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Becoming a “Mexican feminist”: A minoritized bilingual’s development of disciplinary identities through writing



Amanda K. Kibler

Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, 417 Emmet Street South, Charlottesville, VA 22904 United States

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ABSTRACT

This eight-year longitudinal study explores the roles writing played in the disciplinary “becoming” (Stevens et al., 2008) of Fabiola, a Spanish-English bilingual who began her schooling in English (and the US) in ninth grade and went on to complete a Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) major at a U.S. university. I use a longitudinal interactional histories approach (Kibler, 2013) to examine selected writing events preceding the “critical event” (Webster & Mertova, 2007) of her choice to major in GWS, demonstrating how she engaged in writing tasks that supported her burgeoning interest in feminism even when not yet part of GWS communities. I then turn to two key writing events after Fabiola chose this major that exemplify how she forged unique yet circumscribed disciplinary identities through writing: first, through an essay on queerness and religion, for which she balanced disciplinary and nonacademic audiences, and second through a series of blog posts in which she presented multiple identities (including contested ones) as key to her disciplinary interactions. The article closes with a discussion of relationships among writing, instruction, and disciplinary becoming, as well as an analysis of ways in which Fabiola's biliterate and L2 writer identities were marginalized in this process.

1. Introduction

Youth from Spanish-speaking or Spanish-English homes are part of a growing demographic in the United States, and one that accounted for 77.1% of the total K-12 school population classified as “English learners” in 2014–2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Such students often experience residential segregation, and in turn, linguistic isolation (Gifford & Valdés, 2006) and under-resourced schools (Cosentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005). Although researchers working from bi/multilingual and multicultural perspectives have persuasively documented the linguistic and cultural strengths these students bring to their schools and society (e.g., Zentella, 2005), they tend to be discussed as a problem to be fixed in schools rather than as the foundation of an increasingly multilingual society. Further, their interactions with a range of discourses, communities, institutions, individuals, texts, and technologies while writing can serve to either facilitate or marginalize their bi/multilingualism and biliteracies, and a better understanding of the promises and contradictions inherent in such interactions, especially during transitions from secondary schooling to higher education or careers, is overdue. School-based writing is often seen as a gatekeeper for many such students, determining (and often preventing) their access to advanced secondary and post-secondary coursework. Less well known, however, are the ways in which writing opportunities can also help youth from these backgrounds develop academic identities over time.

This longitudinal study draws upon eight years of data to explore the roles writing played in the experiences of Fabiola,¹ a

E-mail address: akk2v@virginia.edu.

¹ All names and institutions are pseudonyms.

Spanish-English bilingual who began her schooling in English (and in the United States) in ninth grade. She went on to complete a Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) major at a U.S. university and self-identify as a "Mexican feminist," suggesting a strong sense of disciplinary "becoming" (Stevens, O'Connor, Garrison, Jocuns, & Amos, 2008) developed through her academic experiences. To answer the research question, "What roles did writing play in Fabiola's disciplinary becoming as a Mexican feminist?", I first review relevant literature and describe my theoretical orientation and methodological approach before providing a brief overview of Fabiola's language and literacy experiences in high school and university, with attention to both English and Spanish. I next examine two key writing events preceding the "critical event" (Webster & Mertova, 2007) of her choice to major in GWS, demonstrating how she engaged in writing tasks that supported her burgeoning interest in feminism even before joining GWS disciplinary communities. I then turn to two key writing events after Fabiola chose this major that suggest ways in which she navigated culturally and linguistically diverse audiences and forged unique yet circumscribed disciplinary identities through her writing. The article closes with a discussion of relationships among writing, instruction, and disciplinary becoming relevant to Fabiola and other bi/multilingual and second language (L2) writers.

1.1. *Bi/Multilingual adolescent and young adults' writing practices over time*

In order to fully understand the influences impacting Fabiola's disciplinary becoming through writing, it is important to consider the contexts in which bi/multilinguals write as well as the ways in which their writing changes over time. This study focuses on a particular type of bi/multilingual – a student who speaks a non-English language at home and is learning the dominant societal language (Kibler & Valdés, 2016) in school. Such students can be considered linguistically "minoritized," in that their home/community language resources are often disregarded by powerful institutions, discourses, and individuals.

Adolescents and adults writing in additional languages often demonstrate varied and non-linear patterns of development over time, according to existing longitudinal studies. A recent case study, for example, explored how a minoritized bi/multilingual was able to employ increasingly sophisticated syntactic and rhetorical patterns and a greater lexical range in English writing through high school and university but experienced ongoing challenges with paraphrasing, even at high levels of proficiency (Kibler & Hardigree, 2017). Such long-term development is influenced by a range of factors, including but not limited to students' instructional settings and exposure to English outside of school (Valdés & Sanders, 2006; Valdés, 1999). As writers' L2 expertise advances, they also tend to develop increasingly sophisticated approaches to drawing upon their bi/multilingualism to support their writing in the L2 (de Courcy, 2002) and across languages. For example, Seloni (2014) found that a multilingual graduate student writer employed both English and Spanish to engage in a range of "translingual academic literacy practices" (p. 88) to develop rhetorical strategies and new disciplinary knowledge across multiple languages and modalities.

Institutional and pedagogical practices at the secondary and post-secondary level in the United States provide unique contexts for minoritized bi/multilingual students' writing development. These writers may not always fully understand secondary teachers' expectations for content-area (or disciplinary) writing (Kibler, 2011b), and their teachers may face challenges in providing appropriately scaffolded instruction (Kibler, 2011a) and interpreting students' participation in writing conferences (Kibler, 2011c). Minoritized bi/multilinguals classified as English learners are frequently prevented from accessing college-preparatory courses while in high school (Callahan & Shifrer, 2012; Kanno & Kangas, 2014), which can lead to problematic tertiary schooling experiences, and those who are deemed "proficient" while in secondary school may face unwanted relabeling as "ESL" once at university (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008). In university courses, writing tends to be a particular challenge for many bi/multilinguals from immigrant backgrounds: As Kanno and Grosik (2012) explained, writing was "the linguistic challenge that plagued our participants most" (p. 135). In other settings, however, post-secondary literacy practices in which such students engage may sometimes involve limited extended writing but greater emphasis on note-taking and multiple-choice tests (Harklau, 2001).

Research has documented the ways in which minoritized bi/multilingual adolescents engage in interactions across languages while drafting and revising their school-based writing in ways that support writing development (Kibler, 2010), as well as their participation in diverse and rich multilingual and multimodal voluntary literacy practices outside of school, which allow them to connect socially with peers and create positive identities (e.g., Lee, 2006; Yi & Hirvela, 2010; Yi, 2007). However, secondary and post-secondary institutional opportunities in the United States for students to develop writing expertise in their non-English home languages are generally rare. Although dual language schools that support bi/multilingualism and biliteracies are growing at the K-8 level, they remain less common in high schools, and yet fewer opportunities exist at the post-secondary level, where even those institutions that officially value bi/multilingualism may not adequately support students' efforts to develop literacy expertise across languages (Kibler, 2014). A similar pattern has also been noted in Canada: Gentil (2005) found that when students were allowed to submit writing in their home language (French) at an Anglophone Canadian university, they faced significant challenges doing so because of a lack of curricular and human resources to support biliterate development. "Translingual" pedagogical practices, however, have been argued to provide new possibilities for bi/multilingual students to explore and employ competencies across linguistic codes in both composing processes and resulting texts for university (Canagarajah, 2009) and adolescent (Smith, Pacheco, & de Almeida, 2017) writers.

1.2. *Disciplinary literacies: knowledge, identities, and navigation*

Writing is considered inextricable from the process of disciplinary becoming, in terms of both learning disciplinary content (Thompson, 2009) and negotiating relationships and constructing identities (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015). At the same time, Prior (1998) has argued that disciplinary writing (which he calls "literate activity" in the context of "disciplinarity") is less tangible than

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