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On Learning English: The Importance of School Context, Immigrant Communities, and the Racial Symbolism of the English Language in Understanding the Challenge for Immigrant Adolescents

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### Author

Brittain, Carmina, Dr.

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**CCIS**

**The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies**  
University of California, San Diego

**On Learning English:  
The Importance of School Context, Immigrant  
Communities, and the Racial Symbolism of the  
English Language in Understanding the Challenge for  
Immigrant Adolescents**

**By Dr. Carmina Brittain**

Center for Comparative Immigration Studies  
University of California at San Diego

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The immigrant student population in American public schools is an ever-growing demographic force, especially in some states such as California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). This concentration of immigrants in these states is the result of the networking process of migration that mobilizes newcomers to areas where more established immigrants from the same country (co-nationals) are located (Cornelius, 1998; Portes, 1999; Valdes, 2001). This mobilization produces a significant information flow across borders as established immigrants share their experiences with potential immigrants in their countries of origin via interpersonal communications (Cornelius, 1998; Mahler, 1998; Menjivar, 2000; Brittain, 2002). One kind of information that immigrants share in these transnational conversations is about learning the English language (Brittain, 2002).

Using the Contextual Interaction Framework (Cortes, 1986), this article examines how adolescent immigrants from China and Mexico shared information about learning English in American schools. Framed as advice to their co-national peers, these *English Messages* reflected how these immigrant students perceived their chances for success in acquiring English skills. While both groups emphasized the *need to learn English*, the Chinese students advised their co-nationals that the English language barrier would eventually be conquered, while the Mexican adolescents advised that *learning English was hard*. These attitudes and experiences were framed by contextual factors in the school, community, and peer groups. Further, these students talked about the racial symbolism of learning English. Some of these immigrants framed English as the language of “White” people, a group that they perceived felt superior to their own ethnic group. Therefore, for these immigrant students, *learning English* became the representation of assimilation but not necessarily acceptance and equal participation into the U.S. society.

### **A Contextual Interaction Framework: Immigrant Communities, School Structures, and Peer Influences**

In his *Contextual Interaction Framework*, Cortes (1986) suggests that language minority students' educational outcomes and attitudes are the product of the interaction between school social contexts and students' socio-cultural backgrounds. Cortes argues that school contexts (e.g., curriculum and organization) reflect specific expectations of the majority segments of society. These expectations represent the societal context (Cortes, 1986). Since minority students' groups hardly have the political power to influence the organization and content of U.S. schools, they react to these school contexts in ways that are framed by their unique sociocultural experiences (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Nieto, 1992). As Sonia Nieto states, “the differences that students bring to school have a profound effect on what they gain from their educational experiences.” (1996, p. 20). The interaction between minority students' socio-cultural factors and the school structures (which are influenced by the societal context) produces diversity in educational outcomes including perceptions of learning English. Following Cortes' Contextual Interaction Framework, I argue that the different attitudes that immigrant students in this study had toward learning English were framed by the interaction between the following societal, school, and students' socio-cultural contexts.

- 1 Societal Context: societal influences that marginalize or empower immigrants, including participation in immigrant communities
- 2 School Context: organization and educational practices for immigrant students in the schools (e.g., teacher preparation) and school staff's negative attitudes toward immigrant groups

- 3 Student Socio-Cultural Contexts: Peer influences that inform attitudes towards learning English.

### ***Societal Context: Immigrant Communities***

One important aspect of the interaction between students' socio-cultural context and societal context is the participation of students in immigrant communities or ethnic enclaves. In general, immigrants tend to rely on people from their own communities of origin to facilitate the migration process (Besserer, 1998; Crisp, 1998; Menjivar, 2000). The long history of immigration from specific sending communities has marked a very distinctive path between the sending community in the country of origin and the receiving community in the United States. For example, numerous studies have captured the experiences of *transnational villages*, a phenomenon of continuous migration from one community in Mexico to one specific locality in the United States (Portes, 1999; Besserer, 1998; Cornelius, 1998; Guarnizo, 1998). Some provinces in China such as Guandong have also been major sources of migration to the United States since the 1800's, contributing to the establishment of a stable network of Chinese migrants to the United States (Wong, 1998).

As established co-nationals in the United States continue to have significant social ties with co-nationals in their countries of origin and in the United States, socialization and assimilation into ethnic enclaves is possible (Portes, 1995). Many prospective immigrants participate in ethnic or immigrant communities because they belong to transnational families (Faist, 1998; Menjivar, 2000) or participate in communities of co-nationals in the United States (Menjivar, 2000). These co-nationals provide information to help newcomers settle in the new locality once they immigrate. Some argue that while this information provides some sort of social capital that opens doors for immigrants in the new community of settlement, it also contributes to some kind of social reproduction as newcomers continue to be marginalized because the socialization within the co-ethnic environment has a ceiling effect on the promotion of opportunities and distribution of resources (Ong, 1995; Guarnizo, 1998). Because the minority status of the co-nationals, some of these immigrant communities are also marginalized by the societal forces. That is, the resources provided by the immigrant communities are not sufficient to relieve immigrants from marginalizing forces in the society at large.

### ***School Context: Lack of Support for Immigrant Students***

Structural factors in the school organization (e.g., student tracking), lack of teachers' preparation, and school staff's negative attitudes towards minorities are barriers in the academic and English language development of immigrant students (Nieto, 1992; Franklin, 1998; Freeman & Freeman, 2003; Faltis & Wolfe, 1999; Merino, 1999; Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999; Olsen et al, 1999; Valdes, 2001). The organization of the American schools is mostly based on a system of tracking (Grant, 1989), especially in lower income, racially diverse neighborhoods (Nieto, 1992). For immigrant students, this tracking takes place in ability placement in ESL classes. At the high school level, where most of the school organization is done as academic units or departments, many immigrant students are left without academic, language, and social support to face the challenges of an increasingly demanding curriculum (often presented in a language they do not understand) and the acquisition of English skills (Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999; Valdes, 2001). This is in part due to the lack of teacher preparation and understanding of the linguistic and cultural differences of immigrants (Merino, 1999; Valdes, 1991). Even well-intentioned secondary teachers either have not received the proper training (Merino, 1999) or

have not had appropriate cross-cultural experiences to prepare them to effectively work with immigrant students. (Nieto, 1992; Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999; Valenzuela, 2000). Further, there are some teachers who display negative attitudes toward immigrant students. Students who are limited English proficient are perceived by some teachers as being inferior to their English speaking classmates or as lacking intellectual abilities because they cannot perform academically using the English language (Nieto, 1992). Also, some teachers hold negative stereotypical perceptions of some ethnic groups that are represented in their student bodies (Valdes, 2001). Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (2001) argue that immigrant students are often aware of these negative societal attitudes toward their ethnic group. The immigrant students' responses toward these representations of their group could be defiance, resistance, or acceptance (Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). If students learn to accept a marginal position in American society, this acceptance may influence their attitudes toward the instrumentality of learning English. If immigrant students rationalize that learning English ensures equal participation in U.S. society, their attitude toward learning English may be more positive than if they conclude that learning English is not enough to overcome societal barriers.

### ***Socio-Cultural Contexts: Peer Influences and the Racialization of English***

Extensive research has been done on identifying peer influences in the academic achievement of minority students (Galindo, 1993; Fuligni, 1997; Gandara, 2002; Yeh & Drost, 2002). Interestingly, many of these studies “racialize” peer groups (Gandara, 2002). That is, the membership to a specific “peer group” is often organized along ethnic or racial affiliation. One of the principal findings in the literature about immigrant and minority students is that these students usually operate on the periphery of the dominant culture of the schools because of their perceived ethnic differences (Yeh & Drost, 2002). Different immigrant groups have found different ways to operate within a dominant culture—from assimilation to resistance (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Yeh & Drost, 2002). However, for many immigrant students, socialization with other immigrants provide an immediate group affiliation that is safe and accepting (Olsen, 1997; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Brittain, 2002; Gandara 2002). This socialization with co-nationals in the school often serves as a micro-ethnic community within the school grounds (Brittain, 2002). The co-national peers in the schools provide information that help newcomers to participate in specific social spaces in the U.S. schools. It is important to recognize that this trend of choosing co-nationals or co-ethnics as the major peer group is not just the result of the immigrant students' preferences, but also of the organizational structure of schools. Gandara (2002) found that school-within-school tracking influenced the division of students into friendship groups that were organized along racial and ethnic lines.

The availability of fluent English speakers that provide English language learners with language models is pivotal for successful acquisition of the English language (Wong-Fillmore, 1991; Valdes, 2001; Cummins, 2002). In Learning or Not Learning English, a case study of four immigrant Latino middle school students, Guadalupe Valdes (2001) attributed that one of the factors that limited the development of English language skills in these youngsters was the lack of meaningful interaction with English language speakers:

“As we saw in the cases of Lilia, Elisa, Manolo, and Bernardo, in spite of their three-period-a-day ESL classes, they had very few opportunities to interact in English with native English speakers. They were completely isolated from English-speaking, same-age peers. All interactions in English took place exclusively with the teacher in a ratio of 1 to 30-35.” (Valdes, 2001; p. 147).

Valdes (2001) also noted that those immigrant students who showed more progress in acquisition had broader opportunities (outside school) to interact with English language speakers.

Another important factor of co-ethnic peer influences is the extent to which the peer group values academic engagement in relation to their affirmation of ethnic pride. Studies with Latino students (Matute Bianchi, 1995; Portes & Zhou, 1994) have found that some peer groups discourage their co-ethnic peers from being academically engaged in order to affirm their ethnic identity in the school context. These students concluded that “to study hard was to act White and so be disloyal to one group.” (Portes & Zhou, 1994; p. 19) This rationale can also be applied to students' attitudes toward learning English. If students perceive learning English in a subtractive way (e.g., becoming a monolingual English speaker) as a way to be disloyal to their ethnic group, then these students may develop some resistance towards learning English.

In conclusion, the literature suggests that immigrant students' perceptions of English language acquisition are in part influenced by the macro-social context of reception that they experience due to their families' immigrant connections that place them in specific communities in the United States. This community also influences the way the local schools are organized and structured. The schools' structural forces, such as students' access to effective instructional practices and meaningful interactions with fluent English speakers, also have an impact on the way these students perceive their opportunities and abilities to learn English. Socialization with co-ethnic and co-national friendship groups in the schools also acts as a source of information and experiences that may encourage or discourage positive expectations towards academic participation, including learning English. As these peer groups are often organized along ethnic and racial lines, immigrant students learn from their co-nationals the racial symbolism of learning English—is learning English a way to affirm or dismiss ethnic pride? This article aims to describe the distinctive attitudes toward learning English among Chinese and Mexican immigrant students and how contextual factors in the community, schools, and peer groups influenced such attitudes.

## Methodology

The data for this article came from a sub-sample of the *Transnational Messages* study (Brittain, 2002); a study of 74 Chinese and 78 Mexican students, ages 11-17 that addressed immigrant students' participation in transnational activities. The data for the *Transnational Messages* study was collected as part of the Harvard Immigration Project (HIP), a five-year longitudinal, qualitative study of five immigrant groups—Central Americans, Chinese, Dominicans, Haitians, and Mexicans (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). During the third year of the Harvard Immigration Project, a questionnaire that addressed the research questions of the *Transnational Messages* study was annexed to the HIP Student Interview.

One of the goals of the Transnational Messages study was to identify what kind of information immigrant students from China and Mexico shared with co-nationals about American schools. In an open-ended interview, participating students were asked:

*Imagine that a cousin who lives in [country of origin] is moving to the United States in a month. He/she wants to know as much as you can tell him/her about American schools. What would you tell him/her?*

A sub-sample of responses revealed attitudes toward learning English and I classified these responses as “English Messages”. The English Messages sub-sample was comprised of 13 Chinese students and 18 Mexican students. Additional qualitative data were obtained via ethnographic accounts in selected school sites where these students were enrolled. Based on the answers from the “*Cousin*” question, my main research question for this paper became:

*What kind of perceptions did Chinese and Mexican immigrant students have toward learning English in the United States?*

Mexican subjects were recruited from schools in the San Francisco Bay area in California. Chinese subjects were recruited from schools in Boston, Massachusetts. A team of research assistants from the Harvard Immigration Project, who are proficient in the culture and language of the participant students, administered the Transnational Messages Interview to these students. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of my interpretations, I held multiple analytical meetings with these research assistants. Triangulation of data was possible by analyzing additional data already collected by the Harvard Immigration Project in previous years with the students in the English Messages sub-sample. These data helped me to confirm that the themes that emerged in the Transnational Messages Interview reflected the experiences of the participants in American schools. Also, qualitative data from four years of ethnographic observations in San Francisco and Boston schools were used to contextualize some of these answers. I was the ethnographer for the middle and high schools that the Mexican students in the English Messages sub-sample attended. I used written ethnographic reports from the Chinese research assistants to triangulate the Chinese data. A comprehensive student profile was created for each participant based on students and school characteristics. Appendix A includes a table of the modal profile of students in the English Messages Sample. Appendix B includes a short narrative that summarizes the characteristics of the school settings represented in this study.

This is primarily a qualitative study and as such the sample size is considerable small, However, the data showed interesting trends that could be framed within the Contextual Factors Framework and provided some insight on how these attitudes toward learning English were formed. Due to space limitations, the discussion below includes quotes that are representative of the major trends in the students' responses. The inclusion of such quotes does not indicate that the arguments are based on only a few quotes. The conclusions are based on a qualitative content analysis of both interview and ethnographic data.

This article does not address actual students outcomes in English proficiency. The focus is on the socially constructed attitudes toward learning English and how the contextual factors informed such attitudes. While I believe outcomes in English proficiency would be important to address, such outcomes are very difficult to compare in a study that involves multiple schools in two different states that use different assessment tools. Further, many of the students in this study did not have such outcome data available on their students files other than an entry exam that is administered at the time students first enter a U.S. school. For all of the participants in this study those entry exam scores indicated that they were non-English proficient when they arrived to the United States. The only outcome data that were compiled regarding their English proficiency is that at the time of the *Transnational Messages* interview (at least three years after entering the United States) all of the students in this study were still considered limited English proficient by the standards of their respective departments of education and most of these students were still enrolled in either

ESL I or II classes in programs that typically included a four level sequence. However, this may be not out of the ordinary considering that research on English language acquisition has suggested that it may take up to seven years for a second language learner to achieve enough proficiency to perform in an academic environment in the second language (Cummins, 2002). The *Transnational Messages* interview took place three years after the initial recruitment of students in the Harvard Immigration Project. That is, even the most recent immigrants in the study had been enrolled in American schools at least for three years when they were interviewed for this study, but the majority had been in the United States for four to five years.

### **Learning English in American schools: Perceptions and experiences** ***Chinese Messages: You Will Learn English***

Chinese students advised their co-nationals that not knowing English would impose limitations to their academic and social participation in school. Lack on English language proficiency meant that academic subjects would be difficult and that English speaking peers would make fun of the Chinese students.

“[I would tell my co-national peer] the homework is hard because [my] English is not so good.”

- 15 year old girl from Guangdong

“If your English is not good, you would be bullied by other students.”

- 17 year old girl from Guangdong

These students view these limitations as temporary because they were convinced that with time, immigrants learn English. Chinese students shared that there were opportunities for learning English in schools because of the availability of programs such as ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. These classes were viewed as a resource that would help them overcome the language barrier.

“Your only real problem would be if you couldn't understand English, but they have ESL, so there is no real problem.”

-15 year old girl from Shanghai

“At the very first, beginning, you may not know English. But there are ESL classes and teachers will help you.”

- 11 year old girl from Macau

Chinese students felt that English speaking peers ostracized them due to their inability to speak English or because of their foreign accents. However, Chinese students also felt confident that they could still do well in school if they did well in less-language dependent subjects such as mathematics:

“If your English is bad, don't talk much because if you speak with an accent, people are likely to laugh at you. And go to an ESL class. And just ask what other people do because if you don't, people laugh at you too. You do really have to, because I didn't. A lot of kids are inappropriate and they have dates and stuff. People will probably say you are a nerd, but well... Anyway, try to do well in school if you can, especially in math areas since your English is bad.”



- 15 year old girl from Hubei

According to these students, having a foreign accent served as a cultural marker that excluded immigrant students from academic and social participation in school because their English speaking teachers and peers had negative attitudes towards students who have foreign accents. As instructors of English language over-emphasized speech over reading or writing (Cummins, 2002), participants in this study (both Chinese and Mexican) developed frustration when they could not speak without a foreign accent, even if their reading and writing abilities were strong. Because of this fear of being teased or humiliated because of their accents, Chinese students hardly spoke their native language in the classroom setting.

Part of the reason that Chinese students seemed not to be too concerned about English as a barrier to their academic participation was based on their perception that American academic standards were lower than those in China (Brittain, 2002). Chinese students still felt they would be doing well academically even if they were not completely proficient in English.

“To learn English is enough. To have good command of English is enough, because if your English is not good, you can [still] catch up here with things and rules. You [the co-national peer] also studied in China, so your standards will not be particularly low compared to other students in the United States”

- 17 year old boy from Guangdong

The profile of the Chinese students who talked about English Messages indicates three important factors regarding participation in immigrant communities, school structures, and peer influence. First, the families of the Chinese students in the sample settled in areas in Boston that were not necessarily predominantly Asian. The Boston Chinatown has been subjected to rezoning and housing is limited (Wong, 1998). Therefore, working class Chinese newcomers often find housing outside Chinatown. Their children often attended schools that were diverse, that is, no ethnic group was considered a majority. For example, even in the diverse, inner-city schools in Boston represented in the sample, the population of Asian students was below 30%.

In regards to school structures, most of the Chinese students attended schools that provided ESL programs along with mainstream academic classes. Some of the students attended Chinese bilingual programs where China-born teachers provided instruction. In general, these students were tracked within an ESL or Bilingual track but they were mainstream for academic subjects and in these academic classes they had contact with English speakers.

The ESL/bilingual tracks provided Chinese immigrant students with an ethnic community within the school that disseminated information on how to interact within the school. One of the interesting aspects of this ethnic community within the school is that it often provided information on how to *assimilate* into the mainstream school culture. Students often talk to newcomers about how to dress, how to avoid speaking out to prevent others from detecting their accents, how to make American friends, etc. The goal was to eventually participate in mainstream classes with success.

Another characteristic of their school context was that their teachers often had positive attitudes toward Chinese immigrants. Ethnographic data from Chinese and non-Chinese teachers showed that the general view of the Chinese student was positive—hard-working, disciplined, and determined. Teachers imposed the “model minority” view on their Chinese students. China-born teachers often had the cultural understanding and in a sense were able to implement instructional strategies that according to the students were as rigid as in China. These students actually appreciated the American teachers more since they were perceived as

nicer, more polite, and less strict than the China-born teachers. These positive attitudes between Chinese students and their American teachers provided an important element for Chinese students to feel accepted and capable of participating in American classrooms.

In terms of peer influences, the Chinese students attended schools that were predominately White with low percentages of English language learners classified as having limited English proficiency (less than 20% of the school population). Most of these schools were also in low-income neighborhoods where more than 40% of the school population qualified for reduced or free lunch programs. These school contexts pressured Chinese immigrant students to assimilate into the mainstream culture of the school and learn English. By providing an environment where most students were fluent English speakers, Chinese students felt the pressure to learn English to become socially acceptable by their peers in the majority group and that was a motivation for them. However, it was not evidenced that the Chinese students really aspired to have English speaking friends. The ethnographic and interview data revealed that the motivation to learn English was based on these students' need to avoid humiliation and teasing. Because schools had very few English language learners, the need to assimilate linguistically was significant, if not to make friends, at least to avoid teasing. However, the parents' view was a bit different on the instrumentality of English speaking peers. Some ethnographic data from the Chinese group showed that the Chinese parents pressured the students to have American, English-speaking friends, rather than co-national, Chinese-speaking friends. For example, some parents considered instrumental to be associated with English-speaking Americans. A Chinese father expressed in one interview:

“I think it is important that my child has American friends. They will teach him English. He is in America and he needs to learn the ways here. If he was in China, Chinese friends would be helpful.”

However, for the students, it was the co-national peer who was instrumental in providing information to participate in the school life. Most of the Chinese students still socialized almost exclusively with Chinese peers. These students displayed a “selective assimilation” (Portes & Zhou, 1994) approach to school. Selective assimilation refers to the situation when immigrant students realize that in order to successfully participate in the school, they need to adopt some of the behaviors and values of the majority culture that prevails in school, including learning English, but they continue to have strong ties with their ethnic community and display selective cultural forms in specific social spaces (Portes & Zhou, 1994).

Chinese students had good attitudes toward learning English—it is attainable. They also had the confidence in the school structures and programs—ESL classes work. And, the co-national peer also reinforced the belief that students educated in China had stronger academic backgrounds than their American peers. Therefore, learning English would be enough to completely succeed and participate in American schools. This analysis of the Chinese English Messages shows that as Cortes (1986) affirms students' outcomes are the product of interacting forces. Of course, there are many other factors such as quality of instruction and school resources that may contribute to these particular attitudes toward learning English among Chinese students. However, across students who had English Messages, the emphasis placed on academic excellence and the perception that Chinese immigrant students could still achieve it even without full English language proficiency minimized the inadequacies that these immigrant students felt because they were not English proficient.

### ***Mexican Messages: It's Hard, but You Need to Learn English***

More Mexican students (18) expressed English Messages than Chinese students did (13). Unlike the Chinese students who saw the acquisition of English as something that eventually would be accomplished, more Mexican students reported that English was a language that it was difficult to learn. An interesting variation in the Mexican sample (compared to the Chinese) is that the negative views not only focused on the consequences of not “knowing English”, but also on the process of learning English as being difficult.

“[I would also tell a co-national that] learning English is hard. They should learn English in Mexico.”

- 14 year old girl from Jalisco

“Teachers speak English only but they are nice. Learning English is difficult to learn.”

-13 year old boy from Mexico City

The Mexican responses presented a few distinctive characteristics not present in the Chinese responses. First, Mexican students constructed the idea of English support in terms of social relationships with teachers and peers, not in the institution (e.g., ESL programs). Students expressed that teachers and students would help the newcomers with English, but not necessarily in the context of a ESL class. Also, Mexican students did not express feelings of being discriminated by peers because they were not English proficient. This was not mentioned at all in the interview data. This reflects the significant presence of first language speakers in the schools that Mexican students attended, with high proportions of Latino English language learners and the majority of these students socializing with co-nationals in the school.

In regards to the three factors—immigrant communities, school structures, and peer influences—one level of analysis indicates that these students lacked meaningful exposure and communication with English speakers in the school and the community. Most of the Mexican children lived in ethnic communities where the Mexican population was significant in the community and the local schools. Further, the high incidence of violence in some of these neighborhoods forced many families to live isolated lives in the neighborhood. Ethnographic data showed that many of the Mexican students lived “encerrados” [enclosed] at their homes. After school, these students came home and did not go out because of their fear of violence in their neighborhood. Therefore, very little interaction outside the home environment took place.

Like the students in Guadalupe Valdes’ study (2001), the Mexican students in this study also had very limited opportunities to interact with English speakers in the school within an academic context. First, they attended schools with high percentages of English language learners (40-59% of the school population). The Mexican students in this sample were placed in ESL cohorts where most of the students were Latino, Spanish speaking students. In these cohorts, students took 2 hours of ESL daily and 3 hours of academic subjects (Math, Science, and Social Studies) in either bilingual or shelter classes<sup>1</sup>. The majority of the students had all of their classes with the same classmates. As Valdes (2001) noticed in her study, the only significant contact with a fluent English speaker was with the ESL teacher since most of the academic teachers were mostly immigrants from Mexico and Spain who were also limited English proficient. Some of these immigrant teachers had to leave their jobs because they were unable to pass the written portion of an English test that the state of California requires for all teaching credential applicants. Some of the ESL teachers had exceptional credentials and good

<sup>1</sup> Shelter classes use English as the language of instruction, but they also use visual aids and other tools that facilitate comprehension for limited English proficient students.

backgrounds in cross-cultural proficiency (e.g., living in Mexico for more than 10 years), but the majority did not. Most of the teachers who served these ESL/Bilingual cohorts were not fully credentialed and held emergency certifications. Also, many of these cohorts were often served by substitutes.

The teachers' attitudes toward the Mexican students were varied. Mexican teachers often had positive views toward Mexican students but were sad about the behavioral transformation some students experienced—from well-behaved, modest children to disruptive students. Many teachers were convinced that newcomers eventually become problem students. Some South American and Spanish teachers had serious linguistic and cultural discontinuities with their students. A number of Spanish teachers complained about not understanding the way their students spoke Spanish. For the American teachers, achieving English proficiency was viewed as a prerequisite to any academic achievement. In my ethnographic observations I also saw that teachers often looked for students' conversational fluency as evidence of student achievement and intellectual capacity. Students often resented this view as they struggled to speak English in the classroom. Some students indicated that they were able to read very well in English, but their teachers did not consider that an important aspect of their fluency.

Finally, Mexican peers provided an interesting view on learning English—the racialization of the English language and the power struggle they experienced in learning it. Overwhelmingly, Mexican peers realized that it was necessary to learn English in order to become successful in the United States. But some did not view learning English as something they really wanted to do because of the important power connotations that learning English had for some of the students in this group. These power connotations related to the classroom interactions between student and teachers, and to the societal expectations regarding the social position of Mexican immigrants in the United States.

At the classroom level, teachers' attitudes toward Mexican students and their need to speak English provided a power struggle between students and teachers. Students indicated that their English speaking teachers often discouraged them from speaking Spanish in the classroom. Teachers would penalize students who spoke Spanish by taking tokens or stickers away from students. The students resented these *no-speaking-Spanish* practices because they said that most of the time they spoke Spanish because it was the more natural way of communicating—faster and authentic—with other Spanish-speaking peers.

“My ESL teacher yells at us if we speak Spanish. It's like she thinks we do it to bother her. But, we don't. It's just like, if I want to ask my classmate something, I think I can do it faster in Spanish. It's silly to talk to Mexicans in English.”

- 14 year old girl from State of Mexico

Further, most of the Mexican students in this study did not enjoy learning English. For them, it was a difficult process because of the inadequate instruction and limited materials. Because many ESL teachers used instructional strategies that diminished the intellectual capacity of their students (e.g., busy work, constant oral repetition), many Mexican adolescents complained that learning English was boring or that it entailed activities for *little kids*. A 15-year old boy from Guerrero shared:

“I hate Mrs. Franklin's class. [ESL]. She treats us like children in a kindergarten class. All we do is reading aloud and doing stupid games. I'm too old for that.”

Besides the disengaging classroom activities in ESL classrooms, the emphasis on oral proficiency and native-like speech frustrated many students who were too old to acquire a

native-like pronunciation. For some students, their reaction to a difficult and very humiliating process of being corrected in front of their peers was apathy towards learning English.

At the macro-level, the power struggle emerged as Mexican students internalized negative societal views of Mexicans and the Spanish language and sought to overcome them. There was an interesting connection between language and ethnic pride. Bilingualism was often valued by these students. But Mexican students viewed that being a fluent Latino English speaker at the expense of not speaking Spanish was a “stuck up” position. Since most of their peers were Mexicans or Latinos, Mexican peers discouraged speaking English in peer circles. It was not authentic to communicate in English with your peers:

“If we all [peers] speak Spanish and we are just talking among friends, it would be fake to speak in English.”

- 14 year old girl from State of Mexico

In addition, some students stated that they felt that in the United States English was perceived as a “better language” than Spanish and some students resented this view. For example, recent immigrant Mexican students often had conflictive relationships with Mexican American students who were not fluent in Spanish, but they were fluent English speakers. A 11-year old girl from Michoacan shared her dislike for Mexican American girls:

“I do not like Mexican American girls. They are all stuck up, speaking English like they don’t know Spanish. They are as dark as I am, but they speak English. What do they think they are? Blondies? They think they are better than us [Mexican immigrants]”

Issues of race (skin color) are intrinsically linked to this girl’s view. Language is culture and one’s language provides inclusion and exclusion to diverse social contexts. This Mexican girl was upset at the perceived divisive power of English as coming between two individuals who otherwise (by color) should not be in animosity. This is because this Mexican girl perceived English as the language of the “Blondies” or European Americans and speaking this language instead of Spanish meant that one was stuck up or felt superior to Mexicans. Many of the other Mexican students’ in this study share this girl’s view. Interestingly, when students were asked if they interacted with Whites and if that was the reason they knew Whites felt superior to Mexicans, most of them indicated they did not because Whites did not live in their neighborhoods or attend their schools. Their perceptions of English as language of the “Blondies” and Whites’ feeling superior to Mexicans, were based mostly on media representations (e.g., movies and TV) and also on their parents and other Mexican immigrants experiences with Whites in their workplace.

Some students rationalized that there was no need to learn English because they would eventually go back to Mexico. Some male students had serious thoughts about going back to Mexico. They missed their sense of self-worth that they felt in Mexico and they wanted to go back. Mexico was the place where these young men felt respected as individuals. For some students, their inability to speak English fluently, without an native-like accent gave them feelings of inadequacy (e.g., they were not intelligent or they were treated as little kids). These students’ way to fight these feelings of inadequacy for not being fluent English speakers was to express disinterest in learning English. Some of them opted for “not learning English” (Valdes, 2001).

“I do not like learning English at all. I think, what for? I’d rather go back to Mexico or go to work with my dad. When I go to work, I feel I am doing something useful. In school, I

just feel things do not make sense and I am bored. In Mexico I feel like a complete person. Here [it is] like I do not exist until I learn English.”

- 15 year old boy from Jalisco

Valdes alerts that “not-learning” should not be equated with failure. She explains that “not-learning is perhaps a milder, less oppositional form of resistance.” (Valdes, 2001, p.3). *Not learning* is a strategy used by students who feel rejected by family, society, or schools (Valdes, 2001). It has nothing to do with the intellectual capacity of the student. But because they have been placed at the margins of the educational or societal system, they opt for not to learn in an attempt to create a safer world where they could feel they had more control over their issues (Valdes, 2001). I would also add that in the case of the Mexican students in this study, their *not learning* attitude came after experiencing frustration with the methods of instruction in these schools. That is, as newcomers Mexican students wanted to learn English and were eager to try, but overtime they became frustrated with the way they were taught and concluded that learning English was not worth their time.

For Mexican students, learning English meant more than learning a language. Some Mexican peers resisted learning English because the process was unbearably boring or made them feel them inadequate and humiliated because of their accents. But for others, lack of interest in learning English was because it was the language of the “Blondies”, a group that was perceived as wanted to feel superior to Mexicans. In a similar reaction to the “acting White” phenomenon (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), these Mexican students would not accept linguistic assimilation if it meant not valuing their native language—Spanish. By “not learning” English, these students were fighting inferiority labels imposed on them, mostly by teachers and societal perceptions perpetuated in the media and their parents’ workplace. As minority students continue to live in isolated, segregated communities, the possibilities for cross-cultural interaction that could provide these students with more positive experiences with the groups they labeled as oppressive (e.g., the “Blondies” ) will continue to be limited and this isolation will continue to reproduce these feelings.

## **Learning from English Messages**

This paper has argued that the different attitudes between Chinese and Mexican students toward learning English were influenced in part by the interactions between societal, school, and socio-cultural contexts in which these students experienced American schools. As Heath suggests (1986) learning a language is a form of cultural learning. People learn a language in order to participate in a specific cultural setting. What is the instrumentality of being English proficient in a particular school setting? How do these social contexts promote or validate an instrumental value for learning English that immigrant students learn to adopt or reject?

For the Chinese, the pressure to interact with English learners (e.g. low percentages of English learners in school), avoid teasing, and their perception of being academically competitive even without total English proficiency were elements that framed their final conclusion that Chinese immigrant students would eventually learn English. On the other hand, the instrumentality of learning English to interact with peers was less emphasized in the Mexican group. While Mexican students valued learning English (e.g., urging others to learn), for some, the humiliation and frustration experienced in the process of learning English was too much to handle. Even more powerful, the construction of English as the language of the “Blondies” devalued the instrumentality of this language because Mexican immigrant students felt more validated in contexts where English was not necessary (e.g., working with co-ethnics or going back to

Mexico). For both groups learning English was somehow constructed as an issue of power, power to access academic and social spaces (e.g. not feeling excluded, feeling at ease). For the Chinese, their motivation to learn English is placed on their urgency to assimilate both academically and socially into school contexts that reflect the mainstream American society. For the Mexican group, learning English meant the validation that the mainstream culture was somehow better than their home culture and this led to promote *not learning* in some students. Nieto (1999) views pressures toward linguistic assimilation as intrinsically discriminatory and promoters of educational inequality. This does not mean that learning English promotes inequality in itself. But when linguistic assimilation is attached to negative views towards other languages and cultures, inequality occurs because one language is placed as a prerequisite to gain equal access to education (Nieto, 1999). As educators strive to meet the educational needs of all children, it is important to recognize the socialization processes that help build positive and negative school attitudes. Societal expectations, school structures, and peer influences play a role in understanding students' attitudes toward learning English. Schools need to address the lack of meaningful interactions that immigrant students have with English-speaking peers. Not only because they may provide English language models needed in the acquisition of English, but also because both groups of students would benefit from positive cross-cultural interactions that could help eliminate stereotypes and misunderstandings regarding these groups. Just as English speakers peers and teachers held stereotypical views of immigrant students (e.g., model minority), so did the immigrant students (e.g., Whites feel superior to Mexicans or Chinese are better at math than Americans). As any child, immigrant students will thrive in environments where they feel accepted, validated, and valued as important participants and contributors. As these students continue to be teased and humiliated by teachers and peers because of their lack of English proficiency and taught in ways that minimize their ethnic pride or intellectual capacity, the process of learning English will continue to be a struggle and some students will continue adopting a not learning attitude.

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## Appendix A

### Modal distribution of English Messages sub-sample

<b>Profile Characteristic</b>	<b>Chinese n=13</b>	<b>Mexican n=18</b>
<b>Student age at time of immigration</b>	10-12 years of age	7-9 years of age
<b>Student years of residence in U.S.</b>	4-5 years	4-5 years
<b>Student gender</b>	Females (77%) Males (23%)	Females (50%) Males (50%)
<b>Province of origin</b>	Guangdong	Jalisco
<b>Type of community of origin</b>	Urban	Semi-urban
<b>Father educational level</b>	Some post elementary	Elementary
<b>Mother educational level</b>	Some post elementary	Elementary
<b>Predominant ethnic group in school</b>	White	Latino
<b>% Free/reduced lunch program</b>	40% and higher of school population	60% and higher of school population
<b>% of English Language Learners</b>	0-19% of school population	40-59% of school population

## **Appendix B—School Descriptions**

### ***Chinese Schools:***

There were three schools represented in this sample—one middle school and two high schools. The three schools were located in inner-city Boston. These schools served working class neighborhoods, where a considerable number of students qualified for free or reduced lunches. However, the number of English language learners were less than 20% of the school population. All of these schools did not have a lot of educational services and needed renovations, with the exception of one high school that was considered a highly competitive school in terms of academic programs. In fact, this high school was a *exam school*, meaning that an entry test was necessary for admission. Most teachers were certified, but many of the teachers who served the ESL classes and Bilingual programs were in the process of gaining certification (e.g., Chinese citizens, emergency credential teachers, or Teach for America<sup>2</sup> participants). While minority students were represented in these schools, sometimes close to 30-40% of the student population, the White population was still the majority in the school. These schools served Asian and European immigrant students rather than Latino immigrant students. Students often complained about White students teasing them and pushing them around. One interesting thing about the sample is that the Chinese sample was scattered among different schools, rather than concentrating in just one school.

### ***Mexican Schools:***

The students in this sample attended two schools—one middle and one high school. Both were located in the same San Francisco Bay area town, but not in the City of San Francisco. The middle school served as the “feeder” school for the high school. This particular town was notorious of its high unemployment, housing density, and crime rates—among the highest in the United States. Despite covering just a 3-square mile radius, the town had about 17 active gangs. Both schools displayed graffiti and other evidence of vandalism and gang activity. While the community was diverse (Latino, Vietnamese, Laotian, Middle Eastern, and African American), the Latino group was the predominant group in both schools. Among the Latino group, the Mexican group was the largest. The White population in these schools was extremely low, less than 2%. The schools experienced a significant number of racial conflicts among students, including verbal abuse and physical violence. The division was mostly between Mexicans and African Americans and Asians. The schools were located in a severely economically disadvantaged area, close to 60% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch programs. Likewise, the number of English language learners were high (40-59%). Both schools needed major renovations. Doors were not secure, windows were broken, plumbing in the bathrooms and heating appliances were malfunctioning. Most teachers who served the students in this study were not fully certified. With the exception of students in Sheltered classes, most were served by individuals from Mexico, Spain, and South America who were quite limited in their own English proficiency and held emergency certifications.

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<sup>2</sup> Teach for America is a U.S. Program that recruits college graduates, often from prestigious universities, to serve as teachers for two years in severely economically disadvantaged communities.