Academic uses of language (re)defined: A case of emergent bilinguals engaging in languages and literacies in and outside of school

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides nuanced description of the academic uses of language in which Spanish-English emergent bilinguals in Grade 4 engage in and out of school. This qualitative research conducted over one academic year at school and in children's homes, captures the ways in which six focal children from two classrooms (one bilingual, one English medium) use and move between repertoires of English and Spanish. The author argues that these ways have important implications for examining the "language of school." Findings illustrate that although teachers explicitly teach some aspects of academic language, students strategically draw from multilingual repertoires to accomplish academic tasks and communicate for academic purposes in a variety of settings. By using a translanguaging approach, which takes into consideration children's entire linguistic repertoires, this analysis makes visible children's ways of using language (not just one language or another) and thus helps redefine what is considered academic language.

1. Introduction

In the current U.S. educational context and in other countries around the world, students are faced with the dual demands of learning the language of instruction and academic content simultaneously. This issue compels us to consider the language of school and its role in instruction, especially in light of the trend toward national standards (Hammond, 2014; Kibler, Valdés, & Walqui, 2014). In the U.S., College and Career Readiness standards and assessments have elevated and made more explicit the language demands associated with content learning (Bunch, Kibler, & Pimentel, 2012; Lee, Quinn, & Valdés, 2013). These demands have implications for all students and most especially for children learning English as an additional language.

Substantial evidence shows that explicit instruction of linguistic features benefits students' language proficiency (Echevarría, Short, & Powers, 2006; Snow & Uccelli, 2009) and enables students to make more informed linguistic choices. However, classroom research has shown that teachers' narrow views of academic language deprive emergent bilinguals[1] of meaningful engagement with language (Bruna, Vann, & Perales Escudero, 2007; Enright

& Gilliland, 2011), which, when coupled with educational practices that track and isolate emergent bilinguals, further reduces their opportunities for meaningful engagement with the curriculum (Callahan, 2005; Valdés, 2001). Moreover, ample research also demonstrates that English-only policies and practices that devalue students' home languages and cultures are counterproductive to school engagement (Menken, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). While critiques have been leveled at the construct of academic language, in part because of the lack of consensus in defining it (Gutiérrez, 1995; Valdés, 2004), the construct may be of value to teachers to reflect on the language demands of their lessons or on how disciplines are traditionally packaged in patterns of language. I proceed from the view that there is utility in the notion of academic language, but it must continue to be redefined, so that its use, teaching, and learning adds value to, rather than erases or replaces, children's linguistic capabilities.

The research reported on in this paper is part of a larger qualitative research project conducted over one academic year in a mid-sized Midwestern city with the purpose of understanding the language and literacy engagement of Grade 4 Spanish-English emergent bilinguals in and out of school. In this analysis I examine the ways in which six focal children from two instructional contexts (one bilingual classroom, one English-medium classroom) use and move between repertoires of English and Spanish in multiple settings that I argue have important implications for examining the "language of school." The question guiding this analysis is: how do children use their various linguistic repertoires to make sense of

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[1] The author prefers this term to "English Language Learners" or "English Learners" to emphasize children's multilingual competencies.

academic tasks and communicate for academic purposes in multiple contexts? This research enhances understandings of language and literacy learning by calling into question the "norms" of language at school, a necessary step in better supporting emergent bilinguals and in valuing the often overlooked complexity of repertoires with which children engage.

I draw on Gee's (1990) *Big D Discourses* and García's (2009) translanguaging to provide a theoretical framework for a broader notion of academic language, one that situates this form of language among others that students engage with and use in their daily lives. After describing the methods of this study, I present and discuss three sets of data that highlight the focal children's exposure to different aspects of academic language at school, as well as the richness and complexity of their language use for academic purposes outside of school. Finally, I situate these findings in relation to traditional and expanded notions of academic language and offer implications for practice.

2. Big "D" discourses: porous and overlapping

In contrast with scholarship that renders academic language as a primarily stable, unified form of language (e.g., Cummins, 1984, 2000; Scarcella, 2003), I approach academic language as one of many overlapping patterns of language, with related ways of doing, being, and valuing (Gee, 1990) that are acquired and used by individuals and groups while engaged in the activities of the various discourse communities in which they participate (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Heath, 1983; Rymes, 2010). I draw on the work of Gee in particular in asserting that we can (a) identify meaningful patterns of language individuals and groups use while engaged in a specific activity such as schoolwork, and, at the same time (b) acknowledge the porous nature of discourse communities, which include schools, and the language used by children in and across sites of learning.

Gee (1990) makes the distinction between *small "d" discourse*, which he refers to as language-in-use, and *Big "D" discourse*, defined as a "socio-culturally distinctive way of thinking, acting, interacting, talking and valuing" (p. 33). This distinction allows for situating and analyzing language on multiple levels. Learning the language associated with schooling, which Gee (1990, 2013) terms *secondary discourses*[2] includes the linguistic forms and functions of academic disciplines that approaches such as Systemic Functional Linguistics have contributed so much to expounding (Christie & Martin, 2007; Schleppegrell, 2004).[3] Empirical research in this area has helped educators unpack the language of their disciplines and assist students in navigating academic registers through explicit attention to language (for two recent examples see Gebhard, Chen, & Britton, 2014; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014). And yet, following Gee's conceptualization, being a successful student not only involves mastering the *secondary discourse* of academic language but also engaging in certain activities (e.g., reading books at home) and displaying specific behaviors and attitudes (e.g., actively listening to show respect for the teacher) to be recognized as such. From this account of discourse, then, attention to linguistic structures is needed, as well as embodied experiences, to understand a child's engagement with academic uses of language.

Gee also reminds us that discourses are inherently ideological and historically situated, as they involve values and the distribution of material goods and social power (Gee, 1990). Certain discourses can gain prominence over others, becoming, in Gee's terms, *dominant discourses*. For example, acceptance of bilingualism and bilingual identities are conditioned and overpowered by dominant discourses of monolingualism. Although often associated with economic advantage, bi/multilingualism is not encouraged or embraced uniformly in the U.S. (see Callahan & Gándara, 2014). For example, knowing a minority language from birth rather than learning a foreign language later in school, is often rendered a barrier rather than an asset, and the minority bilingual child is considered "at risk" (González, 2001, p. xix). National and schooling contexts often undervalue students' home languages, or worse, threaten language loss, and ultimately weaken rather than build upon emergent bilinguals' linguistic strengths (Wong Fillmore, 2000). The case for acknowledging the porous nature of discourse rests on the notion that languages, literacies, and learning are situated and socially mediated, and that students' home, school, and community experiences, including the range of languages and literacies students negotiate on a daily basis, all contribute to language learning.

3. Translanguaging: a bi/multilingual approach

While the notion of porous discourses offers an understanding of language across repertoires and context of use, the semiotic systems by and through which discourse communities are constituted are made even more complex by multiple languages. In contrast with monolingual speakers, bi/multilingual speakers summon expanded sets of linguistic resources for positioning themselves and negotiating communication (Bailey, 2007a, 2007b). García's (2009) concept of translanguaging is particularly useful because it presents a view of language based on the ways bi/multilinguals use language to communicate. To shift from a traditional notion of bilingualism that tends to separate and hierarchize languages, García argues that bilinguals use languages and language varieties within an integrated system. In this view, bi/multilingual students use and combine language varieties, including academic uses of language, fluidly and strategically depending on the context.

García (2009) defines translanguaging as "multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage to make sense of their bilingual worlds" (p. 45). These discursive practices include but are not limited to code-switching and alternating languages, translating and interpreting, and hybrid language practices (García, 2009; García & Sylvan, 2011). Within a translanguaging perspective, these discursive practices are used strategically as part of a view of sense-making and bilingual performance conceived on bilingual norms of communication (García & Wei, 2013). Flexible and strategic use of linguistic resources defies the view of bilinguals as two monolinguals in one body (Grosjean, 1989) and other monolingual orientations to language learning. The reorientation is important, as monolingual orientations, much like a *dominant discourse* in Gee's words, have in the U.S. historically rendered the discursive practices of bi/multilinguals as deviant from and therefore inferior to standard forms. A translanguaging lens elevates awareness of the complexity and intentionality of these discursive practices, as "bilinguals select features strategically to communicate effectively" (García, 2012, p. 1).

García (2009, 2012) also treats translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy, one that encourages children and teachers themselves as bi/multilinguals to simultaneously draw from, rather than separate and fragment, their linguistic resources. Garcia and Sylvan (2011) characterize translanguaging in education as "constant adaption of linguistic resources in the service of meaning-making" (p. 385)

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[2] *Secondary discourses* are specialist varieties of language often acquired later in life and contrast with *primary discourses*, which are associated with socialization early in life at home and through typical family and peer interactions (Gee, 1990, 2014).

[3] A tenet of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is that grammar, register, genre, and other language features are used to create and examine patterns of language and meaning.