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LINKING MOTHER TONGUE AND ENGLISH ACADEMIC LITERACY COURSES FOR EPISTEMIC ACCESS

Abstract

This paper reports on a mother-tongue based pedagogical initiative aimed at promoting epistemic access among native Spanish speakers attending a community college in the United States. This pedagogical initiative linked English and Spanish academic literacy courses within the framework of a learning community, or clusters of pedagogically integrated courses that students take in the same cohort.

After presenting the political and pedagogical rationale for this program, I will discuss its impact on students' ability to access knowledge in higher education through the medium of an additional language. This impact will be assessed

through a comparative analysis of quantitative academic success indicators combined with qualitative data collected through interviews. The findings show that the link facilitated epistemic access by providing students with an emotionally safe space where they were able to take ownership of their additional language through a higher level of engagement with academic discourse. This greater engagement was made possible by the use of the mother tongue as a resource for self-expression and as a frame of reference.

Key words: Multilingualism, academic literacy, translanguaging, learning communities, English learners.

1. Introduction

The choice of the medium of instruction is of the utmost importance for epistemic access in multilingual societies. Students who are proficient in the language used by teachers, in books, and during examinations are given an opportunity to learn, earn degrees, and succeed as professionals. Students who do not have this proficiency are excluded from this opportunity unless they manage to develop a sufficient level of command of the language in question. This is the case of most language minority students in the United States and native speakers of African languages in South Africa, for whom the appropriation of English is a precondition for meaningful academic participation and upward socio-economic mobility.

A mother-tongue based pedagogical program aimed at promoting epistemic access among native Spanish speakers was developed at Bronx Community College of the City University of New York. This initiative linked English and Spanish academic literacy development courses within the framework of a learning community, or clusters of pedagogically integrated courses that students take in the same cohort. The goal of this link is to enhance English acquisition and promote academic success through the medium of this language by using students' mother tongue as a resource. The program is discussed in full in the book *Using ESL students' mother tongue as a resource for college success* (Parmegiani, 2019). This paper discusses the political and pedagogical rationale for the program and focuses on its impact on epistemic access by exploring the following question: how did the link between Spanish and English academic literacy courses impact students' ability to access knowledge through the medium of their additional language? This question is explored through a comparative analysis of quantitative academic success indicators combined with qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews. The findings show that this link facilitated epistemic access by providing students with an emotionally safe space where they were able to take ownership of their additional language through a higher level of engagement with academic discourse. This greater engagement was made possible by the use of the mother tongue as a resource for self-expression and as a frame of reference.

While these findings cannot be generalized due to the limitations of the study, the positive impact of the program on Bronx Community College's Spanish-speaking population suggests that the linked course model has a lot of potential for facilitating epistemic access among students with limited proficiency in the medium of instruction. This potential is of particular significance for South Africa, where the need to promote a greater use of marginalized languages in education has clashed with the need the native speakers of those languages feel to appropriate English for socio-economic empowerment. The findings of this study, despite their limitations, suggest that piloting linked English-African language academic literacy courses could provide tangible evidence that mother tongue and additional language development are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, and that therefore a strategic use of African languages can facilitate the appropriation of English.

2. Linguistic Diversity and Dominant Codes

“There is no such thing as linguistic communism,” argues sociologist of language Pierre Bourdieu (1997: 3), meaning that while all languages might be considered equal in terms of their ability to make meaning, some languages dominate over others in terms of granting access to social identities and forms of knowledge whose ownership is vital in the competition for socio-economic goods. While it can be proven that any language or dialect is systemic and has the ability to meet the communicative needs of the community that speaks it, only the language of the elite is considered a “legitimate” communication tool for the production and circulation of knowledge in sociolinguistic domains where wealth and status are allocated. In these prestigious domains, the mastery of the dominant language is a precondition for exercising the “right to speech,” (648) or the ability to say anything that will be considered a legitimate speech act worthy of attention. This is certainly true in the case of education: the choice of the medium of instruction reflects societal attitudes towards linguistic legitimacy: in most schools it is the language of the elite that is taken as “the standard” for assessing (and policing) what medium is acceptable in the production and circulation of knowledge (Corson, 2001, 22). Mastering the standard does not merely involve mastering a certain language (such as English, Spanish, isiXhosa), but also using a specific dialect within that language that mirrors the usage of the elite. It also entails mastering a set of discursive practices, or socio-cultural sensibilities around speech acts that find expression through specific, although often implicit, rhetorical expectations that are embedded in belief systems and social identities (Gee, 1996; Delpit, 1992; Parmegiani, 2014a). I will refer conjointly to the dominant languages, dialects, and discursive practices that act as gate-keepers to epistemic access as dominant codes (Parmegiani, 2019).

3. Dominant Codes and Epistemic Access in Education

In a world characterized by such a rapid growth of linguistic diversity, it is increasingly important to examine how dominant codes operate in education. The idea that they create additional difficulties for students who do not inherit them from birth is fairly intuitive: academic knowledge is created and transmitted mainly through language; hence, it is impossible to participate in epistemic production without at least some level of proficiency in the language being used as the medium of communication. It is also intuitive that developing proficiency in the medium is easier for students who are exposed to it from early childhood in their homes and primary communities. Nevertheless, it would be unproductive to theorize about linguistic inequality and epistemic access from the premise that dominant codes cannot be fully appropriated by native speakers of other languages. Restricting the ownership of dominant codes to birthright reifies the power of these codes to exclude and perpetuate a system of privilege based on language. Making their ownership inclusive can turn them into instruments of democratic transformation by giving more people the opportunity to harness their power (Parmegiani 2010; 2014b).

In theory, there is no reason why students should be put in a schooling situation where only the dominant code is used as a legitimate medium of instruction, especially when the home code differs significantly from the dominant code. Every code can be used as medium of instruction, despite how it is perceived in terms of status. A perfect example is Afrikaans, which went from being considered a bastardized form of Dutch referred to derogatorily as “kombuis taal” (or “kitchen language”) to being an official language used in schools and government and revered as the “soul of the nation,” after its speakers came to dominate South African politics (Kamwangamalu 2001: 37). In practice, however, there are many reasons why providing mother tongue instruction to every speaker of every language might not always be feasible.

From a strictly logistical point of view, there are situations where there are not enough speakers of the same language to teach a class in that language or find a teacher who is able to do so. For example, it is hard to imagine how a public school in rural Kansas could offer math classes in TshiVenda, unless there were a substantial presence of speakers of that language living within close proximity of the school district. Similarly, in large urban areas all over the world, it is not uncommon to find such a high level of linguistic diversity within a school that it would be simply impossible to provide every single student with instruction in his/her mother tongue. It is often the lack of political will, however, that stands in the way of a greater use of marginalized languages in schools.

In both the United States and South Africa, there is a certain level of resistance against the use of languages other than English as mediums of instruction. Contrary to what many people think, the U.S. does not have an official language, nor is it a giant Anglophone monolith (Ryan, 2013; Rumbaut and Massey, 2013): approximately 20% of the U.S. population speaks a language other than English at home, and in most cases, this language is Spanish (Ryan, 2013). It would not even be correct to say that linguistic diversity is a new phenomenon, as multitudes of languages have always been spoken on the North American continent (Kloss, 1998; Macias, 2014). Nevertheless the “ideology of normative monolingualism,” or the idea that U.S. citizens should speak only one language, and that English should be that language is pervasive. This ideology constructs “linguistic diversity as an impediment to unity” and “relies on the erasure of the fact of multilingualism in the U.S.” (Fuller, 2013: 10).

It would not be fair to say that every American embraces this ideology, just like it would not be fair to say that Americans are monolingual by definition. Yet, in the eighties, this ideology led to an “English-only” movement which

attempted to make English the official language of the states and the nation [and] to eliminate the use of non-English language in economic activities (e.g., protested the use of bilingual menus at McDonald’s restaurants in Miami, Florida), schools, public libraries and government (Macias, 2014: 35).

This movement came close to but did not succeed in its intent to forbid the use of other languages by the United States government “agencies, employees, and officers, except in very limited circumstances” (Crawford, 2000: 39), in part because the hegemonic power of English in the United States is so well established that it does not need to be made official, but also because the Republican party had become increasingly aware of the importance of linguistic minorities –especially Latinos – as a voting block. While the official language question has been dormant, the ideology of normative monolingualism has not, and it has recently led to the detention of two U.S. citizens for speaking Spanish at a gas station inside the U.S. and on a verbal assault against restaurant staff caused by the fact that the staff had spoken to each other in Spanish at the work place (BBC News, April 21, 2018).

Unlike the United States, South Africa does have not just one, but eleven official languages, and the need to protect and promote linguistic diversity is sanctioned by the constitution (RSA 1996). Theoretically, all eleven languages enjoy parity of status. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth (Alexander, 2003). For most South Africans, the ownership of English is a precondition for epistemic access beyond the foundational stage (Lafon 2009), professional employment (Heugh 2000; Paxton 2009) and political participation, despite the fact that it is spoken as a home language only by 8.5% of the population, as opposed to 80% in the United States. There have been no concerted attempts to make English the sole official language of South Africa or to banish other languages from public service provision. On the contrary, inroads have been made in pushing for a greater use of African languages in prestigious domains (Mesthrie 2006; Deumert 2010, 15; Ndhlovu 2008.). Most importantly, South African universities have embarked on a multilingualization process with the goal of raising the status of indigenous languages and facilitating epistemic access for their speakers (Parmegiani and Rudwick, 2014; Madiba, 2014; Makalela, 2014). This does not mean, however, that the ideology of normative English monolingualism does not play a role in shaping South African language attitudes and practices, even if, unlike the United States, this ideology is not rooted in the idea that English should be the only language spoken by every South African.

In terms of epistemic access, the ideology of English monolingualism in South Africa can be seen with a certain level of skepticism towards the use of African languages in education (Kamwangamalu 2001: 394; Heugh 2000). The reluctance to appreciate the value of languages other than English in education probably does not have that much to do with xenophobia or monolithic conceptions of a national identity based on one language. Black South Africans who are not enthusiastic about being instructed in their mother tongue are much more likely to be concerned with employment opportunities than with a perceived threat to national unity posed by the use of indigenous languages in education.

The need to appropriate English for socio-economic mobility, which many immigrant parents in the U.S. share, is a valid concern, and it is a factor that needs to be taken seriously when pushing for a greater use of marginalized languages in education. The reality is that a mastery of the dominant code is a necessary, albeit not always sufficient, condition for escaping from the clutches of socio economic disadvantage. While battles can be fought and won to push for greater linguistic equality, it is hard to envision how a situation of linguistic communism could possibly be achieved in our life time: there will always be some codes that dominate, and people for whom the appropriation of those codes will be more difficult than for others. Finding pedagogical and programmatic solutions to make dominant codes more accessible is therefore paramount for using language as an instrument of social justice. Students need to be heard and taken seriously when they try to earn college degrees, send resumes, and go for job interviews, and this cannot happen without a sufficient level of command of the language of power. In a world where the way a person speaks this language determines his/her “chances of getting a place to live, a job, a degree, or a promotion, a teaching credential, and health care” (Zentella, 2014: 621), every student must be put in a position where he/she can claim the power that comes with the appropriation of the dominant code (Delpit, 1992; Nieto 2009).

4. Mother Tongue and Additional Language Development are Two Sides of the Same Coin

Fortunately, promoting marginalized languages as media of instruction and facilitating access to dominant codes are not mutually exclusive. It might sound counterintuitive, but decades of research have shown that well designed bilingual programs, which seek to maintain and develop students’ mother tongue throughout their grade school career, are actually more effective at helping native speakers of other languages develop solid academic literacy skills in English and the ability to succeed through this language (Willig, 1985; Greene, 1998, Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass, 2005; Lukes, 2015; Condelli et. al, 2002; Burt & Peyton, 2003). These studies confirm Cummins’ seminal language skills transfer theory (1996), which posits that first and second language academic literacy development are complementary, since skills accessed through one language can transfer to another.

More recently, translanguaging theories have questioned the idea that languages can be conceptualized as separate entities, and have argued that they operate as one dynamic, integrated system in the minds of bi or multilingual speakers, whose verbal exchanges are often characterized by the use of multiple languages, dialects, and discursive practices (Garcia and Wei, 2014: 14; Garcia and OrtheGuy, 2014: 644). Indeed, translanguaging, which Garcia and Wei (2014, p. 22) define as the “language practices of bilinguals,” which are “complex and interrelated,” and rooted in “one linguistic system” which is “integrated and dynamic,” is quite common among multilingual speakers in South Africa (Deumert, 2010; Makalela, 2014), and many have argued that it should be promoted, rather than

suppressed, in multilingual classrooms (Canagarajah, 2011; Garcia and Sylvan 2011; Bartlett and Garcia, 2011; Mashiyi, 2014). There was great value in encouraging translanguaging as a scaffolding strategy in the linked ESL courses, as the qualitative data will show. I would like to highlight, however, that encouraging translanguaging does not mean that students should not learn how to keep their languages separately.

As Garcia and Wei (2014) point out, in order to expand “home language practices,” and facilitate the appropriation of dominant codes, there will be times when teachers, as facilitators, will need to “build spaces where certain language practices or others are sometimes expected. This is what dominant society and government schools and their assessment mechanisms continue to require, and thus it is important to give students an opportunity to engage with these practices” (2014:74). The idea that a translanguaging approach should develop students’ ability to use their languages separately by increasing their lexical-syntactic-discursive resources and metalinguistic awareness cannot be emphasized enough. First of all, there are pedagogical benefits to the *strategic* use of language separation. For example, it pushes students to be less reliant on their stronger language for comprehension, and it can promote the status of marginalized languages (De Jong, 2016: 11). In addition, students will have to show that they are able to master the dominant code as a separate system, rather than to translanguange, in situations where they compete for opportunities of socio-economic empowerment, such as when they take standardized tests or apply for jobs.

5. Epistemic Access at Bronx Community College

Community colleges in the United States offer two-year degrees (associate degrees) that provide students with opportunities to transfer to four year-colleges and/or to enter the job market with a higher level of professional qualification and the prospect of more lucrative employment. With average tuition fees being at approximately a third of those at four-year schools (National Association of Community College, 2018) and less stringent admission criteria, community colleges play a crucial role in epistemic access and are often thought of as a “pathway to middle class for low-income individuals” (Scrivener et. al, 2015). A big part of this population is made of “non-traditional-adults, parents, people with full-time jobs, people returning to school after years away” (Carey, 2017). Unfortunately, many students are unable to overcome the roadblocks scattered along this pathway: according to a study published by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2012, less than 30% of the students who enroll in a community college manage to earn an associate degree within four years.

Like other community colleges across the United States, Bronx Community College’s origin and mission can be traced to a demand for access to higher education as a means of socio-economic mobility. This college was founded in 1957 as the result of the political pressure exerted by local community advocacy groups, which demanded the creation of higher learning institutions in the Bronx to meet the growing demand for pathways to

knowledge and socio-economic power. In 1961, BCC became part of the City University of New York (CUNY), one the largest urban university systems in the United States.

The number of full-time equivalent at Bronx Community college was 8,060 in Fall 2013. The racial/ethnic background of the student body was as follows: 61% of the students identify as Hispanic 33% as Black; 3% as White; 3% as Asian/Pacific Islander. In 2012, about 40% of first-time students reported that English was not their first language, and the vast majority of these students were native Spanish speakers. About 20% of all the students enrolled at BCC were born in the Dominican Republic; in addition, a significant number of U.S. born students are of Dominican descent (BCC Office of Institutional Research, personal communication).

Unfortunately, very few of the students who enroll at Bronx Community College are able to earn their college degree. One-year retention rates for the entering class of Fall 2008 was 65%; only 20% of the entering class of Fall 2003 completed their associate degree within six years (BCC Office of Institutional Research, 2011, p. 1). Socio-economic hurdles create a lot of the obstacles students face as they seek to empower themselves with knowledge: 56% of the students have a household income of less than \$20,000, which is way below the cost of living in the New York metropolitan area; 23% are supporting children; 85% of first-time freshmen require developmental instruction in one or more of the following areas: writing, reading, math (BCC Office of Institutional Research, 2010). Addressing structural socio-economic hurdles to learning is unfortunately beyond the sphere of intervention of most teachers and school administrators. Nevertheless, there is a lot educators committed to social change can do to address the role language plays as a gate-keeper to academic success.

6. Linking English and Spanish Academic Literacy Development through a Learning Community

As a teacher of a dominant language (English), a dominant dialect (Standard English), and dominant set of discursive practices (academic literacy) it was clear to me that given such a strong presence of Spanish speakers, finding ways to use this language as resource could do a lot to promote epistemic access at Bronx Community College. Findings based on decades of studies on bilingual education were very clear: literacy acquisition and academic success in an additional language can be greatly facilitated by using the mother tongue as a resource.

The opportunity to use Spanish as a resource in the academic literacy courses that I taught came from the learning community program. Learning communities, as defined by Hanson and Heller (2009), can be described as “small groups of students who take clusters of courses together with both the faculty and the students teaching and learning together” (1). These types of programs “vary from minimal arrangements of linked or clustered classes, to team-taught interdisciplinary programs, to more elaborate models

with designated residence halls, in-house advising, and the ambience of a small college on a large research campus” (Shapiro and Levine, 1999, p. xi). To be successful, they require a high level of curricular integration, which can take the form of common themes, learning activities, projects, and assessment criteria whose goal is to “provide greater coherence, develop a deeper understanding . . . and encourage student-student, student-faculty and faculty-faculty interactions” (Hanson and Heller, 2009: 1).

Learning communities are an ideal pedagogical space for designing mother-tongue based pedagogical solutions that can help mitigate the dire consequences of structural inequality: studies have shown that “students’ socio-economic status had less effect on their achievement gains in schools with collaborative teacher communities” (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006, p. 9). In addition, Mlynarczyk and Babbit (2002) have found that creating a learning community program built around the specific learning needs of speakers of English as an additional language had a positive impact on “retention and graduation rates of ESL students,” and created a special classroom chemistry, enabling students to be more efficient learners” (2002: 73). This “special classroom chemistry” has a lot to do with the fact that integrated active learning within linked clusters promotes meaningful interpersonal interactions that are both social and academic (Tinto, 1975, 1986; Tinto and Goodsell, 1993). “Students from social bonds while discussing academic course materials and working together to succeed on course assignments and exams” (Mlynarczyk and Babbit, 2002: 83). These bonds help students “establish academic and social support networks inside and outside of the classroom,” which make them “more accountable to each other” and “less likely to skip class or arrive unprepared” (Shapiro and Levine, 1999: 4).

Learning communities had been offered at Bronx Community College for several years. Until Fall 2013, however, there were no clusters linking academic literacy development courses in the mother tongue to English academic literacy. This type of link was easy to create. Not only did BCC have a substantial cohort of students who share the same mother tongue, but the Department of Modern Languages already offered Spanish classes for native speakers. These classes were taught as stand-alone courses, though, which did not help students capitalize on the principle of literacy transfer as effectively as a translingual approach based on curricular integration between first and second language development. Also, most BCC students need to fulfill a foreign language requirement in order to graduate, and given that Spanish speaking students are doing the entirety of their course work in a language that is not their mother tongue, it made sense for them to use the foreign language requirement to create a learning situation that was likely to promote academic success in their second language. An additional advantage was that these students were able to receive college credits for the Spanish class at a point in their career where their course options were severely limited by prerequisite requirements they did not meet. Last but not least, this link would not cost the college anything, other than the course release time that is normally given to instructors who participate in a learning community.

7. Impact of the link on academic access

The Spanish-English learning community ran from Fall 2013 to Spring 2016. During this time, a total of 69 students were enrolled in one of the six clusters that were offered. The impact of the link on learning outcomes was assessed through a longitudinal study that comprised both quantitative and qualitative methods: a comparative analysis of academic success metrics and two rounds of in-depth interviews with students who had completed the program. The goal of the quantitative comparative analysis was to answer the following question: did the link have an impact on academic success, as measured by traditional academic success indicators? This quantitative data has been discussed more fully elsewhere (Parmegiani, forthcoming), but in synthesis, the program did have an impact, and this impact was very positive. Students who took an English academic literacy course that was linked to a Spanish course outperformed students who took the same level English course as a stand-alone class. Students in the link were more likely pass their English academic literacy course, get through the required developmental English courses faster, earn college credits more quickly, have higher grades, and stay in school longer.

As promising as these findings are, they cannot be generalized, due to the small number of students in the sample and the fact that students were not randomly assigned to the program. Nevertheless, the higher performance in the linked courses confirm the findings of meta-studies which have looked at decades of research on bilingual education in the United States, which have shown that first and additional language and literacy development are complementary. The fact that the link helped students learn English and access knowledge through this language was also confirmed by the interviews.

Audio-recorded in-depth interviews were carried out in in two phases. The first phase consisted of focus group interviews conducted in Fall 2014, a semester after students enrolled in the first cluster completed the program. The second of phase took place in Fall 2016, three months after the end of the last cluster. The goal of the interviews was to delve deeper into the assessment of the program by asking the stake-holders (the students who took the program) to discuss the role the link played in their ability to access the knowledge they needed to succeed in college.

The students who had agreed to be interviewed were quite unanimous in claiming that the link helped them considerably in overcoming the challenges presented by having to learn through the medium of an additional language, and they provided compelling reasons in support of this claim. In keeping with the recommendations of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2002), I sought to identify thematic patterns in students' discussion of how the link impacted their learning process. These patterns are presented below with a focus on their relevance for epistemic access through an additional language that operates as a dominant code.

Epistemic access through emotional safety.

One of the themes that kept emerging in the interviews was the idea that the mother tongue helped the creation of a safe space that made it easier for students to access knowledge through a dominant code that they did not inherit from birth. Students often referred to this idea with the concept of “being comfortable: they felt more comfortable in the linked courses than they did in the stand-alone classes. Part of this comfort came from the fact that all the students had Spanish as their mother tongue, so they felt like they were “all at the same level.” Throughout our conversations, several students expressed a sense of inadequacy while engaging with academic discourse with native English speakers, especially when they felt that speakers of English as an additional language were a small minority in the classroom. This sense of inadequacy was rooted in assumptions that might not necessarily be true, such as the idea first language English-speakers understand everything the professor says, and that they are invariably more advanced learners. For example, Monica explained to me that she found it difficult to create a support system outside of the learning community because she felt her English skills were inferior:

I tried to make friends in the other classes, but not everybody is at the same level. Maybe it’s because I don’t speak English as well as they do. Sometimes it’s still difficult for me to communicate in English, because sometimes I forget some of the words. Sometimes I listen to the professor and I’m like “oh my God, what is she saying?” But I’m afraid to ask the other students because I’m sure they understand everything and they’d be thinking “oh, why are you such a dummy?”

Sadly, this sense of linguistic inferiority strips students of their right to speech and severely limits their ability to participate in the production of knowledge. Monica, who in my class came across as self-confident and determined, told me that outside of the learning community, she feels “scared” when she asks questions because she feels like she is “the only one who doesn’t understand, and that’s awkward.” Other students have said to me that they often remain silent when they need clarification and in situations when they have something to contribute. “Sometimes I want to say something,” Isis shared with me, “but I don’t know if I can say it correctly so I don’t say anything.” Rosemond reported a similar experience in her economics class: “All the students in my economics class are native English speakers, so I don’t feel free to speak because I think they’re going to laugh. I have a lot of ideas, but I don’t feel comfortable speaking because maybe the professor won’t understand me.”

The repercussions of the fear of being linguistically shamed by their classmates and not understood by their professors should not be underestimated, as they have a silencing effect that is most detrimental for learning outcomes, in terms of language, literacy, and subject-content acquisition, but also self-esteem. If students don’t feel safe asking questions that can help them grapple with new knowledge, they can fall behind and be

more likely to fail and blame themselves; if they don't feel safe sharing with the rest of the class the knowledge they possess for fear of ridicule and embarrassment, they will be more likely to feel that their knowledge has no value and that they are not "at the same level" as everybody else.

Epistemic access through a support system

This sense of comfort and safety that came from learning with students who shared the same mother tongue made it easier for students to bond and build a multifaceted support system that helped them deal with the challenges they faced while acquiring knowledge in an additional language. One facet of the support system took the form of spontaneous peer mentoring. Students felt comfortable asking each other questions and helping each other whenever they didn't understand something. Juana described the process with the following vignette:

you felt comfortable talking because you knew next to you there was somebody who was at the same level, therefore you knew that you could always ask questions. 'Hey this is going to be on the test. Let's look at it together.' Sometimes I would say "Pedro, I understand this," or he would say to me, "I need information on something." Then we would message each other, and that made things a lot less stressful, because classes were difficult. We were able to help each other so much because we spoke the same language.

The support system also made it easier for students not to fall behind in their pursuit of knowledge while juggling multiple responsibilities. Juana recalled that it was very helpful for her to know that if she had to be absent for work or family reasons, she felt safe checking-in with her classmates to catch up. "I could always go up to somebody and ask these sorts of questions: 'Did you go to class? What happened? What did they do? What do they talk about?' That's because we were always connected." In contrast, she felt like outside the learning community students are isolated and have to fend for themselves:

In the other courses, students just sit in class, and when class is over they simply pick up their books and leave. This means you have to go to class even if you're so sick that you feel like you're dying because no one is going to help you make up the work you missed if you were absent.

Epistemic access through the right to speech

According to the students, the ability to use their mother tongue within a translanguaging framework was also crucial for their epistemic access. English was the default language in my academic literacy class, but students had the option to resort to their mother tongue whenever they were unable to express themselves in their additional language, or if they had trouble understanding something. The word translanguaging and the phrase "right

to speech” were not used in the interviews, but every student brought up the idea that being able to use his/her mother tongue as a resource allowed him/her to understand more and say more, and that this was crucial for their ability to learn through an additional language. Jamie found that “it was a good idea” to use his mother tongue as a resource in the academic literacy class “because sometimes you don’t know something in English and you have to say something in Spanish to figure out how to say it.” Clare thought that being able to use her mother tongue was important because “sometimes when you don’t understand the meaning of a word, you just cannot continue with learning.” Just being able to use a word or two in her mother tongue can make the difference between silence and engagement when she grapples with academic discourse in a second language: “at a certain moment, in a certain situation, a student could give up for just a word, but with a word or two in Spanish, the student can move on, say what he has to say and not get lost.”

Epistemic access through vocabulary building

One of the themes that kept emerging in students’ discussions was the idea that using the mother tongue helped them learn new words in their additional language. Viola explained that she feels “more comfortable when the professor gives [her] the meaning of a word in Spanish.” As an example, she mentioned her struggle to understand the meaning of the expression “to take something for granted,” which she just wasn’t able to figure out based on the context.

I didn’t know the meaning of ‘take for granted.’ I heard that many times, even in songs, but didn’t know what it meant. Now I know the meaning of the phrase and I can use it because professor translated from English to Spanish. It’s the best thing a professor can do to improve my English.

This meaning became crystal-clear to her in the ESL class when we juxtaposed this phrase to the Spanish equivalent “dar algo por hecho,” which would literally translate as something like “to give something as done.”

Rosemond mentioned that using Spanish as a frame of reference was very helpful to help her learn how to use coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, which, if used incorrectly, can make the meaning of a sentence fall apart. Because there is a one-to-one correlation between most English and Spanish conjunctions, I provided students with a bilingual list and asked them to practice their use in English sentences. Rosemond thought that “it was a very good idea to give us the translation [of those conjunctions] because sometimes we don’t use those words because we don’t understand what they mean.”

Epistemic access to the usage of power

In the case of Spanish and other Romance languages, the mother tongue can provide a frame of reference by helping students master morpho-syntactic features of standard English usage that can be difficult to appropriate, especially for immigrants who often live and work in communities where a lot of the English that is spoken is of a non-standard variety. When they are not interacting with their professors, my students are likely to be exposed to English varieties that present features that can be traced to African-American, Caribbean, and hybrid urban vernaculars, such as Spanglish. Discrepancies among these features do not constitute an insurmountable obstacle to epistemic access *per se*, as they rarely impede mutual intelligibility. Nevertheless, because of the way dominant codes operate, non-standard language varieties are not considered acceptable as a language of learning and teaching. Consequently, students can be marginalized, if not excluded altogether, from the production of knowledge for slipping into non-standard usage while engaging with academic discourse. It is not unheard of for professors to fail an essay for containing double negatives or verb inflections that mirror the patterns of stigmatized English varieties.

In the academic literacy class, we often used a contrastive approach while reviewing the rules that govern standard English tense construction in order to help students make a distinction between standard and vernacular English usage, so that they can make informed choices according to the expectation of a given linguistic situation. For example, we juxtaposed verb conjugation patterns in Spanish, Standard English, and the urban vernacular varieties students often hear in the Bronx. As a result, students were able to make better sense of the function of verb endings such as “s” at the end of a third person singular in the simple present, or “ed” in the simple present and past participle. In some cases, they were able to establish correlations between these endings, such as “ed,” in English, and either “ado, edo, ido” in Spanish. These correlations provided students with a simple mnemonic anchored in their mother tongue to ascertain whether or not a verb in standard English takes “ed” at the end.

Epistemic access to the literacy of power

In addition to helping students master mechanical aspects of the dominant code, the mother tongue facilitated epistemic access by helping students resolve conflicting rhetorical expectations around academic literacy when they write in a second language. What is considered “effective academic literacy” can vary dramatically from culture to culture, and the consequences of these clashing rhetorical expectations can also marginalize and exclude students from the production of knowledge (Parmegiani 2014a; Parmegiani and Utakis, 2014).

The few studies available on academic literacy practices in the Dominican Republic (Watkins-Goffman and Cummings, 1997; Rubinstein-Avila, 2007; Bartlett and Garcia 2011; Parmegiani and Utakis, 2014) point to the fact that in my students’ country of

origin, academic writing is used primarily as a tool to assess students' ability to repeat information that students acquired from an undisputed source of knowledge. Rhetorical steps such as the articulation of a thesis statement at the beginning of an essay, and the support of a thesis through a selective and critical use of multiple sources are not taught and actually frowned upon. Keeping this in mind makes it easier to understand that students' difficulties with writing in a second language are bigger than the difficulties they experience with their second language itself. Several students told stories about how baffled they were the first time they were asked to write an essay at Bronx Community College, and how stunned they were when they were given a zero for doing what they had been expected to do throughout their primary and secondary education in the Dominican Republic. Ruby's narrative illustrates this point:

In the Dominican Republic we didn't do essays, but we did something similar with a different organization. When teachers gave us a topic, in the introduction we had to explain what we were going to do and what the writing was about. To write the body, we had to find all the information we needed and then make a summary. We could use google search, copy, and paste. In the conclusion, we described everything we did. (. . .) My first essay was a disaster. I didn't know what an essay is, so I copied and pasted the information I found exactly like it was on the internet. When the teacher saw what I did, she gave me a zero.

Juana mentioned that it was extremely helpful for her to discuss rhetorical expectations of a U.S. college essay in her mother in the Spanish class, where students were given plenty of opportunities to engage with academic literacy practices that were new to them, such as the close reading of a text, the articulation of a thesis statement, the support of that thesis through independent research, and the attribution of sources. Being able to explore these practices in her mother tongue made it much easier for her to make sense of what her professors expected when she was asked to write an essay in her second language.

What is really helpful for Hispanic students is to discuss the expectations of an essay in the Spanish class, to be told in their own language how to elaborate because when you receive instructions in your language, even if you're going to write in another language, you understand what you need to do. (. . .) Sometimes when they explain these things to you in English, you get lost.

8. Discussion

The data presented suggests that for the students who were enrolled in the program, linking first and second language academic literacy courses facilitated epistemic access through the appropriation of the dominant code. Students who took an English academic literacy course linked to Spanish outperformed those who took the same English class as a stand-alone course for several reasons. The link provided students

with a pedagogical space where they felt safe to engage in the production of knowledge in their additional language. Given that the additional language in question is a dominant code that has a tendency to silence students who do not inherit it from birth, the creation of this safe space is very significant. Emotional safety made it easier for students to establish a support system among themselves, which played a crucial role in their ability to access knowledge by tapping into the benefits of collaborative learning. The ability to translanguage in the English academic literacy course allowed students to participate more fully in the production of knowledge by making it possible for them to understand more, ask questions and share their own knowledge thanks to the ability to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire. This ability also paved the way for greater epistemic access by helping students crack the dominant code. The ability to use their mother tongue as a frame of reference made it easier for students to make sense of surface standard usage features and rhetorical expectations that are considered fundamental for college academic literacy in English speaking countries.

These findings cannot be generalized because the quantitative study does not meet the requirements of experimental research design: students were not randomly assigned to the learning community and stand-alone courses, nor was there any attempt to control for variables. The qualitative findings were based on a number of students that is way too small to claim that their experience is representative of every single learner who is trying to access college level knowledge through the medium of English as an additional language. Consequently, it cannot be argued that linking first and additional language academic literacy courses would automatically produce the same results in other learning contexts. Nevertheless, the findings do confirm two fundamental facts that have emerged from decades of research on bilingual education: first and second language development are complementary, not mutually exclusive; giving native speakers of marginalized languages the opportunity to develop their mother tongue in schools helps them take ownership of the dominant code and the ability to succeed through this medium.

9. Implications

More studies are needed to ascertain whether linking first and additional language academic literacy courses would lead to such positive learning outcomes in other contexts. These studies should be done. Mother-tongue based learning community programs are easy to design, implement, monitor, and very inexpensive (Parmegiani, 2019). The difference they can make in terms of epistemic access for students who tend to be marginalized by dominant codes is very big. This is particularly true when universities already offer courses in the mother tongues spoken by large segments of the student population, as it is the case with South African universities. If these resources are already in place, it makes sense to tap into the translingual pedagogical synergies that can be activated when first and second language academic literacy courses are linked, as opposed to being offered as stand-alone classes.

Highlighting the link between first and additional language and literacy acquisition makes sense from a political perspective as well. Resistance against the use of minority languages in education, be it related to deplorable xenophobic tendencies or legitimate concerns about appropriating the language of power for socioeconomic mobility, is a reality that needs to be reckoned with in language policy design and implementation. A great deal of this resistance is rooted in the misconception that in order to take ownership of the dominant code, native speakers of marginalized languages need to somehow disown their mother tongue, at least in situations where the type of knowledge that can lead to wealth and status is produced. It might be politically unpalatable to argue that marginalized languages should be used more in education to promote the learning and acquisition of English, but it might be the most effective way to promote additive multilingualism and move beyond the “either or logic” (Alexander, 2003, p. 11) that has trapped the language question in South Africa since the demise of apartheid.

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