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Cultural Capital, Agency, and Voice: Literacy Practices of Middle School English Language Learners

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Abstract

Grounded in cultural capital and agency theory, this study examines two middle school English language learners' (ELLs) participatory behaviors in literacy practices in the U.S. classroom. A closer examination of the ELLs' participatory behaviors through their authentic voices is important to understand the students' literacy development. The purpose of the article is to report on classroom contexts and dynamics where the sixth grade Russian ELLs portray and position themselves while acquiring English literacy skills as new cultural capital. The data sources include formal and informal interviews, classroom observations, and artifacts, including reading and writing projects. Findings suggest that, despite the students' similar background of race, native language, age, gender, and year of U.S. schooling experience, the difference in literacy practice participation was conspicuous. Classroom dynamics that focus on monoculturalism or multiculturalism appear to affect the ELLs' different participatory behaviors and their positioning. The implication of the study is that, instead of lumping the middle school ELLs as one homogeneous group based on their similar backgrounds, educators need to pay more attention to their individual differences. It also offers educators a cultural and social space where they can activate their cultural capital and agency through the literacy activities that invite ELLs' voices into the classroom

Introduction

In this article, I discuss the interconnection among English language learners' (ELLs) agency, identity, and classroom dynamics by reporting on the different participatory behaviors of the two ELLs who have a similar background of race, native language, gender, age, and length of stay in the US. By focusing on the classroom contexts and dynamics where the sixth grade Russian ELLs portray and position themselves while acquiring English literacy skills as new cultural capital, this article aims to assist middle school literacy educators to better serve ELLs through individual approaches for their identity and agency. The research questions that guided the current qualitative study are: 1) How do the middle school ELLs portray themselves when they participate in literacy activities in the classroom? 2) In what way, do the classroom contexts influence the way the middle school ELLs construct voices and position themselves?

The study was built on existing issues of middle school ELLs' language and literacy learning. ELLs who are a fast growing population in the US (Payán & Nettles, 2007), spend much time in the regular classroom. Literacy learning demands for ELLs in the regular middle school classroom are more challenging than the demands for students in elementary school (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). Given that academic content areas in middle school become more complex and abstract, students' native language and cultural references play an important role in their literacy learning and identities. Middle school ELLs' primary language is considered as "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977a), which is defined as "instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed" (p. 488). In short, cultural capital is an instrument that individuals possess and activate. To activate cultural capital, middle school ELLs' agency, which is their motivation for being in action (Johnston, 2004), needs to be considered for their participation in literacy activities.

Over decades, numerous studies (e.g. Cummins, 1984; Escamilla, 1993; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2005; Hakuta, 1986) suggest that ELLs' first language facilitates their literacy learning because it can readily transfer to second language and literacy learning. Although literature addresses the importance of primary language and literacy experiences for ELLs' learning and identities (Freeman & Freeman, 2007; Yoon, 2012), there is a paucity of empirical studies that closely examine how the classroom contexts allow middle grade ELLs to use their primary language and culture and how these contexts influence the way ELLs construct voices and position themselves.

To fill the gap in this area and to better understand the contexts where middle school ELLs are situated, this qualitative case study explores two Russian ELLs' literacy experiences in the U.S. mainstream and English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. In this paper, I particularly focus on the students' literacy experiences in the mainstream context through their authentic voices. I present my study which shows clear differences in the two ELLs' experiences in the U.S. mainstream classroom. The importance of this study is that it discusses cultural capital in a unique way relative to ELLs. The data of this study are drawn from a larger research project on ELLs' participation in literacy activities.

Theoretical Perspectives

The two ELLs' cases are grounded in cultural capital theory by Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b, 1984, 1986, 1989) in order to understand the contexts behind their participation in literacy practices in mainstream culture. The work of French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu greatly influences the areas of language, literacy, and education (Grenfell, 2009). Cultural capital theory's major contribution to the educational field is that it helps us understand educational inequalities.

More specifically, cultural capital is defined as the "instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being

sought and possessed" (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 488). It can be described as a particular knowledge or skill that is legitimate in a given context. For instance, in an English speaking classroom as in the US, English language might be considered as a legitimate symbolic instrument for students to seek and possess. In a Russian speaking mainstream classroom as in Russia, Russian language might be a legitimate tool as cultural capital. This feature shows that cultural capital is not fixed, but fluid. It is "convertible on certain conditions" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Although it might have power in one context, it might not in another context. This theory implies that, based on different contexts, middle school ELLs' knowledge of primary language and literacy might be served either as cultural capital or not for their English literacy learning.

Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital has dynamic characteristics and has been extended to various approaches used by numerous scholars linking it to class or wealth. A large number of studies (e.g., DeGraaf, DeGraaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; Dumais, 2002; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Orr, 2003) confirm that cultural capital is a powerful tool that is accepted in a given context and structure. They suggest that students' cultural capital resources in the home have an impact on school performance, advantaging higher class students (Barone, 2006; Dumais). This implies that students' performance is related to how their home culture matches with dominant school culture.

Although Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital contributes to expand our knowledge of educational inequalities, it has received much criticism because it is extremely deterministic and does not pay a particular attention to individual interactions and agency (Albright & Luke, 2008; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). For instance, Albright and Luke noted that much research suggests that Bourdieu's theory:

Subjugates the human agency and potential of teachers and students. Such a view, further,

does not map handily onto close analyses of discourse interactions and cultural dynamic of schools and classrooms that stress the fractures and gaps in classroom life, the idiosyncratic turns of discourse, and the very possibilities of the remaking of identity, capital, and social relations. (p. 4)

Due to the emphasis on reproductionist characteristics of cultural capital, the part of human agency is rather absent in Bourdieu's theory.

Because of these characteristics of cultural capital theory, this study also builds on agency, which is defined as the desire/motivation of being in action (Johnston, 2004), to understand middle school ELLs' identities and literacy practices. Numerous researchers in the area of second language learning addressed the importance of agency and identity for ELLs' learning (e.g., Block, 2007; Duff, 2002; Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2008; Yoon, 2012). The concept of agency explains that ELLs are not merely passive, but make choices or resist social contexts that limit their choices. The agency account explains that it might be incomplete and simplistic to discuss cultural capital without looking at the process of how middle school ELLs exhibit and enact their agency while they interact with teachers and peers. ELLs' agency, which is portrayed through their positioning in the classroom, can be better understood by how cultural capital is leveraged in the classroom. Although cultural capital has been emphasized as an instrument that is possessed, but not one which can be activated by individuals (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). That is, cultural capital is not only acquired or possessed, it can be constructed, created, and activated by ELLs according to various contexts.

Taken together, cultural capital, agency, and ELLs' literacy practices need to be closely examined in the classroom context and through classroom dynamics. Although cultural capital is fluid and

can be activated in one context instead of another, it has not been widely examined through empirical studies on ELLs in the middle school classroom context. Thus, in this study I observed how the classroom contexts offered or limited the opportunities for middle school ELLs to activate their primary language knowledge and how it influences the way the students construct voices and portray themselves in the classroom. This study contributes to the field by adding the conversation of how cultural capital, student agency, and culturally inclusive pedagogy are an interacting set of factors for ELLs' language and literacy learning.

Method

Participants' Profiles and Classroom Contexts

Emily (pseudonym as all other names), an 11-year-old Russian girl, is in 6th grade in Flint middle school. She has been in the US for one year. At the time of the study, she was in her second school year in the middle school. Emily was adopted when she was nine years old by her current Russian parents. Her mother is an immigrant medical doctor and her father is a manager of a store. Emily said that her birth parents divorced and their grandmother raised them. Under an extremely difficult financial situation, she and her younger sister were brought to an orphanage in Ukraine, in which they went to school for two years. Emily had two years of schooling experience before her current parents brought her and her sister to the US from Ukraine. She mentioned that she learned how to read and write in Russian in the Ukrainian orphanage school. According to Emily, she was an excellent student. In her reading/language arts classroom, that I observed as a researcher, there were 25 students: 20 European American, three African American, one Korean and one Russian (Emily). Emily's reading/language arts teacher is Mr. Smith, who is in his late 20s and has six years of teaching experience. In Emily's ESL classroom, there were 16 students. Emily was in the beginning level of the ESL program.

The other student, Tori, is also an 11-year-old Russian girl. She came to the US about a year ago as Emily did. Tori had three years of schooling experiences in Russia. She came to the US with her mother, who married a Russian man in the US after divorcing her husband. Currently she lives with her stepfather, mother, stepbrother, and brother. Tori's stepfather is a taxi driver and her mother does not have a specific job, but sometimes works part time. As Emily, Tori was in the beginning level of the ESL class. In Tori's reading/language arts classroom, there were 26 students: 18 European American, six African American, one Korean, and one Russian (Tori). Among them, there were six special education students and two ELLs. Tori is one of the two ELLs. Tori's reading/language arts teacher is Mrs. Putnam, who is in her late 40s and has six years of teaching experience. Both Emily and Tori received two periods of the ESL program a day. Outside of these two periods, the students stayed in the mainstream classroom and received the same instruction as the other children.

Data Source and Analysis

As a researcher, I collected data at the Flint Middle School in New York over one semester by visiting the school almost every day. I visited Monday through Friday, staying about one and a half to two hours in Tori's and Emily's class respectively. The school is located in a suburban area and its ethnic make-up is 83% European American, 11.5% African American, 4% Asian, and 1.5% Hispanic. 27% of the students receive free or reduced price meals. The district has 110 ELLs, and Flint Middle School serves 23 ELLs, including those of Bolivian, Chilean, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Nigerian, Pakistani, Puerto Rican, Russian, and Ukrainian descent.

I observed Emily's reading/language arts class which was operated under a two hour block schedule in the morning, followed by Tori's class. The data sources included two formal interviews (one hour in each interview) and several informal interviews with the students, classroom observations, and artifacts including their reading and writing projects. All formal interviews with the students were audiotaped and transcribed

verbatim. After I observed them in their regular classrooms, I observed them again in the ESL class in the afternoon to speculate on the degree of their participation. I also interviewed Emily's and Tori's reading/language arts teachers to triangulate the data about the two ELLs' participation in literacy practices.

My role as an observer differed according to the situation. I functioned as a nonparticipant observer by writing field notes while sitting in the corner of each classroom. However, I was a participating observer when some students asked for help by looking at me and raising their hands while Emily's and Tori's teachers were busy helping other students. I observed Emily and Tori from a distance when they did small-group work or pair work, sitting to the side of the group or pair. Sometimes, I observed them from farther away to watch their participatory behaviors. I also collected the ELLs' projects to triangulate the degree of the students' participation. I audiotaped classroom observations and crosschecked them with the field notes.

Case study method (Yin, 2003) was employed to design the study of Emily and Tori. Yin noted that case study is "the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p. 1). Case study was an appropriate method to investigate the phenomena of how middle school ELLs portray themselves when they participate in literacy activities in the classroom and how the classroom contexts influence the way middle school ELLs position themselves.

With the case study design, I analyzed my data based on Merriam's (2009) case study analysis and Corbin and Strauss's (2008) coding strategies. First, I utilized Merriam's two stages of analysis: the within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis. For within-case analysis, I took the ELLs' cases individually, focusing on their participatory behaviors in the classroom. After each student's case, I began a cross-case analysis in order to build a general pattern of explanation that helped

to account for the two middle school ELLs' cases. During that process, I concentrated on any similarities or differences in their participatory behaviors in relation to the classroom dynamics. To obtain a big picture of my data inductively, I used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open coding system, during which I wrote down anything that came to my mind in pencil while I read each student's interview transcripts. I did this because it helped to ground the analysis thoroughly in the data and helped me to bracket any preconceived assumptions, based on my familiarity with the school and classroom contexts from extensive observation. Then I followed the axial and selective coding process of breaking down, examining, and conceptualizing data. I used the same process with audiotaped observation transcripts as I did with the interview transcripts and found several distinctive categories according to each student's case.

These coding processes were guided by cultural capital and agency theory. These categories of classroom dynamics and ELLs' participatory behaviors in literacy practices based on cultural capital and agency theory include: "little space for ELLs' native language as activated cultural capital," "ELLs' recognition of English language as a legitimate cultural capital," and "inhibited agency under hidden power." The observation data of the students' participation was constantly analyzed by comparing it with the interview data. To ensure the reliability of these categories, two other coders, who are also qualitative researchers and have experiences in case study methods, read the transcripts of the current data. Both of them consistently coded the data with the same codes.

Limitations

Due to my daily scheduling, I observed the ELLs only in the English language arts class and in the ESL class. It is unclear how the students would position themselves in the other content area classes, including math or science, with different characteristics of content from English language arts. To view the ELLs' participatory behaviors in relation to classroom dynamics more clearly, the observation of the students in the other content

area classes is necessary to triangulate the data of the middle school ELLs.

Findings

The two middle school students, who have the same ethnic background (Russian), first language (Russian), and length of stay (one year) in the US, showed a drastically different level of participatory behaviors in the classroom. I will discuss the answer to the two research questions focusing on the classroom contexts and dynamics that might have influenced the students' positioning of themselves as active or passive. The specific examples to support these themes are provided starting with Emily in each section, followed by Tori.

Classroom Contexts and ELLs' Participation

Emily's classroom dynamics are shown through much discussion with an emphasis on American culture. American monoculturalism was often promoted by using popular culture. In this context, there was little space for Emily to use her Russian language and cultural reference as her cultural capital and she struggled to claim academic identity as a strong student.

More specifically, in Emily's class, a number of whole-group or small-group discussions were conducted throughout the semester. Discussion-based approaches with a focus on American culture, including television shows and football games, were emphasized. For instance, Emily did not participate when American football games were brought up by Emily's teacher for a whole group discussion. She said that she did not have time to watch television programs due to her heavy load of homework every day. Emily was also quiet when American culture was introduced with supplementary materials, such as a local newspaper and a magazine for middle school students.

Another example also shows Emily's struggles in trying to be a strong student. Emily's teacher started a discussion by asking his students in his

reading class on a Monday morning, “Did you read Sunday’s paper?” Many of his students shared what they read. Several students talked about “abuse.” The issue of domestic abuse was actively discussed by the students. However, Emily did not participate in the dialogue. She appeared puzzled while listening to her classmates. In an interview with me, Emily asked, “What is the Sunday’s paper?”

Along with this example, Emily also had difficulties in participating in literacy practices. In Emily’s reading class, students were encouraged to bring in bottle caps from popular beverages because they contained “facts” on the flipside. The students who brought the caps could read the facts to the whole class. The caps had statements including, “Hawaii is the only U.S. state that grows coffee,” and “The state of Maine has 62 lighthouses.” Although many of the students did have opportunities to share the facts with their classmates, Emily had no opportunity to read in front of her classmates over the semester. During my observation, she had never brought in any caps. She mentioned she had never drunk the beverages from which the caps came. The unintentional consequence of using American cultural references was that it disengaged Emily from the lessons. Emily did not have opportunities to share her own native cultural references where American cultural references were stressed.

Emily’s positioning of herself and her participatory behaviors are also related to the interaction with mainstream peers. The mainstream students were highly interactive with one another, but exhibited their hidden power. In this context, Emily’s agency was often prohibited by the mainstream power. Emily looked nervous and uneasy throughout the semester. She rarely presented her ideas in whole-class discussions. Even when she did, she spoke with a soft voice. While many of her American peers exchanged their ideas as they sat on a rug, Emily usually listened at her desk without joining them. Mainstream peers’ hidden power over Emily seems to influence her participation in literacy practices. For instance, Emily could not write a

sentence about an Egyptian leader, but nobody seemed to care about her difficulties. When Emily showed her frustration by saying, “I could not follow you,” one of the American girls said bluntly, “You didn’t say you didn’t understand,” as if blaming Emily for not being able to follow the conversation. Emily did not challenge her status as an incapable student and remained quiet. She looked powerless. During the break, while most of the students went out to the restrooms, she approached me in the corner and disclosed her resentment by saying, “I don’t like this group.” She did not show her anger to the group but rather suppressed it. This incident shows that she sensed the mainstream students’ hidden power over her.

Emily was usually viewed as an unwelcome partner. Another student sitting next to her usually went to work with other peers. Emily was usually unable to find a partner, and she often worked with special education students or the students who did not associate with other mainstream peers. Aside from the classroom, she also felt unwelcome outside the classroom. For example, in an interview, she mentioned that one boy in the reading class kept calling on her “Hey Russian, sit down” when they were on a school bus. In sum, Emily’s attempts to participate in literacy activities were often inhibited by the mainstream students’ hidden power both inside and outside the mainstream classroom.

Compared to Emily’s classroom, Tori’s classroom showed different dynamics. In Tori’s reading/language arts class, many multicultural activities were conducted by celebrating ELLs’ cultural and linguistic differences. In this context, Tori portrayed herself as an active participant in literacy practices. In the beginning of the year, she was usually quiet. However, as the days went by, she looked more comfortable and confident. It appears that Tori’s reading teacher and her classmates seemed to influence her positioning of herself as engaged and confident in the classroom.

For instance, Tori’s reading teacher was reading the book, *The Leaving Morning* (Johnson, 1992), to class as an example of including feelings in

students' writing. The picture book was about a boy's sorrow and anxiety to leave his house for a new home. Noticing that Tori was quiet, the teacher invited her to share her feelings by saying: "Do you want to share, Tori? How did you feel when you moved from Russia to the United States?" Tori answered, "I was OK. I wasn't scared." The reading teacher responded to her with a smile, "Wow, you're so brave." Tori accepted the teacher's invitation, and she was not afraid to express her opinion that moving from Russia to the U.S.A. was an intimidating event.

Not only the teacher, but Tori's classmates appeared to influence the way she positions herself as well. Because Tori had to go to the ESL class in the middle of the two-hour block class, she missed many lessons. But her partner, sitting next to her, often reminded the teacher of what she missed. Tori's response about her classmates is positive: "They are friendly and nice. Even though they don't understand me, they say, it's OK. They don't laugh at me." Tori's response about the peers in her class contrasted with Emily's response about the peers in her class.

Tori's comfort level was observed in her active participation in literacy activities. As noted earlier, she was usually quiet in the beginning of the year. However, as the semester passed by, she frequently raised her hand to present her own ideas. Sometimes, she almost stood up from the chair, waving her hand, to be called on by the reading teacher. For example, Tori shared her writing about her mother. Tori read her story about how her mother screamed at her because Tori did not want to eat too much, so she could keep her slim body. Her mother was concerned because she thought that she only cared about her appearance and not her health. In class, Tori also shared her story about her grandmother, in Russia, who cried whenever she talked with her on the phone.

As shown in the examples above, both Emily's and Tori's classroom dynamics and their participatory behaviors and positioning are different. In Emily's class, there was little space for her to use her primary language and cultural

references as her cultural capital. In Tori's class, however, there were some culturally inclusive activities for Tori to be able to use her cultural references. However, my observation data does not show that the students' primary language, Russian, was activated as cultural capital to facilitate their language and literacy learning in either classroom context.

Recognition of Mainstream Discourse as Cultural Capital

The level of recognition of regular classes as cultural capital was different for Emily and Tori. Compared to Tori, Emily, who was in the mainstream context where monoculturalism was promoted, appeared to recognize English language and literacy more as cultural capital that she has to seek. This finding suggests that individual students' agency to choose and seek certain discourses is interactive with the cultural capital they possess.

For example, Emily often resisted going to ESL class because she did not value her learning in the ESL classroom as her cultural capital. Emily acknowledges that the content areas in the regular classroom are more important than her learning in the ESL classroom. In an interview with me, she said "I don't like ESL because I have to skip social studies, ELA, and reading." Although she mentioned that she feels "more comfortable in the ESL classroom," she resisted going to ESL class by valuing the regular classes' content areas more than ESL class.

Another example also shows Emily's recognition of English as legitimate cultural capital. She said in an interview with me: "When I speak with someone, I'm not very good. They are like, 'don't you understand what I'm talking about?' I feel very bad... I'm angry about myself."

These statements show that, rather than attributing the mainstream peers' misunderstanding of her point in English, she blamed herself. This finding indicates that Emily seems to recognize English as cultural capital, which has

power in the mainstream culture, and she has to use it “properly” to be understood.

Her recognition of English as legitimate cultural capital is also shown in her writing sample. She said to me that she could write the story that she wrote better in the Russian language, but turned it in English to her teacher. Her story starts:

I went to the Fantasy Island with
my Friends we have Fun. We play
games And I won. In sekend week
I lost And I don't know want way
to go Than I Found Them And
we go home.

As her sample writing shows, the story line is simple with few details and with issues of spelling, convention, and tense. Although she seems to struggle with her English, she resists going to ESL class where she can receive additional support for it. She feels that being mainstreamed is her priority and ESL class is unnecessary for the process.

Compared to Emily, Tori, who was in the classroom context where multicultural approaches are often conducted, did not show any difference between her value of learning in the regular classroom and her ESL classroom. My data does not show that Tori resisted going to ESL class as Emily does. Based on my observation over one semester, Tori seemed to feel comfortable in both classes, in the regular class and ESL class, by raising her hands to actively participate in literacy practices. When I asked her whether she has any difficulties in learning English, she replied: “No, I just feel learning better.” Tori also added the reason that she does her school work:

I have to do the homework. If I
haven't done it, teacher will call
my mom and I'll get in trouble at
home...I just don't want teachers
to call my mom...I think I'm a
good student because teachers
never called my mom.

Tori does not show any resistance to complete her work both in the regular class and in the ESL class. Although her desire to complete her homework is to escape from trouble which might cause her mother to receive a call from school, this finding shows that she recognizes the value of both classes.

Tori's writing sample below illustrates her confidence in creating a story. Based on my observation, it did not take more than 20 minutes for her to construct the story. Her story starts:

Emergency! Fire! “Run, Fire!”
said Kattie. They pick their stuff
quickly and leave their home.
Kattie, Will, and Jessica live in
Florida in small town in Nice
huge house. Kattie smells smoke
And go around the house. “Mom,
I smell fire” said Will. They take
their stuff and run from the
house. They was for 1 meter away
then more and more, after 10
minutes they was for mile away
and the house blow up! They look
back and all said “we happy that
we safe our life”, “they never
came back to their town
anymore!” The End

Although this story line is simple, her writing is more descriptive and detailed with a beginning and ending, compared to Emily's writing sample.

In sum, both Emily and Tori showed recognition of dominant culture and language as the cultural capital they were seeking, but Emily's case was much stronger than Tori's in her resisting of the value of learning in her ESL class. My interview and observation data do not suggest that the students raised any questions of the (non)use of primary language for their second language and literacy development.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through the lens of cultural capital and agency, I reported on two middle school ELLs' participatory behaviors with relation to classroom dynamics and contexts. Although the factors that influence the ELLs' participation in literacy practices are complicated and cannot be explained with one single feature, this study suggests that classroom dynamics might affect the ELLs' voices, participatory behaviors, and their positioning of themselves as passive or active. The classroom dynamics that focus on culturally inclusive or non-inclusive pedagogy are important aspects that middle school educators should consider on the development of student agency and engagement. These findings provide important implications for literacy educators to assist middle school ELLs to construct and reconstruct their own voice for their literacy, identity, and agency development.

First, literacy teaching and learning for middle school ELLs can be examined through the concept of cultural capital and classroom dynamics. Without looking at the classroom contexts, educators might assume that Emily's struggle in the mainstream classroom is due to her lack of schooling experience (a total of two years) in her native country. According to Bourdieu's (1977a) reproductionist perspective, it can be viewed that compared to Tori, Emily lacks her cultural capital, which is the accumulated symbolic knowledge that she can use in her mainstream contexts. That Emily's schooling experience in her native country is shorter than Tori's and that she has a lack of family support, by being raised in an orphanage setting, might account for her struggles in the reading/language arts class in the U.S. classroom. Based on the reproductionist perspectives of cultural capital, it might be an important factor to consider.

However, when we examine Emily's participation in learning activities from mainstream contexts, it becomes more complex and provides insights to consider ideology as another important factor. As shown in the data, the middle school classroom dynamics were uniquely different between Emily's and Tori's classes. The classroom

dynamics are a crucial aspect to consider as shown through Bourdieu's (1977b, 1986) habitus and field concepts. He noted that cultural capital reflects habitual practices (Bourdieu, 1986). Specifically speaking, habitus is "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 82). A field is a "configuration of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions" (Bourdieu, 1992, pp. 72-73).

In other words, field is defined as a relational network among individuals. The relationship between habitus and field is a two-way, but not a one-way relationship. The field exists mainly as social agents possess the dispositions that are essential to constitute that field. For example, as shown in Emily's class, American teachers and students might possess the dispositions and the ideologies toward American monoculturalism which might have established over time. American monoculturalism might influence teachers' practices and students' interactions with ELLs in middle school. The dispositions and ideologies influence the network and practice among social agents as illustrated in the interaction with Emily and Tori with their peers and teachers. In short, habitus manifests the structures of the field, and the field mediates between habitus and practice. ELLs learn through continuous cultural and social practice within classroom communities (Lave, 1996; Niesz, 2010; Wenger, 1998).

The other important aspect for the literacy educator to consider for middle school ELLs' learning is the interconnection among ELLs' agency, identity, and classroom dynamics. As shown in the current study, compared to Tori's, Emily's agency to be involved in learning activities did not activate well in the mainstream context when hidden power was enacted. That is, the study shows that the classroom dynamics might constrain the student's agency and voice. It shows that agency is "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112), rather than the isolated fixed act. Agency enables middle school ELLs to create new identities as strong or

poor students. It can also enable ELLs to resist certain literacy practices or behaviors leading to other identities, such as passive or active students, as shown in the data of this study. As Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) point out, ELLs' language and literacy learning depends on the students' agency and social structures.

The concept of agency is also closely related to middle school ELLs' identities, which are constructed and reconstructed based on the classroom contexts and dynamics. According to Norton (2000), identity is "understood with reference to larger, and more frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction" (p. 5). Under the mainstream context where Emily is the only Russian student in her classroom and where her native language was not promoted, there was little space for the student to choose and construct her identity as a strong Russian student. In the mainstream context where the cultural inclusivity approach was promoted as in Tori's class, there was room for the student to behave and participate in literacy activities in a more active manner. The study provides an important insight on the differential effects of culturally inclusive or non-inclusive pedagogy on the development of ELLs' agency and engagement, and how that can influence the development of the ELLs' cultural capital.

This study clearly illustrates how individual ELLs' identities as powerful or powerless are closely linked with the mainstream power structure and with certain ideologies that are promoted by classroom instruction and interaction. It shows that ELLs' identities are not personal, but social (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008). Identity is closely related to ELLs' positioning (Moje & Luke, 2009; Yoon, 2012) and is "a dynamic and shifting nexus of multiple subject positions" (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 35) as shown in the current study.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of cultural capital and agency provides insightful ideas for understanding middle grade ELLs in classroom contexts where certain ideologies are

being leveraged. Despite the similar background of the two Russian middle school students, their construction of identities is presented in a different way. The implication of the study is that literacy teachers and teacher educators need to pay more attention to the individual ELLs' differences, rather than viewing them as a homogenous group, and more attention to cultural capital, that includes the first language and literacy knowledge. Since ELLs are active in constructing their multiple identities through the process of literacy learning (Yoon, 2012), it is crucial to look at the classroom dynamics that are related to ELLs' literacy practices, agency, and voice. Given that middle grade ELLs are more conscious of peer pressure and identity than very young children (Brown, 1987) and they "undergo distinctive changes from the ways of their earlier childhood" (Stevenson & Bishop, 2012, p. 41), middle school teachers might need to consider the students' agency and empowerment for their literacy development.

As numerous studies show (e.g., Gee, 1996; Yoon, 2012), individuals need to be recognized and accepted as group members in order for them to become active participants in learning. Middle school literacy educators might need to consider how to promote interaction between mainstream peers and ELLs and how to activate ELLs' agency to be engaged in learning. Given that "networks of relationships are a resource that can facilitate access to other resources of value to individuals or groups for a specific purpose" (Balatti & Falk, 2002, p. 282), middle school literacy educators' attempt to promote the relationship between mainstream peers and ELLs is important. Indeed, the study demonstrates that agency, cultural capital, voice, and classroom dynamics need to be understood together and at the same time rather than separately. ❖

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