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Danling Fu
University of Florida, Gainesville

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Cover Page Footnote

Danling Fu is Professor in College of Education, University of Florida, with a specialty in writing and literacy instruction for emergent bilingual students. In the past decades, she has worked in schools populated with new immigrant students, involved with literacy program development, reform, adaptation and implementation to meet the needs of those students. She has been a consultant across the nation and the world: giving keynote/feature speeches and workshops, and working closely with classroom teachers in search of effective ways to improve the outcomes of emergent bilingual students.

Ofelia García: A True Pioneer and Leader in Bilingual Education

Danling Fu

University of Florida, Gainesville

In this article I trace my growth as a bilingual educator: how Ofelia García's work has educated, humbled, and enlightened me. In this tribute to her retirement, I will focus my discussion on a few of Ofelia García's publications that have had a great impact on me as a scholar. With her work I will examine my own scholarship development, which demonstrates my growth conceptually as a scholar in bilingualism and a teacher educator in bilingual education.

Keywords: bilingual education, leader, Ofelia García, pioneer, scholarship, translanguaging concept, translanguaging pedagogy

When I started my work in New York's Chinatown schools two decades ago, I knew little about bilingual education and its theory or practice. It was through working with emergent bilingual students and bilingual teachers that I first gained experience and knowledge of bilingual education. My first two books: *My Trouble is My English* (1995) and *An Island of English* (2003), did not focus on bilingual education, though all the student participants in my studies had been, in fact, emergent bilinguals. In late 2003, I first met Ofelia García when we both served on the National Distinguished Advisory Committee for New York Bilingual & ELL Education. I have never forgotten her and what she expressed at that meeting. One committee member complained about the current ineffective ways of teaching ELs, saying: "*I don't understand why we cannot teach English to ELLs as we teach a foreign language by letting them memorize idiomatic expressions, phrases so they can speak and write with fewer errors such as where to use prepositions like 'in' or 'at' properly.*"

I was shocked to hear this, but kept quiet. Ofelia García, however, was not so reticent: "*Now I am going to speak: why should we drill students like that, to speak perfectly? I have been speaking English my whole life, and I am still making mistakes with those 'in' or 'at' propositions in my English speaking and writing. Why do we have to make those students who are new to the language speak perfectly?*" Her words silenced the whole table. I cannot remember anything else about that meeting, but her words have never left my mind since that day.

It is through reading García's work that I have become more knowledgeable regarding bilingual education. Her work has educated, humbled and enlightened me, and it continues to do so. In this essay, I would like to focus on a few of her publications that have had a great impact on me as a scholar.

I was first struck by Ofelia García's work published in 1999 on Latino high school students with little formal education, in which she made the following four suggestions in education for these students:

1. The focus of the educational program would not just be the development of Spanish literacy, rather using literacy, both in Spanish and English, to gain social and science knowledge.
2. Subjects would not be compartmentalized and school would not be departmentalized. A single teacher working with fewer students in small groups would provide most of the instruction.
3. Students would earn high school credit whenever they achieve appropriate competencies and/or pass the required exams. The educational programs would not attempt to graduate students in four years, but rather would be available for as long as it takes.
4. School would not follow the conventional time frame of 9:00 to 3:00, but would offer flexible and compact schedules, making it possible for students to work while attending school (p. 79).

In my experience, these represented the most fundamental changes any scholars had ever proposed for educating SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education) emergent bilingual students at the secondary level. These students have been branded by teachers as the biggest challenges in our teaching and count towards the highest dropout rates in our schools. My first major study was on Southeast Asian refugee adolescents, most of whom were SIFE students. My main recommendation from that study was: focus on students but not on grade curriculum. However, in her work, García asked for transformational changes: deconstruction of the traditional structure at the U.S. secondary education, and reconstruction of the education system with regards to class size, teacher's role, school time and length of high school education. She understood that in order to provide SIFE students with successful formal education, changes at the instructional level or in individual classrooms by individual teachers cannot be enough. Schools have to make fundamental, structural changes to meet these students' needs: they need more time, different schedules for schooling, and different structures of education. I wished I had read her work when I studied my Southeast Asian students and I would have seen more of what hampered their study in our schools.

Today, SIFE students continue to enter our schools from all over the world, and they still have the highest dropout rates and present substantial challenges to our teaching (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). A recent report by Sugarman (2017) from the Migration Policy Institute, states:

Immigrant and refugee youth who enter the United States during their secondary school years face a daunting set of challenges. In addition to learning a new language and adjusting to U.S. classroom norms, they must quickly fill gaps in their subject-matter knowledge and pass the courses required to graduate high school before aging out of the system" (Sugarman, 2017, p. 2).

We should re-visit García's suggestions made nearly two decades ago, which ask schools to go beyond the instructional levels to restructure our schools and education to benefit these students.

Ofelia García's scholarship always advocates for high quality education for bilingual students. In her study on bilingual writers (2002), she analyzed the consequence of remedial English education for bilingual Latino students. She stated that the remedial education these students received in the U.S. high school or colleges not only hampered the development of their English writing competency but also diminished their writing ability and confidence in their home language. She defined this as a backward transfer in biliteracy development and called for culturally authentic, meaningful, and rich contextual literacy education for bilingual students. This is one of the few studies I read among bilingual scholars that pointed out the "writing backwards across languages" (p. 248) caused by the low-quality education in the biliteracy development of bilingual students, which taught writing not for authentic communicative purpose, but as isolated academic activities dominant in English. Her scholarship always pushes norms; she sees good bilingual education as promoting advanced biliteracy development rather than restricting students' potential as bilinguals.

It was through reading Ofelia García's 2009 book on *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century*, that I have gained a more intimate understanding of bilingualism and bilingual education. This book has presented not only a historical and comprehensive overview of bilingualism and bilingual education in the United States and throughout the world, but also the author's new vision and theory on bilingualism, which shakes the foundation of current bilingual theories and pedagogy. As Tove Skutnabb-Kanga's comment made for this book: "Ofelia (and Hugo) have unemployed a lot of researchers. After this book, there is no need for another book in bi/multilingual education for a decade" (García, 2009, back cover of the book). García has challenged the traditional monolingual orientation dominated in current bilingual, language and literacy education for bilingual students, including the terms describing bilingual students, their home languages, and the labels used for them in education such as *mother tongue* and *second language learners*. I am profoundly intrigued by the following quote in this book:

In the globalized context of the twenty-first century, the concept of a second language learner must be replaced by the concept of the bilingual whose communicative practices including translanguaging. ...

The concept of a second-language speaker is also problematic. Is a second language speaker someone who speaks with an accent? When does one stop being a second-language speaker? Terms such as "second-language learner" and "second-language speaker," when studied from a heteroglossic and bilingual perspective, make little sense. Instead, we should speak about "bilinguals," giving the term a full range of possibilities, and taking away the negative connotations associated with being second, and not first (p. 60).

Her critique for the term *second language speaker* also reflects my own current situation. As a native speaker of Chinese, I am considered as second language speaker

of English. But after studying and working in the United States for over three decades, my English, especially in reading and writing, is much stronger than my Chinese reading and writing. Every piece I have written to the Chinese audience is first written in English and then translated to Chinese with the help of my doctoral students or friends. My English writing, especially academic writing, is more fluent and sophisticated than my Chinese writing. But I am always considered as second language speaker of English, even though my *first* language is much weaker than my *second* one in many aspects.

However, despite my own situation as a bilingual, I never thought of questioning the term of *second language learner or speaker*, but live with the established label and concept. That is what I have realized: she is truly a pioneer and leader in bilingual education. I love the image and metaphor she used to explain dynamic bilingualism: a banyan tree (growing to multi-directions) or all-terrain vehicle (with flexibility and mobility), which positively portray and value the complexity and appropriation of everyday practice of bilinguals. Her view of dynamic bilingualism has gone beyond all the conceptual theories that stress the importance of home languages of bilinguals and the recursive bilingual practice such as additive bilingualism (Lambert, 1975), L1 and L2 transfer theory on common underlying proficiency (Cummins, 1979), and translingual practice (Canagarajah, 2005).

In her book, *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century* (2009), Ofelia García, as a visionary, leads readers to reimagine and expand bilingualism and bilingual education, and forcefully advocates that bilingual education is not just for non-native English speaking students, but for “all children and language learners in the world today” (p. 9), where the majority of the population is bilingual/multilingual. Not just in presenting theories or policy for bilingual education, she proposed translanguaging as a promising pedagogical practice for educating emergent bilinguals. Her translanguaging theory proposes a transformation in thinking and practice for not just bilinguals, but for all students in the 21st century.

Ofelia García with her colleague, Li Wei (2014) from London, has given a full discussion on translanguaging theory and practice in their book, *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education* (2014). They believe that bilinguals are not “two monolinguals in one person” (Grosjean, 1989, p. 3), with distinct language repertoires for each of the languages they know. Rather, they suggest that bilinguals have a single language repertoire that gives them more tools, richer resources, and more flexible ways to learn new knowledge, to express themselves, and to communicate with others.

Their conceptualization of translanguaging was both enlightening and intriguing as it provided a compelling, well-fitting framework for my evolving understandings of emergent bilinguals’ language and literacy development, which had come a long way from my days of trying to forget my Chinese so I could truly master English (this monolingual belief truly has contributed to weakening my Chinese). As such, translanguaging provides a welcomed theoretical respite from monolingual perspectives that are single-mindedly focused on the acquisition of a target language, which has continued to dominate language instruction throughout the world. Translanguaging, not only theorizes and names the natural communicative practice of bi/multilinguals but also challenges the monolingual notions underlying the policies,

curriculum, and practice of current second language, foreign language, and bilingual programs across the world. It even goes beyond the concepts of language interdependence, codeswitching practice, and linguistic hybridization, which, though giving value to all the languages of bi/multilinguals, are still grounded in a monolingual perspective: seeing languages as separate entities in a bilingual's brain. She grounded her thinking with a multilingual theory, shifting her focus on bilinguals and their communication practice from linguistic codes to reconceptualizing the instruction of bilinguals with a translanguaging pedagogic approach.

Like all bilinguals, I translanguage all the time in my everyday life. At home, I speak mostly English to my Caucasian, English-speaking husband, and switch automatically to mostly Chinese, or mixed languages when I speak to my son and my daughter-in-law, who are native Chinese speakers but also proficient in English. When I chat with my Chinese students, we switch back and forth frequently between English and Chinese about their studies. In the past, I used to define this practice as codeswitching. However, translanguaging helped me understand: even though we learn different languages with different codes, once they are stored in our brains, these language codes integrate into a new, single linguistic system, mixing and complementing like greens in a salad bowl.

This new system of mixed languages, like a salad of mixed greens, functions together to benefit human lives and activities. If we fail to recognize this unified linguistic repertoire in a *bilingual*, we would tend to give different spaces in pursuing the separate development of their languages or we would use one to serve the other, rather than letting them work together synergistically to strengthen bilingual development as a whole entity of becoming. García's translanguaging theory helped me understand that the two terms of *code-switching* and *inter-language* I used to define emergent bilingual's writing developmental stage not only indicate an emphasis on language codes rather than practice, but also imply that using bilingual's first language should be temporary and disappear once proficient in English. From a translanguaging perspective, I re-examined the writing samples I collected from young emergent bilinguals to bilingual doctoral students and I could see the translanguaging practice in their writing as they do in their oral communication throughout the whole spectrum of becoming and being literate bilingual beings. Translanguaging is part of living as bilinguals.

Translanguaging concept and pedagogy challenges the English-only practice in English programs, the language separate practice in bilingual and dual language programs, and the 99% target rule in foreign language instruction (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). This innovative stance invites all teachers to create space and opportunity in their classrooms for all students to use all their linguistic resources. This action can maximize the students learning potential and break restrictions so that all students enhance their academic knowledge learning. García is truly an intrepid pioneer as a scholar in bilingualism, campaigning for a promising bilingual education for all students in the globalized 21st century.

As a scholar in general literacy, I have been an outsider to the bilingual world for a long time. I remember the first time she invited me to speak to her class at Columbia

University after she read my work about New York Chinatown schools. Then she recommended me to give keynote speeches at other bilingual research conferences in New York City, and later on she invited me to serve on the National Advisory Board for New York State Bilingual Initiative Committee. I truly appreciate her for valuing my work with emergent bilinguals, though my work clearly showed a lack of bilingual theory and scholarship. It was through her recognition and invitation that I gradually entered the community of bilingual scholars.

During a recent meeting with her in January of 2017, I said what I had on my mind for a long time: “You must be so annoyed by my definition of writing stages of emergent bilinguals and advocacy of code-switching in their learning to write English in my book. I am so embarrassed to imagine how you would react to my work when I read your work on translanguaging. How could you still value me and invite me to speak and serve on the committee that consisted of renowned scholars in bilingual field?” Her response was: “We all started from a monolingual perspective; that is the starting point for us all, and grow to understand bilingualism more and better. You are a good writer and know how to speak to teachers. I should learn from you.” Wow, her words encouraged me so much.

At that time, I was struggling with my third revision of writing a book proposal with Teachers College Press. From what she said, I decided to revise my writing by tracing my scholarship development from monolingual to translanguaging perspective in a narrative style that speaks to teachers. The revision went successfully and the book proposal was finally accepted. Ofelia García has been a mentor to me: from reading her work, listening to her words, and having personal contacts with her, I have grown as a scholar in the literacy field. With confidence and knowledge, I am better prepared today to work as a teacher educator and a researcher in the bilingual field.

Ofelia García’s scholarship has impacted the bilingual and literacy education field throughout the world. Her numerous publications have influenced and will continue to influence generations of bilingual and literacy education researchers, educators, teachers, and policy makers globally. She has been and continues to be our leader in the field to guide and mentor us to improve our research and education for all children, and she will never retire from us or from the bilingual field and world!

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