# Struggling for Meaning and Identity (and a passing grade): High-Stakes Writing in English as a Second Language [1]

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## Abstract

In the current context of high stakes testing, writing is gaining ground as an important measure of student achievement, as much for English language learners as for native English speakers. Research on the way a student's first language affects the development of writing in English is emerging; however, we know little about how bilingual children negotiate meaning in terms of the primary language influence on writing (i.e. language transfer) and the construction of the student's cultural identity. At times, these appear to be in conflict, that is, while students have limited abilities in English writing, they simultaneously write sophisticated and rich pieces that reflect their varied, cultural backgrounds and identities. In this paper, we present samples of data: a writing piece from one bilingual, Spanish-dominant secondary student in the process of acquiring literacy in English. Data from this study demonstrate the ways in which the student negotiated multiple identities despite the limitations of his knowledge of English writing conventions. Our conclusions from the data analysis have implications for educators and exam scorers working with bilingual populations in the area of writing.

## Resumen

En el contexto actual de la evaluación de primer orden, la comunicación escrita está ganando terreno como una medida importante del éxito del estudiante, para estudiantes del inglés así como para hablantes nativos de dicho idioma. La investigación respecto a la forma en que la lengua materna de un estudiante afecta el desarrollo de su escritura en inglés está surgiendo; sin embargo, se tiene poca información sobre cómo los niños bilingües plasman el significado de sus ideas en términos de la influencia de su lengua materna sobre la escritura (i.e. transferencia lingüística) y la construcción de su identidad cultural. A veces, estos aspectos parecen estar en conflicto, es decir, a pesar de que los estudiantes poseen habilidades limitadas para escribir en inglés, producen escritos sofisticados y interesantes que reflejan sus diversas identidades y antecedentes culturales. En el presente trabajo, se presenta una muestra de la información obtenida en esta investigación; segmentos del escrito de un estudiante bilingüe (con dominio del español) de secundaria, en el proceso de aprender a escribir en inglés. El análisis de la información demuestra de qué maneras el estudiante negoció múltiples identidades, a pesar de las limitaciones de su conocimiento de las convenciones de la escritura del inglés. A partir del análisis de los datos las conclusiones tienen implicaciones tanto para educadores como para evaluadores de exámenes que trabajan con poblaciones bilingües en el área de la escritura.

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## Introduction

In recent years, the issue of writing among English language learners (ELLs) enrolled in public schools in the United States has received notable attention (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Much of the research on ELLs' writing has been conducted with students enrolled in institutes of higher education (Ariza, 2006; Panofsky et al., 2005) with a significant core of research focused on error correction and assessment (Leki, 2002). Another noteworthy trend that is prevalent at the elementary and secondary levels is that writing has become increasingly high stakes within the national standardized testing movement, much like reading and mathematics. Individual state assessments, such as *Florida Writes!*, (Florida, U.S.) use narrow definitions of what "good" writing should look like for all students to reach state-determined writing proficiency. As evidenced by the state of Florida Department of Education's writing rubric, proficient writing follows a predictable rhetorical structure and uses transitional devices; values the linguistic conventions of standard English only; does not contain "extraneous or loosely related information" (FL DOE, 2008); and injects 'razzle dazzle'[4] words meant to invoke 'voice' and 'creativity', among other characteristics of writing.

Judging by these measures, writing achievements among ELLs have appeared to lag behind those of native English speakers (National Commission on Writing, 2003). While we are currently learning more about the ways in which writing abilities in the first language (L1) influence writing development in English (CAL, 2007; Odlin, 1989), there is still much to learn about the ways in which bi- and multilingual children approach and negotiate the demands of writing in K-12 settings. While knowledge of assessment and identity appear to be unrelated, we argue in this paper that both are useful, if not necessary, in working with ELLs. In this paper, we demonstrate the ways in which one bilingual writer negotiates multiple personal and cultural identities in his writing and how these identities are connected to his attempt to create meaning and engage his audience. We show the multiple discourses that the student enacts, perhaps unwittingly, in his work, and discuss how this insight may be used to inform the way that educators should work with ELLs. Specifically, we answer the following research questions:

> How are the identities of a bilingual, native Spanish-speaking English language learner constructed?
> What challenges does he face in writing in English for high-stakes testing?

## Theoretical Framework

Some scholars, including linguists and educators focusing on first and second language (L2) development, view language learning as more than a process of encoding and decoding language; rather, they view language learning as intertwined with identity engagement, investment (Peirce, 2005) and negotiation (Cummins, 2001). The work of these scholars is grounded in Bakhtinian

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[4] The fourth grade teacher of one author's daughter, in preparing for the *Florida Writes!* assessment*,* sent a note home encouraging her to use more 'razzle dazzle' words in her writing, which consisted of catchy phrases and low frequency verbs.

poststructuralist theory. Bakhtin (1981) views language, or more precisely, situated utterances, as a medium through which interlocutors struggle to create meaning through dialogue. He considers such interactions as highly complex and neither neutrally conceived nor neutrally delivered. Each interlocutor's past, present, and future socio-historical positions are reflected in the utterance, and such utterances are dynamic and shifting as new interactions occur and new meanings are arrived at?

Luk (2005) extends this to communicative competence by noting, "in the process of constructing our sense of self and identities through interaction, our desire to assert our*selves* may also enhance our urge to communicate and the value of meaning of our utterances (p. 251). For second language learners, this relationship between communicative competence and desire to assert the 'self' is intertwined. In her longitudinal study with young adult, second language writers, Leki (2007) investigated the literacy (writing) experiences of four university students learning English as a second language (ESL). She found that the students' literacy development was interwoven with their identity construction, their academic development, and the context where they are studying in the United States.

Gee's (2005) concept of discourse captures the way in which language simultaneously engenders as it reflects meaning from the world. Gee refers to this as "big D" Discourse (p. 22). About Discourse, he writes, it is "[a] form of life" which integrates words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes (p.7). Gee's Discourses are "specific social and culturally distinctive identities people can take on in society" (p. 61). For example, a particular written discourse style (that is, the organizational structure of writing) used by an author reflects a broader language communication scheme, which involves not only the linguistic features of writing, but also a way of expressing thoughts and participation in the sociocultural world. Like Bakhtin, Gee suggests that identities are socially-situated and negotiated or co-constructed during social interactions between interlocutors. Language is only one of many mediums used to enact "human affiliation within cultures and social groups…" which includes "performance of social activities and social identities" (p. 1). Thus, students' writing should be interpreted in the context of interaction of their selves with their inner and outer worlds, rather than with a narrow audience of evaluators.

Similarly, Peirce (1995) views language learning and identity formation as intertwined processes enacted by individuals interacting with the world. Drawing upon her understanding of the complex interrelationship between language learning, identity, and power, Peirce suggests that students, in fact, invest their identities and desires while acquiring language in an effort to organize and reorganize who they are and how they relate to the world. Thus, for Peirce, second language learning is more than just an investment in learning a target language; it is an opportunity for the learner to invest and negotiate her/his identity in the social world.

Some scholars have focused on the ways in which identity negotiation occurs in bi- and multilingual writing (Hudelson, 1989; Maguire & Graves, 2001; Pavlenko,

2001). Pavlenko's work, for example, captures the multiple ways in which bi- and multilingual authors conceptualize and construct their identities through writing. In her study, Pavlenko investigated a corpus of 15 bi- and multilingual authors' cross-cultural autobiographical works in English where the authors describe their relationship between language and identity. Pavlenko found that the authors' identities were negotiated throughout distinct areas such as linguistic, racial/ethnic, cultural, gender, and social. She argued that the genre of cross cultural autobiography allowed the authors "to construct their autobiographical selves in terms of discourses recognizable by particular discursive communities and to adhere to particular constraints of the genre" (p. 320). She noted further that such works represent "ideal discursive spaces for repositioning in terms of particular identities and the invention of new ones," which allow for the creation of "new discourses of hybridity and multiplicity, and imagining new ways of "being American" (i.e., from the United States) in the postmodern world" (p. 339). Other authors (Maguire & Graves, 2001) have interpreted genres such as L2 journal writing as constructed spaces in which students' "speaking personalities" (c.f. Bakhtin) emerge. Pavlenko's findings underscore the link between language and identity and are not unlike Gee's broader Discourses, described above. Each of these authors' works suggests that a writer's "fluid, fragmented, and multiple" identities mark each piece of written expression and should not be ignored (Pavlenko, 2001, p.339).

These theoretical constructs challenge us to consider the role of identity negotiation and affirmation in educational settings and the ways in which teachers can support these processes with their students. How then, do non-native speakers acquiring literacy in English negotiate and engage their identities within the confines of standardized writing? And how can this writing be used in educational settings to affirm students' identities?

Regarding bilingual children in educational settings, Cummins (2001) suggests that when teachers affirm the identities of children in the classroom through positive and culturally sensitive interactions, students become engaged in their own learning. Accordingly, there are specific ways in which teachers and educators can affirm the identities of children learning a second language. These include examining our own interactions with students in order to reflect upon both the technical efficacy of instruction as well as upon the ways in which we affirm the whole child: personal, cultural, linguistic, and intellectual identities. In contrast, non-affirmation of students' identities reinforces unequal relationships that ultimately harm students' spirit and negatively affect learning. In this case, Cummins argues that students' identities and their negotiation are reflected in broader sociocultural and political contexts that impinge upon individuals' identities.

We argue in this paper that writing is an important but frequently neglected setting for identity formation and affirmation. The way we respond to bilingual students' multiple and fluid identities, as they struggle to create meaning in writing, is one way in which educators can affirm students' identities.

Two prior research studies conducted by Coady and Escamilla (Coady & Escamilla 2005; Escamilla & Coady, 2001) have contributed to our understanding of ELLs'

writing development and identity construction. Both studies revealed how the phonologic, morphologic, syntactic, semantic, and discourse subsystems transfer across languages in writing in the process of acquiring literacy in English for Spanish speakers. In a prior study, Escamilla and Coady (2001) obtained 110 writing samples from fourth and fifth grade Mexican and Mexican descent students enrolled in a transitional bilingual education program in an urban setting in the United States. Data from those samples showed specific ways in which language transferred between English and Spanish. We found that students' knowledge of how the first language functions, specifically the orthographic (punctuation, paragraphing, etc.) and linguistic features (e.g., sound-symbol correspondence in phoneme transfer), influenced students' writing development in their L2, English.

We also analyzed the discourse structure in the students' writing, as well as topic shifts and digressions that some scholars have suggested characterize the writing of Spanish speakers (Kaplan, 1966; Montaño-Harmon, 1991). The data revealed that a significant number of the young bilingual writers discussed complex themes of justice and equity in their writing, despite their limited command of English. This led us to question the role of identity and life experiences as reflected in the students' writing, as well as how we assess biliterate students.

In a later study, Coady and Escamilla (2005) returned to that corpus of writing and analyzed themes of the writing samples from children enrolled in a dual language or two-way bilingual education program. In this setting, children were instructed and provided literacy development in both English and Spanish. Half of the children were native Spanish speakers and the second half were native English speakers. The analysis of that writing revealed that students' identities and "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) were socio-historically situated and reflected the social realities of their lives. The analysis further identified themes in students' work that revealed a complex understanding of the world, which included critical issues of equity and social justice, as mentioned above. As a result of this analysis, Coady and Escamilla (2005) suggested that educators working with ELLs in educational settings investigate and respond to the social realities of their students' lives. This information could be used to engage students in instruction in ways that reflect students' prior knowledge and experiences.

These earlier analyses provided insight into the ways that students' writing reflected their realities. However, what remained to be understood was the specific ways in which bilingual students negotiated their identities in writing in English and how those identities enacted broader Discourses (Gee, 2005). Thus, in this paper we chose to explore the identity negotiation of one bilingual student and the Discourses that he enacts. We then discuss possible pedagogical implications for classroom settings of the outcomes of the research.

## Methods

Data for this study were collected in the spring of 2005 as part of a broader study that investigated the writing of dual and multilingual students enrolled in an ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) pull-out program. A total of 120

students participated in the study; 57 of those students (48%) were Spanish-dominant from the following eight regions: Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. The students from fourth to twelfth grades reported that their first language was Spanish and that literacy instruction occurred initially in Spanish. Students' length of residence in the U.S. ranged from two months to five years.

All of the data were collected during the ESOL class periods. Students were given 30 minutes to write narrative essays based on a specific writing prompt. While we realized the limitations of producing writing for inauthentic purposes, we also understood that this exercise replicated, to some degree, the type of writing demands on students during the high-stakes, state-mandated writing assessment program, which occurs each spring. In fact, the Florida State direct-writing assessment, *Florida Writes!*, is described as both more cost-effective and time-saving than student portfolios or projects (FL DOE, 2008); thus, despite its high-stakes nature for ESOL students in particular, we were confident that this type of assessment would not change in the near future. Writing samples were collected in three rounds in which students were asked to write in both their L1 and L2. We did this to investigate the relationship between first language and second language writing, as well as to gain insight into the phenomenon of language transfer. Specifically, language transfer in this case refers to the phonologic, morphologic, syntactic, and semantic ways that first language literacy and knowledge affect writing in English, and subsequently how that appears to influence writing in the first language.

In the first round, students were asked to respond to the writing prompt, *If I Could be Someone Else for a Day,* in English only. They were provided 30 minutes to develop and write a response. We chose this prompt for two main reasons. First, we had worked with data from a similar prompt with younger students in a prior study and were interested in the types of elicitations garnered by this prompt. Secondly, we felt that this prompt might elicit data that reflected the prior experiences and cultural background of the students. We also thought that the prompt would encourage students to use their imagination since this requires the use of complex verb structures (conditional and subjunctive tenses). Data presented in this paper were collected from this prompt.

We separated data into subsets according to students' first language. Data from the L1 Spanish subset were analyzed along three main dimensions with the help of two bilingual graduate assistants. First, we looked at the ways in which students' knowledge of language transferred linguistically from L1 to L2 and influenced writing in English. We specifically looked at discourse style and structure in writing and found that discourse styles transfer from Spanish to English and vice versa. Further analysis of writing samples showed that, although students were able to write in two languages, they did not demonstrate awareness of distinct discourse styles. Next, we analyzed the writing by themes. We noticed patterns in student's writings at the theme level and found that a sizeable number of students from the Spanish subset wrote about social justice themes. We categorized those according to political, social, and economic issues. We also noticed that these topics reflected students' identities and life

experiences, even though these were not often evident upon initial analysis due to students' early stages of proficiency in their development of English literacy.

Next, we conducted discourse analysis on a subset of students' writings. We used Gee's (1999; 2005) framework of d/Discourse analysis which acts as both theory and methodology in order to facilitate this work. We identified six categories of analysis, which demonstrated various ways in which the author (or speaker) used language and enacted identities: semiotic building, significance building, activity building, relationship building, political building, and connection building. Semiotic building refers to how a piece of language serves to (dis)privilege specific sign systems or different ways of knowing and believing. Significance building is a tool meant to illuminate how language is used to underscore certain ideas. Activity building corresponds to the type of language used when engaged in an activity. For example, one talks and acts in a certain way when opening a committee meeting or in a different way when engaged in "chit chat" before opening the meeting (Gee, 2005, p. 98). Relationship building involves understanding of the relationship(s) the piece of language seeks to build with others (who may be present or not). Political building refers to the perspective on social goods that the piece of language is communicating. This entails assumptions about what normal, right, good, proper, high status is, and so forth. Finally, connection building addresses how a piece of language (dis)connects things or how one thing makes another become relevant (see Gee, 2005, pp. 11-13).

Gee (2005) suggests that these six areas or "building tasks" provide clues and cues to guide our understanding and analysis of the author and his/her communication. They further allow us to use language "to construe situations in certain ways and not in others" (p. 104). As such, this work is interpretable, meaning it does not rely on empirical 'facts' or there is not only one correct meaning. In this study we used these categories as a tool to unearth the ways in which students "continually and actively build and rebuild… worlds not just through language but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing" (Gee, 2005, p. 10). The intention of the detailed discourse analysis, then, was to identify more precisely the ways in which students' identities were negotiated, reflected and invested in students' writing. In this paper, we present one illustrative case.

## Data Analysis

Of the 57 samples from the Spanish-dominant students, 21 (37%) wrote narratives that reflected themes of equity and social justice. This pattern was unique to the Spanish-dominant students; students from other language groups did not write about justice and equity themes *per se*. Of those Spanish-dominant students' samples, one is presented below as an illustrative case. The interpretation of this analysis is that of these authors, whose own sociocultural and historical experiences have influenced this analytic process.

### *Diego: A Young Spanish Dominant Writer*

At the time of the study, Diego was a 16-year old, 11th grade high school student receiving ESOL services in a sub-urban school district in north Florida, U.S. The ESOL program included separate courses for English language development and English language arts classes as part of the students' coursework. Originally from Bolivia, Diego had been receiving these services and living in the United States for about six months at the time of the study. He had attended a public school in Bolivia from grades one through ten (enough to have heard history and political stories, and have some comprehension of politics in Bolivia) and relocated to the United States with his family in order for his mother to do graduate work at a local university. Diego's father worked in cleaning and janitorial services for the local school district. He had one younger sister. Diego had traveled to the United States once before moving there when he visited California. He and his family had traveled to Mexico, where he had relatives, on several occasions. At the time of the study, Diego had noted that he could read and write in Spanish, but was not proficient in other languages. Thus, he had first language literacy at the high school level.

When we first read Diego's writing sample, we were struck by the intensity of his writing and the need to express his political views, which appeared to reveal Diego's identities. However, at the same time, we were acutely aware of the difficulties that Diego faced in order to pass the 10th grade *Florida Writes!* writing exam. It was crucial for Diego to pass this high stakes test so that he could graduate from high school in Florida. Given that Diego was a beginning ESOL student already in the United States, we also realized that Diego had little time to develop knowledge of English writing.

The *Florida Writes!* writing rubric consists of four distinct parts on which students are assessed: focus (clarity of the paper including the main idea, themes, or points); organization (the overall structure of the piece as well as the use of transitional devices and sentence connections); support ("quality of details used to explain, clarify, or define" FL DOE, 2008, np) and conventions (general orthography and grammar, as well as variation in syntactic structure). The *Florida Writes!* test is considered a direct-writing assessment in which students are given 45 minutes to respond to a writing prompt. The assessment is given in grades 4, 8, and 10. The monolingual English assessment rubric is considered a 'holistic' writing rubric in that it is scored for overall impression within each of the four categories above. Moreover, the assessment is considered less costly and time consuming to administer and grade than are student projects or portfolios. Students are assessed on a six-point scale (3.5 is a passing grade), with six as the highest score. When applying the rubric from the State's writing assessment to his sample, Diego would not be considered a 'proficient' writer in any of the four areas: focus, organization, support, and conventions. This is true, despite the fact that Diego's writing is sophisticated, reflective, and conveys a powerful message, and that in our view, he is achieving communication. That is, not only is Diego able to communicate complex ideas, but he also conveys messages and invokes various identities and types of knowledge in his writing. He does this through the writing techniques he employs (including rhetorical devices and

parallelism) within the message he delivers. These are discussed in more detail below.
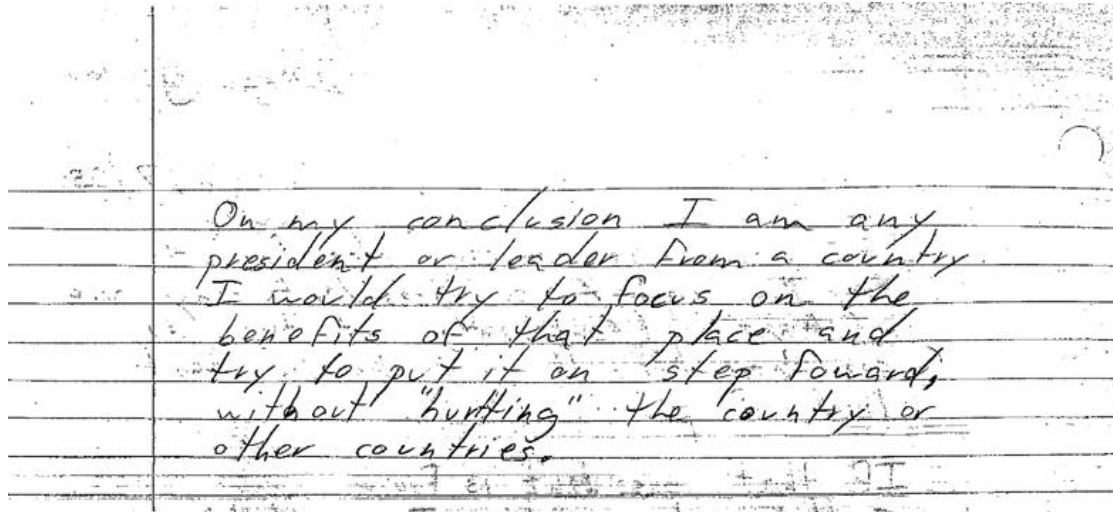
Figures 1 and 2: Diego's Writing Sample

If I could be someone else for a day I'll select a president any one in America (Continent) and try to see how difficult is to be in that level of power.

If that president is from a South America country, I would like to stop all the "disappiring" money, in other words people stealling the money.

If I wake up on the president Bush's pants, I would try to focus my target arrow on United States, how the people is living, all the differences of the social classes and try to help them, and let other parts of the world improve they cuality of live, without blocking the market.

I find interest on be, or I should say, try to be the president, or leader, of Iraq. I would move all the people to stop attacking and to be in peace but to do that United States, Bush, have to STOP!!, let some other countries live; thats the only way that I could lead that country

1-1-11

> *On my conclusion I am any*
> *president or leader from a country*
> *I would try to focus on the*
> *benefits of that place and*
> *try to put it on step foward,*
> *without "hurting" the country or*
> *other countries.*

## Messages and Meanings

It is evident in the sample that Diego understands and follows a particular and planned rhetorical structure, emphasizing certain 'rules' of narrative writing that are highly valued in the United States. Diego's writing reveals a five paragraph narrative structure. The essay begins with an opening sentence that restates the writing prompt (paragraph 1), a body of writing with three paragraphs that develop the topic to some degree, and a concluding statement (paragraph 5). In utilizing those valued writing conventions and structure, Diego participates in the discourse of schooling in the United States, which includes writing for standardized writing assessments. However, writing in this format and following this prescribed structure is undoubtedly a tactical device that Diego employs to demonstrate his knowledge of school writing. In fact, during this round of writing, Diego inquired if he had to follow 'a five paragraph essay' format when he began to write. Adhering to this discourse structure, which was optional, is a maneuver that Diego may have made to ensure that the reader would engage in (read and attempt to understand) his writing. Thus, in Diego's struggle to create meaning through writing, he purposefully employs a discourse structure that the reader in school would be familiar with and in which the reader could engage.

Diego also uses the rhetorical device of parallelism in the first three paragraphs of his essay. Rather than demonstrating 'connections' or transitions across paragraphs in a traditional or valued format (e.g., first, second, third), he uses the word "If" to demonstrate connections within the topic. For example, the first three paragraphs of the essay begin with "If" when Diego discusses being an American President. However, he discontinues this pattern in the fourth paragraph when he changes the topic from being an American President to being the President of Iraq. Thus, Diego keys the reader to a topic shift, as he modifies the connector at precisely the time that he moves from the main topic of "being an American President" to "being a leader of Iraq" for a day.

In addition to using a discourse structure that is familiar to the reader and that the reader can follow using connectors, Diego also builds relationships with the

reader by attempting to use common colloquial expressions. One example of this is his use of the phrase, "We would wake up on the president Bush's pants." While both the article of clothing and verb were untraditional ("wake up" for walk and "pants" for shoes), Diego nonetheless, gains the reader's attention, perhaps in part *because of* the error rather than in spite of it. The humor of this sentence succeeds in engaging the reader further than Diego might have realized, though the fact that he employs (or attempts to do so) a common colloquial expression indicates that Diego is serious about the message he wishes to convey. Similarly, Diego emphasizes the serious nature and immediacy of the message by using the word "STOP!!" In this case it is as if Diego wrote the emphatic expression in capital letters to implore the reader to take notice of what he wishes to convey. In short, the use of these devices represents his struggle to create meaning and deliver a message that is important to him.

Diego uses additional devices to convey the idea of humanitarianism in several ways. First, Diego employs the expression "focus my target arrow on the United States". In this utterance, Diego appears to suggest that as president he would pay attention to domestic U.S. issues. Such a reflective president might reconsider and modify U.S. policies and actions and might address social issues such as class differences. Social class differences are prominent struggles among Latin Americans; therefore, it is not surprising that Diego uses his knowledge of social issues in Latin America and focuses on this particular idea. Secondly, Diego uses the verb "let" on two occasions ("let other parts of the world improve" and "let some other countries live"). He uses these as if he were imploring the president to promote policies that allow social well being and improve the quality of life both in the U.S. and abroad. In combination, Diego uses these words to convey a message that resembles a plea. Ultimately, Diego is writing about his values and beliefs in combination with his experience and identity as a Latin American immigrant in the United States. Indeed, we view Diego as writing beyond the identity boundary of 'an ESOL student in a U.S. high school'; his multiple identities reveal an understanding of the world, as well as his ideals, values, and beliefs. Below we discuss further how Diego's writing conveys these themes as well as negotiates multiple identities.

## Enacting Multiple Identities

Beyond being a writer in an ESOL classroom in which he utilizes various rhetorical devices to convey his message, Diego is also a raconteur who engages in "Conversations" (Gee, 2005, p. 21), or communicates openly, about the world. Such "Conversations", according to Gee, reflect the "talking and writing that has gone on in a specific social group or society at large around a major theme, debate, or motif" (p. 22). Diego demonstrates his knowledge about U.S. foreign policy, the war with Iraq, and the controversy surrounding U.S. participation in the war. His knowledge of particular Conversations both reflects and is reflective of his identity, and Diego demonstrates these several ways.

Diego demonstrates one identity immediately in his writing where he introduces the reader to who he would be for a day. He writes that he would 'select' to be a president from "America (continent)". Diego uses parentheses, i.e. America (the

continent), to let the reader know that the president he would be is not an American from the United States, but rather an American from the continent of America. The parenthetical clarification acts as a caution to the reader that American does not necessarily equate "America" with "the United States of America". In this regard, it is as if Diego were marking his identity (enacted through who he would be for a day) as one would stake out property boundaries. He takes charge of this event and explains upfront what American means to him, rather than leaving the interpretation of "American" to the reader.

Another way Diego enacts an identity in solidarity with other (Latin) Americans is in referring to "disappearing" money. In this case, Diego is an insider with an awareness of "disappearing" money. He indicates that people, at least some people, understand that money did not really disappear but was actually stolen. The word disappearing has a deep history in Latin America (e.g. Argentina in the 1980s), which refers to histories of military dictatorships where people who opposed the government and were later "missing" were referred to as *desaparecidos* or the disappeared ones. While it is possible that Diego, who was born in the late 1980s, was not aware of these events because he lived in Bolivia until his teen years, Diego was impressionable and knowledgeable of the politics of his culture. This interpretation was confirmed by Diego after an initial analysis during an interview in which 'member checking' of the data occurred. In that regard, Diego builds solidarity with other Americans, first by sharing knowledge about money being taken and, second, by sharing a common history and knowledge of the double meaning behind things 'disappearing' in Latin America.

Diego's knowledge is, in fact, not only about Latin America as he relays to the reader his beliefs regarding current world events and views of social inequities and his wish to improve them ("all the differences of the social classes and try to help them"). Diego, then, enacts another identity: an advocate for the oppressed who face social injustices. Diego's main activity in this narrative is arguably one of an advocate for people who face political and economic oppression. His writing conveys knowledge about social class structure, political parties, the position of the United States in the world, and market economies. Diego weaves these types of knowledge together around one theme, *If I Could be Someone Else for a Day*, though his real theme or message may be to advocate for social justice.

In addition, Diego's writing demonstrates that he is a risk taker who is unafraid to take a controversial stance. As he questions the United States' involvement in Iraq, Diego engages the reader in a controversial anti-war position, which was less popular in 2005 than it is in 2009. Diego demonstrates, then, that he knows about conversations engaged in the broader society. This may be the result of having lived in another country, one where conversations about politics and war in the context of U.S. foreign policy may be more openly debated. Diego positions himself as an advocate for a socially-responsive U.S. foreign policy that "improves the cuality of live [sic]" for oppressed people around the world.

Diego uses his knowledge of politics and economics, and his beliefs and views to enact multiple identities that are situated in the social world. For example, Diego demonstrates some knowledge of both socialist and capitalist economic models in Latin America and the United States, and may be referencing, here, U.S.-imposed

trade embargoes. Yet, rather than emphasizing only one economic model, Diego writes about aiding different social class groups while at the same time advocating for policies that do not block the "market". Diego does not view these two positions in conflict but as a viable alternative. This socioculturally constructed stance reveals Diego's hybrid identity. He is neither totally in or from Bolivia, nor totally in or from the U.S. and can be referred to as a member of 'Generation 1.5.' - a cluster of often misunderstood students who are precariously balanced between their parents' home culture and their host country's culture because they share characteristics of first and second generation immigrants (Ariza, 2006; Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999).

In his writing, Diego must negotiate his position and borders in the face of many conflicting ideas (e.g. support for the war in Iraq versus an advocate for 'peace'; support for justice and equity among the social classes versus an open market economy). Diego's identities are multiple and fluid reflecting solidarity with other comrades from America as well as solidarity with people from all over the world who have an outsider perspective of the war. Ultimately, Diego challenges U.S. policy and its position in the war and then imagines alternative paths or solutions that address social inequities. Through his views, beliefs, and life experiences, Diego can imagine a new identity in the postmodern world.

## Discussion

Using a framework of language transfer and identity construction, the analysis of Diego's writing reveals two major points. First, ELLs in the process of acquiring literacy in English may and frequently do write about complex topics, despite what the conventional writing assessments in the current standardized writing era suggest about ELLs' writing. Secondly, ELLs such as Diego enact a variety of Discourses, which reflect multiple, fluid, and negotiated identities. Below we discuss these two positions and the relationship between them.

From a second language assessment perspective, it is evident that Diego's writing, despite its rich and complex ideas, would be considered less than proficient using a monolingual writing assessment, such as the *Florida Writes!* rubric. In fact, there is a contrast between *what* Diego has written, as a sophisticated and reflective piece, and *how* he has written it. Leki (1992) describes this phenomenon of content sophistication as one of several writing behaviors common among ESL students. She writes, "because [ESL] students profit from experiencing and comparing at least two cultures, their understanding of the world often far exceeds that of their U.S. counterparts" (p. 61). She continues that this reflection lends itself to student writing that appears more sophisticated than their native counterparts.

As a bilingual and global student, Diego's life experiences appear to be under-valued both in terms of the ways he uses his L1 knowledge to inform his writing in English (as bilinguals do in language transfer) and the rich, international themes that the writing evokes. Leki (1992) notes that international students frequently write about topics that are unfamiliar to their ESL teachers, and this often includes topics related to politics in their home countries, of which the students are typically well-informed. In that regard, she suggests that students

have a "tremendous advantage" over native English-speaking students, since teachers may not be aware of what ELLs are writing about (p. 63). Indeed, the rubrics from state standardized tests, such as those used by *Florida Writes!,* appear not to place value on novel or sophisticated content; rather, they rely heavily on standard uses of English and topics that are comprehensible to scorers.

In contrast to such a one-dimensional and static piece, Diego's work underscores how languages for bilingual students interact in the brain in sophisticated ways that are largely unmeasured and are often punitive. For example, Diego's writing shows semantic transference (e.g. *if I wake up on the president Bush's pants* versus *if I were in President Bush's shoes*). This particular transfer is a useful guide for educators working with Diego in that it reveals: 1) differences in idiomatic expressions across languages; 2) semantic transferences between languages; and 3) the use of literary tools to convey meaning in writing. The expression chosen by Diego reveals linguistic and cultural knowledge that could be used as a valuable resource, rather than viewed as a deficit in writing. Accordingly, it is up to educators to make the decisions as to how Diego's writing, as well as his identity and life experiences, can be valued in the classroom. At least, one should expect to see rubrics for L2 learners that reflect their valuable bilingual skills.

In addition, Diego's writing illustrates the complex and socio-historically-situated nature of his identity, as well as the complex ways in which he constructs, enacts, and negotiates multiple identities. Following Gee (2005), Diego's 'identity kit', or enacted Discourses, arguably includes a high school ESOL student, a young immigrant from Bolivia, an American building solidarity with other Americans from the continent, an advocate for the oppressed who is knowledgeable about international inequities and improprieties, and a statesperson who seeks to negotiate a new, more humane position. It is these multiple identities that Diego reveals in his writing.

Accordingly, the identities that Diego constructs correspond with some of those delineated by Pavlenko (2001), namely linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and social identities. Linguistically, it is clear that both L1 and L2 usage, and his choice of words, are informed by and inform Diego's identity. Moreover, Diego's writing provides evidence of such ethnic, cultural, and social identities being enacted, which are embedded in the way in which Diego writes, the intended message he wishes to convey, the context or situation of the writing, and his beliefs and feelings. Ethnically, Diego identifies himself both as an immigrant to the U.S. and a Latin American. Both of these identities are enacted in his writing, and it is impossible to separate these identities from each other. Both his linguistic and ethnic identities reveal aspects of a dynamic cultural identity that Diego creates with the reader. In fact, Diego's writing reflects the interrelated nature of those categories and boundaries. Diego's identities are constructed socially as he interacts with a reader, even an imaginary reader, whom he views as one in an academic setting. Diego strategically uses devices inside the essay to engage the reader and to deliver his message and negotiated identities.

Similar to the work of Pavlenko (2001), in his study of bilingual students' writing, Jiménez (2000) found that bilingual students construct their bilingual, bicultural identities in and through "cultural borderlands" (p. 985). He noted that bilingual students' feared loss of the first language as part of their bilingual identity. Nonetheless, data here show that identities for this bilingual student are negotiated in his social interaction in writing, despite the fact that writing did not occur in the student's L1. Moreover, as Bakhtin's work suggests, Diego is in the process of 'struggling to create meaning' both literally in writing, as well as figuratively in the negotiated identities that he wishes to convey as he communicates.

Ultimately, we must ask, in the context of writing that is valued, at least academically in standardized assessments, for its adherence to focus, organization, support, and conventions in English, what is the usefulness of exploring bilingual students' identities in writing? As Cummins' (2001, 2002) work has suggested, affirming students' identities through social interaction between teachers and students is one way in which students see themselves as valued participants in educational settings. It is evident that students and teachers interact both orally and in writing in schools. Thus, the rich opportunities to affirm students' identities as evoked and negotiated in writing would be to overlook teaching and learning itself. That is, when we, as educators, begin to read the content of students' work as an expression of engagement, then we can engage in real dialogue about the world. This is not to suggest that writing conventions are unimportant; rather, students in the process of acquiring literacy in English need to gain control over the 'word' to relate to the 'world' (Freire, 2000). Both are necessary for full participation in the world.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the ways in which one ELL engaged in the process of negotiating his bilingual, multi-dimensional identities, writing, and expression in many interesting and important ways. Rather than viewing emerging English language ability as an array of phonologic, morphologic, syntactic and stylistic deficits which outsiders (or in this case, test scorers) may only view as reconcilable through ultimate command over English, Pavlenko (2001) suggests that "writing in the midst of the turmoil of budding bilingualism allows [writers] to accomplish linguistic transitions" (p. 352). Indeed, the demand for English language learners to perform well on narrow, English-only assessment measures in writing is problematic in so far as it necessarily overlooks the complex and various ways that ELLs communicate and use language to express their identities. Moreover, the interplay between two linguistic worlds, which are embedded in broader Discourses, allows bilingual authors to imagine and invent new identities with new and varied voices.

We believe that the language abilities of bilingual students are a resource that contributes to society, rather than a problem to be solved (Ruíz, 1984). Indeed, the valuing and use of languages can enhance the positioning of the U.S. in this global world. These linguistic resources have previously been squandered, which, in the current social and international context, can no longer afford to be wasted.

As the world becomes more global, the multiple voices of students that reflect their hybridized identities will increasingly become commonplace. As such, our role as educators is to connect learning to students' lives and lived experiences.

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