"I don't feel as embarrassed because we're all learning": Discursive positioning among adolescents becoming multilingual

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ABSTRACT

This study examined interaction among language-minority and language-majority youth participating in one secondary school program that aimed to promote reciprocal learning and teaching of multilingual literacy practices. Analyzing transcripts from over 2000 min of audio and video recordings, we identified discursive positioning patterns that afford and constrain opportunities for language learning. Positioning students as learners who shared common struggles with their peers opened space for meaningful talk about language and collaborative thinking about linguistic problems. Language-minority students showed greater participation when positioned as multilingual experts. Findings have implications for educators who seek equity in peer-led discussions aimed to develop language and literacy.

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1. Introduction

As school populations around the world become more linguistically diverse, questions remain about how educational contexts can enhance learning opportunities for emerging multilingual students. Several studies have found that immigrant students are often separated from their mainstream peers in secondary schools, limiting participation in authentic target-language discourse communities (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco, & Páez, 2008; Valdés, 2001). This study examines an alternative program in one secondary school in which linguistically diverse peers, who would otherwise follow separate tracks, were brought together to learn languages from each other. This program aimed to mobilize students' funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) by bringing together Spanish-dominant, English-language learners with English-dominant, Spanish-language learners to engage in multilingual literacy activities. Our study explores the following research questions: How do language-minority and language-majority adolescents participate in collaborative literacy practices in a multilingual extracurricular program? More specifically, how do students and teachers use discursive positioning to afford or constrain language learning opportunities in this context?

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2. Literature review

Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of peer interaction and collaborative work for language and literacy development (Cheung & Slavin, 2012; Cohen, 1994; Roscoe & Chi, 2007; Slavin, 1995; Storch, 2002a; Topping, Thurston, McGavock, & Conlin, 2012). Research suggests that the *quality* of interactions can impact learning, raising concerns about equity and access to learning opportunities (Evans, 2011; Langer-Osuna, 2011; Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003; Wood & Kalinec, 2012). Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has documented a positive relationship between learner interactions and second language (L2) development (Block, 2003; García Mayo & Alcón Soler, 2002; Gass & Selinker, 2001; Long, 1996; Mackey & Goo, 2007); however questions remain regarding the *nature* of interaction which shapes the learning-in-process (see Philp, Walter, & Bastukmen, 2010; Storch, 2002a; Storch, 2008). Our study builds upon Storch's (2002a, 2002b) research that demonstrated how learning opportunities are influenced by patterns of peer interaction, which she defined in terms of equality (authority over task) and mutuality (level of engagement with each other's contribution). Our study offers a new perspective to understand peer interaction via positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Also, by considering opportunities for reciprocal multilingual language learning among linguistically diverse peers, we fill a gap in SLA research, which has traditionally focused on one-way L2 learning contexts. We build upon recent research which has recognized translanguaging practices within interactions (Creese & Balckledge, 2010; García, 2009; Hornberger & Link, 2012). Canagarajah (2011) defines *translanguaging* as "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system" (p. 401). We conceptualize language use within García's (2009) dynamic theoretical framework of bilingualism, which recognizes the interrelatedness of language practices and the coexistence of multiple linguistic identities within a complex linguistic ecology.

Our conceptual framework draws from sociocultural theories of learning, positioning theory and literacy-and-identity studies. Sociocultural theory conceptualizes learning as a cultural-historical practice, mediated through social interaction and cultural tools such as language (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1987; Moll, 2010; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). SLA research using a sociocultural lens has posited that microgenetic analyses of interactional discourse can help us to understand how language learning occurs during an interaction, not simply as a result of it (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2006; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 2002; van Lier, 2000).

In this study we draw upon the sociocultural concept of the Third Space (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Moje et al., 2004) to understand moment-to-moment interactions among linguistically diverse adolescents as potentially rich sites for expansive learning (Engeström, 1987). As Moje et al. (2004) explain, educational researchers have understood the Third Space as a "bridge" across official and unofficial discourses, or as a "navigational space" where students actively cross discursive boundaries, or finally as a transformational space, "where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152). Adopting this view that the Third Space is where "alternative and competing discourses and positioning transforms conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning" (Gutiérrez et al., 1999, p. 286), our study closely examines these discourses and unpacks these "positionings" to understand potential learning in the Third Space.

Scholars have suggested that positioning theory (Bomer & Laman, 2004; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; McVee, 2011) can fill important gaps in Vygotskian sociocultural approaches which have been critiqued for neglecting issues of access and power (Lewis, Encisco, & Moje, 2007; McVee, Brock, & Glazier, 2011; Moje & Luke, 2009). In this study, we view power relations through the lens of positioning; and although we acknowledge the importance of a larger social context (Wortham, 2006), we focus more tightly on the local context of students' interactional space. As Harré and Moghaddam (2003) explain, presuppositions about rights, duties, expectations and obligations of participants in a given social context (such as a classroom interaction), will determine who contributes to the episode. To advance our theoretical understanding of learning through mediation between experts and novices (Vygotsky, 1978), research is needed to investigate the assumed positions of novice and expert. Davies and Harré (1990) explain that an individual's identity and the positions that he or she will enact are "constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 35). These discursive practices fit within *story-lines* (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) in which a speaker casts herself and her interlocutors as a set of characters with expected ways of speaking (or learning). With this lens, we analyze discursive practices as generating identity trajectories (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001; Langer-Osuna, 2011; Wortham, 2006) or identity potentials (Castanheira, Green, Dixon, & Yeager, 2007). Moje and Luke (2009) argue that the identity-as-position metaphor is "especially useful for literacy research" to illuminate the ways that literacy practices require "enactments of identity" (p. 432).

Drawing from interactional ethnography and discourse analysis (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Castanheira, Crawford, Dixon, & Green, 2001; Castanheira et al., 2007; Garfinkel, 1967; Schiffrin, 1993), we view data with the understanding that contexts are "socially constructed locally by participants and intersubjectively ratified" (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 106). Our epistemological framework draws from literacy-and-identity studies (Moje & Luke, 2009; Van Sluys & Rao, 2012) that view identity as a social, fluid process of *becoming* which is recognized by others. As Norton and Toohey (2002) explain, "Language learning engages the identities of learners because language . . . is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to an utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks" (p. 115). Thus, research is needed to interrogate this ascription of value and meaning as it occurs in interactions among emerging multilinguals.