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Competing discourses of academic Spanish in the Texas-Mexico borderlands

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ABSTRACT

In this descriptive study the efforts of a faculty to prepare a cohort of pre-service bilingual education teachers to pass a newly adopted state certification test of academic Spanish are presented. The faculty’s efforts were aimed at offsetting a low pass rate on this test, but unfortunately efforts fell short. To unpack this outcome, the authors use a theoretical lens aimed at examining the dominant Discourses associated with academic Spanish. Through this analysis the authors maintain that at the national, state, local, and program levels the dominant Discourses associated with academic Spanish work jointly to undermine the acquisition of academic Spanish needed by prospective bilingual education teachers.

Introduction

Across the United States bilingual education teacher preparation programs enact activities such as policies, curriculum, and teaching strategies aimed at developing the prospective teachers’ ability to deliver instruction in the Spanish language. Thirty-nine states in the United States require bilingual education teachers to demonstrate proficiency in the non-English language (Boyle, August, Tabaku, Cole, & Simpson-Baird, 2015), which suggests that most states have established language acquisition-related activities. However, little research has been conducted to better understand what such activities constitute. This is a precarious language situation, since language is at the very heart of the teaching and learning enterprise and doubly so in bilingual education settings. With the growing numbers of Spanish-English emergent bilinguals in the United States in need of well-prepared bilingual education teachers, the significance of this kind of research is only magnified.

To help address this research void, we describe how a cadre of project faculty at a Hispanic-serving institution situated along the Texas-Mexico border worked closely with a cohort of 35 pre-service students over a two-year period (2010–2012) to advance their academic Spanish. The impetus for this study was the introduction of a new Spanish proficiency test, the Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test (hereafter BTLPT), implemented in 2009 to certify bilingual education teachers in Texas. Pre-service students’ pass rates on this test have been low at this site and across the state, also undermining the supply of certified bilingual education teachers in Texas (Arroyo Romano, 2016).

This description of the project faculty’s efforts is rendered using a variation of interpretive and critical qualitative methodology (Cooper & White, 2012). Consequently, we draw on our own experience as members of the project faculty within the bilingual education teacher preparation program where the events took place over a two-year period. However, the cohort’s performance
on the BTLPT was also monitored for an additional two and a half years after program completion, allowing for a deeper analysis. Basically, we describe the national-, state-, and program-level context and then the varied Spanish language-based decisions and activities enacted by project faculty. We also examine focus group data to generate emergent but tentative themes. With this layered context in sharper relief, we then attempt to make sense of the cohort’s performance on the BTLPT.

We recognize that in order to more fully understand what transpired at this site we must also draw on literature that helps elucidate the nature of academic Spanish more broadly. Clearly, what transpires linguistically at the national and state levels influences what happens at the local level, especially in contexts that concern the highly politicized nature of bilingual education in the United States. Said literature offers valuable insight into what we refer to as the Discourse (Gee, 2008) associated with a given community and in this instance the bilingual education community that has given life to academic Spanish over time. In effect, Gee’s (2008) notion of Discourse guides our critical analysis and interpretation of what transpired here in the borderlands.

**Conceptual orientation**

Academic language, particularly academic English, has been the subject of much inquiry, and like most constructs it is difficult to define and operationalize (Anstrom et al., 2010; Haneda, 2014). Scarcella (2003) posits a conceptualization of academic English entailing linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural-psychological components anchored to the context of schooling. With regard to the sociocultural-psychological component, Scarcella surmises that students are apprenticed into the uses of academic English and over time appropriate the language norms, values, beliefs, and practices that characterize the academic community. Scarcella’s conceptualization (2003) is not exclusive to English and applies to academic Spanish as well. However, while the linguistic and cognitive components of academic language are important, it is the sociocultural-psychological component that influences the development of both of these components. The acquisition of linguistic features (e.g., academic vocabulary) is determined by what is valued and used by the academic community. Similarly, the degree to which academic language is used to promote cognition is also mitigated by the values, beliefs, and practices governing its use for knowledge construction. However Scarcella, while drawing heavily on the work of Gee (1996), does not fully explain how the sociocultural-psychological component of academic language evolves.

Bilingual education is at its most fundamental level a matter of social engineering entailing language policy, the implementation of the policy, and power. With respect to power, Tollefson and Tsui (2004) make a compelling case that language planning, including medium of instruction policies, is never politically or economically neutral. This position is akin to Gee’s (2008) theory of Discourses written with an upper case [D]. Gee suggests that some ideologies emanate from the elite, who have but one interest, to retain and enhance their power within a given society. Gee (2008, p. 28) invites us to consider the possibility that the elite create ideology, a composite of their knowledge, beliefs, and behavior, and are able to enact it by “getting others with less power and status to accept their ‘inverted’ view of reality in two ways.”

Gee (2008) explains that one way is by getting intellectuals (e.g., bilingual education teachers, administrators, and professors) to promote the views of the rich and powerful interested in maintaining the status quo. In the United States this means using intellectuals to promote English-only schooling or at best transitional bilingual education. The other way of perpetuating the elite’s ideology is by organizing society and its institutions (e.g., language policies influencing medium of instruction) to promote ways of thinking and behaving that also serve the interests of those in power. These views and ways of thinking and behaving, or ideologies, are perpetuated through a construct Gee names Discourses, which may also be dominant Discourses. Gee sums up the essence of a Discourse in the following manner:
A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language and other symbolic expressions, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting, as well as using various tools, technologies, or props that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network,” to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful “role” or to signal that one is filling a social niche in a distinctively recognizable fashion. (p. 161)

In sum, all those involved in the bilingual education enterprise, including emergent bilingual learners, full professors, and policy makers, constitute the socially meaningful group. Collectively, and since the inception of bilingual education teacher preparation in the United States, this social network has come to enact a Discourse that embodies relatively identifiable and stable beliefs, practices, and tools associated with academic Spanish. New (e.g., pre-service teachers) and established members (e.g., faculty) have served to sustain the community’s identity and Discourse over time. Even so, and as Gee (2008, p. 161) posits, “Discourses are resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny, since uttering viewpoints that seriously undermine them defines one as being outside them.”

Contextualizing and weaving the narrative

This narrative is assembled using a variety of sources (Cooper & White, 2012) including: a review of the literature; descriptions of the state, program, and cohort contexts; and an account of the activities the project faculty engaged in to address the cohort’s academic Spanish needs. Data also include excerpts drawn from four focus groups. Focus group (Carey & Asbury, 2012) data were collected near the conclusion of each semester. Following Institutional Review Board protocol, participation was voluntary; each participant signed a consent form and was assigned a pseudonym. A total of 20 different students participated in the four focus groups; four of the same students participated in two, and one student, Julissa, participated in three. The size of the focus groups ranged from five to eight students. All focus groups were videotaped, conducted in Spanish and English, and transcribed. Their duration ranged from one hour to an hour and a half. During each focus group, the facilitator asked several guideline questions, one of which was associated with the development of the participants’ academic Spanish. This question generated data from across the four focus groups that were then structurally coded and categorized, allowing for the generation of tentative themes. We pose the themes as tentative since the focus group was not strictly centered on the development of their academic Spanish but aimed at understanding their overall program-related experiences in the study.

The project faculty and student cohort activities were nested within the general bilingual education program serving other cohorts of students who did not participate in this research activity. However, the project cohort students were admitted under the same admissions process and criteria as any other students in the program, and all students entering the program had the same opportunity to register for this specific cohort. Students who elected to participate in this study were free to discontinue their participation, though all 35 students remained in the cohort for the entirety of their preparation. The cohort completed the degree plan over a two-year period: Fall 2010, Spring 2011, Fall 2011, and Spring 2012. Each semester consisted of at least four required courses (i.e., blocks), with the exception of student teaching, which was coupled with a seminar during the final semester in Spring 2012.

With regard to our positionality (Milner, 2007), the first author identifies himself as a Chicano of Mexican American cultural heritage with migrant roots. Like many Chicanos he is a heritage language learner, and he began to formally recover his Spanish language as a young adult. The second author is a trilingual Mexican national from a working-class family who immigrated to the United States over 30 years ago. Both authors have terminal degrees and are actively engaged in the preparation of bilingual education teachers. The first author teaches bilingual education courses, and the second author primarily teaches Spanish language and
Macro to micro discourses

National discourses on academic Spanish

Efforts among bilingual educators at all ranks to develop academic Spanish have a relatively long but contradictory history. On the one hand, professional organizations and researchers alike believe that bilingual education teachers should possess the ability to teach across the curriculum in a child’s native language (Aquino Sterling, 2016; Center for Applied Linguistics, 1974; Guerrero, 1997; National Association for Bilingual Education, 1992; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1953; Valdés, 1989). Even the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation defined highly qualified bilingual teachers as “persons who are fluent and literate in English and any other language used for instruction . . . ” (Rosado, 2005, p. 836).

In practice, however, bilingual education programs in the United States are generally subtractive or aimed primarily at English acquisition (Wright, 2010) and do not readily create sustained opportunities to acquire academic Spanish gradually over time. In fact, the use of Spanish in the context of PK–12 schooling in the United States has a long history of subordination, including psychological and physical violence (Flores, 2005). Prospective bilingual education teachers are thus likely to experience linguicism at school at a very early age, which in turn shapes their academic Spanish abilities and influences their own language ideologies (Ek, Sánchez, & Quijada Cerecer, 2013).

As teacher candidates converge on a pre-service bilingual education teacher preparation program, and in light of this broader subtractive sociolinguistic milieu, it is reasonable to assume that candidates will be afforded certain experiences to help them develop their academic Spanish. At a minimum, these experiences might include access to professors who can deliver instruction in academic Spanish, books and materials written in academic Spanish, along with certain programmatic and curricular features aimed at enhancing their academic Spanish.

Four decades ago Gaarder (1977, p. 88) stated that bilingual education faculty must be highly literate and able to function at a professional level in the non-English language (i.e., Spanish). However, what such a professional level might constitute or how such a level of proficiency might be determined remains unexplored. Flores (2005) concludes that bilingual education faculty rely on Spanish language professors in foreign language departments to address the Spanish language needs of prospective bilingual teachers since the latter are deemed experts in the language. Consequently, few bilingual education courses are taught in academic Spanish, and questions remain as to whether or not some bilingual education faculty have the proficiency to do so (Calderón & Díaz, 1993). Nonetheless, job descriptions for bilingual education professors routinely include qualifications preferring or maybe even requiring that the applicant possess a professional level of academic Spanish language proficiency.

It is also common practice to prepare prospective bilingual education teachers using tools (i.e., textbooks, publications, media, and other curricular materials) written in English, as few bilingual education faculty publish their research or textbooks in Spanish (Guerrero & Guerrero, 2013). This language of wider communication is not being used in the United States for what Fishman (2001) would term intellectual creativity, a function that appears to be reserved for English only. Also little is known about the programmatic (e.g., entry and exit language criteria) and curricular features (e.g., uses of academic Spanish) that might promote the Spanish language development of prospective bilingual education teachers within a typical two-year degree plan (Seidner, 1981).

Given this broader subtractive scenario, it should not come as any big surprise that even certified bilingual education teachers are not well prepared to teach across the curriculum in Spanish.
and Solis (1997) report the need for more academic Spanish in-service opportunities for certified bilingual education teachers in Texas. Colina and Cuellar (2011–2012) indicate that most of the bilingually certified teachers in their study lacked expertise in appropriate academic Spanish science terminology. Fabelo (2008) offers similar findings in the Texas context of teaching mathematics. This might also help explain why some bilingual education teachers experience language conflict. Palmer (2011, p. 118) explains how bilingual education teachers in Texas tended to associate strong English proficiency among their students with being intelligent and framed Spanish as a crutch, while simultaneously expressing their belief in additive bilingualism.

Finally, we must consider the practice of assessing the bilingual education teacher’s academic Spanish for certification purposes. Again, 39 states engage in some kind of activity aimed at assessing the teachers’ ability to deliver instruction in the non-English language (Boyle et al., 2015); however, there is a great deal of variation with regard to how this assessment is conducted (Grant, 1997). In some cases, the prospective teacher must take an oral and/or written language assessment, or complete required course work, or meet target language criteria established by a given school district. Under these conditions, it is possible that bilingual education teachers deemed proficient in one state might not meet the language criteria in another state. Moreover, practically no research has been conducted on the validity of these measures or on the social consequences of their use.

In sum, at the broader national level the Discourse associated with academic Spanish is indeed based on the belief that bilingual education teachers ought to be able to deliver instruction across the curriculum in this language. On the other hand, in practice, these teachers are not given much meaningful opportunity (PK–16) to acquire academic Spanish. The Spanish language skills these apprentices do have are more a consequence of their home and community rather than schooling. To further undermine the development of academic Spanish, the practices and measures used to determine their ability to deliver instruction across the curriculum are widely variable and suspect. Consequently, some certified bilingual education teachers enter the classroom unsure of their linguistic abilities, lacking such abilities, and even questioning the very value of academic Spanish.

**State and borderlands’ program discourses**

The implementation of the BTLPT in Texas in 2009 was the impetus for shifting the academic Spanish landscape in this state. The new test replaced the Texas Oral Proficiency Test (TOPT) adopted in 1991, an oral proficiency test designed for bilingual education teachers as well as foreign language Spanish teachers (Stansfield & Kenyon, 1991). The BTLPT is aligned with academic Spanish language standards for each of the four language domains. According to the Texas State Board for Educator Certification (2004, p. i), the bilingual teacher should be able to:

- derive essential information, interpret meaning, and evaluate oral communications in the target language.
- derive essential information, interpret meaning, and evaluate a variety of authentic materials written in the target language.
- construct effective interpersonal and presentational oral discourse in the target language.
- write effective interpersonal and presentational discourse in the target language.

Statewide initial pass rates were quite low, and the programwide pass rates at this borderland’s institution were even lower. Based on the Texas State Board Educator Certification (2014) online data, in 2009–2010 the statewide pass rate was 42% (n = 929); in 2010–11 the pass rate rose to 60% (n = 1,883); for 2011–2012 the pass rate dipped slightly to 58% (n = 2,406). The first year that students in this borderlands program took the BTLPT was in 2010–2011, six years after the establishment of the state standards. Overall, the programwide initial pass rate for 2010–2011 was 36% (n = 98), and in 2011–2012 among the 81 students who took the test, thirty-seven (45%) managed to pass it, some only after multiple attempts. In short, these outcomes were cause for alarm
among the faculty and administration since the pass rates on the TOPT were almost always above 97%. Such a dramatic shift in performance on the BTLPT also placed the program and College at risk for state educator preparation program sanctions.

Over the period of this study (2010–2012), and through faculty meetings and conversations, the majority of the faculty and administrators at this site shifted their Discourses several times in response to the low pass rates on the BTLPT. The initial position was a “wait and see disposition.” That is, the majority of the program faculty and administrators assumed the belief and practice that since this was a new test, it was possible that scores would rise as students adjusted to the new test, and no programmatic or instructional adjustments would be warranted. Since test scores only rose marginally, their position shifted to one of “test early, test often.” The logic was that since the test is difficult, students should be required to take it as soon as possible and as often as necessary until the students passed it. There was also a brief period when the majority of program faculty and administrators assumed the position that the reason for poor test performance was rooted across campus where students had to take one advanced Spanish composition course as part of their bilingual education specialization course work. The basis of the argument was that bilingual program faculty could teach their courses in Spanish, but they should not teach Spanish; it was argued that the latter responsibility, along with BTLPT outcomes, belonged to Spanish language faculty in the Spanish department. The final shift in Discourse among the broader faculty culminated with simply questioning the validity of the BTLPT, since so many students across the state were also struggling to pass the test. The plan was to submit a letter from the Texas Association for Bilingual Education to the Texas Education Agency calling the validity of the BTLPT into question.

In sum, the majority of the program faculty and administration chose not to adjust their practices or Discourse as related to the students’ poor performance on the BTLPT. It is within this context that these two lead authors, in conjunction with other project faculty, attempted to address this challenge within the only space available to navigate, the modification of the program curriculum, through coordinated course design, instructional delivery, and conscious attention to the development of the cohort’s academic Spanish.

Responding to the challenge

To better understand the cohort’s bilingual profile, participating students were asked to complete a sociodemographic survey. Tables 1 and 2 summarize basic characteristics of the cohort. Table 1 indicates that most of these participants are U.S. born and self-identified as Hispanic. A majority of the students reported being served by a bilingual education program during their elementary school years. More than half also reported having parents with less than a high school education. Nearly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Basic Demographic Information.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s) had less than high school education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Served by a bilingual program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s) high school graduate(s), no college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income is $25,000 or less.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family member(s) teacher(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (in years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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</tbody>
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*Excludes one individual with missing information on this item.

Note. Two missing cases.
two-thirds of the participants reported a household income of $25,000 or less, with a fair portion (40%) of them currently married. It is also noteworthy that a number of these students reported having a family member who is a teacher.

As is evident in Table 2, these students are engaged in the use of Spanish at home, including their uses of media. However, most participants report reading English newspapers, with substantially fewer reporting reading Spanish language newspapers. Since a little less than one-third were born in Mexico, and more than a third report only speaking Spanish at home, it may well be that this subgroup reflects the bulk of those who report reading Spanish language newspapers. The more salient characteristic is that just over a third of them speak only English at home. We estimate that all of the students in this sample are either native speakers of Spanish or heritage language speakers.

**Gauging the student’s academic Spanish**

Based on previous experience and the sociodemographic data collected, we were aware that students in this cohort had a fairly wide range of oral and literacy skills in Spanish. Moreover, we knew that there were no Spanish language screening or diagnostic processes used as part of being admitted into the general program. The only related admissions criterion entailed earning a satisfactory grade (a letter grade of C or better) in one advanced writing course offered through the Spanish language department. Note that no prerequisites were required for admission into this advanced course, and the Spanish language program did not use a placement exam. To respond to this situation, these two authors developed an online practice exam similar to the BTLPT aimed at writing in academic Spanish since students in the program were not generally Spanish literate and scored lowest on the written portion of the BTLPT. By the end of the first semester, we had collected sufficient writing samples to gauge the project students’ written proficiency as “high,” “mid-high,” “mid-low,” or “low” using the BTLPT writing rubric (Texas Education Agency, 2010, pp. 53–54) as a general point of reference.

This information was shared with the students so that they could monitor their language development. Only six students received a high or mid-high rating, and they were encouraged to take the BTLPT at their convenience. Three students fell squarely in the range of mid-high and were encouraged to seek out support and opportunities to refine their skills before attempting the BTLPT. The remaining 26 students needed substantial support and were encouraged to take additional Spanish course work if possible. These students were also encouraged to use the Spanish tutoring services provided by the university’s Learning Assistance Center and the research assistants involved in this project, all of whom were highly literate in academic Spanish.

Using the diagnostic information collected, and drawing on the notion of team-based learning advanced by Michaelsen (2004), project faculty made a conscious effort to evenly distribute those students with more advanced academic Spanish language abilities across student teams. One of the requirements for establishing student teams following Michaelsen’s recommendations entails the identification of those student skills that are paramount to success in a given course or program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Demographic Characteristics.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least some Spanish is spoken at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Spanish is spoken at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both English, Spanish spoken at home equally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only English is spoken at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads Spanish-language newspapers at least a couple of times a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watches/listens to Spanish-language television/radio at least a couple of times a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads English-language newspapers at least a couple of times a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watches/listens to English-language television/radio at least a couple of times a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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</tbody>
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*Excludes one individual with missing information on this item.

Note. Two missing cases.
Then the instructor must ensure that those skills are evenly distributed across the teams. For this reason, seven teams of five students were established and remained intact for the duration of each semester per Michaelsen’s approach to college teaching.

**Project faculty proficiency in academic Spanish**

While the general program expectation is that the four bilingual education courses should be taught using Spanish, there are no explicit criteria that faculty at this institution needed to meet in order to teach bilingual education courses in Spanish. Faculty only needed to have a certain number of graduate-level credit hours of course work in or related to the field of bilingual education. Not unlike their students, the project faculty varied in terms of their ability to use academic Spanish both orally and in writing. Briefly, three of the professors were native speakers of Spanish and were educated in Spanish (K–12) outside of the United States. These three professors agreed to teach their general education courses in Spanish. Two other professors were heritage language speakers from the borderlands and also taught general education courses and agreed to do so in Spanish.

Two faculty members (including the first author) primarily acquired Spanish as a heritage language through formal study, time spent abroad in a Spanish-speaking country, and through marriage to a native speaker of Spanish. One faculty member was a native speaker of a romance language and acquired English as a second language as an adolescent. This professor also married a native speaker of Spanish and acquired Spanish as a third language. Two of these three professors also taught bilingual education courses, and one taught general education courses, and agreed to do so in Spanish. One additional faculty member, who immigrated to the United States at a young age, experienced Spanish language loss. Even so, the instructor agreed to encourage the students to use Spanish in this general education course. In sum, each course in the program, whether bilingual or general education course work, was to entail the use of academic Spanish. This was in contrast to other cohorts of students in the same program.

**Curricular design**

In the bilingual education courses Spanish and English were both used for lectures, discussions, quizzes, and oral and written assignments, except for the course on teaching English as a second language. Course readings and media for the bulk of the courses were almost entirely in English, however. The project faculty and research assistants made a concerted effort to locate and acquire course-related academic Spanish texts but with little success. The biggest challenge was finding readings on bilingual education written in Spanish that reflected the U.S. context. Consequently, it was quite common to read in English, orally discuss the reading in Spanish, and then write in Spanish.

The final student teaching seminar was conducted in English and Spanish, and all students were placed by college personnel in a bilingual classroom setting with a certified bilingual education teacher. During student teaching, and following program guidelines, all students were observed at least three times as they delivered lessons using Spanish. The three project faculty who supervised the cohort during their student teaching, with very few exceptions, informally rated these students as Spanish proficient. Only two students were rated lower or as emerging proficient. As the students neared the end of the program, workshops were offered to familiarize students with the format of the BTLPT and to make them aware of their Spanish language strengths and weaknesses. All of the students in this cohort met the program requirements to graduate.

**Students’ discourse on academic Spanish**

Based on focus group data, and in their first semester, students recognized the importance of needing to improve their academic Spanish but also voiced concern about the limited opportunities built into the required degree plan to do so. The participants also expressed an
understanding of how society undermined their opportunities to flourish as a bilingual. Elisa, for example, explained how she had set out to go beyond the degree plan by taking more Spanish classes than the degree plan required and how she was at least going to work at improving her Spanish so she could be the best she could be. Esmeralda is much more forceful in expressing her concern about the limited opportunities she had to acquire academic Spanish, as can been seen in her statements:

… Like now that they changed the degree plan, it doesn’t even have Spanish classes. I’m doing the new degree plan, and it has a lot of science and no Spanish, and I’m going to be a bilingual teacher? … I think they should revise the degree plan, like, completely, because the degree plan that they have right now, it’s like ridiculous. All those sciences; it’s like, I don’t wanna be a science teacher, I wanna be bilingual, and I’m not taking Spanish. It doesn’t make sense.

Later in the conversation Esmeralda also acknowledges how important it is for her to be bilingual so she can meet the needs of the children but then recognizes that what she has learned in the program about providing native language instruction may be rejected by the local school district. Julissa then reveals her interpretation of what broader society did to her language and the unfairness of the BTLPT. She explains how on the one hand she is expected to master academic Spanish but on the other how it was taken from her:

I don’t think it’s fair that the state is, like, making us have to take all these Spanish tests orally and everything written, you know, academically, when we’re not at that level. When they, themselves, took that from us, so I just don’t think that’s fair.

In the second semester of the program students expressed an effective increase in opportunities to develop their academic Spanish; Regina pointed out how two of their four classes were conducted almost exclusively in Spanish. This greater emphasis was perceived as helpful but not in the absence of some added effort. Regina, for example, states that if the professors gave them the choice between writing assignments in English or Spanish, students would choose English because it was easier than doing it in Spanish. This was particularly the case with an assignment to develop a thematic unit. However, she also indicated that she and her classmates learned more when they had to do work in Spanish. She went on to explain that, “I think it’s a lot better for us because we got to practice our Spanish, we got to practice like our English too, but like more our Spanish since we’re bilingual teachers.” According to one student, Olivia, a faculty member told the cohort that they did not read enough in Spanish and, “Por eso están así como están, porque no leen” (“That’s why you are in the situation that you are in, because you don’t read’). However, this may have been a case of tough love since Miranda then defended this faculty member, indicating that “… sí nos inspiró a estar orgullosas de ser Hispánicas, de poder expresarnos en español” (“She did inspire us to be proud of being Hispanic, of being able to express ourselves in Spanish”).

The focus group in semester three is evidenced by diminished access to academic Spanish through course work but a kind of heightened critical language awareness with respect to offsetting the hegemony of English in the schools. Students reported that only one of their professors was teaching in Spanish, in contrast to the two previous semesters. Julissa also comes to the realization that in order to be an effective bilingual teacher “You gotta love your language …” and “… you gotta be able to motivate students to want to love Spanish.” Two other students expressed the need to resist the hegemony of English, via clandestine language resistance, in the following exchange:

Nathalie: You have to have courage to fight people who are against it and to, like, have the courage to do it even if it’s behind guidelines or whatever.

Teresa: Se va a necesitar bastante paciencia porque (‘You are going to need to be very patient because) the principals don’t allow you to, you know, they don’t want you to speak Spanish to them so, how are we gonna do it? I guess under the table.
Alina also maintained that she witnessed bilingual mentor teachers silencing Spanish or discouraging the use of Spanish during her field experience. She believes this led to the children internalizing a sense of inferiority when they should be proud of Spanish since it is linked to their heritage.

The focus group for their final semester revolved around student teaching. Naturally, the participants’ observations of what went on in the schools language-wise were duly addressed as their presence in the schools was extended, and their criticism was clearly much deeper. Elisa suggests that the school where she was placed was knowingly undermining the implementation of the bilingual program by not using Spanish or allowing children to think in Spanish, while collecting state funds that are received for serving bilingual learners. She maintains:

Yes, they’re getting the money, but they’re not doing it. So, they’re not allowed to think, I’m saying it again, they’re not allowed to think in Spanish, they’re not allowed to talk in Spanish, and they’re being harassed, and they’re being left behind, and that’s sad.

Julissa then asks Elisa, “Then how did you do your first observation since they’re supposed to be in Spanish?” Elisa responds by stating that her cooperating teacher allowed her to use Spanish for 45 minutes and explains:

It was like, act, cameras on, go! See? And the day they have the walkthroughs, they call each other, “If you’re doing Spanish, do Spanish.”

Elisa then raises the issue of race and language and recognizes how there is a certain irony about the borderlands area in question:

And another thing that I’m shocked at is that in the Valley we’re all Mexicans, and we’re so far behind bilingual education. It’s silly, we shouldn’t have that, and maybe because I’ve gone through this project, now like I finally realize it, or I never noticed it before, I don’t know, but now I’m going [gasps], that can’t be. We have to pick it up, I think.

At a later point in the exchange, Julissa offers a comment that reflects a sense of hope but a hope that requires a collective value of Spanish. In Julissa’s mind it is necessary to have bilingual education professors who teach Spanish and who also like it; otherwise, these values would not get passed on to them. Regina echoes this sentiment and states that prior to this experience the cohort may not have been aware of how Spanish was viewed as such a problem and how she was going to teach “these kids that Spanish is good and Spanish is OK … no matter what anybody else says.” She concluded by crediting this awareness to the project faculty. Delia’s testimony, also crediting her participation in this cohort, speaks to her own personal struggles in and out of school and the price she had to pay:

Yeah, I also agree because when I was younger I was one of those kids who had it put into my mind that Spanish was bad. My grandparents would speak Spanish, and I didn’t even want to speak to them in Spanish because I thought it was something that, you know, you shouldn’t do. After coming in through here, I was like, Wow!, this school system really ruined you, the whole time I could’ve been talking with them and everything and I wasn’t. It’s just sad.

This closing comment by Julissa seems to capture the broader picture and interplay of factors:

I think they [project faculty] help you valorar (‘value’) your language because in the schools they take it away, and it’s so unfair because now with the testing and all that, they want you to have academic Spanish, like for the BTLPT, and how do you want us to be perfect teachers if you take it away from us when we’re little? Like, how do you expect us to know it when you yourselves are taking it away from us? That makes no sense whatsoever, but yeah, like she says, they take it away from you, they make you think it’s so bad, then it’s like, with this cohort, they helped us love it again, they make you … like a spark, you know, bilingual!

**BTLPT testing outcomes**

Gauging the impact of the different academic Spanish language activities that the project faculty enacted that might have influenced the students preparation for the BTLPT proved problematic. Prior to graduation in May of 2012, only two of the 35 cohort students took the BTLPT, and only
As of January 2015, roughly two and half years after completing the program, 23 more students attempted the test at different points in time, and 17 passed the exam. The first 13 of these 23 students passed it on the first attempt. A total of 10 program completers have not opted to take this exam, including Julissa.

As anticipated, the most challenging part of the test was the written portion. Recall that 26 students were categorized in the mid-low range based on the online practice exam. Among those who took the BTLPT, students averaged 61% of the total possible points on this portion of the test. Among the 17 test passers, only five earned above 70% of the possible points on the writing tasks. The second most difficult part of the exam was the oral part, followed by the reading and listening subtests. Students averaged about 68% of the points possible on the oral part and 80% on the reading and listening portions. It is noteworthy that the written and oral parts use a constructed response format and require interrater scoring; the other two parts use a multiple-choice format.

In sum, the students in this cohort avoided taking the test well after they completed the program and about half of them have either not passed the test or chosen not to take the test as of 2015. In fact, many students at this program site have chosen not to take the test prior to graduation. Between 2010–2013, and based on data available through the College’s Office of Admissions and Teacher Certification, only 45% of the students (n = 573) who could have taken the exam prior to graduation actually took it.

**A dominant debilitating discourse**

Clearly the cohort students did not perform as project faculty might have hoped given the effort put forth to assist the students in preparing for the BTLPT. To propose an explanation that rests exclusively on the backs of the project faculty would be too narrow, as there are several contributing factors that they had no reasonable control over. We propose that there is a debilitating cycle at play driven by national-, state-, and program-level Discourses that provides deeper insight into the outcomes we experienced. This cycle clearly undermines the cohort’s opportunities to appropriate academic Spanish over the long term, and from Gee’s (2008) vantage point represents a clear case of how institutional constraints and intellectuals are used to impede the appropriation of academic Spanish. Evidence of both is embedded within and across the four focus groups.

**A vicious linguistic cycle**

Consistent with the national subtractive orientation toward bilingualism, these students received little K–12 access to academic Spanish, though more than half of the students were in bilingual education programs during the elementary grades. The idea was expressed that the state expects them to be perfect in their command of academic Spanish, even though the academic Spanish language was withheld from them by the state, and that it may be too late to garner the skills to pass the BTLPT. It goes a bit deeper for at least one student, who claimed the school system ruined her and had it put into her mind that Spanish was bad, lending credence to the linguistic symbolic violence reported by Ek et al. (2013).

Further, some students also recognized a silencing and undermining of the Spanish language during their student teaching assignment. The idea that some children were not allowed to think in Spanish, or that the required Spanish language lessons the cohort students had to give as part of their student teaching requirements were contrived is troubling. Moreover, the suggestion that the principals were complicit in silencing Spanish and that school districts might reject native language instruction speaks to how the elite have managed to use bilingual education stakeholders to further an English-mostly agenda. It is no simple matter explaining how certified bilingual education mentor teachers were observed sabotaging native language instruction for emergent bilingual children when both generally share the same racial, cultural, and linguistic histories and struggles.
Perhaps the mentor teachers believed that they were acting in the best interest of the students and chose to transition the children into English as soon as possible under pressure of the state’s high-stakes testing practice (Palmer, Henderson, Wall, Zúñiga, & Berthelsen, 2016). As Smith and Murillo (2013, p. 308) succinctly surmise in their study of these borderlands, “resistance to the use of Spanish as an academic language is strong here.” Cyclically, the children on the receiving end of these acts, potential members of the bilingual education teacher pipeline, have been denied early and sustained opportunity to appropriate academic Spanish much as the student teachers in this cohort were.

It is critical to keep in mind also that the BTLPT, a state policy, is at the center of this debilitating Discourse. Being able to pass the BTLPT by earning less than 70% of the points possible on the written portion of the exam does not support the measure’s validity. Note that a “mid-high” score on the written tasks may include “some grammatical errors,” “occasional errors such as making up words,” and “some errors in the conventions of the written language” (Texas Education Agency, 2010, p. 54). Without question, the writing skills of a bilingual education teacher are critical to the development of the emergent bilingual child’s biliteracy skills, and sanctioning such a low standard cyclically impedes the appropriation of academic Spanish.

**An English-mostly program**

There are at least two program-level institutional constraints that merit examination. First, the Spanish language screening process and criteria adopted by the bilingual education faculty and administration for admitting students into the program is suspect. At issue here is needing to understand where entering teacher candidates stand in relation to some kind of standard—in this case, the standards underlying the BTLPT and the amount of time and support they might need to reach them. Believing that a grade of C or better in one advanced Spanish writing class is sufficient for screening prospective bilingual education teacher is wrought with problems. This course grade could not render credible Spanish language profiles. This points to a weak link between the admissions criterion and the stated goals of the program, which indicate that graduates will be able to deliver appropriate and challenging instruction through academic Spanish and English. Seidner (1981) made clear that program entry criteria are fundamental to the functioning of a bilingual education teacher preparation program, and as Zeichner and Conklin (2008) maintain, there should be a relationship between admissions criteria and the expressed mission of a program.

Second, these students clearly raise concern about the limited program-level opportunities they have to acquire academic Spanish. As one student put it, she was not going to be a science teacher but a bilingual teacher. One could argue that the degree plan designed by the program faculty and approved by the state was never really intended to prepare these students to pass the BTLPT, or more importantly, to meet the Spanish language needs of the emergent bilingual learners they might go on to teach. At issue here is limited time to acquire academic Spanish and limited access to it through the degree plan, underscored by a vague sense of the students’ academic Spanish needs. Once basic core courses have been completed, and pre-service bilingual education teachers are admitted into a state-approved bilingual teacher preparation program, these students have only two years to reach parity with BTLPT standards. Moreover, the expectation is that the bilingual pre-service teacher should be able to master general content, pedagogical knowledge, and bilingual education content, as well as appropriate academic Spanish, within the same amount of time as monolingual-English candidates master only general content and pedagogical knowledge.

**The more capable other?**

It seems reasonable that students in the program would expect their bilingual education instructors to be able to assist them with advancing their academic Spanish development, especially given the
relatively brief period in which they have to do so. Bilingual education faculty ought to constitute the more capable linguistic other (Gaarder, 1977). While project faculty made an earnest effort to support the students in this area, there were signs that access to academic Spanish was uneven across the semesters. At the program level, this points to the need to more carefully and explicitly operationalize what such a professional working proficiency of academic Spanish might constitute and how such a level of proficiency might be determined. This shortcoming, however, is likely a state and national phenomenon as well.

Limited access to academic Spanish was also due in part to the lack of appropriate texts available in Spanish, which required classroom interaction to move from reading an English text and to discussing and writing about it in Spanish. Clearly another national problem, and a bilingual education professor responsibility to produce such texts, it is fair to ask why this English-mostly practice has been perpetuated over nearly 50 years of preparing bilingual education teachers in the United States. Perhaps, and as has been previously suggested, bilingual education faculty do not have the academic Spanish proficiency to use the language for related intellectual creativity (Fishman, 2001), since they too were likely educated in the same subtractive sociolinguistic milieu of the United States.

Overall, the combination of poorly defined Spanish language admissions criteria, the limited number of Spanish-based courses, and professors with a questionable working proficiency in academic Spanish who must rely on English-based texts represent severe structural limitations in terms of the amount of time for in-depth study of content, teaching, and learning (Gollnick, 2008), yet each is established local, state, and national practices.

**Ideological clarity**

In spite of these circumstances, focus group data suggest that these students were not going to give up without a fight. With guidance and encouragement from the project faculty, students were willing to work at developing their academic Spanish, to love it, to be patient about it, and to even engage in teaching in Spanish “under the table.” A clear sense of hope was shared, coupled with the idea that they would teach kids that “Spanish is good” and that “We’re all Mexicans.” Moreover, they were aware of what was taken from them by the state, the shortcomings of the degree plan approved by the state, and consequently the unfairness of the BTLPT mandated by the state. From Anzulúa’s (1983) perspective (cited in Bartolomé, 2006, p. 27), perhaps the students were engaged in “squeezing the colonized” out of themselves.

**Concluding remarks**

We maintain that through this experience we have come to more fully recognize and understand the power of the dominant but debilitating Discourse (Gee, 2008) presently associated with the appropriation of academic Spanish at this borderlands site. In spite of the project faculty’s best effort to assist this cohort with advancing their academic Spanish, their Discourse could not compete with the more dominant Discourses operating collectively at three levels: the national, state, and local. Gee (2008) might surmise that this enterprise is functioning as the elite intended, to maintain the status quo by doing bilingual education teacher preparation on the elite’s terms. The possibility that bilingual education professionals, or “intellectuals,” in Gee’s terms, are perpetuating the very Discourse that undermines their professional mission is troubling.

A rival explanation might be found in casting the situation as one that reflects a profession that is still evolving and better explained as poor macro- and microlevel language planning (Baldauf, 2006). Yet another explanation might be linked to the intense demand for bilingual education teachers in the region and the need to supply certified bilingual education teachers to local school districts as quickly as possible. Or it could well be that this is a matter of benevolent colonization (Cordova, 1997) wherein the colonized assist the colonizer in their own oppression.
Clearly, much more research is needed, but it is essential for faculty to follow the bilingual education teachers they have prepared into the classroom where the politics of native language instruction play out and teacher ideologies and practices are forged. Moreover, a longitudinal approach would also allow faculty to examine how their program graduates use academic Spanish in real time across the curriculum. A sustained perspective is likely the most valid way of informing the language-related decisions faculty make in an effort to improve their respective programs. In the final analysis, having a keener linguistic sense of where our students are from, where they have been, and how they grow linguistically into the profession merits much closer study, since native language instruction is at the very heart of bilingual education.

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