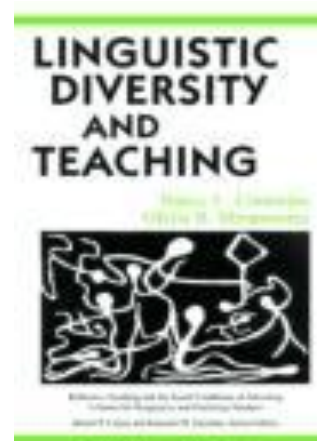




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Linguistic Diversity and Teaching, 4th Volume
Nancy L. Commins & Ofelia B. Miramontes (2005)
Edited by Daniel P. Liston & Kenneth M. Zeitchner
Series: *Reflective Teaching and the Social Conditions of
Schooling for Prospective and Practicing Teachers.*
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The book is the fourth volume of the series *Reflective teaching and the social conditions of schooling*: the first volume is *Reflective teaching* (Zeitchner & Liston, 1996), the second is *Culture and teaching* (Liston & Zeitchner, 1996), and the third is *Gender and Teaching* (Maher & Ward, 2002). In *Linguistic diversity and teaching*, Commins and Miramontes (2005) investigate changes in schooling populations in the US and how teachers are coping with them. Linguistic diversity and teaching is an investigation of new school realities and suggestions to responding to them in practical terms. It is not a theory-based book, it is field-inspired work. The authors ask readers to react to several situations where teachers have to face problems as a result of changes in the demographics of public schools and the arrival of students who are non-native speakers of English.

There is a pedagogical effort in the preface. The authors rightly explain how the success of the book depends on how readers will use it. The aim is not only to reflect on linguistic diversity in American schools, but also to propose solutions to the problem. The authors clearly state their beliefs. For instance, they insist on the necessity to include in teacher training programs topics which promote teachers' awareness of schooling conditions.

Part I: Case Studies and Reactions describes four problematic cases of linguistic diversity and how teachers, learners, principals and institutions have dealt with them. Then, teachers, instructors, Master's candidates, and program coordinators are asked to give their opinions concerning these cases. The cases highlight problems faced by monolingual and bilingual teachers in linguistically diverse contexts.

The first case tells about the consequences of teachers' unawareness of the needs of students who are not native speakers of English. Lack of knowledge of second language learning strategies might lead to resentment and anger. More particularly, the case shows how Frank, a conscientious fourth grade teacher at Walnut Elementary, made wrong decisions concerning one of his students, Vu, a recent arrival to the US.

The second case describes what happens when the teacher's background differs from those of their students. Jane, a teacher at Green Junior High School, tries hard to know about a Latino female student's background who has trouble getting along with other students. Jane wants to change the attitude of teachers who are unaware of the challenges minority students face.

The third case is about Laura and Juana at Randall Elementary where 60% are Latino and 40% white. Laura is taking classes in multilingual education to cope with changes at her school. Juana is bilingual and asks Laura to team teach with her. Laura is afraid of alienating herself from other teachers who do not seem to care, but finally decides to accept and decides to announce this at the faculty retreat, decided by the principal who is not prepared to work with linguistically diverse communities.

Case four is about the accurate assessment of minority students' school achievement. Andrew is a teacher at Edgeview Elementary who is fighting for a fair treatment of schools with a high number of second language learners. The scores of these schools at mandatory standards testing are very low. He believes that the assessments designed do not take into consideration special differences unique to ELLs. Indicators of how these populations have grown in their academic achievement should be included.

Commins and Miramontes report readers' reactions after each case. Some reactions raise serious issues and situate the problem in the larger economic and political context. Unfortunately, the argument of monolingual teachers has not been fairly represented. The dissenting views are criticized, but they have only rarely been given a say. It would have given readers a more balanced view of the attitudes toward linguistic diversity in American schools. This gap will later be filled when the authors recapitulate the public debate over which language or languages to use in American schools as a result of the increasing number of minority students.

Part II: Public Argument situates the questions addressed in the previous part in the wider context of schools which should be put into the core of teacher operation. Commins and Miramontes explain how teachers' beliefs about language learning, the language of instruction, immigration and social issues affect the quality of their teaching. The authors review three prevailing attitudes:

- (a) Those who believe that English is the glue that holds the American nation together, and therefore, are for *English only* teaching.
- (b) The second attitude is held by those who defend bilingualism at schools.
- (c) A third more pragmatic attitude of those who believe that the situation is so complex that one cannot offer one answer to the problem of diversity.

In the same section the authors address problems with the three view points and gauge their feasibility in light of the four cases reported in Part I.

In *Part III: Final Arguments and Some Suggestions and Resources for Further Reflection*, Commins and Miramontes give their own views about linguistic diversity and consider that diversity is positive. They suggest topics for further research and additional readings. However, the titles suggested do not include critical writings that go beyond the main issue of linguistic diversity and how it should be managed in democratic countries and not only in the particular case of a Latino community (Norton & Toohey, 2004).

The book remains an essential tool for teachers who need to respond to the ever-changing conditions of schools. It is both empirical and true. It engages the readers and makes potential teachers think for themselves. The different reactions reported in the book reveal the intricate nature of the challenges faced by teachers in US schools today.

One should stress the fact that the ideas concerning ESL learning are advocated by practitioners and not theoreticians. They have gone through the test of practice in real classes with real learners in particular settings. The larger socio-political context with which schools in the US operate is mentioned very rarely. It is true that some respondents mention socio-economic problems which transcend ethnicity. The additional questions following the reactions of readers to each case point ask what should be done in order to implement what has been proposed.

The diversity of reactions makes the book both resourceful and insightful. The authors withdraw and leave space to a multitude of agents and stakeholders. They intervene only to recapitulate, give some coherence to the diversity of opinions, and make transitions. With minorities in many countries, particularly in the developed world, as a result of migration from poor countries, the issues raised in *Linguistic Diversity and Teaching* reach beyond public schools in the US.

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