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(Re)Categorizing Language-Minority Literacies in Restrictive Educational Contexts

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ARTICLES

(Re)Categorizing Language-Minority Literacies in Restrictive Educational Contexts

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In this discussion, I explore the unfolding effects of Arizona’s anti-bilingual education law (Proposition 203) on schools with predominant language-minority student populations. Instead of facilitating academic progress, policies like Proposition 203 impede teachers from “scaffolding” (Long & Adamson, 2012, p. 39) their students’ native-language abilities in the process of developing academic literacy proficiencies in English—ultimately resulting in significant academic challenges for language-minority students. Based on this premise, I describe the everyday literacy practices of immigrant and language-minority students as a way to demonstrate that the students’ academic difficulties do not represent their true competencies. My aim is to emphasize the breadth of student literacy practices that occur both at school and in the community in hopes of initiating a dialogue on how to expand on these practices to enhance classroom instruction. To do this, I propose a model for efficiently identifying literacy practices as a way to help educators bridge their students’ everyday experiences to school contexts.

Keywords: bilingual education, language policy, literacy

In spite of the fact that the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court ruling of *Plyler v. Doe* requires public schools to admit children regardless of their immigration status (see Crawford, 2008, pp. 104–105), policymakers have been able to manipulate language policies as a means of blocking access to an equitable education for language-minority students (Gándara et al., 2010; Johnson, 2009). In recent years, educational language policies across the United States have become increasingly restrictive—to such an extent that, in many states, languages other than English are considered “forbidden” in public schools (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). This discussion illustrates how language policies embedded within macro-sociopolitical contexts unfold

within local contexts to ultimately affect interactions between teachers and students. To do this, I focus on the U.S. state of Arizona—where immigration and language issues have been particularly contentious issues in recent decades (Civil Rights Project, 2010).

EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY IN ARIZONA

In 2000, voters in Arizona passed Proposition 203 *English for the Children*—effectively dismantling bilingual education services in favor of a monolithic submersion approach named *Sheltered English Immersion* (now called *Structured English Immersion*). Essentially, Proposition 203 claimed that bilingual education and English as a second language (ESL) programs were impeding language-minority students from learning English—thus, limiting the students’ socioacademic opportunities (Johnson, 2005; Lillie, 2011; Wright, 2005) and inhibiting them from achieving the “American Dream” (Johnson, 2006). Although Proposition 203 was passed as an educational initiative, it was shaped by broader currents of linguistic hegemony in the United States (Gándara & Orfield, 2012).

As an alternative to bilingual education and ESL programs, Proposition 203 dictated one school year (not usually to exceed 180 days) of sheltered English Immersion (SEI) instruction to prepare non-English-speaking students for grade-level classes taught entirely in English. Once passed, the Arizona Department of Education was adamant that school districts adhere to Proposition 203’s fundamental tenet: “Children who are English learners shall be educated through sheltered English immersion during a temporary transition period not normally to exceed one year” (Proposition 203, Sec. 15-752). Additionally, the rigidity of this law holds educators personally liable for adhering to the guidelines (see Proposition 203, Sec. 15-754). The chapters in Arias and Faltis (2012) sketch out the legal and historical landscape of Proposition 203, as well as critique the current practices in Arizona’s SEI approach to ELL education.

Within a few years after the implementation of Proposition 203, schools with high numbers of language-minority students began suffering severe academic consequences and continued to struggle on standardized assessments (Civil Rights Project, 2010; Johnson, 2011; Krashen, Rolstad, & MacSwan, 2007; Lillie, 2011; Lillie, Markos, & Wiley, 2012; Mahoney, MacSwan, & Thompson, 2005; Wright, 2005; Wright & Choi, 2006; Wright & Pu, 2005). Confounding the challenges posed by Proposition 203, the Arizona state legislature passed HB 2064 in 2006. HB 2064 created an ELL Task Force that reshaped SEI programs into a 4-hour per day block of instruction specifically focused on “English language development” that segregates ELL students from regular content area classrooms (Lillie et al., 2012; Rios-Aguilar, González-Canché, & Sabetghadam, 2012). In spite of testimonies from multiple university experts in the field of ELL education (two of whom were on the actual ELL Task Force) denouncing the 4-hour block model, language-minority students assessed below the designation of “Intermediate” on the state language proficiency exam were required to participate in the 4-hour block classes starting in 2008 (Faltis & Arias, 2012). While providing tangible guidelines for operating a language support program can help mitigate much of the confusion surrounding inconsistent definitions and implementations of “bilingual education” (see Crawford, 2004, pp. 32–50; Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006, pp. 47–83), imposing a one-size-fits-all policy like Proposition 203 disregards the challenges facing schools with significant numbers of linguistically diverse students (Johnson, 2008, 2012).

Limiting heritage-language services in schools with predominant language-minority populations has a significant effect on the development of prescriptive academic literacy skills in both languages. In turn, educators start to see their students framed within expectations of underachievement, especially once oral abilities in English are acquired and academic literacy continues to lag. In a description of the challenges facing language-minority students and educators at her school, a principal from the Milagros School District (pseudonym) in Phoenix, Arizona explained, “When you don’t have a language, which many of our kids that are coming into us, they don’t have a language, so there is nothing to build on.” While this statement illustrates the inherent misconceptions that many educators have toward language-minority students and their first-language abilities, it also epitomizes the underlying socioeducational paradigm created by subtractive language policies like Proposition 203. This article traces out the unfolding effects of Proposition 203 on schools with predominant language-minority student populations by exploring the way language and literacy skills are negotiated by educators and students in Arizona. Highlighting these interactions as they take place at the local level contributes to an overall understanding of how language policies structure the opportunities of immigrant and minority students (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009; Tollefson, 2002a; Wiley, Lee, & Rumberger, 2009).

Despite Proposition 203’s emphasis on English-only instruction, it is possible to maintain bilingual programs (Newcomer, 2012). That said, although Proposition 203 does include a waiver option to allow public schools to maintain bilingual programs, waivers are difficult to attain, and bilingual programs remain scant in comparison to English immersion in Arizona (Combs, Evans, Fletcher, Parra, & Jiménez, 2005). Considering the overall emphasis on English-only, policies like Proposition 203 essentially preclude bilingual education as a viable approach for scaffolding native-language abilities to develop literacy proficiencies in English—ultimately resulting in significant academic challenges for language-minority students.

When alternative forms of literacy abilities are not recognized by educators, the academic consequences for students are exacerbated. In this discussion, I describe everyday literacy practices of immigrant and language-minority students in the Milagros School District as a way to demonstrate that the students’ academic difficulties do not reflect their true competencies. My aim is to emphasize the breadth of meaningful literacy practices that students are involved in both at school and in the community in hopes of initiating a dialogue on how to expand on these practices to enhance classroom instruction.

SOCIOCULTURAL VIEWS OF LITERACY

Nowhere are challenges with academic literacy more evident than in schools with high immigrant and language-minority populations (McCarty, 2005a; McCarty & Watahomigie, 2004; Pérez, 2004a). This trend is further confounded in low socioeconomic contexts (Heath, 1983; Hornberger & King, 2001; McCarty, 2005b; Moll & Ruiz, 2002; Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). In addition to ignoring the influence of native languages and writing systems, the current emphasis of federal education policy on standardization, accountability, and the constant evaluation of academic literacy skills devalues the prevalence of alternative literacy practices in minority students’ lives (Hornberger, 2003b; McCarty, 2005a; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008; Zentella, 2005). Acknowledging that the sociocultural context depicts what counts as literacy, peeling back the layers of power and influence that prioritize certain forms over others allows us to view a

variety of literacy events in terms of meaningful cultural practices that are situated across different communicative environments (Alvermann, 2009; Pérez, 2005b).

As explained by Moje et al. (2008), a “sociocultural perspective on literacy acknowledges the role of print and other symbol systems being central to literate practice, but recognizes that the learning and use of symbols is mediated by and constituted in social systems and cultural practices” (p. 109). Viewing the literacy practices of minority communities in this light underscores the vast repertoire of literacy skills that multilingual students possess (Peréz, 2005a). Hornberger (2003a) expands on the intricacy of these multilingual competencies by looking at biliteracy in terms of multiple continua of biliterate contexts, developmental stages, and media. By recognizing and honoring these different contexts in which literacy constructs meaning in language-minority students’ lives, educators can bridge already-existing literacy skills to classroom practices (Knobel, 1999, pp. 187–206; Pérez, 2004c; Torres-Guzmán, 2004; Zentella, 2005).

Central to this discussion is understanding why certain practices (e.g., graffiti art or text messages) are often perceived as inferior literacy skills when compared to other forms of literacy (e.g., writing novels or journal articles) that are seen as more prestigious. The New London Group (1996) put forth the concept of “multiliteracies” to emphasize the variety of literacy skills related to emerging forms of communication, technologies, and competencies used in culturally pluralistic societies. Cole and Pullen (2010) portray the range of skills constituting multiliteracies as “deeply dependent on social–cultural factors that are always in motion, and often have unknown trajectories, especially given the current dramatic economic fluctuations that are presently starting to determine new models of work and communication” (p. 4). Moreover, recognizing the value, form, and function of different literacies requires looking at the role they play in human-mediated activities like classroom routines and interactions.

This view accounts for “the infinite variability of different forms of meaning-making in relation to cultures, the subcultures, or the layers of an individual’s identity that these forms serve” (New London Group, 1996, p. 88). In spite of the pedagogical implications outlined by the New London Group (1996, pp. 80, 88), the broader perspective of literacy and multiliteracies is often lost in a school context such that “the content of the curriculum, the materials integrated within academic lessons, and the pedagogical interactions between students and teachers do not reflect these assets” (Smolin & Lawless, 2010, p. 173). This rift is manifested and reconstructed through prominent discourses that legitimate prescriptive forms of literacy while simultaneously devalorizing other forms (McCarty, 2005a). Understanding how this plays out in the everyday lives of students requires situating literacy within the larger social context and exposing the influence of dominant-class prescriptive values on the mainstream concept of literacy (Street, 1984, 1993, 2001).

Street (1993) posits the autonomous and ideological models of literacy to demonstrate the link between cultural behaviors and social power structures—urging us “to recognize the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts” (p. 7). Not only do power-related notions of literacy illuminate the process by which academic marginalization is perpetuated, they emphasize the inherent connections between literacy activities and the social institutions (e.g., schools) in which they are embedded (Mercado, 2005a, 2005b). Viewing literacy as a set of sociocultural practices sheds light on the difficult situation confronting language-minority students in politically conservative states like Arizona. Language-minority students face the challenge of acquiring literacy skills in their primary language—often without any formal assistance—while concurrently being evaluated on their mastery of (prescriptive) majority-language literacy skills.

Espousing a “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) approach to understanding language-minority students’ social interactions and cultural patterns highlights the nuances involved in the way literacy skills circulate within and across different contexts. Fránquiz, Martínez-Roldán, and Mercado (2011) propose that “hidden funds of family knowledge and ‘nonacademic’ literacies be used as resources for learning in schools from preschool to university, in libraries, in churches, in community-based organizations and in other educational settings” (p. 109). Elucidating the multiliteracies perspective within the funds of knowledge framework, Mercado (2005b) depicts family literacy practices that are used for sensemaking of lived experiences, for social participation in various groups, for private leisure, and for documenting life events (pp. 242–245).

Mercado’s (2005a) representation of literacy practices stresses that it is also necessary to include “peoples’ awareness of literacy; how they talk about and make sense of literacy; and the values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships associated with it” (p. 136). Thus, attributing social and economic hardships to language-minority students’ first language (L1) while simultaneously blaming second language (L2) competencies for academic underachievement perpetuates the ethos of failure surrounding language-minority students. It is from this platform that I encourage validating language-minority literacy practices and building upon native-language competencies to enhance the educational experiences of multilingual and immigrant students.

METHODS

Research Context

This discussion stems from a three-year ethnographic project in the Milagros School District in Phoenix, Arizona (Johnson, 2008). According to the Arizona Department of Education, the four Milagros schools served 2919 students during the 2007–2008 school year. While 60% of the students were *officially* classified as English Language Learners (ELL), there are very few students in this district for whom Spanish is not their first language (~5%). From a socioeconomic perspective, most of the students come from impoverished households. Due to this difficult economic environment, Milagros is identified as a Title I school district. The Milagros district has a 100% participation in Arizona’s Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program. This index traditionally represents the percent of students who come from economically stressed families. Moreover, recent assessments estimate that approximately 35%–40% of families within the district live in *extreme* poverty (as reported by the Milagros School District).

Academically, the Milagros district consistently struggles to meet both federal and state standards. As designated by the Arizona Department of Education (2011a), all four schools have been labeled as “Underperforming.” According to federal policy, Milagros had failed to meet *Adequate Yearly Progress* (Arizona Department of Education, 2011b) as a district for each of the five (documented) years prior to the writing of this article (2005–2009). Even more disconcerting, approximately 40% of all students (and 50% of males) from the Milagros district do not finish high school (as reported by the Milagros School District). While implementing the guidelines of Proposition 203 within the framework of the Arizona Department of Education’s school accountability requirements might be feasible in some districts, the Milagros schools are faced

with a dearth of resources to adequately serve such a significant language-minority population (for description of current and previous state accountability systems, see Arizona Department of Education, 2013).

Participation Observations

I employed an ethnographic approach as “a way of seeing” the relation between student literacy practices and academic underachievement (Wolcott, 2008). The data described in this article were collected through participant observations and structured interviews with students and educators from all four schools. As a classroom participant observer, I was involved with the Milagros schools in a variety of different capacities. Officially, my roles in the classroom included classroom volunteer, instructional aide, after-school program instructor, adult ESL instructor, substitute teacher, and a summer school teacher. Furthermore, I was involved with the community as an Americorps VISTA volunteer (see: www.americorps.gov) for one year (2005–2006). This position enabled me to work with students on a variety of community-development activities outside of school contexts. During my participant observations, I was careful to take note of how literacy skills were used, described, and represented in instructional environments as well as outside of school.

Educator Participants

After two years of working in the Milagros district, I was able to recruit multiple consultants to participate in my project. In total, 10 educators (spanning Grades 3–8) participated in structured interviews concerning language policies and academic achievement. When recruiting interview consultants, I approached educators with whom I had already established a professional relationship. This enabled me to discuss sensitive issues and receive candid commentaries without causing any undue stress on the interviewees. The semistructured interviews focused on language policy, instructional practices, and social factors involved in education.

Within the Milagros faculty, there are some relevant characteristics to point out. First, it is notable to mention that there is a high teacher turnover rate in the Milagros district; many leave before their third year (approximately 46% of the teachers have three or less years of experience). Also, many teachers were recruited from the Midwest United States (primarily due to a lack of teaching jobs in that region), and the vast majority of the educators in the Milagros schools are Anglo and monolingual English-speakers. The educator consultants recruited for this project reflect these demographic and professional trends. To complement the viewpoints provided by classroom teachers, I was also able to recruit a principal and a school counselor to take part in the interview process.

Student Participants

Thirty students (spanning Grades 5–8) from all four schools were recruited on a voluntary basis. Before requesting signatures on consent and assent documents, I conducted home visits with parents to explain the nature of my research and the potential for publishing the results. While all

of the student participants were either first- or second-generation immigrants, they came from a variety of social backgrounds (economic, religious, geographic, educational), and their language abilities spanned a broad spectrum. While all students were native Spanish speakers, most of them were bilingual speakers of both Spanish and English. The semistructured interviews comprised 42 questions that focused on the students' perceptions of language, immigration, school, and their heritage backgrounds.

I also made it a point to include students who had been in the United States for varying lengths of time; whereas some participants were born in the United States, others had only been in the country for under a year. Specifically, 10 of the students were born in the United States, 19 were born in Mexico, and one student was born in Cuba. While most students were born in Mexico and then moved to the United States, one student was born in the United States, moved to Mexico when she was 2 years old, and did not return until age 10. Even though there were only 30 total student-interview consultants, the combination of their background experiences and language characteristics is representative of any middle school classroom in the Milagros district.

Journal Consultants

In addition to the 30 students who participated in structured interviews, 10 additional middle school students contributed by writing personal ethnographic journals over a span of 13 months—resulting in 477 total journal entries. I was able to recruit the journal consultants from the Americorps community youth group in which I was involved. Having students chronicle their experiences provided a unique lens on how they interpreted their different social and academic contexts. Knowing the students in this capacity allowed me to use the journals to create a more personal dialogue with them concerning topics surrounding language, education, politics, and culture. The journals allowed me to better understand the students' views on topics like language and literacy and provided a platform for further discussions on their experiences.

The literacy practices described in the observations, interviews, and journal entries were grouped thematically, and eventually resulted in the three overarching categories: (a) instrumental literacy practices, (b) affective literacy practices, and (c) community literacy practices. All three types of literacy practices included instances of using both English and Spanish at school and in the community. I unpack these three categories by illustrating the literacy practices of language-minority students across various contexts. In doing such, I hope to provide an alternative lens that educators can use to view their students' literacy abilities and improve academic engagement in the classroom.

ANALYSIS

Rippling Effects of Proposition 203

With over 15 years as an educator in the Milagros district, Ms. Sandoval (school counselor) explained that before Proposition 203, “there used to be an emphasis on the value of being biliterate and bilingual, being a true biliterate. The focus now is on let’s get these kids . . . able to

read English, function in English, and take a test in English.” Not only did Proposition 203 mark a direct shift away from cultivating heritage-language literacy skills, the current federal emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing has resulted in an educational environment that openly limits professional innovation. The problem here is twofold. On one hand, Proposition 203 does not endorse the type of native-language support that can help students develop strong academic literacy skills in English (August & Shanahan, 2006; Collier & Thomas, 2004; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Krashen & McField, 2005; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Long & Adamson, 2012; Morales & Aldana, 2010; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). On the other hand, the overwhelming focus on high-stakes assessment and accountability results in classroom activities that stress merely “passing the test” instead of cultivating creativity and encouraging intellectual curiosity.

Contributing to the complexity of this context is the common misunderstanding of second language acquisition versus the development of academic literacy skills in the students’ L2 (Long & Adamson, 2012). In spite of having such a high percentage of students classified as ELL, many educators echo the sentiments of Ms. McDonald (K–8 physical education): “I don’t believe that every student here [is ELL], even though they say they’re ELL. I mean some of the paperwork I just filled out, the student speaks better English than I do. How are they ELL?” This perspective has produced a common tendency to conflate oral English abilities with academic literacy skills and “second language instructional competence” (Rolstad & MacSwan, 2008). Many students in the Milagros district reach a high level of oral proficiency by middle school but continue to struggle with academic literacy proficiency.

Not understanding that limited academic literacy is heavily influenced by a lack of native-language literacy support in the early grades shades the way educators view their students. Mr. Walker’s account is a good example of the ways in which second-language oral abilities are negatively conflated with English-literacy skills:

1. **Mr. Walker:** I would say . . . if the kid can’t speak more than a few sentences, I would say that would be ELL. Some of these kids that they classify as ELL can speak English better than you.
2. **Eric:** Is it the same with speaking as it is with reading?
3. **Mr. Walker:** It’s hard to say about the reading because so many of these kids, they’ve been here all their lives, can’t read. They read at a third- or fourth-grade level, and that’s about average for these kids, second, third, fourth, they’re way behind in reading and English grammar.

Although larger social views surrounding immigration could have been coloring Mr. Walker’s overall perspective of his students, it is important to point out that he openly admits that *so many* of his students struggle with literacy skills but then downplays their ELL classification. One result of this viewpoint is a significant underestimation of the students’ true abilities, ultimately placing the burden of underachievement entirely on the students. Rather than looking at how both L1 and L2 literacy skills surface outside of prescriptive academic contexts, teachers often see ELL students in terms of lacking literacy altogether. Instead of viewing the students as “cosmopolitan intellectuals” (Campano & Ghiso, 2011), a deficit orientation toward community language patterns shapes the way educators view their students’ overall academic potential (Escamilla, 2006; MacSwan, 2000). While Proposition 203 cannot be blamed solely for this type of perspective, it does structure an educational environment that foments such deficit views (Johnson & Johnson, 2014).

Student Perceptions of Literacy Practices

While most students expressed a strong affinity for speaking Spanish, they were quick to downplay their own native-language literacy skills. When asked which language is easier to write, Josué (eighth grade) replied: “English. I don’t know how to write in Spanish, *ni sabía leer en español* (“nor do I know how to read in Spanish”), can’t read that good in Spanish.” Many students in the Milagros schools readily admitted similar insecurities surrounding reading and writing in Spanish. Javier (eighth grade) explained that English was easier for him:

because I don’t know how to read or write in Spanish. I know how to read Spanish, but it takes me time to read. I can read it but I can’t write it. I’ll write it . . . but I’ll spell a lot of words wrong, just like in English.

These sentiments of inferiority in both languages are a direct result of the submersion-based approach in Arizona. Frustrated, Javier rationalized his difficulties in Spanish as a product of his experiences in school:

When I was little, I knew how to read and write Spanish. I don’t know what happened. They [American teachers] said, all you need to read English, and I didn’t know [English] and they put me in summer school. You had to do everything in English, even though I didn’t know and they, they didn’t teach me anything, so they like they wanted you to speak and write English without you knowing how to speak and write in English.

This type of experience is so common that the resulting effects have created an encompassing environment of academic uncertainty.

In Javier’s case, reservations concerning reading and writing in Spanish are filtered through his experiences as an immigrant being socialized into school literacy through an explicit schema of English superiority. It is not that students in this context cannot read and write in English and Spanish; rather, the persistent message that they cannot achieve academically in English undermines their view of what they actually can do. Understanding how students integrate reading and writing into their everyday (bilingual) activities to accomplish meaningful tasks underscores their true abilities and suggests an untapped implementational space for scaffolding classroom academic skills (Escamilla, 2006; Hornberger, 2006; Lubliner & Hiebert, 2011; Rodríguez-Valls, 2011).

Categorizing Literacy Practices

My perspective of language-minority literacy practices stems from the “funds of knowledge and discourse” reflected in family, community, peer, and popular culture contexts (Moje et al., 2004). This view underscores the value of all literacy practices by paying especially close attention to “out-of-school” activities (see Moje et al., 2008, pp. 124–125). Such strategies have been described as essential for survival and prosperity in newcomer settings, including religion, home, education, commerce, and law/state, which involve the use of language and literacy to different extents (Martínez-Roldán & Fránquiz, 2009). Additionally, the way I portray literacy-based activities includes both “text-meaning practices” and “pragmatic practices” (Luke, 2000b, pp. 453–454). This particular depiction of literacy practices underscores the “vital signs of

readers” as applied to contexts involving home, culture, environment, language, and economics (Tatum, 2008, p. 160).

Previous models of critical literacy analysis demonstrate the intricate relationship between practices, media, and the structures of literacy. Of particular relevance to my discussion are Luke’s (2000b) “four resources model,” Tatum’s (2008) “anatomically correct model of literacy instruction,” and Moje et al.’s (2004) description of the “third space” in content area literacy. Inspired by these analytical approaches, three distinct categories of literacy practices emerged out of my data:

1. Instrumental literacy practices.
2. Affective literacy practices.
3. Community literacy practices.

In this model, instrumental literacy practices focus on instances of reading and writing devoted to completing a prescribed task (e.g., completing a math problem). Affective literacy practices involve personal and emotional significance (e.g., writing in a journal). Finally, community literacy practices include print-related activities that allow students to negotiate their social surroundings (e.g., getting information from a flyer posted in the market). Examples of specific literacy practices observed within each category are outlined in Table 1.

From this stance, I contend that the literacy practices of language-minority students could be more efficiently determined by classroom educators if narrowed into these three general categories. While there is overlap between the contexts in which the literacy practices occur, the focus here is to delimit the three distinct categories to call attention to the students’ high level of engagement in literacy-oriented events throughout their everyday routines. Recognizing the range of literacy abilities students possess has implications for helping teachers draw on their students’ background experiences to enhance instructional practices. To help educators recognize their students’ abilities, each of these categories of literacy practices is expanded on in the following.

TABLE 1
Examples of Literacy Practices

<i>Instrumental literacy practices</i>	<i>Affective literacy practices</i>	<i>Community literacy practices</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • doing class and homework assignments • translating legal documents for parents • filling out medical paperwork • reading recipes and instructional manuals • responding to school correspondence letters for parents • writing shopping lists • summarizing mail • filling out invoices while working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading with younger siblings • interpreting bilingual movie subtitles • playing videogames • writing letters and text messages to friends and family • text messaging, chat rooms, and blogs • graffiti communications • journaling • creative writing—poems, song lyrics, and short stories • entertainment and social networking Web sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • navigating public signage • reading advertisements at community events • using business flyers to compare goods and services • accessing free periodicals for employment opportunities • shopping contexts • television commercials • bus schedules • license plates and vehicle information • telling time

Instrumental Literacy Practices

For the purpose of this discussion, *instrumental* literacy practices entail accomplishing tasks that do not necessarily involve a specific emotional reward and are usually focused on task-related events (Moje et al., 2004). Instrumental practices are extrinsically motivated and often involve a certain level of risk and/or anxiety (e.g., doing homework or translating documents). The emotional “reward” of instrumental literacy practices is generally limited, though the consequences of not accomplishing the task can be rather severe. While these types of literacy practices generally occurred more frequently in English (usually surrounding school-related activities), references to Spanish arose rather consistently in my data.

In Spanish, these types of practices typically involved assisting a parent. Marisol (seventh grade) reported that she reads Spanish, “with my mom, when she gets mail [in Spanish], she tells me to read it to her, like when she’s driving she tells me to read it to her.” Another example of instrumental literacy in Spanish includes reading school-related documents sent home to the parents. Javier (eighth grade) admitted reading, “the flyers that [school] sends home, I try to read them in Spanish.” In many cases, the students are responsible for delivering multiple letters to their parents throughout the week, so they are provided with ample exposure to Spanish print that concerns them personally, though not necessarily emotionally.

Similar to the Spanish instrumental practices, students described using their English literacy skills to help their parents—yet, usually with more significant consequences. Maritza’s (fifth grade) comments about helping her parents translate mail surfaced as one of the most impressive trends:

1. **Eric:** *¿Tienes que leer el correo que viene en inglés para tu mamá o papá?* (“Do you have to read the mail that comes in English for your mom or dad?”)
2. **Maritza:** *Sí, cuando les llega un recibo que no sabe, me dicen y yo, pues, poquito entiendo.* (“Yes, when they get a bill that they don’t know, they ask me and . . . well I only understand a little.”)

In Maritza’s case, she is called upon to help manage the family finances, but she too struggles to understand. What is important to remember here is that even in fifth grade, once language-minority students start to acquire basic English-literacy skills, they are included in complicated economic transactions at home. As their proficiency increases, so do their responsibilities:

1. **Eric:** Do you ever have to translate for your mom?
2. **Marta:** Yeah, I do like the bills or taxes, and social security stuff. I help her, like she asks me like, what does this say here or, like papers from school, she tells me, like sometimes my brothers get mail from school and they won’t, they won’t like to translate for her because they’re bad or something so she trusts me more than them.
3. **Eric:** That has to be hard with bills and taxes.
4. **Marta:** Yeah, big words. (Marta, eighth grade)

The amount of pressure placed on students in this situation is astonishing. For most adults, keeping up with bills, taxes, and Social Security matters is strenuous—yet, these 11- to 13-year-olds accept the responsibility without question. Marta’s comments also reveal the conflicting position in which younger students find themselves when translating documents that are intended as a reprimand for older siblings. Compounding the stress created by these types of situations, many students admitted feeling bad for not understanding some of the vocabulary in the

documents. These examples exemplify the vital role that language-minority students play in important family matters. It is perplexing that the same eighth-grade students who help their parents complete intricate legal and financial transactions at home are classified as “second-grade readers” at school. I am not suggesting that teaching students how to read a textbook is any less valuable than an electricity bill or a rental agreement; rather, the means by which students are instructed, assessed, classified, and leveled tends to have a perpetually negative effect on the way they view themselves and their abilities.

Affective Literacy Practices

While instrumental literacy practices are extrinsically driven, *affective* literacy practices are intrinsically motivated and generally include activities with a positive emotional investment (e.g., writing a note to a friend)—usually involving family or friends. Whereas much work has been done on family literacy practices across a variety of contexts (Farr & Guerra, 1995; González et al., 2005; Mercado, 2005b; Moje et al., 2004; Rodríguez-Valls, 2011; Zhang & Koda, 2011), my approach also encompasses other instances where emotional investment involves various interactions, including peer groups (Christianakis, 2010; Johnson, 2011), personal connections to literacy (Clifford & Kalyanpur, 2011; Heath, 2011; Lohfink & Loya, 2010; Rodríguez-Valls, 2011; Woodcock, 2010), and entertainment (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Crumpler & Wedwick, 2011; Graziano, 2011).

Due to the inherently personal connection to these means of communication, affective literacy practices constituted the most frequent use of reading and writing, especially in the students’ home language. Unfortunately, though, the academically unconventional nature of many of these practices generally leaves them undervalued by students and unappreciated by educators. Overall, the most and frequent source of Spanish print available to students in the school context turned out to be the letters/notes that they pass around to each other during class. Mindy (seventh grade) offered a pragmatic explanation for writing notes to her friends in Spanish:

1. **Eric:** Why do you write notes in Spanish?
2. **Mindy:** So teachers can’t understand it [giggling].

While passing notes is not unique to the Milagros students, the use of Spanish to subvert the teachers’ authority is significant. Stemming from Proposition 203’s stipulation that “[a]lthough teachers may use a minimal amount of the child’s native language when necessary, no subject matter shall be taught in any language other than English” (Proposition 203, Sec. 15-751), the use of Spanish by teachers was not common in the Milagros district (especially for instructional purposes). That said, it is ironic that the students have incorporated Spanish into their daily academic routines to deliberately exclude educators from their discussions—many of which were academically oriented (for more on “peerlingual education” and the students’ use of Spanish in the classroom for instructional purposes, see Johnson, 2011).

In addition to these exclusionary tactics, writing in Spanish for interpersonal communication is also motivated by ethnic pride:

1. **Eric:** So when you write letters back and forth, do you do it in Spanish or English?
2. **Viviana:** Spanish.

3. **Eric:** Why do you do it in Spanish and not English?
4. **Viviana:** Because we're Mexican . . . and it's better. (Viviana, eighth grade)

Here, writing in Spanish reflects the students' ingrained connection to Mexico. Furthermore, this type of literacy practice provides access to different rhetorical styles, spelling innovations, and other orthographic variations that new students bring in from Mexico.

Without formal native-language literacy instruction, most students are left to rely on friends and family to help them develop reading and writing skills in Spanish. While very few students reported that their parents or grandparents provided explicit literacy instruction, Marisol (seventh grade) described the connection between her learning experiences and a personally endearing topic:

1. **Eric:** Did anyone teach you how to read and write in Spanish?
2. **Marisol:** Well my family taught me to speak Spanish, and my *nana* ("grandmother") helps me write in Spanish.
3. **Eric:** How did she teach you to read and write?
4. **Marisol:** She would ask me to write a letter to my uncle and mom in jail, and I'd ask her how to spell this and that. She would tell me, "by the sounds."
5. **Eric:** How long have you been doing that?
6. **Marisol:** Like a year or two.

For Marisol, Spanish writing lessons are intimately linked to emotion and meaning. As Fránquiz et al. (2011) have shown, "[t]hese interpersonal connections are the ones that have profound consequences for Latina/o students' identity development in elementary through college and for their academic resiliency in meeting personal and communal learning objectives" (p. 110).

The Internet also provided an affective space for students to access materials in Spanish. Web sites focusing on sports (e.g., ESPNdeportes.com), entertainment (e.g., univision.com), and personal networking (e.g., facebook.com) emerged as the most popular. Other common affective literacy practices in Spanish included text messaging, graffiti communication, artistic sketches, and folder decorations. While ubiquitous, these types of literacy expressions are usually discouraged by educators in school contexts and usually result in severe penalties. Ironically, though, for many students, the daily exposure to these types of print materials has helped them develop a practical level of Spanish literacy. Still, in spite of the prevalence of such meaningful literacy practices, when asked if they can read and write Spanish, most students reported no.

The affective element also surfaced in English-literacy practices. Due to his desire to improve his reading scores in English, Roberto (seventh grade) described bringing books home to read with his little sister:

Yo le llevo libros . . . y entonces ella los lee. Y ya que termina, me los da a mí y yo me pongo a leerlos, porque me gusta lo que ella lee. ("I bring books for her . . . and then she reads them. And when she finishes, she gives them to me and I sit down and read them, because I like what she reads.")

As a newly arrived immigrant student, Roberto utilizes children's books to improve his English competencies. Furthermore, his emphasis on English books reinforces the importance of English to his younger sister.

Monolingual English-speaking students were also noted as resources for newly arrived immigrant students. Maritza (fifth grade) mentioned exchanging notes with her friends as a way for both parties to improve their biliteracy skills:

1. **Maritza:** *Cuando escriben mis amigas cartas en inglés, los leo* [giggling]. (“When my friends write letters in English, I read them.”)
2. **Eric:** *¿Les escribes cartas en español también a tus amigas?* (“Do you write letters in Spanish to your friends too?”)
3. **Maritza:** *No, en inglés . . . a las que hablan inglés. Yo les ayudo para que aprendan en español y ellas me ayudan a mí.* (“No, in English . . . to those who speak English. I help them learn Spanish and they help me.”)
4. **Eric:** *¿Usas las cartas para . . . ?* (“So you use the letters for . . . ?”)
5. **Maritza:** *Español e inglés.* (“Spanish and English.”)
6. **Eric:** *¿Los dos? ¿Tú en español y ellas en inglés?* (“Both? You in Spanish and them in English?”)
7. **Maritza:** *Uh huh [yes]. Y enfrente le pongo español y atrás le pongo inglés . . . que entienden.* (“Uh huh. And in front I put it in Spanish and on back I put it in English . . . [at least] what they understand.”)

Once again, the students’ interpersonal communication strategy of passing notes is described as much more than a tactic to gossip behind a teacher’s back. As a second-year student from Mexico, Maritza is eager to develop her English reading and writing skills. Just as motivating is Maritza’s pride in helping her friends with their reading and writing techniques in Spanish. While this strategy is motivating and educational, it is still outside of the realm of literacy abilities favored by prescriptive norms and standardized tests. How to reconcile this disparity between practical skills and prescriptive norms is one of the greatest challenges facing educators in districts like Milagros.

Community Literacy Practices

In addition to the types of literacy practices outlined previously, students in the Milagros district demonstrated a particularly heightened ability to negotiate diverse social contexts by decoding the multiplicity of texts posted around their community. In this context, *community* literacy practices entail literacy skills that are applied to navigate social contexts unique to a specific community (Moje et al., 2004, pp. 55–56). For Luke (2000a), “questions of ‘community’ are central” if we want to understand “how our students are using technologies old and new to make and form, construct, and critique identities and cultures” (p. 482). That said, I move that community practices are not driven by an emotional motivation per se; rather, they involve skills that enable people to read their environment, both geographically and culturally, to be able to carry out their day-to-day activities.

In a school district that does not promote Spanish for academic purposes, the students’ most extensive exposure to printed materials in Spanish is through community-based resources. In addition to the ubiquitous Spanish print located on street signs, buildings, and within local businesses, there is a wide variety of free community periodicals. In front of most grocery stores, mini-marts, and gas stations in the area, one can find multiple small periodical stands offering a variety of free newspapers and advertisement booklets in Spanish. Among the most frequently mentioned by students are: *La Voz*, *La Prensa Hispana*, and *TV y Más*. Considering the availability of these texts, it is not surprising that these types of magazines and newspapers top the list of the most widely read community materials. Marisol (seventh grade) explained that she enjoys reading “those Spanish magazines at Food City [grocery store], my mom gets them to look for jobs, and sometimes I read most of the stuff.”

While educators recognize the prevalence of these materials, as well as the influence that they have on their students, what counts as an authentic community text is often misperceived. In one of my classroom observations, I witnessed a seventh-grade language arts teacher trying to use Spanish pamphlets for a writing assignment. A health and safety organization had donated a few dozen pamphlets in Spanish and English concerning anti-substance-abuse issues. The students were supposed to use the pamphlets to make posters promoting personal health. As described in my field notes (1/29/07):

Walking around the classroom, I noticed that even though the students had more pamphlets in Spanish, they were only looking at the English versions. The teacher [Ms. Walters] told me that the problem with the pamphlets was that most of them were in Spanish. When I asked her why that was a problem, she reported, “because they can speak it, but they can’t read it.” The students seated closest to us looked at me and nodded in affirmation. I sat down with one student and offered my assistance. When I spread out the pamphlets to show her some examples, she told me she didn’t know what the Spanish ones were saying.

In the teacher’s mind, the students were demonstrating a lack of literacy in Spanish, which she consequently reinforced. There are a couple of points that she did not realize. First, most of the Spanish and English pamphlets were not the same. For example, whereas the English pamphlet on cigarettes discussed underage smoking and the threat of lung cancer, the correlating Spanish version discussed secondhand smoke and emphysema. Second, the vocabulary in Spanish was very esoteric (e.g., names of chemicals and diseases) and hard for them to understand. Finally, when the students stumbled on vocabulary in English, the teacher was able to help them out—which was not possible with the Spanish versions. Considering the frequency of unknown words in the Spanish pamphlets, it is obvious why they told her they could not read them.

This example of cross-cultural misunderstanding has two effects. First, it demonstrates that even when teachers try to incorporate native-language materials into their lessons, they are unaware of what constitutes authentic and meaningful texts. The students’ misunderstanding then feeds the general perception that the students are lacking basic literacy skills. Second, the students become frustrated with their apparent “lack” of Spanish knowledge, especially since it is in a classroom setting, further reinforcing their misperception of their actual competencies in literacy.

(Re)Viewing Literacy Practices in Arizona

In response to Alvermann’s (2009) observation that “the potential for research on multiliteracies and the NLS [New Literacy Studies] to inform the discourse of adolescence, and ultimately adolescent literacy instruction, remains largely unfulfilled in the United States” (p. 19), I propose that viewing literacy practices within the three categories put forth here has the potential to contribute to the field of literacy education by giving educators a manageable lens for exploring their students’ competencies across various contexts. While the benefits of incorporating students’ social worlds and funds of knowledge in the classroom has already been widely established in literacy education (Crumpler & Wedwick, 2011; De Souza, 2010; Fránquiz et al., 2011; Martínez-Roldan & Fránquiz, 2009; Mercado, 2005a, 2005b; Moje et al., 2008), it would be useful for educators to have an efficient lens for recognizing the difference between various

literacy skills, as well as how to draw from each to enhance classroom practices. This is especially relevant considering the rejuvenated importance placed on embedding literacy instruction across content areas (Draper, 2008; Hansen-Thomas & Cavagnetto, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

DISCUSSION

Acknowledging that “the persisting challenge in an age of accountability and testing, narrowing conceptions of literacy, and growing socioeconomic disparities, is how to bridge out-of-school and in-school worlds in ways that make discernible, positive differences in youth’s present circumstances and social futures” (Schultz & Hull, 2008, p. 239), this discussion has drawn attention to the disjuncture between the widespread academic underachievement ascribed to language-minority students in Arizona and the wealth of literacy practices in which they are involved on a daily basis. The perspectives of literacy I have outlined lend credence to the value of alternative skills and forms of knowledge while prioritizing the culturally significant patterns of interaction in which language-minority students are involved outside of the classroom (Cole, 2005). While “out of school” and community literacy practices have been documented and supported in previous discussions (see Luke, 2000a; Moje et al., 2008; Zhang & Koda, 2011), my charge has included a schema for identifying particular categories of literacy practices across a variety of contexts to include the bilingual realities of language-minority and immigrant students.

This view reinforces the importance of acknowledging students’ continua of biliteracy abilities (Hornberger, 2003a) and “translanguaging” strategies (García, 2009). Building upon the three-category model of student literacy practices proposed here, educators can develop a broader range of classroom activities that stem from—and build upon—their students’ strengths. Simply noting examples of student literacy practices as they are observed or reported, teachers can start to connect “out of school” skills and funds of knowledge to the classroom context. This view also illustrates that literacy practices in all three categories span a variety of contexts (e.g., classrooms to flea markets), media (e.g., cell phones to spray paint), and codes (e.g., Spanish and English). While certain literacy activities might occur more frequently in specific contexts (e.g., videogames at home or a reading a textbook at school), this model allows us to recognize which practices are most prevalent in our students’ lives so that we can bridge their strengths to areas where they might struggle academically—especially when learning English as a second language (Fu & Graff, 2009; Harklau & Pinnow, 2009).

This view of classroom instruction promotes the type of culturally relevant pedagogy that Smolin and Lawless (2010) claim “enables students to succeed in formalized academic tasks such as reading and writing, while at the same time not alienating them from their familial and cultural histories” (pp. 173–174). Most importantly, this approach can be used to help educators take note of practices that might otherwise be hard to recognize and document while conducting home visits and participating in other community events. Considering the challenges facing language-minority and immigrant youth in U.S. schools (Fu & Graff, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Wiley et al., 2009), it is imperative that we further our understanding of how to identify and build upon a wider range of literacy skills to enhance our students’ educational experiences.

While I have intended to establish a model to enhance our understanding of language-minority literacy practices, there are certain practical points that must be addressed. First, further exploration into methods for accurately assessing student literacy practices is needed to improve educators' abilities to integrate this approach into their classrooms. Next, additional research on how to translate the different categories of literacy practices to actual classroom activities is also necessary for this framework to impact student academic achievement. Acknowledging these gaps opens multiple avenues for future theoretical and practical contributions to the study of literacy practices.

CONCLUSIONS

As a reaction to policies like Arizona's Proposition 203, this article responds to Tollefson's (2002b) call for a deeper understanding of how "language policies in schools create inequalities among learners," as well as his challenge to figure out how to further the interests of language-minority students "through attempts to change language policies in schools" (pp. 3–4). To do this, I have taken an ethnographic approach to illustrate the ubiquity of literacy practices in a school district defamed for academic underachievement supposedly based on low levels of literacy. When state educational agencies are hasty to implicate low levels of literacy in the overall demise of standardized test scores, there is a tendency to ascribe labels of intellectual and cultural inferiority to the students in these contexts. Combating this trend requires a more solid conceptualization of how, when, and why students practice literacy across all contexts in their lives.

Instead of portraying the high levels of academic underachievement in the Milagros schools as indicative of the students' inherent linguistic competencies, the abundance of literacy practices illuminated here suggests more systemic challenges in the schooling process. The underlying autonomous-model orientation toward literacy (Street, 1984, 1993, 2001) in schools heightens the difficulties experienced by language-minority students—especially within contexts that have been shaped by English-only policies like Proposition 203. Over time, this combination of academic difficulties is conflated with the socioeconomic struggles of the surrounding community, causing some educators to believe that their students "don't have a language" (Ms. Castillo, principal).

Eschewing this deficit perspective, I contend that the Milagros students possess a vast repertoire of sophisticated literacy skills—most of which are not aligned with the standards prioritized by state and federal education agencies. Considering the wealth of literacy practices in these students' lives, "it is imperative that educators become more knowledgeable about the literate lives of new immigrant youth. The lived experiences of these youth, often nuanced and multifaceted, can help educators transform their perceptions and approaches to providing new immigrant youth with the academic education they deserve" (Fu & Graff, 2009, p. 401). Additionally, unlike most monolingual students from privileged socioeconomic groups, language-minority students in the Milagros district have accrued multiple adult responsibilities requiring them to use literacy to support their family members during immensely important social, political, and economic transactions. Unfortunately, the students often do not see the significance of these responsibilities because they are constantly reminded of how poor their reading and writing skills are at school (Harklau & Pinnow, 2009).

The final component of my approach to literacy involves honoring native-language abilities as a resource (Ruiz, 1984) and engaging students in a way that contributes to a positive sense of self identity (Cummins, 2006; Fránquiz et al., 2011; Wallace, 2008). Cultivating—rather than eroding—primary-language abilities not only facilitates scaffolding to English skills, it sends the message that the students’ heritage language, culture, and identity are valued both academically and socially. This intricate calculus of factors is predicated upon connecting with the students’ home and community contexts. Observing the types of practices and skills demonstrated at home can help educators draw on their students’ funds of knowledge to improve instruction and make schooling more personally rewarding.

Whereas the state has the capacity to enable the transformation of minority students’ cultural capital into skills and knowledge that are valued on a broader scale (Luke, 2008), I argue that this process is obstructed when policies like Proposition 203 disqualify heritage languages and cultures as resources worth developing and building upon. Being involved in students’ lives and valuing their entire range of literacy practices are necessary steps toward countering the social and academic inequities structured by monolithic policies of standardization like Proposition 203 that continue to perpetuate academic underachievement and position language-minority students as targets for assimilation and deculturation.

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