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Oral Histories of Adult EAL Students: A Rock County Perspective

Let’s begin with some statistics provided by Wisconsin Literacy, Inc. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Report:

- 3.2% (~170,000) of the population in Wisconsin “does not speak English very well.” Of this number,
  - 2.0% speak Spanish
  - 0.5% speak other Indo-European languages
  - 0.6% speak Asian and Pacific Islander
  - 0.1% speak other languages

- 46.4% of the foreign-born population over five years old “does not speak English very well.”

Within Rock County, the Literacy Connection in Janesville was finding it difficult to meet the demand of the city’s growing Spanish-speaking population with the dearth of volunteer tutors available. Now in tandem with the Stateline Literacy Council in Beloit, the Literacy Connection provides Spanish-language GED training with funding provided through private donations. Additionally, the Even Start Family Literacy Program offers free services to adults at poverty level seeking to complete the GED/HSED or to learn English, while their children simultaneously participate in early literacy activities. Wisconsin literacy organizations also have been working with the Regional Industrial Skills Education (RISE) Partnership, led by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development and the Wisconsin Technical College System. Its focus is on building “career pathway bridges” to help adults in need of basic skills or English language instruction succeed in a career pathway, bridges including courses linking basic and English skills development with occupational skills development.

In the previous issue, which took me into the local community, I showcased my literacy activities with the children at Head Start. On a similar outing for this piece, I collected the oral histories of four English language learners who had emigrated to Rock County from Mexico and now participate in English as an Additional Language (EAL) programs and/or work independently on improving their speaking and writing abilities. Oral history offers an avenue for recovering unofficial narratives, popular experiences, and voices from disenfranchised populations. Thus, both collecting and analyzing oral histories render useful means of reconstructing
firsthand details of the literacy practices that assist with EAL learning and instruction. As persuasively argued by Lucas (2007-2008): an oral history approach to interviewing is truly essential to qualitative research—and is ultimately the research practice most closely aligned with the ethos and ideology of rhetoric and composition. We need to understand oral histories as conversational narratives: interpersonal exchanges developed with multiple perspectives and complex dialectical processes. We can then see that the practices of oral history really have a deep affinity with the practices of writing, rhetoric, and literacy studies—perhaps even the strongest affinity of all research methods. (p. 27)

Derided as a negligible research method by critics who seek purely quantifiable data, oral histories actually function as powerful augmentations and correctives to quantitative and document-based approaches that purport to address conditions of otherwise voiceless populations.

Following Brandt’s (2001) influential analysis of oral histories speaking to the ways that literacy is acquired and lived in the United States, I address the strategies that these immigrants have chosen to improve their language competence, the motives behind these decisions, and their social, cultural, economic, and civic integration into Rock County. Drawing from Brandt’s definition of “sponsors of literacy”—“any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy” (p. 19)—I identify those integral to the acquisition of literacy among these four subjects. Asking how and why these learners are succeeding emphasizes how central reading and writing in a new language can be to one’s sense of security and well-being, and even to a sense of dignity. Furthermore, such an investigation reminds us that literacy exists only as part of larger material systems that both enable and confer acts of reading and writing.

The Cultural Capital of Learning Additional Languages

Successful economic, social, and civic integration of migrant populations hinges on various factors, but language skills act as critical elements of active participation in their host communities. After arriving, migrants encounter a gradual transfer from their home country, a transfer whose success depends greatly on premigration language skills, individual willingness to acquire or enhance language skills after arrival, and language learning opportunities (Akresh, 2007; Thomas, 2010).

In two articles I recently completed on literacy and reading habits among the gay and lesbian populations, I drew heavily from Bourdieu’s (1997) concept of cultural capital, which permits us to establish or expand our positions in a social space structured by power relationships. Furthermore, it takes time and other resources to accumulate cultural capital, which then becomes “a force inscribed in objective and subjective structures”—a source of power that helps us “make the games of society” (p. 46). Various forms of capital, including language skills, can be exchanged, an action especially critical for those contending to find a niche by strategically utilizing their available
assets. In this respect, language skills are a form of cultural capital because “they are embodied in the person; they are productive in the labor market and/or in consumption; and they are created at a sacrifice of time and out-of-pocket resources” (Chiswick & Miller, 1995, p. 248).

For immigrants, the ability to enhance their language capital often becomes a treasured resource. As argued by Norton (1997), “Every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (p. 410). Through this process of “creation and negotiation” of linguistic identity, immigrants acquire language capital in the host country. This assertion also reinforces Bourdieu’s (1990) perspective on practice, that accumulation and conversion of forms of capital is possible only through practice in a social field. In this respect, both acquisition of and improvement in the host country’s language are conditional on active engagement with many of the host country’s various institutions. And in an era of increasing global migration, language competencies become especially important to immigrant workers and their families.

**Early Literacy through the Church:**

**The Story of Liliana**

Before moving with her husband to Beloit in 2004, Liliana took the initiative to become trilingual. Born to working-class Italian parents who had migrated to Ecatepec in the State of Mexico—her mother a tailor and her father a locksmith—Liliana and her sisters grew up with only a Bible and a handful of Christian children’s books, all in Italian, in the home. Despite this dearth of reading materials, each evening Liliana would sit at the kitchen table with her sisters while their mother read aloud, sounding out the words and identifying the images in the black and white illustrations. Later, as the eldest, Liliana began reading these books to her sisters.

Because she spoke only Italian, difficulties in her early grades began because all children in the public school were expected to speak Spanish. In the mean time, her mother began to teach herself the local language by purchasing a Bible in Spanish, placing the two texts side by side, and reading both simultaneously. Later, because of her daughters’ difficulties, she paid a bilingual member of their church to teach them Spanish. As Liliana progressed, her formal education failed to enhance her ability to read. In fact, her teachers focused primarily on teaching cursive handwriting rather than on reading and on structuring sentences, paragraphs, and essays. She instead depended on scripture.

As she became proficient in Spanish, Liliana discovered American television: “I started to learn English from watching Little House on the Prairie, and I decided I wanted to go where they were.” As a teenager she taught herself English through the local music school, which she attended in the evenings. While training in opera, she also listened to soft rock by Air Supply, Chicago, Linda Ronstadt, and others, “and I was writing the songs but the spelling was terrible, but I could pronounce the words. I was always an excellent student in English.” When she met her future husband at age 16, she began listening to Christian music in English, “and I started to translate the songs to Spanish, and then I started recording my
own Christian songs in Spanish and Italian.” Now living in Beloit as the wife of a pastor who formed a new church catering to the city’s Hispanic population, Liliana continues to sing and write music in all three languages: “I think music helps the brain, through the music I learned another language.”

Although the church did not directly assist Liliana with learning two additional languages, as a child she participated at home in the language and literacy practices that the church encouraged through recitation, retelling stories, reading words, singing with the choir, and praying: “I mostly prayed in Italian, but later I prayed in both Italian and Spanish and sometimes English.” The church often has served an important role for Hispanic communities, often functioning as a social agency providing multiple services including education. In this respect, the church not only serves as a place of spiritual worship but also as a refuge and a location where its congregations could learn values, knowledge, and skills. Concerned with enhancing the psychological, social, economic, and physical prosperity of its members, it has assisted with developing a greater appreciation for their culture and history, acquiring basic literacy skills, acquiring trades, and keeping informed about societal issues. In other words, the church has not limited itself to spiritual and religious edification; it has been involved in every aspect of its members’ lives (Badillo, 2006).

**English Literacy through Comic Books: The Story of Javier**

Javier was born in 1970 in Tehuantepec, a municipality in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, where a large percentage of the population works in agriculture and livestock. The eldest son in a family of six children, Javier spent little time in school in order to tend to the crops while his father worked in a water purification facility. With illiterate parents, Javier himself learned basic reading and writing in Spanish with help from his younger brothers who attended primary school.

In 1997, Javier migrated to Los Angeles in order to find work after his parents sold their farm. With no English and little money, he found employment at a custom door and component manufacturer, where most of the 600 employees, like himself, spoke only Spanish. Because of the high cost of living, he moved to Beloit after eight months to join his brother, Arturo, and his sister-in-law, Paulina. Squeezing Javier into their 800-square-foot house with their two preschool children became a challenge, but, according to Javier, “family is always there to help.”

While both men knew very little English, they enjoyed looking at the childrens’ superhero comics, especially X-Men, The Avengers, and Batman. Although the words meant nothing to them, “we would make up stories about what was happening.” When Javier began attending tutoring sessions at Stateline Literacy Council in 2003 in order to prepare for the GED, he told his tutor that he wanted to start with the comics. According to Milton (2008) and Sheu (2008), such an approach works well from the perspective of EAL teachers who perceive linguistic value, story value, and picture value in picture story books used with children. For adults such as Javier, who wanted to learn alongside his brother and with the help of Arturo’s
children, who spoke both English and Spanish by attending public school, learning through comics strengthened their familial ties: “They would ask me about the story, so they always checked to see if I understood what Batman is saying. So sometimes I had some questions about the comic and I can ask them. Sometimes we pretend I am Batman and they are Joker and Scarecrow and we say in English what they would say, and we would draw pictures.”

Like Liliana, who learned Spanish and English through community and family connections, Javier describes a participation metaphor of learning. This metaphor seems particularly appropriate to describe the sharing of the targeted readers with their families, for in the sharing process, the learners and their (young) teachers become apprentices or participants in a community, which increases communication within the family and provides a valuable adjunct to tutoring instruction.

**English Literacy through Son Jarocho: The Story of Rolando**

Rolando, now 22, attended a private elementary school in Xalapa, the capital city of Veracruz. Although he had constant access to his textbooks and to the school library, Rolando took no interest in reading until he reached junior high school. At that time, his mother began purchasing motivational books in order to bolster his spiritual and cultural growth. Although he took a liking to these texts, his high school teachers actively encouraged reading although very little instruction took place, for “we had literature courses, but it was just basic composition with not much reading.”

Because Rolando attended private schools, English language learning began early. However, in his community, those who spoke English were generally shunned by the broader population: “They thought we wanted to be better than they were because we studied English, so I could never speak English with my friends in public. We could be beaten up if they heard us so I couldn’t practice out of school.” In this situation, Rolando was not free to choose the quantity and quality of his own learning practices, for his own community restricted his access to new language acquisition.

In the mean time, at 15 he played and sang the Son Jarocho style of folk music with a young ensemble of musicians. Now adept on the *leona*, he also became adept at exchanging improvised verses, or *décimas*, with the other performers. In the spirit of Son Jarocho, the performers began by learning famous songs such as “La Bamba” and extended their repertoire to include “El Coco” and “La Iguana.” For Rolando, “these songs were very difficult because there is a lot of improvisation with the music and words, and I had to think quickly when a singer before me would say something and I had to answer.” However, this form of improvisation helped him improve his English:

In Son Jarocho there’s a lot of word play and double meanings in Spanish, and I knew a lot of English from school already, but using the word play helped me understand sayings in English. Like I didn’t understand what “Look before you leap” means because in Spanish we say “Antes que te cases, mira lo que haces,” which means “Before you marry, look what you do.” And I learned “Is the coast clear?” but in Spanish it’s “¿Hay moros en la costa?” and that means
“Are there Moors on the coast?” My favorite is in English you say “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear” and in Spanish it’s “Aunque la mona se vista de seda, mona se queda,” and that’s “Even if the monkey dresses in silk, she’ll still be a monkey.”

Concentrating on adolescent literacies at public schools in Maizales, Texas, on the United States/Mexico border, de la Piedra (2010) reinforces the importance of combining school literacy with vernacular literacy, for “By focusing on what students contribute instead of what they lack, teachers can help students develop self-images as strong writers” (p. 582). For Rolando, the out-of-class activities of music performance and language experimentation in a public group setting support the observation that formal education alone may be insufficient; for many English language learners, co-curricular activities heighten one’s awareness of the nuances within the various grammars that construct different languages.

Joining the Peace Corps: The Story of Abril

Abril, now 34, was raised in Dallas, Texas, by undocumented parents who had immigrated from Matamoros, in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Known for its high rates of poverty and crime, Abril’s South Dallas neighborhood and school system offered overcrowded classrooms, a dearth of textbooks, violent corridors, teenage drug cartels, and little in the way of sound college preparation. In light of this lack of resources, Abril’s parents encouraged her to seek additional tutoring outside of school because “they wanted me to move away from our street because it was so dangerous and they could tell that I was unhappy.” Furthermore, Abril spoke little English; in this area of Dallas, few of her neighbors did.

Although not seeking formal tutoring, Abril frequented the public library to read Spanish-language novels by Latin American authors:

I remember that I liked to read Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes books because the library had pictures of them on the wall and I wanted to see why. And I liked books by Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. Some books frightened me because they were about war and politics, like I remember one very old book called El Señor Presidente [by Miguel Ángel Asturias] because it was about a dictator. My mother told me I should read books for girls my age instead like romance books, but I wanted to learn about the world and help people.

When Mrs. Ramos, a bilingual librarian, noticed her interest, she encouraged Abril to learn English “because she said it would help me move away and improve my standard of living.” So at 15, she began her self education.

When she graduated from high school in 1997, the Peace Corps sent Abril to Honduras in order to work in the area of youth development. Housed in an apartment with other volunteers, she began her crusade to teach English to the Spanish speakers and to perfect her own language abilities: “It was a good place because Carlos Reina was president and he worked very hard to improve the country. I remember the next year when Carlos Flores became president.
because he wanted to continue Reina’s work on making the economy stronger.” It was also that year, 1998, when Hurricane Mitch devastated the country. Fortunately, the Peace Corps removed its volunteers before the storm, but Abril returned afterwards to discover mass destruction: “When we returned, I was no longer able to teach English because I had to help rebuild all the houses. So many people were homeless.”

Abril left Honduras and the Peace Corps in 2002 in order to pursue her degree in social work at the University of Texas at Dallas. In 2007, she and her sister Sofia moved to Beloit with their parents in order to be closer to extended family. Now working with Spanish-speaking teens who suffer from HIV/AIDS, illiteracy, gang affiliations, and other afflictions, Abril looks back on her high school education with dismay: “The teenagers I work with suffer like I did. In my high school we didn’t have the resources to improve our English, and many students became frustrated and began acting out, like my clients do now.” Fortunately, Abril was able to turn to her public library, which created a more nurturing and supportive environment for engagement in language and literacy practices while the school, suffering from a lack of financial and education resources, failed to provide effective teaching and learning.

The Autonomous Practices of English Language Learners
Just as Brandt and others, I could devote an entire monograph to oral histories of English Language Learners. In the mean time, we can see in these stories support for the growing body of research centering on the significance of co-curricular learning experiences, often accentuating the rich language and literacy learning that takes place in homes, churches, and community spaces (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Zentella, 2005). Since scholars such as Barton and Hamilton (1998) began characterizing literacy as a social practice within one’s community, New Literacy Studies has advocated increased attentiveness to the literacy practices of local groups, particularly those with less political and economic power (Gee 2012; Street, 1995). According to this view, literacy is multiple and local, and the construct of multiple literacy practices varies according to the context and society in which they are embedded.

Because literacy involves being able to use contextualized knowledge to achieve specific ends, “immigrants, in particular, are constantly negotiating the dominant discourses of their adopted country” (Lam, 2004, p. 82). According to these oral histories, beliefs about language acquisition influence many behaviors, such as the choice of learning strategies and self-regulation (e.g., Wenden, 1999; Yang, 1999). While formal in-class learning contributed to proficiency in English, as in Rolando’s case, we can also see that out-of-class language-learning activities correlate with learner autonomy (Gao, 2009), such as through love of music, illustrated comics, and public libraries. Learners’ application of their developing skills outside classroom is important in their language development.

Overall, we can view the discourses to which these students have access as resources for helping them develop stronger understandings of language use outside the classroom. In this respect, competing discourses, such as the vernacular at odds
with the more refined, one often privileged over the other depending on context, provide these language learners with better abilities to navigate multiple texts and communities successfully. Like Brandt, we must pay heed to the literary sponsors that made language acquisition possible.

References


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