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Resisting a Restrictive Discourse Policy

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What happens when policies counter the lived reality of the communities in which classrooms serve? Reporting on one strand of a larger doctoral study, this essay examines how a teacher and her students resisted a restrictive discourse policy. As a doctoral student, my advisor had suggested I begin data collection by simply sitting in a classroom context and observing. Drawing on ethnographic tools and inspired by an ecological approach to language study, my aim was to capture language and learning in a Transitional English Language Arts classroom within a Program Improvement School in the context of the No Child Left Behind policy. The teacher in whose eighth-grade class I chose to sit said to me, "You have a perspective which I don't." From the privileged vantage point of a participant-observer, I listened. I recorded what the teacher said and what the language the students displayed—for both the teacher and me. More important, I heard the students' murmurings, their faintly audible linguistic shifts into non-dominant language forms, which composed their multilingual language identities within this rural California community. This essay draws on qualitative data to examine how this teacher and her students resisted an English-only restriction.

Background: Policy and Language Ecologies

The languages, which we use in society, in the classroom, and in our homes, contribute to the linguistic ecologies within which children evolve (van Lier). Policies on language use may aim to shape the practices in the classroom, but the living language communities which classrooms serve may be very different from classroom language policies. I will report on a subset of data collected for a doctoral study during a period referred to as "the perfect storm" (Gándara and Baca). The perfect storm was the convergence of policy initiatives by Federal and California governance, forbidding Spanish or other languages.

In California, given that these policies are enacted within communities that are largely multilingual, I posed these research questions:

- How do children make meaning with language when classroom language use is constrained?
- What impact do these constraints have on children's conceptions of English and their heritage language?
- How does a multilingual teacher contend with the effects of the classroom climate created by restrictive discourse policies both on her teaching practice and her students' identities as learners?

This essay thus explores the contexts of the state and federal policies at the time of the study and considers how these policies impacted the classroom language-learning context. The data collected include survey data which explored students' perceptions of "academic language," interviews with the instructor, and an analysis of the classroom language-and-learning discourse. Drawing from these data sources, I consider how students and their teacher make meaning with language in spite of a restrictive policy context.

Taking an Ecological Perspective

Van Lier argued that the study of classroom language and learning cannot be understood by isolating variables. Building upon Bronnfenbrenner's theory of human development, van Lier proposed that language and learning are enacted through the interaction of language ecologies. In order to understand classroom language and learning, the researcher must consider the language ecologies, which impact both directly and indirectly classroom language choices. For this reason, van Lier proposed drawing upon the tools of the ethnographer to consider not only the micro-level language use in the classroom, but also to consider the larger macro -policy contexts which may indirectly impact language and learning in the classroom.

An Ecological Lens on Academic Language

Scholars of second language acquisition have attempted to explain why students may quickly develop oral "every day" language but lack the language needed to progress in school. Cummins proposed the terms Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) as a theoretical construct to explain these differences.

However, these constructs taken from a monolingual perspective provide a skewed portrait of BICS building into the more complex CALP as students gain in academic abilities. What a monolingual perspective neglects is that multilingual students have additional tools at their disposal for building conceptual knowledge. In fact, a growing area of scholarly work has begun to consider the notion of *translanguaging*, which involves the use of multilingual conduits for building conceptual understanding (Garcia). When students may draw on their full range of expression, they are allowed additional tools for working through conceptual understanding (Sayer). However, a monolingual policy environment reinforces language hierarchies which may impact students' views of themselves and confidence in their multilingual and academic abilities (Bartolome).

Context and Methods of Data Collection

The context of the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom where I sat in 2010 reflects growing linguistic and economic segregation across many California communities. In the community that the school serves, 80% of the population identifies as non-White, and 44% speaks a language other than English at home (United States Census Bureau, 2010). In addition, a relative indication of poverty in a school is the number of

students receiving Free/Reduced Priced Meals. In this case, 80% qualified for government supplemented meals.[1] Beyond the relative economic segregation, the representation of language diversity within the eighth-grade classroom included 25 students who spoke Spanish in the home, two Tagalog speakers, and one Hindi speaker. Of the 30 children, 22 were still designated English language learners (ELL) according to California's English Language Development Test (CELDT). Only two were monolingual English speakers, while two others were determined upon entering school to be proficient bilingual speakers of English, and two others had been redesignated as proficient in English. Despite a policy which focuses narrowly on children's English language proficiency, children growing up in linguistically diverse communities gain experience in life narrated, as Applied Linguist Lilia Bartolome has observed, through sometimes many and varied dialects, languages, and the language of schooling.

Although these eighth-graders clearly lived in a linguistically diverse community, their cumulative school experience occurred during the converging policies of the Federal, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and California's Proposition 227, which enforced a monolingual educational climate in California (Gándara and Baca). With the introduction of NCLB, changes in federal policy drew on the Bush administration's ideological orientation towards language and learning, which conceived of bilingual education and bilingualism as a problem (Evans and Hornberger). Following the implementation of NCLB in 2001, the term *bilingual* was expunged from the records of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, Crawford). All official language acknowledging the role of the native language in facilitating a child's learning and strengthening academic development in English vanished as well from the new administration's reauthorization of ESEA. Moreover, Title VII of ESEA, the Bilingual Education Act was tacitly revoked (Evans and Hornberger). Eliminating bilingual education, NCLB's provisions for English Language Development were now provided under Title I for disadvantaged students. Furthermore, English as a Second Language (ESL) was not recognized as a core subject under NCLB. Therefore, providing students access to teachers with expertise in teaching emerging language learners was not a priority. Instead, classes often became structured by reading level where special needs students and English language learners were combined, as was the case in the district at the site of this study (Harper, de Jong, and Platt).

Furthermore, funding for Program Improvement Schools receiving Title I money under NCLB (such as the one in this study) was connected to Reading First, which relied on pre-packaged, "scientifically-based" reading programs designed for monolingual native speakers (Pease-Alvarez, Davies Samway, and Cifka-Herrera). Moreover, federal NCLB policy had been preceded in 1998 by the passage of Proposition 227 (Prop 227), which 61% of California voters approved. Prop 227 restricted bilingual education in favor of Structured English Immersion (SEI, Wright). Proponents of SEI, driven by an English-only ideological orientation (Gándara and Baca), claimed that offering instruction overwhelmingly in English applied the methods that Canadian immersion programs had successfully implemented (Baker). This converging storm of policy efforts aimed to force a monolingual educational climate on bilingual students. However, lin-

1. http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html

guistic diversity has blossomed in California as families continue to nurture their children in their mother tongue (Hill).

Resulting Data from the Student Survey, Teacher Interview, and Classroom Language-Awareness Study

Having discussed the policies context of this study, I now turn to the results of the data collection. First, I discuss the surveys I gave to gain the student perspective. Then I describe the instructor, whose philosophy of teaching and language learning resided at the heart of her classroom instruction. Next, I present a brief discussion of the classroom language data findings. In total, this data provides a montage of the classroom language ecology.

Student Survey.

Given that these implicitly monolingual policies were enacted within largely multilingual communities, I wondered how children perceived the language they had to speak in school in relation to the heritage languages audible in their classroom whispers. My field notes documented the use of the term "academic language" in the textbook, in daily vocabulary exercises given by the instructor, and on laminated signs in the classrooms and the office that read, "All teachers are teachers of Academic Language." I wondered how students interpreted these messages. In collecting background data for the larger study, I administered a survey with the following questions:

1) Have you heard of "academic language"?
2) What does "academic language" mean to you?
3) Where have you seen or heard the words "academic language "?
4) Why do you study academic language?
5) How is academic language the same or different from other language?

Table 1 represents a summary of responses to the survey given to 28 of the students. All 28 students reported hearing about academic language. Of the total, eight students specifically attributed learning academic language to learning the English language. While 26 students indicated that the term "academic language" was used at school, two others wrote that it is used at work and in writing respectively. Moreover, nine students reported that the reason for studying academic language was to be better in the English language. Finally, no students attributed academic language to their heritage languages.

The survey data provided qualitative information about how the students conceived of academic language. Two clear themes are noted in the student qualitative responses: *Academic language was a form of English practiced in school which held prestige*, and *Academic language is English as opposed to Spanish.* In students' own words, "to me academic language means using English vocabulary when you are talking" and "learning about the English language." Moreover, one student specifically stated, "Academic language means to me a bunch of students struggling in English." Student responses also revealed that they associated greater prestige with academic language when compared with other varieties. "It sounds better"; "It is different from Spanish because it's English"; "I think

Academic language is a higher level"; and "Academic Language is appropriate for school and the other words are not"; and "Academic language is a more advanced language and other languages are different because they aren't academic." These responses reflect the instructor's concern that students did not see their home languages (Spanish and other languages) as academic, which in her opinion would affect their confidence in using English.

Table 1: Data in Response to Questions about "Academic Language" (Data source: Gage-Serio, 247)

Have you ever heard of "academic language"?		
Yes		No
28		0
What does "academic language" mean?		
Attributed to English	Not Attributed to English	Students' Comments
8	20	• It means learning about the English language. • To me academic language means using English vocabulary when you're talking. • Academic language means to me a bunch of students struggling in English.
Where have you seen or heard the words "academic language"?		
At school	At work	In writing
26	1	1
Why do you study academic language?		
Become better in English		Other reasons
9		19
How is academic language the same or different from other language?		
• It sounds better. • It is different from Spanish because it's English. • I think academic language is a higher level • Academic language is appropriate for school and the other words are not. • Academic language is a more advanced language, and other languages are different because they aren't academic.		

Interviews with the Instructor

Interview data with the instructor showed her alarm about the students' academic confidence on many occasions. The results of the student responses to my survey were not surprising to her. As she put it,

> I'm constantly campaigning for 'building their bilingual biceps.' The students I work with are at varying levels [of Spanish and other languages]. Some came here in the third, fourth, or fifth grades. Some were born and raised here. Few honor it [their language ability]. I don't get the sense that kids have a lot of academic Spanish. I wouldn't say they speak only kitchen Spanish, but most do not read in Spanish, and they aren't as aware of using Spanish as a tool. Spanish is a social thing for them. Yes, a solidarity tool. It is a language of comfort; it is easy. But I'm trying to sell it as academic. I sell

> bilingualism as a tool. I value the same thing. I want them to see the legitimacy of bilingualism as a tool. (Gage-Serio 60)

The instructor's decision for me to study her classroom was due, in part, to the concern that students view their linguistic identities through the divided lens of these segregated communities—English-only at school, Spanish or other lannguages in their communities.

Possessing a Masters degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and having originally been hired to teach ESL, the teacher requested reassignment to English Language Arts when the district adopted the scripted Reading First packages for the below basic-level students. While she agonized over leaving the ESL students, as the below-basic classes were often given to inexperienced new teachers without formal TESOL training, she opted for classes that allowed her the dignity to practice her profession. Having completed a single subject credential in English Language Arts, she elected to teach the Transitional English Language Arts classes. During her nine years at this school, she had learned Spanish as well, initially studying Spanish abroad during her vacations. She discovered that her expert linguistic skills could enrich the classroom experience for students who must be able to transition into Core English Language Arts by high school or risk missing requirements needed to attend college. By the time of this study, she was quite proficient. She conducted many of her parent-teacher meetings in Spanish and was often called upon to translate for the principal and other teachers. Her efforts to mediate the linguistic chasm had afforded her a certain level of in-group status among the students.

When we spoke of how she used her multilingual abilities in the classroom under NCLB, she indicated, she was not really aware of using Spanish as an instructional practice except to stop and elicit students' awareness of cognate relationships. However, she strives to be a model for her students through her own practice and puts a premium on the value of multilingualism especially for teachers. She argues that "knowledge of another language informs your teaching . . . . It is really important to try sitting through, learning languages, constantly being put in your students' shoes." At the beginning of the year, I noted that she used a lot less Spanish in the classroom than when I had observed her classes two years earlier. When we discussed this, she expressed some hesitancy about using Spanish because the classes had been restructured by reading level. Therefore, a few students spoke only English. She was concerned that students who did not speak Spanish would be upset by the use of Spanish in the classroom. As the year progressed, she decided that linking Spanish to French and Latin etymology within English for the purpose of building morphological knowledge was a justifiable practice according to the California Standards for Grade 8.

Classroom Language Data

In my analysis of the classroom language data, I isolated Language Awareness Related Episodes, influenced by Swain's and Lapkin's Language Related Episodes (LRE). Departing from Swain and Lapkin's experimental construct, my unit of analysis is defined as "episodes of language exchange containing ideas contributing to awareness in the construction of

meaning" (Gage-Serio 75). These episodes contributed to opportunities ("affordances") for language awareness, defined by van Lier as the situation in which learners perceive, interact, and think about the language. As I coded my data, I saw four themes emerge:

1) Opportunities for metalinguistic awareness,
2) Opportunities for analeptic awareness;
3) Opportunities for proleptic awareness; and
4) Opportunities for awareness of register shift

These themes revealed exchanges among students and between students and the instructor—and the exchanged proved to be bidirectional. In other words, *opportunities* for language awareness are opportunities for activity between interlocutors, where in many cases the teacher *listened* to how students constructed meaning in order to arrive at a shared understanding. Examples of the coding themes help to illustrate how coming to an awareness of shared understanding is a bidirectional act where the instructor's *listening* to her students is an integral element in expanding the discourse.

Metalinguistic Awareness. The coding the theme of *opportunities for metalinguistic awareness* occurred in verbal exchanges examining meaningful parts of language as an object. For example, Language Awareness Related Episodes (LAREs) might relate to polysemy, morphology, synonymy, and cross-linguistic comparisons. In one instance, while the instructor was explaining that the *guidance counselor* would help students determine their high school classes, one student asked, "I thought a counselor was like someone who helps you with your problems?" The instructor answered, "Your social problems? Yes, [but] a guidance counselor is a little different. . . . someone in school who helps you with your career." The polysemy within the use of the word *counselor* was a source of confusion for this student. In fact, Boers explains that the range of polysemy usage is quite complicated and may be very confusing for students. He recommends that teachers examine polysemy in text with sensitivity, reflecting that polysemy and connotative meaning may be novel or culturally unfamiliar to students. Other examples, include ways in which the instructor sought opportunities to draw on cross linguistic examples, as in the following, when she began to explain a vocabulary word: "So *vivid* sounds like a Latin word. What is it?" One student responded, "*Vivir,"* to which she replied, "*Vivir*—living. So it if is alive, it must be very (pause) colorful? Very lively." *Opportunities for metalinguistic awareness* in which connections are made between linguistic systems appeared to prompt some students to engage in the discussion.

Analeptic Awareness. The coding theme of *opportunities for analeptic awareness* were verbal exchanges in which interlocutors referenced shared experiences and/or knowledge to create a common schema for clarifying meaning. For example, LAREs drawing on *affordances for analeptic awareness* established prior or shared knowledge base, on which to scaffold additional knowledge. One such example in the data included the discussion of the notion "to stand up for something." In this exchange, the instructor began with a shared understanding, using examples the students were familiar with, such as standing up for the pledge of allegiance to the flag, or standing up for your rights. The

students then added examples of people who had stood up for their rights, such as "Martin Luther King", "Rosa Parks." The instructor countered, "What about Rosa Parks? She sat down on the bus. She wasn't standing up." Then the instructor added, "So we have a belief, and it has something to do with your opinion." In this case, the instructor's knowledge of the students and the students' co-construction of concepts in tandem through analepsis provided opportunities for language awareness.

Proleptic Awareness. Another coding theme was *opportunities for proleptic awareness*. These were verbal exchanges exploring inferences or opportunities to step into shared space and assume the direction of the discourse. For example, opportunities for proleptic awareness were situations in which students finished instructor's sentences, or connected hints provided by *wh-* or echo questions, which reflected students deducing the implied or inferred information. These examples were particularly salient when the students did not initially see the connection between linguistic systems, as in the following example. The instructor began, "So 'primordial' has to do with something which has been around since the earliest times. You know? You can use the first part. You Spanish speakers, you have an advantage. Use those bilingual biceps. What is the Latin root?" One student answered, "Ohhh…*primo*!" The instructor answered, "Oh, yes. *Primo* sounds like you got it. *Primero* . . . . So what does that mean? Several students chimed in: "One." The instructor continued prompting: "So one, or the first. . . . What folks? The first . . . ? Sounds familiar, huh? Okay. So even if the second part of the word is not familiar, the first part has something to do with 'first,' since the beginning of time . . . ." Responding, one student answered, "primo . . . . The first day!"

Students appeared to need the prompting of the instructor to notice the relationships among Latin roots and derived terms. Moreover, through stepping into the shared proleptic space, following the thought process of the instructor who presented the information as a kind of puzzle, students were offered the dignity of reaching and noticing the relationships themselves.

Awareness of Register Shift. The last coding theme is *opportunities for awareness of register shift*. These verbal exchanges reflected students' awareness of register shifts, which achieve different norms of language use for different audiences and purposes. For example, register involves LAREs in which students chose language purposely to establish or signal specific social norms for a specific audience. While opportunities for awareness of register shift were less frequent, some occurred with students who had been with this instructor for more than one year. Perhaps the students' familiarity with the instructor or her phrasing may have facilitated the display of more formal register shifts, as in the following example offered by one student who explained his use of a historical term in his written work this way: "I put a more advanced word . . . the Underground Railroad wasn't actually a *railroad*." (He said this with a lowered, exaggerated adult intonation). In this episode, the student tried on the language of his instructor to show what he knew about academic language. In return, she offered him a class token given for special answers.

Findings and Discussion

Taken together, the policy under NCLB and California's Prop 227 had created a restrictive discourse environment in the classroom I observed. Although my survey data had revealed the strain on the children's conceptions of their English and heritage languages, in this particular language ecology, students and their teacher engaged in making connections between languages. In fact, the classroom language data clearly illustrated several ways how the classroom could be a space for making connections and shared understanding. These connections with language were a means of resistance to the dominant discourse of federal and state policies, which were achieved through a teacher's willingness to mediate the linguistic chasm. By empowering her students with the knowledge that their teacher was an ally in their struggle, the teacher's actions become a political form of resistance to restrictive discourse policies. Policies on language use do not stamp out the living language communities, which classrooms serve. A teacher's respect for multilingualism gives status to students' multilingual identities. In other words, for some students, drawing on their knowledge of their home language may provide them with the option to add their own, alternative discourse practices to the discussion. Moreover, a teacher's empathy towards the students' lack of academic confidence, and a teacher's drive to help students bridge their multilingual and developing academic identities can have a powerful impact. Finally, a teacher's willingness to listen to her students in order to arrive at shared understanding can foster a classroom climate of mutual respect. Languages viewed as a resource not only provide children with connections between their homes and the classroom, but honor their multiple linguistic identities and help them see "the legitimacy of bilingualism as a tool."

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