

Book Review

*Teaching and Learning in a Multicultural School:  
Choices, Risks, and Dilemmas*

By Tara Goldstein

Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates  
2003, ISBN 0-8058-4016-8

**Reviewed by Ping Liu**

*California State University, Long Beach*

At a time when about 18% of the population in the U.S. speaks a language other than English at home (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000), *Teaching and Learning in a Multilingual School: Choices, Risks, and Dilemmas* provides an opportunity for readers to think about and understand how to provide high quality education to a culturally and linguistically diverse student body. This book, one in a series of publications on language, culture and teaching published by Erlbaum under the editorship of Sonia Nieto, argues that good teaching of a population with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds requires not only a mastery of subject matter and appropriate application of specific strategies but also an understanding of students who are enrolled in the classrooms. Using a qualitative approach, Goldstein and colleagues documented, analyzed and reflected on the teaching and learning of a group of Cantonese-speaking high school English learners who originally came from Hong Kong and were enrolled at Northside Secondary School in Canada.

In contrast to the diversity of student populations, school teachers are predominantly white and monolingual in the U.S. (Anonymous, 2002). It is interesting to note that Goldstein decided to conduct this study because the preservice teachers in the Initial Teacher Education program had limited understanding of language learning and the use of

---

*Ping Liu is a professor of education in the Department of Teacher Education at California State University, Long Beach. E-mail pliu@csulb.edu*

languages other than English. These new teachers' experiences made it a challenge for them to be prepared to teach students with diverse backgrounds in preservice professional development. Their backgrounds were indeed a direct outcome of an educational system in which the learning of a second language other than English was not valued.

There are some characteristics about this book which deserve highlighting. There are few North American longitudinal research studies that have investigated the schooling of English learners with an Asian language as their primary language. Goldstein's work not only makes a special contribution to help educators understand the background of students with Confucian cultural roots, but also provides a variety of information sources for educators to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between the teaching and learning of this particular group of students and that of other groups. Secondly, "much had been written on teaching strategies for accommodating English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) for high school students in such schools, and setting them up for academic success. However, much less had been written about how students themselves used different languages to achieve success" (pp. 1-2). Goldstein's ethnographic study focuses on an analysis of Cantonese immigrant students' learning in the classroom via an examination of the policy, instructional approaches, and practices adopted at their school. Students' choice and use of languages during their learning were evaluated in the light of the learning environment in which they, along with their teachers, were faced with dilemmas and conflicts while they strived to achieve academic success. Thus, education quality was assessed through the eyes and voices of these students. Thirdly, the author explicitly discusses how this study was qualitatively conducted. Such an approach allows interested readers to understand and apply or modify the research model employed in this book to their own studies.

Some important issues addressed in the study, such as dilemmas in language usage and complexity to make learning/teaching successful, do not seem unfamiliar in other settings and contexts of teaching English learners. One phenomenon discussed in Goldstein's study is the discrepancy between what was stated in school policy and what was actually practiced in the classroom. The Northside school policy clearly acknowledged that "language, culture, and identity are closely linked," "first language literacy is important for second language learning," "all languages and varieties of languages are equally valid forms of thought and communication," and "students' first languages play an important role in the classroom" (pp. 9-10). However, in a reality where English is the superior or powerful language and the heritage language is often lost in

the process of learning English as a second language (Fisherman, 1991; Krashen, 1996; Portes & Hao, 1998; Hinton, 1999; Tse, 2001; Wong-Fillmore, 1991), a number of teachers, staff and parents at Northside expressed concerns when students used Cantonese in the hallway and cafeteria, and some teachers even adopted a monolingual policy in the classroom. When such a discrepancy occurs, what should teachers, administrators or parents do?

Due to the complexity of working with a diverse student population, there seems to be no one-size-fits-all model that can be readily used or applied in teaching. Goldstein strongly argues that educational decisions must be made to address the special needs of students. In fact, individual differences exist among students or people who share the same culture and language background. Are Chinese (old or young, male or female) loud or quiet? It seems hard to come to a conclusion by simply reading Goldstein's excerpts from Maxine Hong Kingston, the author of *Women Warrior*, and Anne Jew, who wrote *Everyone Talked Loudly in Chinatown*. Because her grandmother and every one of her grandmother's acquaintances were so loud and "uncivilized" in Chinatown, Jew was pushed away from the Chinese community. As a result, she started to befriend individuals who were not loud and Chinese. However, a major challenge for Kingston as an American-born Chinese was that she had a hard time breaking her silence and participating at school. She felt bad for either not speaking at all or whispering, and the silencing applied to other Chinese girls in her class. Jew and Kingston shared the same culture and language, but were faced with different challenges to adjust to in the new culture and their needs were no doubt very much different, too.

One important aspect that deserves discussion but is absent in this and many other studies on language, culture and teaching is promotion of bilingual/bicultural education for mainstream children. The United States is one of the few countries in the world which pay little attention to the importance of instruction in a foreign or second language starting in elementary school. The heritage language that immigrant children bring with them to the classroom is often, if not always, treated as a deficit or barrier to their English acquisition. The focus is placed on helping children learn English as fast as possible but little value is given to the maintenance and development of a language other than English for all children.

In response to the significant increase in international communication, it is crucial that all children learn two languages and cultures. There should be little debate that bi/multilingual and cultural competency is a must for individuals to function well in a global society. Therefore, learning a language other than English should not be limited to English learners. When mainstream students learn two languages, they can

benefit in many ways such as biliteracy, cultural sensitivity and better preparation for the new century. If the preservice teachers Goldstein followed had received bilingual/bicultural education when they were in elementary and secondary schools, they would have been far better prepared to meet the challenges of working with a diverse student population. Therefore, it is my hope to have books to review in the future that report, analyze, and discuss how children's heritage language is valued as an asset, enrichment, and foundation for the development of dual languages for both mainstream and immigrant children.

### References

- Anonymous. (2002, Nov.-Dec.). The average teacher. *Teacher Magazine*, 14(3), 30-31.
- Fisherman, J. (1991). *Reversing language shift*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Hinton, L. (1999). Involuntary language loss among immigrants: Asian-American linguistic autobiographies. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 436982).
- Krashen, S. (1996). *Under attack: The case against bilingual education*. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates.
- Portes, A. & Hao, L. (1998). E pluribus unum: Bilingualism and loss of language in the second generation. *Sociology of Education*, 71, 269-294.
- Tse, L. (2001). *Why don't they learn English? Separating fact from fallacy in the U.S. language debate*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000). *Poverty in the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Wong-Fillmore, L. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 6, 323-346.