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“If you don’t find a friend in here, it’s gonna be hard for you”: Structuring bilingual peer support for language learning in urban high schools

Avary Carhill-Poza

Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Massachusetts Boston, 100 Morrissey Blvd, Boston, MA 02125, USA

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ABSTRACT

As schools are called on to educate an increasingly diverse student body to higher levels of academic skill, examination of the role of social resources and social contexts in the learning outcomes and experiences of students classified as English learners is urgently needed to better understand the many factors beyond instruction that contribute to adolescent English language development. Four descriptive case studies of Spanish-speaking newcomer immigrant youth in New York City public high schools examine how schools structured peer linguistic resources. Findings suggest that school policies designed to support language development created boundaries that isolated language learners from mainstream and bilingual peers and had profound repercussions for access to opportunities to use and learn academic English. Hyper-segregation is used to describe the multilayered social separation experienced by emergent bilingual students in this study.

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1. Introduction

In U.S. schools today, one in four students is the child of an immigrant, and immigrant youth are the fastest-growing segment of the school-age population (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Among the myriad challenges encountered by this diverse group, learning English is one of the most critical factors for educational success as well as long-term economic and social mobility (Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007; Gándara et al., 2010). Four and a half million immigrant-origin students speak a language other than English at home and are classified at school as having limited proficiency in English (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

While much public and scholarly debate has addressed the benefits of various programs and instructional strategies for English language learning, an overlooked explanation for language learning and related educational outcomes is the linguistic affordances of school settings for emergent bilingual students. In the well-worn policy debate, language learning is often discussed in terms of program labels, or what Leung (2005) has critiqued as policy based on

the “division of time, curriculum and speakers” (p. 238) rather than descriptive evidence of how language is actually used in schooling.

Schools serve as the entry point for most immigrant youth into new social, cultural and linguistic worlds. Beyond student-teacher interactions, peers form a significant language learning context for adolescents within and beyond the classroom as adolescents actively negotiate their linguistic environments through navigation of social ties and social contexts (Carhill-Poza, 2015; Jia & Aaronson, 2003). In contrast to idealized notions of what language support programs offer, the linguistic environments in which emergent bilingual students find themselves are often far from optimal. Decades of research has documented many ways that school environments shape language learning experiences. Adolescent immigrant students are shown to consistently attend the poorest schools in the nation where few resources are available to meet their educational needs (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Orfield & Lee, 2006; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008), and higher rates of school poverty are linked to lower levels of English proficiency (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Furthermore, students who are learning English are frequently separated from mainstream students in a “school within a school” (Olsen, 1997; Palardy, Rumberger, & Butler, 2015; Valdés, 2001) and tracked into unchallenging curricula that do not prepare them for college or the workforce (Callahan, 2005; Harklau, 1994; Kanno & Kangas, 2014;

E-mail address: avary.carhillpoza@umb.edu

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Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). As the medium of instruction in U.S. schools is almost exclusively English, immigrant youth who arrive in the U.S. in the middle and high school years are especially vulnerable to low academic achievement and academic attainment when they have not yet developed strong skills in academic English (Perriera, Harris, & Lee, 2006; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Stevens, Butler, & Castellon-Wellington, 2000; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).

The current study seeks to build on the literature about the role of schooling in language learning by documenting how schools structure peer support for emergent bilingual students. As schools are called on to educate an increasingly diverse student body to higher levels of academic skill, examination of the social contexts and social resources of students classified as English learners is urgently necessary to better understand the many factors beyond instruction which contribute to adolescent English language development. In particular, it is time to dismantle the myth that emergent bilinguals have ample opportunities to learn English simply because they receive language support services at school. Spanish-speakers, on whom I concentrate in this study, represent an important focus for research on the effects of education policy on immigrant youth because they comprise the majority of students classified as English language learners (ELLs) in the U.S. (78%) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010).

2. Theoretical framework

The current study draws on an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; van Lier, 1996), together with sociocultural theories of language development (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978) and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) to conceptualize individual language learning as fostered within nested, interrelated social systems. Within the ecological framing of this study, peer relationships are conceptualized as an affordance (van Lier, 2000) for language learning. Peer groups, school resources, school structures and school practices have often been considered independently as drivers of differential student achievement (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Palardy et al., 2015), but rarely have the indirect and interrelated effects of school structures on peer group formation been framed as a mechanism for language learning.

A social capital framework (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) is engaged to describe how social relationships are mediated by structural systems and can be leveraged to provide resources for learning academic English. Social capital has been used to understand how immigrant students' experiences lead them to accumulate relationships and access to resources that over time differentiate academic outcomes (Conchas, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Reciprocal relationships with supportive and knowledgeable peers are theorized to link immigrant students to academic and institutional resources (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) including academically engaged and more proficient conversational partners (bilingual or monolingual) who can supply language learners with opportunities to use and learn academic English, a form of cultural capital which has remained less defined in the literature.

Schools have been shown to shape the development of a particular form of social capital—peer relationships—by explicitly and implicitly structuring access to academically engaged peers (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2004) and in the process validating or undermining the resources immigrant students bring to school and are capable of developing in school (Conchas, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). The current study extends these insights to investigate how schools structured peer support for students classified as English learners and more subtly shaped

the ways adolescent immigrant students conceptualized, constructed, and accessed peer linguistic resources. Social networks capture the linguistic resources immigrant youth could draw on for language learning and index affordances for learning academic English they encountered in their school setting. Although friends of friends (weak ties) have been shown to provide some educational resources to immigrant youth (Enriquez, 2011), social networks consisting of close relationships (strong ties) are better indicators of linguistic resources (Bortoni-Ricardo, 1985; Milroy, 1987) and are described here.

Emergent bilinguals are aiming for a moving target as they acquire English at the secondary level. This valued form of cultural capital includes specialized vocabulary, sentence and discourse structures as well as the knowledge of how to use them effectively to communicate meaning in both oral and written English during academic tasks (Bailey & Butler, 2002; Bunch, 2006). Academic language is acquired as students use language to learn academic content and is differentiated from conversational or nonacademic language in the context of its use. As such, general academic language, subject specific academic language, and nonacademic language can all be used in the same conversation or even the same sentence to negotiate meaning in an academic task (Bailey & Butler, 2002). Another important theoretical underpinning of academic language is the recognition that students' native languages as well as English can be academic, a stance that focuses on the strengths of emergent bilinguals and is particularly important for adolescents, many of whom draw on linguistic repertoires containing academic language in a language other than English (Cummins, 1979; Jimenez, García, & Pearson, 1996; Miramontes, 1990; Saviile-Troike, 1984).

For adolescent English learners, the cultural capital of academic English that supports success at school is doubly important for affording students the necessary opportunities to continue to develop academic English. Sociocultural research on second language learning has shown the importance of peers and peer scaffolding (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2000, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1998) as well as interaction with more expert language users for language acquisition (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Nassaji & Swain, 2000). For adolescent English learners, interaction is a necessary condition for the creation of the relationships and shared activities that sustain learning where peers form one of the primary contexts for interactions that can lead to language learning (Swain, 1998). Despite receiving less attention in research and practice (Saunders & O'Brien, 2006), oral academic language is particularly important for adolescents as new standards in education emphasize collaborative problem-solving processes and the articulation of metacognitive strategies across subject areas (Kibler, Valdés, & Walqui, 2014).

3. The current study

Data presented in this paper are drawn from an interdisciplinary and mixed-method study of Spanish-speaking immigrant youth, which linked the development of academic English to linguistic peer support (Carhill-Poza, 2015). Findings from the larger study show that some students had more—and others fewer—opportunities to use English and Spanish at school in ways that supported the development of academic English. Further, having bilingual peers who were academically engaged was strongly and positively related to academic English proficiency when controlling for individual variables. The current study took as a starting point the notion that immigrant youth negotiate multiple social contexts within their schools that influence their choices, opportunities, and language learning outcomes. The embedded case studies presented in this article examine how

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