

IMAGINING AND MOVING BEYOND THE ESL BUBBLE:
OBSERVING CHANGES IN IDENTITY, POWER AND
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THROUGH THE ELL
AMBASSADORS PROGRAM

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Introduction

On both sides of the U.S./Mexico border, new educational realities continue to arise due to immigration and repatriation. How schools in the U.S. and Mexico react to students who do not speak the language of the schools presents a monumental challenge. In the United States, English Language Learners (ELLs) continue to be positioned at schools as immigrants and limited English proficient speakers. ELLs themselves often reinforce this role by clinging to the insulation and isolation of what I call the ESL bubble. Participation only in English as a Second Language (ESL) newcomer classes and sheltered English instruction blocks, which is initially viewed as a positive refuge for immigrant students at school until they learn more English and become more acculturated, can limit these students' important intercultural interpersonal interaction with other peers at school. This valuable interaction with non-ELLs is needed to promote language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), positive identity formation (Norton, 2000), and accelerated academic success.

In Mexico, an issue that is beginning to receive more attention by language acquisition researchers is the many challenges that repatriated students face. These students, who have been educated in the U.S. and are now, in many cases due to deportation, attending school in Mexico, are faced with

trying to learn content in Spanish. To address the needs of these students on both sides of the border, educators and researchers continue to identify and adumbrate creative approaches for facilitating the language socialization and positive identity formation for immigrant learners in and out of the classroom, based on learners' interests and skill sets (Canagarajah, 2004, 2007; Pennycook, 2003; Valdez, 2001) and specifically through participation in massive multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), such as *World of Warcraft* (see Cornillie *et al.*, 2012; Rankin *et al.*, 2008; Reinders, 2012; Reinders & Wattana, 2012; Sykes *et al.*, 2008; Thorne, 2008), that may have potential for serving students in the U.S. and in Mexico.

The ELL Ambassadors program (described below) is one such creative approach that partners ELLs with non-ELLs on the basis of shared interests. This chapter reports on observations from a three-year teacher action research study and a follow-up study with five former high school ELLs on the success that the ELL Ambassadors program had for facilitating greater access for these ELLs, in the Midwest of the United States, into extracurricular activities at school. These extracurricular activities became valuable communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2006; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Thorne *et al.*, 2009; Wenger, 1998) for these students. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight how these ELLs in the U.S. achieved advanced levels of language proficiency and academic success and created the identities that they imagined (Kanno & Norton, 2003) for themselves beyond the ESL bubble, and to lay the theoretical and practical implications that this program could have in Mexico for meeting the educational and personal needs of repatriated youth. I will conclude with a call to action for all educators to presume competence in youth and never stop searching for the key to interaction.

Demographics on Both Sides of the U.S./Mexican Border

Still today, the pervasive use of terms to label the estimated 4.7 million ELLs in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, AY 2011/2012, retrieved May 13, 2014 from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>),

such as English Minority and Limited English Proficient (LEP), act to position these students as different from English first language (L1) speaking students, and as somehow limited. Although linguistically these students are different from their L1 English speaking peers, as youth they can share many interests in common. I will henceforth refer to these students as English Language Learners and when appropriate, *children from immigrant families* (Garcia, *et al.*, 2009, p. 10) or *mixed status students/families* (Alvarez Gutiérrez, 2013). This last category is important, because as much as 79% of children from immigrant families were born in the U.S., are U.S. citizens, and may face the harsh reality of being separated from deported family members (Hernandez *et al.*, 2008; Passel, 2006; Passel & Cohn, 2011). Alvarez Gutiérrez (2013) mentions: “In 2011, there were approximately 5,100 children in 22 states who were put into the foster care system due to parents’/guardians’ deportation” (p. 173; see also Wessler, 2011). This number is projected to triple by the year 2016 (Alvarez Gutiérrez, 2013). Still, many youth return with their families to a country that may represent their heritage, but very little of their lived experience. For many, this means attending school in a language that they do not know. It is estimated that between the years 2005 and 2010, 300,000 children born in the U.S., moved to Mexico (Cave, 2012). In many ways, ELLs in the U.S. and repatriated students in Mexico are facing the same challenges of acculturation, language and content learning, and identity formation. Although differences exist between the experiences that these students have attending school in Mexico and the U.S., it may be that programs that promote horizontal intercultural interpersonal interaction, such as the ELL Ambassadors program, could be beneficial for language learners on both sides of the border.

Horizontal vs Vertical Peer Language Socialization

Current practice that combines some form of peer mentoring with shared interests to promote language socialization can be classified into two distinct domains, identified as 1) *At school, within or outside of the classroom* and 2) *online*. Spanning from elementary schools to colleges in the U.S., educators

have implemented peer-mentoring/tutoring programs to help ELLs overcome cultural and linguistic hurdles. The most common practice within the school setting is to assign a native English-speaking peer to a newly arriving ELL to promote and provide friendship, school orientation, and academic support. The Fort Bend (Indiana) Independent School District's *Buddies For Success* program is one such example. Recognizing that entering a new school, after relocating from another country, can be a tremendous adjustment for ELLs, the FBISD *Buddies For Success* program operates through youth volunteers who agree to a year-long commitment to befriend and help ELLs with their studies (retrieved May 12, 2014 from <http://www.fortbendisdnews.com/go/doc/1934/1416635/Pilot-Peer-Mentoring-Program-to-help-form-FBISD-Buddies-for-Success>). Another similar program at Kingsborough Community College, The City University of New York, in Brooklyn, requires volunteers to complete an application to be a peer mentor and highlights the benefits for volunteers that include speaking and presenting experience, the development of leadership skills, volunteer work for resume building, and personal and professional development.

While the school-based programs mentioned above are similar to the ELL Ambassadors program in featuring peer interaction and collaboration, they offer a stark contrast that serves to emphasize the agentive role that ELLs play in the ELL Ambassadors program. In the above-mentioned school-based programs, ELLs have little choice in their level of interaction and role as participants in the programs. I refer to this as *vertical intercultural interpersonal interaction (V3I)* because the motivation to participate comes from school administrators and teachers down to the students themselves, as opposed to *horizontal intercultural interpersonal interaction (H3I)*. The ELL Ambassador program is an example of *H3I* in that it provides the same framework for peer interaction, but allows ELLs to choose which communities of practice they wish to join based on their own interests and motivation. Their sustained participation and affiliation in these communities of practice purely rests in their own willingness to create the identity that they imagine for themselves. Likewise, the L1 English speaking peers are not assigned an ELL to befriend, rather friendship

is a desired, latent effect that theoretically may arise through shared group membership.

The second domain for language socialization mentioned above, *the on-line domain*, does allow for ELLs to have full choice regarding group membership based on personal interests, as in the massive multiplayer online role playing games mentioned above. Black (2009) looks at the impact of these online spaces such as Fan Fiction where ELLs can participate along with non-ELLs in extending others' storylines, editing and even being edited as authors themselves. This interaction based on affiliation with others promotes the emergence of identity through communicative practice that is highly motivational due to its link to common interests with others in the group. Gee and Hayes (2009) call these affinity spaces: "In an affinity space, people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social class" (p. 2). For ELLs, who frequently find it hard to escape being labeled for their race and social class, and for repatriated students in Mexico, whose language labels them as different from the rest, these spaces can be very empowering. These communities of practice and affinity spaces allow all language learners to challenge these labels.

The ELL Ambassador program attempts to make these two domains of communities of practice available to ELLs, so they can choose between many opportunities for language socialization that are most aligned with their interests. This is the essential strength of the ELL Ambassadors program. It forces neither L1 English speakers nor ELLs into participation through assigning buddies, but rather works from the assumption that collaboration will transpire through shared participation in a wide array of language socialization opportunities that encompass many educational and non-educational arenas.

The ELL Ambassadors Program Implementation and Desired Outcomes

Initial vertical intervention is required to implement the ELL Ambassadors program and to lay the foundation for the above-discussed *horizontal in-*

tercultural interpersonal interaction to take place. In the current study, the researcher was an ESL teacher and ESL caseworker at a high school in the American Midwest and in this role, first compiled a complete list of all extracurricular activities available at the high school. Second, the researcher worked closely with all the ESL teachers to elicit information about the ELLs' personal interests, background knowledge and skill sets through a series of affective activities, such as role playing and storytelling. Thirdly, these interests were cross-referenced with the list of extracurricular activities in order to identify any overlap of interests and available communities of practice. Finally, the researcher visited the club meetings of all extracurricular activities that matched any of the ELLs' reported interests. At these meetings, the researcher addressed current members and described the goals of the ELL Ambassadors program. Current club members were invited to become ELL Ambassadors and were simply asked to reach out to the interested ELLs and invite them to the next club meeting. What transpired after that, in terms of the latent effects of friendship formation, language practice and heightened multi-cultural awareness was left up to chance, mutual motivation and agency through volunteer *H3I*. The following are the four desired outcomes of the ELL Ambassadors program.

1. ELLs who belong to and participate in extracurricular groups, clubs and activities that match one of their personal interests are exposed to meaningful linguistic input in their L2 and have increased opportunities for communicative practice, which in turn have an influence on successful and accelerated L2 acquisition.
2. ELLs who belong to and participate in these extracurricular communities have increased opportunities to form friendships with other more established ELLs and with L1 English speaking peers that they otherwise may not get to know. These increased opportunities for friendships lead to the lessening of the negative aspects of culture shock, through forming an identity of affiliation in the group that accelerates acculturation and assimilation.
3. Both the above-mentioned benefits of increased opportunities for

meaningful communication practice and increased opportunities to form friendships beyond the ESL bubble, lead to greater academic achievement, through a larger network of peer support and resources and through more social and academic language practice.

4. Cooperating L1 English speaking peer mentors gain access to forming friendships, that they may not form otherwise, with a more culturally and linguistically diverse group of individuals, have greater access to their own second language practice, and have the opportunity to gain valuable volunteer experience.

The Study

Evaluating the Effectiveness of the ELL Ambassadors Program in the American Midwest

From 2005 to 2012, I was an ESL and Spanish teacher at a mid-size high school in the American Midwest. My long-term caring relationship with the students provided me with a level of trust and intimate insight into my former students' lives that enabled me to represent the stories of these youth at a level of detail and fullness that would not have been possible had I approached this project as an adult researcher with no previous relationship to the youth. Throughout the research, I was fortunate to have an understanding relationship built on trust; this trust allowed me to closely observe youth in their everyday interactions and over the course of their trajectories in high school, and also to gather insights into youth experiences and ideologies in the follow up study, conducted several years after students' graduation from high school.

Methodology

For the overall study, I combined previous teacher-researcher observations, with a follow up survey, phone interviews, and academic records review. Triangulating multiple lines of inquiry, I compared teacher-observations of students' language and social development with students' perceptions

of their own language learning, identity development, and socialization in extracurricular activities and classrooms during high school, and compared these qualitative forms of data with evidence of language and content learning based in quantitative test scores and Grade Point Averages (GPA, hereafter).

The qualitative data for this study come from observations conducted over a three-year period (AY 2009/2010-2011/2012), whereas by acting as the participants' teacher and linguistic advocate, I at times participated closely with the students and at other times stood back and observed moment-by-moment emergence of linguistic, social and academic change. The most striking observations were how ELLs involved in extracurricular activities were able to maintain diverse groups of friends, both ELLs and non-ELLs and were able to successfully flow between the ESL bubble and diverse communities beyond the bubble. Although I observed that some communities of practice were initially more difficult for ELLs to join, such as the high school basketball team, with help from the ELL Ambassadors, most ELLs who wanted to participate in extracurricular activities were able to achieve these affiliations.

Further qualitative data come from a summer 2013 follow-up study with five former ELLs (three from Mexico, one from Guatemala, and one from Somalia) who participated in the ELL Ambassadors program. Data were collected by the following means: (a) participants provided answers to an anonymous on-line survey of questions about their perceptions regarding the impact of participation in the ELL Ambassadors program on their English language acquisition, their acculturation in the school and community, and on their identity formation; (b) I conducted individual semi-structured phone interviews, in which students were asked to tell stories about their experiences participating in communities of practice at school; and (c) I obtained and reviewed the complete academic records of each participant in order to provide a quantitative perspective of the influence of the ELL Ambassadors program on academic achievement and English language acquisition. The phone interviews were conducted via Skype, recorded using Garage Band, and transcribed. It is understood that the mode of interview-

ing the participants via Skype/telephone may have yielded different results as compared to face-to-face interviews (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). However, I believe that this mode likely contributed to a more honest and forthcoming atmosphere as compared to what might have been created during a face-to-face interview between a teacher and former students. I coded all survey responses and interviews for incidents where participants referenced identification, language learning, academic success, and perceived levels of acculturation as part of their participation in extracurricular activities.

Results

Observations conducted during the three-year teacher action research revealed how ELLs who participated in extra-curricular activities beyond the ESL bubble were able to maintain more diverse groups of friends that included both current ELLs and L1 English speakers. It was observed that these ELLs transitioned out of ESL services quicker than their peers who did not participate in the ELL Ambassadors program and it was reported by their mainstream content teachers that these students were academically successful. The follow-up study was necessary in order to greater measure these observed positive results and evaluate to what extent the participants viewed their interaction with L1 English peers, through the ELL Ambassadors program, as a factor of their language acquisition and content learning success and their positive identity formation. The following is a sample comment from the anonymous survey: “Since I was practicing my English while participating in clubs, I learned to speak English somewhat fast, which, in consequence, helped me to get better grades in my classes because the language barrier was not a problem anymore.”

All participants reported, in the phone interviews and in an on-line survey, that the identity they created as members of the basketball team, soccer team, drama club, and other extracurricular activities, was the major reason for their successful English acquisition, happiness at school and ultimate academic success. The participants also reported that it was their prior related experience with these types of activities and high interest in participating

and becoming a member of these groups that facilitated their participation as new members of these communities of practice. This *H3I* proved to be extremely important for these students' efforts in being successful and feeling accepted at school. This point is illustrated well in the following participant comment: "It helped me because it gave me the opportunity of socialize with people from different countries and different cultures, being involved in school groups, clubs, and teams give you confidence in what you do and what you'll be doing... joining on team helped me to improve my English."

A review of the participants' full academic records showed that all participants made impressive yearly gains of more than 2-4 times the Office of Civil Rights' (OCR) expectation of a one-year gain on the English Language Development Assessment (ELDA) and that the GPA of each participant increased during the years that they participated in the ELL Ambassadors program. All of these participants, who began their schooling as newcomers, with novice English proficiency, graduated from high school and are currently attending university either in the U.S. or in Mexico.

Discussion and a Call to Action for Educators on Both Sides of the Border

The results of this study lend much support to the first three desired program outcomes that ELLs who participate in the ELL Ambassadors program will experience accelerated language acquisition, experience increased academic success, and form linguistically and culturally diverse friendships that aid them in feeling less isolated and more accepted in their new environment. Regarding the fourth desired outcome, all the study participants reported that they still keep in contact with the L1 English speaking members from their communities of practice through social media, and that they often teach them words in their L1 and share with them about their cultures. Further studies are needed to evaluate the impact that participation in the ELL Ambassadors program has on L1 English speaking peer ambassadors.

The description of how the ELL Ambassadors program was implemented in this study provides a road map for the replication of this program in

other schools in the United States and an exemplar for a similar program in Mexico. The current study illustrates how ELLs from Mexico, Guatemala, and Somalia were able to construct the identities that they had always imagined for themselves based on their interests in activities offered at school, such as acting in school plays, playing soccer, designing art for the school poetry magazine and playing basketball. Many of these activities exist at all levels of schooling, from elementary schools to higher education, and provide an outlet for identity formation and highly motivated language learning. I urge educators on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border to tap into the interests of students, and to encourage participation in communities of practice that can provide invaluable language socialization and positive identity creation for new language learners.

One exciting area of research where the ELL Ambassadors program may provide a crucial need for bridging theory of interest based language socialization to practical application is the research being conducted on digital gaming and second language learning. New communities of practice, with potentially new ELL Ambassadors, may be found in digital gaming groups. I will call these groups, consisting of students from the same school, *blended affinity spaces*. Traditional affinity spaces (Gee & Hayes, 2009) have the potential to expose language learners to high interest L2 input and interaction, but do not guarantee interaction with peers in the language learners' immediate environment. *Blended affinity spaces* could facilitate a combination of access to interaction with the global community and also with peers at school who share the same gaming interests and who could act as ELL or Spanish language (SL) ambassadors. I posit that this would encourage the same positive language, content, and acculturation results as reported in the study above. This may especially be true for repatriated, English speaking youth attending school in Mexico. Members in massive multiplayer online role playing games do not always belong to the same linguistic or cultural community, but what can bring them together is the shared interest in the game and also their recognition of lingua franca English (LFE) in digital gaming (House, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2004) as a shared resource (Canagarajah, 2007). In a *blended affinity space*, L1 or highly proficient English speakers,

become a highly valued member for their linguistic expertise that they can contribute to the community of practice. The potential is great for repatriated youth to facilitate the crossing of the linguistic threshold for all members to join the communities of imagination (House, 2003), built upon the foundation of both the interest in the game and the use of LFE.

The social skills and strategies learned in these MMORPGs may have an important impact on the language socialization of learners (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008; Thorne *et al.*, 2009). These gaming groups positively work towards the language socialization goal by: 1) offering group affiliation through shared interests, 2) providing a platform for the English speaking repatriated youth to be linguistic experts, and 3) exposing these same repatriated youth to contextual, real use of the Spanish language, performed before, during, and after the gaming experience between participants. This allows for existence of an important characteristic of successful communities of practice, reciprocal alterations between expert and novice. Gaming, as a blended affinity space or community of practice that combines youth from the same school with an online community of gamers, may afford repatriated youth in Mexico an immediate opportunity for a leadership role in their new educational and social communities.

Conclusion

By encouraging cooperative interaction in multicultural groups and inviting greater participation in extracurricular activities, schools can facilitate the creation of contexts in which cross-cultural learning can take place and mutual friendships can emerge (McKay-Semmler, 2010). Whatever the interaction may be, whether it is online or at school, viewing language socialization based on affiliation of shared interests, reflects Arnseth's (2006) idea of 'learning to play' as opposed to playing to learn. We can see how the identities of ELLs, children of immigrant families and repatriated youth in Mexico, can be re-positioned as members of a team or collaborators towards a common goal, rather than identities of difference or limitation. The ELL Ambassadors program helped to bridge the current realities of the ELLs in

this study with their imagined realities. I urge educators on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border to implement similar programs to provide for the same kind of horizontal intercultural interpersonal interaction that can begin the process of repositioning students from ascribed identities such immigrants and language learners, to avowed identities as teammates and adolescents, who are trying, like all the rest, to figure out who they are and who they will become.

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