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Debating the world – Choosing the word: High school debates as academic discourse preparation for bilingual students

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how migrant, bilingual high school students, who are speakers of both Spanish and English in their out-of-school lives, learn to master academic discourse through the use of their pre-existing internal resources. Our analysis focuses on the instances when the student debaters use their bilingualism, memorization, and flexible identities to take up academic language during the debate season. In doing so, we explore academic discourse as a situated practice. We suggest that the setting of the Migrant Education Speech and Debate Tournaments provides the opportunities for bilingual high school students to interact with academic discourse to gain proficiency in the subtle differences between codes and registers used in formal scholastic settings such as debates and in the wider, public discourse arena.

Introduction

The practice of using note-taking and extemporaneous speaking to construct a reasoned and persuasive oral case that states an empirical point is rarely found in any classroom activity. However, it is a common occurrence in formal debates. The American Forensic Association, National Forensic League, and the California High School Speech Association encourage students to "participate in and become proficient in the forensic arts: debate, public speaking, and interpretation" (National Forensic League, 2011) while "learning skills to be successful in a competitive environment, being able to work peacefully together, and becoming aware of ethical responsibilities with the use of communication skills" (California High School Speech Association, 2011). Such experiences require proficiency in academic discourse.

Comments made by professional bodies designed to promote public speaking and reasoned argumentation in schools and colleges suggest that debate is an essential experience that mirrors literate expectations in higher education (Preese, 2015), such as reading literature and manipulating language to construct a linear set of arguments. At a time when entry to college in the U.S. is increasingly competitive, extracurricular activities are being given greater emphasis in the college admissions process (Clinedinst, 2008; Sternberg, Gabora, & Bonney, 2012).

> Colleges now acknowledge, based on years of experience, that students who demonstrate success in extracurricular activities which give them real-world skills like critical thinking, oral and written communication, and the ability to organize ideas and present them effectively perform better in college (Luong, 2000, p. 2).

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Most high school forensic associations providing opportunities for students to refine their oral language and argumentation skills have conducted debates only in English, and the participants, in the majority, have been Caucasian, English-speaking males (Stepp, 1997). In more recent years, there has been a push to diversify the population of participants, but even with incremental increases in the number of females and students of color joining forensic teams, speech and debate activities continue to be performed only in English (Allen, Trejo, Bartanen, Schroeder, & Ulrich, 2004; Stepp & Gardner, 2001).

This study looks at an alternate debate program designed to bring migrant, bilingual high school students who are speakers of both Spanish and English in their out-of-school lives into the community of debate forensics, with the goal of helping them master the rhetorical genre of formal arguments, counter arguments and verbal persuasion that constitute the debate process. The debate program for migratory students in California has been established as part of Migrant Education Program (MEP) provisions resulting from the original U.S. Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to provide educational access for students whose families move across school district boundaries to work in agriculture. These students may move within a single school year to more than one school district (Jaramillo & Nuñez, 2009). Such a pattern of seasonal migration has meant that while students are able to participate in basic high school programs, as permanent outsiders to regular school communities they have been unable to participate in after-hours programs such as forensics and many sports activities (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Jasis & Marriott, 2010).

Migrant Education Programs in several large school districts, including significant rural regions in central California, began to rectify this situation in the past decade by expanding extracurricular activities which included an attempt to embrace forensic opportunities. California began a program that offers after-school training and hosts statewide forensic tournaments in both English and Spanish. The Migrant Education Speech and Debate Tournaments offer performance opportunities in two languages, with participants selecting just one language for the competition when they initially register for the tournament season. Students have the opportunity to begin their debating experience in either language (Antilla, 2013).

In line with the position of the California High School Speech Association to provide training in ethical responsibility through reasoned argument as a way to achieve a well-functioning civil, democratic society, the Migrant Education Program debates take up issues that are of current concern in the social and political life of the U.S. and the state of California, thus the title for this paper, "debating the world." The students are required to present positions for and against important questions of public life such as, in the following transcript examples, whether youth under the age of 18 who commit serious crimes should be legally sentenced as adults. Such issues as these would rarely be a lengthy topic of discourse in most people's daily lives. Media, political, and social issue discussions seldom provide models of public speaking as sustained argumentation; rather, media discussions increasingly focus on argument where participants aim to forcefully defeat an opposing view through loud and insistent repetition of a single point (Tannen, 1998). Before their debate training the students might never have seen or heard rhetorical argumentation where positions for a proposition are presented and sustained through evidence.

Successful debaters are skilled in specific discourse practices that persuade the adjudicator to favor their argument. Such discourse practices include: providing the burden of definition in which the debaters make the vague points of the resolution clear, refuting an argument, reasoning point-by-point and holistically, and summarizing a case (Lubetsky, 1999). In debate, "students must demonstrate they can reason, plan, use evidence, defend a hypothesis, and explain their thinking" (Peters, 2009, p. 47). Forensics books and training manuals designed for use with school-age youth often approach the teaching of such discourse practices with a two-prong focus on debate practices and language uses. Lubetsky's (1999) book, for example, provides a debate focus and a language focus in each chapter.

Discourse practices in scholastic debate are shaped by actions taken during the preparation for forensic performances. One investigation of the impact forensics has on high school students' academic achievement noted that common discourse practices of debaters include organizing arguments quickly, composing carefully worded speeches, and orally presenting emotionally impacting material (Peters, 2009, p. 37).

Debaters' discourse practices during tournaments include the specialized use of language forms and functions. Academic language structures used in debates include metaphor, metonymy, and metadiscourse (Al-Sharafi, 2012). Toulmin's (1958) explanation of the functions of argument in formal debates identifies cognizing, coherence, inference, and warranting as discourse practices common among debaters.

The recent adoption of the Common Core State Standards in the majority of states in the U.S. brings a renewed focus on the discourse practices of formal debates. The new speaking and listening standards include expectations that students will evaluate a speaker's points of view, rhetoric, and use of evidence, as well as expectations that students will make arguments demonstrating a command of formal English that other students will then evaluate (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). These speaking and listening standards for all high school students are common discourse practices used by competitive scholastic debaters.

The supporters of the debating tradition in high school suggest that the reason forensic participation in school is valued in further education is that debates introduce the students to skills necessary for any participatory institutional life. A more compelling reason is likely that debating provides the experience of constructing a reasoned linear set of arguments that closely mirror the literate expectations in higher education written texts. The experience of constructing a reasoned and persuasive oral case that states a point of view developed from evidence requires structures of formal academic English developed through note-taking and extemporaneous speaking. In the MEP debates, the students are taught how to use the various sources of information to prepare their speeches. They organize the key points onto notecards and use the cards as