument that developmental biology is to blame for the making or unmaking of the “good language learner.” As this paper unfolds, we will see some of the consequences of this lens.

Finally, this review presents two main concepts in critical race literature: linguistic exceptionalism and deficit theories. Through the work of Alim and Smitherman, we saw how the politics of language — including dialects and accents — can collide with racist ideologies and create a hostile environment for linguistic minorities in white educated spaces. And an overview of deficit theory also allows us to look for the discrete ways in which educators can perpetuate a cycle of blame on the students that they work to educate. This field is extremely important in framing a wider critique of ELL literature as a participant in a broader ecosystem that punishes individuals with multicultural backgrounds. However, it has yet to fully develop within the field of linguistics — a task that Alim and Smitherman pioneer — and this paper looks forward to contributing to that with the sections that follow.

V. The Students

A. CARLA

It was always Carla's dad who took the lead in her parent-teacher conferences. He is the one with the perfected American accent, from having grown up traveling for work between the United States and southern Mexico. Her mom, though fluent, still has her thick Dominican accent to this day — a fact which is of little consequence in Mount Vernon, NY where Carla's family lives, but which is not ideal for parent-teacher conferences.

But in third grade, Carla's dad had a last-minute work conflict, and her mom was the one who in charge of meeting her teachers. Carla remembers that the meeting with her homeroom teacher started out with a mix of English, Spanish, and Italian, which both her teacher and her mom had picked up as kids. But it soon became clear that Carla's mom was noticeably more comfortable in Spanish and Italian than she was in English, and the tone of the meeting shifted.

Later that week, Carla was enrolled in an ELL class, which she would be in for the next two years.

But Carla was born and raised in the United States, and her parents made sure that she and her brothers grew up speaking English — they were not even allowed to speak Spanish at home. So when she was placed in ESL in third grade, Carla was a native English-speaker. “My perception, at least as a child, was that my teacher heard my mom speaking the way she does and was like, ‘maybe that might translate over to her and be a hindrance to her reading skills.’” But that was not the case. Carla was always ahead of her classmates, and was often called on by her teacher to help walk other students through their work, or asked to translate from Spanish to English. It was not until middle school that Carla would start learning Spanish.

She remembers in particular being irritated by the books she was given to read in class, which to her seemed like “baby books.” Outside of ELL, she was reading *Goosebumps* and *Bunnicula*, and progressing rapidly through her reading lists. But her ELL teacher had her read short books with large type and lots of pictures, being hyper-critical of her enunciation as she read out loud. Carla remembers wishing she had more opportunities to write and read things that interested her, but also recalls her dad being supportive of the focus on enunciation — his upbringing had emphasized for him the invaluable benefits of having a seamless American accent as an immigrant, and these classes were an opportunity for anyone to heighten their sensitivity to the mainstream brand of English.

Whereas her dad came at this from his personal perspective, at Carla’s school, this message was targeted. Despite the relative diversity of immigrant groups in Mount Vernon, Carla was only surrounded by Spanish speakers in her ELL class. Her teacher, as is often the case, did not speak Spanish. And over time, that impacted the way Carla saw the Spanish

speakers in her life as well. “I remember viewing it as, ‘Oh, you’re not as smart if you can’t pick up this language as easily, or if you can’t pick it up as well. Why can’t you help yourself?’” She is uncomfortable as she tells me this. “I don’t know, maybe I’m exposing myself. I infantilized the people I loved.”

Many years later, Carla would transfer to Choate Rosemary Hall, a private high school in Wallingford, Connecticut with a competitive admissions process. She had stopped ELL classes in the fifth grade and was performing at a very high level academically, but still faced criticism from teachers about her language, especially in relation to the vernacular she grew up using. She remembers in particular her junior year dorm advisor, who often called her out in public to correct her grammar or her pronunciation of certain words.

“She would eavesdrop on my conversations, and would point out when I would, for example, pronounce the word *ask* as ‘axe’. She would joke around and be like, ‘No sweetie, I’m not going to axe you,’ motioning like she was chopping down a tree. And then she would break it down for me — ‘It’s not A-X-E, it’s A-S-K.’”

Carla spent her junior year drilling herself, repeating certain words multiple times until she got them right. She was convinced that she would never be taken seriously if she didn’t eliminate any traces of a different linguistic background, even if they were mainly dialectical. Part of this came from explicit messages on the part of teachers, many of whom echoed the dorm advisor, saying that if she ever wanted people to listen to her she had to speak “with a certain amount of respect for herself.” But it was also implicit: Carla and her brothers were always highly regarded at their schools and placed into honors classes from an early age. Meanwhile, their cousins, who did not have the immediate grasp on English that Carla did, were given fewer opportunities, and even held back for extra years.

Very early on, Carla understood the opportunities that speaking fluent English afforded her, as well as the alienation and anxiety that came with outsiders' assumptions about her English competence. Today, she still struggles to cohere her bicultural background with her enforced monolingual identity, both in a personal and professional context. In family gatherings, she and her brothers are the only ones who don't speak Spanish natively, which immediately causes distinctions in their relationships with the rest of their family. Meanwhile, as she's grown more interested in studying immigration issues and politics, Carla has felt pressure to study Spanish for professional and academic gain, which contradicts the messages she always received from teachers and mentors.

"It's like, all of these white people are speaking better Spanish than I can because I was always pushed to learn English, and I'm in this in-between state where I have a good accent but don't feel at home speaking this language. I can speak a few sentences to you and hopefully speak them well enough that I can present myself in a way, without you knowing what's going on behind that."

B. KYLE

I meet up with Kyle at a tiny table in the back of a Starbucks, which has room for his iced coffee and a stack of papers in a manila folder. He's brought me copies of his Elementary School records, which under California law have to be disclosed five years after high school graduation. He's excited about showing them to me, but apprehensive. "It's weird to have primary documents like these about yourself, because I feel like I only have primary documents for my thesis."

We look through them together, and he's particularly excited to show me his fourth grade assessments, where he placed in the lowest percentile in a series of cognitive exams, identifying him as being 'at risk' in English Language Arts. At the time, Kyle spoke Mandarin at home with his mom and dad, who are from Cambodia and Taiwan, respectively, but had a working knowledge of English and Spanish. He was born in the United States, but soon thereafter moved to Buenos Aires, Argentina for his dad's job. At the age of five, Kyle's family moved back to New York and eventually to Arcadia, a suburb of Los Angeles. By the time he was tested in the fourth grade, Kyle spoke English, Mandarin, and some Spanish, but had trouble with sentence construction and spelling in English. But based on his test performance, his counselor flagged him not only for ELL, but for Special Education classes.

"I'm surprised by the amount of detail they included in these reports," Kyle tells me as he flips through a section labeled *Medical Developmental History*. He laughs as he reads a section in which his counselor and teacher observed that he liked to wash his hands a lot. "That's just called being cleanly," he jokes as he rolls his eyes. In the same section, he also reads out observations about his speech and language development.

For three years after that initial report, Kyle was pulled out of class once a day for a Special Education class to address what the school had identified as a language impairment. His teachers were trained speech pathologists and resource specialists. He remembers feeling very well taken care of, especially with the individualized attention that he was receiving. They focused on pronunciation, reading skills, and structured lessons with daily tasks that emphasized organization and discipline. They had him read books and watch videos, which he notes in retrospect were always about American children and culture, and never about Taiwan or Cambodia or Argentina.

Whereas he felt generally supported by his SPED teachers, Kyle remembers his fifth grade teacher being particularly bad at accommodating for his development. In front of the rest of the class, she would point out any time that Kyle mispronounced a word, or would tape notes to his notebook that said, “Kyle, practice pronouncing X word 10 times for homework.”

By the end of sixth grade, Kyle was much more confident and successful in communicating in English, and even joined theater and debate groups, and ran for Student Council of his middle school. However, his school kept him in SPED classes until eighth grade, which focused primarily on his study habits. At this point, Kyle was already enrolled in college prep and honors classes, and recalls feeling ashamed for having to take a specialized class when he was doing well in his classes. Even his teachers were surprised to find he was still attending SPED classes.

So he found himself hiding or omitting the fact that he was missing class for a study skills course, which added to parts of his life as a low-income student that he was already keeping from his peers. “I could just play the funny kid and do stupid stuff, and in a way built a rapport with people and integrate myself in that community, without ever addressing the fact that I was often late to school or missing class for this or that reason.”

Looking back, he wishes his middle school self could have worried less about what other people thought of him. But he still feels the traces of those instincts today, in relation to the choices he’s made in his language studies. Kyle has chosen not to study Mandarin in college, instead opting for Spanish. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s because if I ever became proficient in Mandarin people would just expect that to be a given anyway. But if you can speak Spanish or French well, and you’re Asian, it’s like ‘Oh, that’s actually pretty impressive. Maybe you are useful for this job.’”

Reminiscing on his days in SPED with his files in front of him also brings up questions for Kyle. He intends to write a paper for his Education Law course on individualized education programs (or IEPs), using his school's resources as an example of high-quality applications of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). But when I ask him how he feels about having been so heavily scrutinized by pathologists, he takes a second to answer. "It's really interesting seeing how adults evaluate kids' performance. I mean, I'm glad. I think I got a lot out of those two, three years of ESL. But honestly even if I didn't do it, I'm not sure how I'd be any different. I don't know."

C. EMILY

She remembers very little from her first years in America, but Emily still retains the image of her younger sister's hair falling out. They are only two years apart, but Emily has always been more verbal in her emotions. Whereas Emily cried and screamed every day before school for all of Kindergarten, her sister was more reserved, keeping her stress beneath the surface — until her hair started falling out.

Emily and her family moved from South Korea to College Station, Texas in 2000, when Emily was five and just starting school. Her dad was pursuing a degree at Texas A&M and later at Virginia Tech, where her family moved a few years later. Emily's first memory of Texas is of terror — in particular, of white people. "The blond hair was freaky. I knew it existed, but in fairytales, princesses, stuff like that. Not in real people." Having emigrated from a relatively homogeneous environment, the fact of being surrounded by people who looked different from her, and most shockingly, *from each other*, took time to sink in.

But she was also overwhelmed by more than the sensory overload. Emily and her sister were the only student of Asian descent at their school, and the only recent immigrants. She was scared, confused, and lonely. Despite being very young when she moved, Emily had already started reading in Korean and was ahead of her peers. But in Texas, she was one of a handful of English Language Learners, and her parents agreed to hold her back for an extra year of Kindergarten after she underperformed in state tests. “It was just so confusing. There were no friends, no one looking out for me. I was just like this strange immigrant child in Texas.”

Yet while she was struggling to navigate her emotions for many months, she understood the stakes of focusing on her English education relatively quickly. Her parents supported her in learning English as best she could, partly because they wanted her to, and partly because they needed her to. Emily remembers translating for her parents at grocery stores, parent-teacher meetings, and at social events. She can pinpoint the moment she realized she was better at speaking English than they were. “It’s a weird power dynamic. I had better communication skills than my mom, who was an adult.”

Her neighborhood was predominantly white, and although her parents found a few immigrant families to lean on, Emily understood that she had to become American, both for herself and for her family. She translated words, but also cultural norms. “My mom and I would do things together, and she just wouldn’t understand the rules. I would get frustrated and upset as to why she couldn’t pick it up.”

So at school, Emily picked up English quickly and took her teachers’ feedback constructively. Looking back, she wonders if she was targeted or treated differently. All of her teachers were local, and had likely never met a student with her background. But all Emily got out of it was an opportunity to fully immerse herself in her new world, and to wipe away the fear

and the confusion. She gravitated toward English-speakers in her friendships, and pushed for her family to speak more English at home. Her sister followed suit, and even picked up English faster than Emily did. Despite that, both of them continued to be selected for yearly language testing long into their middle school years.

I ask her to reflect on what all of this meant for her sense of grounding in her Korean identity. She measures her words, and says, “I think I just... I threw a lot of things away to make room for English, and being American.” Even as her communities began to diversify when she moved to Virginia and eventually to San Diego in sixth grade, Emily continued chasing the sense of safety and belonging that had been so violently absent from that first year. She continued to dive into predominantly-white American culture, and to surround herself with English-speaking friends.

On the one hand, she is happy to be able to navigate social, academic, and professional spaces in a way that she never saw her parents being able to do. But on the other hand, she regrets that her parents didn’t emphasize the value of retaining her Korean culture. Today, she estimates that her Korean is that of a 10-year-old, and is often uncomfortable in majority-Korean spaces. In some ways, she retains her childhood mindset of curating an outward American-ness (which, she points out, contains a strong strain of whitewashing) — a survival mechanism designed to protect her in a world where she was the only one with her physical appearance and heritage. But through implicit and explicit messages, it was always clear that it had to come at the expense of her family’s culture; there was no room to contain both of her selves in one body.

D. LUIS

“I was a really big bully,” Luis tells me over the phone. I laugh, but he’s serious. When he was in first grade, he would intentionally use difficult words around other children who didn’t speak English well. In particular, he remembers a boy from Iran who had just moved to the area, and Luis knew that he would not understand what he was saying if spoke quickly and used big words. “I felt insecure about my English, so this allowed me to feel like I had power over him.” Luis regrets it to this day, and has tried to reach out to the blue-eyed boy who sat quietly in the corner of his homeroom. No response so far.

At the time, Luis was an ELL student at his school in the East Side of Los Angeles. Both of his parents are from Guadalajara, Mexico, and came to the United States in their early adulthood before they met each other. Luis’ first language was Spanish despite having been born in the United States, and by second grade he was still having a lot of trouble with literacy. When his parents realized this, they put him in his school’s ELL program on their own volition. El Monte school in East LA was special, because it was exceptionally diverse — it brought in students who spoke Spanish, Chinese, Cantonese, Korean, and Japanese. But Luis’ close friends were predominantly second-generation Mexicans like him, and had no trouble with English.

Soon after starting ELL, Luis remembers feeling extremely anxious and insecure. When he got pulled out of class, his friends would snicker at him and he worried about what he would be missing out on. He was also not always supported outside of ELL. One day in class, he asked his teacher how to spell the word “gonna,” and she called him out on the fact that “gonna” was not a real word. Luis was so embarrassed that he peed himself. When I inquired into the incident, Luis clarified that this only happened one time, and that the teacher was generally very sweet.

But he was so anxious as a result of all the social changes that were happening to him that he took her comment extremely personally.

When he describes his move to Topeka four years later, it is a much different story. “I pushed through [ELL] and was at the top of my class. When I moved to Topeka, I was obsessed with being the best.” He describes himself as being very competitive in high school, and leveraged his Spanish background to get ahead in his predominantly white school — which is what he advises his own students to do. Today, Luis is a college counselor at his high school in Topeka, and he especially loves working with bilingual students. “I try to emphasize that being bilingual is definitely an asset. Even if you don’t go to college, being able to translate across languages will get you any job you want.”

But he admits that he’s still haunted by his childhood shame of not speaking English well, which he carries with him to this day. “Sometimes I feel second-hand embarrassed or shy about other people who speak Spanish but don’t speak English. I need to remind myself of what I tell my students every day. This is an honor.”

VI. Analysis

This final section will engage with the stories and conversations that I’ve collected, and put them in context and contrast to the stories that introduced this paper. It will parse out three main themes that were drawn from my interviews — the omnipresence of social anxiety, manifestations of deficit thinking, and the shifting of roles within families — which all contribute to the complex experience of ELLs. The following sections will address research questions I anticipated as well as questions I didn’t, and will also demonstrate how our current modes of research and scholarship on ELL do not adequately capture what it means to be an

English learner in this country. As has been made clear throughout this paper, there are infinite layers to the full-body experience of adopting a new language in a country with a monolingual ideology. And, as I promised at the start of this paper, this project will barely scratch the surface of that complexity — but will hopefully spell out the imperative for deeper, more nuanced research in this field.

A. SOCIAL ANXIETY

I've thought a lot about Emily and her sister since starting this project. I think about their fear, moving from their home and family in Korea, to the heart of Texas where they completely alone. And I think about the way that two people from the same family, same background, same school environment, had such different strategies for processing their fear. Beyond anything in any of my interviews, hearing from Emily about her overwhelming stress in her first year in America was the most gut-wrenching. And while other members in my study did not tell stories of such verbal and physical emotional responses as theirs, the theme of social anxiety echoed throughout all of my interviews as well as my own life. From this study, it seems that social anxiety comes from two sources: the experience of encountering a new country and community, and the fact of being designated as “different” — explicitly and implicitly — within the school community.

While most participants did not speak extensively about their experiences of moving to the United States, for Bella and Emily, the very fact of migrating featured very prominently in their interviews. Bella was older when she moved, and therefore remembers the difficulty of leaving her family behind in Italy, and then realizing that she would not have a similar community to turn to in the United States. For Emily, the shock of encountering different faces

and social cues made it extremely difficult for her to feel safe, especially as her parents were undergoing this process simultaneously. Political debates and policy studies are prone to considering the moment of migration to be one-dimensional, important mostly for their broader causes and effects, but not necessarily for their significance in the lives of the migrants themselves (Olsen, 2000). The emotion in these interviews show us how moving to a foreign country can be unnerving, unsettling, and frightening. This is especially true in places like Texas and Ohio, where Korean and Italian immigrants do not make up a critical mass, but can happen even with the safety net of tight cultural communities.

And beyond that is the reality of social stratification within the school environment as well. Kyle's interview is especially salient for this, because Kyle himself is one of the most outgoing and friendly people I've ever met. But in his interview, he revealed that he was extremely self-conscious of the fact that he was taken out of class to attend a Special Education course, and made up for his insecurities by participating in school functions and being silly. This was intensified as he got older and felt that the courses were no longer useful to him, and he even started to question why he was being kept in them. Carla echoes that the very fact of getting taken out of class regularly meant that she had a hard time fitting in with her friends, even though she already had the English skills to communicate and ostensibly create strong social bonds. But, as Haugen reminds us, language is not just about communication, but about establishing authentic membership in a social group (Haugen, 1972). This shows us that one can exist without the other. Even though Carla and Kyle had the verbal skills to communicate, the institutionalized separation through daily or weekly ELL or SPED classes made it harder to develop organic social roots without a high degree of anxiety.

B. DEFICIT THINKING

When Kyle tells me that he wishes his younger self had worried less about what other people thought of him, I think back to a conversation that my friend and I had. I was telling her about the fear that I have when I'm speaking in public or in class — that I will slip up with an idiom or mispronounce a word, and a gaping hole will open up in the ground and swallow me whole. She is white and monolingual, and didn't understand what I meant by that. *Everyone slips up sometimes — nothing will happen to you and no one will judge you*, she told me. But to me, mispronouncing a word or misusing an idiom triggers a paranoia that goes beyond simply feeling judged. Part of it is my perfectionism, but part of it is the way that I've been conditioned to see my belonging in social, academic, and professional spaces: always contingent on my ability to seamlessly blend in without faltering or showing weakness.

This sense of paranoia is fueled by deficit thinking, which this paper defines as the belief that the primary blame for academic underachievement and social maladjustment should be placed on the social group in question (Olivos, 2006). When I panic over failing to blend in or belong as a result of my own slip-ups, I am buying into the idea that it is my own fault that the people around me are not able to reconcile that I am both intelligent and often make mistakes in my speech. The powerful thing about deficit thinking is that it is internalized by all social groups regardless of hierarchical status — and this is seen very clearly in my own story as well as that of my interviewees.

Carla speaks with clarity about this when she admits her frustration over the fact that her mom and her Spanish-speaking family members did not have the English fluency that she had always striven for. She tells me, "I remember viewing it as, 'Oh, you're not as smart if you can't pick up this language as easily, or if you can't pick it up as well. *Why can't you help*

yourself?' (emphasis by author)" Today, she assures me, she is a lot more empathetic to her family's experience. But she still catches herself feeling ashamed or embarrassed when she is called to translate her aunt's taxes or help her mom write emails. And this deficit thinking is also inward-facing. Her experiences with being singled out over and over by multiple teachers in multiple schools for various (unsubstantiated) claims of language deficiency perpetuated the belief that it was her own fault if she didn't get taken seriously in academic or professional spaces. When she then saw her family members struggling with English, she assumed that they too were not to be taken seriously.

Meanwhile, Luis' deficit thinking shone more opaquely in his stories, and was certainly more subconscious than Carla's. But the similarities are clear. When he targeted the Iranian boy at his school, Luis was attempting to establish his superiority based on their comparative language abilities. If Luis had been a monolingual English-speaker, I would not have batted an eye at his story — this is a very common occurrence in interactions between language learners and native speakers around the world (Fishman, 2000). But the fact that Luis was himself an ELL at the time demonstrates how ideologies like deficit theory and monolingual supremacy become internalized and operationalized by all social groups — even if they ultimately only serve to bolster the status of one group. In this situation, Luis was attempting to regain the power and social capital that he felt he was losing every time he was reminded of his weaknesses in English through his teachers and the structure of his ELL classes.

C. SHIFTING FAMILY ROLES

When I began this project, I imagined that I would be primarily focusing on the experiences of individuals within the 'schoolhouse gate,' so to speak. My questions were geared

towards understanding the lives and social strategies of students while they were at school, getting my interviewees to reflect on those. But it soon became clear to me that each of my subjects' families were a crucial part of the story that I needed to tell. Students' families — and especially parents — contribute to setting priorities, navigating social spaces, and developing identity. I highlight this theme, because it is one that is uniquely misunderstood by the two primary lenses of ELL research. Politics is prone to seeing the family — especially the immigrant or multicultural family — as an economic and homogeneous unit. Meanwhile, psycholinguistics often ignores the role of the family altogether, assuming that the study subject is the sole agent in their cognitive development. These perspectives hurt teachers' ability to understand why their kids may be making the decisions or exhibiting the behaviors that they are. This section will show that there is something much deeper to be explored about the impact of families and how they structure themselves around children who are English language learners.

The clearest example of this is in Emily's story. Throughout her life, she has not only been responsible for her own assimilation and socialization in America, but at least partly for that of her parents as well. Although she came to this country at age four, her access to formal English language education meant that her parents — and especially her mom — looked to her to lead conversations, meetings, and discussions. Soon, Emily also started interpreting American culture, customs, and norms for her parents, gently correcting their mistakes and giving them advice. In a grocery store, the stakes were relatively low. But in doctor's offices and parent-teacher meetings, one slip could be much more impactful.

Emily's story is not unique — millions of young children in immigrant families play similar roles in their own families (Hedges, 2000). But it helps to contextualize everything else we've learned about Emily: her fears and anxieties, her desire to adopt white American culture,

and the speed at which she started feeling alienated from her Korean identity. As her role in her family shifted from that of child to that of adviser, translator, and guide, her priorities also shifted. What the *Good Language Learner* paper saw as being “involved in the language-learning process” was the result of a much deeper and more complex set of circumstances that raised the stakes of Emily’s rapid assimilation. And by ignoring or glossing over the intricate emotional effects of such a shift in family structures, psycholinguists are doing a disservice to these students.

English learning can be painful not only because it so often comes with the loss of a mother tongue (Fishman, 2000), but also because it can disturb the family ecosystem. Emily still remembers the day that she realized she was better at English than her parents, and the sense of authority that she gained in that moment was irreconcilable with the established family hierarchy. Over time, she distanced herself not only from her Korean identity, but also that of the Korean daughter. This is a crucial process for educators to understand: even when a student immerses themselves in assimilating linguistically and culturally — the ideal outcome for political philosophers and linguists alike — there is still a deep need for emotional support.

D. CONCLUSION

At the end of our conversation, Emily tells me about a trip that she recently made to Korea. At the age of 20, it was the first time that she had gone back since she and her family left. She remembers being in shock because everyone immediately knew she was foreign once they spent a few minutes with her, even though she looked like they did. “It’s so weird. You feel like you’re always in a limbo [when you’re an immigrant]. You’re never really one thing or another because you’re just a really big jumble of both.” This is not a feeling that is unique to Emily, and

it encapsulates, for me, the instability and disorientation that immigrants feel no matter how long they live in their new country, how old they were when they moved, or what assimilationist strategies they adopted once they grew up.

When given a choice (I use the word “choice” very loosely), Emily for most of her life has chosen to embrace her American identity in her language, customs, and ideologies. But there is still a part of her that feels foreign in the United States, and secretly hopes to find belonging back in her community in Korea. These are highly complex dynamics, affected by a large array of factors that are outside the scope of this paper. But Emily’s story and that of the other students demonstrate how language is a tremendously powerful mechanism of carving out spheres of identity and opening and closing doors to social belonging and emplacement.

As I pointed out at the start of this section, there is an infinite number of dimensions to these conversations that I could have highlighted. But my interest in writing this paper was primarily on the social strategies of ELL students, and what created, affected, and opposed them. The themes that I have identified here help to capture what the current literature does not: language learning is never linear, and it is rarely about quantitative competence and fluency. It is about identity, and family, and self-esteem.

But this is certainly not the end of what I want to do with this field, and should not be the end of anyone’s work with ELL students. Of the millions of students in the United States who are or have been English learners, I have only spoken to a microscopic percentage of them. I was also limited in my study by resources and regulations, and was unfortunately only been able to rely on memories rather than direct observation. In some ways, this is powerful. Memory and reflection allow me to understand the long-term effects of childhood and teenage experiences, and also allows my subjects to dictate what they find important. But it also keeps me from being

able to fully capture the more subconscious elements of the experiences I illustrate. With that being said, my analysis should be

VII. Where We've Been, Where We're Going

My hunch at the start of this project and this paper was that the way in which ELL students are educated in American today is poorly informed by a body of research that does not capture the essence of language learning. Because of this, ELLs are at higher risk of being failed both in their language competence and in their confidence and sense of identity. This paper hoped to show how we might conceive of the lives and minds of ELL students, and to chart a new way of thinking through this problem. And at its core, this project argued for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of English Language Learners, whose lives are predominantly the subject of political tropes, linguists' empiricism, and — especially for students and professionals — racially-coded exceptionalism.

My decision to study ELL students, as opposed to migrant students more broadly, was intentional. Although the identities of migrants and of language learners are deeply intertwined, as was made clear in the stories told in this paper, language more than anything else is about emplacement. It doesn't only say who you are where you came from, but also dictates who you can be and, often, where you will go. Alim and Smitherman remind us:

“In American public discourse, language is often overlooked as one of *the* most important cultural tools that we have for distinguishing ourselves from others. Language, no doubt, is a significant form of ‘symbolic power.’ Yet its central role in positioning each of us and the groups that we belong to along the social hierarchy lies largely beneath the average American’s consciousness.”

(Alim & Smitherman, 2012)

And, as I demonstrated in Section IV, because that social hierarchy is rooted primarily in *fear* — of difference, of change, of national insecurity — this paper is as much about healing its readers as it is about protecting its subjects.

That being said, the need for ethical, comprehensive, and holistic solutions to issues in multicultural communities is urgent. But because it requires rigorous knowledge of the social and cultural contexts of the people in those communities, very few people are willing to cross those lines of difference, especially with culturally sensitive methods (Liamputtong, 2010). This has evident and dangerous effects on the way that educators, scholars, and others see and think about ELL issues. As this paper has shown, any social scientist can tell you what the problems are — dropout rates, weak assimilation, poor performance — but very few are able to identify what the nature of those problems may be. And because we don't agree on how to understand and interpret those problems in a way that is culturally responsive, we are doing an injustice to the recipients of our solutions. This paper argues that there is a more reasonable and sensitive way to conceptualize issues in English language education, and it involves intentional observer participation on the part of the researcher.

Finally, it is important to remember that all of the students I interviewed for this exploratory study were either in college at the time, or had graduated from a four-year institution. For the majority of English learners in this country, this is not the reality. While the decision to focus on this segment of the population has important consequences to broader ELL scholarship as I outlined in Section III, future research should also include the voices of those students for whom higher education was not a possibility — namely, those from first-generation low-income families.

It is my hope that this paper generates more questions than answers. I also hope that it opens up a door to empathetic, rigorous, and curious research on some of the most beautiful, underappreciated minds in this country. In many ways this is the perfect project to end my Yale career on. In less than two months I will be in a classroom of my own, working with students in Tulsa, Oklahoma, whose communities I have never been to and know very little about. While this project was a labor of love and deeply rooted in my own life, it has also taught me the importance of asking questions and continuing this work no matter what students I have in front of me. I hope that it has inspired you to do the same. The future of education is not in the hands of scholars — it is in the hands of students.

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