Chapter 11
Multimodal and Community-Based Literacies: Agentive Bilingual Learners in Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, high-stakes school reforms and draconian budget cuts have constrained the autonomy of public school teachers in developing multi literacy approaches with emergent bilingual learners (e.g., English-only laws, high stakes testing). This chapter describes the community and multimodal instructional practices of two urban elementary school teachers/researchers, developed in the context of a professional development initiative. Using critical, sociocultural conceptions of literacy and qualitative methods of investigation, the paper investigates different aspects of the teachers’ writing instruction (i.e., community involvement; genre-based instruction; digital literacy; and multimodality); it also explores how the writing processes of focal bilingual students incorporated these practices. Findings show that this approach positioned bilingual learners as agentive text makers. In addition, the second-grade students developed a heightened awareness of audience and context. Implications are discussed, including the pressing need for teacher collaboration, robust school-university partnerships, and innovative multimodal approaches to literacy.

INTRODUCTION

In K-12 public schools in the United States, over 11% of students are now categorized as emergent bilingual learners and this number is projected to grow exponentially in future decades (Lee & Buxton, 2013). Instruction informed by multimodality is extremely important for bilingual learners to support their understanding of meaning making in disciplinary discourses (e.g. graphs and visuals in Science...
and Math) and also to support their creative use of semiotic resources (e.g. physical movement, drawing, mapping, photography). As Potts (in press) establishes in her work on multimodality, language often carries a minor role in contemporary texts with the emergence of Snapchat, Instagram and the interactive graphs and multimodality in scholarly journals. Early, Kendrick and Potts (2015) explain how the creative possibilities in contemporary education arise “when language is understood in relation to other communicative resources, new questions arise, new possibilities surface, and new challenges emerge in addressing the needs of English language learners” (p. 455).

Despite this call for innovative multimodal changes in how curriculum is designed and implemented in public schools, the reality is that education policy makers, teacher educators, and administrators often conceptualize academic literacy as a set of discrete, print-based skills to be transmitted to students through sequential banking instruction (Cummins, 2000; Freire, 1970; Ravitch, 2013). Urban school teachers in high poverty school districts, for example, are often pressured into adopting reductive literacy practices that focus on standardized test materials and basal anthologies and that ignore the cultural, linguistic, and social repertoires of their students. Budget cuts also impact curriculum design and instruction. As our current study shows in its exploration of two elementary school classrooms, not all urban schoolteachers can provide their students with digital multimedia resources. Indeed, research reports that urban schoolteachers often face challenges not just with limited budgets but with lack of technical training and instructional support, all of which are formidable barriers to implementing a multimedia-based literacy curriculum (Leu, 2002; Shin, 2014; Tan & McWilliam, 2009).

The purpose of our paper is to explore how two urban teachers in an impoverished school district implemented a contextualized pedagogy of multiliteracies, even when administrative support and resources for using multiliteracies in their schools were very limited. In the context of a longitudinal professional development initiative called the ACCELA Alliance (2008), and through their research partnerships with two members of the alliance and co-authors of this chapter, Ruth Harman and Dong-shin Shin, the teachers supported their bilingual and bidialectal students in appropriating an array of semiotic and experiential resources and audiences. Their multi semiotic approach fostered understanding among bilingual learners in seeing literacy and language as pliable resources for use in multiple academic and social contexts (Halliday, 1996).

Specifically, our article describes the multiliteracy instructional practices in two classrooms at the same urban school, Fuentes Elementary¹, while the teachers were participating in the ACCELA Alliance over the course of several years from 2005-2009. The paper also explores how a focal bilingual student in each classroom responded to this multi semiotic instruction.

The following research questions guided the study:

- What were the key components of the teachers’ instructional approaches?
- How did their distinct approach support or not support two focal bilingual learners in developing a heightened awareness of literacy as dynamic and situated?

PEDAGOGY OF MULTILITERACIES

The term multiliteracies had its genesis in the New London Group’s (1996) proposal for a new orientation toward literacy pedagogy that would better prepare students to question and make sense of an increasingly globalized and digital world. Members of the New London Group (NLG) saw an increasingly