

*“The In-between Crowd”:
Contrasting Representations of Minority Language Students*

LYNNE WILTSE
University of Alberta

Author Biography

Lynne Wiltse teaches Language and Literacy education courses in the Department of Elementary Education, University of Alberta. Previously, she was on faculty at Thompson Rivers University in British Columbia.

Abstract

This paper examines contrasting representations of minority language students in a linguistically diverse junior high classroom in an urban area of Western Canada. The majority of the research participants was of Asian heritage, and spoke English as a second language. Drawing on the construct of *learner identity*, I explore how these minority language learners’ identities affected their experience in school. The study points to hybrid language practices, with particular attention to academic discourse, as a solution to developing English literacy in schools with students from multilingual backgrounds.

*“The In-between Crowd”:
Contrasting Representations of Minority Language Students*

Introduction

With changing immigration patterns and the concentration of immigrant settlements, many urban schools in North America, Europe and Australia have an increasing number of students for whom English is a second language (ESL).¹ This shift in demographic realities entails enormous challenges for these minority language students, as well as for their parents, peers and teachers (Duff, 2001). In Canada, although failure rates of English language learners remain alarmingly high (Roessingh & Kover, 2002; Watt & Roessingh, 2001), there is still little consensus about what might constitute appropriate educational practices and policies for schools that serve large numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Cummins & Schecter, 2003). Not surprisingly, these issues are often felt most intensely in schools where monolingual and monocultural students are the exception rather than the rule. This paper, based on

select findings from my doctoral research, examines particular challenges in one such school.

The purpose of the study was to examine classroom practices and social interaction in a culturally and linguistically diverse junior high classroom, utilizing sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the inherently social and situated nature of learning. The majority of the research participants were ESL students of Cambodian or Vietnamese heritage. Utilizing the construct of *learner identity* and drawing on the work of Jim Cummins (1981, 1989, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2006) and Cummins and Schecter (2003), I explore how these minority language learners' identities affect their experience in school. The students, who used both Khmer or Vietnamese and English in their homes and communities, described themselves as bilingual. Their language arts teacher, on the other hand, described them as "sort of an in-between crowd," suggesting that they had learned neither their first language nor English completely. These representations offer students strikingly different identity positions; by comparing these representations, I show how images of students and their backgrounds can affect their possibilities for learning and, accordingly, possible futures. I examine the role that particular school practices play in determining students' opportunities and make an argument for school practices that encourage hybridity.

Research Methods

The research reported here is part of an ethnographic case study that was conducted over the course of one school year in a Grade 9 language arts classroom. Qualitative research methods were used for my inquiry into how classroom members work together (or do not) in a community of practice. The following research questions framed my research: 1) How does the social structure of the classroom community facilitate or constrain participation of classroom members? 2) How do discourse practices impact on students' opportunities for appropriating classroom language? 3) What is the role of the teacher in disrupting community practices that limit and marginalize students? In this paper I focus on one specific sub-question that arose during the study: How may divergent representations of minority language students' linguistic abilities affect their identities and influence their opportunities for learning?

Although case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis, one of the major strengths of case study research is the opportunity to use multiple methods of data collection (Merriam, 1988). I used a variety of data collection approaches, including participant observation of classroom student-teacher and student-student interaction, contextual field notes, newspaper articles, transcripts from audio-taped semi-structured interviews and samples of student writing. I visited the classroom on a twice-weekly basis, observing the students in various contexts, from individual work to group projects. I also observed in the Grade 9 science class, the Multicultural Leadership class and attended special events and assemblies. After spending several months as an observer, I conducted interviews in an attempt to understand how the research participants saw things. I interviewed eleven students who were positioned differently in terms of language, gender, ethnicity, and social status. Students were asked about their experiences of learning and attending a multicultural school, relationships with peers and teachers, schoolwork and life out-of-school. The language arts teacher, two other Grade 9 teachers, a student teacher, the school community coordinator and the principal were also interviewed. Questions were directed towards interviewees' experiences with the Grade 9 students. In addition to the interviews, I had informal discussions with the students and teachers on an ongoing basis throughout the study.

Qualitative researchers analyze data throughout the study rather than relegating analysis to a period following data collection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). This certainly describes my experience; analysis began with the first fieldwork observation and was carried on throughout the research process in a reflective journal. Numerous analytic memos, written during the course of my fieldwork, accompanied my field notes. After the interviews were transcribed, I began what Merriam (1988) refers to as "holding a conversation with the data" (p. 131). I read through the field notes and the interview transcriptions, making notes in the margins and highlighting aspects of the data I regarded as significant. As relationships and patterns within and among the codes began to crystallize, I inserted colour coded tags for the emergent themes, following Spradley's (1980) domain analysis and Bogden and Biklen's (1998) principles. Analysis of the data showed that particular practices that developed within the community of practice either

facilitated or constrained participation of classroom members and, in turn, defined possibilities for learning.

Study Participants

The setting for the study was Coalfield School, a Kindergarten-Grade 9 school in an inner city neighbourhood in an urban area of Western Canada. ⁱⁱ This site was selected for my research study for the following reasons: 1) it has a culturally and linguistically diverse student population and a significant number of ESL students; 2) I was familiar with the school as I had worked as a research facilitator to Coalfield School as part of a *Culture and Teaching Project*, and 3) the principal of the school had expressed an interest in and was supportive of my research project.

Coalfield School was situated in the lowest socio-economic area of the city. The student population was ethnically and linguistically diverse and a large number of students spoke English as a second language. At the time of the study, approximately 45% of the 220 students enrolled in the school were of Cambodian heritage, while another 30% were Vietnamese and Chinese. First Nations students comprised an additional 15% of the student community. Students of European heritage were very much in the minority at Coalfield School. The majority of the research participants were of East Asian heritage, with Cambodian students who had come to Canada as refugees at a young age comprising the largest group within the Grade 9 class.

Consistent with common practice in Canadian schools (Toohey, 2000; Cummins & Schecter, 2003), ESL students were mainstreamed, although recent immigrants received limited one-on-one or small group instruction from the school community coordinator for a short period of time. The majority of the ESL students in the Grade 9 class had been in Canada for several years, and was no longer at the early stages of English language learning. In this regard, a parallel can be drawn to Leung, Harris and Rampton's (1997) study of young adolescent students in multiethnic urban England. These youth were no longer at an early stage of learning English, had spent a significant proportion of their lives in Britain, and used everyday colloquial English with ease. This description bears strong resemblance to many of the second language learners in my study. The authors refer to the constant struggle to develop adequate pedagogies for the large numbers of these bilingual students. The teaching staff at Coalfield School faced

similar challenges, complicated by the reality that none of the teachers had completed coursework in second language education as part of their teacher education. Given demographic trends and the limits of pre-service teacher preparation programs, the teachers at my research site were among the many mainstream classroom teachers who are learning to educate ESL students on the job (Cummins & Schecter, 2003; Toohey, 1996; Gebhard, Austin, Nieto, & Willett, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Gee (2000) makes the point that, “over the last several decades, in and across a wide variety of disciplines, there has been a massive ‘social turn’ away from a focus on individual behaviour...and individual minds...toward a focus on social and cultural interaction (p. 180). This focus on the social orientation of learning is found as well in second language research; several researchers have emphasised the role of sociocultural context in language teaching and learning (see, for example, Lantolf, 2000; Hawkins, 2005; Kramsch, 2000; Lotherington, 2003). The emergence of sociocultural perspectives on language, typified by the understanding that meanings are negotiated within diverse social contexts, indicates an important new direction for theorists and practitioners in the field of second language use (Miller, 2004a, p. 290).

As sociocultural theorists in second language learning have demonstrated strong connections between identity and language learning (Hawkins, 2005), I also drew on theoretical writing that reflects on the negotiation of identities and representational practices in multilingual contexts. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) make the point that negotiation is a logical outcome in multilingual societies where some languages and identity options are “more equal than others,” while Stein (2004) notes that practices of representation are never neutral, but “inflected with the relations between culture, power, and language that particular communities and institutions have evolved” (p. 113). These perspectives are consistent with the work of researchers who have increasingly called on the construct of *learner identity* to understand how minority language learners’ identities affect their experience in school (McKay, & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000; Leung, Harris & Rampton, 1997; Toohey, 2000).

Harklau’s (2000, 2003) work on representational practices provides a productive model to begin my examination of the ways in which adolescent minority language

identities are shaped in schools. Her study of the ways in which ESL students' identities were constructed in different educational institutions highlights the finding that learners' identities affect their experience in school. Harklau drew on the notion of representation,ⁱⁱⁱ which she describes as “the images, archetypes, or even stereotypes of identity with which students are labeled” to show how “schools categorize and position students with identities” and “how students accommodate, resist, and counter identities imposed on them” (p. 37). Using data from case studies of high school students attending an ethnically diverse urban American high school, Harklau (2003) demonstrates how students positioned themselves and were positioned socially through representational practices. She describes three main examples of representations of immigrant identity in the high school experiences of the students in her study, a “colorblind” representation, in which the ethnic difference was leveled or overlooked, an “othered” view of immigrants as both ennobled and exotic and a representation of bilingual students as linguistically and cognitively deficient. Although each of these representations speaks to my study in varying ways, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the third representation.

Harklau's case study students (3 students of Vietnamese heritage, and one of Turkish heritage) were subject to a representation in which bilingualism was associated with linguistic (and even cognitive) deficit. Rather than being regarded as a “resource,” bilingualism (or multilingualism) tended to be regarded as a “problem” (Ruiz, 1984), with their proficiency in two or three languages being reduced to a deficit in one. This representation resonates closely with my study, as will be seen in the next section of the paper.

“The In-between Crowd”

These kids are sort of an in-between crowd. They never fully learned their first language (which would have been Khmer or Vietnamese), because a lot of them came to Canada when they were about two or three when their language was developing. A lot of them, too, were in refugee camps, and parents probably didn't have time to read to them, and sing to them, and do those types of things. And then they weren't around people who were speaking English, and so they never really learned a language completely, so that affected their language development, and that's the problem.

The impetus for this paper stems from this comment made by the language arts teacher, during an interview near the end of the school year. Emily had been contrasting

the students at Coalfield School with students she previously taught in another inner city school, Eastwood School, which had predominantly First Nations, rather than ESL, students. At the time of the study, Emily was in her second year at Coalfield school.

What I found really interesting is that, at Eastwood School, the kids were not motivated, and they didn't do much homework. They didn't study for tests. They did some work in class, but when it came to a test most of them would do relatively well. And then when I came to Coalfield School here, it was the exact opposite in that the students would be working in class, there were hardly any classroom management problems compared to Eastwood School, and they would have homework done. But, when we had a test, they'd all fail.

Emily explained that it had taken “about a year” before she figured out that the reason for her students' poor academic performance was related to their language development. She went on to say that while “their kids will be okay because they will have a full language, probably English, these students are going to struggle.” With this prognosis, complex issues related to language development and school achievement have been conflated to a diagnosis of linguistic (and cognitive) deficit. Before turning to an examination of the teacher's comments, I highlight some of the students' voices; these comments portray a contrasting representation of their linguistic abilities.

While the teacher appears to regard their bilingualism as a “problem,” there is sufficient evidence to suggest that students regarded their bilingualism as a “resource” (Ruiz, 1984). In school, the research participants used English primarily; outside of school, students used both English and their first language, depending on the context. The following descriptions of home language practices show how Sarun and Dith respectively use both Khmer and English at home.^{iv}

At home I speak both languages. My parents speak Cambodian mostly, although they have learned English pretty much. I speak Cambodian with my mom, but sometimes I speak English with my dad because he understands it better than my mom. With my brothers and sisters, I speak both.

I speak Cambodian with my mom every time, both English and Cambodian with my dad. He's learned more English than my mom, but she's learning right now. With my brothers and sisters I usually speak English.

Hông and Kim describe a similar process with Vietnamese and English.

At home, I speak more Vietnamese than English. This is because my mom wants us (his siblings) to use Vietnamese so we don't lose the language. When my mother is not around, I often speak to my brother and sisters in English. When we visit our grandmother, we speak Vietnamese as she cannot speak any English.

It depends where I am and who is around me. At home, I speak English to my brothers. Sometimes I speak Vietnamese when I get nervous. To my mom, I speak both because she's going to school so she knows some English. My dad I have to speak Vietnamese to. And, I have to speak Vietnamese with my grandmother because she cannot speak too much English.

There were other out-of-school places and opportunities for the students to use their first languages, including the local Buddhist temple, special cultural celebrations, restaurants, sports events and visiting with relatives and friends. That the Asian students saw advantages to being able to speak other languages in addition to English is clear from the following comments. Sarun, for example, explains that

it's (being bilingual) pretty good 'cause I can speak with other people. Like, when I'm out of school, most of my friends speak Cambodian. So, I can get in on a conversation, know what they're saying. I can help other people, if there's some new kid who needs help. So, being bilingual is good.

Similarly, Hông noted that “if you're bilingual, you can talk to two different people, people that speak English and Vietnamese and if you're going to go to university, like, having two languages is an advantage.” These comments are in accordance with findings from the literature. For example, Harklau's (2003) research revealed that case study participants and their families clearly valued multilingualism; unfortunately, very few social spaces were made in the life of the school in which the research participants might demonstrate their resources as multilinguals. As will be seen, this applied to Coalfield School as well. Lotherington's (2003) study of the language and literacy practices of Grade 9 and 10 students in three languages (Khmer, Vietnamese and English) at an Australian High School resulted in similar findings. Parents wanted their children to maintain their Asian languages and culture; at the same time proficiency in English for academic success was considered important. Concerned that these youth were being

assessed in terms of deficit (what they were not rather than what they were), Lotherington asks how the same students could be perceived so differently.

BICS and CALP

I found myself facing a similar dilemma. As an educator and as a researcher, what was I to make of such contrasting representations of students' linguistic abilities? Were either accurate? Were both flawed? At this point in the discussion, the theories of Jim Cummins, well known for his research with minority language learners, prove helpful. In brief, Cummins has researched the linguistic, cognitive and affective advantages of *additive bilingualism*—where a second language is added to students' linguistic repertoire, without negatively affectively first language maintenance. Within the framework of his position that bilingualism enhances cognitive performance, Cummins offers an explanation for the state of affairs described by Emily. His threshold hypothesis states that “there may be threshold levels of linguistic proficiency which bilingual children must attain in order to avoid cognitive deficits, and allow the potentially beneficial aspects of becoming bilingual to influence cognitive growth” (Cummins, 1981, p. 38). Harris (1990) explains that, in basic form, this hypothesis can be restated to say that “in terms of reaching full cognitive potential, a child who is only marginally proficient in two languages is worse off than a child who knows one language very well... Cummins' threshold hypothesis has to do with the danger of semilingualism” (pp. 95-96). It is important to note that, although Harris (and others) have used Cummins' work to discuss this phenomenon, referred to as bilingual semilingualism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981), Cummins himself avoids the use of this contested term. Although Emily does not use the term, her description of the students bears resemblance to the definition of semilingualism.

In order to better understand what Emily's comments, it is useful to consider the conceptual framework developed by Jim Cummins (1981) to contrast basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). The image of an iceberg has been used to illustrate the *above-the-surface* language (BICS) and the immensity of the underlying proficiency below the surface (CALP); like an iceberg, BICS may represent only about 10% of the overall proficiency of an academically competent learner (Roessingh, 2006).^v Classroom teachers may not

understand that students who speak conversational English well may lack the kind of academic English needed for academic success. While these teachers often overestimate ESL students' academic level of proficiency, Emily's description (below) suggests that she is aware that while the students have a good grasp of BICS (context-embedded language), they lack CALP (context-reduced language). Her contention is that this will prove particularly problematic for the students the following year in high school.

They can *talk*, but they have trouble with academics. You know, they can have a conversation with each other, and that's good enough for them. But, I think next year in high school it's going to hit them hard when they don't qualify for ESL support, yet they don't have a great grasp of the English language.

The important factor is the depth below the surface that must be developed in either first language (L1) or second language (L2) for learners to reach their academic potential (Roessingh, 2006). What Emily and the principal, Ruth, (below) seem to be suggesting is that, for the research participants, the threshold had not been reached in either language.

The people who came as refugees, came from an illiterate background, and so they have very poor backgrounds for literacy development. That combined with little, if any, literacy in their first language makes learning a second language difficult. Then they learn English first on the playground from other children who have very low levels of English language development. As well, as their English skills grow, communication between generations decreases, because the parents, by and large, don't have well developed English skills. By the time they get into junior high they now need language development around abstract learning, and that further complicates things.^{vi}

From the perspective of Cummins' model, ESL students who fail in school lack CALP, "due primarily to the inaccessibility of academic-oriented language and literacy in their homes and communities and the predominance of oral interaction deeply embedded in shared personal meaning with ties to situational and contextual clues" (Wolfe & Faltis, 1999, p. 84). Researchers have drawn on Cummins' work to construct ways of enabling secondary ESL students to acquire discipline-specific language that is context-reduced and academically challenging (see Corson, 2001; Mohan, Leung & Davison, 2001; Schleppegrell, 2004 regarding the benefits of content-based language instruction). Darren, who taught social studies to the Grade 9 class, speaks to this need.

In this setting, I do a lot of work with students because of the lack of English language in many of their homes. Many of their parents don't write in English, or speak English, and if they do speak English, it is an abbreviated form that they've learned enough to get by here as adults, but not enough that their children would learn the language properly.

This approach, however, is typically done in the context of a collaborative teaching relationship between ESL teachers and subject curriculum teachers. Without an ESL program, teachers at Coalfield School did not have access to the expertise and support needed to fully implement this type of programming. Furthermore, this teacher's comment about learning the "language properly" provides yet another example of viewing the students' and their families' bilingualism as problem, rather than as resource.

There is also a compelling body of research that this type of language instruction be done in the students' native language (Cummins, 1981; Creese, 2005; Cummins & Schechter, 2003; Sears, 1998; Wolfe & Faltis, 1999). L1 use can be a powerful learning tool for second language learners, especially when they are exposed to complex ideas in content areas. The research clearly shows that the encouragement of first language use does not interfere with the development of English academic skills (Schechter & Bayley, 2002). Research findings in the literature on bilingualism consistently show that the literacy skills in L1 and L2 are interdependent; concepts and knowledge developed in L1 can be transferred to L2, provided that L1 is well developed and that there is sufficient exposure to L2. I began the study interested in the ways in which first language use could foster academic achievement in English; however, this suggestion, as well, was problematic at Coalfield school as the use of languages other than English was actually discouraged. Ruth explains the reason for this:

I always believed that students should be encouraged to communicate effectively, so if that means that you use your first language, then I'm okay with that. But, I've changed because I've seen the divisions and the hurt that it causes. We found from our experiences here that students will use their first language as a way of isolating other students from the group. So, I think that in our setting we do have to say, you have to use English in class, other than for a new immigrant who needs some coaching in that specific language. Again, if they don't have the vocabulary you're putting all sorts of barriers up.

Although I have data that support Ruth's decision, I wondered as to the cost. Her earlier comments, as well as the literature, suggest that the decision to not use first languages could be detrimental to students' possibilities for achieving academic success. Sadly, the school played a role in producing students that had "little, if any, literacy in their first language." Drawing on Cummins, Roessingh and Kover (2002) explain: "There is a common underlying proficiency that flows between L1 and L2, and thus the better L1 is developed, the more likely L2 will develop to the level required for academic success. Conversely, failure to develop the L1 beyond a basic level may have dire consequences for the development of the L2" (p. 4). These 'dire consequences' appear to be what Emily and Ruth have described. With the research participants, the situation was clearly complex. A number of these students were not literate (to any degree) in their first language and several reported that they now considered themselves more proficient in English. Language loss is high among language minority students who are born in Canada or who arrive prior to development of L1 literacy in their home country; strong school support is critical in helping minority students maintain and develop literacy in their home languages (Cummins & Schecter, 2003). The school's English-only policy, while made with the best of intentions, played a role in the representation of these students as semilingual, rather than bilingual. In the next section, I will explore the connections between these representations, identity and learning.

Negotiation of Identities

I have drawn heavily on the early work of Jim Cummins in this paper. I have done so because I believe it is important for educators who are working with or learning about language minority students to have some background knowledge of his theories. His theories are widely used in ESL teaching and in language teacher education.

However, it is important to note that the discussion to this point relates, in large part, to his early writings on second language learning.^{vii} In his more recent work, Cummins (1989) argues that "under achievement is not caused by lack of fluency in English. Under achievement is the result of particular kinds of interactions in school that lead minority students to mentally withdraw from academic effort" (p. 34). Cummins (2000) examines these interactions in his theory of identity negotiation that identifies the

negotiation of identities, particularly those between teachers and students, as central to student learning. The theory explores how different orientations to cultural and linguistic diversity are reflected in the practices and policies of schools. Kanno (2004), for example, adopts Cummins' theory to investigate how the identities of language minority students are represented at a public elementary school in Japan.

Cummins and Schecter (2003) outline a framework for academic language learning that views the interactions between educators and students as the most immediate determinant of student success or failure in school. These interactions can be viewed through two lenses: 1) the lens of the teaching-learning relationship and 2) the lens of identity negotiation. The former is represented by the strategies and techniques that teachers use to provide instruction as well as promote knowledge and cognitive growth. The latter process is represented by the messages communicated to students regarding their identities—"who they are in the teacher's eyes and who they are capable of becoming" (p. 14). I have devoted space to the first lens (and provided references for further inquiry); in this section, I will consider the second lens. Emily shows who she thinks the students are capable of becoming, as well as the role language competency plays in her prediction, in the following comment. Her view was that while

the children of the student participants would be okay as they would learn English at an earlier age, these kids are probably doomed to lives as janitors, when, in their own country, they could be brilliant.

I was struck by the contrasting identities juxtaposed in Emily's comment. Her words also emphasized the point that "the notion of representational practices...has implications for the socialization of bilingual adolescents into schooling paths and ultimate educational and occupational futures" (Harklau, 2003, p, 95). Surely the failing grades that some of Emily's students were receiving had as much (if not more) to do with how they were regarded by their teacher, as to their actual linguistic competence.

An additional example from my study involved career day, an event for students in Grades 5-9. Speakers had been invited to talk about different careers; occupations represented included cosmetologist, plumber, truck driver, photographer, masseuse, soldier, police, computer technician, tiler, geologist, nurse, mechanic, paralegal. Students signed up for the sessions they wanted to attend. Emily told me that some of the students

were “not realistic” in their choices; in her opinion, several of the sessions that were least popular were the jobs the students would be most likely to have (for example, truck driver, plumber, tiler). I am not suggesting that jobs as janitors or truck drivers would be poor choices for these students. Rather, I am concerned that their teacher saw their options as limited. Norton (2000) uses the term identity “to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 5). How did the students understand their possibilities for the future? Based on data from the interviews, in some cases, the future goals of the research participants did not correspond with Emily’s limited notions of what they were likely to accomplish. For example, Dith, one of the Cambodian boys, had plans to enroll in the RAP program, so that he could apprentice for a trade—for example, mechanics or plumbing.^{viii}

If I go through that route I'll have a better chance of finishing school and getting a good job. At career day, a mechanic was talking about the RAP program. And, Mr. Williams told me about it, too because he wanted me to join the program.... I want to be a computer technician, but my math skills aren't as good as they should be.

Dith did struggle academically; yet, he clearly displayed a talent for working with his hands. During our interview, he described his strong interest in hands-on learning, especially in relation to his science and shop classes. With the support of his home-room teacher who saw this potential, Dith was making realistic educational plans for his future. At one point in the conversation, I asked him what his parents thought of his plans. Dith explained that they “are happy as long as I finish high school and get a good job that I could live on for the rest of my life. Then they wouldn't have to worry about me, my lack of money, stuff like that.” Dith’s story contradicts Emily’s view of the boys in the class: “Those guys are not going to have any job, or some menial labour job because their marks aren’t going to get them into post secondary...And, the guys don’t see that.” While there is substance to Emily’s remark,^{ix} Dith’s comment shows that he does have a sense as to how his grades may limit his future possibilities; at the same time, his plans do not reflect a sense of prospective doom. And, there are other ways to look at what constitutes a “good job.” Contrast Emily’s “menial labour job” with Dith’s “good job that I could live on for the rest of my life.” One has a definite negative connotation, whereas the other

sounds positive. Is it possible that they could be talking about the *same* job?^x I suggest that the answer is yes—depending on how one is positioned, of course.

Cummins (1997) identifies “the identity options that are being opened up or closed off for students” (p. 425) as key to whether minority language students will be successful in school. While “being realistic” is a reasonable consideration in making educational decisions regarding possible futures, surely teacher attitudes and practices that contribute to closing off, rather than opening up, options are unreasonable. The gravity of this is emphasized in Toohey’s (2000) comment that “what school practices are determines who particular participants can be, what they can do, and thus what they can learn in that setting” (p. 135). Not only do school and classroom practices determine who students can be and what students can learn in current settings, but they also play a role in who they will become and what they will learn in subsequent settings. With high school approaching, this was emphasized in my study. The research participants were at a crossroads, making important decisions regarding choice of school, courses and programs. The role of teachers was crucial in this regard, especially for many of the students who did not have significant home support in terms of education.^{xi} What practices could communicate a different message to students regarding their identities?

Hybrid Language Practices

Regrettably, it is too late to make any changes for the student participants in my study. What recommendations can be made for future students, so that barriers can be removed, rather than erected? Most importantly, bilingualism/multilingualism needs to be regarded as a resource, not as a problem. Cummins (2006) claims that, in multilingual classrooms, monolingual instructional strategies constrict pedagogical space. Wallace (2005), who studied the literacy resources of bilingual students in a multilingual London school, suggests that it may be possible to tap more fully into the children’s particular skills as bilinguals, especially when they can move fairly comfortably between languages. Her research shows that some of the children’s literacy resources represented cultural and linguistic capital not being realized or acknowledged in school. A parallel can be drawn to the research participants in my study who were able to do move between languages at home and in their communities with ease—an ability which, in Wallace’s (2005) view, represented pedagogic potential, but remained untapped. In this regard, I

recommend ‘hybrid language and literacy practices’ as a productive way to expand pedagogical spaces in school for minority language students. With hybrid practices, “because no one single language or register is privileged, the larger linguistic repertoires of participants become tools for meaning making...” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, and Chiu, 1999, p. 89). Previous research of particular classroom practices suggests that teaching characterized by “hybridity” appears to facilitate minority language students’ literacy learning (Gebhard, 2005; Davis, Bazzi, Cho, Ishida, & Soria, 2005; Manyak, 2001). Such hybrid literacy practices become the tools for mediating literacy learning and serve as a model for imagining how difference and diversity can serve as resources for learning.

While the literacy projects described in these studies encourage the utilization of students’ first languages to promote learning, it is important to note that they also emphasize the importance of academic English. This is of particular significance to “the in-between crowd,” given their relative ease with BICS, and considering the school’s English-only policy which made taking advantage of hybrid language practices difficult. At this point, I return to Emily’s comment, “They can *talk*, but they have trouble with academics.” It has long been recognized that schools require specific forms of discourse that potentially disadvantage minority language students (Creese, 2005; Delpit, 1998; Gee, 2004; Hawkins, 2005; Heath, 1983). Accordingly, most practitioners and researchers agree that, in order to succeed in schools, such learners must be given the opportunity to acquire academic, rather than everyday, language (Valdés, 2004). That Emily was aware of this need can be seen in the following comment, made in reference to the Cambodian boys:

I hope this doesn’t come across as racist because it’s not meant to be, but when I was in the States, a Black person would have a lingo that he would use with his culture, and a different one that he would use out in the business world, and that’s sort of an understood thing. Like, if you want to make it in the business world you’re not going to be calling each other bro, and that kind of talk—it just wouldn’t do. And, I think these guys don’t realize that. In your own group, it’s fine to talk that way, but once you step out, you need a different kind of talk.

From this comment, I think it is fair to say that Emily recognizes the importance of what she calls lingo to identity; at the same time she acknowledges the significance of

another “kind of talk” for other contexts (for example, business or school discourse). While the Black person to whom Emily refers can move between different lingos (or what Gee, 1992, would call Discourses), she is suggesting that her students are not able to do that.^{xii} Clearly it is the “school language” or “academic discourse” in which they are not competent. While recognizing that pedagogies need to be designed for the learner who is new to the English language, Leung et al. (1997) suggest that, given complex urban realities, “other forms of English language pedagogy might be better based on an assumption that most learners, albeit from different starting points, are unfamiliar with the deployment of standard English for academic purposes” (p. 558).^{xiii} Delpit (1998) stresses the necessity of teaching standard academic English (which she refers to as the Discourse of power) to students from nonmainstream language, dialect, and cultural backgrounds. While I do not think Emily was intentionally denying her students’ access to the Discourse of power, they were further disadvantaged by her negligence to ensure they were aware of the differences between Discourses and fluent in standard academic English.

Hornberger (2002) describes a promising study of Cambodian students’ second language literacy development in a mainstream classroom setting that could be adapted as a model for the students in Emily’s classroom. The teacher’s successful teaching practices included attention to academic English, explicit teaching of academic discourse, and the communication of high expectations—approaches that have been documented in other research in minority language education, and largely absent in Emily’s teaching.^{xiv} Had these practices been adopted, the “crowd” may have been better positioned to acquire school-affiliated discourses and identities, and as a result, able to move with ease between Discourses, rather than being stuck “in-between.” This is crucial because “through access to the discourses of school, students have opportunities to construct identities as learners. And by coming to take on identities as learners, students gain increasing access to the discourses of school” (Hawkins, 2005, p. 80). Gee and Crawford (1998) make the point that “all good teachers know there is much about identity that is crucial to classrooms” (p. 225).

Being a ‘successful’ student requires identity work. It requires adopting and affiliating with multiple new ways of talking, listening, acting, feeling, responding, interacting, and valuing, as well as writing and reading. All

the other identities students bring to the classroom are relevant to whether and how they affiliate with school and its characteristic “ways with words” (Heath, 1983). (Gee & Crawford, 1998, p. 225)

Clearly, the “in-between crowd” was not getting enough identity work. They were not being scaffolded to new ways of talking, acting, writing and so forth (i.e. Discourses of school). At the same time, students’ out-of-school identities were not being recognized or utilised. Both were needed for the research participants to be successful in school.

Conclusion

In closing, I turn to Canagarajah (2004) who proposes that, despite fascinating theoretical advances made which have helped us understand identities as multiple, conflictual, negotiated and evolving, “We are left with the question, What is it about the school that prevents students from negotiating favorable identities?” (p. 119).

Canagarajah suggests that researchers are often disappointed to find that students tend to take on unitary identities, which are shaped by notions of deficiency and disadvantage. I certainly saw evidence of this in my study, where students were offered identities that limited and constrained. In several school-related ways, the student participants were regarded as “disadvantaged” by others (for example, they were not proficient in English, they had not learned their first language properly, their parents were uneducated, they lived in the inner-city).

Like other researchers, I tried to identify “hidden spaces in the classroom where students negotiate identities with positive consequences for their literacy development” (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 118). And, while the research participants did negotiate positive spaces, due to current practices at the research site, these were all too few.^{xv} Miller (2004b) suggests that sociocultural understandings, including a knowledge of Discourses and identity theory, offer schools, teachers and students a promising way to transform their practices. My study suggests these perspectives are needed if, as Donato (2002) stresses, learners are to actively transform their world and not merely conform to it; “sociocultural theory is about language classrooms where agency matters” (p. 46).

On this topic, Adrena, the one Caucasian female in the class for the majority of the year, offers a different way of looking at the “in-between crowd.” Certainly, the

descriptions of the students above represent an incomplete and limited perspective. Could the same students (and their families) be seen as “advantaged” in other ways? While inadequately prepared in some ways for academic success, were they perhaps better prepared for life in other ways? “In a world at five to twelve (= on the verge of self-destruction),”^{xvi} Skutnabb-Kangas (1988, p. 38) emphasizes the need for

bilinguals as mediators. Those who are bi-something (bilingual, bidialectal, bicultural) have been forced to look at *two* different languages, dialects, cultures from the inside. It is easier for us bilinguals to understand both parties.

Even Adrena, not particularly sensitive to or appreciative of her Asian classmates’ cultural backgrounds throughout the study, recognized the potential significance of their linguistic abilities. Her remarks, below, are made in reference to a newspaper article, *Leveling the Playing Field*, which appeared in the local newspaper the day after the Grade 9 class, along with junior high students from two other “inner-city” schools, had attended a sports camp at the nearby university. During an interview, Adrena took exception to the manner in which the author had represented inner-city students in the article:

It’s stupid, totally branding us like this. She has more status, and, like, probably lives up town, but in ten years who’s going to be running the country? It could be some of the kids in this school. Like, if Darith really concentrated, I’m sure he could teach, like, whatever he speaks, ‘cause he can speak it really well. Like, we’re going to need interpreters—that’s who these people are. That’s what they’re going to be to our nation.^{xvii}

Adrena’s comment provides a powerful example of how languages other than English can be considered as resources rather than as problems, and in the process, open up rather than close off, identity options. This paper is my attempt as a researcher to foreground the interrelated issues of language, identity and school achievement for those who either work with or are learning about English language learners in Canadian schools. Watt and Roessingh (2001) suggest that the “final challenge for researchers in this area is to privilege the examination of issues that promote equitable educational decisions...for students whose academic success is critical to the future of Canada” (p.

220). Perhaps then, more students with backgrounds similar to the “in-between crowd” would be considered brilliant in *this* country.

Notes

ⁱ Terminology regarding English language learners is problematic; students are often described in terms of deficiency, rather than abilities. Thesen's (1997) view is that naming is inevitable and potentially useful because equitable educational policy cannot happen without it. I use the term ESL in this paper, albeit with caution. Also, as I make references to the literature on language minorities in various English-dominant countries, I use other terms. Creese (2005), for example, notes that the term English as an additional language (EAL) is used in Britain, and is increasingly common in Canadian contexts.

ⁱⁱ Pseudonyms have been used for the name of the school and all participants mentioned.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hall (1991) contends that identity is always a kind of representation.

^{iv} The students referred to the Khmer language as Cambodian.

^v Many researchers have drawn extensively on Cummins' theories of language learning; for the purpose of this paper, I cannot explain at length. Suggested references include Creese, 2005; Roessingh, 2006; Roessingh & Kover, 2002, 2003; Sears, 1998).

^{vi} While there is support for the position that literacy in the first language facilitates developing literacy in the second, the reverse is a different statement.

^{vii} It is worth noting that Cummins' original conceptualization of CALP has been criticized for presenting a view of academic language as abstract (Creese, 2005). In like vein, Valdés (2004) explains how the second-language-teaching profession has moved beyond BICS and CALP. However, as this paper makes clear, many educators and researchers are still using his developmental continuum.

^{viii} The Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) allows full-time high school students to start training in a trade as early as Grade 10.

^{ix} For a more thorough discussion of the gender dynamics in the classroom as related to ethnicity and academic achievement, please see Wiltse (2008).

^x A case in point could be the janitor's position within the local school district which provides workers with a unionized workforce with good security and good salary as well as the place of the janitor in many schools (for example, the one person to whom some children can talk). One wonders how it feels to be a school janitor if teachers use this reference as an example of students making “poor choices.”

^{xi} Many of the parents were working long hours at more than one job, spoke little English, and had limited understanding of the education system in Canada.

^{xii} Gee (1996) defines ‘big D’ Discourse as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network,’ or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’” (p. 143).

^{xiii} Although not the focus of this paper, this comment does apply to the research participants in general, regardless of whether or not they were English language learners.

^{xiv} Please see Wiltse (2006) for a description of the classroom discourse practices.

^{xv} See Wiltse (2008) for an example of one such positive space from this research context.

^{xvi} If it was five to twelve in 1988, given the current state of world affairs, I assume that the minute hand has moved a little closer to midnight.

^{xvii} The language that Darith speaks is Khmer. While these students may very well not be running the country in the future, Adrena's point about their potential as interpreters/mediators is pertinent.

References

- Bogden, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Canagarajah, S. (2004). Subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses, and critical learning, in B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 116-137). Cambridge University Press.
- Corson, D. (2001). *Language diversity and education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Creese, A. (2005). *Teacher collaboration and talk in multilingual classrooms*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Cummins, J. (1981). *Bilingualism and language minority children*. Toronto: OISE Press.
- Cummins, J. (1989). *Empowering minority students*. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Ontario: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Cummins, J. (1997). Minority status and schooling in Canada. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 28(3), 411-430.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Cummins, J. (2006). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. Paper presented at Joint conference of the American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL) and the Association Canadienne de Linguistique Appliquée/Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics (ACLA/CAAL), Montreal, June 2006.
- Cummins, J. & Schecter, S. (2003). Introduction: School-based language policy in culturally diverse contexts. In S. Schecter & J. Cummins (Eds.), *Multilingual education in practice: Using diversity as a resource* (pp. 1-16). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Davis, K., Bazzi, S., Cho, H., Ishida, M. & Soria, J. (2005). "It's our Kuleana": A critical participatory approach to language-minority education. In L. Pease-Alvarez & S. Schecter (Eds.), *Teaching and community: Contributions of situated and participatory approaches to educational innovation*, (pp. 3-25). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Delpit, L. (1998). The politics of teaching literate discourse. In V. Zamel & R. Spack (Eds.), *Negotiating academic literacies: Teaching and learning across languages and cultures* (pp. 207-218). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Donato, R. (2000). Sociocultural contributions to understanding the foreign and second language classroom. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 27-50). Oxford: University Press.
- Duff, P. (2001). Language, literacy, content, and (pop) culture: Challenges for ESL students in mainstream courses. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58, 103-132.
- Gebhard, M. (2005). School reform, hybrid discourses, and second language literacies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39, 187-210.
- Gebhard, M., Austin, T., Nieto, S., & Willett, J. (2002). "You can't step on someone else's words": Preparing all teachers to teach language minority students. In Z. Beykont (Ed.), *The power of culture: Teaching across language difference* (pp. 219-243). Cambridge: Harvard Education Publishing Group.
- Gee, J. (1992) *The social mind: Language, ideology and social practice*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideologies in discourses* (2nd edn). London: Taylor & Francis. New York:
- Gee, J. P. (2000). The new Literacy studies: From 'socially situated' to the work of the social. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 180-196). New York: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. New York: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. & Crawford, V. (1998). Two kinds of teenagers: Language, identity, and social class. In D. Alvermann (Ed.), *Reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives* (pp. 225-245). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gutiérrez, K., Baquedano-López, P., Alvarez, H., & Chiu, M. (1999). Building a culture of collaboration through hybrid language practices. *Theory Into Practice*, 38, 87-93.
- Hall, S. (1991). Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities. In A.D. King (Ed.), *Culture, globalization and the world-system: Contemporary conditions for the representation of identity* (pp. 41-68). Birmingham: State University of New York.
- Harklau, L. (2000). From the "good kids" to the "worst": Representations of English language learners across educational settings. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34, 35-67.

- Harklau, L. (2003) Representational practices and multi-modal communication in US high schools: Implications for adolescent immigrants. In R. Bayley & S. Schecter (Eds.), *Language socialization in bilingual and multilingual societies* (pp. 83-97). Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Harris, S. (1990). *Two way Aboriginal schooling*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Hawkins, M. (2005). Becoming a student: Identity work and academic literacies in early schooling. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(1), 59-82.
- Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hornberger, N. (2002). "Remember I said": Cambodian students' second language literacy development in a mainstream classroom. In Z. Beykont (Ed.), *The power of culture: Teaching across language difference* (pp. 73-88). Cambridge: Harvard Education Publishing Group.
- Kanno, Y. (2004). Sending mixed messages: Language minority education at a Japanese public elementary school. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 316-338). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Kramsch, C. (2000). Social discursive constructions of self in L2 learning. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 133-153). Oxford: University Press.
- Lantolf, J. (2000). Introducing sociocultural theory. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 1-26). Oxford: University Press.
- Leung, C., Harris, R. & Rampton, B. (1997). The idealised native speaker, reified ethnicities, and classroom realities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 543-561.
- Lotherington, H. (2003). Multiliteracies in Springvale: Negotiating language, culture and identity in suburban Melbourne. In R. Bayley & S. Schecter (Eds.), *Language socialization in bilingual and multilingual societies* (pp. 200-217). Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Manyak, P. (2001). Participation, hybridity, and carnival: A situated analysis of a dynamic literacy practice in a primary-grade English immersion class. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 33, 423-465.
- McKay, S. & Wong, S. (1996). Multiple discourses, multiple identities: Investment and agency in second-language learning among Chinese adolescent immigrant students. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66, 577-606.
- Merriam, S. (1988) *Case Study Research in Education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

- Miller, J. (2004a). Identity and language use: The politics of speaking ESL in schools. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 290-315). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Miller, J. (2004b). Social languages and schooling: The uptake of sociocultural perspectives in school. In M. Hawkins (Ed.), *Language learning and teacher education: A sociocultural approach* (pp. 113-146). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Mohan, B., Leung, C. & Davison, C. (Eds.). (2001). *English as a second language in the mainstream: Teaching, learning and identity*. Harlow: Longman.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. London: Longman.
- Pavlenko, A. & Blackledge, A. (2004). Introduction: New theoretical approaches to the study of negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts, in A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 1-33). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Roessingh, H. (2006). BICS-CALP: An introduction for some, a review for others. *TESL Canada Journal*, 23(2), 91-96.
- Roessingh, H. & Kover, P. (2002). Working with younger-arriving ESL learners in high school English: Never too late to reclaim potential. *TESL Canada Journal*, 19(2), 1-20.
- Roessingh, H. & Kover, P. (2003). Variability of ESL learners' acquisition of cognitive academic language proficiency: What can we learn from achievement measures? *TESL Canada Journal*, 21(1), 1-21.
- Ruiz, R. (1984). Orientations in Language Planning. *NABE Journal* 8, 15-34.
- Schechter, S. & Bayley, R. (2002). *Language as cultural practice: Mexicanos en el norte*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Schleppegrell, M.J. (2004). *The language of schooling: A functional linguistics perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sears, C. (1998). *Second language students in mainstream classes*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1981). *Bilingualism or not*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1988) Multilingualism and the education of minority children. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas and J. Cummins (Eds.)/ *Minority Education: From Shame to Struggle* (pp. 9-44). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Stein, P. (2004). Representation, rights, and resources: Multimodal pedagogies in the language and literacy classroom, in B. Norton & K. Toohy (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 95-115). Cambridge University Press.

- Thesen, L. (1997). Voices, discourse, and transition: In search of new categories of EAP. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 487-512.
- Toohy, K. (1996). Learning English as a second language in kindergarten: A community of practice perspective. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 52, 549-576.
- Toohy, K. (2000). *Learning English at school: Identity, social relations and classroom practice*. Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Valdés, G. (2004). Between support and marginalisation: The development of academic language in linguistic minority children. *Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 7(2/3), 102-32.
- Wallace, C. (2005). Conversations around the literacy hour in a multilingual London primary school. *Language and Education*, 19(4), 146-161.
- Watt, D. & Roessingh, H. (2001). The dynamics of ESL drop-out: *Plus ça change...* *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58, 203-222.
- Wiltse, L. (2005). *Cultural diversity and discourse practices in grade 9*. Edmonton, AB: Qual Institute Press.
- Wiltse, L. (2006). "Like pulling teeth": Oral discourse practices in a culturally and linguistically diverse language arts classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 63(2), 199-223.
- Wiltse, L. (2008). "Learning the right way round?": Carnavalesque Social Spaces and Literacy Learning. In *Boys, Girls and the Myths of Literacies and Learning* (pp. 143-166). R. Hammett & K. Sanford (Eds.). Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Wolfe, P & Faltis, C. (1999). Gender and ideology in secondary ESL and bilingual programs. In C. Faltis & P. Wolfe (Eds.), *So much to say: Adolescents, bilingualism, & ESL in the secondary school* (pp. 83-102). New York: Teachers College Press.