Hispanic Undergraduate Students' Perspectives on Academic Language and Self-Representation in Academic Writing[1]

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Abstract

In recent years researchers and educators have engaged in serious discussions on how to improve college access and graduation rates among underrepresented groups in the United States. For language minority students an evident challenge is the socialization into academic discourses which requires the acquisition of literacy practices of mainstream students. Understanding academic discourse socialization as a complex process that involves negotiation of power and identity, this study sought to answer the following questions: (1) What are the study participant Hispanic students' perspectives on academic language? (2) Based on their understanding of academic language, how do the students negotiate self-representation in writing within the constraints posed by academic language conventions? Five Hispanic undergraduate students participated in this study which relied on the following data sources: a language history survey; a focus group interview; analysis of students' written reflections; an individual interview. Using the academic literacies model (Lea & Street, 2006) and Gee's (1996) discourse theory as framework to make sense of data, three main categories emerged: Students' perspectives on academic language, academic discourse socialization and reward, and struggling to socialize. Each category is separately analyzed and discussed. Implications for teaching and further research are addressed in the conclusion section.

Resumen

En las décadas recientes, investigadores y educadores se han concentrado en la cuestión de cómo mejorar el acceso a la educación superior y las tasas de graduación de los grupos minoritarios en los Estados Unidos. Uno de los retos para los hablantes de lenguas minoritarias es su socialización en el uso del lenguaje académico y esto implica un proceso de adquisición de prácticas de literacidad que son comunes entre los grupos dominantes. Tomando esta socialización como un proceso complejo que incluye negociaciones de poder e identidad, este estudio intenta responder las siguientes preguntas: (1) ¿Cuáles son las perspectivas de los estudiantes hispanos participantes acerca del lenguaje académico? (2) Tomando en cuenta sus perspectivas, ¿cómo se representan los estudiantes a sí mismos en sus escritos dentro de los límites impuestos por el lenguaje académico? El presente estudio examina la participación de cinco estudiantes hispanos de licenciatura en una universidad en la frontera México-EE.UU. Las conclusiones presentan los datos obtenidos mediante: un cuestionario sobre su historia lingüística, una entrevista de grupo de enfoque, el análisis de reflexiones escritas de los estudiantes y entrevistas individuales. Basado en el modelo de literacidades académicas (Lea & Street, 2006) y la teoría del discurso propuesto por Gee (1996), surgieron tres categorías en el análisis de datos: las perspectivas de los estudiantes acerca del lenguaje académico; su socialización en el mismo lenguaje y los beneficios asociados con eso, así como sus luchas para socializarse. Este articulo trata cada categoría discretamente y discute las implicaciones para la enseñanza y para futuras investigaciones.

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Introduction

College readiness and retention in the U.S, particularly with underrepresented groups, are issues that have gained increasing importance among scholars. Ensuring college access and completion is crucial especially among Hispanics considering the high dropout rates. In 2008, secondary level dropout rates among Hispanics were 18.3% as opposed to 4.8% among whites (NCES, 2010). In higher education, white youth beginning at community colleges were nearly twice as likely as their Hispanics counterparts to finish a bachelor's degree (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004).

A national survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center (2009) shows that 89% of Hispanic youth acknowledge the importance of education, however; only 48% of that number planned to attend college. Reported reasons were financial pressure followed by Hispanics' negative perception of their English skills. Negative self-perception related to language skills among language minority groups reflect the power relations surrounding literacy – as society favors mainstream language and linguistic codes, minority students are denied access or are gradually excluded from certain spheres, such as postsecondary institutions (Street & Heath, 2008).

In the attempt to improve academic success among minorities, remedial classes are offered; however, those classes have proven to be ineffective due to "unproductive and weak strategies for literacy learning" (Gutierrez, Morales & Martinez, 2009, p. 225) and a technical approach to literacy with overemphasis on basic skills. With regard to the postsecondary level, Valdés (2006) draws attention to the high numbers of referrals of functional bilingual students to remedial ESL classes as a result of a lack of understanding of certain features that characterize these students' writing due to fossilization that can occur at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic levels. As Valdés (2006) points out, functional bilingual students are penalized as college professors, not often aware of students' unique language profiles, expect them to achieve a native-like level of written expression.

This is just one instance of how language, intentionally or not, serves as a mechanism of social exclusion and stigmatization as some educational practices, even the ones intended to improve school access and retention, end up oppressing students by reinforcing negative ideologies such as the deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) and bi-illiteracy (Escamilla, 2006), which implies language minority students' supposed inability to develop proficiency in their first and second languages.

Challenges of academic discourse socialization

Besides proficiency in the privileged variety of language, students face another challenge to enter and succeed in higher education – socialization into academic discourse which goes beyond the normative use of language. Duff (2010) uses the terms *academic language, academic discourse*, and *academic literacies* almost interchangeably and defines them as "forms of oral and written language and

communication—genres, registers, graphics, linguistic structures, interactional patterns—that are privileged, expected, cultivated, conventionalized, or ritualized, and, therefore, usually evaluated by instructors, institutions, editors, and others in educational and professional contexts" (p.175).

Thus, academic discourse socialization entails the mastering of the dominant linguistic code but it also requires familiarity with different genres, or types of texts (Lea & Street, 2006) within disciplines. Most often, disciplinary writing conventions, which encompass the normative use of the privileged code, poses constraints to bilingual and multilingual students, leading them to prioritize form over content (Canagarajah, 2011). As Ivanič and Camps (2001) explain, academic writing is traditionally expected to follow the rigid structures of the dominant code so as to convey objectivity and impersonal tone. Opposing this idea, the authors argue that "there is no such a thing as 'impersonal' writing" (Ivanic & Camps, 2001, p. 5) because writing is always a representation of self; nevertheless self-representation may occur at different levels as authors make language choices so as to adapt texts to different audiences. Ivanič and Camps (2001) refer to different levels of representation in writing as *positioning* or *voice types*.

Gee (1996) also offers a detailed analysis of the tensions between language and identity. Rather than voice types or positioning, the author uses the term *discourses* to explain how individuals appropriate language to enact different identities with the goal of being recognized as a member of a group. He defines *discourse* as

> *…a social association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts', of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role' (Gee, 1996, p. 131).*

Gee's (1996) definition helps to reinforce the notion that academic discourse socialization goes beyond adapting language to context; it involves embodying the practices, beliefs, and values of a group. In other words, the extent to which students are socialized into academic discourses is reflected in the way they speak, behave, read, and write. Thus, in higher education, for example, it is appropriate to say that students need to socialize into the discourses of different disciplines in order to be identified a member of each particular group (Gee, 1996; Duff, 2010). The process of socialization can be more challenging, however, for those students whose linguistic codes and ways of knowing are very distinct from mainstream students. For this reason, discourses, similar to the conceptualization of literacy, are grounded in a history of struggle for power, resistance to established conventions, and transformation (Gee, 1996; Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis & Scott, 2007; and Lea, 2008).

The dynamics of power concerning discourses is intensified by the fact that globalization has greatly impacted student populations in the U.S. and other

nations – social and culturally diverse students, bilingual and multilingual youth, are using advanced communication channels to creatively convey their thoughts. This new social landscape challenges "ethnocentric" (Street, 2011) and "technorational" (Bartlett, *et al.*, 2011) frameworks that position literacy simply as a set of technical skills to be learned and applied to any context. Diverse student populations more than ever before seek representation and empowerment through writing (Janks, 2010). The current changes in society lead to critical questions regarding language, literacy, and discourse socialization. If our goal as educators and researchers is to democratize education, we need to think about teaching approaches that acknowledge the complexity of literacy practices as well as the sociocultural and ideological nature of literacy (Gee, 1996; Street, 2003; Lea & Street, 2006).

New perspectives on literacy and academic discourse socialization

The framework used for this study was grounded in the *ideological* model of literacy which promotes the view of literacy as social practices deeply rooted in cultural contexts (Street, 2003). The ideological model underlying the academic literacies approach and Gee's (1996) discourse theory provides a lens for understanding bilingual students' perception about academic writing and the way they position themselves in academic writing. Drawing on research fields such as applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociocultural theories of learning, new literacy and discourse studies, the academic literacies approach is founded upon an understanding of language as social practice rather than a simple set of conventions to be learned and transferred to any context (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Note that viewing literacy as social practice is to acknowledge its contextual, thus multifaceted nature. Therefore, socialization in higher education entails more than familiarity with disciplinary discourses; it also entails awareness that different institutions and faculty members may value specific sets of requirements. Considering the complexities of literacy, some scholars prefer to use the term *academic literacies* rather than *academic literacy* (Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis, 2003; Lillis &Scott, 2007; Lea, 2008).

Lea and Street (2006) explain that the academic literacies approach overlaps with the academic socialization model to the extent that both models acknowledge that academic writing involves adaptations to suit different contexts and audiences; however, the scholars argue that the academic socialization approach does not problematize aspects of identity and authority in writing. This argument is contested by scholars such as Duff (2010) who sees academic discourse socialization as "a dynamic, socially situated process that in contemporary contexts is often multimodal, multilingual, and highly intertextual" (p. 169). In this study, Duff's (2010) view of academic discourse socialization is validated as it is seen as complementary to the academic literacies model which is highly "concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369).

Also taking a critical perspective on literacy, Gee (1996) offers an insightful analysis of the ideological role of discourses as they are always intertwined with issues of power and identity. He compares discourses to "a sort of identity kit" that involves acts, beliefs, values, ways of talking, reading, and writing, etc., and is enacted by individuals according to contextual requirements. In this regard, "we are all capable of being different kinds of people in different discourses" (Gee, 1996, p. 128). However, the author explains that the relationship between discourses and identities can be problematic when one's *primary discourses* conflicts with *secondary discourses*.

Primary discourses are acquired through primary socialization with family members whereas s*econdary discourses* are acquired through participation in public spheres such as church, educational institutions, and workplaces. Acquiring a secondary discourse may be troubling for some individuals as their positioning in society (*i.e.*, their gender, social class, beliefs, and values, and social practices) may be too distant from the group they desire to take part in. For example, language minority students may have difficulty socializing into discourses valued in academic settings while mainstream students may do it with ease. It is important to point out as well that conflicts related to discourse socialization may also result from one's resistance to conform to certain conventions of a new group (Gee, 1996). Even though distinctions between primary and secondary discourses are made, they cannot be seen as binaries. On the contrary, strongly opposing dichotomies such as literate/illiterate, formal/informal, and written/oral language must be represented as continua (Gee, 1989; 1996). In the same way that language transfer is a common phenomenon among bilingual students (Gee, 1996; see also Hornberger, 1989; Creese & Blackledge, 2010), transfers between primary and secondary discourses are inevitable.

Because Gee's (1996) elaboration on discourses and identity helps to illuminate the barriers faced by language minority students, it was integrated into this study's framework to help in the analysis of Hispanic undergraduate students' understanding of academic language and the choices they make when negotiating self-representation within the constraints and possibilities related to academic writing (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). As scholars in the field of literacy have pointed out, despite the constraints writing conventions may pose, writing is essentially a social practice which enables individuals to exercise agency and critical consciousness, thus *re-writing* (Freire, 2005; Janks, 2010) or *redesigning* (New London Group, 1996) the world through the appropriation of language.

This study relied on the academic literacies model presented above and the discourse theory informed by Gee (1996) as frameworks to examine the following questions: RQ1) What are the study participant Hispanic students' perspectives on academic language? RQ2) Based on their understanding of academic language, how do the students negotiate self-representation in writing within the constraints posed by academic language conventions?

Methods

This qualitative case study was conducted in a Hispanic serving institution located on the U.S.-Mexico border (southwest Texas). The study, which derives from a larger project, relied on the participation of five Hispanic undergraduate students who took the junior level class titled Content Area Literacy in the fall 2011. All participants were my own students in that class and volunteered to take part in the project. Data sources included: (1) a language history survey, (2) a focus group interview, (3) written reflection assignments, and (4) a semi-structured individual interview.

The language history survey, which contained demographic questions, was answered by all students enrolled in the class. Aware of the power relations involved, I took appropriate measures to ensure that students did not feel coerced to participate. First, I limited myself to briefly mentioning the study to students and clarifying that since the study was not at all related to the class, participation was totally voluntary. Second, students who volunteered to participate met with two members of the research team out of class time. In that meeting, two other members of the research team introduced the study to students, obtained informed consents and conducted the focus group interviews. With regard to the written reflections, those were part of the course assignments and participant students signed the consent allowing their use as data source. Finally, for ethical reasons, I conducted the one-hour individual interviews in the spring 2012 when participants were no longer my students.

Participants

The five Hispanic students who volunteered to participate in the study are here identified by the pseudonyms Daisy, Ines, Karen, Maria, and Ricardo. Except for Maria, all other students were born and raised in the United States. All participants consider Spanish their first language and English their second language. Maria, born and raised in Mexico, started the process of acquiring a second language around three years ago when she enrolled in an ESL class with the goal of pursuing a college degree. Thus Maria is defined as a *late* or *adult bilingual*, that is, one who started acquiring L2 after puberty and is still in the process of becoming bilingual (Pavlenko, 2000). Table 1 provides more details on participants' profiles.

Student	Country of origin	Bilingualism	Major
Ines	U.S	Early bilingual	Mathematics
Karen	U.S	Early bilingual	Mathematics
Maria	Mexico	Late bilingual	Mathematics
Daisy	U.S	Early bilingual	Mathematics
Ricardo	U.S	Early bilingual	Physical Education

Table 1: Participants' profiles

Data analysis procedures

Considering that the goals of the study were to examine students' understanding of academic language as well as how they represent themselves in academic writing, a qualitative research approach was used. I used the systematic, but flexible guidelines of grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006) which enabled me to generate open/initial codes that, after being compared across data sources, helped me to construct focused codes. Open coding refers to the process of naming and categorizing responses that were perceived through a close examination of lines, sentences and paragraphs that were taken from the interviews, participants' reflections, and surveys. The focused coding involved a comparative analysis of the categories that were found with the goal of identifying core categories (Charmaz, 2006). I audio-recorded and fully transcribed all interviews which were conducted in English. Full transcriptions of interviews were meant to capture participants' meanings (Seidman, 2006) therefore contributing to the process of data triangulation for the ultimate purpose of answering the research questions.

Findings and discussion

From the analysis of data, three major categories emerged: (1) Students' perspectives on academic language; and factors associated with the students' academic socialization processes: (2) Academic discourse socialization and reward; (3) Struggling to socialize. Each category will be discussed in light of the proposed framework.

Students' perspectives on academic language

In the literature academic language is viewed as comprised of an array of academic discourses (c.f., Duff, 2010; Street & Lea, 2006; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Nonetheless, for the purpose of this study, the term *academic language* was used in a broad sense to refer to a type of discourse used in academic setting as it seemed to be more familiar to participants. Thus, in individual interviews students were asked the question "How do you feel about having to express yourself using academic language in written assignments?" Analysis of students answers, triangulated with all other data sources, revealed that students' perspectives on academic language was limited to the use of Standard English. The normative use of syntax, punctuation, spelling, and grammar were often cited as features of academic language or "good writing", however, among all these language components, elaborated vocabulary seemed to be particularly important for students.

Both in reflection assignments and in interviews, students demonstrated concern about improving their writing and speaking abilities by using "higher level words", "sophisticated vocabulary" or "bigger words". As Daisy told me, "When I am writing, I always use basic words but I will highlight them so I know that I have to go back and look for a bigger word". The same concern about vocabulary was

expressed by Karen in individual interview. She told me that she does not consider herself a good writer because of her difficulty in putting her thoughts into words and also because of her supposedly lack of appropriate vocabulary. She said, "When I am writing, I tend to use lower level words rather than higher level."

While Karen and Daisy saw the use of formal vocabulary in written expression as a means to enact the identity of college student (Gee, 1996), Maria expressed the belief that group membership cannot be ensured by incorporating "sophisticated words" to writing only. She argued that this practice must be extended to oral expression as well:

> *The issue is that if I learn some sophisticated words I am not going to use them with my classmates. I think that… for me… I need to talk with people who are more sophisticated in their use of words (Maria in interview, February, 2012).*

In the excerpt, Maria is complaining about lack of opportunities to practice the words she has been learning since she subscribed to the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) website with the purpose of enhancing vocabulary. When asked if she really found it necessary to use elaborated words in spoken language, Maria replied, "Yes, I think so because I do it in Spanish." In the same vein, Daisy stresses the importance of selecting vocabulary when preparing for oral presentations:

> *I will do my note cards and I will just review what I have to say so I don't go and say something very informal like, you know, everyday talking. … because I am used to the everyday language but that's not what they are going to grade. They are going to grade the more professional language (Daisy in interview, March, 2012).*

It is worth noting that the term "professional language" by itself could imply the notion of disciplinary discourses which involve knowledge of vocabulary commonly used in specific disciplines. Nevertheless, within the context of Daisy's response, "professional language" is conceptualized in opposition to "everyday language", thus conveying the socially ingrained idea of language as binaries, *i.e.,* oral vs. written; L1 vs. L2; formal vs. informal (Gee, 1989, 1996; Hornberger, 1989). The dichotomous view of language is also supported by Karen's and Maria's responses as they perceived academic language as "sophisticated" and "higher level" as opposed to the "lower level" language used in daily interactions.

The findings indicate the students' traditional perspectives reflecting the internalization of widespread ideologies on language (Escamilla, 2006; Gutierrez, *et al.*, 2009) which may be stronger in particular educational settings and disciplines. This represents their awareness of certain socialization processes into academic discourses and their sensitivity to potential audiences when negotiating self-representation within the requirements of academic writing (Canagarajah, 2011). This task may be easy for some students while for others it may be challenging. The next sections will analyze issues concerning socialization and in academic writing.

Academic discourse socialization and reward

This category focuses on three students pursuing a degree in the field of mathematics – Ines, Daisy, and Maria. Relying on Gee's (1996) view of discourses as a continuum, the analysis of interviews and reflection assignments indicates that that these students were the most socialized into academic discourses. Because of this they had been continuously rewarded for their writing. The notion of socialization adopted in this study is aligned with the one proposed by Duff (2010). Rejecting the common idea of discourse socialization as *acculturation*, Duff (2010) sees it as a process of *enculturation* that involves "negotiation of power and identity" (p. 171). As Ivanič and Camps (2001) highlight, writing always conveys "voice", that meaning "the writer's own views, authoritativeness, and authorial presence" (p. 7); nonetheless, authors often feel the need to negotiate the extent to which they represent themselves in writing due to certain constraints such as language conventions, disciplinary discourses, requirements that may vary for particular assignments or according to individual professor's standards (Lea & Street, 2006).

Secondary or public sphere discourses (Gee, 1996) require greater ability to negotiate self-representation in writing. Aware of that, Daisy, Ines, and Maria seemed to be socialized into academic writing. In the reflection assignment, Daisy described how she felt about academic writing:

> *Though I am a good writer, I have always struggled when it comes to writing the introduction. I always require a lot of editing. For some reason I always struggle because it has to be interesting, tell what the paper is about without revealing all of your ideas (Reflection 5, November, 2011).*

Daisy's statement indicates socialization into academic discourses as she is aware of certain requirements for writing a good introduction and spends time editing so as to meet those requirements. In the interview, Daisy told me she perceived herself as a good writer as a result of constant positive feedback from professors and family members. The following writing excerpt shows how Daisy chose to represent herself in a reflection assignment that required students to describe their literacy history in light of class readings:

> *Once I entered high school, I was not forced to read and remained stagnant in reading and writing. I was not challenged to read or write more complex texts and it showed in my senior year in high school. Since I was in a dual credit class I was forced to write at a college level and I had remained at an eighth grade level! I believe that what [name of author] said was correct, that upper class students are provided with means for success, and since I was a student of lower income, I was not encouraged to do better (Reflection 1, September 2011).*

In the excerpt above, Daisy's discourse shows elements of both informal and formal discourse which she found appropriate for a reflection assignment based on her own experiences. Daisy did not follow the APA style conventions for in-text

citation and was more dialogical with readers (Ivanič & Camps, 2001) – the use of exclamation mark is an evidence of that. Despite the dialogical elements found in the excerpt, Daisy's writing also demonstrates aspects that characterize secondary discourses – she uses quite complex sentence structure, selective vocabulary, and transition words to facilitate the flow of ideas.

In Ines's writing, self-representation is negotiated rather differently. The following is an excerpt in which students described their experiences with academic writing:

> *I have, however, found that research papers are assigned just to provide students with "busywork of copying facts laboriously" and "thrown together the night before it is due," as stated in chapter 11 (p.237). I believe the fact that these papers are basically a regurgitation of facts is what makes these types of writing easier for me to produce (Ines, Reflection 5, November 2011).*

Ines finds research papers easy to write because they are nothing but "a regurgitation of facts". This view, which seems controversial at first glance, is an indication of socialization into disciplinary discourses (Duff, 2010) – being in the math field and realizing that most of her professors value facts, Ines consciously chose to "play the game" accordingly so as to be rewarded. In this reflection assignment she felt free to represent her critical insights on academic writing. However, she still maintained aspects of writing that are valued in academic settings – complex syntax, selective vocabulary, use of APA style, and citation of information sources. Already socialized into the discourse of her discipline, Ines was able to enact the identity of a "mathematics student".

Similarly, Maria sought to construct an identity as a "literate person" in her second language. As she wrote in a reflection assignment:

> *As a Mexican native my first language is Spanish. I consider myself as a literate person who masters the Spanish language; I read, write and speak with a literacy college level. I grew up within a family whose Spanish was the only language we spoke among us. On school, at secondary level, English courses were considered as part of the curriculum a student must accomplish to get a diploma. Then, at high school, some of the courses I took were taught in English (Reflection 1, September 2011).*

The excerpt above illustrates that, despite not having acquired oral fluency in L2, Maria has internalized techniques and conventions valued in academic writing – her paragraph is carefully structured so as to present her literacy history in a chronological manner and transition words are used to facilitate the flow of ideas. As an EL learner, her writing is also characterized by noncomplex syntax so as to avoid errors. Not so obvious in the excerpt but clear in other parts of her essays is the phenomenon of heteroglossia, that is, the hybrity of linguistic codes or even languages within one text (Garcia, 2009; Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Another aspect that stands out in Maria's excerpt is authoritativeness (Ivanič & Camps, 2001) as she introduces herself as *a literate person who masters the Spanish language".* In her reflections and interview, Maria, who considered herself a good English writer despite language barriers, expressed her great desire to become a

fluent speaker, reader, and writer of the English language in the same way she already was in her first language. It seems that Maria was eager to broaden her identity as a "literate person" in her second language.

Ines, Daisy, and Maria have indications of being socialized into academic literacies for having appropriated secondary discourses (Gee, 1996) in terms of genres, linguistic structures, and interactional patterns. This allowed them to better adapt language to audiences (Canagarajah, 2011), thus enacting the identity they deem more appropriate in order to signal community membership (Gee, 1996; Ivanics & Camps, 2001).

Struggling to socialize

As previously discussed, students who are better able to socialize into academic discourses are rewarded by the educational system. In this study, two participants, Karen and Ricardo, seemed to have had difficulty accomplishing this task apparently because of a conflict between primary and secondary discourses. Gee (1996) argues that "one is not in a Discourse unless one has mastered it" (p. 146). Thus, in order to participate in a given social group, it is necessary to acquire the ways of knowing which include the thinking, feeling, and behaving of the members of the group. For some individuals this can be more challenging than for others. Language minority students, for example, may find it difficult or extremely difficult to acquire white-middle-class secondary discourses valued in educational institutions, especially in higher education. Karen's and Ricardo's cases exemplify the challenge of socializing into the secondary discourses of postsecondary education.

Karen, a mathematics student, revealed that reading and writing have always been a struggle for her despite the fact that her mother, as an educator, had supported and encouraged Karen to succeed in school. In middle school, Karen was enrolled in a reading program which she did not find very helpful. She wrote: "I was passing my writing classes with C's" (Reflection 5, November 2011). In the interview Karen ascribed her struggle with reading and writing to the fact that she never really enjoyed these activities. Nevertheless, she became a little more interested in reading and writing in junior high school when her English teacher encouraged students to write about topics of their interest and freely express their opinions based on personal experiences. Even though Karen thought that that particular class helped her to write better, she still faced great difficulty when writing research papers. She wrote:

> *The most challenging part of writing papers is that at times I don't really know how to write my papers the way I want my point to get across. I would rather say it out loud and get my point across. So therefore, I am used to writing papers as far as autobiography and biography papers that are talked about in (Bean, 2008, Pg.235) all the time. And at times I believe that when I write papers it seems as if I am giving a lot of information but not getting my opinion or point across. (Reflection, November 2011).*

Karen's writing demonstrates conflicts between primary and secondary discourses. Even though she uses conventions valued in secondary discourses (i.e., use of APA style for in text-references, grounding arguments in reliable sources, use of transition words to connect ideas), it is possible to notice that she has not yet mastered secondary discourses. Her writing closely approaches primary discourses which tend to be more informal presenting more word repetition and flexible structure (Gee, 1996). From the perspective of language and discourses as a continuum (Hornberger, 1989; Gee, 1996), Karen's writing seems to lean more towards orality.

Similarly to Karen, Ricardo shared his struggle to socialize into academic discourses. In a reflection assignment, he wrote about his desire to be able to enact the identity of a "great writer": "I really *wished* that I was a great writer, I would be writing all the time. But, the truth is that I would really not write a paper at all if given the choice". In the interview, Ricardo associated his dislike for writing to the fact that he grew up in a low income family who could not afford to buy books. He also complained that reading and writing were not supported at home as his parents were busy with work. Most of Ricardo's academic writing not only exemplified a great level of conflict between primary and secondary discourses but also conscious resistance to acquiring the latter. The following excerpt from Ricardo's written reflection corroborates this point:

> *After the passage I was really at a loss for words as to what exactly I was reading, who the author was, and what purpose was it used for. Usually I would not even bother with reading this particular type of text. First of all, I would not be reading such difficult material written by [name of the author] (Reflection 2, September 2011).*

In this excerpt Ricardo describes his frustration when required to interpret a passage written in very elaborated linguistic code. Ricardo's case seems to be a controversial one as he acknowledges the importance of acquiring academic language. However, sometimes consciously and other times unconsciously, he resisted the acquisition of secondary discourses. Resistance was clearer when, in the interview, I asked Ricardo how he felt about academic writing. He answered:

> *Oh, well, having to meet the requirements of academic writing doesn't bother me. I mean, am I good at it? Of course not. I don't write proper English. I write the way I know but there is a proper way of doing it and that's the Standard English. I don't write like that. I mean, I know it is important and it is the correct way but I write the way I have always known (Interview, February, 2012).*

Gee (1996) explains that resistance is common when one's first discourse greatly differs from secondary discourses. As the notion of discourse is tied to identity, one's primary discourse acquired at home represents her or his first identity. In this sense, even though individuals may wish to acquire secondary discourses for different purposes, they may resist a process that, in their perception, implies total assimilation and consequent loss of identity. In academic writing, the contestation for identity is evidenced by little mention of authors and little justification for

arguments (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). These characteristics were found in both Karen's and Ricardo's writing; however, it seems that for Ricardo resistance is most often a conscious act.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper examined how five language minority students perceived academic language and negotiated self-representation in writing within the constraints posed by academic language conventions. Based on the research questions the findings were presented in three categories: Students' perspectives on academic language; academic discourse socialization and reward; and struggling to socialize. In response to the first question the data suggest the participants' view of academic language is interchangeable with the use of Standard English. Furthermore, "higher level words" or "sophisticated vocabulary" was seen as the most important means to enact the college student identity in writing. In terms of socialization elements (RQ2), the second category portrays the cases of students who have consistently been rewarded by the school system for indicating a higher level of socialization into academic discourses. Students in this category are better able to negotiate self-representation in academic writing without losing agency (Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Gee, 1996). The third category presents the cases of students who have difficulty socializing into academic discourses due to a conflict between their primary and secondary discourses (Gee, 1996). These students, sometimes consciously and other times unconsciously, resist the acquisition of secondary discourses. Resistance is reflected in their writing which is evidenced by a greater need for self-representation combined with a more informal style that approaches orality (Gee, 1996).

The findings of this study have significant implications for practice and further research. With regard to practice, this study draws educators' attention to the need of reconceptualizing literacy given the increasing diversity of current educational settings. The traditional view of literacy as a standardized set of skills is oppressive for suggesting homogeneity among student populations, thus completely disregarding that students from different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds engage in rich multiliteracy practices in everyday face-to-face interactions and also through various media channels (New London Group, 1996; Janks, 2010). By understanding the complexities of literacy educators will become aware of the conflicts surrounding academic discourse socialization, especially in the case of language minority students. Consequently, practitioners will be able to think of effective approaches to explicit instruction intended to not only enable students to navigate primary and secondary discourses. Students should be explicitly taught that language offers an array of possibilities, however, critical skills are necessary for making decisions on how to adapt writing to different audiences (Canagarajah, 2011) without losing "voice" (Ivanič & Camps, 2001) or agency to re-write the world (Freire, 2005).

Finally, further research could be done to examine college professors' perspectives on academic discourses. It might be the case that professors in the same discipline understand academic discourses in very different ways; thus expectations towards students' writing will be unclear which may have a very negative impact on students' academic performance.

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