

LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND PROJECT BASED LEARNING:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF A NEW TECH
CLASSROOM IN A HIGH SCHOOL
ON THE US/MEXICO BORDER

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Dedication

To my family

PREVIEW

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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF A NEW TECH
CLASSROOM IN A HIGH SCHOOL
ON THE US/MEXICO BORDER

by

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This ethnographic case study sought to understand how English Language Learners used their language and literacy practices within a project based learning (PBL) classroom to complete their PBL tasks. Studies revealed the impact of how English language learners within a PBL learning environment were able to use their language and literacy as a social practices that led to successful student engagement (Call & Sotillo, 1995; Campbell, 2012). This study was conducted at Wilson High School, located along the US/Mexico border. The focus of the case study was a 9th grade combination English/World Geography class of the school's inaugural New Tech Program. Using a purposive sampling, four focal English Language Learners within the case were selected and followed throughout the study.

This study was grounded in the sociocultural theories relevant to language and literacy practices. Most significantly, this study focused on the code-switching and translanguaging practices that ELLs used to make meaning and communicate with others. In Zentella's seminal study, *Growing up Bilingual* (1997), she identified three linguistic exchanges *in the head*, *out of mouth* and *on the spot* that pertained to intentional code-switching as a social practice aligned to identity. These linguistic exchanges were applied to the languaging practices of the focal students and analyzed using Discourse Analysis to understand how the students negotiated meaning and understanding.

Various ethnographic tools were used to conduct the study that revealed three significant findings. The students used their translanguaging practices to communicate informally and formally within the academic classroom. Secondly, the students engaged in higher order thinking to solve their project tasks. Finally, various literacy events functioned as pivots that triggered a show of solidarity and status as reflected in the students' languaging practices. The implications

of this study revealed a need for further research to compare/contrast code-switching and translanguaging within the classroom environment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the 2016-2017 school year, the Texas Education Agency reported 1,005,765 Bilingual or English as a Second Language Learners enrolled in public schools in the state of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2017). Similar enrollment trends were evident on a national level as schools saw a significant increase in English Learners and recent immigrants over the age of 15 entering US school (García & Wei, 2013). Schools were directed to identify the instructional needs of the new immigrant enrollees and place them accordingly in the appropriate classroom setting. The challenge remained on how to best serve the languaging needs of these students to help them develop second language acquisition while gaining relevant content knowledge. With an interest in understanding how the learning environment contributed to the development of language and literacy, in this study I examined how ELLs used their languaging interactions within one particular kind of learning environment, that of Project Based Learning, to shape their academic language and literacy practices.

The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 led to the implementation of bilingual education programs designed to meet the needs of ELLs (Gee, 2012). This legislation was designed to provide services for immigrant students enrolling in US schools. But during the 1960s and 1970s, most of the programs developed to help ELLs were subtractive in nature and minimized the students' use of their home language in an effort to promote the learning of English (Collins & Cioè-Peña, 2016; Edwards, 2006; García & Wei, 2013). The practice of subtractive bilingualism favored one language over another, primarily replacing the home language with the dominant language (Baker, 1996; Edwards, 2006; García & Wei, 2013). But the practice of replacing a student's home language with the dominant language sent the message that the

language of the ELL was unacceptable or inappropriate in the same way that it implied that the ELL was unacceptable or inappropriate (González, 2006). Many educators did not yet understand how first (L1) and second (L2) languages were connected (Edwards, 2006; Martínez, 2010), and ELLs were often placed in English-only learning environments with the goal of gaining English language proficiency while suppressing their first language (Alamillo, Palmer, Viramontes, & Garcia, 2005; Baker, 1996; Edwards, 2006; Olsen, 2014; Valenzuela, 2005). The concept of languaging, i.e. using language as a social communicative practice, was more than the use of syntactical words and phrases. Gee (2012) emphasized that people were a reflection of their up-bringing, their environment, their ideologies and their languaging. So, from this perspective, the connection between language and identity could not be negated as languaging was a social practice of communication be it formal or informal. The practice of subtractive bilingualism was damaging not only in the short term, but it had long term negative effects as students were often denied the opportunity to engage in academically rigorous instructional settings which could negatively impact academic outcomes (Esquinca, 2012; Olsen, 2014).

Research conducted by Cummins (1979) showed that the subtractive learning environment did not promote the proficient use of English. Studies showed that students who were denied the use and development of their native language struggled in gaining proficiency in a second language (Cummins, 1979; Cummins, Baker, & Hornberger, 2001). Research indicated that the brain of an ELL did not store languages in separate areas, indicating that the act of languaging, to include speaking, writing or communicating, was done by drawing on all available linguistic resources within the ELL in order for them to make meaning or communicate with others (Cummins, 1979; Garcia, 2009). Researchers (Cummins, 1979; García & Wei, 2013;

Zentella, 1997) noted that students used their entire language repertoire to communicate with their own versions of linguistic exchanges to include code-switching and translanguaging. Hornberger (1989) posited that rather than distinguish between different language practices, she stated that all languages, including translanguaging should be seen to be on a biliteracy continua. The continua demonstrated that languages were interconnected and supported the research that students drew from their many forms of languaging within their own biliteracy continua to make meaning. Translanguaging was identified as a new integrated language practice used by the speaker to engage in specific forms of communication (Baker, 2011; Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012), demonstrating that students used various linguistic exchanges to communicate with other. Translanguaging was more than a mixture of two languages, as it was an amalgamation of the speaker's entire language repertoire.

Cummins (1979) stated that an important component to second language acquisition was not so much the practice of using one language over the other, but more so to engage the ELL in meaningful cognitive development of languaging practices that will lead to the development of academic language. Dewey (1938) recognized that for any type of learning to be meaningful, it had to be relevant and purposeful. The Project Method was based on the idea that students could extend what they learned in the classroom and apply it to solve a real-world problem (Hugg & Wurdinger, 2007; Kilpatrick, 1918). Teaching the students, regardless of their languaging ability, how to solve applicable problems within society would promote purpose and value in their lives. This concept of Project Based Learning (PBL) was embraced by several researchers (Boss, Larmer & Mergendoller, 2013; Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006; Larmer, Mergendoller & Boss, 2015; Thomas, 2000) to create authentic and meaningful learning experiences as expressed by Cummins (1979). While some researchers acknowledged the detrimental effects of

subtractive bilingualism and called for academically rigorous and meaningful instructional settings for ELLs (Cummins, 1979; Olsen, 2014), educators had to find more effective ways to provide academic support for ELLs. Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2006) stated that one of the main components of implementing an effective PBL instructional unit was to have the students work collaboratively to solve their research problem. If learning conditions were optimal, bilingualism would be “multi-directional and recursive” (Garcia, 2009, p. 69), meaning that if PBL groups included both native and non-native speakers, the languaging practices of all the students would be strengthened. The collaborative learning environment within the PBL instructional setting could help provide a translanguaging space for ELLs to foster academic meaning-making and purposeful communication.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to contribute to the existing body of literature on the languaging practices of ELLs within a PBL instructional setting by using theories of discourse and figured worlds to examine how such a setting contributed to their use and development of academic language and literacy practices. This study will specifically address how ELLs used translanguaging within the instructional setting to complete collaborative PBL tasks. Additionally, this study will focus on how the developing identities of the ELLs, within their cultural world or figured world of their PBL classroom, were reflected in their language and literacy practices. This study was conducted at Wilson High School, a comprehensive 9 – 12 high school, along the US/Mexico border. The high school was part of a district that was associated with a cheating scandal that started as far back as 2006 and that resulted in the prosecution of several district administrators including the district superintendent. At the time of

this study, litigation was still pending for several high level administrators accused of fraud to manipulate test scores to gain a better accountability standing. In an effort to improve the district's overall academic performance, Wilson High School was authorized to implement the New Tech (NT) program with an inaugural cohort of 80 freshmen beginning with 2016-2017 class. This study was conducted during the second semester of the inaugural year of the New Tech program at Wilson High School. In order to initiate comprehensive restructuring for what was once a struggling campus, the district aligned the PBL focus of the New Tech program with strengths that the school had previously demonstrated in the arts and humanities. The NT network provided schools with services and support to implement a more creative approach to learning to include interdisciplinary project based learning rather than the traditional teacher-led instructional format (The New Tech Network, 2017). This ethnographic case study focused on one combination English/World Geography New Tech class where four ELLs were selected as focal students of the study.

This study sought to understand how students used their language and literacy practices within their NT classroom to complete their PBL tasks. The instructional format of PBL was designed to promote student learning within a socially mediated setting, along with understanding how the students used their language and literacy practices to express comprehension and communicate with others was significant to understanding their learning process. Pertinent to this study was to understand how a rigorous learning environment, much like that intended with the structure of a New Tech PBL classroom, contributed to the developing student identity of ELLs as they gained academic and cultural status that was demonstrated within their language and literacy practices. By combining all the components of the NT classroom, to include opportunities for student collaboration, implementation of real-world

instructional tasks and a socially mediated learning environment, a rich learning environment would be created allowing space for authentic translanguaging interaction among the students.

Within this context, this study will address the following research questions:

Overarching question: How do oral and written interactions in a New Tech classroom shape the academic language and literacy development of ELLs?

Sub-questions

- What are the oral and written language and literacy practices that New Tech students use to complete their PBL tasks?
- In the context of the figured world, how do ELLs demonstrate solidarity and status in their language and literacy practices?

Theoretical Framework

Code-Switching and Translanguaging.

This study was grounded in the sociocultural theories relevant to language and literacy practices. Most significantly, this study focused on the code-switching and translanguaging practices that ELLs used to make meaning and communicate with others. Using Zentella's research in the seminal study, *Growing up Bilingual* (1997), she identified three linguistic exchanges that pertained to intentional code-switching as a social practice aligned to identity. Linguistic exchanges such as On the Spot, In the Head and Out of Mouth not only reflected the identity of the speakers in Zentella's (1997) study, but they were examples of purposeful code-switches that the focal students in the study used in their communication with one another. By using the body of research from the New Literacy Studies (NLS) to understand how language practices were used as social forms of communication, I was able to apply the linguistic exchanges identified by Zentella to the languaging practices of the participants in my study in

order to gain a better understanding of their motive and intent of their languaging as a social practice. Zentella indicated that the linguistic exchanges used by the children in her study reflected purposeful shifts or what she referred to as footings (Zentella, 1997). When the students in Zentella's study code-switched, they switched specific words or phrases to show emphasis in meaning. These intentional shifts in footing were supported by the research from NLS as those shifts in literacy, such as used by the children in Zentella's study (1997), were more just than grammatical structures. The way the children code-switched demonstrated how they were able to use their languaging practices as a form of social communication intended to convey a very specific meaning.

Discourse, status and solidarity.

Gee (2012) stated that Discourse (capital D) was more than just the use of language. Discourse included ways of speaking, listening and interacting on a social level to create an intricate connection between languaging activities and identity. As the Discourses of the focal students of this study were analyzed, the concepts of solidarity and status were reflected in their languaging practices (Gee, 2012). The concepts of status and solidarity, according to Gee (2012), were concepts that were both related and often competing depending on the social intent of the speaker. A speaker could demonstrate a show of status or power that would elevate their position within their circle of friends, and at the same time they could use intentional word choices that would show solidarity to align their membership with those same friends. When strangers entered the neighborhood in Zentella's study referred to as *El Bloque*, they often spoke in English to people they did not know. But as the children befriended these people, they eventually started to speak to them in Spanish as a show of acceptance and solidarity as neighbors within *El Bloque* (Zentella, 1997). By identifying when and how the focal students in