

# Different Lenses for Looking at the Writing of English Language Learners

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## 1. Introduction

This article begins with two narratives (Figures 1 and 2) written by fifth-grade students in an English/Spanish bilingual program, along with a lengthy description of the conditions under which they were produced. We offer these two narratives as a springboard for answering the question: What is gained and what is lost when we use different theoretical lenses to help us understand students' writing? As we look at the students' writing through the different theoretical lenses, we will explore what we believe each lens illuminates and what it obscures.

### Trip to Rocky Point By David L.

"Let's go! Let's go!" I shouted. I could already see myself on the beaches of Rocky Point taking in the sun, stuffing myself with camarones, swimming in the ocean until my skin was as wrinkled as a prune.

When my dad and my mom finally made it on the road, it seemed endless. We passed mountains and deserts and freeways until finally . . . Rocky Point!

The ocean smell attracted me. As I got closer and closer, the smell got stronger and stronger. I saw the waves hit the rocks, and I heard the water calling me. I went into the water. I was in a trance. I could feel the water on my feet. I was so cold escalofrios appeared all over my body like tiny little mountains. I turned slowly in the water taking in my surroundings. There were people playing in the sand and taking in the sun.

"No te vayas muy lejos, David!" My mother's soft voice broke the silence. I looked over at her and smiled. She had taken two steps in the water. I turned to continue my exploration when suddenly I heard someone scream.

"Oh, no!" I knew it was the same sweet voice. My mom. I ran towards her cutting through the water like a knife. I asked her what happened, but she couldn't answer. My mother's face was clenched in pain—a pain I had never seen or would want to see again. I went running to my dad. He was buying a newspaper at a stand nearby.

"Papí, Papí, una agua mala mordió a mamá." My dad helped my mother to shore and went running to a liquor store nearby. When he got there he bought medication for my mom. He sprayed the medication on my mom. My mom tried to smile, but I could see pain in her eyes. I felt anxious and helpless. My mom was in pain and there was nothing I could do.

We returned to the hotel. Everyone was tired and quiet. We spent the night at the hotel. The very next morning we packed up and left.

"Papí, ya nunca volveremos a Puerta Penasco!" I said to my dad on the way home. My mom pulled me close as my dad said, "Está bien mijo."

Figure 1: David's Final Draft: "Trip to Rocky Point"

The Greatest Gift  
By Isabel

Every year my abuelita would come to visit from Parral, Chihuahua, and she would cook the most delicious food you could imagine: tamales, chicken, cookies, doughnuts and best of all...my favorite...CAKES! Chocolate, vanilla, pecan! They were number one! **But** she never let me cook, not once!

“You’re too little,” she’d say.

It was my sixth birthday. “Oh, Isabeeel, ven a sacar la mantequilla, por favor.”

It was my seventh birthday. “Oh, Isabeeel, ven a sacar la jarra de la azucar, por favor.”

It was my eighth birthday. “Oh Isabeeel, ven a sacar la harina, por favor.”

As the years crept by, I kept loving her wonderful food, and I kept watching every step it took to make her delicious cakes.

One day as I was reading in my room, I heard my grandmother call me, “Oh, Isabeeel, come help me please!” I sighed then headed to the kitchen.

When I walked in the kitchen I saw my grandmother wearing her usual flower apron, and she was reaching out for the top cabinet where the baking powder was.

I sighed again. “I’ll get it,” I mumbled. I got on the counter, and I got the baking powder from the top of the cabinet.

“Thank you, mijita,” I heard my grandmother say as I was heading out the door.

“Espera? no me quieres ayudar?” said my grandmother smiling. I couldn’t believe it! My grandmother was asking me to help her! I couldn’t help it, so I ran to hug her.

After two hours of mixing and pouring and baking and eating, I washed my hands, then I took one step toward the door, when suddenly...

“No, no, no, ahora tenemos que limpiar, it is time to clean.”

The huge grin on my face disappeared. Everything turned blue... And so my grandmother and I cleaned, but it was worth it! My grandmother had given me the best thing in the world...

Something that will live on forever through her recipe...

Figure 2: Isabel’s Final Draft: “The Greatest Gift”

During the 2000-2001 school year, when these two pieces were written, David and Isabel were fifth-grade students in a dual language program at an elementary school in a major city in the Southwest. Ernestina Aragon and Rebecca Osorio were their teachers. They valued writing as part of literacy instruction, and they believed that for their students to learn to write well, they had to write frequently. Ernestina and Rebecca devoted approximately 45 minutes a day to writing where they guided students through the "components" of the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing). Their students also kept writers’ notebooks that primarily were used as a place to reflect on stories they read or had read to them each day. Four or five times each year, the children published a piece of writing that was then added to the classroom or school library. While the students enjoyed writing, Ernestina and Rebecca were not satisfied. Despite their efforts, the students' writing seemed perfunctory--lacking signs of engagement, voice, a sense of audience. Isabel's response to Eve Bunting's The Wall (1990) (Figure 3) and David's response to Two Bad Ants (1988) by Chris Van Allsburg (Figure 4) are typical of the flat writing the children were doing.

The wall  
Eve Bunting

uesday  
September 5, 2000

asked  
never mind  
@ P.S.

When I saw the video and I saw the wall I felt really sad because I saw all the names of the soldiers that had past away. I felt really sad when I saw all the soldier's relatives crying and tracing the soldier's names with a pencil and I felt really sorry for the people who had relatives in the war but never met them.

I feel happy that this woman thought of the idea of building this memorial because I think that all the soldiers gave in their lives because two countrys disaggred (America and Vietnam).

Figure 3: Isabel's Response to The Wall

Two Bad Ants. 9/12

What I think that the mom quiza would fell very mad at her two sons because the two ants got in alot of trouble.

What I think is that if I see like a hole the would think that its food inside for them but what if there is nothing in there. And if I put a bucket or big bucket and they get in ther and what if there a snake that snake will eat them. Or

Figure 4: David's Response to Two Bad Ants

In order to address their concerns, Ernestina and Rebecca talked with Nora Ulloa, the assistant principal at their school, Cecilia Espinosa, a doctoral student at the local university, and Karen Smith, a professor who had collaborated with Ernestina and Rebecca on other literacy projects. The five agreed to work together to try and change the conditions for writing in these two fifth-grade classrooms.

They began by reading an article in *Primary Voices K-6* by Isoke Nia (1999) who claims that most writing workshops are an endless repetition of “steps” in the writing process. She argues for the need to put content (i.e., different genres) into writing instruction. After much discussion, the study group decided to engage Ernestina’s and Rebecca’s students in a unit of study on memoir. For a month, the adults spent time investigating their own understandings of this genre by reading adult memoirs such as *The Color of Water* (1997) by James McBride and *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993) by Esmeralda Santiago, and books and articles on how to write memoir (e.g., *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art* (1996) by Judith Barrington). They shared with students what they were doing and what they were learning in what they came to call their “adult work.” For instance, they talked with the students about Barrington’s belief that memoir writing is especially significant for members of marginalized groups because it provides a place for them to speak personally and truthfully about their lives, thus playing a small part in erasing years of invisibility and interpretation by others (14).

Barrington’s words gave purpose to the study: Through writing memoir these mostly Latino/a students—many of them immigrants, all of them speakers of English and Spanish—could make their lives visible and available to others to read. This seemed personally important to Ernestina and Rebecca because at the same time they were considering having students write memoir, huge struggles over ballot Proposition 203—an initiative that would effectively end the use of instructional languages other than English—were going on outside the classroom. Ernestina and Rebecca began engaging the

students in discussions about this Proposition—about why their stories mattered, focusing on the fact that Latinos are frequently misrepresented in the media by non-Latinos and about the need for Latinos themselves to tell their own stories. Ernestina, Rebecca, and Nora went to considerable effort to collect not easily available published memoirs by Latino authors written in English and in Spanish so students could come to believe that "people like them" indeed did this kind of work.

It should be noted that this effort to find materials in which students might see themselves was not new for Ernestina and Rebecca. Nor was the work they did generally throughout the day to make what students had to say seem "smart." They were accustomed to taking great pains to turn seemingly unrelated or superficial student contributions into relevant, important, profound gifts. What was new was how they were viewing writing instruction. They were beginning to conceive of what teachers and students would do if schoolwork were aligned to what writers of a particular genre--in this case, memoirists--would do.

Each day, the teachers read memoirs aloud to spark memories from the children's own lives, and they had students tell each other highlights from these memories. These stories were then recorded in students' notebooks and became "seed ideas" that might later be developed into a published memoir. Following is the seed idea that grew into Isabel's final piece (Figure 5).

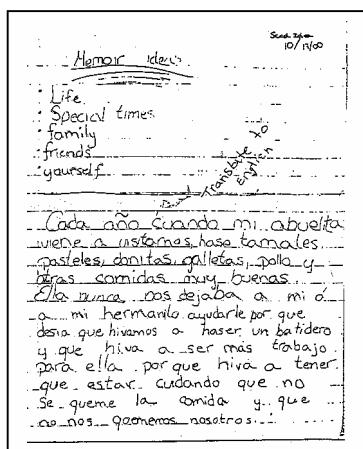


Figure 5: Isabel's Seed Idea

Cada año cuando mi abuelita viene a visitarnos, hace tamales, pasteles, donitas, galletas, pollo y otras comidas muy buenas. Ella nunca nos dejaba a mi o a mi hermanito ayudarla porque decia que hibamos a hacer un batidero y que hiba a ser mas trabajo para ella porque hiba a tener que estar cuidando que no se quemara la comida y que no quememos nosotros.

(Every year, when my grandmother comes to visit us she makes tamales, pastries, donuts, cookies, chicken and other very good food. She never would let me or my little brother help her because she said we would make a mess and that it would be more work for her because she would have take care that the food didn't burn and that we didn't burn ourselves.)

Students also spent time pouring over memoirs, identifying and defining features of this genre. They agreed that memoir is a snippet of a person's life; it can be told in first or third person; it is based on truth but can be embellished if the embellishment enriches the felt experience of the story.

Further inquiries were made into how memoirists write: how they begin memoirs (types of leads), how they end them, how they manipulate sentence structure to make it poetic, and so on. For these investigations, students followed an inquiry pattern that went something like this. They searched through memoirs and looked for particular techniques or stylistic devices they found interesting; they

made up a name for these devices; and finally, they discussed the consequences of what they found. Sometimes they debated over writers' decisions such as whether to translate code switching or leave it to the reader to interpret from the context. Importantly, students included themselves among writers who make such decisions. David, for instance, interrupted Karen reading aloud The Freedom Trip (1998) by Frances Park to point out that Park had used a writing technique, making a long story short, that David himself often relied on to move his readers from one destination to another using only a few short sentences.

Students not only talked about and debated the merits of particular techniques, they also participated in "try-its"—an exercise where they tried their hand at one of the authors' techniques they had discussed: ellipses to build suspense or engage the reader; various ways of "making a long story short" (avoiding the kind of "bed-to-bed" story (Graves, 1983) David first produced about the trip to Rocky Point in which the key incident is buried in what preceded and what followed); codeswitching with and without translation; or leading off with dialogue. This "try-it" by David (Figure 6) is based on Jane Yolen's memoir, Owl Moon, in which she conveys sights, sounds, sensations of touch and taste.

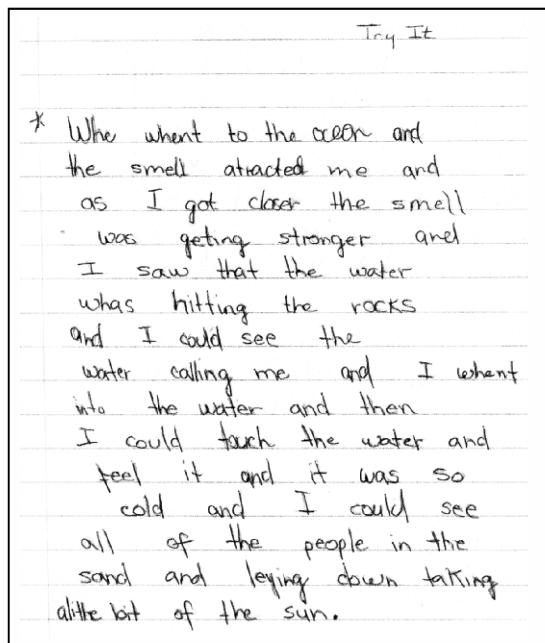


Figure 6: David's "Try-It"

As other writers do, these students worked their ideas, played with them in writing, crafted them; and as other memoirists do, the students began to care deeply about their memoirs.

Throughout the students' work on memoir, the "adult work" also continued, and what the adults were learning about memoir informed what they and the students talked about. Also on-going was considerable support for students: peer support; adult support, and support from long distant "memoir mentors." Along with growing teacher knowledge and the above types of support, students also continued to benefit from the teachers' long-established general practice of responding to students' comments--and therefore positioning students--as "smart."

## 2. Looking through different lenses

What kind of theoretical lens, then, can we use to understand this academic work? When we began conceptualizing this paper, we were most interested in looking at the students' work through our preferred lens: a version of Gee's Discourse with a capital D (1990; 1999) that highlights alignment issues (Edelsky, Smith, & Wolfe, 2002). We began, however, by looking at the students' writing through a language proficiency lens, thinking we could infuse that construct with the sensibility of Gee's capital D Discourse. And that, maybe in the process, we could work out some of the questions we have about capital D Discourse. But when we began to seriously investigate the construct of

language proficiency it became clear that, for our purposes, nothing could save it. Language proficiency means a test score no matter how we spun it; and its central assumptions about language (as in-the-head and individual) are just that--untheorized assumptions. We looked at several other theoretical lenses too (academic language, academic language proficiency, academic discourse, genre theory, and Discourse) to see what they might illuminate as well as what they obscured about what the students were learning.

## *2.1 Language proficiency*

Language proficiency has the advantage of addressing a common sense question: how much or how well. The main benefit of looking at how much/how well is that it permits comparisons and rankings and can be translated by language professionals into scores and accorded numerical precision which, in turn, carries considerable authority. But its target--the native speaker, and implicitly, the educated native speaker--is an artificial idealization. As we stated above, it's a tautology--language proficiency is what language proficiency tests measure. If we used that as a lens to look at the students' writing, we would have to separate text from activity and look at Isabel's and David's and the other fifth graders' writing as simply a reflection of individual knowledge and ability, rather than as material artifacts of layers of collaboration over a period of weeks. In other words, we would have to ignore how the students' sense of themselves as writers figured into their writing.

## *2.2 Academic language*

Right in their names, academic language (AL) and academic language proficiency (ALP) and their parent cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979, 1986) acknowledge contexts (two, to be exact: academic and everyday). This is a plus. Moreover, built into their names is the implicit claim that contexts and proficiencies are inseparable-- a significant theoretical advantage from our perspective since it might permit an examination of the fifth graders' writing and the classroom context as mutually constitutive.

Unfortunately, "context" in ALP and AL bears a striking resemblance to "context" in the literature on language proficiency; it is constituted by stable, a priori features (location, task, academic discipline, activity structure, and so on). Thus, the potential theoretical advantage mentioned above is lost. These lenses do not help us examine aspects of context that we believe are crucial--for instance, how the fifth grade students were positioned moment-to-moment by teachers' responses that made students seem "smart," how they were positioned across many moments by such curricular decisions as arranging for student inquiry into the features of memoir, and how students located themselves in their activity.

ALP and AL are offspring of Cummins' well-known theory (1979; 1986) which, in part, proposes two language proficiencies: basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). CALP (and ALP and AL) is supposed to be more decontextualized than everyday language. However, Gee (1999, pp. 30-34) has provided a persuasive analysis of the fact that, if people have been a part of an ongoing societal conversation about smoking and lung cancer, for instance, they immediately come to a single interpretation of the sentence, "Lung cancer death rates are clearly associated with an increase in smoking," rather than any of the more than 111 others that are possible. Language in such statements, Gee argues, is not decontextualized; it is simply contextualized differently. What a BICS-CALP dichotomy--or the unopposed lone pole ALP/AL of the same dichotomy--does is distract educators from seeing the potential for language in school to use the language of home, street, and playground as a rich resource. When the fifth graders codeswitched in writing and argued about when to translate, academic issues of voice, authenticity, and audience were couched in informal talk. When they talked and wrote about culturally tied memories of home and family, that language was not a scaffold to something more advanced at some later time; it was a manifestation of genuine multicultural education with home and school discourses converging.

### 2.3 Academic discourse

By "academic discourse," we mean work by people who teach and write about college students who are "strangers in academia" (e.g., Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Fleischer, 1995; Shaughnessey, 1977). Academic discourse compares what academic assignments demand with the language students supply. Scholarship in academic discourse, as we are foregrounding it here, often looks to philosophy, anthropology, and literary criticism (e.g., the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, Jonathan Culler, Frank Kermode, Stanley Fish) for intellectual guidance. As such, it appeals to issues of voice and authority, as well as to a view of power as created and exercised. Academic discourse focuses on the same students spotlighted by the lenses of ALP and AL--English language learners and students who enter college with limited experience with academic versions of mainstream English--"strangers in academia" (Shaughnessey, 1977, p. 3). These are the college students, as Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986) put it, whose language is not just "the language of the streets or the language of home or the language of the neighborhood" but "something in the margin, belonging neither here nor there and preventing . . . participation with . . . authority;" the students whose language is in dramatic but perplexing contrast (Shaughnessey, 1977) to academic discourse that includes not only reading and writing but also "the peculiar spoken version that passes as 'talk' in disciplined classroom discussion" (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986, p. 4).

Because of its intellectual teachers (e.g., Bakhtin, Fish, and so on), academic discourse is a theoretical lens that invites more description than measured comparison. Nevertheless, as the Bartholomae and Petrosky quote shows, comparison is in its bones. Not only between "demand" and "supply" (what academic assignments demand and what students supply), but also, implicitly, between populations (i.e., minorities who are in the spotlight because they are presumed to need help and "mainstreamers" standing silently in the wings because it is assumed they do not).

The lens of academic discourse is appealing because of the rich potential afforded by its guiding theorists and because of the occasional example it provides of critical research. If we were to look at David's and Isabel's work as examples of academic discourse, we would be encouraged to examine the conditions of their written language learning, noting who exercised power in what ways, and looking at the heteroglossic character of their texts.

However, a discourse analysis lens would encourage us to look at demand (of academic work) in contrast with supply (of student discursive practice), a contrast that we believe would be inappropriate here. The practices of production in these two fifth grade classrooms--students' inquiry into features of the genre and student/teacher collaboration on what constitutes the demands of the discourse--do not lend themselves to pitting discourse requirements, or even teachers' requirements, in opposition to discourse features evident in students' work. A demand/supply contrast would obscure the collaborative character of the written work as well as the multi-purpose nature of the conditions of its production (e.g., activity that simultaneously and interactively promoted inter-student connections as well as embedding one social language within another). And it would not help us look for signs of students caring about their academic work in the memoir study, of believing that what they did mattered.

### 2.4 Genre theory

Genre theory would seem to be the right lens since the work we have been showcasing is from one genre--memoir. But genre theorists study curriculum genres and everyday life genres rather than literary genres. And genre theorists are not generally interested in aesthetics of writing. Some genre theorists (e.g., Martin, 1993; Christie, 1989) maintain that certain genres ("genres of power") "do things" such as confer power. Yet, these genre theorists claim that the schematic structure of genres of power should be taught with templates or proformas. Thus, genre theory too has its unappealing baggage. Direct explicit instruction from templates of structural components of a genre is very different from what was going on in Ernestina's and Rebecca's classrooms, very different from what Gee (1994) called an immersion pedagogy and what others, including the five adults featured in our description of this fifth grade classroom, know as whole language pedagogy (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores 1991).

Not all genre theorists advocate generic templates. Kamler (1994), instead, urged teachers to explicitly raise their own and their students' awareness of the ways in which language choices are socially constructed. Indeed, explicit attention of this type--certainly without templates--is what Ernestina and Rebecca offered their students.

But as with language proficiency, academic language proficiency, cognitive academic language proficiency, and academic discourse, genre theory too would background what the fifth graders valued in their work, what they believed about it, how they felt, how they saw themselves. For that--as well as a focus on practices, activities, and all the rest of what we see as part of the students' writing, we turn to Discourse with a capital D (Gee, 1990, 1999).

### *2.5 Discourse with a capital D*

Discourse with a capital D takes in ways of using language, thinking, believing, valuing, and acting to identify oneself as a member of a social group. As Gee has said, it gets "minds, bodies, interactions, social groups, and institutions all in the soup together" (Gee, 1999, p. 5). Capital D Discourse lets us look at the various structures for participation in which the writing was developed--the dyads for memory telling, the small groups hashing out when to translate, the teachers' "adult work." It helps us spotlight students' beliefs that their writing would matter and their valuing of artistic crafting techniques. Big D Discourse helps us see David's and Isabel's writing as embedded in material practices--not just any curricular activity but this particular curricular activity--this hybrid: aligned with the culture of memoirists and also embedded in the culture of school. And big D Discourse highlights identity work, in this case, also a hybrid since it was about being students in Ernestina's and Rebecca's classrooms which simultaneously entailed identifying with out of school memoirists. For example, the overlap of what memoirists' do and what students do in the set of practices called inquiry (students searching within a teacher-assigned block of time to identify features of memoir or features of leads, thus reading as writers) permitted students to act as insiders rather than consumers (Gee, 2001).

### *2.6 The small q questions*

Right from the start, we appreciated what the theoretical lens of capital D Discourse could offer. But we also knew from the start that we had some questions about the lens of Discourse, not only what it obscured in regard to our own data from these dual language classrooms but about the lens per se. Those questions did not go away. First, Discourse, with its emphasis on social languages, de-emphasizes in-the-head linguistic work. So it backgrounds what child language researchers would call overgeneralizations. For example, what would be called overgeneralizations by psycholinguists are backgrounded by a Discourse lens. Rafael, another fifth grader, wrote "I had a big smile from ear to ear" and later "I had a sad face from foot to foot." David made liberal use of ellipses, for example in Figure 1 ("finally. . . Rocky Point!") and also, peculiarly, in his memories of his mother making tamales ("and the best thing of all was that I helped . . . Mama with los tamales"). No matter how a Discourse lens would account for such phenomena (e.g., as the overgeneralizations of a hypothesizing individual [Lindfors, 1987] or as the workings of a social mind establishing neuronal networks for derived patterns which may need later modification [Gee, 1992]), that lens does not make much of either the phenomena or a way to account for them.

Maybe that is how it should be. Maybe the background is where this in-the-head linguistic work should be. And besides, maybe it is not as -in-the-head as it seems. David's "clenched in pain, a pain I had never seen," Isabel's "no sooner then I had turned around," and Rafael's "eyes wide, mouth opened" seemed like new constructions. Could these second language learners have "had" such syntax before (never mind what it means to 'have' syntax) but they just didn't have occasions to use it? Or could it be that, as Bakhtin (1986) says, syntax is taken in along with experience? When experience includes reading and hearing dozens of literary memoirs, spending hours poring over particular literature to find and try out artistically worded sentences, maybe such forms are appropriated quickly. Maybe it isn't rules but utterances- embedded -in-social activity that are what is learned.

On the other hand, no matter how they got on the page, putting "foot to foot" in the background is a loss. Those overgeneralizations are not only charming; they provide evidence of intriguing human

activity and agency. Moreover, maybe that Discourse claim--Gee's, Halliday's, our own-- about language being inseparable from the social is overstated. Or maybe we are just taking it too literally. But the fact is that some people who suffer neurological trauma can have asymmetrical losses in language and social performance, sometimes losing more language abilities, sometimes losing more social abilities. If language were as thoroughly social as Discourse presumes, such asymmetries shouldn't be possible.

Gee may have been trying to head off this problem with his discussion of two grammars: grammar one, the traditional grammar of nouns and verbs and clauses; grammar two, the 'designs' for collocating those nouns and verbs and clauses so as to signal particular social languages in the Discourse. But that is a hard distinction to maintain. When Isabel wrote "no sooner then I had turned around" or when David wrote "clenched in pain, a pain I had never seen," which parts belong to grammar one? And how were they learned if they were free of sociality? Were they just waiting for re-assembly into socially infused patterns for artistic crafting when the conditions were right? If these parts from grammar one were not quite so 'clean' but were in fact as thoroughly stained with sociality as the patterns of grammar two (as Halliday, 1978, Givon, 1979; and others have claimed), then we are back where we started--with no explanation for cases of neurological disorders that result in unimpaired syntax but impaired sociality or pragmatics, back to our question about whether we've overstated just how social language is.

We end this article on that open note. As we said at the outset of this article, we intended to explore various theoretical lenses, including our preferred lens: Discourse. This exploration has not made us forsake this lens but it has left us with questions that are genuine, not rhetorical. The final question, also not rhetorical, is this: could repairing what we see as holes occur through tinkering from within the Discourse of Discourse or would it require re-theorizing from another Discourse (Gee, 1990)--in which case we remain within the lens of Discourse after all?

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## **Children's Literature**

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