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## The discourse of first year writers at border sites: Discerning the transcultural, bilingual strategies of English language learners in college

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### **Introduction: Matriculation of ELL students**

According to U.S. Department of Education statistics, 9.8% of students enrolled in American elementary and secondary public schools are officially classified as *English Language Learners* (ELL) (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In border states and states with high numbers of immigrant populations, such as Texas, Florida, New York, California, New Mexico, and Arizona, the ELL percentage is much higher. In Texas, for example, 17% of public school students are classified as ELL (Texas Education Agency, 2012). According to U.S. Department of Education statistics, 0% of college students in public higher education institutions are English Language Learners. In truth, this is a non-statistic because the Department of Education does not track ELLs into post-secondary settings. The tacit implication is that once students matriculate into Institutions of Higher Education (IHE), the ELL distinction and characteristics no longer apply. However, those of us who work at border site IHEs know that the linguistic backgrounds and English proficiency of many Hispanic students would place them firmly in the ELL category if such categorization existed at the post-secondary level.

The ELL population in American colleges and universities is an overlooked segment of our college attenders. An important distinction must be made at this point: students classified as English a Second Language (ESL) learners because they were born in other countries and are fluent in their first language are a subset of the broad, federal ELL criteria. Community colleges and other IHEs have resources available for working with ESL students, such as special English classes and writing lab tutoring. However, the other groups of students classified as ELL through federal guidelines that applied at elementary and secondary levels enter IHEs with no expectations that their language and academic needs will be addressed by their institutions. Students classified as ELLs through federal regulations do not cease being ELLs when they graduate from high school.

At border site *Hispanic Serving Institutions* (HSI) where Hispanic enrollment is as high as 87% of the student body, the Hispanic enrollment becomes the most salient aspect of the institution's

culture. The collective “Hispanic” label suggests homogeneity among college-level ELLs; however, researchers who work with Hispanic students are united in the assertion that a great deal of diversity exists among Hispanic college students (Roberge, Siegal, & Harlou, 2009). Despite the wide range in levels of English language proficiency, Hispanic students at border site institutions *are* linked through a common home language (albeit in different dialects and varieties), through various degrees of bilingualism, and through simultaneously similar/different stories about negotiating co-existence of two cultures and languages. When these “residual” ELLs arrive in our first year writing classes, they develop patterns of adaptation that enable them to reconstruct the college landscape through transcultural and bilinguistic negotiation.

### **College-level English Language Learners**

Federal regulations that govern the educational environment for ELLs are vast and far ranging but limited to the elementary and secondary school environment. Public Law #107-110, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968 (ESEA), is the impetus for the proliferation of language support programs in public schools. NCLB appropriately acknowledges the need for special attention to students whose English language proficiency puts them on an uneven educational field. According to NCLB, students are labeled Limited English Proficient (LEP)/English Language Learner (ELL) if they meet one of the following criteria: (1) they were not born in the U.S.; (2) their native language is a language other than English; or (3) they come from an environment in which a language other than English has significantly impacted their proficiency in English. In the context of the push for educational equity that is the hallmark of NCLB, the rationale for identifying a student as LEP/ELL is that the student’s English proficiency limits his/her ability to succeed academically and socially (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Additionally, an array of Supreme Court, Federal Court, and state court decisions have defined the parameters for creating educational equity for all students in America. Notably, *Lau v. Nichols* in 1974 first addressed the special educational needs faced by non-speakers with the decision that identical education does not constitute educational equity (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974). The 1971 Federal Court Case, *U.S. v. State of Texas* similarly addressed the need to ensure educational equity; this case eliminated discrimination on the grounds of race, color, or national origin in Texas public schools (*U.S. v. State of Texas*, 1971). On-going amendments to Title VII of the ESEA of 1968 have extended the level of federal funding for bilingual education and teacher training and have made assessment and results an integral part of bilingual education (Hanna, 2012). Cases such as these have ensured that English Language Learners are offered opportunities to acquire English language proficiency while also achieving academic expectations *in elementary and secondary public schools*.

So what does this legislation have to do with college level teaching? Directly, nothing. But indirectly, the abrupt cessation of special language programs when students exit high school creates circumstances that significantly impact former ELL students’ adjustment to college, particularly to writing in college. What’s missing in the discourse surrounding educational equity for ELLs is the realization that English Language Learners do not abruptly cease being ELLs upon entry to an IHE.

What happens when ELLs enroll in universities and colleges where no federally-mandated regulations for ensuring educational equity provide oversight for helping Hispanic students thrive and succeed? Admittedly, federal funding exists via Title III and Title V grants, but institutions self-select to apply for these grants, and while the types of projects funded by these grants are admirable, there is no on-going, all-encompassing promotion of educational equity for college-level Hispanic students whose English proficiency is still developing. The vast oversight provided through NCLB does not exist at the IHE level.

Given that higher education continues to be optional whereas elementary and public school education is ostensibly mandatory, the need for federal oversight of public education issues is obvious. What is not as obvious, however, is the rationale for abrupt cessation of concern over ELL students' chances for success and access to equitable education as soon as they matriculate into an IHE. Even institutions identified as Hispanic Serving Institutions do little if anything to consistently support the special educational needs of college-level ELLs. In a country that continues to tout the necessity for post-secondary education as a means for maintaining our global competitive edge, higher education is increasingly a necessity even for language minority students (Harklau & Siegal, 2009, p. 23).

At border site institutions, a substantive number of students would be classified as English Language Learners if the federal regulations for ELL distinction extended to post-secondary settings. Many college students at border sites are in fact recent immigrants who may have been through transitional newcomer programs but who not yet been in the U.S. long enough to develop English proficiency. Much has been written about these 1.5 students' efforts to adapt to a new country, to fit in, to negotiate the in-betweenness that seems to characterize this category of English Language Learners (Roberge, 2009).

Additionally, at border site institutions, there is an established population of *native non-speakers* who are neither native speakers of English despite having been born in the U.S. nor traditional ESL students because their family language is largely oral, and they have no extended literacy skills in Spanish. In border areas where, demographically, Hispanics constitute over 90% of the population, the political, social, and economic environment promotes a type of bilingualism that makes it simple for families to remain monolingual because there is no need to acquire English. In border areas, Spanish is the language of commerce and service: in retail and service job selections, monolingual speakers of English are passed over in favor of bilingual speakers. City notices, utility bills, school information, and political information are distributed in Spanish and English. At my institution which is 10 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, recorded greetings when you dial in to a university line are in English and Spanish.

The students I refer to as native non-speakers constitute a vast majority of the 87% Hispanic demographic at my institution, which is one of the biggest Hispanic Serving Institutions in the country. At border site HSIs, the Hispanic students demonstrate English proficiency that ranges from complete L2 acquisition to intermediate proficiency. There are, however, no mechanisms for formally labeling students according to levels of English proficiency. Instead, faculty must rely on observation, anecdotal evidence, and self-selected faculty development to create pedagogies and strategies for supporting college-level ELLs in meeting academic goals.

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Procedures for identifying ELLs in elementary and secondary public schools seem byzantine by our college-level standards. Typically, students (or parents) respond to a language survey designed to determine whether a language other than English is the primary or supplementary language spoken at home. Students who indicate English is not their primary or exclusive home language must take exams to assess their English language proficiency levels. Finally, students are recommended for placement in language support/language acquisition programs (the varieties and possibilities are numerous) or regular classes on the basis of these exam scores. In all such programs, the long-term goal is to eventually move students into mainstream classes by exiting them out of ESL or bilingual programs, but students need to demonstrate competency in basic academic and English proficiency through the assessment programs and levels of satisfactory achievement that are in place in the student's state of residence.

A gap exists between the declaration of ESL program exit readiness and college readiness. Thus far, the gap remains unbridged and in many cases, unacknowledged. The looming reality is that exiting special language programs in secondary public schools does not certify that ELL students are sufficiently proficient in English to compete equitably with native English speakers. And this is why the ELL status residually and realistically persists into the college years. However, in the absence of the byzantine guidelines and programs in place at the elementary and secondary public school level, college-level ELLs develop what we might see as *hybrid* rhetorics to negotiate the exigencies of continuing to acquire English language proficiency while negotiating the rigorous demands of college.

### **English Language Learners in college**

By analyzing the experiences of college-level ELLs, we can answer two key questions:

- (1) What strategies do college-level English Language Learners develop on their own to enable them to succeed in the college environment?
- (2) How can college writing instructors adapt/modify/improve pedagogy and practice to meet the needs of college-level ELLs?

College-level ELLs initially share the same concerns as all other first-year students. In their study of undergraduate writing at Harvard, Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz (2004) describe the first year college students' transition from high school to college as a "threshold, a liminal state from which they might leap forward—or linger at the door" (p. 25). That threshold is particularly treacherous for ELLs: their still-developing English proficiency significantly raises that threshold. Researchers and practitioners who study the acquisition of second languages (L2) point out the realistic challenges that young learners face when they must simultaneously acquire English proficiency skills *and* academic knowledge; additionally, the task becomes almost daunting when we consider the difficulties that ELLs must face in attempting to learn academic content in a language that they have not yet fully mastered. For college-level ELLs, the stress caused by these dual tasks is manifested in their classroom demeanor. From a pedagogical perspective, however, the behaviors manifested by college-level ELLs are basically the

behaviors of typical first-years students, but magnified significantly because of the L2 acquisition challenges.

Possibly no area of college adaptation requires more inventiveness and self-sufficiency than the acquisition of college-level writing skills. Sommers and Saltz' work delineates the strategies used by "regular" college students (that is, students who are native (L1) speakers of English) (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). College ELL students, however, must simultaneously negotiate continuing growth in L2 proficiency *and* the acquisition of rigorous college-level content and competencies.

Relying on their L1 knowledge, college-level ELLs create a hybrid rhetoric that integrates their competencies in Hispanic communication into the more "rigid" expectations of academic writing. Below, I illustrate some varieties of these hybrids through several student stories.

Selena revealed her immigrant status by integrating into an early essay the story of her family's immigration from Mexico and her own struggles to learn English and fit into the academic environment in her new country. Selena's writing did not mark her as an English Language Learner; because she had gone through the Mexican school system, she clearly was able to rely on her L1 knowledge to develop substantive proficiency in English. The tell-tale markers of Selena's persistent ELL status were her reluctance to participate in small group and whole class discussions and her reticence about taking advantage of one-on-one conferencing opportunities with me. In the parlance of ELL pedagogy, Selena had highly developed skills in the academic domain but the affective and social domains were still developing. Over the course of the two semester first year writing sequence, Selena demonstrated two key strategies for managing her college-level ELL status. In the second semester, Selena addressed the social difficulties by self-selecting a group made up of students with linguistic backgrounds much like her own. In group discussions, Selena and her group spoke in Spanish, coached each other in preparing group reports, and cohesively worked as peer editors even without prompting from me.

Forging affiliations with other students who feel more comfortable talking in Spanish is a typical academic success strategy at border site institutions. While the students in such groups are supporting each other academically, they are also developing their affective and social language skills. The group provided Selena and her group members a sense of well-being in the class community; conducting their group deliberations in Spanish enabled them to strengthen their comprehensible *output*: when they contributed their informal group reports before the whole class, they did it with a confidence fostered by L1 scaffolding. The social aspects of Selena's growth as a student were manifested in her higher levels of animated participation in this self-selected group of native Spanish speakers.

Selena's story includes another important chapter: the convergence of academic resistance and affective needs. Despite in-class opportunities for mini writing conferences in class and despite workdays we set aside for one-on-one conferencing in my office, Selena chose to work independently. Like many college writers, she was having difficulties meeting the demands of analytical writing tasks. But she did not ask questions in class, and she did not come in for conferencing. Then, one weekend, when I invited students to submit drafts for formative

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feedback, Selena sent me her draft. It was a weak draft; I started doing the usual bubble comments that I put on drafts, and then I realized that the feedback session would go much better if Selena were sitting next to me, and I could explain the L1 interference errors and offer targeted writing instruction—I could not do this efficiently in bubble comments. So I experimented by using my Windows sound recorder to offer audio feedback. Admittedly, this was time-consuming, but I was trying out a new pedagogy. I explained holistic and local writing concerns, I made sure I let her know that I understood what she might be trying to say, and I invited her to let me know if my audio feedback was better than the usual bubble comments. Here’s her end of course comment about the recordings:

As the semester progressed, recorded feedback was available which made it more personal and more one on one with the professor and at the same time more specific and detailed which helped my grades take a major turn. I mean there is a before and after factor in my grades because of the recorded feedback. I got to see some of the words I used in excess, some of the sentences that didn’t make sense or were extras in the essay, and primarily increase my vocabulary which not only helps me in writing but life as well.

Deciding to offer Selena audio feedback was based on triangulating her academic needs as a first year writer, her developing social skills as a member of the class community, and my desire to guide her toward discovering her writing potential. The audio feedback with Selena worked so well because we extended the classroom space into our personal spaces: I made the recording from my home office imagining what I would say if I were working with Selena in real time and real space in my real office but fully knowing that my comments would have to offer Selena comprehensible input. In other words, I was hyper conscious of the need to be supportive as a writing professor while offering tangible explanations for writing improvement. In the absence of the tangible surroundings of the classroom space, we created a new space that merged Selena’s social, affective, and academic needs as a college-level ELL. Working with audio vs. face-to-face environments, Selena and I created a hybrid space where our rhetorical choices—her writing choices and my feedback choices—forged new opportunities for teaching and academic success. The hybridity effectively encompassed my goals as a first year writing professor as well as Selena’s needs as a college-level ELL.

A different type of hybrid rhetoric is created when college-level ELLs apparently ignore the demands of a writing task and reconfigure the task into something they can handle. On one hand, this would seem an abdication of academic expectations, but I see it as a success-oriented, self-advocacy strategy that moves college-level ELLs toward academic success and fosters a high degree of academic buoyancy. Two students—Alberto and Alex—illustrate this hybridity.

Alberto tried three times to complete the requirements of the last major essay in his first year writing class. In brief, the task called for an analysis of two education-related videos: a short video of Pink Floyd’s classic “Another Brick in the Wall” and a clip from Peter Weir’s *Dead Poets Society*. The writing task was contextualized in a full semester of thematically linked class activities and writing assignments, all focused on the theme “education issues in America.” Alberto took advantage of feedback opportunities and submitted his drafts well before the deadline. However, despite abundant in-class demos and activities designed to help these first

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year writers understand the parameters of an analytical essay, Alberto just seemed unable to understand what was expected of him. I kept sending back his drafts with holistic comments about his insistence in discussing the videos only on a literal level; he sent three more drafts, which got progressively weaker.

Alberto fit my *native non-speaker category*: although he was born in the U.S., his family environment was not conducive to promoting higher levels of literacy in English. In class, he did try to participate in class discussions, but his spoken English was so flawed that we had trouble understanding him, and he frequently lacked the vocabulary to complete his comments meaningfully. Alberto finally “scrapped” his analysis of the two videos and submitted an essay in which he told a narrative of his route to college, explaining the numerous tragedies that had befallen his family and focusing on his surrogate father’s relentless push for Alberto to attend college. Alberto ended his essay with this statement: “My life has been filled by little ups and many downs towards my education: but if there is anything to say about this, it is that there is no reason that anyone cannot have a proper education no matter the hardship that they endure and to always find that light that wants to help you.”

Technically, Alberto did not do the task he was assigned; rhetorically, he reconstructed the writing task and shaped it to fit the story (and analysis) he could provide. In that last comment, as well as in the discussion he wove through the essay, he reflected on how life events had shaped his view of education. In that last comment, I saw connections to the images and lyrics of the Pink Floyd video, which in earlier drafts he had presented as a literal anti-education message. From my perspective as a first year writing professor, I saw Alberto’s essay, which he titled “Why College?”, as a rhetorical hybrid: he did not ignore the assignment but he relied on his funds of knowledge (Newman, 2012; Gonzalez et al., 1995) to richly recreate the assignment in a manner that preserved his affective integrity and promoted his academic performance.

The reconstructed assignment hybrid seems to be a prolific strategy for college-level English language learners. From my bilingual perspective, I believe that when students adopt this strategy they are forging a meaningful connection with the academic task by integrating the intellectual rhythms of Spanish conversation into the text of the academic writing. When I’m reading my college ELL students’ drafts and all of a sudden there appears to be a shift in the tenor of the writing, I have come to recognize this as a rhetorical hybrid. By shifting to a more fluid, more lyrical (but unfortunately sometimes linguistically and academically “off” style), they demonstrate the coming together of academic and affective domains. As a first year writing professor, I am aware that the most adept student writers frequently humor us by producing academically perfect essays that fulfill all requirements but that show no genuine engagement on the writer’s part. Perhaps because they are still learning the nuances of academic discourse, college-level ELLs politely and meaningfully reveal their engagement with academic writing assignments by slipping into a conversational, personal writing persona.

Alex, another first year writing student, used this conversational integration strategy. Like many students in our border site institutions, he commuted daily from directly across the border in Mexico. His written English was almost flawless, but he had trouble sustaining an analytical tone in his writing—until he reconstructed his writing tasks so that he could position himself

meaningfully in the task. In an essay titled “Where the Line Is Drawn,” he analyzed how teacher LouAnne Johnson in John Smith’s *Dangerous Minds* pushes traditional limits in order to impact her students. He ended the essay with a long paragraph in which he reminisced on a friendship he developed with a teacher. When I read this conclusion, my first impulse was to “dock” the writer for slipping into a personal narrative instead of concluding his analytical essay appropriately. But I reread it, and I realized I could “hear” Alex’s voice and see his conversational gestures as I read this paragraph; so it was not a deviation from the task but instead a rhetorical hybrid that effectively merged analysis and personal experience. He could have written a perfunctory conclusion and sealed the analytical task effectively, but he chose to take an academic risk. In the end, I saw his apparently inappropriate conclusion as evidence of the affective and social growth: he was secure enough in his academic persona to invite me into this conversational strand without fear that he would be academically penalized for demonstrating a genuine connection to the writing task.

I offer a final example of this rhetorical hybrid strategy. Fernando was an international student (born and educated in Mexico) who chose to go to college in America. He lived right across the border, and after he met Alex in my first year writing class, they started carpooling and were frequently late because of traffic snarls at the international bridge. Fernando’s English proficiency was at a much lower level than Alex’s. In fact, the first essay he wrote would probably be considered incomprehensible by most first year writing standards. This is “part” of the first paragraph of an essay that was supposed to be an analysis of the role homework plays in a student’s educational experience:

My position in the value of homework is in such greatness, that there had been several times when I need to explain my self and defend my position, because I hardly believe that homework have a great purpose in our life; And I will start at the beginning of times, when you are young and you start having several home works, they are easy for an adult, but for a kid it is the starting of learning, and sometimes it gets complicated, I agree totally that kids should have homework obviously for a kid to handle. I spoke with my cousin that is a teacher for kindergarten in Montessori in the city of Monterrey and i ask her: “What is the type of homework you give to the children?” Her response was: “I don’t give to the kids homework, we call it ‘games’ or ‘fun work’ so the kids start to see their assignment as a game, as fun, of course she before the starting period, made a plan with the rules of this school and the staff and director study her material and review it.”

A typical professorial response might be to shake one’s head and mutter something about this student not knowing how to put a sentence together. A response informed by understanding of rhetorical hybrid strategies would call for attentive rereading. I admit that I find my bilingualism infinitely valuable in working with my college-level ELLs. When this essay was submitted, it was only a few days into the semester, and I had not yet learned who all my students were; thus, I did not know anything about Fernando at this point, other than where he sat in the classroom and which group he was in. Yet, I recognized the rhythms of Spanish in this piece. I could tell that he was thinking in Spanish and possibly translating almost directly from his Spanish prose into incompetently presented English sentences. I let myself “listen” to the voice coming through the writing, and in my grading comment, I invited Fernando to come by for a one-on-one

conference. He lingered after class the very next meeting. We talked about his writing, and he admitted he was relying on his Spanish prose and conversational rhythms to construct his English text. I had him read the passage to me as he would have said it in Spanish—it was lovely in Spanish. In language learning terms, Fernando’s strategy showed a great deal of negative transfer of Spanish structures into English with resulting syntactic and semantic interference errors.

Fernando did much more than simply use a common L1 to L2 strategy. Faced with an academic task that he could not manage effectively, he constructed a rhetorical hybrid that demonstrated a great deal of engagement with the writing task. By no means could I fault this student with failure to complete the assignment; he completed it by relying on the “platform” of his first language to generate a product that more or less met the parameters of the academic task. The level of Fernando’s accomplishment stands out when we recall what Alberto did in the example I provided earlier. Alberto could not move beyond the literal level; his initial attempts at analysis resulted in stultifying summaries of the videos he was supposed to be analyzing. Fernando’s attempt, however, reveals a higher degree of critical thinking, but he lacked the English proficiency to present that thinking effectively. His hybrid demonstrates the type of innovative thinking that Steven Johnson writes about in *Where Good Ideas Come From* (2010). On the surface, Fernando’s writing seems inept, incomprehensible, and deficient; from the perspective of linguistic and writing innovation, it demonstrates the collision of abilities to engineer an “innovation” (Johnson, 2010, pp. 182-189). Fernando forged a type of comprehensible output (Krashen, 1984) by creating a hybrid discourse that integrated his thinking about homework into a refashioned essay form.

In discussing what I consider a hybrid rhetoric created by college-level ELLs, I am not advocating that we dismiss academic standards for students whose bilingual abilities do not stand up to mainstream literacy expectations. I am, however, suggesting that we learn from the writing artifacts and academic behaviors of our college-level ELLs and appropriately adjust our pedagogy and practice in first year writing classes. The stories of Selena, Alberto, Alex, and Fernando point to very real academic concerns we need to face in first year writing classes if we teach at border site institutions where the ongoing fluidity and sharing of language and culture significantly impacts every aspect of educational experience. We could adopt a “guarding the gates” approach and simply penalize Hispanic students’ integration of their bilingualism into standard academic practices. Or we could embrace the linguistic and rhetorical innovation evidenced in their hybrid rhetoric.

Johnson’s attitude toward innovation is germane here. As I explain Johnson’s patterns of innovation to my students, I draw a horizontal line on the board with A at one end and B at the other. I suggest that Johnson’s patterns of innovation explain how we get from Point A to Point B in problem-solving, task completion, accomplishment of goals, necessities, and desired achievements. In observing my college-level ELLs, I appreciate the efforts they are making toward achieving the incredibly noteworthy goal of attaining a college education in a language that is not their first language. In Johnson’s discussion of the adjacent possible, serendipity, error, liquid networks, the slow hunch, exaptation, and platforms (2010, p. 19), there is application to the linguistic richness at work in our border institutions. The strategies our

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college-level ELLs use to push for higher levels of English proficiency underscore Johnson's advocacy of inventive capacities: "The more we embrace these patterns—in our private work habits and hobbies, in our office environments, in the designs of new software tools—the better we will be at tapping our extraordinary capacity for innovative thinking" (p. 17). The strategies our college level English Language Learners create for adapting and thriving in the environment of higher education are nothing less than innovation in practice.

### Patterns of transcultural adaptation in academic spaces

For the English Language Learner, the transition from the secondary setting to the college environment is marked by a change in directionality of agency. The federal regulations governing the treatment of ELLs in public schools trickle down into the classroom through an array of allegedly learner-centered teaching initiatives designed in part to promote English language proficiency but more so to ensure that federal guidelines are not violated. At the extreme, this creates a teaching environment in which ELLs are handled with metaphorical kid gloves. For example, the state of Texas Code of Education includes an entire chapter on bilingual education, which delineates teacher expectations in detail, including the requirement that special language programs address affective, linguistic, and cognitive needs (Texas Constitution and Statutes, 2013). An instance of the far-reaching *agency* of classroom expectations is seen in the correct response to an item in the state's sample test for ESL certification. The item poses this scenario: "A teacher replies to an incorrect response from an ELL by recognizing the student's effort through positive reinforcement. By recognizing the student's effort, the teacher is demonstrating an understanding of which of the following?" The correct response is "lowering the affective filter" and the explanation for this correct response is "providing positive reinforcement makes the ELL feel appreciated for putting forth effort" (Texas Education Agency, 2011, pp. 49, 58).

While supporting learners' efforts is a laudable pedagogical strategy, this selective instance is only a sample of the one-directional agency that occurs through the reach of federal regulations that extends into specific classroom practice and even research. A recent article on teaching ELLs, addresses how teacher actions and beliefs impact student achievement, including a section on *emotional warmth* as a key factor in creating classroom dynamics that support student learning (Lopez, 2012, p. 7). This degree of solicitousness over the learners' affect, I believe, creates a one directional responsibility for learning: the broad reach of government regulations promotes a culture of "learned helpness" (Gallagher, 2006, p. 12) where the learner is never encouraged to assume responsibility for his/her own capabilities . . . or achievements. Because of the ever-growing body of federal and state regulations governing the education of ELLs, this culture persists throughout the elementary and secondary years, and when they transition into college, ELLs find they must abruptly become their own agents for success: the directionality of agency shifts and the college level ELL assumes control of his/her own academic success.

In the transcultural environment of border sites, college-level ELLs forge and implement robust strategies for becoming their own agents of success. Borrowing Johnson's (2010) patterns of innovation metaphor, I propose a paradigm of recognizable behaviors that bilingual students adopt in adjusting to the first year writing environment: silent observation, reconstruction of the academic space, and resolute persistence.

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**Silent observation.** One of the most prevalent markers of college-level ELL status is a student's *apparent* reluctance to participate in whole-class discussions. Even more so than the typical student who fears the embarrassment of giving the wrong answer, ELL students must contend with that fear as well as with the awareness that they might mispronounce an academic term or not have in their L2 lexicon a word they need for an appropriate response. There is also the self-consciousness that many ELLs feel regarding their accents. So they retreat into the safety of silence (which might suggest disengagement). Frequently, this silence extends to small-group work. What college teachers must realize is that this silence does not signal academic non-participation; instead, such silence should be seen as what ESL specialists refer to as “a silent period” in L2 acquisition: the learner very likely actively engaged in the discussion but feels unready to offer linguistic output (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008, p. 55).

College-level ELLs are quite aware of this apparent deficit in their student profile. Nely, a first year writer who was educated in Mexico, spent most of the semester in this “silent observation” stage. Her demeanor indicated a high-degree of involvement in our class discussions: her facial expressions showed clear understanding of everything being discussed and her body language betrayed a desire to “jump in” and contribute—but she didn't. In the end of class comments that I collected each class meeting, Nely frequently commented about how much she wanted to join in the discussion. Like many college-level ELLs, Nely had a pronounced Spanish accent and, on the occasions she spoke to me after class, I noticed that her oral discourse was halting as she struggled to find the words she wanted. Very likely, her filter was raised so high that it interfered with fluid speech (Brown, 2007, pp. 294-295). So, I took a proactive step: one day, during a class discussion triggered by a news report on alternatives to college, we were discussing “traveling the world” as one of the options that had been offered in the report. I seized the opportunity. In an early essay, Nely had written extensively about her experiences as a foreign exchange student in Germany, so I asked her to tell the class a bit about the experience. This was the first time she had spoken out loud in class; she was clearly uncomfortable, and she responded perfunctorily to my request, but it was a beginning.

It was not until close to the end of the semester that Nely finally self-selected to join a class discussion. On that day, we were discussing the positive and negative aspects of American education. The class was having a panel discussion; one student panelist had just talked about the problems of favoritism, and Nely jumped in with a story of how one of her teachers had overtly favored a particular student. The class was delighted with Nely's contribution. In this opportunity to contribute comprehensible output, she was a vibrant, highly animated, and almost unstoppable. Listening to her and watching her was like seeing someone who had undammed a linguistic torrent. She held her classmates' attention for about five minutes; they asked her questions. I sat there professionally and personally pleased at what I had just witnessed. Nely had emerged from her silent observation period.

**Educational architecture.** College-level ELL students are typically reticent about seeking out professors during office hours or even immediately before or after class. However, this resistance to engaging one-on-one with a professor is not atypical among college students in general. This common resistance is exacerbated by the linguistic and cultural issues that ELL

students bring into the college environment. When they arrive on college campuses, residual ELL students are in classrooms where professors' content knowledge usually overwhelms their pedagogical sensitivity to language-related needs of language minority students. Furthermore, while many college instructors do in fact make significant efforts to reach out to students—ELL or otherwise—who seem to need additional help, the norm seems to be the misguided expectation of a homogeneous linguistic and academic college readiness (Matsuda, 2006).

Additionally, college faculty unwittingly promote draconian expectations, as evidenced in these excerpts from syllabi from several Texas universities:

Sample 1: from a Management Course Syllabus

Written and Oral Communication Skills:

(4). Grammatical errors:

- a. Sentence fragments (5 points each).
- b. Subject-verb agreement (5 points each).
- c. Spelling (1 point each spelling error in excess of 3).
- d. Misuse of words: their-there, its-it's, from-form (5 points each).
- e. Run-on sentences (5 points each).
- f. Run-on paragraphs (5 points each)
- g. One-sentence paragraphs (5 points each).

Sample from a Communication Class syllabus:

You will be marked absent if you skip class. To be clear, if you miss class for any reason, even if you tell me, that counts as one of the excused absences. Absences over two will cost you 10 points each time. Avoid illegitimate excuses like "my boyfriend's uncle died." Only incidents involving immediate family members are legitimate. You will also need to notify the school of such incidents, which will inform me.

Sample from a Marketing Syllabus:

Agreement to the Terms of the Syllabus: This should be considered a contract, whereby you agree to abide by the terms and requirements within this syllabus. Your continued enrollment in the class assumes that you have agreed to all of the terms listed herein.

Sample from an Engineering syllabus:

**Submission of written assignments:** Written reports will be submitted at 3 p.m. on the dates they are due (see Table 1 for due dates). The drop off box is located outside the Writing TA's office (ENS329/330). If you are one or two minutes late and the Writing TA is still nearby, he or she may or may not accept your report: *Do not count on it*. If the TA has already gathered the reports, removed the drop-off box from the front of the door, and left the office, then your paper will be counted late. To be safe, you are advised to submit the paper on time. **The penalty for lateness is a 10% deduction *per day* of the assignment's grade.** Reports will not be accepted after the official final exam period has started.

Expectations such as those articulated in these syllabi pose problems even for native speakers: there appears to be no room for non-conformance. For ELL students, such behavioral expectations compound the greater problem of trying to acquire a sufficient level of L2 competency in order to succeed in college. In short, the academic landscape might seem less than hospitable to college-level ELLs. Thus, there is a need for reconstruction of the educational space. In his/her role as agent of success, the college-level ELL proactively creates a learning space that effectively addresses academic and social needs.

We can see this reconstruction as the creation of a *third space* (Soja, 1996, pp. 6-11) that triangulates (1) the traditional dimensional area of a classroom with (2) the historical associations of the given educational space and with (3) the newly imaginatively *created* space generated by the learner as architect. For the transcultural, bilingual learner, this site must be a space in which the trappings of physical dimensionality and historical baggage are replaced by effectual new partnering between learner and professor with the student proactively designing the space (Newman, 2011). In practical terms, this means that ELL students frequently eschew the traditional educational space because it is designed to cast a harsh spotlight on difference, thereby *otherizing* the learner as he/she attempts to negotiate the demands of two (apparently competing) languages and cultures. Discovery/construction of this third space allows the learner to *reconcile* “competing” discourses from a position of multilingual subjectivity (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 145). Pedagogically, it is the learner (rather than the instructor) who constructs the hybrid third space as a site of empowerment, responsibility, and control (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 147). As educational architect, in a third space, the ELL writer casts him/herself as a linguistically proficient, academically competent, success-oriented writer and empowered learner.

The real-vs.-constructed space dichotomy is operationalized in the reconstruction of the traditional drafting-and-feedback cycle. For the ELL writer, the historicity of the classroom space resonates with awareness of deficiencies in language, so the writer’s resistance to participating in real-time writing groups in class or walking to the professor’s desk to ask for writing assistance is a manifestation of the historical negativity of the space, *regardless of the current professor’s pedagogical attitude and behavior*. In the construct of third space, the associations triggered by the space persist and are transferred to the space regardless of the individuals who occupy the space.

One of the most pedagogically productive aspects of online teaching platforms, such as the Blackboard course management system, is the extension/dissolution of traditional classroom space. The same students who reject in-person opportunities for writing conferences will submit a draft at the first opportunity and resubmit multiple drafts to apply formative feedback. From my perspective as a long-time writing professor at an HSI, I see this behavior as a *successful* attempt to reconfigure the authority of the professor. In the real space of the fixed dimensionality of the classroom, all of the ELL students’ past experiences with writing instructors are transferred (unfairly but explicably) unto the current, real classroom instructor. As educational architect, however, in the cyberspace of Blackboard submissions, the student reconstructs the instructor as an edifying coach (Gale, 1996) and the trappings of the typical classroom fall away. In the online environment, the communication between student and teacher

is distilled into pragmatic, focused discourse where the historicity of the typical classroom environment falls away and learner and professor are reconstructed. There are no gestures, no facial expressions, no vocal inflections—and no judgments or preconceptions. For Hispanic students who have gone through the K-12 education system knowing that they fall short of linguistic expectations, the online environment eliminates the potential for public exposure. (Newman, 2011, p. 87) A recent discussion of the impact of online environments in teaching composition addresses the way ELLs adapt to such environments, suggesting that underrepresented groups bring into the online environment linguistic self-consciousness and discomfort over cultural codes (Griffin & Minter, 2013, p. 147). While this caveat holds in environments where ELLs are a minority of the class population, at border site institutions where ELLs are the majority, the online environment, I believe, creates an opportunity for meaningful reconstruction of the classroom space.

In Spanish, my title is *Maestra de ingles*, which we translate as “English teacher,” but the cultural resonances of the term *maestra* inform my assertion that Educational Architecture is a pattern adapted by college-level ELLs as a means of seizing agency for success. In Mexico, teachers are held in high esteem (the *maestra*/master). Students educated in Mexico frequently refer to me not as “Dr.” or even “Mrs.” but as “Teacher.” In their cyberspace reconstruction, clearly the teacher seems far more approachable perhaps because as they submit their drafts, ELL students create a third space in which the teacher/professor is a solicitous master/*maestra* intent on guiding rather than exposing error.

By constructing this third space classroom, ELL students position themselves in an educational environment in which past negative experiences are replaced with possibilities for success. Even if as a professor I do not dwell on their linguistic difference, as I explain below, for many ELLs, past classroom experiences darkly tinge present day experiences. If the real classroom dissolves into a digital classroom, perhaps all the negative associations dissolve as well, and the ELL recasts him/herself as a competent, confident writer collaborating with the professor and claiming proactive agency for successful writing experiences.

**Pragmatic persistence.** Before this semester started, Jonathan sent me this email message in response to my “Welcome to English 1301” Blackboard message:

I just graduated from [local high school]. I came from Mexico City four years ago encountering the unexpected. My struggles through high school were not the same as any other student due to the fact that English was not my first language. I had my ups and downs but that did not stop me, I graduated in the top ten percent of my class and I hope to keep on doing as good or even better through college. Thank you for welcoming me to your class and I can't wait to meet you and learn from you.

This short message encapsulates the overarching characteristics and attitudes of ELL students who have successfully completed their high school requirements but who are now college-level ELL students:

1. College-level ELL students frequently exhibit a deficit view of their English

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- proficiency; they seem to consider their non-native speaker status as their most salient academic marker.
2. College-level ELL students pre-emptively volunteer information about the difficulties they've encountered in attempting to succeed academically in a language that is not their native language.
  3. College-level ELL students are resilient and persistent in their efforts to succeed.

The note from Jonathan also reveals a distinct pride born out of the need for pragmatic persistence to offset the deficit mentality. Mayra's essay titled "Rainy Days at School," articulates the slow construction of that deficit view:

My first day of school had started in a totally different country. The school setting was different to what I had been used in the past seven years. I did not speak the language of my new country. Additionally the first days of school were miserable, but slowly I started to get acquainted. The good thing was that there were more students like me, so we would stick together and become good friends. My eighth grade year went well, and it was time to go to high school. Somehow I was excited, for I was starting to understand and speak English and get used to the new setting. Like every kid, I had the dream of one day becoming a teacher, a doctor, a nurse, or any other professional. I wanted to have a degree. My teachers did not think the same way since I was from a minority group. They kept me from reaching my full potential because they did not care about the Mexican girl that did not speak enough English.

When I met Myra in semester one of our first year writing sequence, she had clearly risen above the negativity described in this passage: she was on a teacher certification route, persistent, confident, but still shaky about her English proficiency. When she enrolled in the second semester of the FYW sequence, she told me on the first day of class, "I waited three semesters to get in your class." In the two semesters she spent in my first year writing classes, Myra drew constantly on that persistence, working impressively hard on every essay, contributing richly to the class conversation, and ending both FYW courses with success that perhaps offset the deficit view of her early educational experiences in America.

A few semesters ago, Karla, one of my first year writers read to our whole class her essay titled "We Did It!" Her commentary about dealing with deficit views of the English Language Learner does much to explain why border site students need to be proactive agents in rejecting ethnocentricity. Here's an excerpt from Karla's essay:

Mr. Perez taught me that it doesn't matter how old you are or the language you speak, you can do whatever you propose in life and never should let anybody let you down for what you are or what you're not. He was my very first teacher since I moved from Mexico, as well as we were his first students ever, since he had barely started his career as a teacher. Everybody in his class had something in common, we didn't know a bit of English. Other fifth graders, used to call us, The Perez Kids. Outside our classroom, we had no name or last name, we were the Perez kids. Perez kids this, Perez kid that, get in line Perez kid,

report to the office Perez kid. It was kind of frustrating, but we couldn't do anything about it, we didn't know how to respond since we knew no English and we were afraid of speaking Spanish. Mr. Perez, as well as us didn't like the nickname the other students and teachers had adopt us, he notice how we felt about it and the impotence we felt over not being able to respond to what -that for us was- humiliation.

It is reductive to say that this is a survival story; the controlled recounting of this experience powerfully reveals the notes of persistence that run through the stories of many English Language Learners. Karla's prose is richly tinged with the rhythms of Spanish; in the end, she relies on that Spanish linguistic scaffolding to reflect rhetorically on the impact of the experience:

Mr. Perez made an impact on me that left a scar on my life. The type of scar you want for everyone to see, the type of scar you are proud to have and tell the story of how you got it over and over again, like those of a shark bite or those you get for playing your favorite sport. I might not be the only one with a story like mine; I'm certain that as more than half of the population in the valley is composed of Hispanics, they might also have similar stories, and even more controversial stories, but I'm sure they have never and will never be the Perez kid.

By the time they get to college, ELLs are pragmatic about their *perceived* linguistic deficiencies. Years of academic experiences with instructors whom they perceive to be less than supportive, as Karla's comments indicate, have made them sensitive to but realistic about how they are viewed. In the excerpts from Karla's essay, for example, some instructors would seize on the "errors" and overlook the power of the writing. The most self-sufficient ELLs shrug off such superficiality and concentrate on cultivating the types of third space relationships that I described above. One of the most interesting aspects of teaching at an HSI where almost all the students in my classes are college-level ELLs is that linguistic variation is the norm in this environment. But it is a shock for individuals who are hired from linguistically homogeneous, mainstream native speaker environments to discover that traditional pedagogies need to be replaced with culturally-informed, linguistically tolerant attitudes. Unfortunately, there is resistance to such abrupt change, and frequently, the resistance is manifested as non-student centered attitudes in which the learners are blamed for their language "deficiencies."

Students who have successfully navigated the "liminal" first year writing threshold (Sommers and Saltz, 2004, p. 125), identify certain attitudes as vital components of persistence that likely began when they were young and that have sustained them through their college experience. Recently, I interviewed over 20 college juniors and seniors from my border site institution to ask them about their transcultural and bilinguistic experiences as English Language Learners. Their responses clustered around the following persistence strategies:

1. Family support
2. Maintenance of Spanish as home language (parents have never learned English)
3. Resilience after language-based exclusionary treatment in school

4. Perseverance despite being subjected to poor teaching practices
5. Education-based goals

Oralia's comment about being immersed in an English-only school environment was typical among the 21 students I interviewed:

I finished first grade in Mexico but when we migrated they put me back in first grade in an all English classroom, sink or swim. I had a hard time: holidays, procedures, what the teacher wanted. I was always lost. There wasn't anyone who would explain to me. I had to teach myself. I didn't know what 4<sup>th</sup> of July was.

In general, these students talked about the lack of educational support in their elementary and secondary years. Given the ever-increasing array of federal regulations for language support programs, it is amazing that so many students arrive at border site HSIs with the stories these students tell. Even more amazing is the integrity and persistence that shapes these students' journey through our border site institutions.

### Community (re-) construction

Last summer, we had our roof replaced. The crew worked tirelessly for several days, starting around 8am, working in over 100-degree, high humidity temperatures, ending around 7:30pm. They spoke only Spanish. On their last day, we realized they hadn't returned our handsaw that they'd borrowed to trim some tree branches. As the bi-linguistic member of the family, it was my job to retrieve it—but I couldn't figure out how to say, "Could we have our saw back please?" in Spanish. I could say "*¿Donde esta el saw?*" But, this would have sounded accusatory with inappropriate code switching—would the workers know what "saw" meant? So I got out my Spanish-English dictionary and looked up all the words I needed to politely ask for the saw and practiced saying the question in probably syntactically incorrect Spanish: "*¿Nos dicen por favor donde esta el serucho que les prestamos?*"

I felt the way our border site students must sometimes feel in class—they envision a semantic and syntactic contribution to class discussion, but don't have the vocabulary to articulate it. Community Reconstruction—another pattern of transcultural adaptation—eliminates the ability to speak fluently in English as a precondition for meaningful participation. This reconstruction is another example of proactive agency on the part of border site ELLs. Ordinarily, the instructor constructs and maintains the class community, but by integrating practices such as code switching and substantive use of Spanish *without seeking prior approval from the instructor*, bi-linguistic students create an inclusionary community that welcomes trans-lingual contributions.

Not too long ago in one of my first year writing classes, we were talking about symbols of education. Jesse had his iPhone out so we could listen to a piece he had composed and which had become the tune he used to calm himself out of stressful situations. That original tune was the symbol he wanted to write about. He was telling the class he keeps his iPhone with him all the time: "at night, I have it right there on the . . . [Jesse stumbled] on the . . . I don't know how to say it, on the *chiffonier*." We figured he meant dresser or possibly nightstand. Jesse had a few

choices in the discourse he had initiated. He could have said, “Never mind; I don’t know how to say it” and withdrawn into silence. He could have interrupted himself to ask a classmate for help. But, he clearly felt sufficiently comfortable in the class community to risk code switching. He didn’t miss a beat after he said *chiffonier* instead of dresser; he went right on with the story of his musical piece.

Code switching during class interactions is, I believe, a common occurrence at border site institutions. However, my monolingual colleagues assure me that it doesn’t happen in their classes. In my classes, it is not at all unusual for students to conduct their group discussions partly in English, partly in Spanish. Frequently, I sit in and listen to them, enjoying the way they take ownership of course content through code-switching, a talent that I have never developed. The facility with which they seamlessly interweave English and Spanish constructions is amazing to me, especially when in the end, they present their group report in fluent English. When they’re talking about their writing, they frequently refer to *el tesis*. They refer to colons as *puntitos*, and *las rayitas* refers to dashes. It has always seemed inappropriate and somewhat draconian to insist that all class communication be conducted in English at border site universities. Such a restriction, I believe, would have a stultifying effect on our community discourse while welcoming translinguistic contributions reinforces the democracy of the classroom.

As interesting as code switching is the use of what I call *phatic conversational fillers* during class discussions or during one-on-one conversations. “*Pues*” and “*es que . . .*” are two such fillers. For example, a student might be talking during a whole-class discussion about how he felt in the last few moments of his district track meet: “*Pues*, I was so tired. Man! I didn’t think I could do it. *Pero . . .* it was like I didn’t have a choice.” During a writing conference, Becky was explaining how she’d revised a section of her draft: “I added this paragraph . . . *bueno*, I fixed it a little.” Ana, explaining her revisions, said this: “No, it’s the same one . . . *no mas . . .* I wasn’t sure how to use the semicolon *pero* I put one here.” Nathan, in explaining how he used our mentor essay to reshape his own draft, used a variation of *pues* which many of my bilingual students use: “Oh . . . *pos . . . pos . . .* when I was reading it, the sample, I saw how I could fix mine.” Liz sat down for our conference saying, “*Es que . . .* I just have this paragraph, not like *todo el* draft.” I find this type of minimal code switching quite interesting. I don’t believe the students realize they are slipping in Spanish versions of “well” or transferring Spanish structures (like *es que*) into English constructions.

A few semesters ago, Alexis lingered after our first year writing class with Julia, another student, at her side. Alexis asked me if I spoke Spanish; when I nodded, she launched into an explanation, in Spanish, about the problems she was having with our current writing assignment. I understood most of what she was saying, and I responded in English. Julia translated what I’d said to Alexis. I wondered how Alexis had made it all the way into college unable to actually speak in English. From the writing she had submitted to date, I had no idea that she was unable to conduct a conversation in English. In truth, students like Alexis *can* speak English, but when they have a choice, as Alexis did in her conversation with me, they choose Spanish because it is the language with which they construct meaningful discourse. The linguistic partnering that these girls represent is not typical at border site institutions but neither is it unusual. It is

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evidence of the community reconstruction that transcultural students innovatively rely on as a strategy for elegantly rejecting ethnocentric attitudes in the IHE environment.

At root of code-switching and outright preference of Spanish over English is the comfort that ELLs feel in the college class community which they have preemptively reconstructed to support their linguistic varieties. Rhetorically, such code switching represents construction of an environment that layers English-upon-Spanish-upon English in rich multilingualism.

### **Conclusion**

The student stories I have examined here suggest a challenge to the status quo of institutional authority. At border sites, the fluidity of the easy movement between English and Spanish positions students as agents of that challenge. Latino rhetorical traditions that privilege participation and narrative reflection transform the formality of the college writing classroom into a site for community, sharing, and growth. There is a blurring of traditional linguistic difference that in the public school dialogue is reductively signified by the native speaker and non-native speaker labels. It seems to me that the patterns of adaptation I've presented here (Silent Observation, Educational Architecture, Pragmatic Persistence, and Community (Re-) Construction) point to a shift in the directionality of institutional discourse. These transcultural and bilingual patterns of adaptation create a two-way directionality with the college-level English Language Learner assuming a proactive role in the construction of meaningful literacy experiences. The fluidity of border sites promotes a culture of transcultural and bilingual adaptation that merges attitudes and ways of thinking to forge an inclusionary reality scaffolded on diversity, tolerance, and endless possibilities for reconstruction.

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