“Words Were All We Had”:
Confronting Social Injustices Facing Hispanic Students in American Schools

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ABSTRACT

Language and identity are inextricably intertwined. Over the years, countless Hispanic students have been categorized dichotomously in schools in ways that marginalize their language practices and restrict their evolving identities. American public schools often unjustly force Hispanic students to deny who they are, stripping them of the ability to retain their self-claimed identity and linguistic freedom. This common practice in American schools is nothing short of social injustice. Therefore, the overall purpose of this study was to illuminate and more deeply understand Hispanic youth’s experiences in schools and to examine closely through analysis of classroom discourse and interaction the identities and ideologies that come into play in FLL-HLL mixed classrooms. The analysis presented in this chapter reveals critical information about how these diverse students see themselves, information that might otherwise be constrained by schooling practices (i.e. labeling and categorization), which marginalize rather than empower diverse students.

KEYWORDS: Emergent Bilinguals, Restrictive Institutional Categories, Positioning, Labeling Practices, Marginalization, Heritage Language Learners

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my schooling, I refused to allow myself to be categorized as either ‘a Spanish speaker’ or ‘an English speaker.’ I spoke both; I was bilingual. I remained obstinate about retaining all of what I was and possessed. In spite of my insistence on linguistic freedom and success in achieving this for myself, English hegemony was the rule in schools and in the communities around me. That’s how it was then and, sadly, how it is now (Halcón, 2011, p. 94).

As Halcón (2011) so poignantly proclaimed, his perceived obstinacy at school was simply rooted in an intense desire to retain, as he wrote, “all of what I was and possessed” as a bilingual in a world of English hegemony (p. 94). What distinguishes Halcón’s tale from a U.S./Mexico border town in the 1950s to that of the scores of bilingual youth today is a sense of agency that Halcón held firmly on to amidst a restrictive environment that confronted him daily. While there are of course, some ethnolinguistic crusaders like Halcón in American schools now, the voices of the vast majority are silenced by English-only policy and practices and powerful monolingual ideologies.

Over the years, countless Hispanic students have been categorized dichotomously in schools in ways that marginalize their language practices and restrict their evolving identities. Halcón (2011) desired a basic
…many individuals find themselves in a perpetual tension between self-chosen, invested identities and the attempts of others to position them differently. This tension between a dominant ideology of national homogeneity and actual heterogeneity has important implications in liberal states for multilingual identities and social justice (p. 385).

BACKGROUND

Super-diversity in Schools World-wide

The world today has shrunk from the vastness that previous generations experienced. Since the advent of the internet, information from across the globe can be accessed in mere seconds. Similarly, the convenience of travel has created a reality in which many people are able to move freely across borders, and even continents, in little time. Globalization has led to the so-called ‘super-diversity’ of many first world regions, namely the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. This increased mobility world-wide “generates cultural and linguistic diversity within schools” (Moskal, 2016). For example, in the case of Scotland, migrant children and youth from Poland currently constitute the most rapidly growing portion of the school-age population, yet their cultural capital is disvalued in schools where mainstream education which excludes the home language is the norm (Moskal, 2016). According to the 2011 National Household Survey of Canadians, 20.6% of the respondents were immigrants, with the
majority being of South Asian and Chinese descent (http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/index-eng.cfm). In the 2011 Canadian census, over 200 languages were reported as home languages or mother tongue. However, in Canada, no one specific minority ethnic group dominates quite the same way the Hispanic population does in the United States.

Current demographics of the United States provide staggering numbers with respect to the exploding Spanish-speaking population. The most recent census estimates the number of U.S. Hispanics at 52 million, which is about 16.7% of the total population. In fact, Hispanics are widely acknowledged to be the current largest ethnic minority in the U.S. Consequently, a wide variety of schools all across the United States are enrolling Hispanic students. This trend will only continue as predictions are for the Hispanic population to more than double from 52 million in 2012 to an estimated 128.8 million in 2060 (www.census.gov). These projections are based partially upon a 43% increase in the Hispanic population between the 2000 and 2010 census recordings.

While the ethnolinguistic profiles of Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States are quite distinct, they share the complex issue of educating a significant number of students for whom the official or de facto language is not their home language. Research from all three regions reports unequivocally that these migrant or linguistically diverse pupils are disadvantaged in schools. Moskal (2016) identified school practices in Scotland which created barriers of inclusion for migrant students. For example, she noted that there is a high correlation between academic achievement and language proficiency when it comes to standardized tests, with migrant students attaining much lower scores than their native-born peers (Moskal, 2016). In their study of a super-diverse area called Flanders, which is located in Dutch-speaking Flemish Region of Belgium, Clycq et al. (2014) found that “pupils with a different socio-ethnic background than the dominant majority and middle class seem to be confronted with a lot of difficulties in this school system” (p. 796). They discovered that variables such as educational background and socio-economic status were directly linked to educational track and grade retention in their large-scale survey of students, parents, teachers, and principals in Flanders (Clycq et al., 2014). Despite the fact that each distinct area has the autonomy to deal with the ‘super-diversity’ of their schools, research indicates that marginalization of minority students persists.

Bilingual Classrooms: Sites of Social Injustice

Fuller’s (2013) notion of language ideologies strengthened the view of heterogeneous bilingual classrooms as potential sites for producing and reproducing social injustice, privileging certain types of students while marginalizing others. Language ideologies as defined by Fuller (2013) are “ideas about language structure and use relative to social contexts” (p. 4). Language ideologies and hegemony are intricately intertwined. They are particularly detrimental because of the fact they often persist unchallenged, particularly in schools: “the state of hegemony means that one entity (usually one social group) is dominant over another and this dominance is thought of as ‘just the way it is’” (Fuller, 2013, p. 4). However, power inequalities that are displayed and reinforced by language ideologies cannot be ignored.

This issue is particularly acute in schools where language ideologies serve to both produce and reproduce social injustice (Fuller, 2013). As Fuller (2013) explained, one common ideology regarding bilingualism in schools is that bilingual schools are full of students who are all immigrants and for that very reason, so-called immigrant bilingualism is linked to the working class and therein not prestigious (Fuller, 2013). So, while bilingualism for monolingual English speakers has by and large been perceived as a resource for social mobility, it has the very opposite meaning for Spanish speakers for whom bilingualism is connected unfairly to immigration and a lack of prestige. Therefore, a monoglossic language ideology has flourished in schools where languages are seen as “distinct, pure entities; if they are mixed, they lose value and are not taken seriously” (Fuller, 2013, p. 12). While schools have long been promoting a normative monolingual discourse, this has been to the detriment of heteroglossia or the notion that “all
ways of speaking include multiple voices” (Fuller, 2013, p. 12). These prevalent language ideologies provide affordances for certain students (monolingual English speakers learning a second language) while constraining opportunities for others (Spanish-speakers are expected to forego their first language in pursuit of the normative monolingual English ideal).

Even within a given classroom, some groups of students are viewed as powerful and thereby influence the class’ prevalent ideologies. In language classrooms, where individual and collective identity is enveloped in language and culture, it is of the utmost importance to consider the implications of intergroup positioning on the social justice of the classroom. Intergroup positioning is defined by Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) as “the process by which individual persons or groups of persons position themselves and other individuals on the basis of group membership and the process whereby persons or groups position their own or other groups” (p. 183). Since classrooms necessarily involve multiple participants, intergroup positioning and its effects are crucial points of consideration in any analysis of classroom discourse.

In an explanation of his struggles in school, Halcón (2011) recalled having to fight for his “linguistic freedom and success,” going against the grain in school at the expense of being labeled obstinate for his desire to maintain his sense of self (p. 94). Not every student back in the 1950s or even now, is so lucky able to actively resist English hegemony in schools. Therefore, educators should carefully consider both Halcón and González’s (2011) accounts of what was (and what remains) regarding the state of education in the United States from a multilingual and multicultural perspective. It is paramount to consider all of the effects (both positive and negative) of the decisions made about how to run schools, as well as the enacted curriculum on diverse student populations. Not much has changed regarding the education of Hispanic bilingual students in the sixty years that have elapsed between Halcón and González’s (2011) experiences in schools and the students you will meet in this chapter.

**SOCIALLY UNJUST LABELING PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS**

Various labels in use in educational institutions and practice have been contested as artificial and exclusionary, but they are nonetheless an ever-present part of mainstream U.S. society. Educational institutions have adopted terminology to represent diverse people for as long as they have existed. Labels were (and will likely continue to be) necessary to categorize a diverse population into manageable groups for logistical purposes. However, care and consideration must be taken with both the choice of labels as well as their use in schools (García & Sylvan, 2011; Holland & Lave, 2009; Hopewell & Escamilla, 2013; Reyes; 2006). This is because naming practices are not merely referential. The labels we give carve up the world in particular ways, and in that respect, they do not just name what is, they create and sometimes constrain what can be. Ngo reiterated this important point, writing “expectations from others of who we are or should be may collide and conflict with how we want to identify ourselves” (2010, p. 65).

Top-down decisions about labels and their corresponding definitions reflect the power imbalance that has long existed in schools between the administration and the students. When educational stakeholders label students they have underlying intentions, the least concerning of which is logistical. Schools implement categorization systems as a means to place students in like groups and so-called educationally appropriate courses. While the grouping and placing is definitely necessary when there are hundreds or thousands of students in one given school, particular attention should be given to the labels that schools adopt to categorize their diverse student bodies and to the criteria used in assigning labels. For example, a study of a fifth grade bilingual classroom conducted by García (2009) illustrated how homogeneous grouping of students does not accurately reflect the nuances of students’ ethnolinguistic backgrounds. While the teacher in the study offered two labels to the class (Latino or Anglo), the dichotomized structure had clear implications for students. As García (2009) explained, “the individual experiences of the children were far more complex than simply those of two ethnic or linguistic groups. Among the so-called ‘Latinos,’ there were monolingual Spanish speakers, monolingual English speakers, and bilingual and trilingual
speakers.” (p. 390). Reducing students’ vibrant ethnolinguistic backgrounds to one school-issued label simply does not do them justice.

**Problematizing Restrictive Institutional Categories**

This case-study of a Spanish/English bilingual middle school in the United States begins to illuminate the clash between school-issued categories and students’ own self-claimed identities. Since the school-issued categorizes were so limiting, offering only two options to an extremely diverse study body, students’ self-claimed identities, helped to reveal their personal perspectives which complexified the dichotomous institutional categories ascribed to them. In this bilingual school, students were initially assessed using a state battery test to ascertain their linguistics skills, in order to place them in language classes. Then, the school categorized each student based on the test results using the dichotomous labels “Spanish-dominant” or “English-dominant.” While the school used a two label system for student categorization, the researcher discerned at least three salient categories of students in her classroom observations, which are presented in this section. As the student profiles presented below illustrate, even within these three categories, great diversity existed. The school’s restrictive classification system is called into question as it appeared to efface the subtleties of students’ evolving identities in this heterogeneous Spanish class in a bilingual school.

**Participants**

All thirteen students completed a short survey in class which asked about their language experiences at home and in school. The story of the nine HLLs in this class problematizes the commonly held notion that HLLs are a monolithic group. Instead, the demographic survey reveals the nuances in their experiences as diverse HLLs in a bilingual school and heteroglossic community. Please refer to Figure 1 below for demographic details about the students.

*Insert Figure 1 about here*

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Ethnographic data collected originate from six months of classroom visits. Acting as a participant observer, the researcher became an active part of the classroom community. Over the course of the study, the students became comfortable with the researcher and offered important insight into their experiences and perspectives. Data analyzed for evidence of positioning and evolving identities include: audio recordings, observation fieldnotes, samples of student work, and informal chats between classroom participants and the researcher. Student work was particularly informative for answering research questions about classroom positioning.

Data analysis was an ongoing, recursive process. It began with observational fieldnotes of the classroom interactions. Then, analytic memos were used to assist with reflection and analysis of the observations. Audio recordings of informal chats with the researcher were transcribed verbatim to provide an accurate portrayal of students’ perspectives. In combination with transcripts of the informal chats, open-ended class assignments afforded an opportunity to ascertain students’ self-claimed identities without the restrictions inherent in the school-issued dichotomous categorization system.

**Students’ Self-Claimed Identities V. School’s Classification System**

“Spanish-dominant” HLLs
Jimena, age 13, came to the United States via the Dominican Republic where she was born. Jimena self-identified as “Dominicana.” Jimena’s family moved to the northeastern United States when she was nine years old. She had been learning English for nine years and for this reason, she was most confident using English despite the fact that she identified her first language as Spanish.

In one particularly informative conversation with the researcher, Jimena noted that she was “tired of learning Spanish” which she felt she had already mastered. In the home and community, Jimena explained that she spoke only Spanish. Jimena articulated a desire to learn French because she was “bored with Spanish and English.” Her boredom was likely a consequence of not being sufficiently challenged in school because Jimena underscored her affinity for learning languages and the desire to add more to her repertoire. Jimena said during class time, “I cannot wait to be multilingual. It’s my goal. I know I can get a good job being bilingual but it would be even better for me to speak French, too.” Jimena’s comment alluded to the possibility of studying French next year in high school, an opportunity which was not available to her at school, which only offered Spanish and English classes. Clearly, Jimena valued language learning for career opportunities, expressing a desire to set herself apart from her future job competition. She also repeatedly demonstrated a love for her Dominican heritage and was quite proficient in all areas of Spanish.

In Spanish class, Cristina was always very quiet and reserved. This fact initially shrouded her in mystery. However, over the course of the school year, Cristina opened up little-by-little, enough that toward the end of the study, it became well-understood how she felt about learning both Spanish and English. Unlike some of her HLL peers, Cristina was reticent to comment on her ethnicity or language background. It seemed that she was proud of her Puerto Rican heritage but in a much different way than her vocal friend, Jimena, who chattered on excitedly about her Dominican background. Cristina’s upbringing was similar to Jimena’s in that she also was born in a predominantly Spanish-speaking country (in this case, Puerto Rico). Cristina’s family immigrated to the northeastern United States much like her HLL peers’ families, to improve their quality of life. Cristina explained that she spoke only Spanish at home with her parents and siblings but that she began learning English early on at her Puerto Rican preschool. Cristina enrolled at this school in third grade and attributed her strong English proficiency solely to school instruction, explaining that in the home and community, Spanish predominated. Quiet Cristina self-identified as a Spanish speaker but much like her HLL peers, vocalized a preference for using English. “I feel most confident when I can use English to explain how I am feeling or what I am thinking,” she said in an informal group conversation.

Bright-eyed, curious Ignacio was a talented young eighth grade boy from Puerto Rico. Ignacio self-identified as “puertorriqueño” (Puerto Rican) and often enjoyed talking about his heritage with the other classroom participants. Ignacio was highly proficient in both Spanish (his first language) and English (his second language), repeatedly demonstrating his strong receptive abilities. Ignacio was very proud of his dual language skills and Puerto Rican heritage, coming alive during a country project where he was able to showcase pieces of his Puerto Rican culture (like Puerto Rican customs, dance, music, clothing, food, etc.) with his classmates. Ignacio sought out opportunities to chat with the researcher about his home life on a farm in Puerto Rico after learning of the researcher’s recent trip there. Ignacio’s upbringing had been tough; consequently, he explained that he had moved ten times in his young life. However, instead of seeing his nomadic lifestyle as a disadvantage, Ignacio expressed an appreciation for having lived in different settings that was beyond his thirteen years of life.

Unlike some of her classmates also of Puerto Rican descent, Liliana was born in the northeastern United States and lived with her grandparents. Still, she was referred to by the teacher and likewise self-identified as “Spanish-dominant.” Liliana typifies the variability of heritage learners because she self-identified as Puerto Rican despite being born in the United States. In the home, Liliana spoke only Spanish as her grandparents had limited English proficiency. In interactions with other Spanish-speakers in her community, Liliana indicated that she was able to successfully communicate with them. However, in
school Liliana demonstrated a relatively low Spanish proficiency for her confidence level, often using English first on speaking and writing tasks and then attempting to translate the content into Spanish.

Araceli and Liliana had one important attribute in common: they were both born in the United States to Spanish-speaking families who had emigrated from Puerto Rico. Araceli self-identified as Puerto Rican and a HLL, preferring to use Spanish over English in classroom conversations. Other than that the girls were polar opposites. Araceli was a feisty, strong-willed, sassy young lady who often found herself in trouble in school (she was suspended a few times during the study). She ended up embroiled in verbal disputes with classmates when conversations over trivial topics like music, sports, and pop culture escalated.

Araceli likewise had issues with authority figures and over the course of the study, clashed often with her teacher and other school personnel. One important clue to her behavior could lie in her high Spanish proficiency level as Araceli frequently expressed her boredom in Spanish class. Engaging in loud verbal disputes with Ms. Flores who attempted to redirect her disruptive behavior, Araceli shouted: “I already know this stuff [Spanish content]. I’m sick of this class! I know how to do this so I don’t see why I’m even here – it’s a waste of my time!” Ms. Flores time and again urged Araceli to be a Spanish helper for her “English-dominant” peers in obvious attempts to curb her distracting behavior but Araceli never appeared to rise to the challenge. Even if she was asked to read a passage aloud to the class, Araceli would simply rush through and resume off-task chatter. Perhaps, she resented her school-ascribed position as a “Spanish-dominant” student.

“English-dominant” HLLs

One student who often collided with Araceli and other peers was Hernando, a very tall and intimidating young man. Hernando was a HLL, born in the local community to Puerto Rican parents. However, Hernando’s family made a decision not to speak Spanish in the home in service of their larger goal of helping Hernando assimilate and acculturate to the United States. Since Hernando surrounded himself with Spanish-speaking friends and frequented Spanish places in the community, he was sometimes able to understand Spanish conversations. However, other than slang terms and vulgar language, Hernando was neither fluent nor literate in Spanish.

A son of Puerto Rican immigrants to the United States, Antonio was born in the Bronx but moved to the local community at age seven. He was an intelligent, studious young man who articulated a desire to learn and be successful in school. In Antonio’s home, English predominated despite the fact that his parents came from Puerto Rico and were Spanish speakers. Antonio explained that his parents and grandparents spoke to him mostly in English. What Antonio lacked in Spanish literacy, he made up for with knowledge of Puerto Rican culture, which he often shared during classroom discussions.

At the beginning of the study, when the teacher provided the researcher some background on her students, Jamarion was labeled “English-dominant” without a heritage connection to Spanish. In fact, Jamarion self-identified as African American in class. Fascinatingly, months into the study, one side conversation between two young boys, problematized his case. The school labeled Jamarion based on the information that had been made available at the time: namely, that Jamarion hardly spoke Spanish, was “English-dominant,” lived with paternal grandparents in an English-speaking home, and self-identified as African American. However, one day in class, Jamarion revealed that he was actually half African American and half Puerto Rican. Jamarion’s primary familial contacts were his paternal African American grandparents who spoke only English. He also had occasional visits with his father, an African American monolingual English speaker. The side that was unknown to school personnel was that Jamarion’s mother was reportedly Puerto Rican American, a fact that he proudly announced to his peers during class time. Due to very limited contact with his mother, Jamarion did not have frequent access to her spoken Spanish; therefore, his English-speaking side predominated.
Much like the case with Jamarion, Logan’s heritage connection to Spanish did not appear on the radar until about half-way through the study. Logan was always very enthusiastic about learning and speaking Spanish in class, volunteering to read aloud and always participating in class. It was clear that he had a real interest in learning Spanish despite the fact that he was “English-dominant.” Logan lived in the local community with an American family of English speakers (mother, stepfather, and siblings). It became evident one day during a discussion with Jamarion that Logan also considered himself to be a heritage learner of Spanish. Logan explained that his biological father, with whom he had infrequent contact, was Puerto Rican. Logan’s preference for English was due to being brought up in an English-speaking home environment yet he expressed a genuine desire to learn Spanish.

It was not revealed until halfway through the study that David had a slight heritage connection to Spanish. During the country project, David brought his cultural knowledge about Spain in to the classroom discussion. He appeared to know a great deal about many cultural elements of Spain (music, food, dance, etc.) despite almost no ability to understand or speak the language. David’s demographic survey and writing piece shed some light on his feelings about his Spanish background. David reported feeling closer to the cultural elements of his Spanish background than the linguistic ones, classifying his relationship with the Spanish language as “distant.” He explained that he was more interested in pursuing his cultural ties to Spain via dance, art, and music than through learning the language of his ancestors.

“English-dominant” FLLs

This Spanish classroom also had students who were “English-dominant” FLLs with no heritage connection to the language. One such example was a kind and smart young African American boy named Dylan. Dylan was a great friend to his peers in the Spanish classroom; he could always be seen helping his various partners with classroom tasks. Dylan had a natural aptitude for learning languages. He seemed to pick up the Spanish content relatively easily. In fact, at times, Dylan was better able to explain grammatical answers to his peers than the teacher. Somehow, Dylan had an ability to teach others about the language that he himself was busy learning.

Another monolingual English speaker in the class was Destiny, an extremely shy, sweet young African American girl. For the first entire semester of Spanish, Destiny was painfully shy in Spanish class, only answering questions in the softest whisper when called upon by Ms. Flores. Destiny did not speak much in class nor did she take an active role in group work, instead opting to be the reserved, quiet one.

Jessie was a very quiet, shy young lady who appeared disinterested in engaging with the Spanish language during observations. She rarely participated in classroom tasks even when called upon by Ms. Flores. In dyadic interactions, she generally was the quiet one – letting her HLL peer do the majority of the task individually. Her general demeanor during class was one of disinterest and apathy. She appeared to do the bare minimum of what was expected of her during class. However, she did not present any behavior problem to the environment but rather generally quietly abstained from classroom discussions and activities.

STUDENT SELF-POSITIONING IN SCHOOLS

While the previous section detailed a disconnect between the dichotomous school classification system and students’ self-claimed identities, the present section moves the discussion toward a deeper exploration of the ways students both self-positioned and articulated their identities in a classroom activity. When given an open-ended activity where they had the freedom to explore all aspects of their classroom identities, the students’ own responses revealed that the restrictive school categorization system did not adequately account for the nuances of their evolving identities as language learners and users in a heterogeneous Spanish class. Therefore, teachers of emergent bilinguals should offer more opportunities
Foreign-Born HLLs

Despite the fact that they were all labeled “advanced” by their teacher, each of these students had diverse language skills, preferences, and priorities. Two of the five “advanced” HLLs were born and educated for some time outside of the continental United States. Jimena was born in the Dominican Republic and in the survey self-identified as “Dominican.” She reported going to school in the Dominican Republic for about five years and entering U.S. public school at the age of nine when she moved to her current community. Jimena reported learning to read as a young child in Spanish. Ignacio was the other foreign-born HLL of the group, born in Puerto Rico. In the survey, he self-identified as Puerto Rican. He lived and was educated in Puerto Rico until the age of nine, when he moved to the United States with his mother. Ignacio reported that he began learning to read first in Spanish in Puerto Rico.

Both Jimena and Ignacio wrote that their family wanted them to continue learning Spanish. However, Jimena reported using Spanish more often than Ignacio. While Ignacio explained that he used English most of the time, Jimena said she used both equally. Both students used mostly Spanish at home but Jimena reported speaking with friends in both English and Spanish whereas Ignacio recounted his language experiences with friends as occurring mostly in English. Similarly, when asked in general which language they preferred to speak, Ignacio selected English while Jimena listed both English and Spanish as her preferences. Through these two examples of foreign-born “advanced Spanish-dominant” students, different language use and preferences reveal some nuances of their HLL experiences.

Despite living in Spanish speaking homes in the very same community, Ignacio and Jimena had distinct attitudes towards learning and using Spanish. Jimena demonstrated a preference for using both languages in multiple settings. Ignacio definitely spoke Spanish at home but tended to prefer using English as well as sought out friendships with English speakers rather than Spanish speakers like Jimena. Interestingly, both “advanced” HLLs clearly valued the ability to speak multiple languages. Recall that Jimena exhibited an intense desire to be multilingual - expressing to the researcher the advantages it would afford her in life, in particular, for her career. Ignacio was less outspoken about the importance of being multilingual but in his survey and some informal chats with the researcher, he detailed a desire to learn Chinese and live in China one day.

In addition to the language background survey, students completed a task in which they were asked by the teacher in an activity during class time, to create a visual depicting their relationship to the Spanish language. Then, they were asked to provide a short written explanation of the visual. On this activity, Ignacio drew both countries where he had lived. His drawing incorporated a sketch of the island of Puerto Rico with his home city, Ponce, included. The text below the drawing read “I was born here.” Then, Ignacio sketched the United States and wrote beneath “Move here when I was nine.” In his own words, an explanation of the drawing is as follows: “I was born in Puerto Rico learn Spanish and English untill [sic] I was nine. My mom wanted to move to the US for I can have a better life than in Puerto Rico. I would like to live in China and learn Chineis [sic].” Ignacio decided to share not only the basis for his family’s move but also provided the rationale his mother had given him for moving, one very common for immigrants to the United States.

Jimena’s visual was quite different than Ignacio’s. Jimena drew herself helping her Spanish-speaking friend understand the English sign on a nearby building. In Spanish, Jimena’s friend is saying “Que dice eso. No hablo ingles.” [What does that say? I don’t speak English.] Jimena is answering, “película en la esquina” [movie on the corner]. Clearly, Jimena viewed her bilingualism primarily as an avenue to assist others. In her own description of the drawing, Jimena explained, “I could help people translate. I love
speaking Spanish but when I get older I’ll know more than just two languages like French and Chinese.” Jimena was consistent as she repeatedly mentioned her goal for multilingualism. At times, she indicated an expectation that her multilingualism would open up career opportunities. In this writing selection, Jimena informed the researcher of her desire to use Spanish and other languages she wanted to learn in the future, to help others by translating for them. Jimena’s given classroom role and responsibility very much mirrored this statement, as she was constantly referred to as a “teacher” for her “English-dominant” classmates.

**United States Born HLLs**

Of the five “advanced Spanish-dominant” HLLs, three were born in the United States. In this class, all three U.S. born “advanced” HLLs had Puerto Rican heritage. All three of these students self-identified as Puerto Rican American in their surveys whereas the two foreign-born HLLs mentioned above self-identified with their home country and not the United States.

There were some very interesting similarities in this small group of students. For example, all three of them described learning to read first in English as a young child. Their answers contrasted with the foreign-born group (Jimena and Ignacio) who started reading first in Spanish. When asked which language they spoke more often, all three students listed English. Interestingly, all three reported speaking both English and Spanish at home. While Antonio described speaking both English and Spanish with friends, the two girls (Liliana and Araceli) explained that they usually spoke with friends in English.

In the picture section of the language-identity activity, both girls depicted the importance of friends in their lives as bilinguals. Both Araceli and Liliana drew pictures of their school and labeled their classmates as their friends with whom they spoke Spanish. Their drawings are not included in this paper because they did not use pseudonyms for the school nor their friends’ names. Both girls considered themselves friends as they included one another in their pictures, along with two other classmates, Madison and Dylan (FLLs). Araceli also wrote about speaking Spanish at school with friends in Spanish class. She wrote:

> I only speak Spanish in school with my friends because I feel more comfortable speaking Spanish with them because they won’t judge me speaking Spanish. By them laughing at me and saying I can’t speak Spanish because I can’t speak that much Spanish.

Araceli referred to her Spanish as “ghetto Spanish” informally in class during the observations. Since she was quite fluent in Spanish but not literate, it seems that Araceli was devaluing her dialect more than indicating that she truly did not speak Spanish. She appeared to be conveying a comfort of speaking her Spanish variety with other Spanish learners and users in Spanish class. To Araceli, the classroom environment provided a safe place where she could use the Spanish variety she learned at home, what she called “ghetto Spanish,” meanwhile learning the standard Spanish variety along with her peers.

Another U.S. born HLL, Liliana, wrote about self-identified gaps in her knowledge as a Spanish-speaking HLL in an English-dominant world. In Liliana’s writing piece, she devoted considerable time and attention to her home connections to Spanish. In her case, both her home and the school were Spanish learning environments where she could obtain significant Spanish input and expand her horizons as a Spanish language learner and user. She wrote:

> I speak Spanish in school and at home. My mother and father both are Puerto Rican and both like to speak Spanish. There are some words I don’t know in Spanish but sooner or
For Liliana, using Spanish was the norm in life. She reported speaking Spanish at home with various family members. It is important to note that Liliana’s family structure is typical of many Latinos in that her grandparents lived in her home. So, she had frequent daily contact outside of school with four adult Spanish speakers (her mother, father, grandfather, and grandmother). Liliana perceived that as a reason to continue learning and using Spanish as an emergent bilingual. She definitely desired to achieve successful communication ability with her grandparents in Spanish out of necessity because they were unable to communicate in English. The family connection appeared to provide Liliana incentive to continue expanding her linguistic repertoire inside and outside of school.

Three other heritage language students in this class were also born in the United States but in contrast to Antonio, Araceli, and Liliana they were labeled as “English-dominant.” Certainly, their family exposure to Spanish was more limited than the “Spanish-dominant” group who lived in exclusively Spanish speaking homes. However, they were still considered HLLs by the broad definition, which includes a Spanish heritage connection as well as some Spanish content knowledge.

Interestingly, all three of these “English-dominant” HLLs self-identified as “mixed” on the survey. David self-identified as “mixed” but listed white, black, Spanish from Spain, Italian, and Native American on his paper. He took the opportunity to include all of the facets of his heritage on the survey and detailed where his Spanish side came from: Spain. Despite the eclectic nature of his heritage, David drew and wrote specifically about his relationship to the Spanish language and culture, noting that he was distant from it. In David’s drawing, he incorporated many aspects of Spanish culture to a center box entitled “me.” Branching off from the word “me” David included cultural items like “art,” “music,” “clothes,” “dance,” “entertainment,” and “food.” He then added two linguistic elements to the drawing “Italian language” and “English” that he explained directly connected to him. In contrast, David drew a line off of the “food” section, which included the phrase “Spanish language.” In his own words, David provided his rationale for the placement:

*I am very distant from the Spanish language. We eat Spanish food, listen to music, and dance. However, the language I am distant from. For me, Spanish branches off of food and music which is what I like. Also now I’m attempting to learn the language for me and my family when I really want to learn Italian.*

Clearly, David felt much more connected to the cultural aspects of his Spanish heritage. He explained that he was “distant” from the Spanish language but contrasted it with his closeness to Spanish cultural aspects like “food, music, and dance.”

Jamarion was another young man who was labeled by the school as an “English-dominant HLL” and self-identified as “mixed.” Under the word “mixed” Jamarion included the following additional features of his heritage: “Puerto Rican American, African American, and Native American.” On the drawing activity, Jamarion’s visual depicted both sides of his family as he drew a stick figure labeled “Mom” with the words “Puerto Rican” beneath her. On the other side of the page, Jamarion included another stick figure labeled “Dad” and the words “African American” below the drawing. To explain further, Jamarion completed the writing exercise with the following excerpt:

Jamarion expressed a desire to speak Spanish in his writing “I would want to speak Spanish” yet during the observations he did not appear to take Spanish class very seriously as a means to that end. Perhaps, though, the apparent disconnect between Jamarion’s classroom behavior and his statement about wanting to speak Spanish was a consequence of the fact that his Spanish class did not really provide him an opportunity to learn Spanish seriously. A possible reason for Jamarion to learn to speak Spanish was the family connection; he explained that his mother’s entire side of the family spoke Spanish. Spanish could have been seen as an avenue for him to reconnect with his mother’s side, particularly since he lived with his father.

Logan was also an “English-dominant” HLL in Ms. Flores’ class with a mixed heritage. On the demographic survey, Logan responded to the self-identification question with both the terms “Puerto Rican American” and “American.” His choice to include both terms is noteworthy and corresponds to his actions in class regarding his family background. Even though the term “Puerto Rican American” includes the word American and therein the American heritage, Logan added “American” to the category “Puerto Rican American.” This choice might reflect a more fractured identity representative of Logan’s feelings about his heritage expressed in class during the observations.

Due to a geographic separation from his Puerto Rican side (Dad’s side) Logan repeatedly spoke of a desire to re-connect with his father via the Spanish language. In his drawing, Logan included two stick figures, one was his father and the other was Logan himself. In order to contact his father’s side of the family, Logan had to call on the telephone so his picture included a phone up to the ear of the stick figure. To explain his drawing, Logan wrote: “My father is Puerto Rican and Hungarian. He usually talks in Spanish to his friends and to me and whenever my grandma calls I ask him to help me understand what she says and helps me tell her things in Spanish.” Logan’s father was an intermediary between Logan and his grandmother who could not easily communicate with two different dominant languages. Logan’s father’s bilingualism was a resource that facilitated communication between two generations of the family who had different language abilities. Also, like many other heritage learners, Logan’s family connection to Spanish propelled him in his motivation to be bilingual.

**United States Born FLLs**

In this class there were three FLLs enrolled: Destiny, Jessie, and Madison. All were English monolinguals beginning to learn Spanish in this bilingual school. However, they each had a very different relationship with Spanish.

Jessie self-identified as “American” in the survey and listed only English under the question about languages spoken. She clearly did not perceive herself as a “Spanish speaker” at the time of the survey which took place during the second semester. This perspective was evident in her classroom demeanor. She was very quiet in Spanish class and did not appear to be learning much Spanish in class over the course of the study. Since she was so quiet in class, a fascinating revelation about her family was revealed in the survey when she reported that her family did not want her to learn Spanish. This perspective is interesting particularly since they had deliberately enrolled her in the school which was marketed as a Spanish/English bilingual school.

Likewise, her general disinterest evident in classroom interactions was surprising considering what she drew and wrote about her relationship to Spanish. Regarding the picture she drew of herself and her pet cat, Jessie reported: “I don’t speak Spanish. I want to learn in high school. I have a cat named Kevin. I am going to take Spanish classes in high school. I want to learn Spanish for fun.” Jessie’s perspective clearly was that she did not speak Spanish. She likely equated speaking Spanish with having Spanish heritage like many of her HLL classmates.
Destiny shared many of Jessie’s sentiments regarding learning the Spanish language. Destiny self-identified as “African American” on her survey. Destiny also reported only speaking English under the section about language spoken on the survey. Destiny wrote about her rationale for studying Spanish: “I want to learn Español in high school because it’s fun, and I can use it to travel around the world. Teach other people Spanish who doesn’t [sic] know Spanish like English speakers.” Destiny clearly desired to continue learning Spanish during high school which was not too surprising because she had both made significant progress in Spanish and seemed to enjoy it during the observations. Like her monolingual classmate, Jessie, she appeared to subscribe to the ideology that for her, a monolingual English speaker, learning Spanish was “fun” but not at all constitutive of her identity. Instead, Destiny’s writing revealed a goal of helping non-Spanish speakers (for example, the English speakers she wrote about) learn Spanish. Destiny clearly subscribed to the ideology that English speakers “do not know Spanish.” This ideology likely had implications for how she viewed herself as a Spanish language learner and might explain why she did not consider herself a Spanish speaker despite being a successful language learner in Spanish class.

The third FLL in Ms. Flores’ class also indicated that she did not speak Spanish on the survey. Madison self-identified as American and reported a preference for speaking English. Her classroom behavior supported this position as she was typically reluctant to speak Spanish in class. Madison’s writing affords an opportunity to better understand her experience as a FLL in this heterogeneous Spanish class. Madison wrote the following:

_I only speak Spanish in school with my friends or I wouldn’t be speaking Spanish. When Im [sic] at my friends [sic] house her family speaks Spanish I hear them and I understand them and I respond back in English. The only reason why im [sic] learning Spanish is because I have to at school._

Here, Madison explored her feelings about learning Spanish in school. It appears that Madison viewed Spanish learning as compulsory at the bilingual school she attended. However, she did not seem to find much value in doing so. Possibly, she was required by her parents to attend the bilingual school since she reported in the survey that her family did in fact want her to learn Spanish. Madison’s behavior during class corroborated this writing sample’s perspective as she did not usually put much effort into learning or speaking Spanish in class.

For Madison, speaking Spanish was more about a general school obligation than a personal area of interest. However, she clearly valued the friendships she garnered while being enrolled at the bilingual school. Interestingly, Madison’s closest school friends were fairly diverse; the two girls were “English-dominant” HLLs (Araceli and Liliana) and one boy was an “English-dominant” FLL (Dylan). In the writing piece, Madison recalled times when she encountered Spanish at her friend’s home. Interestingly, Madison created a firm boundary for her Spanish at Liliana’s home. Despite reporting to speak Spanish at school amongst friends, Madison explained that she only spoke English at her friend’s house. Madison recounted solid receptive ability with Liliana’s family of native speakers (whom she reported being able to understand in Spanish) yet elected to respond to them in English. In a separate conversation with Madison, she explained that Liliana would translate her responses in English to Spanish so that Liliana’s family could understand. The personal choice not to speak Spanish to Liliana’s family resonated with Madison’s general disinterest in learning and speaking Spanish. It appeared that her friendship with HLLs provided minimal motivation for speaking Spanish at school, and did not prompt her Spanish language use to transcend the physical boundary of the school.

**SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**
“Emergent Bilingual”: An Attractive Alternative

These findings detailed identity tensions between the school’s classification of students and the students’ own self-claimed positions. The school’s attempts to categorize their diverse student body using the labels “Spanish-dominant” and “English-dominant” created a rigid hierarchical structure that students were largely unable to traverse. These dichotomous labels engendered serious identity tensions in the classroom as students either succumbed to or negotiated the social identities ascribed to them by the school and classroom participants who took up the school’s labels. Official school discourse and practices constrained identity options available to students and had a significant impact on the ways that the teacher and students assumed classroom positions. However, as the researcher grew well acquainted with the school and classroom participants, the complexity of the classroom positionings became salient.

In order to resolve identity tensions like the ones presented above, the researcher set out to find a more inclusive term for these dynamic students and others like them in American schools. García (2009) has argued that the term “emergent bilingual” be used because it not only emphasizes the positive characteristics of emergent bilinguals by putting bilingualism at the center, but also because it is perceived to be much more inclusive. For example, including the word “emergent” highlights the learner’s potential in developing their bilingualism rather than focusing on the end-product of achieving bilingualism (García, 2009, p. 322). As a result, García (2009) believed the term “emergent bilingual” inherently recognized bilingualism as a cognitive and social resource for these students, “emergent bilinguals are seen as having an advantage over those who speak English only and for whom becoming bilingual will be more difficult” (p. 322). The term “emergent bilingual” has the potential to reflect the extreme diversity of these students’ linguistic repertoires, “emphasizing the students’ emergent bilingualism places students on a bilingual continuum of more or less accessibility to language bilingually” (García, 2009, p. 323).

A fundamental change in perspective comes with the new label “emergent bilingual.” Now, a positive spin has been given to students who have previously been viewed as having a deficit to overcome in schools. Furthermore, emergent bilinguals’ potential for language and literacy development is expanded rather than constrained as it so often has been in the past. Reyes (2006) explained this new label’s (“emergent bilingualism”) impact on early learners:

> for emergent bilingual children, their zones of proximal development are expanded because they have the opportunity to transact with two overlapping and interacting literate worlds and to enhance their learning by thinking and exploring their social worlds with others in two languages (p. 286).

This shift from an orientation of deficit to a language as a resource perspective allows educators to conceive of all students in their classes as capable of achieving success in schools (Fuller, 2013). As Hornberger and Link detailed, teachers can and should create “a learning environment that recognizes and builds on the language and literacy repertoires students bring to school” (2012, p. 243). Instead of tearing our diverse learners’ down, we need to build them up to appreciate their dynamic identities.

**FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

It is concerning that so few studies have been published thus far which investigate classroom talk for evidence of HLL and FLL students’ experiences in a heterogeneous class. The field of heritage language education has only very recently begun to receive researchers’ attention. So far, there is only one specific heritage language conference in the U.S. One relatively new educational research journal, called the *Heritage Language Journal (HLJ)*, makes it a priority to report research studies dealing with heritage language education. However, the need is great for future research in the previously unchartered territory of heritage language education, particularly classroom-based studies like the one presented in this chapter.
In large part, the scant existing heritage language research is dominated by studies of either affective aspects of being a HLL or specific linguistic skills and funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) that HLLs bring to the classroom. Even at these heritage language conferences, pure, theoretical linguistic studies clearly dominate. The HLJ is heavily biased towards theoretical linguistics rather than applied linguistics research like the study present here. On the other hand, educational research is critical because HLLs are already in a great deal of American public classrooms today. Teachers are largely unaware of how to effectively teach HLLs and as an extension, how to approach the heterogeneous classes that are quickly becoming commonplace in our nation’s schools. Therefore, urgent attention must be given to applications of heritage language education. More studies such as the one presented here are desperately needed to provide language instructors with more information about how to better meets the needs of the diverse students that end up in classrooms today.

CONCLUSION

Using data gleaned from twenty-six ethnographic observations of Ms. Flores’ class, this chapter presented identity tensions that arose in classroom interaction. In order to handle their diverse student population, school-issued labels not only dichotomously categorized students with very complex linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but resistance to this rigid classification system spilled over into the classroom in the form of serious identity tensions. One particularly enlightening, open-ended assignment allowed students’ to explore their connections to the Spanish language through image and writing. With the freedom to explore any and all aspects of their relationship to Spanish, the students’ images and writing complexified the dichotomous labels handed down to them by the school. Without this sort of open-ended assignment, we might not have understood the students’ true feelings about learning and using Spanish in this heterogeneous class and the surrounding community. The take-away point is that without the freedom to express themselves, students either tended to adopt school-wide labels that constrained them by failing to capture their linguistic and cultural complexity or behaved in ways that appeared to resist this rigid classification system. In both situations, the school is doing these students an injustice.

The concept of language dominance and its incorporation in labeling practices at this school reveal an underlying conceptualization of bilingualism as dichotomous. That is to say, bilingualism was viewed as two separate language systems existing within one person. The transitional bilingual school model adopted by the bilingual school focused on the acquisition of English as the primary goal for their diverse student body, which often appeared to come at the expense of Spanish. García and Sylvan (2011) provided an example of this outmoded view, “there is a conception of two autonomous languages - an L1 and an L2 - and of bilinguals as two monolinguals within one individual” (p. 387). However, diverse students’ varied linguistic and cultural background in multiple languages is in reality much more complex than this simple conceptualization. In fact, scholars have recently urged a view of bilingualism as a continuum that includes all of speakers’ linguistic resources or essentially in terms of linguistic repertoire, which refers to the totality of languages and communicative resources available to speakers (García, 2009; Hornberger & Link, 2011).

As an alternative perspective to the linear models, dynamic bilingualism “suggests that the language practices of all bilinguals are complex and interrelated; they do not emerge in a linear way” (García & Sylvan, 2011, p. 388). To underscore this point, this study shows what happens when bilingual students are characterized by language dominance. It was discovered that language dominance becomes the most salient feature and the bilingualism component fades away. Students are labeled as and assume their subscribed identities as either “Spanish-dominant” or “English-dominant” since no labels existed to capture the realities of their individual and collective linguistic heterogeneity.

There was no label available to students in Ms. Flores’ class which emphasized their emergent bilingualism. Every student, regardless of language proficiency and heritage status must fit into the rigid
dichotomous duo of labels available to them: “Spanish dominant” or “English dominant.” Holley et al. (2009) explored the problem caused by schools which often force linguistically diverse students into pre-established categories and explained, “it is within the school context that youths often first encounter pressures to select a racial category…many children of color are forced to figure out their places within pre-established racial and ethnic groups” (p. 15). The notion of language dominance excludes that possibility that any given student could utilize a single linguistic repertoire potentially including multiple languages for communicative purposes.

In actuality, be(com)ing bilingual is a process but in this school it clearly was conceptualized as product or end-goal, something that is fixed and static instead of fluid, dynamic, nuanced, and situational. The notion of bilingualism as a process is complicated and messy; students who are in the process of be(com)ing bilingual do not fit nicely into dichotomous boxes for the purpose of categorization. He (2010) spoke to this very dangerous issue: “HL learning provides fertile ground for us to reconsider dichotomous concepts such as native language versus target language, native speech community versus target speech community, instrumental versus integrative motivations…” (p. 78). Schools like the one examined here force an extremely nuanced process into a limited binary: conceptualizing bilingualism as a product which results in the dominance of one language at the expense of another.

Though the labels currently utilized by the school are convenient for the grouping of students, they clearly limit possibilities available to students, making the process of bilingualism a black or white one (Abdi, 2011; García and Sylvan, 2011; Reyes, 2006). A fundamental change in perspective by the administration regarding labeling practices would widen the scope of bilingualism as a continuum and influence the enacted curriculum. Instead of viewing these language learners as two monolinguals in the same skin, an emergent bilingual view would definitely allow the students an opportunity to embrace the exciting process of be(com)ing bilingual.

Language and identity are inextricably intertwined. The language(s) people speak impacts how they define themselves and how they are defined by others. Therefore, it is important to (re)conceptualize emergent bilinguals as both language learners and users because neglecting either aspect would fail to capture the emergent nature of their bilingualism. All emergent bilinguals are to varying degrees both learners and users of two languages. Emergent bilinguals are not only learning and using multiple languages but they are also involved in identity negotiation inherent in the language learning process. The analysis of classroom discourse presented in this chapter, reveals critical information about how emergent bilinguals see themselves, information that might otherwise be constrained by schooling practices which marginalize rather than empower diverse students.

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