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Writing Backwards Across Languages: The Inexpert English/Spanish Biliteracy of Uncertified Bilingual Teachers*

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THE CONTEXT

As the United States raises educational standards for all students, the standards for teachers have also been set higher. Bilingual teachers in New York State, for example, have to pass three general certification exams with demanding English language essays, and two additional exams—one in English and another one in the language other than English (LOTE). The two language exams not only assess the teachers' bilingualism (listening and speaking), but also their biliteracy (reading and writing). In fact, for the first time, *advanced biliteracy* is required of these teachers, as measured by their ability to read decontextualized and isolated reading passages followed by multiple choice questions, and their ability to write an academic essay in both English and their LOTE. The balanced advanced biliteracy required of bilingual teachers is difficult for any bilingual individual to achieve, especially in the United States, a society that does not value bilingualism and whose schools do not develop biliteracy. And thus, in a city where 40% of residents are immigrants and over 50% speak languages other than English at home (García & Fishman, 1996), there is a shortage of qualified bilingual teachers (García & Trubek, 1999).

*My gratitude to the 12 dedicated bilingual teachers who taught me more about biliteracy than I ever taught them.

The reason why it is so difficult to find bilingual teachers who meet the new advanced biliteracy standards set by New York State has to do as much with the sociolinguistic difficulty of achieving advanced biliteracy in the United States, as with the history and nature of New York Latinos and their lives in the NYC public school system. Advanced biliteracy can only be developed if there are meaningful purposes and authentic audiences for which the two languages are read and written. But in the United States, there are few reasons why advanced literacy in Spanish is needed. Even students who arrive in the United States with good Spanish writing skills experience rapid Spanish literacy loss.

Approximately 30% of New Yorkers are of Latino ancestry, and of those, 40% were born in the United States (García & Fishman, 1996). New York Latinos born in Spanish speaking countries come mostly from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico (Zentella, 1996). For the most part, these New York Latinos arrive in the United States with Spanish literacy that often does not correspond to the advanced literacy uses in an increasingly complex and bureaucratic society with a huge academic testing industry. For example, they often have had little experience reading isolated passages followed by multiple choice questions or writing in ways that follow the essayist tradition, both prevalent activities in U.S. schools. The language barrier that they find in NYC schools is not limited to the language itself; for even if schools functioned in Spanish, these students would not have had experience using Spanish in the decontextualized literate academic ways of a U.S. school system.

Likewise, the English literacy of Latinos, both native born and foreign born, is sometimes less advanced than that of the white middle class. This has little to do with their Spanish language background, and more to do with social class, the poor quality of schooling that many receive, and the inability of the U.S. school system to build on the different literacy practices of the home (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, Rodríguez, 1999).

Understanding that, for the most part, New York City Latinos have poor literacy development in their first language—whether English, Spanish or both—is of great consequence in understanding why claims about *transfer across languages* are of little consequence when gauging Latino college students', and especially bilingual teachers' writing. Instead of transfer from L1 to L2, these bilingual teachers with inexpert biliteracy end up "*writing backwards across languages*". As we will see, both Spanish and English are written according to the English rhetorical perspective learned in U.S. schools. And both languages are written to communicate only with an inauthentic English literate audience made up of writing teachers.

This chapter analyzes the literacy views, experiences, and texts of 12 bilingual teachers who have been unable to pass the New York State Teacher Certification Exams. All the teachers speak English, as well as Spanish, fluently. As such, they are not traditional ESL students. As with the Chicanas in Anzaldúa's (1987) work on borderlands, these writers are socially situated in the margins of U.S. and Latin American discourse communities. Although they speak two languages, they have not had the sustained home and socio-educational conditions to be able to use writing in either language to explore complex ideas and texts at the university level. Their writing in the two languages, however, is being assessed within a U.S. higher education context, one that values standard English essayist literacy and

does not recognize either a different Spanish literacy tradition or the different ways of writing that these borderland writers use.

ACADEMIC WRITING: DIFFERENCES ACROSS CULTURES AND TRANSFER ACROSS LANGUAGES

The high school and university literacy standards in the United States are clearly those associated with what Scollon and Scollon (1981) have called essayist literacy. Heath (1983, 1987) and Rogoff and Toma (1997) have shown how middle-class homes socialize their very young children in this essayist tradition even before they arrive in school. It is this literate tradition that is reinforced in U.S. schools and expected of middle-class adults (Gee, 1996, 1999). The features of English academic writing have been fairly well established (Biber, 1988; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; MacDonald, 1994).

Different cultures have also been shown to hold different views of critical analysis and to support evidence differently (Carson, 1992; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Different languages seem to structure their written products in various ways and have different textual features, including lengths of sentences, and different ways of drawing on metaphorical and personal language (Egginton, 1987; Hinds, 1987; Kaplan et al., 1983; Purves, 1988; Reid, 1990; Tsao, 1983). In general, researchers have found difference in academic writing depending on the culture and gender of the writer, on the topic addressed, on the genre or register of the writing, and especially on the language used.

Studies contrasting rhetorical patterns in, for example, Puerto Rican Spanish and English have shown higher proportions of coordinate structures, nonsequential sentences, additive constructions, and one- and two-sentence paragraphs in Spanish (Santiago, 1970; Santana-Seda, 1974; Streti, 1971; reported by Kaplan, 1976). The different discourse features of written Mexican Spanish have also been described (Montaño-Harmon, 1991). Writing seems to differ across cultures and languages.

That language abilities transfer across languages has been fairly well established, especially by Cummins (1979, 1981). Working with different language populations, researchers have tried to establish this transfer relationship for biliteracy in different languages and groups (Edelsky, 1982; Mace-Matluck, Dominguez, Holtzman, & Hoover, 1983 for elementary Spanish-English students; Canale, Frenette, & Belanger, 1988 for French English bilingual high school students). Moragne e Silva (1988) found that there is a high transfer of composing skills from L1 into L2. Connor (1996) has shown how writers draw on cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences at the sentence, paragraph, and text level. Yet, Cummins (1979, 1981), among others, has shown that there is a *linguistic threshold* that must be reached in the *first language* before such transfer occurs. Parallel to Cummins' hypothesis, the *Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (LIH)* in second-language reading research pertains to a threshold in *second-language* knowledge below which L1 reading comprehension skills cannot be transferred to reading comprehension in L2 (Alderson, 1984; Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995; Bossers, 1991).

Despite studies that confirm the literacy transfer across languages—provided that one has reached a linguistic threshold both in the first and the second lan-

guages—transfer in L2 writing remains under debate (Mohan & Lo, 1985). Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, and Kuehn, (1990) have shown that reading ability transfers more easily than writing ability. But researchers seem to agree that there is some degree of transfer of writing ability across languages.

WRITING BACKWARDS ACROSS LANGUAGES: THE DOMINANCE OF ENGLISH IN INEXPERT BILITERACY

Our inexpert bilingual writers defy, as we will see, the findings of the literature on the differences in writing across cultures and transfer across languages. Situated in the borderlands, our writers do not have experience with two cultures and different discourse modes; rather, they write in two languages within the context of one dominant culture that imposes its rhetorical tradition. And they write in two languages solely within the U.S. university domain, where writing is only assessed according to well-defined canons of U.S. English language essayist literacy. Furthermore, their audience when writing in the two languages is limited to the teachers and evaluators who read their essays.

As inexpert writers, these students have had many remedial writing courses in U.S. high schools and college. Thus, they have learned well the narrow *English essayist rhetorical tradition* that these remedial writing courses focus on. Yet, they have not developed other English written registers because they rarely write English for other than this schooling purpose. At the same time, they have either experienced loss of a very different Spanish essayist tradition or they simply never became familiar with it. Although the linguistic codes they use may differ, the rhetorical codes used in either language clearly come from the English essayist tradition that is valued in school.

Although these inexpert biliterate writers have acquired English rhetorical devices, they are unable to enter into authentic dialogue with a broad Anglo audience with whom they have had little verbal or literate interaction, even in real life. Both the English and the Spanish texts are written solely for the teachers and evaluators, all English speakers. These writers have had little experience socially with a broad range of English literate monolinguals who are not teachers, and little purpose to communicate with them, either orally or in writing. This has much to do with the continued patterns of social, residential and schooling segregation, and the little possibility of communication that these writers have with English speakers. Writing, as a productive language skill, needs an audience. And these inexpert biliterate writers have had little reason to establish written communication with an English monolingual audience, other than for purposes of schooling.

BACKWARD BILITERACY: THE WRITERS

The 12 female teachers involved in this study have lived in the United States for a minimum of ten years. Two of them were born in the United States and are of Puerto Rican background. Five of them were born in the Dominican Republic, with the rest of them coming from Colombia, Peru, and El Salvador. All have undergraduate degrees from colleges in New York City, and all but one had attended at least 2 years of high school in New York City.

The comments that follow were gathered through interviews with each of the teachers, as well as entries into journals that some kept for a course. The teachers' words are quoted in the language they used. Their views explain some of what we found in the limited biliteracy that they displayed.

Spanish Literacy: Positive Attitudes, Limited Use, and Audience

"Era muy buena escribiendo en mi país"

Almost without exception, the teachers who had been schooled in Latin America felt that their Spanish literacy was excellent. In fact, their attitude was indeed unrealistic, given the level of Spanish literacy that their essays revealed. What they said, however, makes evident the difference between how the Latin American school defined literacy and the literacy demands made by U.S. universities.

Era muy buena escribiendo en mi país. Se decía composición, y siempre sacaba buena nota. Allí no era como aquí. No hacíamos errores. Somos muy buenos en eso. Nos enseñaban las letras, las sílabas. Nos memorizábamos todo el libro. Allí no es como aquí en que los niños en quinto grado no saben ni leer ni escribir. Tenía una letra bonita y todos los días hacíamos páginas de letras.

[I was very good writing in my country. We called it composition, and I always got a good grade. There, it wasn't like here. We didn't make mistakes. We're great at that. They taught us the entire alphabet, the syllables. We memorized the entire book. There, it is not like here, that kids in the fifth grade don't know how to read and write. I had beautiful handwriting and every day we did pages of letters.]

It is clear that the act of writing that this student engaged in while in school in the Dominican Republic is different from that which she teaches students in the United States. Literacy there was about having beautiful penmanship, copying carefully, being a careful and correct writer. Writing was not used to support a thesis, to provide evidence, to express novel ideas, to convince an unknown audience. Writing was personal, an intimate transaction that one valued for its beauty and symbolism, for its mechanical correctness, more than for its cognitive challenges.

"En español el único problema es el bendito acento"

Because these teachers perceived Spanish writing to be a mechanical act, they evaluated it only in its surface features, especially its orthography. "In Peru," one of the teachers says, "the only rules in writing were the difference between b-v, s-c-z, and the accents [accent marks]. Here everything gets me confused. There's one word for a hundred meanings." Writers perceive that there's more to English writing than handwriting and orthography, including the choice of lexicon to express cognitively complex ideas.

"En español el único problema es el bendito acento," says another student. ["In Spanish, the only problem is the lousy accent."] Again, only surface mechanical features of Spanish writing enter the picture.

“No es lo mismo escribirle a mi esposo, que a un padre hispano, que a un principal”

But it is not only the literacy tradition that writers perceive as different in Spanish, it is also that the readers of their Spanish writing have been less demanding than readers of their English writing. Thus, regardless of their level of Spanish literacy, these writers always feel more secure writing in Spanish. These writers have never taken standardized tests in Spanish writing, and their use of written Spanish is limited to those who are family, friends, or parents with limited education. A student says, *“No es lo mismo escribirle a mi esposo, que a un padre hispano, que a un principal.”* [“It is not the same to write to my husband, as to a Hispanic parent, as to a principal.”] The audience for whom Spanish is written is less powerful and less capable of literate judgement.

The security that these teachers feel in writing Spanish comes not only from their position of power vis a vis the readers of their writing, mostly poor immigrant parents, but also from the limited range that Spanish literacy has in the United States. Teachers claimed to read in Spanish nothing more than magazines such as *Vanidades* or *Cosmopolitan en español*. One told me that she read wonderful books in Spanish, and when questioned further, she replied: *“Sí, libros buenísimos en español, Sopa de Pollo.”* [“Yes, wonderful books in Spanish, *Chicken Soup*.”] Clearly, this was very undemanding literate material, making the teacher feel extremely competent in the act of reading Spanish.

English Writing: Negative Attitudes, Extensive Use, and Audience

“I feel illiterate in America”

These words were repeated in some sense by almost all of the foreign born teachers. *“Me siento analfabeta en inglés,”* said another one, in what was a nearly perfect translation of the quote above. Another student expressed it thus: *“Me siento frustrada. Estoy traumatizada. Yo aquí no quiero ser una ignorante.”* [“I’m frustrated. I’m traumatized. I don’t want to be an ignorant person here.”]

Even the native-born teachers blame the English language itself for their difficulties. *“El inglés tiene demasiadas palabras,”* [“English has too many words,”] said one student, referring to the broader range of literacy use of English. Writers comfortable with the intimacy and limited range of Spanish language literacy seem to find the English language context far too broad for them to conquer. Spanish and English lexicon for these teachers manifest differences that have much to do with the contrast between the Latino world in Latin America and the United States, and the Anglo U.S. world. It parallels the difference between going to the Museo del Barrio in New York City or the Faro de Colón in the Dominican Republic, and the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. Whereas Latinos in New York City and Dominicans in Santo Domingo may become extremely familiar with all that the exhibit halls in the first two museums hold, no one ever truly becomes familiar with everything in the Metropolitan Museum. The books and experiences that these teachers have had in Spanish are limited, making their lexicon also limited. Likewise, the range of Spanish written lexicon that they have been exposed to in

printed schoolbooks in Latin America and the United States can be controlled by these writers. But in the U.S. culture, with rich and powerful publishing houses, the lexicon explodes without any restraint, and it seems to these inexperienced writers that it just has too many words.

Most writers not only expressed negative attitudes toward English writing, but also communicated their anxiety and doubts when writing English. “I worry that there’s a mistake,” said one teacher. And another one said, *“Me causa ansiedad porque tengo que tener algo que me toque para yo escribir,”* [“It causes me anxiety because I have to have something that really touches me in order to write”]. This teacher not only expresses her anxiety, but also communicates her feelings of alienation and separation when she has to write in English. Topics to be written in English simply don’t touch her, she says. It’s as if topics in English do not concern her, are outside of her, and are for others.

“Es difícil mantenerse en la mente del que lo está leyendo”

It is the difference between the Spanish-speaking and the English-speaking audience that seems to impact most strongly in these teachers’ English writing. One teacher expresses it as follows:

Es difícil mantener el tópico, mantenerse en la mente del que lo está leyendo porque ése no es mi idioma. Si es español lo va a entender mejor porque uno conoce la mente de la gente.

[It is difficult to maintain the topic, to get oneself into the mind of the person who’s reading because this is not my language. If it were Spanish it would be understood more easily because one knows the mind of people.]

This teacher has been told again and again by English writing professors that she needs to maintain the topic as she writes, but she claims that the problem is not one of holding the topic, but of entering and sustaining the interest of an Anglo mind. As far as this student is concerned, the problem lies with her audience. If she were writing for a Spanish speaking audience, she would have no trouble engaging them in her topic.

But it is not only the alienation from the English speaking audience that is the problem; it is also that the English language audience range is so vast. It is not limited to principals; it now goes beyond to Chat Rooms on the Internet. I was surprised by the number of teachers who mentioned their insecurity in entering Chat Rooms because they were worried about writing English to an unknown English-speaking audience with whom they have little interaction in real life.

Spanish and English Writing: Differences

“El español es más rico, más romántico. El inglés es más directo, más fácil.”

All of these inexperienced biliterate teachers, regardless of bilingual ability or the language they identified as their L1, identified emotionally with Spanish, and not Eng-

lish. This emotional attachment to the Spanish language was expressed by weighing Spanish with romanticism and sentimentality and portraying the English language as lacking these. The writer above referred to Spanish as richer, more romantic, whereas English was characterized as more direct and easier. Another student said, "As Spanish writers, we're more sentimental. Our feelings are deep. We tend to feel sorry or explain with a lot of words, to emphasize more. English writers go straight to the point. They tell you what it is, straight." And another one says, "El inglés es más *specific*."

This feeling that English is a lot more direct than Spanish is also expressed by the student who says, "El inglés es más *directo que el español. En español se escriben muchas líneas, y darle vuelta, vuelta, y casi no decir gran cosas.*" ["English is more direct than Spanish. In Spanish you write many lines, and you go around and around, and you don't say much."] This teacher's intuition about the development of paragraphs in Spanish echoes Kaplan (1966), who describes the greater freedom of Romance languages to introduce extraneous material in complex digressions from the central idea. And yet, the written texts of these bilingual teachers, as we will see, all follow a more direct English rhetorical tradition.

These inexperienced writers see English and Spanish writing only through the essayist tradition that they have been taught in U.S. schools. After many years of remedial English writing classes, they know the formula well, a formula they all seem to recite. This description was characteristic of what the teachers said: "You start with an introduction that is general. Then a body with the main idea and three paragraphs with supporting details and examples. You give first other people's opinion, what they said. Then you write your own opinion, and then the conclusion."

The functions of academic writing in school in Latin America were very different from those of schools in the United States. One of the teachers had attended high school in both Colombia and the United States, and she described the differences in this way: "In Erasmus [New York] you have to respond to reading in writing. In Colombia you discuss it, but you don't have to write about it. During a year and a half in Erasmus I did more writing than in Colombia. The problem is not school in Colombia, it is the lack of practice in writing." Writing is used differently, and assessed differently, in different societies. These teachers have written much more academic English than they ever wrote academic Spanish, and it is the English rhetorical tradition that dominates.

These teachers complain about the vastness of the English lexicon, but they're much more familiar with English rhetorical rules that they have drilled and practiced and that they control well. For them, it's as if the English world of words, represented in the vastness of published texts, is unmanageable as compared to Spanish. And yet, the English world of writing, represented by the essayist tradition, is much more manageable than the unstructured, more creative writing that some have once done in Spanish.

"Me parece muy frívolo en inglés cómo se dice"

These teachers feel the English language audience are less sympathetic, less emotive, more distant and cold, more alienating and alienated. Although these writers talk about rhetorical differences between Spanish and English, as we will see fur-

ther on, in reality there are no rhetorical differences between their Spanish and English written discourses.

Describing her writing, a teacher makes the following insightful remark:

The problem is when I write I don't think in Spanish, I think in English. *Quiero escribir lo que tengo por dentro, algunas veces en inglés es diferente de como yo lo siento. Me parece muy frívolo en inglés cómo se dice. Por ejemplo, 'I feel sorry for him.' Esa palabra es muy frívola, muy frívola, muy fría. En español, yo diría, 'Oye, qué mal te veo', pero yo creo, siento que debe ser distinto.*

[... I want to write what I have inside, sometimes in English it is very different from what I am feeling. It seems very frivolous in English the way in which it's said. For example, "I feel sorry for him". That word is very frivolous, very frivolous, very cold. In Spanish I would say, "Listen! you really don't look good," but I think, I feel that it should be different.]

This teacher is feeling her alienation from an English-speaking audience. It is not the English lexicon itself that she characterizes as frivolous, it is the fact that her engagement with the audience is superficial, fleeting, cold, alienating. What she says in English and Spanish is of different import. In English, she does not directly address the English-speaking person, the target audience of her feelings and the written message. Instead, she directs her comments to her Spanish inner-self, speaking about the object of her remark in the third person. "I feel sorry for him," she says. The teacher comments that in Spanish she would have said, "Listen! you really don't look good!" In Spanish she directs her comments to the target audience directly. She becomes personal, direct, getting the attention of her audience with an imperative. In Spanish she doesn't simply express a feeling, as she does in English. Rather, she is direct with what she sees, the fact that the person she's talking/writing to doesn't look good, and she communicates that truth directly. It's as if, in Spanish, she's empowered to communicate, to act, to be personal, and to have an effect on the audience to which her remark is made. In English, however, she feels powerless, unable to directly address the person, able only to convey feelings indirectly, knowing that whatever she says, whatever she writes, will not have any direct effect. This is an insightful statement, one that conveys how important in the act of writing is the feeling of being able to reach and affect an audience, something that these inexperienced biliterate writers feel incompetent doing.

BACKWARD BILITERATE TEXTS: SPANISH AND ENGLISH ESSAYS

A number of essays in both English and Spanish, written by these teachers throughout a semester, are the basis of our claim that the texts were composed backwards. The Spanish texts of these teachers show more Spanish writing loss than English influence. This is manifested by the support that English exerts in the mechanics and the rhetoric of writing in Spanish, and yet, the absence of the characteristic loans or loanshifts.

These writers are composing in Spanish not with their Spanish literate voices with which they have ceased to be familiar, or even with their Spanish oral voices

that they use in their communities, nor with their popular English oral voices also used in their communities, but with a controlled and limited English literate voice that they have acquired in the many remedial writing courses. Their Spanish literacy is simply the lip-syncing of the English discourse.

Looking first at the loss of familiarity with Spanish writing mechanical and rhetorical conventions, the *benidito acento* [lousy accent], referred to earlier, is almost absent from these texts. These teachers, who use Spanish literacy rarely, have lost all ability to write Spanish accents. Likewise, the Spanish writing rules referred to frequently by the teachers and quoted previously, the difference between b-v, s-c-z, have been quite forgotten. We found both cases very frequently. Examples follow: *abanzada* for *avanzada*, *devido* for *debido*, *centirse* for *sentirse*, *ocacionan* for *ocasionan*, *nessesia* for *necesita*, *canzado* for *cansado*, *empiezern* for *empiecen*.

Their Spanish lexicon also follows English rules of capitalization. Teachers write: *Inglés* instead of *inglés*, *el Viernes* instead of *el viernes*. And English penetrates even the orthography at times. Some examples:

estoy the acuerdo for *estoy de acuerdo*

coger classes for *coger clases*

medios de comunicacion for *medios de comunicación*

examen de inglés for *examen de inglés*

hablamos de education for *hablamos de educación*

el collegio for *el colegio*

Other times, English affects the structure of the writing. As in English, articles are omitted, as, for example:

[Los] *Estudiantes deben ser informados*

[Los] *Immigrantes necesitan apoyo*

[Los] *Programas de empresarios son importantes*

And the passive voice is used much more frequently than in texts of Spanish-literate Latin Americans. Some examples:

En esta sociedad es necesario preparar maestros

Estos estudiantes eran pasados por edad

But what most clearly characterizes these as backwards Spanish texts is that they're being composed from an English rhetorical tradition, following a rigid template. Although limitations of space prevent us from reproducing entire essays that follow the English rhetorical conventions, portions of a text, taken from one teacher's essay, help us understand this situation.

13. WRITING BACKWARDS ACROSS LANGUAGES

The teacher starts with an introductory paragraph paraphrasing the writing prompt, and she immediately gives her own opinion:

Los exámenes regentes de las escuelas secundarias están ocasionando controversias. Algunas personas están de acuerdo y otras no. Yo estoy de acuerdo que los estudiantes de escuela secundarias tomen estos exámenes y voy a exponer mis ideas a continuación.

[The High School Regents exams are causing controversy. Some people agree and others don't. I think high school students should be taking these exams and I'm going to present my ideas in what follows.]

Despite the lack of accents, some errors in orthography (for example, *ha exponer* for *a exponer*), and the loanshift in *exámenes regentes* for Regents exams, this paragraph is written in correct Spanish. What strikes us, however, is the orderly structure of the paragraph, the lack of elaboration of the idea or deviation from the main topic, the lack of poetic language, images and metaphors, the use of very controlled vocabulary, the few adjectives—all uncharacteristic of Spanish writing. This teacher, a fluent Spanish speaker, is composing her Spanish composition from the limited English rhetorical tradition she learned in remedial writing classes.

This introductory paragraph is followed by three perfectly structured paragraphs that make three arguments with a thesis sentence:

Primero, si los estudiantes pasan los regentes significa que están preparados para ir a la Universidad.

Segundo, pasar los exámenes regentes les beneficia los estudiantes.

Finalmente, pasar exámenes de Regentes ayudaría a la economía.

[First, if students pass the Regents it means that they're prepared to go to University.

Second, passing the Regents Exams benefits students.

Finally, passing the Regents exams would help the economy.]

And the essay concludes with a final paragraph, again, following all the conventions of the English essayist tradition—repetition of the thesis statement and expansion of the introduction.

Finalmente, yo creo que es positivo que los estudiantes de escuelas secundarias pasen los exámenes de Regentes para graduarse de High School. Esto es para beneficio de ellos y para la sociedad.

[Finally, I think that it is positive that high school students pass the Regents exams to graduate from High School. This is of benefit to themselves and to society.]

When we look at the teachers' English essays, however, we realize that their limited English literate voices are full of gaps, and that the voice that provided the discourse for the lip-syncing in the Spanish texts is only a whisper, limited to one register. Communication is sometimes impeded because the voice is timid and

inauthentic and fails to engage an audience that, as listeners, has a much broader range of registers.

The English essays manifest all the mechanical errors that have been associated with developmental literacy—incomplete knowledge of punctuation, lack of subject-verb agreement, unfamiliarity with past participles. But beyond the mechanical errors, they lack the normal flow of communication. Developmental native English writers often write just as they speak, with their writing showing a torrent of words and an informal, conversational tone. But the language in this writing is almost artificially controlled. The writers are not writing with their Spanish torrential voices, nor with those of the English in the streets; rather, their English writing is completely artificial. They have acquired a template in which they fit their voice, leaving no room for linguistic creativity and experimentation.

This artificiality in the flow of the text is also reflected in the difficulty that these writers have initiating written text. When composing, they freeze; they cannot find the words, those words that they cannot conquer. They write timidly, as if they were not the authors.

Yet, these teachers are bright and have a lot to say. They even like to write. One of the students wants to write a book. She says:

I would like to write a book. I have a lot of ideas. I just don't know how to write them down. My thoughts became more and more complex, and then writing became complex and difficult. *I have many opinions to write, so it is difficult to arrange them.* (Emphasis mine)

And it is perhaps this image of many ideas and opinions and an inability to arrange them that gives us a sense of what's happening with these inexperienced biliterate writers. There have to be good reasons and meaningful functions for developing biliteracy. Experienced writers develop biliteracy as they experience an *expansion of functions* for which they write. But for these powerless inexperienced biliterate writers, writing in the borderlands, the process is actually one of *contracting functions*. Two writing systems with distinct rhetorical traditions share one narrow function, that of the dominant U.S. academic society. And the purpose of the act of writing in either language becomes limited to the academic essay for an evaluative English-speaking audience. Thus, these writers' multiple literacies, expressing the different contexts, realities and views of two cultural worlds, are forced and cramped into a limited space, a restricted function, a very narrow audience. The written biliterate text, rather than establishing a meaningful and airy dialogue in public with a literate audience in both languages, becomes suffocated and whispers only to itself within academic confines. Rather than communicate and open up different worlds of possibilities, the use of the two languages in these academic essays restricts vision, as the essayist literacy they have learned funnels, limits, and forces acculturation to U.S. literacy patterns and world view.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. SCHOOLS: EXPANDING THE DISCOURSE RANGE

In order to have advanced biliteracy and reap the benefits of transferring skills across languages, writers must have a broad *Discourse range* in the two languages;

that is, they must have opportunities to use different written varieties or registers for different social purposes and different audiences. (We use *Discourse* here in the sense used by Gee, 1999, and in this book).

If schools were really serious about developing advanced biliteracy, they would give students ample opportunity to read authentic texts and literature from both cultural traditions, as well as opportunities to write different genres in the two languages. As long as the books used in bilingual classrooms are mere translations of English texts, bilingual students will not develop familiarity with the range of texts and literacies of different cultural contexts. As long as the texts used in English language classrooms contain simplified vocabulary and structures, and the texts they write are solely academic essays, bilingual students will not be able to develop the richness in English language use that an English-speaking middle-class home supports.

Latino bilingual students need to engage in rich English language experiences in school that they cannot get in a Spanish-speaking home. Simplifying and reducing their language and literacy context in school may result in better scores in standardized tests in the early grades, but it will not get them to develop the advanced literacy needed for professional status as adults. Likewise, these Latino students need to read the rich literature of Latin America and delight in the richness of images and language of its poetry and fiction, as well as the vastness of its humanistic essays. Reading only academic texts that use Spanish to communicate content that is exactly the same as that in English texts leaves Spanish devoid of separate and different meaning and purpose, and makes Spanish and English completely redundant.

Unless advanced biliteracies, with different rhetorical traditions and functions are recognized as separate in U.S. schools, true biliteracy for U.S. citizens will elude us. And bilingual teachers will continue to compose backwards from a narrow English rhetorical tradition with English speaking academics as the sole audience, restricting not only their biliteracy, but also their professional and human possibilities.

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