

# Language Arts

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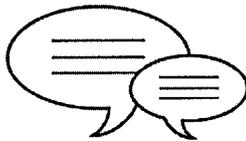
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## Language Brokering and Translanguaging in School

Marjorie Faulstich Orellana and Ofelia García

This issue of *Language Arts* focuses on language and literacy brokering, which are forms of *translanguaging*: the ways bilinguals draw on their full linguistic toolkits in order to process information, make meaning, and convey it to others. Here, a scholar who is known for her work on translanguaging (Dr. Ofelia García) and one of the editors of this issue whose work has centered on language brokering (Dr. Marjorie Faulstich Orellana) discuss convergences in these new ways of thinking about the crossing of linguistic borders, and about exciting new ways to consider the language resources children bring to classrooms and other educational settings.

Dr. Marjorie Faulstich Orellana is a professor in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA, where she is Director of Faculty for the Teacher Education Program and Co-director of the International Program on Migration. A bilingual teacher in Los Angeles from 1983 to 1993, she now runs an afterschool program that connects theory to practice and serves as a site for introducing undergraduates to the field of education, pairing elementary school children with college students and conducting research on language and literacy practices. Orellana's explorations of children's work as language and culture brokers are

summarized in her 2009 book, *Translating Childhoods: Immigrant Youth and Cultures*. She has also led a team that includes the two coeditors of this special issue, Danny Martínez and Ramón Martínez, in designing curriculum that leverages language brokering experience for the cultivation of academic literacies in school (<http://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/xchange-repository/current-issue-fall-2010:TeacherWorkroom>).

Dr. Ofelia García is a professor in the PhD program of Urban Education and of Hispanic Literatures and Languages at The Graduate Center, CUNY. She has been a professor of Bilingual Education at Columbia University's Teachers College and Dean of the School of Education at Long Island University. García's extensive publication record on bilingualism and the education of bilinguals is grounded in her life experience living in New York City after leaving Cuba at the age of 11, teaching language minority students bilingually, and educating bilingual and ESL teachers. Among her best-known books is *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective*.

**This excerpted conversation was recorded on September 12, 2013 and has been edited for publication. The full conversation is available as a podcast at <http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts>.**



**Marjorie:** When I first began studying *language brokering*, most people thought of this practice of translation/interpretation from the mindset of *languages are separate and you move*

*words from one to the other.* As I watched what kids do, it very quickly became obvious that's not at all what they're doing when they broker language. Rather, they're using their languages in a whole variety of ways, crossing linguistic borders and tapping into their full repertoires of language as they make meaning for others. That very much fits with the notions of *translanguag-*

ing that you've been bringing into the field in ways that resonate with everything we see and know about bilingualism, but we haven't had the words for it or ways of thinking about it. So I'm excited to talk with you about this, and I'm wondering if you could just expand—what are your thoughts on this?



**Ofelia:** Your language brokering work is extremely important because it starts from the position of the ability of being bilingual; the ability to translanguage is a gift that has been invisible. I don't see any

contradictions between your work on language brokering and the work that I do on translanguaging. I think what the translanguaging lens makes clear is that for a bilingual child, what is happening is really not that he or she is going from one language system to another language system (because those are social constructions); what is happening is that they're drawing from one linguistic repertoire. It's a different epistemological stance: by taking a translanguaging lens to your language brokering work, we see even more explicitly the actual gift or ability that children have in being able to draw from one linguistic repertoire that then is socially constructed as two autonomous language systems (if you want to call them that). So actually, if you apply a translanguaging lens to the language brokering work that you have done, it emphasizes that children are really experts at self-regulating according to social conventions, even when those social conventions do not recognize the fact that you have one language repertoire. From a monolingual perspective—and I think that's the way that we have looked at bilingualism—it has always been seen as two separate linguistic systems.

**Marjorie:** One of the things that struck me about listening to kids as they broker language is that sometimes they do the separation of language because the people they're working with expect them to do that. A person might say, "*Here, say this to your mother,*" and they'll translate that, but they also, in that very conversation, will be engaged as a listener, as a speaker themselves in conversation. So a child speaking

to and for her mother and her teacher is also a child talking *with* her mother *and* her teacher. The kids moved seamlessly across supposed language barriers as they sometimes literally translated and sometimes just drew on their full linguistic toolkits to communicate with and for others as they sometimes literally translate, and sometimes just speak in their two languages, and draw on their meanings. They're always juggling these different ways of thinking about language as separate and not.

**Ofelia:** I agree with you one hundred percent. That's the way that we see kids acting in classrooms, but only because the classrooms recognize languages as separate. After all, that's what schools do—normalize ways of using language. That's what we see on the surface. It's easy to see that this is what kids are doing. They are adjusting their languaging to social conventions that require them to speak in one way in some settings, in another way in other settings. What they're doing, of course, is drawing from their entire linguistic repertoire and not these two separate containers that have totally separate features and that exist separately for the child.

**Marjorie:** So this is the crux of what I think we're both saying, and this is what brings translanguaging and language brokering together in relation to schools and classrooms and teachers. What would it mean in classrooms if we broke out of that monolingualist frame that assumes a separation of language and reinforces the importance of keeping them separate—a framework that schools have historically perpetuated?

**Ofelia:** First of all, I want to acknowledge the fact that I learned this way of thinking about language from you. I always use a quote from an article that you wrote with Jennifer Reynolds where you actually questioned (very specifically) the language separation that occurs in classrooms (both in monolingual classrooms and in bilingual classrooms, because we have that issue in both kinds of classrooms). I think that adopting a translanguaging lens in classrooms would mean that teachers would understand that it is impossible *just* to have a monolingual classroom, because you are always confronted with children that have very different language practices—even when we see them as bringing in only one language.

A translanguaging lens really questions the idea that there is a monolingual way of acting. In a sense, it does away with monolingual education. It would mean that teachers would have to acknowledge and work with the language practices that all children bring into classrooms, because the only way to make sense of school language is to start from what one knows and to integrate it. And we do the integration for everything else, right? We know that children learn by integrating contexts. And yet when we think about language, we never think about integration. We never think that Spanish could be used not only as a scaffold to learn English, but actually as a way to expand English. Yet, we do think of integration when we say that social studies and English language arts should be integrated in some way. So that's a question: how do we break out of this monolingual mentality that sees these other language practices as interfering with the language practices that we usually perform in classrooms?

This is very liberating for teachers—especially teachers who have very heterogeneous language classrooms where children come in with very different languages—because once you start talking about bilingualism in this way, teachers can put together language groups in which the children help each other. So if learning and teaching are really about transforming knowledge, then it doesn't matter in which language they transform that knowledge; what's important is to develop it.

**Marjorie:** It can be powerful to see knowledge transformed and represented in different ways in different language forms. But you touched on something very important, I think. Teachers' concerns with bilingual education often result in questions like *What if I have more than one language in the classroom? How do I meet all my students' needs when I don't speak their language(s)?* But you have designed classroom environments that work with the existing languages without expecting the teacher to be an expert in those languages.

**Ofelia:** First of all, this thinking breaks away from the prevailing mold of bilingual education: a teacher who speaks *the* other language, which implies, of course, that you only have one other language group in the classroom. I want to be careful in what I say—I don't think translan-

guaging is a substitute for bilingual education in cases where that is possible. What I'm saying is that circumstances often dictate a different approach.

I like to talk about bilingualism in education—whether it's monolingual education or bilingual education—because more often than not, you have more than one language in the class, and most teachers don't speak all the languages because it's impossible to do that. As we all well know, classrooms are becoming more diverse than ever. Especially in New York, where I am, this is a real issue. In those classrooms, then, you cannot just have bilingual education, but you can certainly use the children's language resources to ensure that they deepen their knowledge. This is not about scaffolding language or scaffolding instruction, it's about developing deeper understandings. It's making sure that it's a transformative process that actually builds creativity and power, while also interrogating these linguistic inequalities that often exist in classrooms.

This process, however, takes a different kind of teacher. It takes a teacher that understands that teaching is not just the transmission of knowledge, but the co-construction of knowledge with students. Translanguaging challenges traditional concepts of language, traditional concepts of bilingualism, traditional concepts of bilingual education, but also traditional concepts of what teaching is, because it takes a teacher who deeply believes in this process and who engages students where they are.

**Marjorie:** You mentioned bilingual education and, in places where it's possible, the value of that. One of the concerns that bilingual educators have about adopting more of a translanguaging frame or mixing languages in the classroom is that you've got to somehow protect the non-dominant language in society. If you let English in, it takes over. This argument can shore up the monolingualist framework of thinking about language—that they have to be separate. But at the same time, there is something important about protection for nondominant languages. So how do you respond to that?

**Ofelia:** This is such an important issue, and it needs to be addressed head on. I want to make sure that we all understand that we're not talking

about language mixing. The first thing I want to say is that translanguaging (I stay away from talking about mixing or hybridity; instead, I like to talk about fluid language processes) is a better way to conceptualize this because we're saying that these are normal, discursive practices of bilinguals. We as bilinguals don't translanguage all the time. I'm not doing it now because I have to communicate and I understand who my audience is. And that's what we have to teach children to do—to help them understand how to use language to their advantage cognitively, but also to adjust to some social norms.

I think there are two critical issues related to bilingual education. One that we have paid a lot of attention to is what I call "macro alternations" in classrooms—when to use one language and when to use the other. Do you use it with one teacher or two teachers? In the morning or the afternoon? I think we have figured that one out. What we have not done is address the "micro alternations"—these translanguaging moments that are critical to learning, creative and critical moments that lead to some transformation, which is what learning is all about. It's very important to understand that translanguaging does not substitute for a bilingual education space. What it does is *transform* the bilingual education spaces, enabling us to understand that maybe language separation most often occurs because of societal constraints. What we really need to do is open up spaces where children are able to translanguage. If you don't do that, what you're really doing is submersing them—perpetuating a sink or swim approach that is precisely what bilingual educators often complain about. You can't do that. You have to think of how to support the children in using their entire linguistic repertoire, even when you're asking them to perform in English only or in Spanish only.

**Marjorie:** That's very interesting: how to use your full linguistic repertoire even when you're performing in one or the other. There are times we speak in one language or the other, we write in one or the other. But even when you're writing in one language, you're still leveraging what you know.

**Ofelia:** That's so important, but let me also address the other question you raised, the one about protection. There has to be some separation of languages because, societally, that's what

schools do. Schools develop standardized language. People who believe in bilingual education both for language minorities and for language majorities would want the children to be able to develop language practices that conform to these societal norms. But it is also important to consider the question of protection for language maintenance with language minorities, because I have seen that sometimes teachers, in their efforts to protect the standard language, stigmatize the language practices that bilingual children use. That's why you have many Latino youth tell you they speak "Spanglish," because they have a stigmatized idea of their own bilingual language practices.

We shouldn't condemn these bilingual speakers; rather, we should see how we can develop their practices in some way. Sometimes this insistence on having the child speak one language or the other actually builds up a linguistic insecurity that works against the maintenance of the language. I've given up the word "maintenance"; I prefer to talk about "language sustainability," because I think it's a more modern concept that engages with the sociopolitical construction of what reality is. That's something that we have to consider. By building these barriers, we're not protecting anything; we are demanding that bilingual children—I'm only going to talk here about the Latinos or language minorities in the US—perform their language only according to monolingual norms. That is not based on a bilingual reality. So again, schools develop practices of use that are standardized because that's what they do, and at the same time, they build those practices from the bilingual practices that children come in with. Right?

**Marjorie:** Yes, and maybe the job isn't for the teacher to somehow protect languages, or as Ana Celia Zentella says, to serve as the "bilingual border control," patrolling both sides of the border. That isn't the job of teachers; our job is to nurture and support, to *sustain*, not *maintain*. Part of that involves those metalinguistic reflections: *When do we want to use particular forms of language and in what ways? How will some people react when you translanguage? What do people expect when you broker language for them?*

But this process has to evolve over a long period of time. I learned that when Danny

Martínez (coeditor of this volume), Cliff Lee, Elizabeth Montañó, and I worked with middle school kids on a curriculum like this, looking at their language practices, thinking about their language practices, creating movies that demonstrate their practices. In the end, when asked “What did you learn?” some of the kids said things like, “Well, I learned that I don’t talk right.” That was not at all our intention in that curriculum, but it resulted when we brought attention to language, and that activates dominant ideologies about the “right” way to speak. It takes a long time to work through those ideologies. If we had a model of language education from kindergarten on, or preschool on, that talked about these things, reflected on them, used language in multiple ways, it would make a difference.

**Ofelia:** I think you’re absolutely right. One word that has not come up in our conversation has been “critical.” A curriculum on critical language awareness that focuses on language inequalities, language and power, et cetera, would be really really really important to develop. We’re all living in multilingual communities in our schools, and we really need to talk about that, because if kids understood what’s critical about language (talk about metalinguistic reflection!) and if they were really critical about languages, then they could engage teachers in making sure there is classroom support for this. But we haven’t developed a critical consciousness of language use among children, so the only language use that children see is what happens in schools, and what happens at home is barely even talked about or acknowledged.

**Marjorie:** And it is separated, so when it is talked about, the message that’s often conveyed is “Well, that’s fine at home or that’s fine on the playground, but in school . . .,” again conveying separation of language. It’s in those little words like, “That’s fine, *but* . . .” that a lot is conveyed.

**Ofelia:** Right. The other thing is that I think in order to build this critical language awareness program that we’re thinking of, it has to be for everybody. It cannot just be for “children who are English language learners,” as they are often called. In New York City, 50% of the kids in public schools speak languages other than English at home. They could be very bilingual, but

that doesn’t mean that they do not have a whole other life that taps into other knowledge systems, into other ways of being, et cetera; that is never recognized. We need to be able to recognize the home funds of knowledge also, because if we could then address the bilingualism that the children bring into the classrooms as a gift, we could go a long way toward changing these ideologies of deficit or of separateness. That’s a real concern for me, that these home practices are never recognized except in remedial contexts.

**Marjorie:** Part of the problem is schools generally start by labeling and diagnosing individual children, and trying to fit them into a limited set of categories. But children bring a variety of linguistic repertoires. To think that we’re going to somehow fit them into the categories of fully English dominant or English learners does a disservice to everyone. What if, instead of thinking about bilingual *kids* or multilingual *kids*, we thought instead about multilingual *contexts* and *how you work in those contexts*? Language education has been historically conceived as narrow and deep as related to standard English proficiency, but what about breadth and depth? Ability and versatility? What would it mean to help all kids deepen and broaden their linguistic toolkits?

To listen to the full conversation, please go to the podcast at <http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts>.

**Ofelia:** The question that you bring up on labeling and diagnosing is extremely important. We need to understand that these labels—English language learner, English dominant, English fluent—are socially constructed, just like languages are. For example, the way that we’ve set up some of our dual-language bilingual programs is called “two-way.” Fifty percent of the students have to be English language learners (in my work, I like to refer to them as “emergent bilinguals,” just because I want to make sure that everybody understands that what we’re doing by developing their English is making them bilingual). The other 50% have to be English fluent. The assumption is that all English language learners are born abroad, that they’re foreigners, that they’re only Spanish speakers,

and that the English fluents are language majorities, possibly white, monolingual, et cetera. Wrong. If you sit in the classroom and try to do an analysis, you realize it is impossible. In class after class, the English language learners have not been born abroad, they've been born in the US; they are sometimes of mixed parents, they are quite multilingual, and they speak languages other than Spanish, so they're not monolingual Spanish speakers to begin with. The English fluent kids are definitely not monolingual, either. Most of the parents who register their children for the dual-language program are speakers of languages other than English at home; they speak Farsi, Hindi, or Arabic. They realize that Spanish is a very important language in New York City. We're full of these labels that make absolutely no sense, because childhood is a lot more complex than that.

**Marjorie:** Yeah, sí, sí, sí, I get it. Here we are having this conversation in our standard academic English. We know there are times and places to do that, but I'm struck by what you said. We want kids to be able to perform in all kinds of settings and to hold their place in the worlds that they go into. At the same time, if we let it, the already multilingual world could be an even more dynamic, multilingual, translanguaging environment. There is something we lose when we cut off parts of our repertoires. We lose collectively as a people, as a nation, as a planet.

**Ofelia:** We lose a lot. We lose a lot of creativity. We lose a lot of criticality. We lose a lot of knowledge. This is a big loss for everybody. And I think it is a loss tied to fear. If we were a little bit less afraid of this linguistic diversity and a little less afraid of not knowing—because you absolutely have to be less afraid of not knowing—we could embrace it.

**Marjorie:** I am also struck by the fact that there is a vast and growing body of literature on polylingualism, translanguaging, multilingualism; much of it is theorizing about how we think about language, and how we can challenge that monolingualist framework that has shaped so much of our thinking. But there's not a lot that really addresses what this means for teachers in schools and practices. You have really done both—the theorizing and taking that into practice.

**Ofelia:** Well, there's a lot of work to be done. The pedagogy is still what needs some development and description. What has happened (and has happened with other pedagogies in the past) is that although translanguaging pedagogy has been used in many countries in many contexts (and it happens every day behind teachers' closed doors), it has not been legitimized in either the literature or in teacher practices until very recently. As a result, we do not have good descriptions of what it looks like. This is something that we all have to develop together. When we started working with the schools in our CUNY-NYSIEB project we put out this guide written by Christina Celic and Kate Seltzer, members of our team. They wrote it because we needed something to use with our teacher development. Still, there is even more radical, if you will, critical work that needs to be done beyond just meeting standards, so it's something that we really have to work on.

**Marjorie:** There's just one more thing I'd like to say before we wrap up, and that's to return to the beginning of our original conversation. We started out thinking about the term "language brokering" and this more generalized notion of "translanguaging," which we've agreed are entirely consistent. I think language brokering reminds us that kids, especially the children of immigrants, are often called upon to be the experts for other people. They're invited into that role outside of school, but typically in school, they're not given that authority and expertise or recognized for it. Sometimes it's not just that it's up to teachers to cultivate kids' translanguaging toolkits, but they must also recognize the toolkits kids already have and the ways they are using them to be experts. They can be bringing that expertise into the classroom, too. They can broker language for their peers, for their teachers, for their parents, for other people.

**Ofelia:** Right, and as you point out in your work, teachers have been doing that in teacher conferences forever.

**Marjorie:** They often do it on the side, too, but they don't know if they should. It is complicated. There may also be times you don't want to use it. That's another piece of translanguaging practice to think about: *When do we want kids to step into that kind of a role?* As you've shown,

the challenge of doing this kind of language education is not having a formula that works in all situations, but having some guidelines and ways of thinking about *how we orchestrate the languages in our culture*.

**Ofelia:** Right. The other situation where I see a lot of translanguaging work is with new arrivals in classrooms. Teachers may be teaching in English, but they have the new arrival work with one who knows a little bit more. In private, then, this language brokering is happening all the time. So how do we take that which teachers already know how to do and move it to instruction? That's a challenge. Monica Heller said it best when she said that bilingualism is not just

parallel monolingualism; it is one repertoire. Good pedagogical practices would allow instruction not just for those who have recently arrived, and not just in private between two students, but as a part of the classroom ethos.

**Marjorie:** Well, we do have our work cut out for us, don't we? I certainly do hope that the teachers listening to this or reading this transcript or looking at this special issue of *Language Arts* will join us in thinking about these important questions and will try these things out in their classrooms. We need to work at articulating a whole new way of thinking about language education in schools, because we surely don't have it all figured out!

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