Using Language to Do School: Linguistic Minority Students and Academic Tasks

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1. Introduction

In the United States and elsewhere around the world, educational decisions are based on assumptions about the nature of language used in academic settings. Such decisions, which include the areas of language testing and placement policies, curriculum design, instructional practices, classroom assessment, and the preparation of teachers, profoundly impact linguistic minority students.[1] With its concern for understanding the ways in which language is used for particular social practices in specific social contexts and the language development of speakers at various stages of bilingualism, the study of bilingualism can help inform both the assumptions about language and the practical decisions made as a result of those assumptions. Scholars of bilingualism recognize that developing competence in more than one language is a lifelong process, where even "fluent" bilinguals are still most likely developing language competence in one or more domains of language use (Baetens Beardsmore, 1986, Grosjean, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to expand current definitions of academic language by beginning to explore multiple ways to understand the actual language use of young adolescents, both monolingual and those at various stages of bilingualism, engaged in academic tasks. Because linguistic minority students often struggle academically even after they are able to carry out conversations in English, scholars have suggested that differences exist between the language used for school purposes and that of everyday communication. According to this view, the issue is not only how *much* English needs to be learned, but also what *kind* of English. Several theories have conceptualized the language of school either as particular registers marked by a set of specific linguistic features (e. g. Biber et al, 2002; Hinkel, 2002; Martin, 2002; Christie, 2000), language used in cognitively demanding situations characterized by low levels of contextualization (Cummins, 1984, 2000), or genres associated with particular intellectual traditions or academic disciplines (e.g. Swales, 1990; Freedman & Medway, 1994). Each of these approaches adds an important perspective to understanding how language is used in academic settings. However, shortcomings also limit the usefulness of each approach in gaining a full understanding of how linguistic minority students use language for academic purposes. First, focusing exclusively on linguistic features of academic texts makes it difficult to understand how language as a whole is used to engage in academic projects and often ignores the productive linguistic work done by second language users who may not have mastered particular features but who nonetheless do sophisticated things with the target language. Second, a framework based on levels of cognitive demand and contextualization ignores the fact that non-academic social interactions can themselves be cognitively demanding and that there is no language use which lacks context (Bartolomé, 1998; Gee, 2003; see also Rivera, 1984). Third, genre studies often focuses on language at the highest levels of academia, such as graduate courses, doctoral theses, and professional journal articles, far from the language demands of elementary and secondary school subject areas.

In addition to their theoretical limitations, these current approaches to academic language also have potentially negative practical implications as well. The danger is in reifying academic language, measuring it, and then claiming that linguistic minority students are unable to participate in the settings

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[1] Despite the fact that students learning English in the United States are sometimes in the numerical majority, I use the term "linguistic minority" because those who do not speak the dominant language of instruction are often still in the minority in terms of social and political power and prestige.

which use it because they have not yet mastered its discrete features. The analysis offered in this paper challenges the notion that students cannot or should not engage in higher level academic tasks until they have demonstrated mastery of a certain "kind" of proficiency in the target language.

The data explored in this paper come from students in seventh-grade world history classrooms in a middle school in a medium-sized agricultural city in California. The schools' student body was approximately seventy-five percent Latino and had high a proportion of students qualifying for free and reduced meals, a common indicator of poverty. The school was suffering from low morale among teachers and students, in part due to students' low scores on state-mandated standardized tests.

In addition to first and second generation Mexican immigrants, the Latino population at the school included students from families who had lived in California for generations. The school's student population therefore included a range of linguistic proficiency in both Spanish and English, representing those currently and formerly designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP), native speakers of varieties of English influenced by Spanish, and a small minority of monolingual, English-speaking Anglo students. Over half the students were designated by the school as LEP. Some of these students were labeled as "Mainstreamed LEP," indicating that the school believed they were ready to participate in mainstream courses. Others were designated "Transitioning LEP", indicating that the school believed these students were no longer in need of English as a Second Language courses but still needed to be in separate, sheltered content area courses, consisting solely of students designated as Limited English Proficient. Linguistic minority students who had been designated as LEP but were deemed no longer to need any special services were designated "Fluent English Proficient" (FEP). A number of students, both Latino and Anglo-American, were designated as "English Only," indicating that their families reported to the school that no language other than English was spoken at home.

This paper focuses on the interaction of a small instructional group of four students (two labeled Mainstreamed LEP and two labeled English Only), and on the writing of one student designated as Transitioning LEP. Data were collected during the 2000-2001 school year, as part of a larger study investigating development of language and social studies content in linguistically and academically diverse mainstream classrooms.[2] The larger study included a two-fold intervention. Students previously designated by the schools as "transitional limited English proficient" were de-tracked by placing them in mainstream social studies classrooms, in contrast to the separate, sheltered classes they would have attended otherwise. At the same time, these mainstream classrooms were reformed to better suit the needs of linguistically and academically diverse heterogeneous students. The curriculum and classrooms organization was based on Complex Instruction, a research-based approach developed and tested over the past several decades (Cohen and Lotan, 1997). Complex Instruction is characterized by work in small heterogeneous groups; intellectually challenging, grade-appropriate learning activities; open-ended tasks requiring multiple abilities; techniques designed to promote equal status participation by all members of each group; and careful attention paid to teacher development and support (Cohen and Lotan, 1997). The larger project was designed based on the theory that Complex Instruction, along with an explicit focus on academic language in the classroom, would create conditions beneficial to the language development and content learning of language minority students (Bunch, Abram, Lotan, and Valdés, 2001).

In this paper, I discuss at length two examples of student language used for academic purposes: first, an excerpt from a group discussion in which students interpreted the meaning of a political cartoon from the time of the Reformation; and second, one student's written essay discussing the growth of the Islamic Empire. For each example, I outline a variety of ways in which the language used by linguistically diverse students can be analyzed and understood. The purpose of the analysis in each case is not to make an airtight case for the particular interpretations offered, but rather to demonstrate that academic language can be understood in a variety of ways which go beyond the conventional definitions described above. I conclude by discussing implications for this kind of expanded analysis, both for the study of bilingualism and the education of linguistic minority students.

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[2] "Language Acquisition and Mastery of Content for English Learners in Heterogeneous Classrooms," funded by the Spencer Foundation and directed Rachel A. Lotan, Elizabeth G. Cohen, and Guadalupe Valdés at Stanford University.

2. One group's discussion

The first example comes from an activity completed as part of the last Complex Instruction unit of the school year. While studying the historical period of the Reformation, students were encouraged to think about one central question throughout the unit's four activities: "How do individuals and groups challenge the authority of institutions?" Activities called for students to analyze excepts from Martin Luther's *95 Theses* and create a skit in which followers of Martin Luther and Pope Leo X debate; study the demands that came out of the Peasant's Rebellion of 1524-1525 and design a "Peasant's Declaration" with slogans representing the demands; and study diagrams of the early printing press and design and build a printing press with moveable parts.

For the activity addressed here, "Political Cartoons--Art as a Weapon," a group of four students was given a packet which included an authentic political cartoon from the time of the Reformation (1) along with a task card. The task card asked students to discuss what the cartoon's message was, what visual symbols were used to convey the message, what specific institution was being challenged, and how art was used as a "weapon" during the Reformation to express people's dissatisfaction with the existing order. It also directed students to design their own political cartoon to challenge the authority of a current institution, to be shared with the class the following day.

(1) Resource Card: Art as a Weapon

Activity 1 Political Cartoons--Art as a Weapon
Resource Card
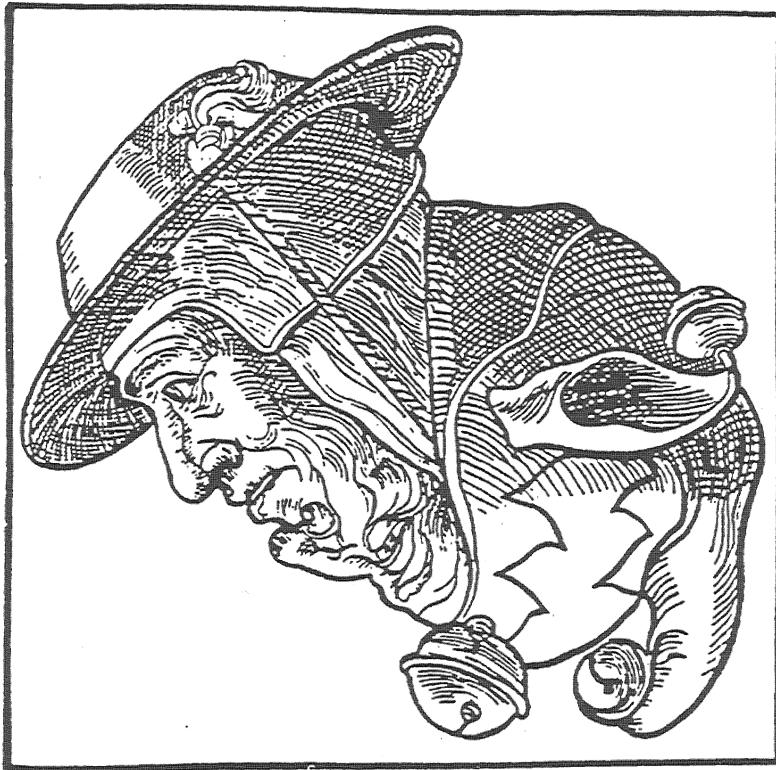
Anti-catholic cartoon showing a cardinal or a fool according to which head is uppermost. (*Woodcut by an unknown master. Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich*)

The group consisted of four students. Student One (S1) was designated by the school as Mainstreamed LEP. Students Two and Three (S2 and S3) were designated as English Only. A fourth member of the group, another female student designated as mainstreamed LEP, arrived late to class and joined the conversation after the segments analyzed below.

In the excerpts below (2), students examine the political cartoon and grapple with its meaning and message. In analyzing the students' talk, I will address two central questions. First, what academic content is this group able to discuss using English? This question is a logical starting point for the study of language in academic settings, but it is often overlooked when studying language use among language minority students, in favor of analyses which focus on linguistic characteristics which may or may not be relevant to students' ability to talk about academic subject matter. The second question is how can we understand the language used by the group to engage in the academic task? In answering this question, I will explore a variety of alternative lenses through which the language can be viewed.

The excerpts below are taken from the first half of the group's allotted time to answer the discussion questions and create their own cartoon (approximately forty-five minutes total). I have paraphrased what happens in the group between excerpts, in double parentheses.

(2) Group talk excerpts[3]

((Students talk about the tape recorder, introduce themselves, look at the activity card and resource cards, read the first question, get paper out, argue about who is assigned to each group role-- materials manager, reporter, etc.--and talk about what they had for lunch))

1 **S1:** question number 1
2 what is the message
3 ok what kind of message
4 what is the message of the cartoon
5 **S2:** that you have a good side
6 and then you have a bad side
7 no you have a
8 you have a good mature side
9 and then you have a joker
10 joker side
11 like see look at the joker
12 the bells and then [the]
13 **S?:** [the] the ears
14 **S?:** [and then the joke's on you]
15 **S1:** is that what we all see?
16 it looks like an elf
17 **S2:** like what she said
18 like the joke's on you

((Students argue about whether someone has made a "put down," and one student starts singing parts of the Alleluia chorus.))

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[3] Transcribing Conventions:
" "   tone indicates reading printed material
[ ]   overlapping speech
?   rising intonation indicating questions
@@   laughter
xx   unintelligible
S?   unidentifiable speaker
(( ))   description of interaction not transcribed here

19 **S2:** that in every person [ ] there's a mature side
20 and then there's a joke side
21 **S1:** [you're breaking it @@@] . . .
22 **S1:** hello
23 **S1:** so is that what we all think?

((Students look at resource cards, call the teacher over for help, ask each other if they are wearing eye liner, repeat the question, talk about one students' new glasses, and confirm that they are having a pizza party in another class.))

24 **S1:** "anti-catholic cartoon showing a cardinal
25 or a fool according to which head is uppermost"
26 it says right here and we're all looking
27 **S2:** we're all figuring it out by xx
28 **S1:** he's an anti-catholic
29 an anti-catholic
30 "cartoon showing a cardinal or a fool
31 according to which head is uppermost"

((Students argue about who is playing which group role and what that person's responsibilities are, and one student suggests again that the cartoon is about the "mature side" and the "joke side" in people. Teacher arrives briefly to remind students they need to explain their answers fully.))

32 **S2:** like in every guy there's a mature side
33 and then on the in the
34 and there's like a joke
35 **S1:** what is the message of the cartoon?
36 **S1:** what is the message of this cartoon?
37 **S?:** what do you think it is xx?
38 **S?:** I don't know
39 **S1:** "an anti-catholic cartoon showing a cardinal or a fool according to which head is uppermost"
40 **S1:** this is the fool and this is the anti-catholic
41 this means
42 **S3:** cardinal and the fool
43 cardinal @@ and the fool
44 **S1**: this is an anti-catholic
45 he's a catholic and this is a fool
46 **S1:** what is that trying to say?

((Group spends extensive time continuing to talk about the cartoon, what "anti-" means, and what "anti-catholic means," before moving on to designing their own political cartoon))

In addressing the first question, regarding what academic content the group discusses in English, it is clear that this group covers a range of academic territory. Throughout these excerpts, students discuss "Cardinals" and "fools", both important social players during the time of the Reformation. They also analyze details of an historical document, both visual (e.g. identifying the joker because of "the bells" and "the ears" in lines 12-13) and textual (reading several times the caption of the cartoon: "anti-Catholic cartoon showing a cardinal or a fool according to which head is uppermost," first in lines 24-25). They interpret contemporary and historical meanings of the political cartoon, as they consider possible messages: that in every person there is a "good" and "bad" or "mature" and "joker side" (first argued in lines 5-10), that "the joke's on you" (lines 14-18); and finally that the cartoon has something to do with being "anti-Catholic" (first suggested in lines 24-29). Students continue to interpret the meaning of the cartoon as they try to figure out whether one of the faces itself represents an anti-Catholic, and they continue to grapple with "what is the message of the cartoon?" (lines 35-46).

This excerpt ends with one student asking simply, "what is this trying to say?" (line 46). Part of the confusion becomes clearer later on in the conversation (not included in these excerpts), when it is evident that the students do not fully understand what the prefix "anti-" means. The point of the content analysis here, however, is not to evaluate the extent to which students understood the cartoon or grasped the central social studies concepts, but rather to suggest that a logical place to begin to understand the language used for academic purposes is to look closely at what specific academic ground students were able to cover given the language resources at their disposal. From the outset of the analysis, this approach significantly shifts the focus of the study of academic language from one concerned primarily with discrete linguistic characteristics to one concerned with the practical outcomes of language use.

But the second question remains: *how* does the group use language to engage in the task and cover the academic ground summarized above. I will address this question by using several different analytical lenses: *functional*, *interactional*, *rhetorical*, and *linguistic*. The lenses offer a concrete way to expand the conception of academic language from those described in the introduction. The lenses are not, however, either original or designed to be mutually exclusive. Characteristics of language as seen through one lens obviously impact and are impacted by what is seen through the others. Furthermore, there is no attempt to offer a comprehensive analysis of language through any one lens; instead, I suggest the *kind* of analysis that might be done using such a lens, and other questions that might be addressed by using that particular perspective.

First, using a functional lens, this group's talk can be analyzed according to what language functions students use to do their academic work.[4] On the broadest level, students in this group are concerned with language tasks such as following a task card, interpreting a resource card, and engaging in a group discussion. Analytically, these tasks can be broken down into necessary functional components, such as *reading a task card*, *describing a picture or cartoon*, and *proposing, defending, and questioning interpretations of meaning*. These can be broken down even further, into micro-skills such as *reading out loud*, *paraphrasing original text*, and *asking for clarification*. The analysis can become even more focused by addressing what even more discrete functions are needed, for example, for *reading out loud*, such as *compensating for unrecognizable words*, *maintaining the group's attention through tone of voice*, *signaling the beginning and end of a text*, etc. The analysis becomes more complex when taking into account the fact that in addition to the obvious language functions required to complete the task, students are engaged in a number of simultaneous social functions, such as maintaining solidarity with group members, presenting a particular "self" (Goffman, 1959), and signaling the extent to which students "buy into" the given academic task.[5] The point here is not to provide an exhaustive list of language functions required for this task, but rather to point out that this when trying to understand the nature of language used to engage in academic tasks, a functional approach helps to keep the doing of academic work at the heart of the analysis.

Looking at the excerpt through an interactional lens, we can ask how students use language to manage the group interaction.[6] What different ways do conversations start, what are the rules for turn-taking and maintaining the floor, and how do students move "on-" and "off-task"? In the excerpt above, for example, it becomes clear that students use various strategies to maintain the floor, whether it is to help clarify a concept for the group, buy time for them to develop their own thinking, or maintain their control over the conversation. For example, S1 repeats and paraphrases the assigned question in several ways before giving up the floor ("what is the message/ok what kind of message/what is the message of the cartoon?", lines 2-4). In holding the floor for eight lines, S2 uses parallel structure ("that you have a good side/and then you have a bad side," lines 5-6); conjunctive

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[4] This approach to understanding language, with its origins traceable to Hallidayian linguistics (e.g. Halliday, 1975), has been used in the study of workplace communication, the design of language instruction syllabi, and standards for school-based content and language instruction designed by the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages organization (TESOL, 1997).

[5] See Candlin, quoted in Swales (1990, p. 17), for examples of multiple functions of language used by speakers simultaneously.

[6] This lens is influenced in part by social theories of interaction (e.g. Goffman, 1974), interactional sociolinguistics (e.g. Gumperz, 1982), and conversational analysis (e.g. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974).

strategies such as repetition (Tannen, 1989) and building on her own previous answer ("no you have a/you have a good mature side/and then you have a joker/joker side," lines 7-10); and the use of "like" to provide an example ("like see look at the joker"). In addition to effectively maintaining the floor individually, students in this group also use interactional strategies to build upon each other's answers, such as when, in response to S1's question "what is the message of the cartoon" (line 4), S2 replies with the subordinate clause "that you have a good side," building on the previous utterance. S1 and S2 again effectively move together when S1 suggests "it says right here and we're all looking" (line 26) and S2 uses parallel structure to continue the thought: "we're all figuring it out by xx" (line 27). Other questions that could be addressed using an interactional analysis include how students collide to exclude the floor from other students, how those excluded students attempt to gain the floor, and what happens when students divide the floor into two separate conversations.

A third possible way to view the language of this group is through a rhetorical lens. For example, members of this group demonstrate that consensus is important to them at various points in the excerpt presented here. S1 several times asks for consensus: "is that what we all see?" in line 15, and "so is that what we all think?" in line 23. S2 explicitly credits an unidentified student as the source of what S2 believes: "like what she said/like the joke's on you" (lines 17-18). In these examples the group's rhetorical language reflects the norms of Complex Instruction that had been emphasized throughout the school year. In orientation activities, definitions of roles each student should play in the group, and feedback both to groups and the class, the teacher emphasized the importance of group interdependence and consensus. Other rhetorical areas of inquiry could include the ways in which students indicate investment at a variety of levels: with the activity, with each other as a group, with the class itself, with school in general, etc. A rhetorical lens could also be used to investigate how students' language relates to norms for using language to talk about thinking, learning, knowledge, and ideas vary according to intellectual cultural traditions (such as "the Western tradition," however oversimplified that might be); academic discipline (social sciences, humanities, mathematics, natural sciences, etc.); level in school (elementary, secondary, tertiary); and national, state, and local standards.

Finally, the use of specific features of language can be examined through a linguistic lens. The functional, interactional, and rhetorical moves explored above are, of course, composed of linguistic features such as phonemes, morphemes, syntactic structures, and lexical items. Specific linguistic characteristics may be particularly relevant for communicating in academic settings, such as nominalization, passive main verbs, and complex embedding (Gee, 1991), although it may be that other, less "academic sounding" language also plays a large role in doing academic work. In the excerpt analyzed here, for example, students in this group use the second person pronoun *you* in a variety of ways relevant to accomplishing their academic task. While there is one example of the common use of the term as direct referent to an interlocutor in the group ("you're breaking it," line 21), S2 repeatedly uses the generalized meaning of *you* when interpreting the message of the cartoon: e.g. "that you have a good side/and then you have a bad side" (lines 5-6, and repeated several times later). Since this use of the second person pronoun is typical of English and much less frequent in Spanish where either *uno* (one) or the *se* passive are generally used with this meaning, it is important to understand how developing bilingual students use and respond to this construction, which is essentially an English native-like feature. S2 also use the second person pronoun in the idiomatic expression "the joke's on you" (line 14). In these examples, students' use of the pronoun *you* does not fit the profile of academic language as being necessarily either lexically complex or "decontextualized". On the contrary, this analysis indicates that using basic vocabulary in socially contextualized ways was crucial for this group to engage in its academic discussion.

3. One student's writing

The second example comes from the first Complex Instruction unit of the school year, "Shaping an Empire: the Mosaic of Islam". Throughout the unit students were challenged to understand what characterized the Islamic Empire, and what factors could be attributed to its growth. In their group activities, students examined Islamic art, architecture, and styles of clothing; studied how the

etymological changes of words were related to trade routes; and analyzed original quotations from Islamic leaders. In addition to answering discussion questions, groups were assigned to create a product for each activity: an artistic work which would express the feelings as a conquered people but which would not anger the Islamic rulers; a "news brief" outlining the strategy of an Islamic leader; an illustrated map telling the story of a group of merchants; a skit dramatizing language conflict along trade routes; and others.

Here I will discuss one student's final essay for the unit, designed to allow students to reflect on the activities and discuss how they are related to the central theme of the unit: the spread of Empire. In the essay prompt, students were asked to reflect on the four activities and "discuss how the leadership styles of Islamic rulers, the movement of language, the patterns of trade, and the forms of art shaped the growth of the Islamic Empire". Since this was the first essay assignment of the school year, students were provided with a framework for their writing which included a model introductory paragraph, a framed conclusion for which students had to add key words, and a sample topic sentence for the body paragraph that read *In this paragraph, I will give details and evidence from the activities my group completed to explain how the Islamic Empire developed*. The segment below represents the part of the essay which students were responsible for without such support: the body paragraph following the topic sentence provided for the students.

Isabel[7] was born in the United States, raised by an unemployed single mother who speaks only Spanish. She participated in a transitional bilingual program in elementary school, and at the beginning of this study was designated by the school as Transitional LEP. As part of the intervention of the larger study, Isabel was placed in the mainstream social studies classroom using Complex Instruction and characterized by the reforms described in the introduction to this paper. In studying Isabel's writing, it is helpful to consider questions similar to those asked when looking at students' talk during small group activities. Here the questions are what academic content does Isabel write about in English, and how does she use written language to engage in this school task? The body paragraph of Isabel's essay is included below (3) in its entirety, followed by an analysis addressing the two questions.

(3) Isabel's Body Paragraph

The Islamic Empire developed by the ruler because he was wise, proud, and helpful. Ali as the ruler he was wise because he told that "knowledge is a treasure". Also he was helpful because help his fellow men. Finally he made the Empire develop by him being proud and telling his men that who never corrects himself will never correct another. Another way that develop the Empire is by the language and its movement. It develop because if you knew the language of Islamic you could communicate with them. Even if you knew the language you will trade faster and trade your stuffs for better objects. Finally the patterns of trading helped because the word "saffron" it was a spice people wanted to have and trade. Also the word "saffron" spread the Empire because it was easy to transport. Finally it keep growing because people wanted and took it to another places and keep growing it.

The first question to consider is what academic content Isabel is able to cover in her essay. While historians and social studies teachers may find reason to criticize Isabel's thinking, from a language perspective it is important to note what content she is able to discuss in writing. As it did with the content analysis of the group talk, starting with the academic content of the essay places what students are able to accomplish with language at the center of the analysis, rather than the linguistic features of that language alone. Below (4) is a paraphrase of Isabel's main academic points:

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[7] Not her real name

(4) Isabel's Academic Argument (paraphrased)

Theme	Isabel's Argument (paraphrased)
Styles of leadership	The Islamic Empire developed because it had a wise, proud, and helpful leader. Ali, the ruler, was wise because he told people that "knowledge is a treasure." Ali also helped his fellow men. Ali helped the Empire develop by being proud and telling his men that "who never corrects himself will never correct another".
Movement of language	Another way the empire developed was by the movement of language. If you knew the language of Islam, you could communicate with others.
Patterns of trade	Saffron was a spice that people wanted to have and to trade. Saffron helped spread the Empire because it was easy to transport, and people kept growing it and taking it to new places.
Links between trade routes and language	If you knew the language, you could trade faster and trade for better objects. The word "saffron" spread as the spice itself did.

Beginning an analysis of writing by first articulating what academic ground students are able to cover provides the context for asking the second question: how does Isabel use written language to engage in the academic task? Again, a variety of lenses could be used to study Isabel's writing. A *functional* analysis could focus on the fact that Isabel is capable of "stating a thesis," "providing examples," "using quotations," etc. A written equivalent of the *interactional* lens could also be developed, focusing on writing as interaction between writer and multiple audiences. A *rhetorical* analysis could focus on Isabel's marshaling of evidence to support her position and her conception of audience. In the remainder of this paper, however, I will focus on several aspects of the perspective still dominant in both educational practice and the study of bilingualism: viewing writing through a *linguistic* lens.

Due to the nature of writing and the fact that the focus here is on one individual instead of a group of students, the linguistic lens focuses on different aspects here than it did in analyzing the group work above. Here, I will start with what Isabel can do linguistically in English as demonstrated by this essay. She can write ten largely comprehensible sentences, varying both sentence complexity (including compound and complex sentences) and length (from nine to twenty words in each sentence). She uses vocabulary effectively, including everyday words (*proud, helpful, language, objects, because, growing*); words associated with social studies (*developed, communicate, patterns, trade, ruler, transport*); and specialized words unique to this unit (*Islamic Empire, treasure, saffron, spice*). Finally, she demonstrates almost flawless use of written conventions, including capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

Still, however, a number of grammatical errors[8] and/or disfluencies stand out and clearly mark Isabel as a developing writer in English. Below (5) is Isabel's essay again, with some problems underlined that many teachers and other readers would probably identify as problematic.

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[8] Since I am focusing this part of the analysis on what readers would most likely notice, I use the common terms *grammatical* and *errors* here aware that they are problematic because they include what are in fact include uses of language which are not grammatically incorrect in the linguistic sense, but rather are not considered "proper" written standard English, a normative judgment and not a linguistic one.

(5) Isabel's Writing Errors

The Islamic Empire <u>developed by the ruler</u> because he was wise, proud, and helpful. Ali as the ruler <u>he</u> was wise because he <u>told</u> that "knowledge is a treasure". Also he was helpful <u>because help</u> his fellow men. Finally he made the Empire develop by <u>him</u> being proud and telling his men <u>that who never corrects himself will never correct another</u>. Another way that <u>develop the Empire</u> is by the language and its movement. It <u>develop</u> because if you knew the <u>language of Islamic</u> you could communicate with <u>them</u>. Even if you knew the language you <u>will</u> trade faster and trade your <u>stuffs</u> for better objects. Finally the patterns of trading helped because the word "saffron" <u>it</u> was a spice people wanted to have and trade. Also <u>the word "saffron"</u> spread the Empire because <u>it</u> was easy to transport. Finally it <u>keep</u> growing because people wanted and took it to <u>another places</u> and <u>keep growing it.</u>

More difficult than identifying these errors is how to understand them. One possibility is to look at the number of errors that Isabel commits and to conclude that, from a language development perspective, she has yet to acquire several important features of English syntax. A closer look at Isabel's writing, however, forces alternatives to the conclusion that all her errors represent developmental gaps in English language proficiency (Valdés, 1999, 1992). Some of Isabel's errors may indeed represent systematic language development issues, including transfer from her native Spanish. However, before such a conclusion can be drawn, a number of alternative explanations must be considered, including the possibility that Isabel's errors are indicative of those of inexperienced writers in general, including monolinguals. A close analysis of Isabel's essay and the context surrounding it indicates that a number of factors may be influencing her errors in addition to language development issues. Here I consider a variety of alternatives, both as a way to analyze Isabel's writing and also as a more general example of what this kind of analysis might offer.[9]

First, it is necessary to consider the conditions under which the writing was assigned. Much student writing, including the example above, represents in-class assignment under time constraints, challenging conditions for all writers but especially beginning writers, meaning that in essence the writing represents a first draft. Therefore, it is often unclear whether some of the errors could be random mistakes, the hand-written equivalent of oral "slips of the tongue". For example, skipped words are a common issue among young writers that can often be attended to by having students read their own drafts out loud. It is unclear what other kinds of errors might have been corrected with more time or with the opportunity to write multiple drafts. Considering the fact that high-stakes writing in almost any adult context, including education, government, business, and science, is done with the assistance of peer or professional editors, it is not surprising that the writing of developing writers without such assistance might contain a number of flaws.

Second, therefore, it is necessary to examine a particular kind of error in the context of the correct use of the same feature elsewhere. For example, while it appears as though Isabel may have gaps in her systematic development of the English language, only by considering errors in the context of instances of correct use can we begin to tease out what might be a structure yet to be developed and what might be attributable to other factors. For example, in the following sentence (6) Isabel incorrectly drops the required pronoun before the verb *help*:

(6) *Also he was helpful <u>because help</u> his fellow men.*

In studying the one error alone, it would be tempting to conclude that Isabel does not command the pronoun rule in English, probably because of the fact that she is a native speaker of Spanish, which allows pronouns to be dropped in similar cases. However, in looking at evidence elsewhere in this sentence and paragraph, it is clear that Isabel does include the same pronoun correctly five times, some

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[9] I am grateful to Guadalupe Valdés for suggestions in how to conduct this kind of writing analysis.

in cases in which the pronoun would most likely not have been used in Spanish, including one instance earlier in the same sentence (*he was helpful*). The other examples follow (7, 8, and 9):

(7) *The Islamic Empire developed by the ruler because <u>he</u> was wise, proud, and helpful.*

(8) *Ali as the ruler <u>he</u> was wise because <u>he</u> told that "knowledge is a treasure".*

(9) *Finally <u>he</u> made the Empire develop . . .*

It could still be the case that Isabel has some confusion with the fact that English is not a pronoun drop language. However, in the context of the correct uses of the pronoun, it is obvious that she has some understanding of the rule.

In addition to the possibility that Isabel may have skipped words or made other unintentional errors, what might other factors be that would indicate something other than developmental gaps in English? One possibility is that Isabel's writing shares features of the writing of many developing writers, including monolinguals. Expository writing is difficult, and it is common for middle school students, including monolinguals, to struggle with expository forms (see Freedman, Dyson, Flower, and Chafe, 1987). Even among monolingual college students, however, many of Isabel's errors are common. Many of Isabel's errors are included in the list provided by Lunsford and Connor (1999) of the "twenty most common errors" among U.S. college students, including vague pronoun reference (*It develop because if you knew the language of Islamic you could communicate with <u>them</u>.*) and missing possessive apostrophe (*Finally he made the Empire develop by <u>him</u> being proud. . .*).

Lunsford and Conners (1987) also include among their twenty most common errors three having to do with verbs: wrong or missing verb ending, wrong tense or verb form, and unnecessary tense shift. While it may be difficult to decide which of the three kinds of errors a particular verb form might represent, what is important to point out is that all three represent errors that native-speaking, monolingual writers commonly make. Therefore, any analysis of bilingual writers' errors would have to consider the fact that verb errors may represent something other than second language development issues. A full analysis of Isabel's writing could examine various options. Is Isabel still developing present and past tense forms of regular verbs like *help* and irregular verbs like *keep*, or is she using these verbs in their spoken, vernacular forms in which case her deletion of the morphological endings would be expected. To what extent does Isabel know and use verb forms correctly but is experiencing problems in maintaining and shifting tense appropriately in expository writing, such as is most likely the case in the following sentence (10):

(10) *Even if you <u>knew</u> the language you <u>will trade</u> faster and trade your stuffs for better objects.*

While maintaining and shifting tense appropriately is a difficult challenge for developing writers, there is evidence that the job might have been even harder for students in Isabel's classroom, given the context of their writing, highlighting another necessary consideration when trying to understand the writing of linguistically diverse students. Students were encouraged to use a number of resources in writing their essays, including resource cards from the group activities they had completed during the unit, individual reports they had written after completing those activities, and the essay task card itself. Each of the resources contained significant information written in the *present* tense, which students were expected to use as an aid in writing *past* tense expository essay. For example, one resource card included a merchant's narrative written in the historical present tense. Another included famous quotations from Islamic leaders, all in the present tense and the imperative. Individual report assignments that Isabel completed leading up the activity and which students were encouraged to use as resources were written in the present tense, including responses to the following questions (11, 12, and 13)

(11) *How is the movement of language related to other things that move?*

(12) *What makes a place a 'good' location for a capital city?*

(13) *In what ways does the spread of the word 'saffron' reflect the expansion of the Islamic Empire?*

While shifting from resources and previous writing in the present tense to an essay written in the past tense may not have been difficult for experienced writers, it is likely that it presented a major challenge for a developing writer like Isabel.

The above analysis is not intended to claim that Isabel's writing is characterized *only* by issues in writing development as opposed to language development. In fact, systematic language development issues, with or without transfer from other languages, are still undoubtedly factors in Isabel's writing. For example, it is likely that Isabel's use of *another places* (instead of *other places* or *another place*) and the *language of Islamic* (instead of *the language of Islam* or the *Islamic language*) represents a collocation error, common among those developing a second language (Nation, 2001), perhaps influenced by transfer from her native Spanish. A full analysis such as the one above, however, is helpful in contextualizing students' errors and reminding both educators and language scholars that the errors of writers at various stages of bilingualism should not automatically be assumed to be indications of gaps in the development of one of the languages. At the same time, the linguistic lens may serve as a reminder that the writing of linguistic minority students, due to the nature of bilingualism, may never seem exactly like that of monolingual students (Valdés, 1992).

4. Conclusion and implications

This paper has offered a preliminary investigation into a variety of ways to conceptualize and analyze spoken and written work done by linguistically diverse youth in academic settings. The range of options for analysis described here has suggested alternatives to dominant conceptions of academic language as linguistic register or genre alone. This kind of expanded analysis has implications for both the study of bilingualism and the education of linguistic minority students.

This small study serves as a reminder that academic language cannot be conceptualized fully without keeping academic content at the heart of the analysis. For example, any analysis of the data presented here that ignores the academic ground covered, no matter how sophisticated the analysis, runs the danger of losing sight of the fact that, despite use of language not traditionally characterized as "academic" (in the case of the group) and the use of writing with multiple disfluencies (in the case of Isabel), students in both cases ultimately used English to successfully engage in sophisticated academic tasks. From a language study perspective, the danger of ignoring academic content lies in using constructs for academic language that measure specific features of language effectively but hide what language users are actually accomplishing academically. The educational implications of such a restricted conception of academic language are that developing bilinguals like Isabel, who may indeed be able to cover an appropriate amount of academic ground in English, may be seen as unable to complete such work and therefore excluded from opportunities to do so.

It is not enough, of course, either from a language study or educational standpoint, to stop with the content analysis. Scholars of bilingualism endeavor to understand the nature and development of students' language for particular purposes in its full complexity, and educators are responsible for seeing to it that students learn ways to write about subject matter in ways which will be accepted both for general and discipline-specific purposes. The traditional ways of studying the unique features of academic language as a register or a genre are helpful, but the other lenses offered here suggest that other facets of language are important too, a finding which carries educational implications. From a language testing standpoint, for example, this study challenges the notion that a catalog of linguistic features of academic language can serve as the best construct for testing students' ability to engage in academic tasks. The students in this analysis, for example, may not have been able to demonstrate academic language proficiency on a test which measured their mastery of syntactic or lexical complexity, even though when seen through the lenses above they are clearly ready to engage in the tasks, in which they participated effectively.

Academic language proficiency cannot be conceptualized as a terminal status for which bilingual students must wait before they can engage in academic tasks in English. This analysis demonstrates the

fact that under certain conditions, linguistic minority students, despite differences from monolinguals and even disfluencies in the target language, can effectively engage in and complete sophisticated academic tasks along with monolingual, native English speakers. A more superficial error analysis of Isabel's writing, for example, might have concluded that she lacked the English proficiency needed to do certain kinds of academic work. This point has implications both for decisions regarding whether to place linguistic minority students in mainstream classrooms, and what those mainstream classrooms might need to look like in order to facilitate the participation of students from a variety of linguistic backgrounds.

Finally, this analysis also provides an expanded range of factors to consider in terms of the language demands of particular academic settings. Expanding a view of language demands has implications both for classroom assessment and for the preparation of teachers. In addition to students' use of linguistic features, for example, teachers may want to notice growth in students' ability to hold the floor in a group conversation, or may want to focus on the development of rhetorical strategies in writing. This means that teachers need to understand how language works at a variety of levels beyond the traditional linguistic areas such as phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.

As schools in the United States and elsewhere continue to require a language of instruction that is different from the home language of many of its students, and as native language support becomes less and less available for a variety of reasons, the need for a better understanding of how students use the language of instruction is greater now than ever. Meanwhile, the field of bilingualism continues to explore how best to understand the language used by individuals at various stages of bilingualism in particular social contexts. This paper is offered as one small step toward a better understanding that will serve both the study of bilingualism and the education of linguistic minority students, as part of an endeavor for which much more work is required.

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