Multilingual Writers in the Mexican Sociocultural Context: Towards Improved Pedagogical Practices in the U.S.

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Contemporary U.S. context

Currently, the education of Latina/o students in the United States for higher education and future careers comprises multiple moving parts. As the U.S. educational system, in particular the Pre-K-12 years of schooling, struggles despite efforts to address the needs of all students, both native English speakers as well as English language learners (ELLs), to better prepare them to enter institutions of tertiary education and succeed in careers, various organizations and consortiums articulate more rigorous educational standards (WIDA and the Common Core Standards as two examples). These recent proposals focus on academic literacy skills, in particular on reading and writing skills development from the earliest years of elementary school. Further evidence in both print and radio media of the emphasis on academic skills and high stakes testing appear in the public statements of the new CEO of the College Board. David Coleman, for example, has articulated his vision of a new SAT writing section that requires test takers base their writing samples on sources provided by the test developers. Mr. Coleman explains that the test takers should be asked to write a source-based paper in line with contemporary writing practices rather than an opinion-based, five-paragraph essay, a reminder of dated Anglo-American composition traditions. He even goes so far as to claim that SAT test questions will include questions on the mechanics of writing such as punctuation, citations, and paragraphing conventions.

While many practicing educators and researchers generally see these recent moves to improve the quality of K-12 education in the U.S. in a positive light, teachers and whole school systems must engage in considerable teacher training and curriculum and materials development to help learners achieve at the level of the new requirements for academic excellence. The will and good intentions are there, yet it remains to be seen how research findings and new standards get played out in the real world of everyday classroom practices Valdes (2004) makes a strong case for, first, defining what is meant by *academic literacy* and, second, enabling Latina/o students to have opportunities to acquire that literacy through quality teaching.

The urgency of the need for higher-level academic skills involves all adolescents in the U.S. educational system. Graham and Perin's (2007) extensive study of writing instruction of

adolescents that focuses on the types of instructional inventions that can be labeled successful remind us that "a majority of adolescents in the United States do not achieve this critical goal," a statement from the National Commission on Writing (2003). Meeting the critical goal requires "strong writing skills" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 464) to function in "an advanced technological society." Further, The American Society for Cell Biology's publication *Life Sciences Education* (2007) includes an article on "Learning to improve: Using writing to increase critical thinking performance in general education biology" (Quitadamo & Kurtz, 2007). Their study looked at the role of such variables as gender, ethnicity, and age, and they found no significant effect. The authors, however, did find positive effects for writing ability, critical thinking skills, and teaching practices. In other words, it is not just the educational system that displays concern about such factors as the low levels of literacy and the high attrition rate of Latina/o students.

Another example of the complexity of the situation regarding minority group students is the move, reported by Maxwell in *Education Week* on 9/5/2013, by states to develop a "uniform way of identifying ELLs." Supported by the U.S. Department of Education, this initiative includes three goals: (1) identifying ELLs; (2) determining their proficiency levels in English to ascertain who needs English language services and rule out those that don't; and (3) developing clear criteria to distinguish a learner's language abilities from academic content knowledge. These efforts may have ramifications with regards to policy and practices, the definition of what is considered effective schooling for immigrants, the politics of teaching English, and such classroom centered concerns as access to English support, sheltered classes, and student progress and how it is measured. Given that Latina/o learners are often classified as de facto ELLs, these measures may succeed in helping ELLs, including Latina/os learners.

A state-of-the-art article by Menken (2013), entitled "Emergent bilingual students in secondary school: Along the academic language and literacy continuum," overviews research in the U.S. and internationally on bi/multilingual secondary students who have had interrupted formal education (SIFE) or who have been in the educational system without achieving high levels of proficiency in English, the "long-term English language learners" (LTELLs). Given that states like Colorado and California have large populations of both types of emergent bilingual students, attention is required to address the complexities and challenges of such students, of the diversity in this population, and of their urgent needs to acquire academic literacy, language proficiency, and content knowledge all at the same time.

The recent developments cited above flash a wake-up call for writing instructors, requiring them to become more engaged in improving students' writing skills beyond the predominant U.S. paradigm of process writing and the development of the authors' voice. Writing instruction in the context of academic skills requires taking a pro-active approach to better prepare Latina/o learners for successful experiences both within the formal educational system and beyond in their daily lives and chosen careers. One important factor of their preparation is helping them see themselves as having an academic identity, as learners with goals that can be articulated and achieved within the educational system. Taking on the identity of an active learner fosters their involvement, indeed engagement in their education and beyond.

A brief background on academic literacy

The recognition that academic literacy skills require urgent attention in the U.S. educational system is not new. One noticeable lacuna in the current academic discussion on Latina/o learners is the lack of connections with research conducted earlier, during the 1970s and 1980s regarding the difficulties African-American students experience in the educational system. For example, Shirley Brice Heath (*Ways with Words*, 1983) spent nine years in the South Piedmont area of the Carolinas working in three different elementary schools to learn what factors got in the way of the black students succeeding. She focused on the interactions between and among the poor black and the white students and their teachers, who are predominately white and middle class. One major finding was that the white middle class teachers posed questions to their poor black pupils in ways that differed noticeably from what they experienced in their homes and communities. For example, the children were not used to answering display questions where the answer is already known. There are reasons to assume similar problems may be occurring with Latina/o pupils and their classroom teachers (see, among others, Hernandez Zamora, 2010; Ramírez-Dhoore & Jones, 2007).

Another researcher who has contributed to our knowledge of what happens in classrooms that sets up discrimination and disadvantage is Courtney Cazden (2001). Several of her studies have documented the extent to which minority learners, perceived as low level students—linguistically and cognitively—are exposed to undemanding, rote learning activities that do not help them develop competencies in academic literacy skills. Cazden's work links with that of other researchers such as Gutierrez (1995) and Moll et al. (1980), who question labeling Latina/o students as "remedial" learners and only given tasks at lower cognitive levels. Moll (1988) studied how teachers adjusted social interactions to compensate for the social stratification that occurs with working class pupils where they do rote work and are not involved in decision-making or exercising choice. Multiple studies have focused on the extent to which the social class, not just color and gender, of the pupils influences how they are taught and what they are taught. Hernandez Zamora (2010) elaborates on the enactment of disadvantage both in and outside classrooms in by interviewing Mexican informants on both sides of the border.

A current example of non-specialized reading on this subject is the autobiography *My Beloved World* of Sonia Sotomayor (2013). She describes her experiences as an undergraduate student at Princeton University. It was not until she was a first year student there that she became aware of how much her spoken English was influenced by the Spanish language family environment of her Puerto Rican childhood in the Bronx. Spanish word order had heavily influenced her spoken English and affected her ability to achieve at higher levels beyond her Bronx high school.

This paper thus attempts to contribute knowledge and understanding of this complex territory. The differential and disadvantaging treatment of minority group learners such as Latinas/os derives from multiple sources, importantly from differences in class and sociocultural backgrounds that influence every aspect of the learners' lives from their primary or L1 languages to interpersonal interactional styles to the desire to achieve within U.S. academic and professional standards.

One point of clarification is due. Although this paper addresses issues of Latina/o students in the U.S., there is no doubt that this ethnic group is only the most recent to experience a period of transition from immigrant status to members of the U.S. mainstream. Several factors have caused an escalation of the situation: the population of Hispanics outnumbers that of other ethnic groups, in particular recent immigrants to the U.S. Further, the U.S. educational system has come under much scrutiny as high stakes international achievement tests demonstrate serious weaknesses of all U.S. students. Moreover, Latina/o immigrants are certainly not the only ones to arrive in U.S. schools with weak literacy skills. Despite the high standing of China on the international tests for math and science, for example, young people from China experience serious problems adapting to U.S. norms for academic writing (see, for example, Casanave & Li, 2008). There is a particularly contemporary source of the pressure on the U.S. educational system: the recognition that future progress in the U.S. depends on having a highly educated, technologically capable population of young people. This relatively new awareness can provide positive opportunities to leverage minority group members into the mainstream in the next decades.

Mexican literacy studies

The literature on the academic literacy development of Latina/o students includes publications from both north and south of the Mexican border. Studies of a more academic and statistical nature are those of Kalman (2008) on Latin America as a whole, Ortiz Casallas (2011) on Colombia, and Crawford (2010) on Mexico. These sources provide statistics on literacy from UNESCO and the World Bank, findings of research on strategies of student writers, and evidence of students' struggles to enter the academic discourse community. Perhaps the most relevant for the present paper is Crawford's on "The rhetorical clash of Mexican Spanish and American English" that incorporates sections on the historical origins of written Mexican Spanish, the standardization of Mexican Spanish, and perceived cultural differences between English and Spanish writing. He documents his findings with excerpts from compositions of ten participants in a research group. Crawford makes connections regarding the influence of the indigenous language of his students, Nahuatl, and their Spanish writing. The excerpts from the students' essays focused on the features of text structure, text organization, and the use of *rollo* (problem/issue) in their essays. Their conclusions and Crawford's as well emphasize the need for explicit instruction to help the learners become aware of the differences between Mexican Spanish and English academic writing and improve their multilingual writing skills.

Emphasizing classroom practices, Kirklighter, Cardenas, and Woff Murphy (2007)'s edited volume on teaching university level composition at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) in the U.S. draws on teachers' experiences at the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) and in California community colleges. The chapters elaborate on such topics as the limitations of new teachers in the local sociocultural context of South Texas and the HIS; the problems of transfer students from community colleges to four-year institutions in the California system; and the personal experiences of teachers seeking to develop a pedagogy for their underprepared learners in the situated context of UTPA.

The most elaborated recent contribution to the literature on Latina/o populations is Hernandez-Zamora's (2010) book, "Decolonizing Literacy: Mexican Lives in the Era of Global Capitalism."

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This volume is a very powerful exploration of literacy in the contemporary global world, involving literacy development despite the complexities of the sociohistorical and economic environment of the borderland area of Mexico and the U.S. Hernandez-Zamora takes a broader perspective on literacy when he argues that literacy is more than a "technical capacity;" rather, it entails developing one's voice for multiple purposes in particular for one's personal and social emancipation. The core of Hernandez-Zamora's work is case studies based on interviews with eight individuals on both sides of the border and on their efforts to become literate in the broader sense of Hernandez-Zamora's research agenda.

Plan for the paper

Having introduced this contribution by reviewing a small selection of the literature relevant to the macro context concerning the urgency for change in the academic skills development of Latina/o students in the U.S. educational system, I now turn to a project I carried out while I was a faculty member at a university in central Mexico during the first decade of this century. I focus in this paper on multilingual learners of Spanish/English within the Mexican educational system to help teachers in secondary and post-secondary institutions in the U.S. acquire a better understanding of learners in their classrooms. Given that many Latina/o students in the U.S. leave their home countries to live in the U.S. and often find themselves as ELLs in schools, their teachers can improve class lessons, materials, and curriculum informed by greater knowledge of learners' previous experiences. In addition, teachers of Latina/os can better understand their interpersonal needs and sociocultural origins, also important features. Teachers can thus motivate and support learners' efforts within the U.S. system to go beyond the ELL status to achieve academic success.

I use the phrase *multilingual writers* throughout this paper for three reasons. The acronym "ELL" is a loaded word and carries mostly negative connotations. Further, since the Latina/o learners at the center of this project were young adults, already in university, they would not be considered ELLs within the U.S. system. Thirdly, both adolescents and young adults in the U.S. system, in high school and in universities, can legitimately be considered multilingual writers. I take the view that such students can become proficient writers, functioning as educated professionals in their chosen careers using both their languages.

First of all, I summarize the findings of the Mexican agency CONACYT[i]-funded project I carried out in Central Mexico between 2000 and 2004. CONACYT (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología) is the Mexican Federal agency in charge of research and scholarship at a national level. There are three parts of the study. The first data collection of this ethnography contributes background information about what Mexican multilingual writers bring to the U.S., addressing such questions as how writing is taught, where textbooks are used, and what value is attached to writing within the Mexican educational system. I collected information from a variety of sources, even texts such as leaflets found in public offices to make parents aware of the need to encourage their children to read.

The second part of the study draws from participant accounts of teachers and students regarding writing instruction, formal and discourse features of writing, and attitudes regarding academic

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literacy skills. I discuss the sociolinguistic, educational, and ideological dimensions that are played out in the teaching of writing in the Mexican system of education.

The third part comprises insights based on a situated literacy case study of the writing practices of four bilingual students at the central Mexican university where I taught for five years. I was motivated by a desire to help researchers and teachers understand issues of this under-researched population regarding academic literacy from participants' perspectives. The voices of these multilingual writers form the core of this part of the overall study.

Finally, in the last sections of this paper, I draw on the findings of the CONACYT project, in addition to my own experiences with several populations of nonnative English speakers outside of Mexico (Quebec, New York City, Japan, Slovakia), to make pedagogical recommendations for U.S. writing instructors. Issues such as requiring grammatical and mechanical accuracy, providing feedback, and linking reading and writing all require instructor awareness and motivated implementation. Instructors can make progress in destroying the stereotype of Latina/o students as unable to develop the required academic literacy skills by means of targeted, demanding educational interventions informed by research and knowledge.

Background research in Mexico[ii]

The ethnography I conducted is a grounded examination of the sociocultural context of the participants and their literacy practices. The case study took place in the state of Puebla in Central Mexico, specifically in the local environment of the Universidad de las Americas-Puebla (UDLAP) and the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP). The findings are grounded as they come from the participants themselves and interpretations of the informants' discourse by the researcher and Mexican colleagues who also lived and worked in the same context. The impetus for the study came from my own experiences at the UDLAP where I taught academic writing to undergraduate students and directed M.A. theses in Applied Linguistics written in English or Spanish. Having carried out similar functions at universities in Japan and Slovakia, I wanted to understand what my Mexican students did in their written texts in both languages. I knew from research I conducted in Japan that there would be Mexican Spanish sociocultural explanations from several features of my students' rhetorical practices.

First of all, I searched for other researchers' publications involving comparisons of English and Spanish rhetorical practices; the literature on cross-rhetoric studies of multilingual writers led to useful insights. Two in particular illustrate features that concern writing instructors.

Neff et al. (2004) compared argumentative texts written by three different populations: (1) published, professional work by both English and Spanish writers; (2) Peninsula Spanish university students writing in their L1, Spanish, and their L2, English; and (3) L1 English writers at U.S. universities. Neff and colleagues studied both structural, i.e. linguistic, features as well as the organization of content information. They focused on the types of clauses and the number and types of connectors, all features to be discussed below. They found preferences for patterns derived from the L1 by all of the participants when they used subordinate clauses. However, they claim that the "loose coordination" (i.e. the long paragraph pattern with few explicit cohesive markers) can be attributed to the fact that the writers in the study were primarily

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novices. That result is not surprising given that many of the participants in the study were students and inexperienced writers. The features documented in Neff et al., specifically the patterns regarding subordinate clauses as well as the loose coordination, are characteristic of Spanish rhetorical style and are discussed below.

A second relevant study by Simpson (2000) examined paragraphs from articles published in academic journals written by expert native speakers of Latin American Spanish and of English, in their L1s. Simpson found that the evidence from the linguistic analysis supported earlier studies that characterize the Spanish rhetorical style as favoring elaborated structures with many additive clauses. A topical structural analysis showed a distinctive feature of Latin American Spanish to be the linking of ideas by means of extended, sequential clauses across a paragraph.

The search for published studies by Mexican scholars about writing practices evidenced a dearth of literature until the early 2000s. However, there were two that introduced concepts and findings of interest to writing instructors. Kalman (1999) carried out an ethnographic study of a small plaza off the main Zócalo in Mexico City where for centuries scribes have produced written texts, from love letters to government documents, for local citizens who may have lacked the literacy skills or simply been less confident of their skills. Kalman's work highlights the notion of scribes, a concept alive and well not only in Mexico (see below), but in fact in many parts of the world.

A study more directly relevant to the current paper is that of Del Rosal Vargas (2002), who researched his own students' L1 Spanish essay writing in an academic writing course he taught at the BUAP, the public university in the state of Puebla. He sought to understand reasons his students wrote essays without any evidence of argumentation, a feature of writing found to be important in Anglo-American norms. The students' essays were devoid of any explicit dialogue or discursive development of ideas; further, there was no evidence of a point of view or voice. This style had become conventionalized given the evidence in Del Rosal's study and experience. He argued that learners use this "safe" or encyclopedia-type style as a form of defensive stance in a school environment that prioritizes conformity and dependence. They had internalized the cultural restraint on expression of self within the formal education system. The writer as scribe may be an appropriate metaphor for this style.

These studies have contributed to an understanding of the sociocultural context of literacy skill development in Mexico. Then, in the first decade of the 21st century, several publications, cited above, have further augmented our knowledge base of Latina/o multilingual writers in their home countries. In particular, Crawford (2010) focused on the "rhetorical clash of Mexican Spanish and American English" and the awareness of his students of the differences by drawing data from their essays. He analyzed perceived differences, specifically regarding sentence length and text structure, finally discussing the value of raising students' awareness of the differences to intervene pedagogically in the classroom.

The following section details the sociocultural context of the informants in my project. The data collection consisted of written texts of the students (assignments they completed in the writing classes), a questionnaire, classroom observations, interviews with teachers and informants,

public documents, and data from tutorials with four students conducted by myself in the third part of the study. All the participants signed written consent forms.

For the first two parts of the study, the informants comprised students at both the UDLAP (n=46) and the BUAP (n=21). The first is a private university; the second, the public university for the state of Puebla. The UDLAP students were all non-language majors in their final semesters enrolled in an academic writing class taught by an English speaking teacher with advanced degrees from U.S./U.K. institutions. The BUAP informants were all English language majors enrolled in a linguistics course in the final semester of their B.A. program. Although the students came from different strata of the Mexican social structure, all of them had one thing in common: in response to one question on the questionnaire for the study, almost all expressed a desire to study, work, and/or live abroad in the future.

In addition, teachers of writing at the BUAP were interviewed about their perspectives on writing instruction in Mexican. There were five volunteer colleagues at the BUAP, all with master degrees in foreign language teaching or literature. However, none of them had any specialized training as writing instructors, a situation found as well in the U.S. educational system.

An example of text analysis

Before presenting a selection of the study findings, I present an example to illustrate the type of text structure found in Mexican Spanish writing. My purpose here is to set up the context for the discussion that follows. One M.A. student, a student under my direction, wrote his M.A. thesis in Spanish. What constitutes a paragraph in his text illustrates the features of Mexican Spanish style, used by multilingual writers I taught in content courses and supervised for their theses whether they wrote in Spanish or English.   Examples also abound in, for example, articles in Spanish language publications in contemporary Mexico.

My analysis is informed by a functional approach; the question underlying the analysis is: what does the writer do to communicate with the potential reader? The analysis starts with a description of the communicative intention underlying a linguistic items or parts of a sentence prior to assessing how the particular function is enacted linguistically. Error analysis is not the goal. Literacy practices are always situated; they develop over centuries in a particular sociocultural context. In Asian request business letters, for example, the writer starts by setting up the situation, including some background for the request, and some massaging of the reader before, towards the end of the letter, making the explicit request. I asked myself what reasons would underlie the Mexican Spanish writers' using such long sentences without explicit cohesive markers.

As a native English speaker teacher of academic writing, I noticed instances of non-standard usage in the texts of multilingual student writers: spelling errors, misuse of personal pronouns, long sentences, simple sentence structures, misplace commas, and semicolons, fused or run-on sentences, lack of cohesive markers/connectors, among others. I focused on the textual features found with high frequency in my informants' work. My choice was influenced by discussions

with colleagues at the same universities as well as others with experience with Mexican-Spanish writers in the U.S. and Mexico.

The unit of analysis is the conventional "sentence," defined as starting with a capital letter and ending with some form of final punctuation. In cross-rhetorical research, the "sentence" has more psycholinguistic validity than other units, such as the T-unit, often used as the basic unit of analysis.

The following is an example of one paragraph from the informant's M.A. thesis. This passage below comprises an example of the elaboration component, of the loose coordination with few explicit cohesive markers:

> *Al comparar el método comunicativo y participativo de la enseñanza de la matemática con el método de enseñanza tradicional, se encontró que el primero fue más eficiente sobre el segundo debido a que el método tradicional tiene una estructura rígida en su forma de enseñanza y en donde se hace énfasis en procedimientos rutinarios, fórmulas y demostraciones carentes de significado para los estudiantes, este tipo de procedimientos es para la mayoría de los estudiantes estériles, aburridos y carentes de sentido, fuera de contexto y del ámbito cultural de los estudiantes, además la imparticíon de la clase se realiza a través de monólogos par parte del maestro con lo que la parte interactiva de la enseñanza se pierde.*

> English translation: Comparing the communicative and participative method of teaching mathematics with the traditional method, one finds that the first one is more effective than the second, due to the traditional method having a rigid structure in its form of teaching and where emphasis is put on routine procedures, formulas, and demonstrations devoid of meaningfulness for the students. This type of procedure is for the majority of the students sterile, boring, and devoid of meaning, without context, and outside the cultural context of the students, in addition to the fact that the class is realized through monologues by the teacher where the interactive dimension of teaching is lost.

Below, a diagram of the text breaks down the constituent clauses to highlight how they are connected to form this paragraph. The linguistic connectors are in the boxes. The numbers indicate the conjugated verbs.

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There is an apparent mismatch of terms regarding English and Spanish academic writing practices. A sentence in English does not equal either *oración* (sentence) or *párrafo* (paragraph) in Spanish. The translation equivalents are not functional equivalents. For the M.A. student, this paragraph constitutes one sentence. In addition, the syntactic features follow Mexican/Spanish rhetorical practices. Typically, a sentence in English academic writing is composed of two or more main clauses, linked with a connector word, with other clauses embedded in one or both of the main clauses. In Mexican Spanish, what is called a *párrafo* can be expanded with additive clauses appended with only commas, as seen in the above example, or semicolons to join them. The result is a "run-on" or "fused" sentences in English. The example illustrates what might be labeled a "sentence-long paragraph" in Spanish.

Eliciting talk from students in writing classes as well as from graduate students about their own writing, I learned that, according to what they had been told (if they had received writing instruction earlier), all ideas related or linked to the main idea of a "paragraph" should be kept together. This is also what students are taught to do in writing classes in English. However, whereas American English has gone through some campaigns to make written texts more reader friendly, anecdotal evidence from Mexican multilingual writers suggests they were instructed to build "paragraphs" that include all related ideas. In fact, one student explained that such paragraphs are viewed in a positive light: it is considered to be more polite to write such "sentences," demonstrating to the professor, the main reader of the essays, how intelligent one is by writing long sentences. This notion of politeness of written texts, not frequently included in any discussion of appropriacy in U.S. writing instruction classes, is found as well in Asian literature on the subject.

Thus, what is appropriate language usage in formal, written texts in English and in Spanish varies according to the sociocultural context. The writer of the example above had communicative purposes in mind in writing the text as he did following the norms of his cultural background. Indeed, part of his cultural capital comprised his ability to use his L1, in this M.A. thesis, to attend to the face needs of its readers, specifically to engage in polite behavior.

In addition to the longer sentence structure in the above example, there is a noticeable lack of explicit cohesive devices, in comparison to native English speaker rhetorical practices, in the texts of Mexican writers. Coherence is signaled by a variety of linguistic as well as non-linguistic means. It can be enacted without surface level connectors in Spanish, according to von Mentz (2001); coherence is after all a cognitive dimension that does not require explicit markers in texts in any language.

Another means to signal cohesion is punctuation markers, including the comma and semi-colon. Regarding punctuation conventions, there are two interpretations of the origin of the markers. In contrast to English (Halliday, 1989), the system for Peninsular Spanish (REAL, 1999) is based on regarding commas and other intrasentential markers as representing breathe pauses in the stream of speech in written texts. This convention concerning the placement of commas differs from the norms for punctuation markers in a language such as English that follows a different set of norms.

In addition to differences in punctuation conventions, there are beliefs and practices that arise regarding the oral and written codes in Spanish. The written code has been historically associated with elite groups of society. This practice likely developed from the fact that only members of the elites were literate. Even today, Mexican students are taught that in *la lengua culta* [cultured language] more subordination is required whereas in less *culta* texts, more coordination and more commas are noticeable. Thus, there is a diglossic situation regarding the high variety (written code) and the low variety (oral code), a fact that is not surprising given the problems of literacy development in Mexico (See Hernandez-Zamora, 2010). The prioritizing of the high variety as the norm for writing in Spanish is reinforced by views that the "cultured" style is also regarded as more "polite" and that it signals higher intellectual ability on the part of the writer. Such influences are found not only in the Mexican Spanish context. ELLs from countries without high levels of literacy are likely to be influenced by this diglossic pattern in their primary language(s).

This summary of the summary and analysis of one Mexican Spanish informant's writing both illustrates a sampling of the influences on the literacy skills of Mexican-origin students in the U.S. educational system. Although the example above is in Spanish, all of the features observed and discussed were found in all of the extended texts of multilingual writers over the five years I taught in Mexico. Now I turn to a description of writing instruction in the Mexican educational system from the point of view of the learners and the teachers.

Mexican educational system

The Ministry of Education, the *Secretaría de Educacíon Pública* (SEP), engages in promotion of the need for literate citizens by several means, including large posters in prominent places and pamphlets urging parents to expose their children to simple reading and writing activities. The actual teaching of literacy begins formally at the start of the six years of formal education in the primary school. The focus is on the communicative use of language, not on writing per se. The *how* of writing is not included. During the secondary school period of three years, the grammar and literary aspects of Spanish are studied. Finally, for students who intend to continue their education at a preparatory school (senior high school in the U.S. system) the curriculum includes reading and writing courses along with some instruction in the use of the library where students learn how to carry out small research projects and use academic writing skills. There is a noticeable lack of attention, however, to writing skills development.

Geography plays an influential role in the Mexican educational system. In the rural areas, there may be no preparatory level schools at all, a circumstance that forces families with the financial resources to send their adolescent children to urban areas to live with extended family members while they continue their education. Note that required, state-supported education does not continue beyond the secondary level. Further, there may not be enough schools or teachers, let along trained teachers, to continue public education beyond the mandated secondary level.

Regarding the teaching of writing, both anecdotal evidence and questionnaire findings reveal that unexamined beliefs and practices plague the educational system. Writing instructors follow the policy that mere practice in writing is sufficient. Copying passages, following models of literary writers, and playing it safe with the non-dialogue style studied by Del Rosal comprise writing instruction, indicating a lack of awareness that writing needs to be explicitly taught over time. Note that two U.S. based researchers of the Mexican educational system, Vaughan (1997) and Levinson (2001), claim that the Mexican government seeks to promote equal education up to the end of the secondary school. Given this policy, there may be a de-emphasis of anything that smacks of elitism. There is no assumption that underlies the U.S. system that all students will go on to tertiary education. Further, it is generally claimed by the media, academics, and scholars in Mexico that reading literacy skills are very weak in Mexico. Many Mexicans view their own country as not being "a reading public." Consequently, the extensive and intensive reading recognized as a necessary base for development of writing skills is missing.

Classroom observation data of primary school classrooms describe the role of writing as a means for students to learn to write during the first years whereas in the last two years, textbooks and teachers focus on having learners write short texts, again to practice the mechanics of writing and achieve accuracy. At the secondary level, writing becomes part of the daily activities in class and for homework. At the preparatory level, writing is linked to reading. Students study passages, looking for the main points of each paragraph. It is assumed the students can apply what they learn through the analysis of the textbook passages to their own writing without any further instruction.

Much attention is given to orthography and punctuation rather than to the communicative functions of, for example, the accent marks on words. No rules are proposed for punctuation to be memorized for their L1. Levinson (2001) highlights the great emphasis on correctness and there is tolerance for mere copying of what can be found in the textbooks. The students function as scribes (see above) rather than as creators of texts. As long as the SEP requirements are met, teachers are not concerned with teaching how to write, how to develop an argument, or what the student may have learned composing a text.

A review of the few textbooks that are available in bookstores for preparatory and university level instruction demonstrates the most important features of writing in the Mexican context that are assumed to be important for academic skill development: punctuation, accentuation, correctly copying assigned passages, verb tenses and gerunds, prepositions, sentences (*oraciones*), common spelling errors, and figures of speech. Thus, much attention is given to form, to producing scribes that can create completely accurate texts.

Note that of the textbooks that are available in the bookstores, even those published in Spanish, display a strong influence from composition books for native English speaker students in the U.S. Although Mexican teachers and students do not favor these textbooks, viewing them as too heavily influenced by non-Mexican, non-Spanish sources, those written and published in Mexico tend to be limited to grammar, common errors, and figurative language use with passages taken from primarily literary sources. Any analysis of these materials must take into consideration that they only represent the overt curriculum, i.e. what the Ministry of Education wants to have taught. It is difficult to know what individual teachers do in their classrooms.

In terms of reference materials, such as dictionaries or style sheets (e.g. the APA, Chicago Manual of Style), the only similar document is the *REAL Académica Espanola* (1999), published by the Peninsula Spanish national authority for that language, similar to the *Académie Française* in France. The *REAL Espanola* includes a dictionary and a handbook on spelling, accentuation, and punctuation. Thus, materials for academic writing are limited in Mexico and do not address such areas as citations and text organization that are regarded as basic in the English publishing world.

Teachers' perspectives

Now I turn to summarizing what I learned from interviews with the teachers and students who participated in the project.

The teacher informants all taught in secondary or preparatory schools. They claimed to be discouraged about how writing is taught in the Mexican system. Their discomfort was partially due to the negative attitudes of the students who criticized the combining of reading and writing, taught not as a skill to be developed, but rather as a means to test comprehension. Paraphrasing, summary writing, and translation were particularly used for that purpose. The mandated curriculum from the SEP has strict directions for summary writing, for example. As for the process approach to writing, with multiple drafts, the teachers were also discouraged because they had no time to give feedback to the students. Indeed, error correction or feedback, although known to the teachers, was relegated to self-correction by the students themselves and pair/group

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work. The emphasis is on orthography, grammatical correctness, and the physical appearance of students' work. They noted that the use of cohesive or discourse markers is not taught as cohesion is carried out differently in Spanish, i.e. not generally through the use of the linguistic resources as for English. Plagiarism is not addressed. What tends to happen is that if the author of a passage in the textbook is famous, then students copy what is in the passage. In general, copying texts is tolerated as it does serve to demonstrate that learners can do some writing.

Finally, the teachers gave their views on the role of reading in teaching writing skills. nAfter citing the generally held view that Mexico is a country with serious literacy problems, they strongly stated the need for a writing-across-the-curriculum approach rather than having language and literature teachers being solely responsible for learners' writing skills development.

Learners' perspectives

A questionnaire to collect information on informants' previous experiences with writing instruction was administered, first of all, to 67 students, 21 at the public university and 46 at the private institution. This self-report instrument revealed several interesting and relevant findings.

First, the respondents indicated that, because writing was always used as a means to check comprehension, with no or little instruction about writing as a skill, they could not claim that they had had any writing instruction. Further, those that claimed to have had writing instruction had all attended private schools, reflecting the greater resources found in that sector of the educational system in Mexico.

Second, another question asked about techniques teachers used most frequently where there was some instruction about writing skills. The most frequently used strategies were: lecturing about writing, discussions about the topic, writing in class, explicit instruction on patterns of organization (e.g. for compare and contrast essays), writing research papers, and direct teaching of grammar with exercises. The questionnaire data do not permit an assessment of how much time, for example, a teacher would spend on lecturing in contrast with the time students spent doing grammar exercises.

Third, the informants were also asked to describe their perceptions of what teachers emphasized in assigning grades. Most of the students claimed that teachers were most interested in clarity of the main idea, correct grammar and spelling, and punctuation. A small number also added "using good examples and details to illustrate main ideas" and "originality and imagination."

Finally, four students who participated in the second part of the project (see below) made claims in unstructured interviews with the researcher that they did not get the kind or amount of feedback they needed to improve their skills. Feedback, i.e. correction or negative evidence, almost exclusively came in a whole class context or in pairs/groups. Second, the writing tasks functioned solely as a means to award grades and for disciplinary purposes. A teacher would simply put a check in a grade book and the student never saw the paper again.

Situated study of four students

This next section reports on the part of the CONACYT study of four students' literacy practices in their local sociocultural context at the UDLAP. It is in this context that their academic identities as multilingual writers become transparent; it is clear they are seeking to improve their writing skills in English for potential future matriculation at a U.S. university or for professional opportunities elsewhere in the world. They were all enrolled in a Chicano literature course, taught in English by an American native English speaker faculty member. The instructor encouraged the students in his class to volunteer to work with me, the researcher, to take advantage of the opportunity to work one on one to get feedback on the assigned essays for the course.

The framework for this part of the project assessed the gap between teacher expectations and student interpretations regarding academic writing norms. While research shows that writing instructors have strongly held views about what constitutes good writing, they are unable to give clear explanations to students. The negative effect of this recognized weakness in writing instruction is particularly salient for second language learners. This situated study compared the instructor's articulated expectations in (1) the course syllabus, (2) email memos to the students, and (3) brief interview data with the researcher with the students' efforts to produce appropriate writing assignments for the course. Using the students' essay drafts and audio taped tutorial sessions with me, a view of the informants' efforts and identities as multilingual writers emerged.

First, I engaged in exploratory talk with the students, using questions to elicit their views of their writing practices. The bulk of the data was derived from elicited talk as the informants introspected on their essay drafts, strategies, and reactions, in particular, on their efforts to meet the instructor's expectations for what their interpreted to be a good essay. The informants signed permission forms.

The analysis of the tutorial data revealed three recurring themes in the students' talk: attention to formal linguistic features, discourse features, and related literacy practices. The first two themes reflect the expectations of the instructor; the third comprises concerns that went beyond the overt syllabus. The students presented themselves as able to reflect critically on their writing practices through the interactions with the researcher who facilitated the discourse, avoiding imposition of her point of view. The following includes a selection of examples from the three categories.

Linguistic features

The first example involves attention to word choice.

> Francisco: "Bad" treatment is the same thing as "poor" treatment? …
> VL: I think that "bad" is a word that is used more when we talk, in conversation, whereas "poor" treatment is ....
> Francisco: Okay.

In the second example, Marco asks for help with punctuation. As noted in the text analysis example above, punctuation rules differ in the two languages.

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To make these sentences to have a specific sense, I use a lot of commas, but in English I realized, that we don't have to use so much commas. [I] don't know if this comma should be there or if it would be better if I don't or the sense is changed without the comma. I'm really used to use a lot of commas in Spanish, but in English I have to use just a few.

Discourse features

This example from the second theme brings up one structural feature of extended texts.

Marco: Because the limit extension of the essay was 1000 words, I couldn't make a better conclusion. I prefer a conclusion after each paragraph. So here could be a conclusion, here another, and the end there's another.... I know it's not the right way to write conclusions, but because of I have a lot of things to say and then I crashed with the limit of the essay, I preferred to give other conclusions throughout the essay.

Marco explains the dilemma he faced regarding where conclusions are embedded, opting to use his own style, very likely to be the preferred style in Mexican Spanish rhetorical practices.

Beyond the syllabus features

The third theme comprises references to issues for the informants that had not come up in the course with the instructor in any explicit manner. This first example of this theme concerns the language of the first draft, a topic often discussed in composition courses for non-natives English speakers in the U.S.

Maru: So I start to write, and, put it in English….
VL: So basically you do the whole thing in Spanish first.
Maru: Yeah, for me it is easier to think in Spanish.
VL: Words or sentences and everything?
Maru: No, not all the sentences, like ideas, the principal ideas, I put it in Spanish.

Maru had probably figured out earlier in her educational career that writing an entire paper in Spanish that then had to be translated into English was not a good use of her time.

The second example demonstrates awareness of style; rather than using the labels *formal* and *informal*, Marco distinguishes the two styles with more colloquial terms.

VL: This is more related to style.
Marco: Okay, but it would be very if I just put it out, is more uh, *elegante*?
Elegant?… The problem is the style because I'm still using a, kid style….
VL: Let's say…high school.

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> Marco: Yeah, more, sophisticated language: I'm now in university and I have to write better papers than this one, to prove the vocabulary.

The following example presents a question about expressing their own voices, specifically their opinions in their compositions.

> Maria: I wasn't sure if that should put like my opinion. I don't think so because I haven't put my opinion in anyone. It's a critical essay so I shouldn't, no?

One interpretation of Maria's question suggests teacher intervention at some point in her education when she learned that bringing in her own voice has no place in academic essays.

These few selected examples from the tutorial sessions with the researcher demonstrate the participants' concerns about formal as well as discoursal features of their essays: lexical choice, punctuation, and the organization of information. They went beyond the instructor's stated directions to discuss the language of their first drafts, formal versus informal style, their voice in the texts, and, indirectly, their identities as writers.

Conclusions of the study

What does this situated study tell writing teachers in the U.S. about the participants? Working with the researcher, an experienced teacher of academic writing in several geographic locations, the students had an exceptional opportunity to improve their writing skills. Most Mexican students in their own sociocultural environment would not have this kind of educational experience. Thus, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about how to teach Latina/o students in the U.S. Nevertheless, this study illustrates salient features of this demographic of learners as follows:

1. These informants could discuss their concerns, bringing up questions they wanted answered, however seemingly mundane. One of the participants checked whether or not he had to use verbs in all parts of sentences in English. Verbs are a basic feature of any language and he needed his confusion to be addressed.
2. They were highly motivated to do well in the course and to improve their writing skills in general for whatever they might find themselves doing in the future. They knew those skills were important in both languages.
3. They had academic identities as these examples illustrate. They wanted help and they took advantage of the opportunity to get help.
4. The examples and others included in LoCastro, 2013, focus on predominantly linguistic features: grammar, word choice, punctuation, and information structure. These are features of writing unfortunately not taught in U.S. K-12 schools, a result of pedagogical trends over the last several decades. Yet these informants in Mexico had some awareness of the importance of these features and sought help to improve their basic writing skills.

The next section of this paper is devoted to recommendations for the type of pedagogical interventions needed by Latina/o students in the U.S. The list is based in part on the findings of

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the studies discussed above, knowledge of Second Language Acquisition research, and extensive and intensive experiences of as researcher, teacher, and multilingual writer.

Pedagogical implications for U.S. educators

U.S. writing instructors face high stakes decision making, taking into consideration the non-native English speaker students in their classes and preparing curricula and materials to help learners develop their multilingual writing skills. First of all, in reviewing samples of students' writing, usually collected the first day of class, instructors are likely to notice a wide-range of linguistic, formal/mechanical, and information structure levels, from students who may have had little or no experience writing extended texts in their primary language to those who had some composition classes in their earlier education years. Students still at the developmental (inexperienced) level may need more intensive instruction work in writing instruction at U.S. secondary and tertiary institutions, coming from all countries of the world, even from those who take pride in high levels of literacy.

There are significant sociolinguistic and educational differences across ethnic or cultural groups. Anecdotal evidence from Japan, for example, of student writing at the post-graduate level suggests that junior and senior high schools as well as universities in that country vary considerably with regards to the quality of instruction its students receive to become proficient writers of their L1, least of all in English as a foreign language. As for China, students coming from urban areas of that country differ vastly from those who were educated in rural areas. Thus, Latina/o learners are by no means the only ethnic group that struggles to acquire the ability to write well according to U.S. academic norms. The emergent bilingual students that Menken (2013) has studied are often hidden in the push to categorize learners as either requiring language support (ELLs) or no longer needing language support.

These generalizations about the diversity of the population of students without high levels of language proficiency, academic skills, and content knowledge are also valid for the U.S. One recent publication (Woody 2013) reports on recent statistics for the state of Colorado regarding gains in state writing, math, and science test scores for Hispanic and ELL students and those in the Free or Reduced Lunch Program (FARM). Here, it is not so much rural vs. urban environments as it is the socioeconomic background of the students in Colorado's K-12 system.

Further, it is not entirely clear that multilingual writers will have first learned to write extended texts in their L1 before being required to adopt the standards of the L2. Research in bilingualism makes the claim that literacy in the L1 is a highly significant step to support learners' cognitive development that must occur before immersing children in a program entirely in the L2. One issue for writing instructors is then the extent to which the non-native English-speaking students in their classes already have academic writing skills in their L1. An additional concern involves identification of a student's L1; in Mexico and other Latin American countries, a local indigenous language may, in fact, be a student's primary language of communication and their spoken and certainly written literacy in Spanish may be influenced by that L1 and or underdeveloped.

In sum, even the most conscientious writing instructors with lots of intellectual curiosity, confront a confusing array of factors embedded in the context of working with Latina/o students to improve their academic writing skills. Further, instructors may confront themselves, in teachers' rooms and school corridors, and at conferences and workshops, the dilemma of respecting diversity, as embedded in students' dialects, ways of thinking and writing, and cultural practices, and the constant questioning about what to do in classrooms to bridge the achievement gap between those students' literacy skills and what is required for success in high school, university, and beyond. Cultural diversity does not sit well with academic literacy skills (Villanueva, 1997). Hernandez-Zamora (2010) addresses these issues in much more details beyond the scope of this paper.

An interventionist stance

In the following section, I outline dimensions and strategies of an interventionist approach to help instructors work with Latina/ learners in their classrooms. My perspective could be criticized by some researchers as a monolingual perspective (see Menken, 2013) as I assume that the instructional practices outlined below are most likely carried out in English and that the goal is to help the students improve their proficiency level and academic skills in that language. While I acknowledge that my perspective does not take into consideration in particular the emergent students described above, I take a pragmatic, problem-solving stance here in urging action be taken now to ameliorate the current situation and Latina/o students' emergent needs.

My choice of an interventionist perspective is motivated by several factors. First, as a nontraditional student myself, from an immigrant family, living in Central New Jersey, I was fortunate enough to have K-12 and university instructors who were prescriptive in their standards and very demanding in all subject areas, including English classes. Second, the results of the study I carried out opened my eyes to what the Mexican informants required in terms of writing instruction and what they brought to the experience of working with me. I also found direct articulation of non-native English speaking students concerning their writing instructional needs in countries like Japan, Slovakia, Mexico, and the U.S. Third, I recently read Sonia Sotomayor's autobiography (2013), *My Beloved World*, and found that her reflections on her own educational experiences in the Bronx resonated with my own and my beliefs and values regarding a more interventionist approach. Latina/o students deserve much more and much higher quality of instruction than they have been getting.

Here, then, is a list of interventions for inclusion in instructors' repertoires of classroom practices. I have attempted to categorize them into three areas: (1) Social dimensions; (2) Instruction and classroom management; and (3) Macro-level development. The first group of recommendations includes aspects of teaching that can be implemented both outside and inside the classroom that have to do with affective dimensions of the educational environment. The second category attempts to develop a more inclusive worldview for instruction in classrooms. The final section is more elaborated and brings in a variety of issues. Researchers such as Moll (1992) have studied in great detail the various socio-historical factors that influence instructional practices. Each one of the points below is worthy of a research project. Note that the three categories are not mutually exclusive.

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These recommendations could be criticized for the lack of empirical research. Due to the urgency of the need for change in the educational system, I have chosen to map out a view of teaching drawn from years of my own practice as a reflective teacher in various places in the world as well as the results of my two ethnographic research studies and other projects I have carried both within and outside classrooms. In addition, the list reflects the work of other scholars in applied linguistics and education, too numerous to cite here.

A. Social dimensions: outside and inside the classroom

    1. Learn students' names and how to pronounce them as accurately as possible with the Latina/o pronunciation
    2. Become knowledgeable regarding their backgrounds. Learn about their neighborhoods, families. Read about their history as well as contemporary literature. Watch movies that are important to Latinas/os. Establish links with their communities, attend picnics, baseball games, etc.
    3. Build trust: greet each and every student in halls and outside school to show respect and develop bonds with the students.
    4. Be strict and demanding at the start of each school year/semester, and then ease up from time to time, especially regarding individual students. Nevertheless, show respect by treating students equally, providing equal opportunities for learning.
    5. Learn about the function of literacy in their daily lives, in Spanish as well as in English. What is the language of the home? With whom? What are their attitudes towards writing and reading, family expectations of their futures, availability for space at home to do homework and writing assignments?

B. Instruction/ classroom management

    1. On the first day of class, have students do an in-class writing assignment on a topic such as a recent event in their community, city, and state. Give them an academic topic to assess both their writing abilities as well as their potential to develop academic content knowledge. Use this task as a diagnostic tool. Do not grade these, but do give them feedback, while keeping copies for the teacher to refer to from time to time.
    2. Assume learners will have different levels of English proficiency and writing skills. Assume each class is a heterogeneous group and be ready to provide individual support for different students or groups of students.
    3. Give regular and detailed feedback on assignments. Don't use a red pen. Underline, circle and otherwise indicate errors. Use a rubric with categories (see various online sources). Do indicate errors of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Give feedback on such features as flow of information, argumentation by using restatements or reformulations.
    4. Discuss upfront with learners the process vs. the product approach and creative writing vs. academic writing. Do a mix of the process and product approaches, but use demanding academic topics only. Draw attention to the need to revise, produce multiple drafts, with the teacher giving feedback at every stage.

5. Set up writing labs during regular class sessions. Give some students silent time to read and write, working alone, while conferencing with others. Encourage them to ask the teacher at your desk and/or circulating to monitor work for help.

6. Do lots of traditional exercises: outlining, mental maps, sentence diagramming, combining sentences to form more complex structures, punctuation, paragraphing, summarizing, and paraphrasing. Push students to compose more complex sentences and to become more correct. Reward them with praise only when they make progress.

7. Train them how to use paper and online dictionaries, thesauruses, synonym dictionaries, and spelling and online grammar checks. Also introduce them to the local library with facilities and quiet areas where they can do homework, read, and get help from staff if needed for searches for books, and so forth.

8. Use pair and group work sparingly: students need prescriptive adult help, not just from peers. Scaffolding may occur with peers, but it is not likely. When using groups, do not allow the same students to always work together. Have them count off and use other means to get mixing of students. Further, have the pair/group work be motivated, serving a clearly articulated purpose; avoid giving learners the impression the teacher is using group work as a form of baby-sitting.

9. Have required tutorials to do several things. It can help students gain confidence. It empowers them when they can talk about their work and themselves with an adult; it helps them develop an academic identity and gives them direct help with their own questions.

10. Regarding tutorials, teach the students how to elicit the help they need to improve their writing skills. Demonstrate how to elicit their concerns, questions, and requests for direct feedback. Avoid a strongly judgmental attitude. Learn how to listen and help them learn to do the same. In sum, help them develop their identities as self-actualizing learners.

11. Work together with all of the students to analyze texts for all kinds of features. Help them develop the metalanguage for analysis and for asking about content and language.

C. Macrolevel development

1. Learn about the students in your class regarding their backgrounds. It is helpful to try to obtain answers to the following questions. However, be sensitive to evidence that individual students may not to want to share this information with their peers.

   o Literate in Spanish? In English?
   o Heritage learners?
   o Possess productive vs. receptive skills in English? Spanish?
   o The language used at home? With whom?
   o Use a standard variety of Spanish? Indigenous language? Or another language?
   o Possess proficiency in Spanish for academic skills?
   o Possess proficiency in English for academic skills?
   o Tracked academically?
   o Had previous educational experiences? Where? For how long?
   o Have friendships with people within or outside their L1 community?

- o Work part time or full time work? Doing what? Where? In which language?
- o From Mexico? Of Mexican origin? Other Spanish-speaking country?
- o Had interruptions in formal schooling?
- o Family responsibilities?

2. Link writing to reading, especially focus on how reading can provide learners with content information for writing assignments as well as exposing them to good writing about complex topics.
3. Prepare them to give oral presentations on what they have written as well as what they have read, emphasizing the use of academic language in the spoken language.
4. Include topics of interest to Latina/o students in the reading and writing assignments. Academic or informational topics, not just street culture, pop culture, or IT topics, must be considered. Work with content teachers the students in your classes have to find topics that they need to write about and can write about.
5. Be knowledgeable about different groups within the Latina/o population and local community, in particular. Be sensitive to and aware of the diversity and possible tensions. Watch for any marginalization or stigmatization of small groups or individuals. Set a policy of equal opportunity and equity.
6. Recognize the tension between acceptance of diversity as can be seen in classrooms, i.e. linguistic and cultural diversity, and the need for Latina/o students to become proficient in academic skills.
7. Talk about writing being as important as IT skills, as another skill to have in their repertoire of competencies.
8. Observe, listen, discuss/dialogue with students to derive instructional insights from the classroom environment, from interactions with and among students, and from the community context.
9. Put aside personal opinion and creative writing assignments. Work on style, opinion vs. facts, formal/informal style features, and so forth. Focus on helping the learners develop their voices as emergent academics and professionals.
10. Learn about Mexican group-oriented cultural practices in classrooms and in writing. Displaying politeness and respect in writing is an important feature of writing in any language and culture. Discuss rhetorical differences in classrooms.
11. Set up a classroom lending library of relevant books and other materials for use in class during silent, working periods and to be loaned to students for outside reading and work.
12. Develop a plan within the school to assess the Latina/o students' language proficiency in their first and second languages. Latina/o students need to have both their oral and written language skills reviewed in order to understand what their needs are. For example, Mexican-origin students in communities along the U.S.-Mexican border may appear to be fluent in English. However, they may not be sufficiently literate in English or Spanish to benefit from being placed in classes where they do not get help to improve their reading and writing skills. Further, their oral language skills may be limited to the local variety of English, to talking primarily in the local variety of Spanish or using a translanguage[iii] (3) with friends. They may lack the vocabulary, level of accuracy in their English vernacular, and the more complex sentence structures to engage in, for example, giving a presentation on a content-based topic in classrooms.

Note that these issues are not easily addressed. Although ostensibly "fluent" in English, these emergent learners need to be placed in programs where they can develop their *biliteracy* or *translanguage* competence, in what may be called *additive* language programs. Their proficiency in English may not be adequate to benefit from content courses without at least additional work with teachers trained to provide support.

13. Become aware of the limitations of current practices regarding what is called the *minority gap* or *achievement gap*. Research about literacy skills development seeks to develop a deeper understanding than is currently possible for many classroom teachers about adolescent literacy and illustrate actual applications in daily classrooms where teachers struggle to deal with daily manifestations of less than adequate progress towards higher levels of academic literacy. Callahan (2005), for example, looked at interactions of several variables: English language proficiency, track placement, content-area knowledge in subjects, previous schooling, and the number of years in the U.S. schools. Her results demonstrated that track placement, where content-area academics is emphasized, was a better predictor of student academic success than English language proficiency. Quality instruction in general is what needs to be emphasized, according to Callahan.

Snow and Biancarosa (2003) summarize the state of affairs regarding the "achievement gap" in a report entitled "Adolescent Literacy and the Achievement Gap: What do we know and where do we go from here?" published by the Carnegie Corporation. Having assessed multiple studies of African-American, Latina/o, English Language Learners, and students from low-income backgrounds, they conclude that one key factor regarding the achievement gap is literacy skills, in particular, learning how to use reading to learn. According to Snow and Biancarosa, much is known about teaching how to read words on pages, but too little knowledge supports effective teaching practices to help learners "learn to read to learn" (page 1 of Executive Summary, 2003).

Conclusions

This contribution has included sections that introduce the current state of affairs in the U.S. regarding academic literacy development of minority groups, some relevant literature, followed by a review of two ethnographic-like studies carried out at a central Mexican university between 2000 and 2004 to learn about the background, academic writing skills, and literacy practices of multilingual student writers. The purpose has been to draw from those sources of information to highlight the situation of the Latina/o population in particular. The overriding goal of this paper has been to be helpful to teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in the educational system, specifically the secondary and tertiary levels, in the United States. Given the research findings and my own professional background and experience internationally with a variety of multilingual learners, I have proposed recommendations for consideration by colleagues engaged in teaching Latina/o students in the U.S. The topic is vast, complex, and immensely important. If this population of learners is to overcome the multiple hurdles to enter college, graduate, and go on to professional careers, much more is required of an educational system already under duress. Yet, the future of this demographic in the U.S. educational system and beyond demands motivated and informed attention.

One topic not addressed in this paper is the issue of teacher preparation. This highly controversial topic as evidenced in the mass media goes beyond the purview of this paper. The literature on the topic is predictably extensive. One example which hits directly on the needs of preparing teachers to work with ELLs is an article by De Jong and Harper, "Preparing mainstream teachers for English-language learners: Is being a good teacher good enough?" (2005). Clearly, the demands placed on teachers of emergent bilingual learners entails specialized training; Menken (2013:467) suggests special certification is required. There is no doubt in my mind that teaching practices for this population go beyond "being a good teacher," and that solid background knowledge of what the students bring to the classroom is mandatory to implement informed and motivated practices, within and beyond the classrooms.

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[i] CONACyT or Consejo nacional de ciencía y tecnología (The National Council for Science and Technology) has a mission of furthering innovation and the development of science and technology in Mexico. It provides scholarships as well as grants for postgraduate research.

[ii] For a full description and sources for the studies, see LoCastro, 2008 and 2013

[iii] Translanguage refers to the spoken language and literacy practices of multilingual individuals. Menken (2013) uses this term to highlight the language skills of such students and to move beyond the deficit perspective too often used to address their educational needs.