Creating Space for Students' Mother Tongues in College Classrooms

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ABSTRACT: This study is a qualitative action research that explored the possibility of legitimizing the use of students’ mother tongues (L1) in college classrooms as scaffolds to their acquisition of their second language, English (L2). There were three phases to this study. The focus of the research was to understand the impact of this multilingual pedagogical approach on the students’ learning experience, academic engagement and identity formation. Phase 1, was a survey of 90 English as a Second Language (ESL) students to determine their levels of understanding of our English-only curriculum delivery and student services. Phase 2, comprised of interviews with three English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students. Phase 3 was the major phase comprised of five focus group sessions with 19 EAP students. On the basis of the findings of this study, the paper argues that the creation of space for students’ mother tongues in college classrooms is an ethical imperative since their mother tongues are integral components of their identities, and all of their prior learning and life experiences are encoded in their mother tongues. Overall the findings highlighted bilingual students’ perceptions that their L1s constituted an important scaffold for their learning of English. Students’ comments also expressed their sense of the centrality of L1s to aspects of their identity.

Introduction

Canadian and American colleges and universities are actively recruiting international students. At the college participating in this study, the international student population fluctuates between 18% and 22% of the total full time enrolment. In addition, 56% of the total student population at the college are students who were born outside of Canada. English is an additional language for 42% of the total student population. Since English (L2) is not their mother tongue (L1) these students experience a range of difficulty with instructional English. However, depending on their IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores, not all of these students receive specific instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Only approximately 15% of the students, both local and international, are enrolled in specific classes to study ESL or EAP courses to improve English skills. Up to five years ago there was no
documented effort to accommodate the L1 in the college classrooms or to use L1 to scaffold L2 learning. These other languages are continuously heard in the college hallways, yet not integrated into classroom pedagogy, hence in essence, shut out of classrooms. Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) in making a case for bilingual reform in Europe argue for a paradigm shift in foreign language teaching (English in continental Europe) and capture in this quote the essence of my pedagogical exploration in this multilingual college:

In many countries official guidelines create positive pressures for teachers to use the [L2] as much as possible. However, this chapter argues that the way to increase message-orientation in the [L2] is to mobilize targeted [L1] support. We can breathe more communicative life into our classrooms by giving some instructional time over to carefully crafted bilingual techniques. Teachers must be freed from the shackles of misguided restraints that have for too long been hobbling the pace of communicative language teaching and learning. (p.48)

Research Questions and Theoretical Context

My goal was to explore, as an administrator, the reaction of students to their teachers allowing them to use their L1s for such classroom activities as research, essay preparation and same-language group concept clarification sessions in class. I was guided by Vivian Cook’s notion of a language super system (see Cook, 2003 p. 2), in our multilingual students’ minds. In discussing L1/L2 multicompetence, Cook explains:

In the area of vocabulary some people have claimed that, rather than four separate mental lexicons, the L2 user has a single lexicon where words from one language are stored alongside words from the other (Caramazza & Brones, 1980). In terms of phonology some have found that L2 users have a single merged system for producing speech, neither L1 nor L2 (Williams, 1977). Integration does not say that L2 users are unable to control what they do; they can still choose which language to use in a given context, just as a monolingual can choose which style or register to adopt in a particular situation. In this model the discussion is not about the influence of L2 on L1, but about balance between elements of a single language system. Indeed there is little point to counting ‘languages’ in a single mind – L1, L2, L3, Ln – as they form a single system. (p.7)

Clearly neither of these four models can be absolutely true: total separation is impossible since both languages are in the same mind; total integration is impossible since L2 users can keep the languages apart. These possibilities represent the endpoints on the integration continuum (Cook, 2002; Francis, 1999). In between these four extreme, and probably untenable, positions of total separation and total integration, there are many different degrees and types of interconnection. (pp. 7-8)

The research sought to explore these claims as they applied to the L2 college students who were experiencing the unique multilingual pedagogical approach by two teachers who legitimized their students’ mother tongues in their classrooms.
My research question was: How does a multilingual pedagogical approach that veers from the current monolingual conceptions of literacy pedagogy, impact on L2 students’ learning experience, academic engagement and identity formation?

Since the L1 is the language of thinking for many students, the research attempted to explore the extent to which the L1 can enhance comprehension of L2. Macaro (2005) has identified a continuum of perspectives on L1 use in the classroom. It ranges from the virtual position, which advocates exclusive use of the target language, to the other end of the spectrum, where students’ L1 is viewed as a cognitive tool that can facilitate L2 learning.

**Relationship Between L1 and L2**


Cook (2007), in arguing for the promotion of multicompetence among second language users writes:

> L2 users have different uses of second languages from monolinguals, have a different command of the language, and utilize different skills: L2 users of English in particular need to interact with different types of non-native speakers. Internally, L2 users are different types of people with different cognitive processes and different knowledge of both languages. Language teaching is creating L2 users with mental and linguistic potentials that monolinguals lack. The goals should be to help them on the one hand to function as multilingual individuals in whatever capacity they choose in the diverse situations of L2 use outside the classroom, on the other to acquire the benefits of bilingualism in cognitive ability and language awareness. (p. 237)

Cook (2003) in an earlier work argues for an end to monolingual conceptions of the bilingual learner and makes a case for using the L1 in the classroom. He recommends that schools open their doors to using L1 in the classroom, arguing that bilinguals and multilinguals differ from monolinguals insofar as their L1 and L2 competence is qualitatively different from each other and that their language awareness and language processing systems are also different from those of monolinguals. He uses the term multicompetence to refer to these differences. He suggests that the L1 and L2 are interwoven in the L2 user’s mind in vocabulary, syntax, phonology and pragmatics. Because of this interweaving, he suggests that it makes sense to encourage L1 use within the classroom and view it as a resource for learning the L2 rather than an impediment. He suggests that learning a L2 is not just adding rooms to your house by building an extension at the back; it is the rebuilding of all internal walls (2001, p. 4). The attempt to separate and isolate the L2 from the L1 is doomed to failure since the two languages are connected in many ways. Cook summarizes his key point as follows: “since the first language and other language or languages are in the same mind, they must form a language super-system at some level rather than be completely isolated systems.” (Ibid. p. 2) He maintains that they are not “like watertight compartments” (Ibid. p. 6).

According to Cummins (2004b), there is consistent research support for the language interdependence hypothesis. He suggests that in learning a L2, students will transfer aspects of linguistic and conceptual knowledge from one language to another in input (reading, listening) and
output (speaking, writing). Cummins suggests that depending on the sociolinguistic situation, five types of transfer are possible:

- Transfer of conceptual elements (e.g. understanding the concept of photosynthesis);
- Transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies (e.g. graphic organizers);
- Transfer of pragmatic aspects of language use (ability to use paralinguistic features such as gestures to aid communication);
- Transfer of specific linguistic elements (e.g. knowledge of the meaning of photo in photosynthesis);
- Transfer of phonological awareness—the knowledge that words are composed of distinct sounds.

Language and Identity

As an expatriate South African, Nombuso Dlamini’s (1998) research into language and identity resonated with me. In examining the construction of identity among Zulu youth she writes:

The multiple linguistic practices of individuals were hallmarks of the formation of their identities within this highly linguistically politicised region. The use of language then resulted in emergent, rather than conventional, associations with political organisations, and therefore, individuals redefined their lives through language use.

As I will demonstrate in this paper, individuals were not ready to give up their ethnic identities, irrespective of whether or not they were ANC supporters. I argue that ANC Zulu youths were proud of their Zulu heritage, despite its association with Inkatha politics, and that their use of the Zulu language was in many ways in contrast to the ANC political agenda of a non-racial post-apartheid state. This paper, therefore, is an assertion of their linguistic, ethnic/cultural Zulu autonomy, and is critical of the practices by political organisations aimed at creating political and economic unity out of linguistic, ethnic/racial disparity. The practices of the youth in this paper demonstrate that Zulus in the ANC did not want to move away from their Zulu cultural/ethnic identity, and that language and other cultural material were used not to escape the label Zulu, but rather to affirm it.

The students who participated in the research in this paper also asserted the importance of language to their identities and repeatedly emphasized that using their mother tongue to bridge to English is a critical scaffold for them.

While researching the applied linguistic implications of codeswitching (moving from L1/L2) among heritage bilingual children, Potowski (2009) commented that codeswitching “began with native bilingual adults, showing that codeswitching is generally rule-governed behavior that fulfills pragmatic and social functions” (p. 89). Fuller (2009), while working with children, also arrived at the conclusion that codeswitching is used for both structuring conversation as well as constructing social identity. She writes:

Social identity is viewed in this research as something which is discursively brought into being, and as such is fluid and situational. Switching languages allows these
speakers to alternate between aspects of their identity, such as being a dutiful student of English or a part of the local (German-speaking) peer network, and also allows them to create a dual identity. In this way, they create new categories for social identity – not merely (for example) German or American, but an identity which allows them to be both at the same time. (p. 130)

This study would echo this finding among adult college students who are new learners of English and in the formative stages of forming an identity that includes being English speaking Canadian while maintaining their prior cultural and lingual identities.

Dailey-O’Cain and Liebscher (2009) look more closely at the problem of the optimal amount of codeswitching that should be used in class and by whom – teacher and/or student? Hence, according to them, the question becomes not if the L1 should be permitted but how much and by whom. In other words—what’s the optimal use? The study looked for student perceptions of pedagogy that created a structured space for their mother tongues in their EAP classroom and focused on student use of L1 not teacher use.

Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) comment on the optimal and targeted use of the L1 in classroom pedagogy. On bilingual teaching techniques they say:

Until we start using them, we will continue to sell our students short. Yet we are not offering them as a universal panacea, since it will always remain a challenge to survive in the heat of some classrooms. But we do think they can change both the teachers’ and students’ lives for the better. The judicious and skilful use of bilingual activities empowers the student and doubles the teacher’s repertoire of techniques. (p. 243)

In exploring academic achievement and social identity among bilingual students Wong and Grant (2007) write:

We examine the ways in which societal discourses (e.g., relating to English-only instruction, cultural and linguistic deficits, etc.) affect the ways in which bilingual students in the United States form their social identities. Specifically, socially and historically determined structures within the wider society identify minority communities as subordinate to the dominant group and position students from these communities for academic failure. The ways in which literacy is conceptualized, researched, and promoted in classrooms plays a central role in both the identity formation and academic engagement of racial and linguistic minority students. An alternative model is presented that outlines how educational professionals working with ELL [English Language Learners] and bilingual students can transform schooling and make a difference in the academic achievement of their students. (p. 682)

They contrast the monolingual meritocracy paradigm against the bilingual culturally inclusive theoretical framework and offer an instructional model that includes three essential components for successful achievement of English language learners and for transforming the inequities in the politics of schooling:

1. Human resources: ELL students, their families, and educational professionals;
2. Dialogic pedagogy; and
3. Curriculum for democratic citizenship, and economic and community development (p. 681).

Their model works well in a college setting where adult students can be full partners in their own education process. Students can be encouraged to develop a self awareness about important cultural components of identity such as language. The dialogic pedagogy is based on mutual teacher-student respect and collaboration. Teaching for L1/L2 interdependence and transfer does not require that teachers speak the languages of their students. It does, however, require that teachers and administrators be willing to examine critically the implicit assumptions underlying curricula (Cummins 2004b). In other words, the question is what image of the student is constructed by the implicit or explicit language or literacy policy of a school or college? Potowski (2007) in examining identity investment in a dual immersion school writes:

Forming and performing social and linguistic identities is at the heart of the development and maintenance of any language. It is generally agreed that when people feel that their language and cultures are valued, they will be more likely to claim themselves speakers of the language and members of the cultural group. On the contrary, when a language is stigmatized and the cultural inheritance is ridiculed, people will be less willing to be identified with it, whether they are heritage speakers or L2 learners. (p. 198)

This Three Phase Study

An important question for me as an administrator is: “Does the tacit English-only language policy at the college construct an image of the student as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented? Or are we using a deficit mind-set about our L2 students’ inabilities, accents, un-intelligibility and second class citizenship in an English dominant society?” With the teachers and students in this study, I probed the dilemma of whether or not it is good practice to leave student mother tongues at the door of the classrooms or to bring them into the learning environment. In this article, I include summaries of the first two phases as the data shaped the third and major phase.

Phase 1

In Phase 1, I surveyed 90 ESL students. The central tool for Phase 1 was a student survey with questions that sought both quantitative and qualitative answers. In the first section, using the Likert scale, I asked college students to indicate their levels of understanding of English-only curriculum delivery and student services such as registration, enrolment, course selection, and student loans. In the next section, to probe pedagogy from the students’ perspective, I asked the students to identify some enablers and barriers to their learning experiences at the college. In the last section, to seek input from students regarding the value they placed on their mother tongues in their new adopted country, I asked about their perceptions and experiences regarding use and acknowledgement of their L1 languages both in the college classrooms as well as in outside settings. I sought to explore what second language learners could tell us about creating positive learning experiences as well as providing insights into the social construction of identity and its impact on academic engagement.
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**Table 1 – Ability to Understand Materials and Processes as a Percentage of the Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material or process</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College ads (print, brochures)</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College website</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration and fee processes</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course selection</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Based on 2006 survey of college ESL students (Bismilla, 2006); n= 90; 1 =Easy to Understand; 7= Very Difficult to Understand.*

The grid demonstrates the students’ levels of understanding of college services and shows the range of understanding that the students had of the front line services that the college provides in the way of college websites, print materials, and course selection materials.

**Table 2 – Ability to Understand People at College as a Percentage of the Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruiters</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration desk</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loans office</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language assessment</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers/Instructors</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other students</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Based on 2006 survey of college ESL students (Bismilla, 2006); n= 90; 1 =Easy to Understand; 7= Very Difficult to Understand.*

The grid explores the students’ levels of understanding of people at the college and shows the range of understanding that the students had of the front line services that the college provides in the way of teachers, administrators and instructors.

When asked if they perceived their L1s to be assets or barriers, the overwhelming response was that their L1s are assets outside the college but that L1s were not permitted in class. They used their L1s outside class to clarify meanings and concepts with same-language friends. They considered their L1s to be highly valued in their communities, social circles and professional lives. Below is a sampling of student qualitative responses. The grammar, spelling and sentence
structures are quoted verbatim from the survey responses and the student sheets were numbered rather than using student names:

I don’t think my first language would be a barrier in my professional life. It surely be an asset because it’s good to know more than one language (Bismilla, 2006, No. 83)

I think my first language will be an asset because I believe I can be a translator in my workplace (Ibid., No. 82)

It is an asset for my college education because for my future education it will be helpful (Ibid., No. 80)

My first language will be an asset in my professional life since Canada is an multi-cultural country. It helps me to know people who come from different countries (Ibid., No. 78)

I think my first language is not a barrier because I can understand better the diversity of people in this college (Ibid., No. 76)

It’s should be an asset. Because used for more than one language that means you can understand more than one culture (Ibid., No. 75)

When I graduate from college my first language would be another language to asset my professional life. Because its good to know more than one (Ibid., No. 20)

My first language is my asset because my first language could be bridge between my country and other country (Ibid., No. 13)

An asset, the more you know language the more success (Ibid., No. 9)

Cummins (2001) pointed out that identities are being negotiated in the interactions between teachers and students. In classrooms where their L1s are effectively prohibited, as in college classrooms, students may not engage in cross-language transfer. Phase 1 of this study, in addition to providing quantitative data that showed that ESL students were not understanding much of what the college was teaching and delivering, revealed that the college students I surveyed believed that the most helpful assets to their L2 learning were:

Teacher-student relationship builders such as, “The teachers need to talk more slowly”;

“Helpful teachers; approachable teachers; clear voice of teacher; nice friendly teachers;”

Student to student relationships such as, “My friends help me a lot; my same language friends; speaking English with classmates.” (Ibid, random surveys).

**Major Findings in Phase 1**

The two major findings in phase 1 are summarized as:

The percentages of ESL students on the Likert scale who were experiencing difficulties understanding English services and curriculum delivery indicated that comprehension of L2 (English) was a problem.
The qualitative responses indicated that students valued their mother tongues outside of the college but that it was not allowed in the college.

**Phase 2**

Phase 2 of this study was designed to explore this last finding further and introduced mother tongues in an EAP classroom, not only to validate them but to use mother tongues to scaffold the learning of English. In this exploratory phase my intention was to collaborate with one teacher who allowed structured use of mother tongue in the classroom in order to assess if this multilingual pedagogy would engage students more enthusiastically in class and hence enhance their learning experience. My goal was to gauge the reaction of students to the teacher allowing them to use their L1 to research and prepare for their (un-graded) essay and to write that essay in English. I interviewed three students individually. The questions I asked probed how they felt about their mother tongues being permitted into their EAP classroom; whether using their first language as a scaffold made specific tasks easier or more difficult; and whether they would recommend using first languages in Canadian classrooms. I quote directly from the student responses since the raw content of these small sample responses was critical to the continuation of this study as intended.

(Student #1):

At first I think about my first language, Bangla. Then I translate into English. Sometimes I feel difficulty because some words are not in English. There might be a word in Bengali that does not translate into English. If I think in my first language, I can use or think more words to write anything.

I think at first and then I translate into English.

...I did not have the books here (in Canada,) and Dreams is not a common topic. Bengali poetry would have been no problem. In Bangladesh there is no culture of making notes – we read and then we write the essay. I think in Bengali and write in English. I don’t do drafts in Bengali.

I think that it is good to allow my own language only sometimes for particular reasons but not all the time, because I want to learn English.

I worked with a group of people in my language and that was O.K. The teacher allows us to get into language groups to help one another or to discuss topics. I feel comfortable and think it’s a good idea. Sometimes students are shy to speak out in class so it’s good opportunity for them to try their English in a small group of same language students. It strengthen the learning of new concepts and the understanding of specific examples given by the teacher. We support one another in our language, specially to find translation for idioms and slang commonly used in the academic environment.
(Student #2):

When I’m working by myself (at home or alone) for me is not easy to make the switch from the English mode to the Spanish mode. When I’m thinking and communicating in certain language it’s better to do it only in that medium. But in the classroom, it’s always useful to be allowed to communicate in Spanish with other Spanish speakers, because it helps us to clarify and understand instructions and concepts.

In Canada and Colombia it’s far easier to find more text and resources in English. In the field of medicine, physicians are always asking pharmaceutical companies to give them the state of the art information in the original paper that’s always in English. Most of them reject abstracts or translation to Spanish. They want the whole study. The state teaches a very poor English in the schools, so if somebody wants his or her children to learn English, he or she must pay a very expensive private bilingual school. I didn’t go to one of these schools, I learned on my own, because I wanted to sing American songs but I didn’t want to sing words without meaning.

It’s always useful to be allowed to communicate in Spanish with other Spanish speakers because it helps us to clarify and understand instructions and concepts.

We support one another in our language, specially to find translation for idioms and slang commonly used in academic environment.

I think it’s very useful to allow students to use their first language to communicate, but I’m convinced that regulation is going to be necessary, otherwise, they won’t feel the necessity of the second language. What I mean is, it should happen under control, not like a pendulum, not too few, not too much.

(Student #3):

It (using mother tongue) should be easy for us to understand complex material, but we probably lose the chance to improve English. Sometimes it is necessary (to use our mother tongue in class) but I don’t think it’s very helpful if we use it too much.

Using my first language to do research on the internet was easier because (1) I read faster and easy to get to the point (on the internet).

Using my first language to make notes was easier and about the same because sometimes I don’t know the correct words in English to express ideas.

I always choose the easier way to write. If I know English I write English. If I can’t write very perfect point very quickly I’ll write my language.

My opinions about using first language in Canadian college classroom are (1) For beginner or medium students sometimes it’s necessary because their limited vocabulary (2) For advanced learners I don’t think it’s necessary.

This very small exploratory phase provided some evidence that the mother tongue was being used by L1 students in various ways. Phase 2 of this study pointed to some significant
internal conflicts that our students are experiencing regarding their linguistic identities and, in Goldstein’s (2003) words, their “individual language choice decisions…their goals and roles in life and larger historical, economic, political and educational events” (p. 11). This small sample study was intended to ascertain from students whether introducing their mother tongues in their classrooms would enhance their learning experience, academic engagement and the construction of identity. The mother tongue was also being used to assist one another in learning new English concepts and vocabulary. The students appreciated that their mother tongues were being respected and given importance enough to be included in class as part of their thinking and writing processes. The students were being allowed to think and share in a more collaborative environment, making them feel more valued consistent with Cummins’ (2001) argument that positive teacher-student relations improve student engagement. This phase of the study also pointed out that EAP students were certainly using translation as a tool and that both languages were interacting inside their heads as they were processing what they would say and write and this is clear evidence of Cummins’ interdependence hypothesis at work.

Phase 3

The insights from Phase 1 and 2 informed Phase 3, the major phase of this study and helped frame the interview questions (Appendix A) for my 19 E.A.P. student participants from 2 classes. The 19 students who participated in the interviews represented nine different mother tongues. There were ten Chinese speaking students originally from China and Hong Kong; one Spanish speaking student originally from Mexico; one Japanese speaking student originally from Japan via Saudi Arabia; three Bengali (Bangla) speaking students originally from Bangladesh; one Korean speaking student originally from South Korea; one Arabic speaking student originally from Iraq; one Urdu speaking student originally from Pakistan; and one Urdu and Punjabi speaking student originally from Pakistan.

Phase 3 Data

The responses provided by the multilingual students in the five focus groups yielded six large clusters of key insights. The title or titles of the clusters are indicated in parentheses.

- Questions (see Appendix A) 1, 2 and 12 yielded insights into their feelings about the mother tongue being validated in their participating classes compared to classes where mother tongues were disallowed. Comments about cultural and lingual identity, cross cultural attitudes and metacultural awareness (Reyes & Vallone, 2007) were made (Identity, engagement, feelings).
- Questions 3, 4 and 5 yielded insights into how useful students regarded their mother tongues to be in class work, assignments, and academic engagement. They also spoke to the shortage of resources in various languages in libraries and educational websites (Usefulness of mother tongue in class/college/assignments and lack of resources in mother tongue).
- Questions 6, 7 and 8 provided keys into the students’ brains and the scaffolding strategies they are using to bridge between their L1 and L2. Their mother tongues, as
described by the students, showed interdependence (Cummins, 2004) and they described the language super-system (Cook, 2003) or super highway type of busy activities that were occurring in their brains between their L1s and L2s (L1/L2 strategies for scaffolding and interdependence).

- Question 9 gave students the opportunity to give teachers some hints as to small everyday accommodations that we might make to alleviate their struggles in understanding our speech patterns (Helpful hints for teachers).
- Question 10 provided insights into the thought processes in their brains when they listen to one language as input and speak in a different language as output (Thought processes in brain – cognate/non-cognate and superhighway).
- Question 11 allowed students to reflect on the importance and value of their language in a new country (Value of mother tongue).
- Question 12 further explored issues of identity and self-esteem as perceived by students in settings where their mother tongues are not given a role in their learning process (Identity, Engagement, Feelings).

There were 5 focus groups and below is a sampling of quotes from the students and a brief summary analysis. [Note: While maintaining the students’ grammar and sentence structures, I have removed sounds such as “Hmmm…”; “eh…” and long pauses recorded in the transcripts in order to make the excerpts more easily read.]

**Group 1 Data Summary**

In Group 1, comprised of Andy (Cantonese), Carol (Cantonese and Mandarin), Khalid (Urdu), Rachel (Cantonese and Mandarin), and Lois (Cantonese) the word “comfortable” was heard 17 times as they discussed their feelings about being allowed to use their mother tongues in class. They did also, however, as did some students in other focus groups, display cross cultural respect, hence some reservations about speaking their mother tongues when others may not understand and think them impolite. Their need to use the mother tongue was captured by Carol precisely when she said: “I can’t control myself to think in Chinese Mandarin language my mother language. It’s very natural I think” (Group 1, November 14, 2008, Bismilla, 2008, L62-74).

Khalid’s statement that his mother tongue allows him to understand more and “restore more in my mind,” (Ibid, L94) about difficult concepts such as theorems speaks to the necessity of mother tongue in his learning process as all his prior learning is encoded in Urdu.

The usefulness of the mother tongue to bridge the gap between a limited understanding and a fuller understanding of classroom activities was illustrated when the students described their difficulties with colloquialisms; e.g idioms like “hit the books!” They laughed about it in the focus group but when confronted with idioms by teachers in classrooms, the stress for them stems from not knowing whether that phrase is important to their learning and outcome in class. If the teacher recognizes this gap and explains the idiom the stress level is alleviated; or if other students with varying degrees of understanding can allay their fears in their mother tongues, the students can then continue with their learning.

A critical area in the college that these students identified as a place where allowing mother tongue usage would be helpful, is the counseling office. Lois explained: “When I have
some…emotional problems I can express more comfortable to the people who speak the same language with me” (Ibid., L368-370). Rachel continued: “…when I have a strong feeling that I know what’s in my heart, but I when I try to translate it into English everything’s changed because it it’s not the exact thing what I’m going to express” (Ibid., L379-382).

In probing the kinds of strategies the students are using to discover meanings of new words and whether there are lingual and conceptual transfers from their mother tongues to English, I was given a window into their scaffolding strategies. Andy described a decoding process whereby he asks for the spelling of the word, writes it, looks at the prefix or suffix and root and attempts to figure out the meaning:

Group 1 was able to offer practical suggestions for English speakers addressing L2 learners to facilitate better understanding of the teacher’s speech. (Group 1, November 14, 2008, Bismilla, 2008, L648-654.) Lois suggested that teachers need to speak more slowly and reminded us that there is translation going on in the heads of L2 learners and if we speak too fast they cannot translate quickly enough to understand.

L: I think they may try to speak slower
V: okay
L: Yeah, because if they speak too fast we can’t we can’t should should I use calculate? Or can’t translate

Carol, in this interview, directly asked for mother tongue scaffolding in class when she said: “in sometimes the teacher maybe ask the other students who speak the same language to explain to you” (Ibid., L691-692).

Group 1 yielded some critical insights into the thought processes that occur inside the brains of L2 learners in the L1/L2 learning mechanism. Andy, in keeping with Cook’s (2003, 2007) description of multicompetence and the L2 learner’s mind being a super system (in my words, a super highway) in which both languages traverse at the same time, described how in his mind both languages are occurring at the same time as he is speaking to me (Ibid., L708-734):

A: I thinks the same time. I use the same time. For example, use you speak with by English to me I just translate Chinese. And understand then answer you by English. So yeah…

Group: yeah
A: So very fast in the bridge
V: Very fast highway
A: yeah yeah bridge, bridge.

Carol, who teaches Chinese classes in Toronto, made a pertinent point (Ibid., L736-754) when she said that even when Canadians are learning Chinese they need to translate into English to understand, so we must make the same allowance for Chinese speakers who are learning English.

C: Yes I think that at the same time and this situation is by the Canadian to learn Chinese. They also translate at the same time. Because I…I’m a part-time teacher.
In speaking about whether their mother tongues are valued, they mentioned that their mother tongues are valued in the class where they are permitted to use them to clarify concepts and vocabulary. However, their mother tongues are greatly respected in the Toronto community at large: “Toronto is a freedom most respect another Toronto is a multiculture society understand many kinds of language it can help you to find a job easier” (Ibid., L827 and Ibid., L856-858).

Rachel made a critical observation. She said that it is important to allow concept clarification in class in the mother tongue because if a concept is missed at the beginning or middle of the class and not allowed to be clarified, then the rest of the class may not be understood.

R: I think in class it might be valuable because maybe the teachers going to explain some main points if you can’t get it maybe the main problem is related what she’s going to explain a bit later, but if you can’t get the main point you might you might fail to understand what’s or what’s coming, what’s coming up. (Ibid., L890-895)

**Synthesis and analysis summary of group 1 data.**

This first focus group validated the space for their mother tongues that this study created in their EAP classrooms. They further brought to life Cook’s (2003, 2007) super system of language interaction that exists in their brains as they described the activities that occur in their minds as their mother tongues scaffold English (Cummins 2007a, 2007b). By revealing the emotional needs that mother tongue fulfills for them in their academic and social lives the participants opened a window into the identity aspects (Cummins 2001) of language encoded prior learning. They articulated the academic perils of disallowing their mother tongues in class by articulating that if they cannot clarify a concept quickly in class they risk losing the rest of the lesson. Of the 57 ground codes in this group’s data 18 (32%) were related to identity; 15 (26%) related to the usefulness of mother tongue and the desire to have more resources in the mother tongue; 14 (25%) referred to the value that the students place on their mother tongues socio-culturally and academically; 10 (18%) of the ground codes related to scaffolding and language interdependence between mother tongue and English (see table 3 and figure 1).

**Group 2 Data Summary**

The students in group two were Shariat (Bengali), Justin 1 (Chinese), Christina (Cantonese and Mandarin), and Bruce (Cantonese). Farwa (Urdu and Punjabi), who participated in all the other activities as part of this group, was ill on the day of this interview.

On questions 3, 4 and 5 that probed the students’ perspectives on the usefulness of the mother tongue in college classrooms, assignments and research tasks, the students in group 2 offered rich data. Justin and Christina said that it is important to have same language peers to clarify assignments, share ideas and consider examples that may be useful in essays.

C: I think if we are in one group if we use the same language, sometime we have an idea for, I can’t explain that in English and if we are in the same language we
can talk with another and exchange our ideas better. And but I thinks, just I think it’s better. (Ibid., L164-184)

Christina, like the previous focus group, identified the difficulty that English idioms present.

C: Yes, I can’t explain in English, like some that’s it. Chinese idiom, Chinese have a lot of idiom, but I don’t know how to say that in English. But if we are in the same language, you can understand me, maybe you can use another ways to explain it (Ibid., L189-191).

Echoing the first group, Justin 1 pointed out that mother tongue is critical for them, as adults, to keep abreast of world events and news and build their knowledge base more quickly and efficiently than their proficiency in English allows.

J: Like our English is not that good or not, if we want to get some information like a news. Sometimes you very difficult to understand, we want to build up our knowledge or we use our mother tongue, that would be much faster.
V: Okay. So to build knowledge, your…
J: yeah
V: mother tongue would be useful. So to discuss the news, like if something has happened in the news.
J: Like if something create news, something like that. (Ibid., L238-248)

Shariat and Justin confirmed the data that I found in phase 1 of this study, that L2 students often have difficulty understanding college processes, events, important notices, and signs which if explained by a same language peer provides operational clarity for them.

S: It is actually useful if you allow us to discuss even outside the classroom, so we can clarify ourself and different issue of the college. Let’s say there are some notice signs some events going on the college, even if I don’t know if you are allow I cannot ex… somebody cannot explain me or I don’t understand from the English language, then I can ask my peer or my friend the same language, to clarify this, so then she can clarify this. (Ibid., L250-266)

Group 2 yielded several strategies that they use to unlock meanings of new vocabulary. Shariat identified colloquialisms as particularly problematic for him. He then went on to explain in detail (Ibid., L356-409) how he goes about establishing the meaning of new English words and information. He explained that he first tries to get clarification from the teacher. Then he tries to match the meaning as he understands it in English with his Bengali understanding, remembering that he used both languages in Bangladesh. He also checks the dictionary and website and then, “match with our own language for better understanding.” He writes down new words (as in a word bank) and reviews them weekly. He constantly connects the meaning back to his mother tongue which he said helps him to “remember…to keep the word.”
S: Yeah, yeah. To keep the memory.

V: So Bengla helps you to keep the memory.

S: Memory, yes.

V: Okay.

Bruce, a Cantonese speaker, who uses the dictionary as a last resort gave some deeper insights into language transfer strategies (Ibid., L447-494). He said that he first of all tries to guess the meaning of new English words based on the sentence and context. If he still does not understand he asks a same language peer, then the teacher. If he is still unclear, only then does he go to a dictionary. When asked if he has transferred any skills from his formative learning of his mother tongue to his learning of English, Bruce responded:

Chinese and English is very different is totally different if there is a relation maybe their strategies are review, review, rebuild that is the only strategies the same as English cause when I was small I try to learn a word in Chinese, my mom will ask me to write it 10 times, 20 times, 30 times to remember the words how to write it. So I think is the only way can do it in English. (Ibid., L482-494)

Bruce’s response is an indication that strategies for learning language can be transferred from Chinese to English but any language clues or phonological elements depend on transferable elements which might be easier in cognate languages than non-cognate languages.

On the question of their feelings in classes where mother tongue is banned, this group expressed discomfort. They made two critical points. Firstly, that if a teacher does not allow the mother tongue in class for quick clarification with a peer about a concept, then the rest of the lesson is missed because that key concept was missed.

Nobody should stop us talking in our own language to get clarification if we miss one main point that I cannot understand, I cannot follow the whole class, and the whole class will be is not justify to stay in that class because I’m not following that class. The main point I have missed. So if I’m not allowed talking other than English, it’s not justified. (Ibid., L1090-1097)

Secondly, these students asserted that they are adults. They have come to the college and paid tuition fees to learn English and to learn a profession. They fully understand this. They use their mother tongue in class for emergencies related to understanding key building blocks. They pointed out that they should not be subjected to rules barring their mother tongue in class:

We are adults; we know why I’m here. If I don’t want to learn English I won’t give money and starting here right. [Chuckling from group]. And like, I’m not international student, I spend more, lots of money than them right. So I know why I come here, so I will do my best to speak more English. [The speaker, Christina is an international student, so this is a slip of her tongue, or speaking passionately, she was flustered amid her equally passionate and animated peers – she might have meant to say, “I’m not a domestic student” rather than, “I’m not international
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student.""] But like sometimes, some situation you have to speak your own language. You have no choice. If you don’t speak that maybe that is just one words. If you speak at that just one word to understand the whole class will help you a lot. (Ibid., L1168-1177)

**Synthesis and analysis summary of group 2 data.**

There were 72 coded comments in the group 2 transcript. 19 (26%) of the comments related to mother tongue being central to their identities; 15 (21%) of the comments related to how useful they found their mother tongues to be in class; 13 (18%) of the comments were about the value of mother tongue in their lives and 25 (35%) of the comments described specific activity occurring in their brains between their L1 and English. While group 2 continued, as did group 1, to provide comments related to identity formation, usefulness and value of mother tongue and L1/L2 scaffolding strategies, a further insight provided by the Chinese students in this group related to guarded comments about political freedom. Justin, Christina and Bruce talked about the difficulty of separating opinion or propaganda when using Chinese websites for research. The impact of political power relations on identity is a phenomenon that I experienced personally in apartheid South Africa. There was nothing that we could do about the propaganda of the racist government without risk to life. Zu Zhiyong (2007) found that Tibetan students’ identities were impacted in Chinese power dominant school settings. Power relations and propaganda were not directly referenced by the students in this group but their need to separate Chinese website opinion and fact indicated a concern. The students in this group also affirmed that while linguistically there may be similarities among Chinese speakers, there are vast cultural differences among Chinese immigrants depending on where they lived in China geographically before coming to Canada. This is a useful caution for educators to respect individual differences regardless of seeming similarities among students.

**Group 3 Data Summary**

Group 3 was comprised of Asm and Shubnum (Bengali), Justin 2 (Korean), and Murphy who indicated in both his demographic form and the interview that he speaks Chinese (he did not specify Cantonese or Mandarin). Shubnum and Asm indicated that using their mother tongue in class makes it easier for them to understand concepts by clarifying them with each other using their first language.

Murphy made the point that understanding examples in mother tongue is “very, very, very fast” (Ibid., L219) whereas English is too hard to understand. Shubnum and Asm also made the point that Justin did: English speaking friends repeat what the teacher said while same language friends are easier to understand because they go to the root of the word (Ibid., L265). Concepts like “summary,” or a point made during a lecture if quickly clarified makes it “easier to go forward” (Ibid., L257) for them.

Regarding other places in the college where being allowed to speak to someone in mother tongue would be useful, Justin explained that if someone in Student Services or in the International Student Office was there from Korea they would understand cultural situations, like in his case, the interruption of educational pathways by the requirement for military service:
Actually the kind they...office doesn’t really know, they don’t know what’s going on, like what’s my situation because all Koreans should know that, like man should go military and then that’s for how long and then, like, whatcha gotta do for that thing...why didn’t drop the courses and then they ask me all those questions, but if they were Korean there, like, just tellin them I gotta go to military and they he’ll understand everything...(Ibid., L286-294)

As in previous interviews where students explained that Counseling and Advisement Offices were not serving the needs of L2 students, Shubnum expressed the same frustration:

...when I go to Enrollment Office I want to know how I can go the way subject, they give me some advice, but I do not understand some words, some sentence and I think there if there person who speak Bengali, it was easy for me to understand. (Ibid., L319-323)

She went on to explain that even though she speaks English (a language commonly spoken in Bangladesh) she has an easier time with Bengali: “but Bengali I can express very quick and fluently” (Ibid., L337-338). This point was expressed before regarding the need in Counseling Offices to be able to express feelings.

In describing their thought processes between mother tongue and English, Asm and Shubnum used the supermarket as an example (Ibid., L744-786). When they examine a product they are thinking in mother tongue but when they reach the check-out counter they switch to English to communicate with the cashier. In class it is the opposite, they think in English in class and when they leave class and want to clarify they switch to Bengali.

Justin said that he thinks most times in Korean but he described the speedy highway, precipitous process happening in his brain. He gave a description of the process occurring in his mind where his first and second languages appear to form a language super-system (Cook, 2003) interacting quickly enough to allow him to think in Korean but carry out a conversation in English:

Like, just until a moment before I talk with some Canadian speakers, I think it in Korean and I not sure how the function goes, but I just put some words that I need to ask or that I need to know and then I just put it in the order by myself and then ask like a question or something. And in class I think it’s 50/50, yeah. I think in Korean, but when she the teacher speaks or classmates speaks, then I think it in English first and then I try to translate in Korean. If I have something to ask, if it’s a simple things like what time is it or something like that, then I don’t even need to think. But if it’s like very hard thing to ask or thing that I need to think about, then I think it in Korean first and then translate it to English and then I ask again. So it goes here (pointing to his brain). (Ibid., L789-802)

In discussing the value of their mother tongue, Asm and Shubnum spoke passionately (Ibid., L843-895) about the historical significance of their mother tongue in Bangladesh during partition:

[In] 1952 there are many who sacrificed their lives for Bengali language and we respect this person that persons respect the way they sacrificed their lives for Bengali
language and how it is world mother tongue language 21st February [mother tongue day]. (Ibid., L847-860)

A: I think is valuable every nation or country have their own mother language our mother for Bangladesh our mother language Bangoli and in nineteen hundred …
S: 1952
A: Yeah, 52
S: There are many who
A: There are ss…
S: sacrificed their lives for Bangoli language and we respect this person that persons
V: right
A: respect the way they
S: sacrificed their lives for Bangoli language.

Synthesis and analysis summary of group 3 data.

There were 75 ground codes in this group and significantly, 33 (44%) of the comments related to the usefulness of mother tongue (see table 3 and figure 1 below). The students continued as in previous groups to provide insights into their mental processes involved in L1/L2 interdependence through 15 comments (20%). Seven comments (9%) related to the sociocultural value of mother tongue and 20 comments (27%) related to identity. A powerful emotional piece related to identity was provided by the Bangladeshi students. As part of colonized India, Bangladeshis experienced English as the language of their colonizers. On this issue Cummins and Davison (2007) write:

When English is taught in former colonial contexts, the language carries complex baggage related to its historical role in establishing and reinforcing patterns of power relations both between colonizer and colonized and within the colonized population. In non-colonial contexts, access to English is also associated with social stratification both with respect to who gets access and the social advantages of access. (p. 3)

Pennycock (2007) in the same volume explains that colonizers used the vernacular languages for instruction in schools in order to keep the populace docile. Education in the language of the colonizer would mean that the locals would not be willing to perform the much needed manual labour. This produced an image of English as a superior language. The educated class of Indians who already had power, learned and perfected English and some emerged as writers of English literature. Shubnum and Asm displayed a visceral reaction to this multi-tiered class system based on power and language when they spoke passionately about “mother tongue day” in Bangladesh and about the people who sacrificed their lives in the struggle for independence from the British. Both of these students talked about their passion for preserving their mother tongues for their children with a sense of pride in that identity.
Group 4 Data Summary.

This group was made up of Yoko (Japanese & Arabic), Karim (Arabic), Ana (Spanish) and Wendy (Cantonese and Mandarin). Yoko has no one in class who speaks Japanese; Arabic is her second language which is still developing. Ana has no one in class who speaks Spanish.

Karim began the discussion saying that it is comfortable (Group 4, November 28, 2008, Bismilla, 2008, L36) to be able to use mother tongue in class. Ana, even though there is no one with whom to speak Spanish in class, made the observation that grammar is different in Spanish and English so when learning English the grammar constructs are difficult (Ibid., L60). Wendy said she finds mother tongue good for “explaining something” making it easier “to get the meaning” (Ibid., L79-86). She said she finds mother tongue an easier medium to express feelings and ideas. Yoko struggled in her third language, English, to explain that she has only been learning English since May (this interview took place in November). Being the lone Japanese speaker, she said she wants to express her thoughts in Japanese but there is no peer in class. She finds that when other students speak mother tongue in class it is distracting for her and she cannot enter the conversation because of the language barrier (Ibid., L169-170). Wendy, even though she does speak mother tongue with her peers, shares Yoko’s view that other mother tongues are distracting. She said that she feels that if other students do not understand her group speaking mother tongue that, “they will feel we are talking about them” (Ibid., L201). Ana said that she feels “out of place because nobody .can…can talk with me” (Ibid., L221-222).

Ana, the Spanish speaker, said (Ibid., L442) that she prefers to do her research in English. It is pertinent to note that Ana was a pediatrician in Mexico and North American pharmaceutical research is often predominantly written in English, as explained by a Colombian student in Phase 2 of this study who was a pharmaceutical executive in Colombia.

Wendy said that she does her research in Chinese only when there is something that she cannot find in English. She said that she uses her Chinese high school text book to figure out words she cannot understand in English (Ibid., L478-482).

Yoko explained that she researches in Japanese and translates into English, her third language, and it takes time. She further explained that she uses the English-Japanese dictionary and also her personal knowledge and her life experiences to figure out meaning.

Karim said that he uses contextual clues, general knowledge, and experience first then goes to an Arabic-English dictionary. He translates the meaning into Arabic in order to store the meaning in his mind (Ibid., L566-567). Using the Arabic-English dictionary is only a last choice for him (Ibid., L578-579).

Regarding strategies learned in mother tongue that now help students learn English, Ana explained (Ibid., L590-619) that she writes out words, makes sentences, repeats the words, tape records them and listens to them repeatedly while travelling on the bus and subway and tries to use them contextually.

Regarding the value that these students place on mother tongue Yoko maintained that retention of mother tongue is important for her as a mother and for her daughter as well as for industry in Canada and that when it is barred in class she “suffers.”

Y: If in my class there are Japanese mate, maybe I maybe I want to use Japanese sometimes. Yeah.
V: Right
Y: Hmm
V: So you do like to use Japanese.
Y: Yeah, uh huh.
V: Okay. And if they said don’t speak in Japanese how would that make you feel?
Y: Yeah, suffer [chuckles]. (Ibid., L836-903)

When discussing thought processes that occur in their minds between mother tongue and English, (Ibid., L1035-1038) Yoko said that she thinks in Japanese and translates into English while Ana said that at the beginning she used to think in Spanish but now she thinks in English. Karim said that for easy words he thinks in English but for difficult words and meaning he thinks in Arabic because he said that the information is saved in his brain in Arabic. He also specifically said and emphasized that his language is part of his identity. He said that at the college his mother tongue does not have the same value because it is not used. Wendy said that when she writes she always thinks in Chinese and translates into English; but in conversational English she does not need to translate.

Synthesis and analysis summary of group 4 data.

There were 47 ground codes in the group 4 transcript. The majority, 17 (36%) of the ground codes in this group related to identity. 13 (28%) of the comments related to the usefulness of their mother tongues in their classrooms; only 4 (9%) of the comments related to the value of mother tongue in their social lives and 13 (28%) of the comments gave insights into the processes in their brains between their L1 and English. Yoko, the Japanese student who arrived in Canada via Saudi Arabia just a few months before the interview struggled with her third language, English. Yoko was a nurse in Japan and is unemployed in Canada. Leki (2003) wrote about the travails of a foreign trained pediatrician Yang, who was re-training in the United States to become a nurse. While Yang’s clinical knowledge was intact, expressing that knowledge in English and accurately filling out the nursing care plan forms were the aspects of her academic program that posed seemingly insurmountable difficulties for her. The literacy needs of the students were not being met in the traditional accreditation based curriculum. This is still evident in many post-secondary programs and Yoko’s journey to her desired pathway into a Canadian nursing program will be a long one. She is still struggling with English and says that she would “suffer” if her mother tongue is disallowed. The dilemma of course is that without a proper grasp of English, foreign trained clinical practitioners cannot perform life and death related health duties. The impact on the identities of all the participants in this group was evident. In addition to Yoko, there was a pediatrician, an engineer and a technologist in this group, all foreign trained and all unemployed in Canada. Hence the focus of this group was their professional identities as evidenced by the majority of the codes generated.

Group 5 Data Summary.

Xiao (Mandarin) was the final interviewee—and the only member of this “group”—and he arrived at noon for this interview in a December snow storm even though the college had been
closed that morning because of the inclement weather. He regarded this as an important meeting. He was alone for the interview because the other times were not convenient for him and he requested this time slot.

He expressed that this particular teacher was the first to ever allow Mandarin in class and that it made him feel confident because Mandarin allows him to know exact meanings while English is still confusing. He said that while meaning may be lost in English, in Mandarin it is very clear.

The kinds of things that he said he finds useful to discuss in Mandarin with peers include cultural conversations and the differences in writing styles between Chinese and English. Explanations in Mandarin by a peer are easier to understand than explanations in English by the teacher (Ibid., L135-143). Xiao indicated that when he attended a different college in Toronto he was not allowed to use his mother tongue and that caused him to miss due dates on assignments and not be able to clarify rules and concepts (Ibid., L162-167).

Xiao does his research in Chinese because, “…in Chinese we have very clear concepts what the topic is, what the point is” (Ibid., L193-194). When he uses the Chinese internet he said that he can research more quickly:

When you in Chinese we can go there very quickly, when you, I can’t get it quick…criticize which articles is the best, which is the regular. But in English we can’t have identify which is better, which is the good one…(in Chinese) I can understand deeply. (Ibid., L200-208)

To unlock new English words he said that he uses the Chinese dictionary and then uses contextual clues to figure out the meaning. He finds English – English dictionaries give “a lot of word,” (Ibid., L237) that is, several meanings of a word, which he finds are not exact enough; in English-Chinese dictionaries he finds the “exact meaning” (Ibid., L239).

In describing his thought processes in Chinese and English, Xiao explained that to work with “deep ideas” (Ibid., L363) he needed to think in Chinese but for simpler conversations, which he has practised, he can think in English. But if difficult to understand then “I want to translate it [into] Chinese first” (Ibid., L400).

Xiao had some rich comments about the value of his mother tongue. He said that Chinese has, “a lot of history” (Ibid., L422).

[It is] concentrated. I think meaning have a code has a decoded language only a few words have a lot of…have more meaning. For example if I write one page article in Chinese, I translate in English maybe three or five pages. (Ibid., L421-428)

A comment that he made reminiscent of the work of Wade Davis (2001) and the problem of language extinction is:

…my language only is a tool of communication depend on how many people hear…if there lot of people hear then…good communication. If no people use it, you can’t. How can you for example, you have good tools, but no people to use it, how do you use it? (Ibid., L453-459)
Regarding his feelings when his mother tongue is barred, Xiao returned to his concept of deep meanings and deep understandings. He said that he can engage in deeper, meaningful conversation if allowed to use Mandarin as a scaffold, otherwise using just basic words makes his conversation more shallow (i.e. “skin deep.”)

...why some people are not, don’t allow a use in the Mandarin, why I can speak a little, because I want to get more deeply that I can only try to speak more deeply some easy word I come press clear, in some deep ideas I can’t speak well. So I cannot find word to communicate if I can speak Mandarin, I can talk a very, very deep, very exactly meanings and I because for me I have a lot of knowledge and background about any topic but while I in Chinese I can speak very deeply I talk in English, I only can talk some use some words I know I can express it sometimes it’s only the basic words and a is always a skin deeply. (Ibid., L522-541)

I heard frustration here from Xiao who was an engineer and post secondary professor in China. He went on to say that one word in English may have several meanings but one word in Mandarin has one meaning (Ibid., L546-561).

**Synthesis and analysis summary of group 5 data.**

The 28 ground codes from Xiao’s interview provided insights into all four major themes that emerged from all the focus groups. The issue of identity (nine or 32% of the comments) resonated for this professional engineer and university professor from China who was still unemployed after 3 years in Canada. But it was his passion for Mandarin that came through in his rich comments (eight or 29%) about the usefulness of his mother tongue. He made seven comments (25%) relating to the value of his mother tongue in his life. Four (14%) of his comments were about the ways in which his mother tongue scaffolds his learning of English. His differentiation between the ability to express “deep ideas” in his mother tongue compared to “skin deep” conversations in English was poignant. The critical pedagogy in his EAP classroom where he was allowed to discuss the benefits of bilingualism (Freire, 1970) contributed to his ability to look at his bilingualism through his unique comparative lens from his experience as a professor in China. Not only is his language the “carrier of his culture” (Reyes & Vallone, 2007) it is also the language of deep thought as opposed to the surface level expressions of conversational English.

This interview completed the five sets of semi-structured interviews for this phase of the study.

Tara Goldstein (2003) in Chapter 5 of her book, titled *Resisting Anti-Immigrant Discourses and Linguicism*, quotes well known Latina writer and poet Gloria Anzaldúa and explains:

Gloria Anzaldúa talks about her desire to communicate in multiple voices, to feel pride in the many languages she speaks, and to have her multilingual tongue legitimized. The journey toward pride can be a difficult one in multilingual communities where the use of particular languages or language varieties is devalued, trivialized, or vilified. (p. 83)
In our English-only colleges and other educational institutions in the Greater Toronto Area there are thousands of “Gloria Anzalduas” also experiencing the linguicism that Goldstein addresses above.

Summary of Phase 3 Results

Table 3 – Major Themes from Ground Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Comments related to Identity, Engagement, Feelings</th>
<th>Usefulness of Mother Tongue</th>
<th>L1’s/L2 Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Class/Assignments</td>
<td>Lack of Resources</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>18 (32)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19 (26)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20 (27)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>17 (36)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9 (32)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>83 (30)</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 279. MT = mother tongue. Values shown without parenthesis are expressed as counts; Values shown in parenthesis are expressed as percentages.

Figure 1 – Various Themes as Percentages
Major Themes That Emerged From Phase 3 Group Interviews

Close examination of all of the student transcripts through the coding process yielded the following major themes:

- Impact of the L1/L2 process on identity/engagement/feelings gleaned through student comments;
- Usefulness of mother tongue in the L2 learning process despite shortage of L1 resources;
- Value of mother tongue to L2 students;
- L1/L2 strategies used by L2 students to scaffold their learning of English.

Major Findings in Phase 3

The major findings in this phase of the study were:

1. Students articulated the value of their mother tongues to their families, their children, to business and in society.
2. Students’ feelings, identity and engagement were impacted positively through validation of their mother tongues in their EAP classrooms.
3. Students clearly articulated the usefulness of their mother tongues cognitively, academically and socioculturally.
4. Students provided insights into the activities occurring in their brains as mother tongue scaffolded English and they described the strategies they were using that demonstrated interdependence between L1 and L2.

The data provided by these 19 college students opened a window into their perceptions about the impact of this pedagogical practice on their learning experiences, academic engagement and identity. Students were clear that barring the mother tongue in some of their other classrooms was perceived by them as the teachers’ right but that they felt that a part of their identities was being undervalued. Their highly engaged multilingual activities in seeking meanings of vocabulary and concepts by using mother tongue dictionaries and same language peers pointed to academic engagement that represented academic survival for them at the college. We also saw specific examples of interdependence between mother tongue and English in all of the interviews (see quoted excerpts). Mother tongue and English, existing simultaneously in their brains, in their social and cultural norms and validated in their four classrooms allowed them to be valued as holistic, multilingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural beings in a microcosm of Toronto society that is their college.

Several students made reference to the “super-highway” of languages in their brains. For example, in Group 1, Carol said “I can’t control myself…” in lines 62 – 74; in Group 1, Andy referred to “very fast bridge,” in lines 715 – 722; in Group 2, Bruce referred to “exchange the idea in English” and Christina noted “when I create new ideas I think in my own language…but use English to talk about it” in lines 801 to 810 of the transcript (Bismilla, 2008). This is a concept that
Vivian Cook (2001; 2003) labeled as a “super-system” and this metaphor easily captured for the students the process occurring in their brains and they were able to relate to this imagery.

In discussing the often frenetic activity in their brains during a class, especially a program specific class in which new words and concepts are constantly arriving into their brains as input and having to be processed in the brain in their L1s and quickly translated into L2 for output, the students demonstrated Cummins’ interdependence hypothesis (2004b). In every interview the students described the transfer of conceptual and linguistic elements proposed in the interdependence hypothesis. Cummins’ (2000) claim that L1 inclusion facilitates the learner’s identity investment and positive self-image is echoed by the students I interviewed. A powerful example is found in Group 2, (Bismilla, 2008, lines 1168-77) when Christina, supported by her equally passionate peers, vehemently expressed that L2 learners pay a lot of money to come to Canada to study. They know that they are here to study English and do not need to be subjected to “English-only” rules. They indicated that there are some learning situations when “you have to speak your own language.” Also, in Group 3, Justin profoundly stated that allowing students to use mother tongue in the classroom is important to facilitate understanding because “if students cannot understand…then there’s no point of learning,” (Group 3, November 18, 2008, Bismilla, 2008, L1017). This is also a statement about academic engagement. It points to the frustration of students who continue to sit in a class where their lack of understanding of concepts presented may lead to disengagement.

**Teacher Interviews**

The teachers in this phase, Dara and Marg, rather than under-valuing their students’ mother tongues, regard mother tongues as relevant in scaffolding the acquisition of English and give first and additional languages a place in the learning processes in their classrooms. There is an acknowledgement that their students’ mother tongues are firmly established as key components of their adult identities and they are aware that their students are finding unofficial ways to use their mother tongues to scaffold their learning of English by forming same language support groups outside of class to clarify concepts. In the study, these teachers were providing opportunities in their classrooms for these language support groups to enrich learning experiences with the additional support and presence of themselves as teachers and advocates for this learning style. In discussions with me, the teachers were knowledgeable about research into bilingualism and that their students’ prior learning, education, and experiences are encoded in their mother tongues. Rather than closing off this integral part of their students’ social, cultural and lingual identities in their classrooms and forcing them to perform with that missing pillar, the teachers in this phase of the study chose to create a space in their classroom programs and pedagogy for their students’ mother tongues.

Moje and Luke (2009) review various ways in which identity is conceptualized in general. They document five metaphors used in identity literature. They named them (a) identity as difference; (b) identity as sense of self/subjectivity; (c) identity as mind or consciousness; (d) identity as narrative and (e) identity as position. They contend that “subtle differences in identity theories have widely different implications for how one thinks about both how literacy matters to identity and how identity matters to literacy” (p. 416). In examining the metaphor of identity as position they write:
Creating Space for Students' Mother Tongues in College Classrooms

Just as one might see evidence of the layers of varnish on a piece of wood, so we might also see the layers of identity on a person. To play out the metaphor even further, those layers can be stripped away, reapplied, nicked, scratched, or even gouged. Thus, identity as layers of positions (i.e. laminations) carries with it the histories (hence, the overlap with the concept of histories in person, or even possibly, of *habitus*) of past experiences. (p. 430)

By the time a student reaches college, they are adults and have accumulated many layers of “varnish,” their mother tongues being one of the rich and vibrant layers. Through their years of schooling if that layer has been stripped, nicked or scratched, evidence of that would form another layer of their identity. Power relations that subjugate any aspect of identity, “are thought to shape a person’s self (or a group’s identity) through acts that distinguish and treat the person as gendered, raced, classed, or other sort of subject” (Ibid. p. 430).

Both teachers find that allowing students to use their L1s in class helps their students to be academically engaged and on task. Time for classroom instruction is scarce (four three hour classes a week) and maximum effort and engagement is critical for progress. Both teachers find that metalinguistic awareness and the ability for their students to talk about language while learning a language is a key enabler of L1 development. The older students in their classes, more often the Internationally Trained Immigrants (ITIs), are generally more mature and professional with great sensitivity and respect for other students and the learning process. The younger students, just arrived after completing high school in their country of origin, need greater reliance on their L1s in order to survive the first few months at college. Hence, for both teachers, the issue of balance is a key consideration. Both teacher and student must understand the need for balance between L1 and L2 and the teacher must be able to appreciate the pedagogical implications of this balance; therefore, the lower the student’s functionality in English the more monolingual the English environment may need to be. As the students develop their L2, the teacher can then use intentional instructional strategies to allow the L1 to scaffold the L2.

The data from the teacher interviews and written submissions pointed out the strength of their multilingual pedagogical approach as being one that is respectful of their students’ prior learning and holistic identities and one that engages their students in academic learning. Dara spoke of her experience in a school board, with a highly punitive approach to L1 suppression that she found intolerable. They also spoke of the ways in which the first language scaffolds the second. Their own personal experiences in learning a second language were instrumental in their creating collaborative spaces in their classrooms for L1/L2 interaction. However, they also identified some gaps and tensions associated with their multilingual pedagogy that the college will need to consider in applying the pedagogy more widely. The differences between cognate and non-cognate first languages and their similarities or differences with English sometimes pose specific difficulties in the teaching of decoding skills. Fossilized errors that students bring to their learning of English are often difficult to correct. But correction is necessary as these students will need instructional level English as they proceed into professional programs of study.

The teachers also pointed out that creating a space for mother tongue too early in a college student’s English learning process would be problematic since when they first arrive, mother tongue is a crutch and they need to become acclimatized to intentionally use English in class. As they progress through Levels 1 and 2 to the third level of EAP, students become more aware of
strategies that they, with the assistance of their teachers, can use to bridge L1 and L2. The teachers indicated that it is at this Level 3 EAP stage of English proficiency that the L1/L2 bridge most effectively enhances students’ vocabulary, usage, learning experience and academic engagement. This in turn impacts their identities as valued multilingual learners of English. The teachers found the student interview transcripts helpful to adjust their own teaching strategies, for example, going forward they would ask students to keep language journals or pocket-sized vocabulary notebooks. So there is active learning and identity formation occurring for both the teachers and students in these mother tongue friendly classrooms where collaborative relationships have been forged between and among teachers and students.

Developing a Model

In order to explain my findings to the college it was necessary for me to develop a visual model of the applications. This model (Figure 2 below) was derived from all the ground codes.

In Figure 2, the major themes, distilled from the level 1 and level 2 coding processes are shown as circles on the outside supporting the new insights into brain activity and the required action items for teachers (level 3 codes) contained inside. Starting at the top left hand outer corner and working our way anti-clockwise around the model, the student data informed us that when college students’ mother tongues are given a place in their classrooms, their prior learning, encoded in their mother tongues and their whole identities are invited by the teacher into their classrooms. “Whole students” with all their integral characteristics including language, are therefore participating in the classrooms rather than students with truncated profiles. Recognition of their feelings and identities enhances their engagement in the academic space.

Proceeding to the next cluster down, despite the lack of resources in their mother tongue in college, the L2 students thrive by helping one another in the learning processes. They find same-language peers to be of great value in quickly explaining concepts so they can keep pace with the teachers. Clarifying concepts in their mother tongues assists them to understand assignments and participate more fully in the learning processes. Moving to the next cluster, the students’ words provided a window into their multilingual profiles in the complete socio-cultural spectrum of their lives both inside and outside the college. Respect for their mother tongues validates multiple facets of who they are, allowing them to become robust contributors to their educational, personal and job-related personalities.

Finally, in the top right hand cluster, the rich processes of language scaffolding, through the numerous strategies L1 students are using in peer language groups, provide insights into the interdependence occurring inside their brains. These processes are given the dignity of acknowledgement as critical cornerstones to educational pedagogy in the classrooms of teachers who have created spaces for students’ mother tongues.

The items inside the model frame the four most important aspects for teachers to understand in order to teach the “whole” multilingual college student. On the right hand side, teachers need to understand that their students’ brains contain all of the information gathered through their lives and learning, regardless of the language in which those key experiences and learning took place. Attempting to erase those foundations or pretending that the intricate translation and scaffolding occurring inside the students’ brains are irrelevant, strips the students of important keys to their educational process.
Once the thought processes are understood we arrive back at the inside left hand side of the model that is, “what do I do as a teacher then, to accommodate my new understanding of the L2 learners’ needs and the rich skills, profiles and experiences that they bring into my classroom.” The final most central box in the middle of the model is the final third level coding pointing to the essential paradigm shift in pedagogy that needs to occur in order to create inclusive college classrooms in which the learning experience, academic engagement and identity formation of L2 students are given the same importance as they are for other students.

**Figure 2 – A Model for Creating Space for Students’ Mother Tongue in College Classrooms**

This model is derived from the level 1, 2 and 3 codes of the student interview transcripts and through the process of refining the codes in Table 3 and Figure 1.

**Limitations of the Study**

In this study there were three Phases. There were 90 students who responded to a written survey in Phase 1, there were three students interviewed in Phase 2, and there were 19 students interviewed in focus groups in Phase 3 for a total of 112 community college students. Although the total sample size was large, only the intensive focus group interview data from the Phase 3 ground
codes were used to create themes for application through my model. This was considered the major phase of this study. The 19 students had participated in a full semester of the multilingual pedagogy in two participating classrooms. The focus group questions and interviews were controlled and consistent in all the five groups and the sample size was large enough to generate themes across the groupings. The in-depth, semi-structured, audio recorded focus group interviews with the 19 students elicited 102 pages of transcripts which generated 279 ground codes which were sufficient for thematic saturation (for definition of saturation see p. 143, Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Guidelines for determining optimum sample size for L1/L2 research in community colleges are non-existent, but this sample was meant to be a preliminary push into this area of study, and the small group afforded the intimacy needed to garner quality information from the participants. The four major themes (identity, usefulness of mother tongue, L1/L2 scaffolding strategies and the socio-cultural value of mother tongue) that emerged were consistent in all five interviews; but if I had chosen to conduct a larger number of focus groups with a larger number of L2 students there might have been more than four major themes emerge. My application and model make evidence-based recommendations drawn directly from the student transcripts.

Conclusions

The students in this study gave us insights into the workings in their brains between their L1 and English and thus confirmed the importance of their L1 in scaffolding their L2. Cummins’ (2004b) interdependence hypothesis and Cook’s (2001, 2003) language super-system in the L2 learner’s brain were confirmed. There were several comments from students cautioning against the overuse of mother tongue in class which is consistent with literature on bilingual education that calls for balance and a search for the optimal use of the L1 in class (see Turnbull 2001, Macaro, 2003, Turnbull & Dailey-O’Cain, 2009a, b, c). The code counts demonstrated that students in every focus group commented specifically on the centrality of their mother tongues to their identities. These college students are adults with decades of prior learning encoded in their mother tongues. At present the college is not respecting that prior learning by excluding their mother tongues from the classroom. Freire (1998) in his book Pedagogy of Freedom encourages respect for the autonomy of the student:

Another kind of knowledge necessary to educational practice…is the knowledge that speaks of respect for the autonomy of the learner, whether the learner be child, youth, or adult. As an educator, I have to constantly remind myself of this knowledge because it is connected with the affirmation of respect for myself. This principle, once again, is a question of the ethical implications of being an unfinished being. Respect for the autonomy and dignity of every person is an ethical imperative and not a favor that we may or may not concede to each other. It is precisely because we are ethical beings that we can commit what can only be called a transgression by denying our essential ethical condition. The teacher who does not respect the student’s curiosity in its diverse aesthetic, linguistic, and syntactical expressions; who uses irony to put down legitimate questioning…who is not respectfully present in the educational experience of the student, transgresses fundamental ethical principles of the human condition. (p.59)
Dara and Marg’s collaborative classrooms and inclusive pedagogy respect the whole identity of their students including their mother tongues. Recognizing a multilingual approach to pedagogy as an ethical imperative is transformative for both the teacher and the student in Freire’s paradigm. By being “respectfully present in the educational experience of the student” (Ibid.) these four teachers, according to their students, have enhanced their learning experiences and academic engagement. In order to teach the whole student they recognize that there is a place for mother tongues in college classrooms. Bringing this multilingual pedagogy to the attention of the college through this research begins to fulfill my ethical imperative as an administrator and honours the voices of the students who participated in this research and informed the outcomes.

Reyes and Vallone (2007) used identity construction as one of their arguments for four-way bilingual education and urged the removal of the “hostile conditions” (p. 6) under which bilingual programs presently flourish. They claimed that a student’s active use of four different language systems strengthens their cognitive, linguistic and metalinguistic abilities, and this impacts positively on academic engagement and achievement. As engaged educators it is important for college teachers and administrators to examine whether we are creating a hostile linguistic environment in our classrooms for our L2 students by affording English its hegemonic place to the exclusion of a balanced, structured and pedagogically informed use of mother tongue.

All of the college students interviewed for this study touched on all of Moje and Luke’s (2009) metaphors of identity. The authors named their metaphors (a) identity as difference (b) identity as sense of self/subjectivity (c) identity as mind or consciousness (d) identity as narrative and (e) identity as position. While evidence of all of these metaphors are found in the student transcripts, their metaphor of identity as position resonates poignantly as we examine the life and learning experiences of our college students in this study. Their “layers of varnish” that make up identity as described by Moje and Luke (p. 430), have been stripped away in many different ways as they journeyed from their countries of birth to Canada. We heard from students who were professional engineers, nurses, doctors and professors starting their professional lives all over again in our college. By reaffirming their lingual identities, through a carefully considered multilingual pedagogy, we as college educators have the opportunity to reapply and repair some of the scratched and damaged layers of their identity “varnish”.

The spectrum of studies that I have undertaken in my quest for a better understanding of the interdependence between L1 and L2 confirmed my belief that creating a space for mother tongue in the classroom has benefits for both student and teacher. The studies revealed visceral passions from the very young elementary student who referred to his ability to speak his mother tongue as “magical,” (Bismilla, 2005) to the angry outcry of the college student who said that she has paid a large sum of money to come to Canada to study and knows that English is important but does not need the indignity of being told not to speak her mother tongue in class for quick clarification with a peer. It was fascinating to have a window into the students’ brains that revealed the mental activity between their L1 and L2. The students taught me the folly of pedagogical approaches that look at multilingual students through deficit lenses. The quiet dignity of the student in the last interview (group 5) when he spoke of “deep learning,” reminded me that L2 students sitting before us in class carry a huge and sorrowful weight when their profound academic qualifications are negated by our regulatory bodies that do not recognize the credentials of internationally educated immigrants. The bilingual students in the study confirmed that their L1s constituted an important scaffold for their learning of English and hence enhanced their learning
experiences and academic engagement in class. Their perceptive comments also expressed their sense of the centrality of their L1s to aspects of their identity.

Areas of Further Potential Research

A potential area of further study might be to explore the differences in scaffolding and interdependence between cognate and non-cognate L1s to English. This will require a non-randomized sample of L2 learners in groupings of mother tongues that share roots with English and those that are non-cognate.

Another potential area for further exploration would be a longitudinal tracking of the academic performance of students from mother tongue permitted English language learning classrooms to mother tongue prohibited English language learning classrooms. This will need to be a new mixed mode study involving pre and post English proficiency testing of students as well as a comparison of graduating grades of both groups of students. Impact on academic engagement and identity will need to be gauged through student interviews.
References


Appendix A

Interviewer: Vicki Bismilla

Focus group questions for semi-structured, audio-tape-recorded group interviews:

1. Describe how you feel about being allowed to use your mother tongue in college classrooms?
2. How do other students react when they see/hear you using your mother tongue in class?
3. If you are in your same language groups in class what sorts of discussions do you have? In what ways are these helpful to you? Were there ways/times when this was not helpful?
4. You are being encouraged to use your mother tongue while preparing for assignments and clarifying classroom discussions. Are there other times and activities where this might be helpful?
5. When your teacher allows you to do research in your mother tongue what do you do? Is it helpful? Why or why not?
6. When you see or hear a new English word how do you try to discover its meaning? Can your mother tongue help you to figure out its meaning? How?
7. What strategies (ways) have you learned from your own mother tongues that help you to learn English? For example breaking the word up into smaller pieces or thinking about word associations.
8. Can you think of pieces of an English word that might be the same in your mother tongue that help you to figure out meanings of English words? For example in Greek or Latin “auto” or “inter” are also used in English.
9. When an English speaker speaks to you what kinds of things might they do to help you understand better?
10. When do you think in English and when do you think in your mother tongue? How do you switch from one to the other at college or outside the college?
11. How valuable do you believe your mother tongue is to you (a) in class (b) in the college (c) in Toronto in general? Why?
12. How do you feel in other classrooms where you are not allowed to use your mother tongue in class?

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