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Non-convergent literacy practices and Dominican students in the U.S.

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Introduction

This paper presents a literature review to articulate a pedagogical rationale for integrating English writing instruction with writing instruction in Spanish as a strategy for improving success rates among Spanish speaking ESL students (SS-ESL) at Hispanic serving institutions such as Bronx Community College (BCC), where we both teach ESL. This rationale underpinned the creation of a new learning community cluster that was piloted at BCC in Fall 2013. The cluster included an advanced ESL class, a Spanish composition class, and a Freshmen Year Seminar (FYS). Success indicators for the students enrolled in this cluster were very promising.

Our discussion will begin by adopting a “New Literacy Studies” theoretical framework (Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998) in order to problematize the notion that graduation and retention rates at BCC are low because students “lack basic skills.” We will argue that a more productive starting point for promoting success among SS-ESL students is a notion of academic literacy that sees reading and writing as a set of social practices that can vary significantly from culture to culture. With this in mind, we will review research showing that academic literacy acquisition in a second language is positively correlated with solid literacy foundations in the mother tongue (Cummins, 1979, 2000; Ferguson, 2006; Ramirez, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). We will look at studies suggesting that many Dominican SS-ESL students might not have had the opportunity to develop solid academic literacy skills in Spanish and studies suggesting that what is considered effective academic writing in Dominican secondary schools can differ significantly from what American college professors expect from writing assignments.

After a brief discussion of how the integration of ESL and Spanish Composition has helped SS-ESL students to bridge the gap between divergent literacy practices, we will compare the average class GPA of the students in the learning community to the GPA of other cohorts. We will

conclude by calling for the need to expand this intervention, to further explore its impact through a longitudinal study, and to further assess the literacy skills incoming SS-ESL students possess in their mother tongue.

Background

Bronx Community College is a Hispanic serving institution (HSI), with Latinos/as making up 61% of the student body in Fall 2012 (CUNY Office of Institutional Research, 2012). About 40% of first-time students report that English is not their native language, and the vast majority of those students have Spanish as their native language. About 20% of all the students enrolled at BCC were born in the Dominican Republic; in addition, a significant number of U.S. born students are of Dominican descent (BCC Office of Institutional Research, personal communication).

Most of BCC's incoming students begin their college career with a strong desire to succeed. According to a survey carried out in 2007, 91% of first-time BCC students indicated that they intended to earn at least a bachelor's degree. In most cases, however, a harsh reality gets in the way of students' intentions. One-year retention rates for the entering class of Fall 2008 is 65%; only 20% of the entering class of Fall 2003 completed their associate degree within six years (BCC Office of Institutional Research, 2011, p. 1). Obviously, graduation and retention rates need to be drastically improved if BCC is to live up to its mission, which is encapsulated by its official slogan: "transforming lives."

In order to improve student success, BCC embarked on a guided self-study process in collaboration with the John Gardner Foundation to identify the most important obstacles that stand in the way of students' completion of their degree (BCC Office of Institutional Research, 2011). Four barriers were identified: student disposition, pedagogy and academic supports, curricular organization, and institutional organization. The first two are of relevance for this paper, as there is a lot that ESL instructors can do to develop effective pedagogical strategies to impact students' disposition. The executive summary of the self-study found the following about students' dispositions:

- a. Students are not well prepared for college success (they lack basic skills, prior knowledge, and effective study skills)
- b. Students are unfamiliar with college expectations, what is required to be successful in college, and how to navigate academic affairs, policies and procedures of the college. Some may have negative views of education and do not trust teachers.
- c. Students have multiple and competing roles (parent, worker, caregiver and financial responsibilities) (p.1).

In terms of pedagogy and academic support, the report noted that there is "considerable variation in faculty use of effective pedagogy" and "student performance by instructor." The goal of this paper is to explore effective pedagogical strategies to improve students' performance by taking as a starting point the language and literacy learning needs of Spanish-speaking ESL students,

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with a focus on Dominican students, who account for such a large part of the student population. Based on a literature review, preliminary qualitative data, and success indicators for the Fall 2013 learning community cohort, we argue that creating learning communities where Spanish composition courses are linked to ESL courses is crucial for removing a major barrier to SS-ESL students' success.

Academic literacy

The notion of academic literacy we are taking as our starting point is rooted in “New Literacy Studies” theories (Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998) and Lea and Street’s application thereof to the teaching of writing in higher education (1998). The purpose of this application is to “move away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing and to consider the complexity of writing practices that are taking place at degree level universities” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 157). While the teaching of reading and writing are sometimes considered the exclusive purview of English departments, Lea & Street argue that “academic literacy practices – reading and writing within disciplines – constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study” (p. 158). Also, an academic literacy approach highlights “the cultural and contextual component of writing and reading practices” and calls for a more thorough understanding of the nature of students’ writing within institutional practices, power relations, and identities (p.159).

New Literacy scholars in Latin America have been active in challenging official discourses about literacy promoted by governments and international agencies, which reduce reading and writing to a set of “singular, neutral, and objective skills that are learned through the progression of ordered exercises and then transferable to any situation” (Kalman & Street, 2013, p. 1). These studies have shown that even within a single Latin American country, the notion of literacy eludes straightforward, monolithic definitions (Marinho, 2013), that what counts as literacy is invariably social and culturally specific (Hernandez, 2013) and that literacy involves much more than the ability to decode a system of signs based on the alphabet (del Carmen-Lorenzatti, 2013). According to Barton (2013), this strand of literacy studies has been particularly useful in understanding the social practices that frame reading and writing events of Spanish-speaking children and adults living in the United States, helping scholars and teachers to establish “links between home practices and educational practices” (p. 217).

We have found this notion of academic literacy an ideal basis for examining the language and literacy learning needs of SS-ESL students. While we certainly believe that a discrepancy between students’ language and literacy practices and academic literacy practices at BCC are a major obstacle to students’ success, we are uncomfortable with the executive report’s characterization of this gap in terms of a categorical lack of “basic skills, prior knowledge, and effective study skills.” We find it much more productive to construe students’ difficulties with academic literacy in terms of divergent ways of using language and literacy, rather than to subscribe to a notion of absence of skills. This is particularly true in the case of ESL students, who have been socialized into academic reading and writing practices through the medium of other languages and in accordance with socio-cultural practices that often vary greatly from the conventions that shape academic discourse in U.S. colleges. Rather than positing that students drop out because they “lack prior knowledge,” we argue that students’ retention will increase if

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educators find ways to validate and build on the knowledge students already possess (Robson, 1995). To this end, it is important to create a classroom space where divergent language and literacy practices can be explored, demystified, critiqued and integrated in order to empower students with the ability “to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evoke” (p. 159).

Building on their mother tongue

In the words of the seminal UNESCO report *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* (1953), it is “axiomatic” that the best starting point for building on the knowledge students already possess is their mother tongue.

Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind words work automatically for expression and understanding. Socially, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.

A plethora of empirical studies that has emerged in the past half century supports the claims of the report. From a cognitive point of view, minority language students who are able to develop communicative competence in two or more languages have advantages in terms of mental flexibility and the ability to think abstractly (Peal & Lambert, 1962), early metalinguistic awareness (Tunmer & Myhill, 1984) and communicative sensitivity (Ben-Zeev, 1977). From a psychological and social point of view, studies have shown that creating spaces for language minority students’ mother tongue in the classroom is likely to enhance the development of students’ positive identities and self-esteem (Duff, 2008), increase positive attitudes to learning (Lindholm-Leary, 2001), and create greater levels of appreciation of cultural diversity (Blackledge, 2000; Gregory & Williams, 2000).

Educational research suggests that far from constituting an impediment to the mastery of the dominant language, the use of language minority students’ mother tongue in school is a very effective way to promote the learning and acquisition of academic literacy in a second language and academic success across the curriculum. Krashen’s review of the studies carried out in the U.S. indicated that “well- designed bilingual programs produce better academic English” (1999, p. 7). Based on the findings of a longitudinal study of bilingual education in the U.S. mandated by Congress, Ramirez (1992) concluded that minority language students can be provided with “substantial amounts” of mother tongue instruction “without impeding their acquisition of English language and reading skills.” Willig’s (1985) and Greene’s (1998) use of statistical meta-analysis techniques to examine educational outcomes in bilingual programs indicated that the use of mother tongue instruction actually facilitates success in English (see also Krashen, 1999).

The idea that the acquisition of academic literacy in a second language can be facilitated by the use of the mother tongue is often attributed to Cummins’ (1979) seminal “Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis,” which posits that a speaker’s second language competence is partly dependent on the level of competence achieved in the mother tongue. Empirical studies

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confirm that, indeed, when students are required to master a second language to succeed academically, and they are given the opportunity to develop strong foundational skills in their mother tongue, there seems to be a transfer of skills and concepts from one language to another (Errasti, 2003). For example, “scanning, skimming, conceptual guessing of words, skipping unknown words, tolerating ambiguity, reading for meaning, making inferences, monitoring, recognizing the structure of text, using previous learning” are all strategies that a speaker can apply to reading a text in a second language, if he/she has mastered them in his/her mother tongue (Baker, 2011, p. 322).

Despite all the evidence pointing to the benefits of using minority language students’ mother tongue as a learning tool, resistance against bilingual education remains very high in the United States. A study by McQuillan and Tse (1996) showed that between 1984 and 1994, while 82% of research studies provided evidence of the effectiveness of bilingual education, only 45% of the articles that appeared in U.S. newspapers took a favorable position on this controversial topic. Not surprisingly, most of these articles did not mention research findings. At the policy level, it is worth noting that a legislative initiative misleadingly named “English for the children” has made bilingual education virtually illegal in the states of California, Arizona, and Massachusetts. Nationally, the “No Child Left Behind” legislation does not make any mention of bilingualism or minority language maintenance (Wiley & Wright, 2004), and “while bilingual education can still qualify for funding if states allow it, the federal administration functions in a way that encourages English-only instruction” (Baker, 2011, p. 193).

Attacks on bilingual education are often justified with the claim that it is responsible for the underachievement of minority language students (Baker, 2011). While it is true in the U.S. that language minority students do tend to perform below the norm in terms of test scores (Kindler, 2002), we argue that in a country where school funding relies so heavily on local real estate taxes, and where income-based segregation relegates most minority language students to impoverished school environments, this achievement gap has a lot more to do with structural inequalities of the public school system than with bilingual education. While there is no shortage of evidence suggesting that creating a space for minority languages in the classroom could actually be part of the cure for the achievement gap, we do not wish to claim that using minority students’ mother tongues is a magic wand for all the “savage inequality” (Kozol, 2006) that afflicts public education in the U.S., nor do we wish to claim that mother tongue instruction is some kind of pedagogical panacea that can automatically create positive learning outcomes in any given context and regardless of how it is used.

We agree with Baker that “effective bilingual education is not a simple or automatic consequence of using a [student’s] home language in school,” but the result of an “effectiveness equation” which is “complex, variable across region and politics, multivariate, and often contested” (2011, p. 256). As ESL instructors, there are certainly important variables of this equation that are beyond our control. Nevertheless, we believe that effective pedagogical strategies built on the integration of Spanish and English academic literacy can have a significant impact on increasing students’ success at Hispanic Serving Institutions such as BCC.

In addition to the evidence we mentioned, there are several BCC-specific reasons why supporting Spanish academic literacy development could improve the retention and graduation rates of SS-ESL students. First of all, we have reasons to believe that some of our SS-ESL students do not have solid academic literacy foundations in their mother tongue. Students' clumsy handwriting, frequency of errors with basic sentence structure, and the fact that some of them have told us that they had never read a book from cover to cover prior to enrolling at BCC have alerted us to the possibility that in some cases SS-ESL students' struggle with reading and writing in English should not only be attributed to the fact that they are using a language in which they are not yet fully proficient, but also to the fact that they have not fully mastered academic literacy in their mother tongue.

Academic literacy in the Dominican Republic

In the case of our students who attended public schools in the Dominican Republic, it would be safe to speculate that in some cases they might not have been able to develop strong Spanish academic literacy skills, given the problems of the Dominican educational system highlighted by reports published by non-government organizations. According to these reports, despite the fact that expenditure on public education has increased in the last ten years, it remains among the lowest in the region, especially for secondary education. According to the 2002 census, 15.7% of learners between the ages of 6 and 13 did not attend school (UNDP, 2008, p. 37); a survey from 2006 indicated that only 36.8% of boys and 51.9% of girls between fourteen and seventeen were in school (UNDP, 2008, p. 177).

Problems that contribute to the “perpetuation of an educational system that is deeply inequitable and reproduces an exclusionary social order” (UNDP, 2008, p. 37) include overcrowdedness (UNDP, 2008, p. 62), insufficient access to basic learning materials such as textbooks, and teachers' absenteeism caused by inadequate salaries which force teachers to work several shifts in order to survive (OECD, 2008). Sadly, UNESCO found that Dominican third and fourth graders score among the lowest on literacy skills in Latin America. According to Hace de Yunen and Montenegro (1993), overcrowdedness and the fact that teachers are forced to teach multiple shifts in order to survive on such low salaries are major obstacles to first language literacy development in the Dominican Republic: “schools here meet in three daily 4 hour shifts called *tandas*.” In one *tanda* each day a teacher meets “180 students. It's simply a given that the amount of time to read papers is limited, and it must be divided among students” (p. 266).

We would like to emphasize that in no way do we mean to suggest that our Dominican students “do not possess skills” or are illiterate. In fact, one of the main reasons why we have chosen a New Literacy Studies approach is because it challenges the idea that the under schooled “are incapable of having an opinion, understanding complex social issues, and participating in social spaces” (del Carmen Lorenzatti, 2013, p. 81). As ESL instructors at BCC, we know from experience that language minority students with limited formal schooling “have important background experiences outside of school that need to be acknowledged and abilities that need to be drawn upon” (Freeman & Freeman, 2002, p. xiii). The reason why we felt it was important to take an honest look at educational opportunities in the DR for those students who are not from a privileged background is because of the implications for the mother tongue academic literacy development of many of our students.

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The last thing we want to do is suggest that we can make sweeping generalizations about students' reading and writing competence in the first language based on their nationality or the limited evidence that we mentioned. We do know, however, that students who do not have solid academic literacy foundations in their mother tongue are at a very high risk of dropping out because they face the overwhelming task of having to reach college level reading and writing competencies in a language that they are still learning and in a very short time. For these students, it is crucial to reap the synergistic benefits of integrating mother tongue and English academic literacy development. This is why we are calling for the need to assess students' academic literacy skills in their mother tongue, not just through tests, but also through qualitative studies. Assessing students' reading and writing abilities in their mother tongue is important not only to identify those learners who are at a greater risk of failure, but also to get a better understanding of the skills students already possess, and how they might differ from the skills that they are expected to use in U.S. colleges.

We also have reasons to believe that the academic literacy practices our students are socialized into in their home countries might differ significantly from some of the ones they might be expected to master at BCC. For example, several of our students have told us that they were not taught to use paragraphs, topic sentences and thesis statements in their essays, and that writing had much more to do with repeating content from a source of information that students were supposed to have studied, rather than with engaging with several sources critically to generate an informed argument to support a personal position. This could explain some students' hesitation in expressing and supporting their personal opinion when they write, or their difficulties in understanding the notion of plagiarism, as the few existing studies on the learning needs of Dominican students in the U.S suggest. Existing studies on the way academic literacy is practiced in Dominican secondary schools confirm what we gleaned from our conversations with our students.

In *Additive Schooling in Subtractive Times* (2011), Bartlett and Garcia present a longitudinal study of bilingual language and literacy practice at Gregorio Luperon High School, a dual medium school that was created as the result of a community initiative to cater to the learning needs of mostly Dominican SS-ESL students. Their findings point to the fact that in addition to becoming proficient in a second language, Dominican students need to bridge a gap in literacy practices in order to succeed in U.S. schools:

What counts as literacy, and which literacy practices are considered varies situationally and relationally. Thus, a student who has gone to school in the Dominican Republic for many years has experienced a way of communicating 'in and around writing' (Hornberg, 1990) that is profoundly different from what is expected in the United States (. . .) It is not just that English differs from Spanish (. . .) the language and literacy practices in which students engage vary in the two societies and the two school systems (p. 120)

Similarly, Rubinstein-Avila's (2007) case study of the challenges faced in a U.S. middle school by a female Dominican student shows that not only did the student in question have to deal with

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“the pressures of learning and developing academic skills in the new language, but [she] was also expected to gain awareness of the particular kinds of literacy practices and knowledge that were valued in her adoptive society” (585).

Bartlett and Garcia have noticed the following divergences between the way Dominican students were taught to read and write in their home country, and the way they were expected to do the same at Gregorio Luperon High School: “a much greater emphasis in U.S. schools was put on the development and expression of personal opinion” as opposed to a focus on “specific recounting of factual information” in the Dominican Republic. Also, in the United States, “teachers expect much more independent reading than students normally did in the previous schools” and to consult multiple sources, which students often did not have the opportunity to do in a developing country where access to educational resources is limited (p. 121).

Indeed, the student that was the focus of Rubinstein-Avila’s case study (2007) expressed a sense of loss when asked to use writing to take a position on an issue and to defend it by using supporting evidence. She mentioned that she was not trained for this sort of literacy task in the secondary school she attended in the Dominican Republic:

In Santo Domingo, they expected us to learn and remember the information straight from the book or from copying the teacher’s notes, but here I am not sure what exactly we should be learning. They sometimes say, ‘write about what you think, write about this or that.’ They say ‘go get information on the internet,’ or they say, ‘the answers are all in the chapter.’ It’s confusing. What I find [on the internet] is . . . It’s not always the same of what it says in the book. And also, what I think may not be correct. So, even if I understand the English, I still sometimes don’t know how to complete it [the assignment] (p. 584).

Watkins-Goffman and Cummings’ (1997) study of a Spanish Composition course at the *Universidad Autonoma de Santo Domingo*, a leading public university in the Dominican Republic, found that students’ reading based writing assignments focused on “(1) distinguishing between main and supporting ideas, including writing summaries. (2) Categorizing texts into types and levels of discourse. (3) Learning the use of accents, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, vocabulary, and syllabification” (p. 338). According to Kalman and Street (2013), this approach on reading and writing “as neutral, objective skills that are learned through a progression of ordered exercises and then transferable to any situation” has dominated official discourses on literacy in Latin America “for decades if not more” (p. 1).

Hace de Yunen and Montenegro (1993) argue that this is because in countries such as the Dominican Republic “Spanish speaking teachers are beholden to . . . the Real Academia de la Lengua Espanola – the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language . . . the Supreme Court of Spanish grammar,” which, sitting in Madrid, decides for Latin America “what is grammatical and what is not, what is spelled correctly and what is boorish.” According to these critics, this vestige of Iberian colonialism “has had the effect of equating culture with grammatical purity and orthographical correctness,” standing in the way of the implementation of more expressive, student-centered, and culturally appropriate approaches to the teaching of writing (p. 266).

Be that as it may, it is clear that existing studies show that the way academic literacy is taught in the Dominican Republic is based on practices that vary significantly from what is expected of students in U.S. colleges. Consequently, Dominican students who attended secondary schools in their country of origin and who are looking to get a college degree in the U.S. are not only facing challenges related to second language acquisition, but also difficulties related to different sets of socio-cultural expectations around reading and writing. With this in mind, we created a new learning community cluster as a nurturing pedagogical space for SS-ESL students to use their mother tongue as a learning tool to develop second language proficiency and to help them navigate different expectations around reading and writing.

Bridging divergent literacy practices in a learning community

Learning communities, as defined by Hanson and Heller (2009), can be described as

Small groups of students who take clusters of courses together with both the faculty and the students teaching and learning together. Clusters share a common theme and a range of integrated activities to provide greater coherence, develop a deeper understanding . . . and encourage student-student, student-faculty and faculty-faculty interactions. (p. 1)

Given the evidence that in order to thrive, bilinguals need to be given the opportunities to integrate the linguistic resources they possess in both of their languages, the framework of a learning community is ideal for linking a Spanish composition course to an advanced developmental ESL writing course. The concept of a learning community also lends itself particularly well to our commitment to discover effective pedagogical strategies to help students bridge divergent practices. This is because learning communities give instructors the opportunity to “work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence of the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p. 4).

The learning community cluster that was started for SS-ESL students in Fall 2013 comprised an advanced ESL course, a Spanish Composition class for native speakers, and a Freshmen Year Seminar (FYS). Ten students were enrolled; of these, seven were Dominican, and three were Honduran. The ESL class was taught by Parmegiani, who also sat in the Spanish composition course as a participant observer.

The integration strategies that were implemented in the new learning community cluster were inspired by what had worked at Gregorio Luperon High School, producing spectacularly high graduation rates for foreign born Latino/a students (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011). As we will see at the end of this section, the results have been extremely promising at BCC too (Parmegiani, forthcoming).

As at Luperon High School, BCC students were given the opportunity to “develop academic literacy practices in Spanish that are similar to academic literacy practices in U.S. schools” (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011, p.22). We share the concern several contrastive rhetoric scholars have expressed about privileging American English ways of writing (Spack, 1997; Zamel, 1997; Kubota, 2001), and we agree with Canagarajah (2002) that students do not need “to be held

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hostage by language and culture,” but they can be encouraged to mediate divergent literacy practices “and conflicting rhetorical structures to their advantage” (p. 68). Nevertheless, given that the mastery of English academic literacy is a precondition for success across the curriculum, and given that we believe that learning is about adding knowledge, rather than subtracting it, we agree with Bartlett and Garcia’s recommendation that Spanish be used to help SS-ESL students adjust to teaching practices that “reflect educational and cultural norms in the United States, as well as the learning processes and ways of demonstrating knowledge that are important in the United States” (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011, p. 129).

ESL and remedial students in general at BCC need to demonstrate knowledge by passing the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (CATW). This test consists of a multiple paragraph essay that students need to write in response to a short passage. In this essay, students need to show the ability to summarize the main ideas of a text and to respond to one idea “with examples from what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced.” These skills were constantly developed in both the ESL and the Spanish Composition course through the critical reading of a wide range of texts. As the students grappled with these texts, they engaged in close reading exercises, paying attention to how language constructs meaning, but also to how the reading of a text lends itself to a wide range of interpretations. Students were always encouraged to come up with their interpretation by making connections with their personal experience and by supporting their points with textual evidence, which was not something they had been asked to do in their high school Spanish class.

As done at Luperon and recommended by Elbow (1999), we have found it pedagogically productive to invite the mother tongue into the English composition process as well. Rather than reprimanding students for “speaking in Spanish” or even “thinking in Spanish,” as some ESL instructors have been known to do, students were encouraged to practice their English as much as possible but also to resort to their mother tongue if that was the only way they could get their ideas across. In the words of a Luperon ESL teacher, “If you don’t know a word in English, write it in Spanish. You can always get the English word later” (in Bartlett and Garcia, 2011, p. 143). We found that giving students the opportunity to use Spanish to fill in lexical gaps allowed students to engage with ideas of a greater complexity while building their vocabulary in their second language.

It was particularly useful to have students work on the same writing assignment in both the English and the Spanish classes in the respective languages. Being able to compare the way students handle the same writing assignment in their first language and second language provided precious insights into the nature of students’ errors. Discussing both versions of the same assignment provided an opportunity for students to develop a better awareness of these errors—especially those related to sentence structure. More importantly, comparing the way they compose in both languages gave students an opportunity to be more alert to the different rhetorical conventions that shape academic writing expectations in different learning contexts.

The integrated academic literacy development strategies we implemented in the learning community turned out to be extremely successful in promoting success rates. Table 1 compares the average class GPA of the students enrolled in the learning community to the average GPA of

all ESL Freshmen. The average class GPA for the students in this cluster was 3.68; the average GPA of all ESL freshmen was 1.72.

Table 1.

Comparative Outcomes for Fall 2013 First Time Freshmen

STUDENT GROUP	AVERAGE GPA FOR FALL 2013
LEARNING COMMUNITY CLUSTER	3.68
ALL ESL FRESHMEN	1.72

Given the small number of students who were in the cluster, the findings cannot be generalized yet, but they certainly suggest that integrating the teaching of English and Spanish academic literacy development courses within the framework of a learning community can have a huge impact on the college success rates of a student population that is at a particularly high risk of dropping out.

Conclusion

Our literature review has shown that the struggle many SS-ESL students face when trying to achieve academic success in U.S. colleges can be attributed not only to issues related to second language acquisition but also to divergent literacy practices. Regardless of the language of instruction, the way SS-ESL students are taught to read and write for academic purposes in their countries of origin can be significantly different from the way they are expected to read and write by their college professors in the U.S. Trying to bridge this gap using exclusively a language students are still trying to learn can turn out to be an insurmountable task. This constitutes a major barrier to academic success for SS-ESL students at BCC and other Hispanic serving institutions. Based on a plethora of research suggesting a correlation between solid literacy skills in the mother tongue and academic success in a second language, we created a learning community at BCC that integrates Spanish and English language and literacy development courses. This learning community was piloted in Fall 2013 with extremely positive results: the SS-ESL students enrolled in this learning community had an average class GPA that was almost two points higher than the average GPA of all the ESL students who had started BCC in Fall 2013.

Given the small number of students who were in the cluster, the findings cannot be generalized yet, but they certainly suggest that the cluster configuration should be continued and that its long term outcomes should be assessed through a longitudinal study that would track the long-term impact of this intervention by monitoring students' performance throughout the rest of their academic career at BCC. In addition, to further develop effective integration strategies between ESL and Spanish courses, more studies are needed assess the literacy skills students already possess in their mother tongue, and how these differ from the skills students need to acquire to succeed in U.S. colleges.

To this end, we have gotten a grant to assess the Spanish literacy proficiency of the students who will be coming into the learning community by using a Spanish translation of the CUNY Assessment Test of Writing (CATW) <http://www.cuny.edu/academics/testing/cuny-assessment->
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[tests.html](#)), the standardized writing test that is currently being used to track students into remedial or mainstream courses throughout the City University of New York. In addition, we are planning a series of in-depth interviews with a group of students who were enrolled in the learning community to find out as much as possible about their language and literacy life histories in the Dominican Republic and the United States in order to further develop our integration strategies.

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