

Here, There, and In Between: Transnational Development across Time and Space

The author profiles a young woman's English and Spanish language development as she maneuvers among different discourse communities.

Between Two Worlds

Laura's father expressed that his greatest hope for his children was that they were able to pursue careers, have their own professions and enjoy economic freedom without having to depend on anyone.

Pienso que ... todas las personas ... deben educarse. No importa la edad, no importa el sexo; pienso que no hay límite para aprender. Uno debe aprender. Mientras más se puede aprender, más se puede.

[I think that ... everyone should educate themselves/get an education. Regardless of their age, regardless of their gender; I don't think that there is a limit to what one can learn. Everyone should learn. The more they can learn, the more they can do].

As educators, we recognize that children live in complex spaces where development takes place within cultural

practices mediated by the use of artifacts, signs and tools (Vygotsky, 1978). We understand that learning occurs through students' movement between peripheral and full participation (increasingly diverse participation across varying forms of group membership) as they acquire the tools, beliefs and practices of the communities in which they participate (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

This article is concerned with the transnational linguistic, social, and literacy development of one first grade bilingual student, Laura, whose parents emigrated from Ecuador to the United States. From 2010 to 2013, I met with Laura, her teachers, her parents and other members of her family and collected data through interviews, fieldnotes, and primary documents that offered insight into her literacy and identity development over time and across spaces.

Learning and development, as a result of ongoing and meaningful interaction

and increasing participation within sociocultural contexts, will be discussed in relation to the data collected during this research in order to answer the following questions: (a) What types of literacies and tools are available to and accessed by the focal child within and across the transnational, intergenerational and multilingual contexts?, and (b) How are multiple zones of proximal development facilitated within, across, and between communities of practice? In the sections that follow, I approach these questions with the understanding that learning and development are the result of social interaction situated within authentic activity, context and culture and mediated through tools and signs particular to participation and membership within certain cultures and communities.

Intergenerational, Transnational and Multilingual Development across Time and Space

In this case study, Laura's meaning making and collaborative action involved mediation in both English and Spanish. Over the course of three years, her meaning making and language learning were mediated through collaboration in context, social interaction, conversation and verbalization in English, Spanish, and a combination of both English and Spanish simultaneously,

depending on her social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). At the onset of the research Laura moved between two main linguistic and social cultures and communities more or less equitably: (a) U.S. school (English), and (b) Ecuadorian American home (Spanish-English). Due to unforeseen circumstances, Laura experienced a break in her formal schooling, which caused a shift between her transnational linguistic and social cultures and communities, and consequently influenced the (potential) types of development, tools and literacies available to and accessed within these diverse contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). In the sections that follow, I will discuss how this shift evolved during the three-year trajectory in which she participated in this research.

Laura's Story

During the first year of the research, English dominated Laura's school and home experiences. She was born in the United States and began her formal schooling in a monolingual English medium preschool. Her older brother, Mateo, Jr., was also born in the United States and began his formal schooling in a monolingual English medium preschool. Like Laura, he was English dominant at the onset of the research and understood a limited amount of spoken Spanish. Laura's oldest sibling, Luz, was

fully bilingual at the onset of the research, as she had immigrated to the United States to join her parents after beginning her formal education in Ecuador. Both of Laura's parents were Spanish dominant. Laura's father, Mateo, recognized that while he and his wife, Maria, both spoke to their children in Spanish, it was not the dominant language in their home: "Pienso que hablamos 50 español y 50 inglés porque mis hijos la mayoría hablan inglés y nosotros español [I think that we speak 50% Spanish and 50% English because my children speak mostly English and we speak Spanish]." Both of Laura's parents completed at least two years of higher education in their home country before immigrating to the United States in search of economic opportunity: "[F]ue por la economía [It was due to the economy]." While Maria expressed lack of interest in mastering the English language, for "I never liked English," Mateo was passionate about his commitment to education and invested a great deal of time to pursuing continued education opportunities in the United States, including ongoing coursework in English.

Year One. During the first year of research, Laura was a kindergarten student in an English medium school. Her responses to questions about her language use and what she thought about Ecuador showed that she identified herself strictly as a

speaker, reader and writer of English. She acknowledged that she found books at school where it was important to "do what the teacher says" and learn through reading. Toward the end of the third quarter of her first year of elementary school, Laura was no longer able to attend as a result of unexpected health complications. As a result, she stopped receiving daily instruction in the types of skills and literacies that students learn in formal (U.S.) school settings, which include the practices and processes bound to school-based benchmarks in preparation for proficient scores on grade level, district and statewide assessments in English. For example, Laura was learning phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge of letters and sounds, high frequency words, phonics knowledge and concepts of print. Her inability to attend school meant that she was no longer immersed herself in an English dominant learning environment that emphasized school-based literacies (Alexander & Fox, 2004). At school, she was also learning the social norms of schooling, including the accepted beliefs, practices and common sense assumptions within that particular community of practice (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). She was no longer able to participate as an active or full member of her school-based community of practice or benefit from opportunities to develop within

and as a part of that community and the types of linguistic, academic and social literacies it promoted (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Year Two. During the second year of research, Laura experienced a shift from her U.S. school community (English) toward her (a) Ecuadorian American home community (Spanish-English) and (b) Hispanic/Latino church community (Spanish). As a result, her initially strong school-based identity plateaued as she recognized that she was not developing school-based literacies at the same rate as her peers. Her isolation from school began to affect her perception of herself as a reader. She expressed discouragement because she did not “know all of the words in the book.” By the second quarter of her first grade school year, Laura’s classroom teacher requested that she receive tutoring five days a week when her health allowed in order to “push reading and math.” Her teacher emphasized that Laura “worked so hard” and showed a “willingness [...] and an eagerness” to improve her reading and writing abilities. It was not until the last few months of the school year that she was able to attend school for half of the day. Attending school helped reinforce Laura’s identity as a reader, writer, and learner who belonged to a school-based community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

The central community in which Laura participated throughout the second year of research was composed of members of her immediate and extended family. The members of the Spanish-speaking Catholic Church that the family attended also became a community of practice in which she participated. In response to Laura’s health condition, her monolingual Spanish-speaking maternal grandmother moved from Ecuador to the United States in order to help care for her. Laura lived at the hospital with her grandmother and mother for the first half of her first grade school year and spent most of her time with her grandmother “playing with her, being with her [and] talking to her” in Spanish. She also tried to teach her grandmother some English, common words such as “fork.”

Laura’s primary community, or the people with whom she spent most of her time, included her elderly Spanish-speaking grandmother and her Spanish-dominant mother. As a result, Laura became immersed in an intergenerational and transnational community of practice that used Amazonian lowland Ecuadorian Spanish to collaborate, share and create meaning and scaffold participation through oral literacies rooted in a time and a place where time is circular, not linear, for “te sientes más libre. No tienes que temer esa marginación de horarios [You feel freer. You don’t have to

live with the fear of being marginalized by schedules].” Consequently, Laura not only began to further develop her Spanish language abilities, but she also became a peripheral participant in a multigenerational community of practice rooted in its own transnational time and space that began to facilitate her development of multiple worldviews (Hornberger, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998).

Year Three. During the third year of research, Laura experienced another shift in linguistic and social cultures. By that time, she participated in her (a) U.S. school community (English), (b) Ecuadorian American home community (Spanish-English), and (c) Hispanic/Latino church community (Spanish). Laura was able to return to school full-time because her health improved. She described regaining her identity as a reader with the help of her peers who “just kind of helped” her “with the words because” she did not “know how to say—sound it out—because it’s kind of like hard.” In addition to receiving help from peers, she began helping others in math and continued to read books in English from the school library. Unlike the first and second years of research, during a third year interview Laura noted that sometimes people (mom, dad, grandmother, and sister) read to her in Spanish. She continued to

develop new literacies with technology, including using a digital camera, iPad, laptop computer, and a smart phone to listen to music, play video games, and research toys that she was interested in purchasing or receiving.

After Laura’s health improved, her grandmother returned to Ecuador. Laura reported that she continued to communicate with her grandmother via the telephone and Skype. She also said that she enjoyed listening to a music CD that her grandmother gave her. She explained that she could not understand what they were singing at first, but that she gradually began to understand and sing the right words (Vygotsky, 1978):

Well, I really like the music in there because it’s, like, from my mom’s country and I really like it because when I first heard it with my grandma it, like, gave me emotion to keep liking it. So she just gave it to me ... But when I first heard it, I didn’t know what were they saying and what it meant ... When I first heard it, I just keep on singing it wrong and the words were like wrong that I heard ... But I just [kept] listening to it.

As discussed throughout this paper, Laura's linguistic and cultural development shifted during the three years in which she participated in the research in response to her participation within different communities of practice that offered multiple zones of proximal development in more than one transnational language and culture. During the first year of research, Spanish and English were used more or less equitably at home while English was used exclusively at school. Even though she understood some spoken Spanish, Laura was English dominant and identified with her English-speaking siblings, teachers and peers. During the second year of research, English was used but Spanish was the dominant language within her central communities of practice—home and church. Laura spent most of her time immersed in an intergenerational, transnational and Spanish dominant community of practice, which influenced her bilingual language abilities, cultural practices and transnational identity (Hornberger, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). During the third year of research, Spanish and English were once again used more or less equitably at home. English was used at school but distinct from other years, Laura identified having Spanish-speaking friends at school. In addition, she was observed interacting and communicating with her family

predominantly in Spanish during the third year of research (Hornberger, 2007). These shifts in language use and identity between the first and third year were the result of increased and ongoing legitimate peripheral participation within an intergenerational, transnational, Spanish dominant community of practice during the second year of research.

Significance

This paper explored the intergenerational, transnational and multilingual social spaces in which the focal child participated in order to (a) discuss the types of literacies and tools available and accessed within and across these contexts, and (b) better understand multiple zones of proximal development within, across and between communities of practice (Lave, & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). Throughout the study, the focal child's shifts between tools and literacies in English and Spanish were scaffolded by more capable peers, family members and teachers who spoke only English, only Spanish, or both English and Spanish. As discussed above, Laura moved between a (a) U.S. school (English), and an (b) Ecuadorian American home (Spanish-English) more or less equitably during the first year of the research. As a result of an unexpected break in her formal schooling, Laura experienced a shift between transnational linguistic and social cultures

and communities during year two, which consequently influenced the (potential) types of development, tools and literacies available to and accessed by her within these diverse sociocultural/linguistic contexts. Her access to the types of literacies and tools available within and across these contexts shifted as a result of an extended period of legitimate peripheral participation within an intergenerational, transnational and Spanish-dominant community of practice during the second year of the research.

By the third year, Laura took part in multiple intergenerational, transnational and multilingual social spaces and participated in varying communities of practice. Her learning was facilitated and scaffolded by immediate and extended family members, teachers and age level peers. Her participation across communities not only increased and enhanced her opportunities for development, but also contributed to the transnational, intergenerational and multilingual transformation of the communities themselves (Wenger, 1998). As a member of multiple language communities, Laura's evolving bilingual resources, tools and experiences will continue to contribute to her ability to share multiple worldviews, cultural norms, and transnational perspectives across, between, and within diverse sociocultural/linguistic communities

of practice. Laura's story illustrates how longitudinal participation and membership within, across, and between simultaneously existing transnational communities facilitate multiple potential and actual linguistic tools, literacies and zones of proximal development (Alexander & Fox, 2004; Hornberger, 2007). This research is important because it reminds us to value and incorporate the multiple tools, literacies and zones of proximal development students bring to school. Laura's story teaches us about the central role language plays in identity and literacy development for bilingual and multilingual immigrant student populations.

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Brook Marie Goralski-Cumbajin is a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction and Second Language Acquisition at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; email bgoralski@wisc.edu.

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