Title of Project

Making Meaning across Modes: English Language Learners and their Academic Writing within a Digital Space

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Background of the Study

In recent years, scholars and policy-makers have raised alarms regarding the literacy education of adolescent students. Disappointing results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other assessments on the reading and writing proficiency of adolescent students have prompted some to declare a national literacy crisis (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Particularly disheartening are the scores of adolescent English Language Learners (ELLs), who score significantly lower than their English proficient peers on tests of their academic literacy (NAEP, 2011). Such assessments rely heavily on the written mode as a primary means of evaluating students. What is often forgotten in the school context is that writing is a communicative act, one that involves a variety of social roles and modes of meaning making.

This dissertation addresses this oversight by bringing together research on literacy, bilingualism, and multimodality. The study examines data collected from an innovative project that seeks to integrate content area literacy practices in an interactive, multimodal online space. The goal of the project is to improve the teaching and learning of academic literacy for Latino ELLs through the use of technology. In doing so, it directly addresses The International Research Foundation for English Language Education's (TIRF's) research priority on the optimal uses of technology in the delivery of English language instruction.

Research Questions

This dissertation study drew on data collected from a larger research project, called *STEPS to Literacy*. The original project included a 1:1 computer writing intervention that took place in an eighth-grade social studies class in the fall of 2011. Over the course of six instructional sessions, English Language Learners studied the U.S. Civil Rights Movement through an examination of multimodal curricular resources, which included photographs, videos, and historical documents. While they discussed the resources with peers and instructors, the students took notes and drafted

essays in an online writing space. This study examined how the student participants in the *STEPS* to *Literacy* project assembled meaning from across these varied multimedia resources and socially situated literacy tasks. The specific research questions for this study are as follows:

- 1. What semiotic resources do English Language Learners students draw upon to make meaning in and around an online writing space?
- 2. How do English Language Learners assemble meaning from these semiotic resources in order to accomplish the writing tasks?
- 3. What role do students' linguistic repertoires play in the meaning assemblage and text creation process?

Data Collection and Analysis

The dissertation study focused on four 8th grade English Language Learners (ELLs) from a New York City middle school. Primary data sources included video camera recordings and screen capture recordings of the students as they engaged in online note taking tasks. The camera and screen capture videos were transcribed using ELAN (Wittenburg Brugman, Russel, Klassmann, & Sloetjes (2006), a video annotator, which allowed for the synchronization and transcription of students' online and offline interactions along a common timeline. Each student's interactions were transcribed across four different tiers in ELAN: online navigation, curricular resources, written, spoken and gestural modes. The resulting multimodal transcripts were analyzed using an embedded analytical approach that incorporated tools from conversation analysis, context analysis and multimodal discourse analysis. Additional discursive concepts from multimodal discourse analysis (e.g., resemiotization from Iedema, 2001; 2003) and bilingual education (e.g., translanguaging from Garcia, 2009; Williams, 1994) guided the analysis of students' multimodal/multilingual meaning making across turn-by-turn moves.

Findings

The findings of this dissertation research are reported as they relate to each research question:

1. What semiotic resources do English Language Learners students draw upon to make meaning in and around an online writing space?

Data logs of students' online actions revealed that while all students did access the online curricular resources during the intervention, the regularity with which they accessed these resources varied by student. A close analysis of the ELAN transcriptions revealed insights into how each student used the online resources during the writing activities. Online interactions varied in accordance with each student's (1) individual interests, (2) language preference and (3) online browsing habits. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on the variability of students' reading and research practices in online spaces (McEneaney, Li, Allen, & Guzniczak, 2009).

2. How do English Language Learners assemble meaning from these semiotic resources in order to accomplish the writing tasks?

Analysis of multimodal transcripts revealed how, throughout their writing activities, the focal students drew upon a number of meaning making strategies that spanned modal boundaries. For example, in one highlighted transcript, one student appropriated and merged her peer's *spoken* utterances as well as the *written* text from an online resource in order to draft a note. In another second highlighted transcript, a third student and a research assistant worked together to interpret Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. By juxtaposing the written language of the text with information gained from previous lessons, they created a new entry into understanding and appropriating the complex academic discourse of the speech. In each of these instances, the students' text constructions emerged as a result of collaborative resemiotizing moves (Iedema 2001, 2003).

For all four of these students in this study, collaboration and interaction with others during the writing task played a key role in supporting their interpretation and synthesis of all types of online resources, including images and written texts. By appropriating language and juxtaposing meaning from other texts, including peer and instructor talk, the students assembled new interpretations of the online resources. The key to this assemblage process was social interaction that spanned modal and linguistic boundaries. The students' cross-modal meaning making generally followed the resemiotization model that Iedema (2003) proposes. However in Iedema's (2003) model these resemiotizing (cross-modal) moves unfold in a linear, sequential manner. In my analysis, I found that talk and writing occurred simultaneously and were layered in interaction so that each mode informed the shape of the other.

3. What role do students' linguistic repertoires play in the meaning assemblage and text creation process?

Analysis of students' written and spoken text production revealed a dynamic intersection of multiple languages, including different varieties of Spanish and English. In one focal interaction, two students employed African American Vernacular English as a bridge to academic English writing. In another interaction, a different pair of students collaborated in translating an online resource from English to Spanish. For the students in this study, the interchanging of different languages, *translanguaging* (Garcia, 2012; Williams, 1994, 200, and (3) expanding school-sanctioned narratives and conventions in writing. These findings broaden the concept of translanguaging beyond previous studies' emphasis on teacher-centered pedagogical uses. Translanguaging in this study was not a premeditated and teacher-controlled practice, but rather emerged as an unplanned, student-managed collaborative practice. For the students in the *STEPS to Literacy* project, translanguaging was a primary means to understanding and making themselves understood in the face of challenging academic tasks.

Pedagogical Implications

This study has important implications for language and literacy instruction of English Language Learners. Recently, education reform efforts in the U.S. have resulted in the development of new standards for ICT-mediated literacy practices. For example, the Common Core standards for writing state that students are expected to use the Internet in order to (1) produce and publish writing, (2) collaborate and interact with others, and (3) gather and integrate information from a variety of sources (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1155). The focal students in this study engaged in all three of these tasks. They were able to do so largely because they were exposed to a variety of online texts (e.g., written documents, images, graphs, and multimodal media) and engaged with these materials through a number of interactional activities, including whole-class discussion, pair, and small group work. These interactional activities provided important opportunities for the students to work together in order to pool their linguistic resources, background knowledge, and technological expertise.

Educators can support students' academic literacy by providing opportunities for students to collaborate in the writing process, especially during activities in which students are expected to interpret and respond to multimodal, nontraditional texts that may be particularly challenging. Collaborative opportunities can also be spaces that allow students to use their home languages and literacies as entry points into the curricular content. By providing the opportunity for such variability, online spaces allow for student-centered learning experiences, where students can assemble understandings and develop texts on their own terms.

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