

Negotiating the “ideal immigrant:” A microanalysis of email exchanges between a Latina adult
and newcomer student.

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Abstract

This paper provides analysis of a series of email correspondences between a secondary newcomer Latina and a Latina business professional within the same urban community. It chronicles an attempt to sidestep the limits of school-based discourses via email and put a student in direct contact with a mature, successful practitioner of English. After an initial, highly stylized message from the mentor is met with a much more basic written response from the student, the mentor drastically reduces her output. This withdrawal allows the student space to exercise her own identity as a *mexicana* with aspirations rooted in familiar cultural spaces. In constructing these responses, the student relies consistently on appropriation of the mentor’s language, yet shifts that language in ways that continue to affirm her sociocultural identity and educational project. Paradoxically, these expressions of voice and agency draw the mentor back into conversation, and a tentative dialogue is mutually constructed.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, computer-mediated communications, second language acquisition, Latino newcomer students, mentoring

Word count: 8849

Introduction

The impetus for this research project arose from a confluence of data sources that pertain to the lives of late arrival, or “newcomer” secondary English Language Learners in Texas public schools. Demographic projections of current and future school-aged populations depict a society that is undergoing rapid and dramatic change, highlighting the need to examine current instructional practices and societal perspectives, and to seek more effective ways to serve increasing numbers of secondary ELLs before they leave formal schooling programs (Callahan, 2005; Capps et al., 2005; Fry, 2005a; Fry, 2005b). Ethnographies of the schooling lives of immigrant secondary students attest to their isolation from academically challenging culturally relevant curricula, and to the destructive processes of Americanization that they endure as they are framed as marginal members of the wider society (Bettie, 2003; Olsen, 1997; Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Given the factors depicted above, I attempted to construct, then examine, an educational experience for newcomer students that would sidestep the normalized and normalizing discourses of secondary ELL instruction. Heeding Gee’s call for “language apprenticeships” with discourses of power as a vehicle for language acquisition for marginalized students (1990), I connected students with business professionals in the local community via email. This decision was bolstered by research that had demonstrated a higher degree of tolerance for grammatical irregularity among non-educator professionals, especially among multilingual business professionals, as long as the intent behind communications was clear (Gray & Heuser, 2003; Hairston, 1981). I further stipulated the need for Latino business professionals, hoping to avoid deficit perspectives of Latinos and culturally subtractive models for “becoming American” (Olsen, 1997). Because many of the adult participants were non-native speakers, readers, and

writers of English, I hoped they would extend latitude to their student partners as co-communicators in the global lingua franca of English (Cliett, 2003).

Email is a hybrid language medium, displaying some conventions familiar to both oral and written communications. These traits of email-based communications matched well with the second-year students’ emerging social and academic fluencies. Moreover, through emoticons, abbreviations, embedded images, and flexibility in spelling, capitalization, and sentence construction, email allows for a flexibility not normally tolerated in traditional paper-and-pencil work (Grosvenor, 1998; Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004).

This paper presents a case study of one of the 13 paired exchanges. The exchange is notable for the evidence of identity work and language appropriation within both partners’ messages. The case offers evidence of the fertile ground that email offers newcomer students as a non-threatening space for language and identity exploration within authentic language tasks. In this case, the mentor Anne found that her anachronistically stylized invitation to a refined exchange was met with a much more basic written response from her partner Maricruz – a response entirely befitting a new practitioner of English. In the follow-up email to Maricruz, Anne drastically scaled back not only the word count but the informational content, and resorted to a rapid-fire series of questions. This withdrawal allowed Maricruz space to exercise her own identity construction as a *mexicana* with aspirations rooted in family and familiar cultural spaces. In constructing these responses, Maricruz consistently employed appropriation of Anne’s language, yet shifted that language in ways that affirmed her own sociocultural identity and offered rejoinders to Anne’s cultural assumptions (Bakhtin, 1981; Prior, 2001). Paradoxically, Anne then became the appropriator of Maricruz’s *mexicana*-based discourse, this time shaping it to a more nostalgic look at her own youth in Mexico. Together, they found a joint space of shared identity. What appeared to be a promising restart to their communications was abruptly

dashed when they met face-to-face for the first time; Anne levied harsh judgments based upon Maricruz’s (nonvirtual) public persona, and upon her lack of knowledge about concrete steps to build her social and linguistic capital in their community. Though Maricruz was willing to continue correspondence, Anne’s overt displeasure led me as the project supervisor to discourage further, unsupervised communications upon the project’s conclusion; my concerns rested with Maricruz’s overall well-being but were particularly oriented toward not calling unwanted attention to her status as an undocumented resident of the U.S.

Despite the ultimately negative outcome of this pairing, within a wave of newcomer academy development steered toward their isolation (Boyson & Short, 2004), and in an era of test-driven instruction for ELLs (Solórzano, 2008), this project highlights the linguistic dexterity and communicative potential of newcomer students when provided naturalistic communication domains.

Theoretical Framework /Literature Review

The theoretical foundations of this project rest upon the tenets of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which posits that there exist discourses of power in equitably structured societies that remain exclusive to privileged users, who also both consciously and subconsciously monitor and maintain this exclusivity through judgments of “correctness” and “appropriateness” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1999; Wodak, 2004) These discourses retain their hegemonic control through the distribution of norms of usage, often through schools, that simultaneously favor the “native” users of these discourses while co-opting other, “non-native” users in negative judgments of their own discourse patterns and preferences. As an all-too-common example of this phenomenon, ELLs in U.S. schools often come to view

their own inflected English as “inferior,” or “wrong,” rather than as indicative of their joining a community of practitioners of diverse and flexible World Englishes (Cliett, 2003).

The era of high-stakes accountability for schools, by shifting instruction to test-based practice and review, has placed further constraints on the types of language that English Language Learners receive exposure to and offers feedback in the form of unnuanced judgments of correctness (McNeil, 2004; Solórzano, 2008; Valenzuela, 2004). Coupled with this truncated version of language use is a somewhat contradictory push for higher standards of language production for ELLs couched as “academic English” (Scarcella, 2003; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007) On the one hand, while students in schools experience sooner and greater immersion in the language of standardized testing, the burden falls to them to do “double the work” to meet these idealized standards (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

The framing of late arrival ELLs as in need of remediation gains power from the students’ own skin colors and languages of origin, which fit them into a long history of deficit views of non-white, non-mainstream cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). All the while, the project of teaching English is portrayed and defended as a politically neutral, race-blind, color-blind activity (Larsen-Freeman, 2002).

To combat these hegemonic moves, the emancipatory agenda of CDA is bolstered by two features of discourses as they operate in societies: first, discourses are fluid and ever-evolving. Examples abound of innovation in discourses arising within marginalized communities that gain broad acceptance and cachet, even in exclusive discourse communities (Hall, 2002; Smitherman, 2000). Second, discourses can be subject to analysis that reveal the underlying ideological stances of users and expose inequity, prejudice, and contradiction.

As a highly flexible, uncanonized medium, email was deliberately chosen for the paired communications (Grosvenor, 1998; Thurlow et al., 2004). Email demonstrates a combination of features normally residing within the realm of either oral discourse patterns or written composition, as well as features such as emoticons, abbreviations, and alternate spellings that originated in the domains of CMCs but are rapidly evolving via various electronic media (personal computers, PDAs, and smartphones) (Grosvenor, 1998; Thorne & Payne, 2005). The amorphous discursive styles within CMCs, and the prioritization of efficiency of expression over grammar, accorded well with the students’ emerging expressive abilities in English; as second-year students in the United States, they typically had a stronger proficiency in oral communication than written, yet the demand for stronger written expression loomed large in their last year of studies in the newcomer program, and in their final year of exemption from high-stakes exams. Email was conceptualized for this study as a useful transitional medium from predominantly oral discursive styles to developing stronger written expressive skills. Email is also a potentially hybrid territory in the political sense in that the virtual world of computer-mediated communication allows for the recreation of self and the presentation of a persona of one’s own choosing (Lam, 2000; Thurlow et al., 2004)

Email literacy has also emerged as a vital literacy unto its own, with powerful ramifications in social and professional lives (Thorne & Payne, 2005). As well as a mandatory mode of communication within the professional classes, many multinational students currently use email as an important link to fellow expatriates in the U.S. as well as to family and friends in their home countries (Suárez-Orosco & Suárez-Orosco, 2001). In this case, students used the terrain of email to accomplish two less familiar tasks: establishing direct contact with a member of the professional class of their urban community, thereby eroding some of the physical and

psychological isolation they experience from this sector of society (Orfield, Frankenburg, & Lee, 2003); and attempting written communication in English, not for the sake of a workbook-based exercise, but with personal import.

The final element in the conceptual framework was the role of the instructor in assisting students in the deciphering of adult messages and in the production of their own. The actual texts of the business professionals’ messages to students were used in the classroom as vehicles for explicit language instruction. These messages substituted for the more typical controlled, sequential, and abstract language of textbooks, workbooks, and pedagogical guides. Whole-class and individual conversations with students about their messages to the business partners focused less on correctness as judged against a codified rule of grammar and more on the clarity of messages and the avoidance of syntax that could sacrifice meaning. When possible and appropriate, features of these texts were examined for their potential ramifications in an ideology-laced world—in other words, to conduct what Fairclough calls “critical language awareness” (1995).

Methodology

Students in a second-year (10th grade) Social Studies class were paired with mentors of the same gender and based upon career and personal interest inventories. 13 of the students were Latino and were paired with Latino business professionals and university graduates in the urban area. All of the adults were naturalized American citizens or first-generation American-born; their proximity to Latino immigrant experiences was a key factor in their selection, as I was striving for high degrees of shared understandings within the pairs of sociocultural and linguistic practices (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). The adults followed district protocols in submitting to police background checks and undergoing formal mentor training. Students were assigned gmail

accounts (www.gmail.com) with anonymous address names; during practice sessions, students became familiar with the features of gmail, as well as the forms of oversight that the accounts would receive. (At the conclusion of the project, the researcher, with parent permission, created new, entirely private accounts for all students who had received parent or guardian permission.)

The project launched in October 2006 with the first message composed by the adult to the student partner. Therein ensued a cycle of exchanges that occurred approximately once every two weeks through the month of December. In January of 2007, a face-to-face gathering was arranged for all participants at the school site.

Data collected for analysis consisted of copies of all email exchanges, contextualized by biographical data gathered for all participants, records of whole-group and individual instruction on email composition, researcher field notes on class activities, including the face-to-face gathering, analytic notes, and transcripts of semi-structured interviews that took place with purposively selected pairs midway through the project and at its conclusion (Patton, 1990). Anne and Maricruz were one of the pairs selected based upon their “information-rich” communications and upon Maricruz’s relative independence in composing messages (p. 169).

Analysis

The field of critical discourse analysis offers a multitude of methodological approaches that reflect its applications in the varied realms of mass media, political speeches, legislative rulings, educational institutions, high-tech businesses, and domestic conversations, to name a few (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Gee, 1999; Rogers, 2004; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Though scholars have not arrived at a canonical set of procedures for critical discourse analysis (and indeed, many resist calls for standardization given the contingencies inherent within all discursive moments), key to all approaches is a constant interplay between discreet bits of

language and the ever-shifting, ongoing context of language production as well as commitment to the social project of bringing to light inequitable distributions of power and knowledge (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1999; Wodak, 2004). By focusing on the micro-details of human linguistic interactions, critical discourse analysis can attend to both language-in-action and the active use of social constructs, including their acceptance, resistance, and innovation.

Email texts from all participants received an initial, cursory analysis for the primary purpose of aiding the comprehension and production of email messages by the students. In this analysis, I recorded marginal notes that gave contextual information about the composition of individual messages, such as the affect of the student, summaries of conversations, and the sources of assistance received (from peer, adult, dictionary, or online translator). I reflected on student responses to adult questions or themes. For the purposes of instruction, I noted constructions that seemed particularly challenging as well as advances that had been made in written fluency.

Upon conclusion of the email project, beginning in February 2007, the entire corpus of email messages and supporting data underwent a second round of analysis in which I added contextual data from the composition sessions, the face-to-face meetings, and the post hoc interviews.

The email messages were first reorganized into “lines,” units typically smaller than the sentence level, composed of salient pieces of information (Gee, 1999). I followed the method of line division recommended by Susanna Sotillo who, in analyzing asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated communications of ESL students, suggested looking beneath a T-unit level of analysis in order to more effectively examine syntactic complexity (Sotillo, 2000). Like

Sotillo, I saw the benefit of looking more closely at subordinate and phrasal clauses in order to observe the variety of clausal uses and whether there would be changes in this variety over the course of the study. Therefore, I determined to insert line breaks with each verbal unit (those that involve an active, passive, imperative, gerund, or infinitive verb form) or prepositional phrase.

The analysis thereupon proceeded in three phrases. In the first phase, I concentrated on the individual as the unit of analysis. By looking at verbal structures, word choices and collocations, clausal relationships, and knowledge claims, I arrived at initial hypotheses of socially-situated identities and underlying ideological orientations, as well as shifts in socially-situated identity, over the course of the communications (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1999; Johnstone, 2002).

In the second phase of analysis, I looked at the messages as dyadic structures, exploring the interplay between the two correspondents. This analysis included examination of surface-level features of language, such as instances where one correspondent was directly addressing the other through questions and answers, imperatives, or threads of conversational topics that were deliberately passed back and forth between the two. I also looked beneath surface-level readings to examine instances of silence, when questions were not answered, imperatives not addressed, and where conversational threads were discontinued. Moreover, I identified instances of language appropriation, when a partner (typically the student, though not always) mirrored the exact language, a close approximation, or a stylistic structure from the other (Bakhtin, 1981). This phase of analysis enhanced the situational nature of identity construction and presentation, and illuminated changes in the partners' expressive repertoires.

In the third phase of analysis, I imported email messages into TAMS analyzer, an open source product for ethnographic and discourse analysis (<http://tamsys.sourceforge.net/>)

(Weinstein, 2004). Using TAMS analyzer permitted the assembling of like-coded language from across messages in order to give a holistic view of similarly-coded material, and in order to see instances of appropriation side-by-side with the original statements.

Through all phases of analysis, I continuously moved back and forth between microtextual analysis, the larger bodies of text, and the contexts of text production. “These steps are taken several times, always coming and going between text, ethnography, theories, and analysis. Most importantly, the decisions that are constantly required in the analysis have to be made explicit and justified” (Wodak, 2004, p. 210). In this regard, the descriptive and analytic notes, and the interview transcripts and corresponding notes, were instrumental in performing micro-textual analyses.

Findings

The mentor, Anne, was a 46 year old female born to a Mexican father and a (White) Canadian mother. Resisting simple ethnic or country-of-origin modifiers, she indicated her heritage as “Mexican,” “Latin-American,” “Nordic,” “Scandinavian,” “Spanish,” “French,” and “Caucasian born in Mexico” (Interview, November 14, 2006). She was raised primarily in Mexico City but had short stints as a child living in Boston and Montreal. She attended private schools and university in Mexico City. Married to an American, she has resided permanently in the United States since 1990.

Anne worked in the past for the Mexican Foreign Service in the United States helping recent immigrant families adjust to American cultural norms and rules. She fulfilled a longtime ambition of obtaining her Ph.D. in Business Administration (in the U.S.) and at the time of the study served as a professor for an M.B.A. program that relied heavily on Internet-based media for course materials and communication. Working primarily from home, Anne used email daily

in both English and Spanish for work and personal communication. She did not send text messages via a cellphone or PDA.

Though Anne was easily described as a fluent, confident speaker and writer of English, her oral and written communications in English did carry some traces of Spanish grammar and syntax. Most notably, in her email messages she periodically elided the subject noun of sentences, as she would have in Spanish since the verb carries the subject noun marker.

Maricruz at the time of the study had just turned 17; born in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, she had been in the United States for nearly two years. Her father had been in this country for 11 years and her mother joined him six years later. With the departure of her mother, Maricruz and her younger brother were cared for by her grandmother until her parents could bring them over.

Unlike many NHS students, particularly those in their second year, Maricruz did not hold a job outside of school. In school, she tended to be quiet and diligent in her studies; she had long, straight black hair that she sometimes used to shield her face. Though she rarely volunteered information in class, when called on by a teacher, she provided responses that were usually correct and often well-reasoned in their judgment. Words of praise from a teacher would elicit a slight smile. Maricruz’s course grades hovered in the 80-to-90 range but perhaps due to her shyness, teachers rated her as “Beginning” in her oral and written language performance.

Anne’s initial sentence provides a rich entry into her vision of the virtual relationship and its correspondence to her identity presentation:

Since we are embarking on this journey together and in the hope we can be good pen
(email) pals let me tell you a little about myself.

Parsed into lines (Fig. 1), the opening includes rhetorical tactics and several metaphors that invite examination.

[Insert Fig. 1 here]

Lines 1-4 contain two subordinate clauses; as rhetorical embellishments, they delay Anne’s first direct words to Maricruz in line 5. Line 5, a polite imperative, serves to keep Anne in the foreground as the object of interest. Taken together, this opening suggests the discursive style of a formal letter, of one “person of letters” addressing another formally while attempting to establish a tentative solidarity. Nostalgia and a sense of romance are reinforced by the nautical metaphor of the two “embarking on a journey” together; the anachronism can be highlighted through comparison to a more current metaphor such as “traveling on the information superhighway.” Anne does not ascribe to their communications an immediate relationship, just an expressed “hope” for one. Contributing to the antiquated effect of the metaphor is the invocation of the term “pen pal;” in fact, she subordinates the more accurate description of an “email pal” to parentheses. Not surprisingly, because this is a new experience, Anne looks back in her cultural repertoire to pen pal experiences from her youth, using language that evokes for her an ideal cultural model of communication—sophisticated and elegant, with a balance of formality and a hint of future intimacy.

Anne proceeds in this message by providing details about her life experiences. She contrasts the difficulty of living in Boston as an immigrant youth with the joys of cosmopolitan Mexico City, and how the latter experience prepared her to be a curious traveler and observer of the world.

In the closing, Anne sets up her own letter as an exemplar for Maricruz, framing several questions that echo the order of her own exposition. Anne shifts her address, arguably for the first time, to Maricruz. She provides an open-ended question (“What was growing up for you like?”); a yes-no question (“Were you born in the US or [sic] from somewhere else?”); and a polite imperative that echoes the conclusion to the first paragraph (“Tell me about yourself”).

Maricruz’s first response came as a marked contrast to Anne’s florid style:

Dear Anne,

Hello! how are you ! I am your new friend today I could tell you about myself and my life. I am from Mexico,Guerrero Mexico. My mother is Mexican and my father too but,my parents they came to America (my father 11 years ago and my mother 5 years ago) and I was in Mexico with my grandparents. After I came too and I am with my parents and my brother.

I like these country because i am learning different thinks for example to talk the English.

Have a good weekend.

Sincerely,
Maricruz

Looking at Maricruz’s language analytically yields some clues to her sociocultural identity. Moreover, analysis reveals her attempts to respond to Anne’s requests and to replicate Anne’s discursive style. Rather than taking up the “pen pal” motif, Maricruz uses the simpler “friend.” She does attempt, however, to use stylized language by saying “could” instead of “can” for “I could tell you...”¹ Moreover, in responding to “Tell me about yourself,” she does tag on “and my life” as a brief extension to the appropriated phrase.

Maricruz answers Anne’s second question at first simply, “I am from Mexico,” then, by adding the detail “Guerrero Mexico,” mimics Anne’s prior place references (“Mexico City, Mexico;” “Boston, Massachusetts;” “Montreal, Canada”). As Anne had done in her email, Maricruz shifts from a brief walk through personal history to arrive at a present state; she effects this shift by moving in a single sentence from simple past tense “After I came too” to present tense “and I am.”

In her next paragraph, Maricruz provides some judgment on her presence here (“I like these country”) along with a justifying statement “because i am learning different thinks” that is further bolstered by a concrete example “for example to talk the English.” Maricruz has not taken up Anne’s call to join her in a stylized, literary adventure; instead, given the opportunity (in fact, the first opportunity), she frames an argument for why she is in this country and presents her commitment to the project of studying English. This sociocultural identity, of which

Maricruz only provides a skeletal version here, is a theme she shall return to and embellish in subsequent emails with remarkable consistency.

In the mid-point interview, Anne stated, “Initially, I was taken aback because I wrote this really long detailed email then got back such a short little thing” (Interview, November 14, 2006). She expressed disappointment that she had elected to “pour [her] heart out and then to get that type of response.” (Interview, November 14, 2006). From this point forward, the length of Anne’s messages remained at or below Maricruz’s production level (See Fig. 2). The reduction comes primarily at the expense of narrative content about her life. It signifies Anne’s reduced interest in establishing an intimate rapport with Maricruz and participating in a co-constructed dialogue. Instead, this move positions Anne in a privileged role as one who extracts personal information from another without a like commitment. It certainly indicates a reduced corpus from which Maricruz can borrow language and ideas.

[Insert Fig. 2 here]

Ironically, the reduction may have also opened space in this communication for Maricruz to assert her own sociocultural identity without an overweening influence from the language of Anne. Additionally, the change in Anne’s writing strategy paves the way for their communications to more closely resemble the oral conversational qualities of email and less the standardized characteristics of handwritten correspondence (Grosvenor, 1998; Sotillo, 2000). In other words, Anne’s retreat from her initial cultural model of literary text production allowed Maricruz to make better use of the hybrid space of email to describe her own sociocultural identity and cultural priorities (Lam, 2000).

Anne’s second email to Maricruz contains 11 complete sentences, of which seven are questions. As Maricruz answers Anne’s string of questions, a pattern emerges in her responses. In each answer, Maricruz provides the most basic information to satisfy the question but in each,

she goes one step further to provide an additional piece of information, be it biographical or evaluative in nature. This is evidence of language appropriation, of her taking on Anne’s words, including the ideologically-tinged discourses that surround those words, but reshaping them to fashion a performance of her own sociocultural identity (Bakhtin, 1981; Menard-Warwick, 2005; Prior, 2001). It is also an example of language scaffolding at work, of an incremental adjustment and expansion of her expressive language capabilities based upon a model she has been provided and upon her own expressive capabilities (Moll, 1990).

To cite examples, Maricruz responds to Anne’s question/imperative “Tell me how long you have been in Austin?” with the reply

I have in Austin one year I live with my parents and my two brothers

In the next reply, this one to the question, “Do you like school?”, Maricruz inverts the answer-additional information order by writing

I like to live in Austin and I too like the school

By providing the evaluative information first, she bridges more effectively from the previous statement; this order along with the “too” also achieves more emphasis on the latter phrase, which is directly related to her project of constructing her pro-school identity.

In the next section of the email, Maricruz answers Anne’s questions about school and learning. She also gives important clues to her identity as a learner of English:

I have time for to do, I only I learning English and sometimes practice the English in my home with my brothers.

Having provided information about her other classes, she then launches a clarifying statement (“I have time for to do”) but then halts that clarification with a restatement (“I only I learning English...”). I read the halting phrasing in this section as an indication of the importance Maricruz is placing on getting the point across that despite any homework she may receive, learning English remains her utmost priority.

Do you have any hobby's? [sic] Special activities you enjoy? For example, I enjoy reading, playing with my dog and going to museums.

The topic of the questions is reinforced by the relaxed attention to formatting (possessive hobby's instead of hobbies; an elided “Do you have” in the second sentence). Two of the three activities are of course linked to notions of literacy, but also to particular notions of cultural literacy (Johnstone, 2002). Positioning reading and going to museums alongside playing with a dog indicates that for Anne, these two activities are a kind of play. The notion of reading as play was further reinforced by Anne's fascination with non-fiction books about chocolate – not cookbooks but histories of chocolate (Interview, February 21, 2007). This pursuit of esoterica marks Anne as a person who seeks information about her world not solely for work or for study, but for fun. It also provides a glimpse of her literacy practices and the context in which she pursues them. As Brandt states, “[L]iteracy abilities are nest in and sustained by larger social and cultural activity” (2001, p. 3). As a highly educated individual, Anne's literacy work is not focused as much on the acquisition of literacy, though it is probable that she obtains linguistic and literate benefits from engaging in literacy practices in her free time, especially those practices that engage her non-native language(s). Instead, her leisure-time literacy work is a means to another end, to participation in activities that provide her a sense of agency (as a reader of a highly specific non-fiction genre, for example) but are nevertheless sanctioned within her particular sociocultural milieu. Such an identity stands in contrast to Maricruz's self-characterization thus far as one who acts as a learner primarily in school, pursuing coursework in English and only “sometimes” practicing English with her brothers. Brandt cautions that a literate identity that does not look outside of the often archaic and static routines of literacy work within school may not position a student for success in the wider world, where literacies are ever-changing and highly competitive commodities (Brandt, 2001; See also Gebhard, 2005).

Maricruz’s third email to Anne displays reveals several innovations in her repertoire. She relaxes her opening “Hello” to a “Hi” and for the first time, indicates with punctuation that “How are you?” is asking a question of her respondent.

Later, Maricruz signifies a change of topic with “Now”, then proceeds with her first move into unsolicited information. She provides not simply declarative information; she sets up a comparison between her Halloween in this country versus what she had experienced in Mexico.

Now in Halloween I spent it very well with my family and in the school too with my friends but,too I remember when it was in Mexico because I enjoyed with my friends and we asked for candies in the doors of the houses. After I went dancing dressed in my costume and each year we celebrated in the same manner.

Some context for her writing is in order here. The school had concluded classes early on Halloween day in order for students to experience American-style trick-or-treating. They funneled through the halls, visiting teachers at their doorways and employing the rehearsed phrase, “Trick or treat!” (still visible weeks later on some whiteboards) in exchange for candy. The handful of students who wore costumes were surrounded by hordes of friends as they made the rounds to the classrooms. It did not take long for the students to visit all the classrooms on both floors; the rest of the time they passed chatting and roaming in the hallways or in small groups inside classrooms. In all likelihood, some students took advantage of the altered schedule to leave the school early that day.

Maricruz states that she spent the day “very well” both at home and at school “with my friends.” Then, she marks a transition and entrance into narrative territory: “but, too I remember.” Maricruz does not say that *she* was in Mexico; rather, “it” (Halloween), perhaps for her “the real Halloween,” was there in Mexico, and she had been there to take part in it. Rather than being confined to the hallways of school, she and her friends had gone door to door in her hometown and had concluded the day with a dance outside of the home. This too was not a regular come-as-you-are dance, as she had witnessed in her U.S. school. On Halloween in

Mexico, she remained in her costume. The nostalgia for this past life is punctuated with the fairy tale-like coda “and each year we celebrated in the same manner.” Indeed, the school’s version of an American-style Halloween seems like the facsimile, not the once-exported but now entirely *mexicano* version that Maricruz carries in her memories from years past.

Anne responded positively to Maricruz’s message in her next response, providing nearly double the content of the previous one. After relating her own recent Halloween experience with her godson, Anne launches into her own narrative, utilizing the “I remember...” trope of Maricruz’s last email in describing a scene with the kind of detail she had abandoned after her first email:

I love to cook, do you?
I remember cooking with my mother and grandmother as a child and loved the different smells in the kitchen. I even remember writing my grandmother’s recipes down, since she never wrote them down and I wanted to make sure that when I was older I would be able to cook her recipes. She loved to bake cookies, cakes and brownies.

Anne’s language summons her own nostalgic memories of Mexico as she describes baking with her mother and grandmother, including sensory detail and her youthful attempt to capture moments through writing that would otherwise be lost. This use of literacy, unsolicited by adults and purely for personal, pleasurable reasons, complements her prior identification of reading as a hobby. That the cooking is focused on desserts, not day-to-day basics, adds to both the pleasure of those moments and to the self-identification with leisure-time cooking as opposed to necessary cooking. Finally, Anne’s given rationale for writing down the recipes, so that she could recall them in a future time, summons an identity that, even in its youth (“I even remember...”), was forward-thinking. Though this is an *a posteriori* rationale, given long after the actual events occurred, it not only serves to construct her current identity as someone who values traditional family activity, the art of cooking, and literacy, it also sheds light on what she values in youth identities and priorities.

In Maricruz’s next response, she continues the thread of this now-conversation. She puts her own twist on the trope of “cooking with mothers” initiated by Anne.

I like to cook, but I don't to cook very good because always I help my mom. My mother and me sometimes we cook enchiladas,chilaquiles. One time I cooked with my mother a cake

I like to cook cakes. I like too how it smells in the kitchen because it smells of different types of food – my favorite smells are chiles, cinnamon, chocolate, and coffee.

Like Anne, she clearly casts herself in the role of child, but rather than acting as an archivist, she implies by the word “always” that assisting in the kitchen is a regular activity. She allows that “one time” she cooked a cake with her mother and in solidarity with Anne, she decided she liked the idea. Also in solidarity, she expresses pleasure with the smells of the kitchen, but goes further to cite four earthy, complex, powerhouse ingredients of Mexican cuisine.

Anne opens her final email to Maricruz on an exclamatory note – in fact, three of the four paragraphs in the email conclude with exclamation points. The prominence of the words “you” and “your” within the email, nine times in the first three sentences alone, point to Maricruz as the source of this excitement.

What a wonderful email you sent me, with so much information about you and your life, thank you!

Your command of the English language and your writing skills have improved so much since you sent me your first email.
I am so proud of you!

In the second sentence, Anne adopts the stance of evaluator of Maricruz’s written English, her word choice reflecting not only formal evaluative archetypes but possibly too the return of stylized language (“command of the English language” instead of “English,” “writing skills” instead of “writing”) reminiscent of her first message to Maricruz. The perceived improvement in Maricruz’s English may be permitting Anne a return to a favored style she had abandoned after the disappointment of Maricruz’s first response. Of course, it must be noted that the role of

evaluator is itself a position of power, so here, praise comes delivered from a superordinate stance.

Anne deepens their culinary connection by indicating her favorite holiday treats: “chilaquiles de pollo, and the Mexican hot chocolate with churros.” These items contain as their chief spices chiles, cinnamon, and chocolate – three of the Maricruz’s four preferred “kitchen smells.” Throughout the email, Anne demonstrates that she has found elements of a shared sociocultural identity with Maricruz; from this comfort zone she can adopt a more fluid, sincere style of communication, much like Maricruz’s tone in the previous email.

Over the course of the email exchanges, Anne presented a variety of socially-situated identities, beginning with a rhetorically highbrow description of herself as a well-educated, multinational actor. When this self-description was met with a relatively sparse response from Maricruz, she scaled back on both the amount of language she provided and the narration of her life, resorting instead to questions interspersed with brief commentary. As Maricruz’s composition skills grew, and she herself began to present a more complete social identity – of a student dedicated to the learning of English, nostalgic for her life in Mexico – Anne found common ground in some of the cultural models Maricruz had provided, particularly the image of the girl apprentice in her mother’s/grandmother’s kitchen, and reflected back some of these cultural models in her own terms.

From the basis of the email exchanges, it would appear that a sort of shared identity had been co-constructed between the partners, a starting point of positive energy for the face-to-face meeting in January. Unfortunately, this was not to be the case. During the classroom meeting time and in the debriefing session held immediately afterwards, Anne projected a tangible rejection of Maricruz that caught the attention of observers and fellow mentors. At several points in their discussion, prolonged silence or Anne’s raised voice brought intervention from another

pair, who sought to include Maricruz and Anne in their discussion. Anne’s discomfort was confirmed in the follow-up interview. The rejection was rooted in Anne’s perception that Maricruz was “lacking of incentive, motivation” (Interview, February 21, 2007); according to Anne, this lack of motivation was apparent not just in Maricruz’s lack of elaborated responses to questions in their face-to-face conversation (“it was kind of like question, answer, stop”) but also in her physical appearance:

I’ve seen... in people with the most modest means, poor, rural take so much more pride in their, in themselves, the way they come across, and wanting to look good and feel good and she, she didn’t do any of that. I mean, she didn’t come across as having bathed... (Interview, February 21, 2007)

In a statement that confirmed Anne’s decided subordination and dismissal of Maricruz, she compared her conversation with Maricruz to the brutal metaphor of “pulling teeth... out of a very tame animal” (Interview, February 21, 2007).

In her post hoc interview, Maricruz enthusiastically agreed with Anne’s suggestions that going to the public library, reading newspapers, and conversing in the public sphere in English were all excellent ideas; in fact, she had communicated these suggestions to her mother and older brother the very day of their conversation, and they had concurred that this was sound advice (Interview, January 31, 2007). However, as of the date of this writing, Maricruz has not pursued any of these actions, not because of a lack of will or motivation, but because I believe within her and her family’s ideological framework, *she is doing her part as a learner by going to school*. In fact, her voyage to this country was strongly motivated by the desire to continue her schooling life whereas completing high school would have been financially impossible in Mexico. Compared to the school she attended in Mexico, she was learning “much more,” and her grades were markedly better (Interview, January 31, 2007). While many, if not most, of her fellow students had taken jobs in their second year in the United States, her family had consciously decided to keep her out of the workforce and see her through college (Interview, January 31, 2007).

Conclusion

Researchers have written of the pro-school ethos of immigrant students and their strong faith in the formal education system (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 1997; Suárez-Orosco & Suárez-Orosco, 2001). This is sometimes seen as naïveté by jaded age-group American-born peers (Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999), whose view is reinforced by investigators of the linguistic, social and cultural capital that allows elite groups to retain their positions in society (Anyon, 1980; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; R. D. Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In the pairing of Anne and Maricruz, I witnessed an almost visceral clash of ideologies as I brought two these two individuals and members of disparate sectors of society together.

Unlike the face-to-face communication, which provoked such a strong reaction from Anne, the email messages, though indicative of ideological stances, did not demonstrate the same strength of commitment. Importantly for the premise of this study that business professionals are more interested in the content of messages than their grammatical constructions (Hairston, 1981), Anne quickly refuted the idea that Maricruz’s written language had or could have bothered her in any way, stating that, “it’s just a person that [is] struggling to take command of a language” (Interview, November 13, 2006). Moreover, whereas the content of Maricruz’s messages initially caused Anne to feel “taken aback” for its “lack of depth,” she later indicated genuine pleasure, both in the email to Maricruz and in the post hoc interview with me, at the progress Maricruz had made in her written abilities (Interview, November 13, 2006).

I attribute the softening of Anne’s stance vis-à-vis Maricruz both to Maricruz’s negotiation of the conversation and to the medium of email itself. In this case, email had both a physical and a temporal distancing aspect that in this case, opened spaces for more equitable communications and identity constructions (Grosvenor, 1998; Lam, 2000; Sotillo, 2000). First, it allowed Maricruz, a shy student, to operate without the fear of direct face-threat (Lam, 2000). In

their face-to-face conversations, Maricruz did not venture conversation in English and gave minimal responses in Spanish, much as she had given basic responses at the outset of the email correspondence. This aggravated her partner, perhaps because of the face-threat it presented for her as a participant in a publicly unsuccessful conversation. The conversation became more of a one-sided series of directives, further closing down both Maricruz’s speech as well as her speaking opportunities. In contrast, as Maricruz built competence in composing responses in email, she elaborated responses, initiated topics, and provided assertions of her beliefs and preferences.

Second, the lack of face-threat opened Anne up to following Maricruz’s topic threads, both consciously, as when she discussed Halloween activities, and unconsciously, as when she listed her favorite holiday foods, which echoed Maricruz’s identification of her favorite kitchen smells.

In a related sense, email through its anonymity allows identity play not easily available in face-to-face communication (Lam, 2000). In that regard, perhaps Maricruz’s repeated assertions of being a student dedicated to the learning of English went beyond “mere” statements to allowing her to try on a new, more aggressive identity as a language learner.

In other words, the virtual space of email allowed Maricruz to conduct identity work that her personality may have hindered in face-to-face communications. In a reciprocal relationship typical of discourse interactions, the email exchanges worked, unbeknownst to her, to expand her identity as a language learner (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1999; Johnstone, 2002; Wodak, 2004). Through this email arrangement, Maricruz became a language apprentice (Gee, 1990; Gee *et al.*, 1996), appropriating the language of an mature and successful practitioner of English and turning the other’s words to her own uses (Bakhtin, 1981; Prior, 2001). Maricruz acknowledged in her interviews that the writing she did for this project was distinctly different from the reading and

writing that she routinely performs in her other classes. This difference is rooted in the identity the project required her to assume at the outset—to move from a *student* of English to an active *user* of English.

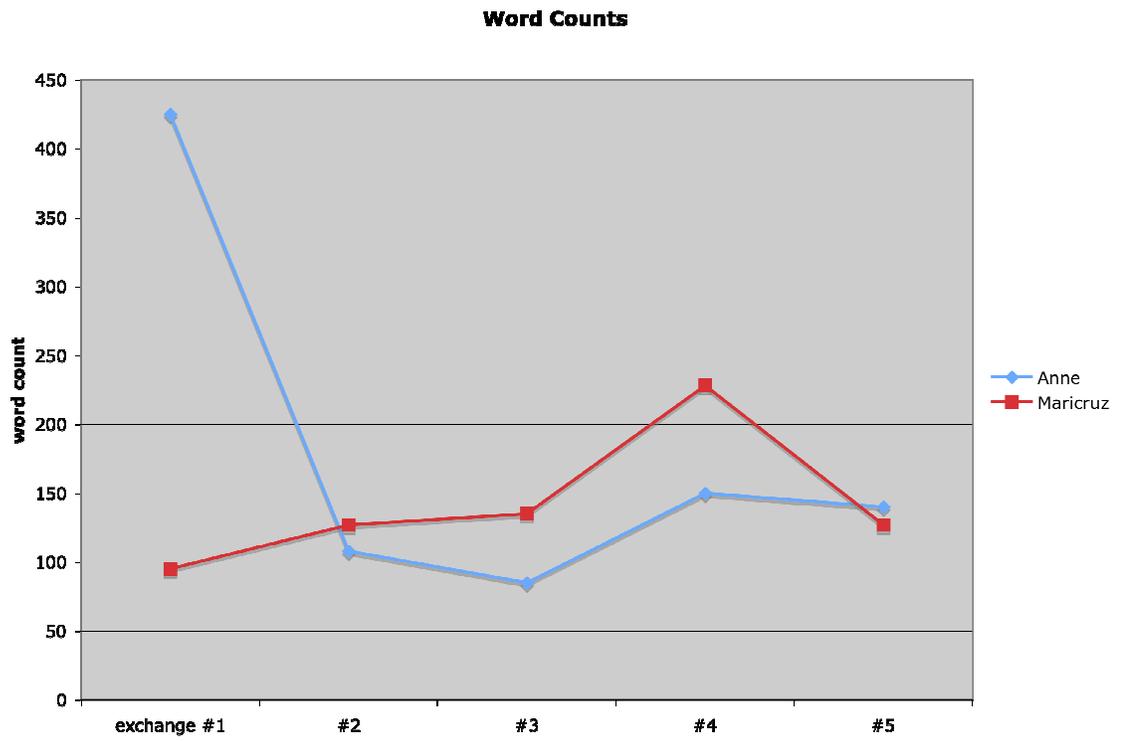
Given the monumental challenges facing newcomer students as they traverse the terrain of public schools and the wider society, it is not surprising that this case reveals conflicting possibilities for the use of CMCs as a vehicle for language acquisition and identity exploration. Great care needs to be exercised by researchers and educators in introducing newcomer students to technologies that can broaden their linguistic repertoires, and instruction needs to take into account likely scenarios of conflict, misunderstanding, and outright resistance to the students’ presence in American society. What should not be overlooked is the potential for CMCs to provide these students, despite the geographical and institutional isolation they are likely to experience, legitimate outlets for their expressions of voice, and for these voices to chip away at societal blockades to their acceptance.

ⁱ I have interpreted Maricruz’s “could” as an attempt at a stylistic flourish. Another way to read “could” is as a modal verb which reduces the strength of Maricruz’s commitment to talking about her life from “can” to “could” (Fairclough, 2003). In other words, Maricruz is not yet comfortable or confident laying bare the story of her life. Future emails do indicate that she does withhold important information about her life, such as her undocumented resident status, making the modal interpretation tantalizing. Nevertheless, given the verb usage and variation that she employs throughout her writing, both in the emails and in class, I prefer the reading presented above.

Figure 1: Analysis of Anne's Opening Statement

1	Subordinate clause	Since we are embarking
2	Prepositional phrase	on this journey together
3	Prepositional phrase	and in the hope
4	Embedded clause within the prepositional phrase	[that] we can be good pen (email) pals
5	Polite imperative	let me tell you a little about myself

Figure 2: Comparison of Anne's and Maricruz's Word Counts



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