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In memoriam

Agency, identity and imagination in an urban primary school in Southern Mexico¹

Agência, identidade e imaginação em uma escola primária urbana no sul do México

ABSTRACT - This paper presents an ethnographic study of two student-teachers in a Mexican public primary school in a fifth-grade English-as-a-Foreign-Language classroom. Typical of classroom ethnography, this study incorporates systematic observation, description, micro-analysis of events, and discourse analysis. Utilizing a sociocultural perspective as a theoretical framework, the activities created by the two student-teachers are contrasted to the exercises and tasks prescribed in the official textbook. The analysis reveals that although the official textbook reflected a traditional, transmission-oriented pedagogy, the two student-teachers were able to adopt a socio constructivist and transformative teaching approach. They created activities that enabled their learners to work together through a variety of modes and to participate in a wide range of tasks that were relevant to their worlds beyond the classroom.

Key words: sociocultural theory, ethnography, identity, second language education.

RESUMO - Este artigo apresenta um estudo etnográfico das práticas pedagógicas de duas estagiárias em uma classe de inglês de quinta série em uma escola pública mexicana. Típico da etnografia de sala de aula, este estudo incorpora a observação sistemática, descrição, micro-análise de eventos, e análise do discurso. Utilizando uma perspectiva sociocultural como referencial teórico, as atividades criadas pelas duas estagiárias são contrastadas com os exercícios prescritos pelo livro-texto oficial. A análise revela que, embora o livro-texto refletisse uma orientação pedagógica tradicional de transmissão, as duas estagiárias conseguiram adotar uma forma de ensino sócio-constructivista e transformadora. Elas criaram dinâmicas que possibilitaram a seus alunos trabalhar juntos através de diversas modalidades e de participar de várias atividades relevantes aos seus mundos fora da sala de aula.

Palavras-chaves: teoria sociocultural, etnografia, identidade, ensino de línguas estrangeiras.

Introduction

In the last two decades the fields of applied linguistics and language education have undergone a major shift of perspective “from viewing language learning as an isolated individual phenomenon to viewing it as inherently embedded in and shaped by situated social interactions” (Hawkins, 2004, p. 3). Sociocultural approaches (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006) have turned the process of language acquisition “on its head” (Hall, 1997, p. 303). Instead of looking at language ac-

quisition as mostly a psychological process which starts in the minds of individuals and moves toward socialization into the community, sociocultural theorists argue that the process begins in our social practices before it is internalized by our individual minds. As Gee (2004, p. 15) explains, from a sociocultural perspective, “teaching and learning language and literacy is not about teaching and learning ‘English,’ but about teaching and learning specific social languages”. Models of language learning must be “firmly rooted in contingent, situated, and interactional experiences of the individual as a so-

¹ This article is dedicated to Michael Higgins, who passed away in February, 2011. His concern for social issues and passion for equality of human rights will forever inspire the work we do.

cial being” (Firth and Wagner, 1998, p. 93). The work of language teachers, therefore, becomes that of establishing classroom communities in which learners participate in situated activities with specific identities, and in which they collaborate to negotiate new language and concepts within specific contexts.

Unfortunately, most nations around the world enforce highly centralized language education policies through mandatory curricula, teaching materials and/or standardized tests (Shohamy, 2006). These policies typically emphasize a methodology that can be used throughout the educational system without regard to learners’ specific needs and the situated practices of the local context. English language education in particular often occurs through materials and methods that are imported from English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (McKay and Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). Teachers are pressured to conform to these government mandates, since they often lack the power, the tools or the time to create spaces within their classrooms for alternative ways of learning. As Willet and Miller (2004) point out, however, teachers need to be supported in developing resources to both participate in and resist these top-down policies.

English in Mexican Public Schools

Public education in Mexico is highly centralized. All primary schools, both private and public, use the same textbooks, which are produced by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), Mexico’s Ministry of Education. The teaching of English in Mexican public schools has traditionally occurred at the secondary levels and above. Although in the urban areas some private schools have offered English instruction at the elementary grades for some time, English, or any other foreign language, has not been an official requirement in Mexican public primary schools. Recently, however, Mexico has seen a growing interest in the teaching of English to young learners (Sayer and López Gopar, 2009), and in 2008 the government launched a new program to bring English to all public fifth and sixth grade classrooms. Commissioned by the Mexican Ministry of Education, materials were produced by Pearson’s ELLIS (English Language Learning and Instruction System), a U.S. company. The new instructional program consists of computer-based units, a student workbook and a teacher’s guide and it has now been distributed to public primary schools in most states of the country (López Gopar *et al.*, 2009). The authors clearly state that the program is to be delivered by the homeroom teacher, who is not supposed to meet the requirements established by Mexican educational policies outlined in the document entitled *Certificación Nacional de Nivel de Idioma (CENNI)* (SEP, 2011).

This paper presents a study of two student-teachers in a Mexican public primary school who, while teaching English to a group of fifth graders, were able to create a classroom environment where learners worked together through a variety of modes and participated in a wide range of activities that were relevant to their worlds beyond the classroom. Focusing on one unit of study, we contrast the activities created by the two student-teachers to the type of exercises and tasks prescribed in the official textbook. Before we present the study, however, we review some key principles of sociocultural approaches to language teaching and learning. These principles reflect the theoretical framework that informs this study.

Language Teaching and Learning from a Sociocultural Perspective

Derived from the works of Lev Vygotsky, sociocultural theory assumes that all learning occurs through social interaction. The central claim in Vygotsky’s work is that the individual cannot be understood in isolation, “but only as part of a history, of a culture and of a society” (Swain *et al.*, 2011, p. x). Scholars from different fields have used, adapted and extended Vygotsky’s ideas to enrich the current state of knowledge of their disciplines, and as mentioned earlier, the field of applied linguistics has been particularly influenced by this body of work and has experienced a major paradigm shift in recent years. Today more and more research studies on second language acquisition draw on “sociocultural and allied theories” (Swain *et al.*, 2011, p. xv) and reflect what we call a *sociocultural perspective*. This perspective “prioritize[s] sociocultural and contextual factors in addition to the importance of individual agency and the multiple identities involved in the process of learning and using an L2” (Swain and Deters, 2007, p. 821).

One of the main areas of sociocultural inquiry focuses on how language serves as a psychological tool that mediates mental activity. Lantolf and Appel (1994) compare language to other psychological tools or “artifacts,” such as “algebraic symbols, diagrams [and] schemes” (p. 9) which we use to facilitate our performance of tasks. Language is one of the most powerful psychological tools, and like other tools, it not only mediates our mental activity, it may also “qualitatively change the nature of the activity and it may change the subsequent outcome” (Swain and Lapkin, 1998, p. 321). The act of *linguaging*, defined as “the use of speaking and writing to mediate cognitive complex activities” (Swain and Deters, 2007, p. 822), helps us develop intellectually and emotionally. As Lantolf (2007, p. 695) remarks, “through speaking (and writing) we are able to gain control over our memory, attention, planning, perception, learning and development, but this control is derived from the social activity we engage”. Recently García (2009) has

used the term *translanguaging* to describe the practice of bilinguals of accessing various languages in the process of meaning-making. She advocates for the inclusion of translanguaging practices in the classroom, adding that “programs that insist on [...] separate languages end up denying the complex multilingualism of much of the world” (p. 141). When teachers forbid students from using all the resources from the multiple languages they have at their disposal, they are in fact limiting their possibilities for mediation and cognitive development.

A fundamental concept in Vygotskian theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD has crucial implications to pedagogy, and is defined as “the difference between what a person can achieve when acting alone and what the same person can accomplish when acting with support of someone else and/or cultural artifacts” (Lantolf, 2000, p. 17). This type of support, also called “scaffolding,” helps learners move through their ZPD in order to complete a task or solve a problem, to the point where they can act independently and no longer require assistance. Traditionally researchers have examined the notion of scaffolding within interactions occurring between experts and novices or learners and more capable peers, but recently several scholars have expanded the scope of the ZPD to include interactions between learners of similar skill levels; they hypothesize that “people working together jointly are able to co-construct contexts in which expertise emerges as a feature of the group” (Lantolf, 2000, p. 17).

The belief that learning develops from social interactions and is mediated through language gave rise to the social constructivist movement in education, and has been embraced by second language practitioners espousing communicative and collaborative pedagogical approaches (Brooks and Donato, 1994; Kaufman and Brooks, 1996). In constructivist classrooms the role of the teacher is not to dispense knowledge, but to create conditions for students to generate new understandings through guided assistance (scaffolding) and the utilization of mediational tools, such as peer dialog, pictures, and textbooks. Unlike transmission-oriented pedagogy, where the goal is to transmit information from the curriculum directly to students, socio constructivist approaches encourage learners to co-construct knowledge (Cummins, 2006). Open-ended activities promote interaction and exploration of topics through multiple perspectives (Huong, 2003).

More recently, language and literacy scholars have called for the broadening of the traditional school curriculum to include alternative modes of communication that are not based solely on language. Drawing on theories of multiliteracies and multimodality (Street, 2005), they argue that “within a particular social, cultural, and linguistic context, people make meaning through multiple means” (Kendrick *et al.*, 2010, p. 182); therefore, indigenous forms of communication from the local culture

must be present at school. Just like language, these modes of representation (e.g., drawing, dramatic performances, songs) act as mediational tools to help learners to build new knowledge. These multimodal forms of communication are often accompanied by bilingual and multilingual practices (García, 2009).

Drawing on the Vygotskian notion that students’ learning is embedded within their social, cultural, historical and political experiences, González, Moll and colleagues at the University of Arizona formulated the theory of *funds of knowledge* (González *et al.*, 2005). This theory grew out of ethnographic research conducted by teachers in the homes of their students to uncover “the richly layered knowledge bases that inform the everyday ways of being of students, families, and communities” (González *et al.*, 2011, p. 481), and in turn use what they learned to inform their classroom practice. The theory of funds of knowledge is based on the assumption that minority students’ households possess rich social and cultural capital that is never reflected in the school curriculum. When teachers include their students’ pre-existing knowledge and everyday experiences in their classrooms, they bring academic legitimacy to these experiences. Equally important, they make it possible for students to use these experiences as mediational tools to acquire new forms of school knowledge.

Another important construct that has been the focus of recent research on second language acquisition is the concept of *sociocultural identity* (Norton, 2006), which has its origins in poststructural theories. Contrary to the essentialist conception that every individual has a fixed identity, the emphasis of poststructuralism has been on the multifaceted, complex, and dynamic nature of identity(ies), shaped by the contexts and situations in which the individual operates. This notion of social and multiple identities is critical for language learning, since language is “the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (Weedon *in* Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 15). Norton’s seminal study of five immigrant women in Canada (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995) focuses on the women’s changing social identities over time and their struggle to negotiate their “right to speak” in different settings. Through their interactions with others, the women negotiated their second language identities; they were “constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they [were] and how they [related] to the social world” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 18). Norton concludes that a person’s identity is “a site for struggle” (2000, p.127). Feelings of lack motivation, inadequacy, and poor self-confidence are always “socially constructed within and by the lived experiences of language learners” (p. 123) and must be linked to the power relations embedded in everyday interactions that place these learners in marginalized positions within the community. Very often access to target language speakers does not mean access to opportunities to use and practice the language.

Building on her work on sociocultural identity, Norton (2010) developed key theoretical concepts that have important implications for second language education. One of these concepts is the notion of investment, which relates to learners' sometimes conflicting desires to learn and practice the target language. The concept of investment is closely related to the notion of agency, and it problematizes the traditional view of motivation in second language acquisition. Instead of looking at the learner's personality as the only variable, the notion of investment takes into consideration the learner's commitment to learning in relation to the language practices of a particular classroom or community, and also acknowledges the learner's capacity for agency. As Norton (2010, p. 354) remarks, a learner may be very motivated, "but have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community, which may for example be racist, sexist, elitist or homophobic". This learner could be positioned as a "poor" or "unmotivated" learner and be excluded from the language practices of the classroom.

Cummins (2006) utilizes the construct of investment to propose the identity text, defined as any creative work or performance carried out within the pedagogical space of the classroom that reflects students' identities in a positive light. As Cummins (2006, p. 56) points out, "when students take ownership of the learning process and invest their identities in the outcomes of learning, the resulting understanding will be deeper than when learning is passive". Identity texts embody multiliteracies and multimodal practices, as they often combine bilingual/multilingual written, spoken, visual, musical or dramatic forms. Students are encouraged to share their identity texts with peers, teachers, parents and community members, and "are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences" (Cummins, 2006, p. 60).

Another important concept derived from Norton's work on sociocultural identity and investment is the notion of imagined communities (originally coined by Anderson, 1991), which refers to the communities that language learners wish to belong when they learn a new language (Kanno and Norton, 2003). "An imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context" (Norton, 2010, p. 356). The notion of imagined communities supports classroom approaches that encourage critical inquiry and that focus on the relationship between language learning and social change. Teachers can maximize students' investment by nurturing their individual expressions of agency, and by providing them with opportunities to explore their interests, express their desires, and imagine alternative futures for themselves. Classroom activities encourage students to explore concerns that are important to them, "to raise awareness of the social, cultural, and political inequities manifested

in their experiences, and to work to transform them by articulating their own directions for living" (Hall, 2002, p. 114). These practices reflect a transformative orientation to pedagogy, based on Freire's problem-posing approach (Auerbach, 2000; Freire, 1970). "The goal is to promote critical literacy among students to encourage them to read between the lines of societal discourses rather than to skim along their surface" (Cummins, 2006, p. 55).

Context of the study

The state of Oaxaca is located in the southern part of Mexico and has a very diverse population with different indigenous groups and more than fifty language varieties spoken. It is one of the poorest states in the country. The city of Oaxaca is its capital and largest city. The research site for the present study was "Ignacio Allende" School, a public primary school located on one of the main streets in the center of the city of Oaxaca. The building is an older two-story, L-shaped structure, with a large cement patio area in the middle. Two separate school sessions are held within this building: a morning session and an afternoon session. Each has its own principal, teachers, and student body. While the morning session serves a middle-class population of students, the afternoon session is set up to meet the needs of children from the urban popular classes, many of whom may have started school late, failed some grades, or already have to work in the mornings (Clemente, 2007). This type of morning/afternoon separation is not uncommon in Oaxacan public schools. However, "Ignacio Allende" is somewhat different in that a large number of its male students in the afternoon session come from the "Ciudad de los Niños," a children's shelter and orphanage in Oaxaca.

The Language Center at the state university of Oaxaca places its student-teachers in fifth and sixth grade classrooms at local public schools, including "Ignacio Allende," to provide introductory classes in English. These student-teachers are completing the last semester of their bachelor's degree in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and are fulfilling their social services requirement for graduation by teaching the classes. As part of the experience, they also attend a weekly seminar where they debrief their lessons with fellow classmates and receive theoretical and practical guidance from their professor. In addition, they assemble a portfolio which includes a detailed description of the teaching context, a discussion of their teaching philosophy and theoretical framework, a collection of their lesson plans, a teaching journal, and a reflective and critical analysis of their teaching experiences. As Sayer (2010, p. 166) points out, these student-teachers are "part of a new generation of English teachers [in Mexico] who have a good command of the [English] language and pedagogic training in TESOL theories and methods".

Research methods

In the two-year period between 2007-2009, a team of researchers from the state university of Oaxaca conducted ethnographic research at “Ignacio Allende” School alongside its student-teachers (Clemente *et al.*, 2009; Clemente *et al.*, 2011; Clemente and Higgins, 2008). We worked closely with the four student-teachers placed at “Ignacio Allende:” Rosi and Irma in fifth grade, and Carlos and Yago in sixth grade. In addition to twice-weekly participant observations in the two classrooms, we conducted in-depth interviews with the four student-teachers and the school principal. We interacted with the children in and out of the classroom, and had several informal conversations with the two homeroom teachers. We collected samples of work produced by the children in class and took photos of their activities in the classroom and in the school patio. Also, we participated in the weekly seminars held at the university and collected a copy of the final portfolios produced by the student-teachers.

Typical of classroom ethnography, this study incorporates systematic observation, description, micro-analysis of events, and discourse analysis (Duff, 2002). Data collection and analysis followed qualitative procedures and utilized methods such as field notes from classroom observations, transcripts of audio-recorded interviews, and a researcher’s journal, as well examination of classroom artifacts, materials and photographs.

Participants

The present paper provides an analysis of selected activities and materials utilized by two student teachers, Rosi and Irma, in the fifth grade classroom at “Ignacio Allende” School in the second part of the 2008-2009 year during a unit on occupations and professions. At that time there were 15 children in the fifth grade class, three girls and twelve boys. Six of the boys came from the children’s shelter, and several of the other children lived in single-head households, often in homes where the fathers were working in the United States. Most of the children’s parents were construction workers, small scale vendors or domestic laborers. Crises of health, economic hardship, and domestic violence were not uncommon in these households.

Rosi and Irma were both in their twenties and had been good friends since they started at the university. They had similar educational philosophies and styles, so it was not difficult for them to work in a team-teaching situation. When they entered the university, Rosi and Irma did not think that they would become teachers, but after student-teaching at “Ignacio Allende” School, they started considering it an option. This was their first experience in front of a class. It had been a very enriching experience,

although they struggled with issues related to classroom management, student relations, and the stresses of lesson planning, materials development and grading. Working with the kids from the shelter had been particularly rewarding because they wanted an opportunity to link their teaching to their concerns for social justice. As they noted, these kids did not have their moms and dads pushing them and telling them what to do. As Irma said, “When they decide to do something, I can see that they make the effort.” They wished to make a difference in the life of these students: “We believe that everything creates a chain... If we mistreat them, they will repeat this type of behavior... And if they are mistreated in other places, we will only teach them to be more aggressive. We want to show them another way.”

A unit on occupations and professions

When they first started student-teaching at “Ignacio Allende” School, Rosi and Irma’s fifth grade classroom was supplied with the government-sponsored textbook and computer-based program *Inglés Enciclopedia* (ELLIS, 2006). Realizing the limitations of the official materials, they developed competitive games and art projects to actively involve the children in the learning process and to make the English language more relevant to their lives. What follows is a critical analysis and comparison between the exercises in textbook and computer program, and the activities created by Rosi and Irma. Our intention is to explore not only possible linguistic gains but also the sociocultural, interactional and affective opportunities afforded by these two different types of materials and activities. We focus on a unit on occupations and professions for the purposes of this comparison.

The textbook and computer program

The unit on professions in *Inglés Enciclopedia* (ELLIS, 2006) focuses on seven different occupations: engineer, doctor, teacher, secretary, farmer, artist, and taxi driver. The types of exercises in the textbook and in the computer program are very similar.

In the first exercise in the student book, the seven occupations are listed in a box and images of people in each occupation are shown on the page. Students are asked to label each image with the correct word for the occupation. The second exercise presents the same pictures with scrambled words for the occupation under each image. Students have to order the letters and spell each word correctly. The third exercise focuses on the articles “a” and “an.” The students are given the same seven words again with a blank before them. All they need to do is to write “a” or “an” in each blank (e.g., a teacher; an artist). In the fourth exercise, the students are given

a chart with three columns. In the first column, there are words indicating family members such as grandmother, father, sister, etc. The second column contains the list of the same seven occupations. In the third column, the students are supposed to write sentences with the information from the first and second columns (e.g., “My grandmother is an artist;” “My father is an engineer”). Finally, the last exercise again shows the same pictures from the previous exercise with labels for family members and occupations below each of them (e.g., mother/engineer; grandfather/doctor, etc.). The exercise asks students to work in pairs, choose a person from the page, and introduce the person to their partners following this dialogue pattern: “Hi, _____. This is my mother. She is an engineer.”

The computer-based unit starts by asking students to click on each of the seven words (engineer, doctor, etc.), listen to its pronunciations and repeat it. It then presents several other short exercises where the students are asked to match words and images, fill in the blanks, or watch short videos with dialogues where they must click on the correct word corresponding to the occupation being shown. There are also exercises on the use of the articles “a” and “an.” Students are asked to drag and click the correct article next to the occupations, and to complete short sentences.

As we can see, the types of exercises in the textbook and computer-based program assume a traditional, teacher-fronted classroom environment, reflecting a transmission-oriented pedagogy. There is practically no opportunity for collaboration or creative co-construction of new understandings. Very few opportunities are provided for meaningful interaction or unrehearsed production of output. Although there is minimal attention to meaning through the use of pictures, language is for the most part presented in a decontextualized manner. All exercises are close-ended, with only one possible correct answer, and without any possibility for a critical examination of topics. One conjures up a classroom with students quietly sitting while completing the workbook, with the teacher approving or disapproving their answers. Most of the exercises are designed to be answered individually, with the exception of the last exercise, where students work in pairs on a dialogue. But even in this last exercise, students do not have the power to choose which profession corresponds to which family member. The choices are already made for them: mother/engineer; grandfather/doctor; grandmother/teacher, etc.

In their analysis of *Inglés Enciclomedia*, López Gopar *et al.* (2009) reveal several shortcomings of these materials. They point out that the textbook reinforces stereotypes of the United States, such as a focus on the traditional family structure, and racial, classist, and gendered portraits of occupations, both through the types of occupations presented (i.e., middle-class professions such

as doctor, artist and engineer), and through the images displayed. For example, the engineer is a White man and appears to be giving orders to a Black man. The artist is painting a picture of France’s *Arc de Triomphe*, a clearly Eurocentric image. Considering the students in Rosi and Irma’s fifth grade classroom, these exercises are quite artificial, since these kids most likely do not have people close to them who are engineers, doctors or secretaries. The idea of connecting family members to different occupations is even more problematic, since so many of the children live in a shelter or come from single-head households. The language being presented is completely disconnected from the students’ realities and identities; there is no attempt to utilize their experiences and prior knowledge as resources for new learning.

López Gopar *et al.* (2009) also decry the textbook’s suggestion to eliminate the use of Spanish in the classroom. Not only does this suggestion disregard the indigenous national languages of Mexico, it also takes away an important learning resource the students have at their disposal: their shared language. Since this is a textbook published specifically for Mexican schools, a huge opportunity was missed in this respect. “Students’ home language (L1) is an educationally significant component of their cultural capital,” (Cummins, 2006, p. 63) and should be utilized as a tool for learning at school. At the very minimum, the textbook could have explored the Spanish/English cognates introduced in this unit (e.g., doctor, secretary, engineer, artist). Also troubling is the fact that, even though there is a suggestion to create an English-only classroom, all the exercises have written directions in Spanish. The Spanish language in this case is being used solely to ensure successful performance in English. There is an obvious language hierarchy at play, with Spanish cast in a subservient role to English.

Although Rosi and Irma were aware of the limitations of the textbook, they did not abandon it altogether. They understood that the books represented something important for the kids in this classroom, who did not have much access to books in general. In fact, when the books first arrived, there were not enough books for all the students. Rosi and Irma suggested that the students share books, but they immediately realized that some children, especially those who came from the shelter, would not be happy unless they had their own books. As Rosi said, “They already share too many things. They like to have their own identity.” Rosi and Irma quickly re-arranged the distribution of the books in a way that some kids would have their own books, while others who did not mind sharing books would work together.

Also, because Irma and Rosi had created a classroom atmosphere in which flexible participation formats were acceptable, the time spent on textbook work did not mean quiet seatwork. When completing their workbooks, the students chose where to sit, to work independently or

in groups, to collaborate or not. They went in and out of groups, they moved around the classroom, and they often gathered around the desk next to Irma and Rosi to work while talking to them. The computer program also presented an opportunity for excitement and fun. Since the class only had one computer, the exercises were always projected on a big screen, with one student at the mouse clicking on the answers. The class was always really involved in these activities, with kids shouting the right answers for the person controlling the mouse.

Games

Irma and Rosi created different games and art projects for each unit, which encouraged creativity and self-initiative, and allowed for exploration and negotiation of relationships within the class. In addition, they expanded the content of the unit to include a range of jobs that are common in the Oaxacan context and that reflect both skilled and non-skilled labor. For example, they provided English translations for words such as “albañil” (construction worker), “barrendero” (a person who sweeps the streets), and “cargador” (a person who carries heavy loads, e.g., in a market, a store, or an airport).

On one occasion they played a variation of the popular musical chairs game. After reviewing the names of professions/occupations they had learned the previous day, they told the students to arrange their chairs in a circle, choose a profession, and write it down on a piece of paper. Each student taped their papers to their backs. It was evident that this was a game the kids had played before, since they did not need much direction. Irma stood in the middle of the circle and said: “La teacher viene por los hunters” (The teacher takes the hunters). All the students who had a piece of paper labeled “hunter” had to stand up and find a different chair to sit in. Meanwhile, Irma would sit in one of the empty chairs, so one of the hunters would be missing a chair. This student had to stand in the middle of the circle and make the next announcement. He said “El hunter viene por los actors!” (The hunter takes the actors), and the game continued. Irma also announced that the students who were left without a chair three times would have to dance in front of the group, and showed them the dance she wanted: “El pollo mueve la patita, el pollo mueve las alas, el pollo mueve el piquito, el pollo mueve la colita” (The chicken moves its leg, the chicken moves its wings, the chicken moves its beak, the chicken moves its tail). There were lots of laughs and giggles. The students were also quite unruly at times, with lots of pushing and shoving going on, and some accusations of cheating. The overall atmosphere, though, was of play and excitement.

Another game they played involved the students tying balloons to their ankles. Two students at a time would come to the front of the room to kick and try to

pop each other’s balloons. As one can imagine, the class became quite loud and rowdy, with kids cheering, jumping and kicking, and balloons popping. After the game ended, Rosi gave the winners envelopes containing cards with words. With their partners, they were supposed to order the words to make sentences such as “Fernando is an intelligent teacher.” All the names in the cards were those of kids in the classroom. Each pair sat on the floor with their envelopes and arranged the words. When they were finished, they would dictate their sentences to Irma, who would write them on the board.

Irma and Rosi gave the students opportunities to work through multiple modalities, including physical movement, songs and play. The format of the games and the words and rhythm of the songs were familiar to the students, allowing them to utilize their “funds of knowledge” (González *et al.*, 2005) as a bridge to new learning in the classroom. In creating these flexible participation structures, Irma and Rosi risked losing control of the class. They struggled with discipline issues, but through collaboration and competition, they created spaces where the children could perform their particular expressions of agency. Students will remember these activities more than how well they filled blanks in their workbooks or repeated English words from the computer program. Instead of attempting to control this bilingual and bi-cultural context through an authoritarian imposition of English monolingualism, Irma and Rosi were composing new ways of learning and producing knowledge *through* the children’s bilingual resources.

Art projects

The class also worked on an art project which involved creating small posters entitled “What do you want to be?” The kids were supposed to write about what they wanted to be in the future and why. On the back side of the poster, they were also asked to write about what they did not want to do in the future and why. Rosi and Irma wrote the following directions on the board:

Yo quiero ser de grande _____ . (I want to be ____ when I grow up)	
I want to be _____ in the future.	
¿Porque?	(Why?)
Lo que no quiero ser de grande _____ .	
(I don’t want to be ____ when I grow up)	
I don’t want to be _____ .	
¿Porque?	(Why?)

In addition to poster board, markers, scissors and glue, Rosi and Irma brought to class several different magazines for the kids to find relevant pictures. They also brought clip art graphics with drawings of different

professions (e.g., fireman, mailman, pilot, doctor, veterinarian, psychologist, and teacher).

In their posters, several kids expressed very practical reasons for the jobs and occupations they chose for their future. Ernestina, for example, said she wanted to be a psychologist “Porque tengo que estar sentada” (Because I can be seated) and “Porque puedo mandar” (Because I can give orders). Antonio did not want to be a fireman: “A mi no me gusta ser bombero porque te puedes quemar” (I don’t like being a fireman because you can burn yourself). Fredy did not want to be a pilot: “A mi no me gusta ser pilot porque casi no me gusta bairar (sic) porque me mareo” (I don’t like being a pilot because I often don’t like traveling because I get sick). Alberto expressed a concern for safety: He wanted to be a chef “porque trabajan en lugares seguros” (because they work in safe places). Finally, Roberto was more materialistic: “I want to be a fireman ¿Yo quiero ser? Fireman porque apaga el fuego y gana mucho dinero” (What do I want to be? Fireman because they put out the fire and earn a lot of money).

The kids also expressed idealistic hopes for future occupations. Many of them talked about a desire to help others and to make a difference. Anita wanted to be a doctor “para curar niños” (to cure children). Vicente also wanted to be a doctor for several reasons: “Porque quiero salvar vidas. Porque quiero conocer bastantes curas de enfermedades incurables. Porque quiero cuidar a los enfermos. Curar a mi familia” (Because I want to save lives. Because I want to know many cures for incurable diseases. Because I want to take care of the sick. Cure my family). Sonia wanted to be a doctor, a lawyer, a chemist and an astronaut so she could “ayudar a la gente a cumplir obligaciones” (help people fulfill their obligations). Edgar wrote on his poster: “Yo quiero ser chemical (sic), quimico y doctor porque me gusta el oficio, para cuidar a las personas, para inventar cosas” (I want to be a chemist and a doctor because I like the occupation, to take care of people, to invent things). Antonio selected a picture of a mariachi singer and wrote in his poster: “Singer – cantante. Yo quiero ser cantante porque me (sic) a mi me gusta cantar canciones bonitas” (Singer -- I want to be a singer because I like to sing beautiful songs). In this way, the posters functioned as “identity texts” for the children (Cummins, 2006).

The students’ sociocultural realities perhaps became more clearly depicted when they expressed what they did not want to be in the future. Vicente, David, Damián and Roberto all said that they did not want to be “borracho” (drunk). Damián added: “porque no me gustaria andar en la calle ni tomando” (because I wouldn’t

like to walk the streets or drink). Sonia did not want to sweep the streets, to sell candy or to be a beggar: “Lo que no quiero ser: barredera, dulcera, pidente lismona (sic).” Finally, two boys reflected in their posters the negative stereotypical image often assigned to teachers in the state of Oaxaca. Edgar said: “I don’t want to be a teacher. Es orible no me gusta ser teacher (sic).” (It’s horrible, I don’t like being a teacher). Alberto was more critical: “I don’t want to be teacher. Porque hacen huelga” (because they go on strike)².

The posters were powerful vehicles for getting the children to interact with the English language in their own terms. By asking the kids to write about what they wanted to be and not to be in the future, Irma and Rosi were encouraging them to expand their identities into imagined future communities. As Kanno and Norton (2003, p. 246) suggest, “to envision an imagined identity within the context of an imagined community can impact a learner’s engagement with educational practices”. Their reflections on wanting to become psychologists, doctors and singers, and not wanting to become drunkards, firemen or teachers likely will have an effect on their ongoing educational experiences.

The mixing of Spanish and English in the posters contributed to a safe learning environment and expanded opportunities for critical inquiry. By asking the students to justify their choices through the questions *Why?* and *Why not?* Irma and Rosi invited them to critically reflect on their current realities and their hopes for the future, as well as to explore more deeply the possibilities presented by each of the (desirable or undesirable) occupations. In many ways the poster activity reflects a Freirean problem-posing approach (Auerbach, 2000), or transformative pedagogy (Cummins, 2006), in that it asked the children to examine their social conditions and concerns so that they could imagine changes in their lives.

Through the use of Spanish, the students were able to express the nuanced and localized meanings of the English words they were learning, such as the fact that people should not become pilots if they suffer from motion sickness, or that (local) teachers often go on strike. Without using Spanish as a resource, the children would have been limited to matching pictures to words or reading dialogues that have little relevance to their lives. Equally important, the use of Spanish alongside English in this classroom served to legitimize the children’s shared language and equalize its status vis-à-vis English.

It’s important to point out, however, that Irma and Rosi were also constrained by Eurocentric forces that dominate Mexican media and society. This can be seen in the pictures from the magazines they brought in for

² The teachers’ union in Oaxaca is very politically active, and organizes frequent strikes and marches.

Table 1. Contrastive Analysis of Official Textbook and Computer Program vs. Activities Created by Rosi and Irma through a Sociocultural Theoretical Lens.

Principles of a Sociocultural Perspective Applied to Second Language Education	Official Textbook and Computer Program	Activities Created by Rosi and Irma
<p>Mediation <i>Languageing:</i> Use of language as a tool for learning <i>Translanguaging:</i> Use of resources from students' multiple languages</p>	The materials did not encourage creative use of language. The exercises were mechanical and reductionist (e.g., multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, matching). Using languages other than English was discouraged.	Through the games and art projects, the children used language in creative ways. The use of Spanish together with English expanded their opportunities for learning and participation.
<p>Zone of Proximal Development <i>Scaffolding:</i> Guided assistance in interactions with peers and teacher <i>Socio constructivist orientation:</i> Use of open-ended and collaborative activities for co-construction of knowledge</p>	The materials reflect a transmission-oriented pedagogy. Close-ended exercises gave students little opportunity for interaction, collaboration or creative co-construction of knowledge.	The games and art projects allowed for flexible participation structures in the classroom. Students were constantly interacting with the teachers and each other, engaging in collaborative problem-solving, and offering and receiving assistance to complete tasks.
<p>Multiliteracies and Multimodality Use of creative forms of representation from the local culture, such as drawing, art, drama, music. Use of bilingual and multilingual practices</p>	In addition to written and spoken language, the materials included pictures and technology. However, the pictures reinforced stereotypes of the United States. The computer exercises emphasized repetition and mechanical motions (e.g., drag and click). There were no suggestions for students to use alternative forms of communication in creative ways.	The students worked through multiple modes, including physical movement, songs, play, and drawing/art. The use of Spanish and English was accepted, modeled, and encouraged.
<p>Funds of knowledge Inclusion of students' pre-existing knowledge and everyday experiences in the classroom</p>	The language and pictures presented in the materials were disconnected from the students' realities and identities. The students' experiences and prior knowledge could not be used as resources for learning.	Students utilized their funds of knowledge as resources for learning. The format of the games and the words and rhythm of the songs were familiar to the students. Their previous knowledge and everyday experiences were an integral part of their art projects.
<p>Sociocultural identity <i>Complex nature of identity:</i> Students have multiple and changing identities <i>Identity negotiation:</i> Identities are developed in relation to power relations within society</p>	The materials did not give students the opportunity to share aspects of their identities, or to express their agency. For example, students could not choose the occupation of family members when completing one of the exercises.	The games and the art projects gave students an outlet to express their individual identities in their own terms. The games allowed for exploration and negotiation of relationships within the class.
<p>Investment and agency <i>Identity texts:</i> Creative work that reflects students' identities in a positive light; students invest in the learning process and have pride in their work</p>	Since all the exercises were close-ended and only allowed for one correct answer, there was no element of choice or opportunity for personalization of content.	The posters functioned as identity texts. They reflected the children's investment in their future and allowed them to feel proud of their creative work.
<p>Imagined communities Students explore their interests and desires for the future <i>Transformative orientation:</i> Critical literacy and examination power relations in society</p>	There was not attempt to explore students' interests and desires, or to encourage critical analysis of topics. As noted above, the materials reflect a transmission-oriented pedagogy, which is best realized through direct instruction in a teacher-centered model.	The children critically examined social issues they faced in their lives; for example, they reflected on desirable and undesirable occupations. They were encouraged to express their hopes and envision future identities in their chosen careers/occupations.

the students to use in their posters. Unfortunately, the posters depicted cut-out pictures of fair-skinned, middle-class individuals who were dressed in what looked like designer clothes. The only exception was Antonio's poster, which featured a singer in full mariachi attire, which, sadly, also communicates a stereotype.

Conclusions

The present study did not seek to measure and contrast gains in language proficiency stemming from the two approaches used in this classroom (the official textbook and computer program vs. the activities created by Irma and Rosi). Such research would require the adoption of an experimental methodology and the investigation of cause and effect relationships. As mentioned above, ours was an ethnographic study, which by definition seeks to understand, rather than measure and control, the complexity of social phenomena. Our intention in conducting this study was to examine this classroom through a sociocultural theoretical lens, and to explore not only the linguistic possibilities but also the interactional and affective opportunities afforded by the children's use of materials and participation in activities with Irma and Rosi.

We conclude our paper by revisiting the principles of a sociocultural perspective to second language education discussed above, and offering a contrastive analysis of the textbook and activities used in this classroom. This analysis is presented in Table 1.

Final thoughts

McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008, p. 198) point out that local teachers are in a strong position to design a pedagogy

that promotes English bilingualism for learners of all backgrounds, recognizes and validates the variety of Englishes that exists today, and teaches English in a manner that meets language needs and respects the local culture of learning.

In this paper we presented a portrait of a fifth grade classroom in Oaxaca, Mexico where two student-teachers, Irma and Rosi, attempted to do just that. They were able to balance the use of the government-mandated materials with classroom practices that connected learning to the students' social worlds and legitimized their local culture and shared language. They participated in activities in which they expressed their agency, expanded their identities, critically examined complex issues, and imagined alternative possibilities for their lives.

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