



## A Biliteracy Dialogue Approach to One-on-One Writing Instruction With Bilingual, Mexican, Immigrant Writers

This interpretive study explores the writing and writing experiences of 2 bilingual, Mexican, immigrant undergraduates at a US university. Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester's (2003) continua model of biliteracy situates writing interactions to understand how students explore and draw on their bilingual and bicultural resources as they develop academic writing in English in the university. Data include questionnaires, literacy history interview-conversations, text-based conversations, student writing, course syllabi, and assignment sheets. Biliteracy dialogues demonstrate how students approached writing. The 1st student, Diego, focused on negotiating what he perceived as appropriate to include in his writing, while the 2nd student, Nicolas, connected to academic reading and writing through previous educational experiences. The findings illustrate the writers' bilingual and bicultural resources, suggesting that biliteracy dialogues have potential to facilitate bilingual writers in developing more confidence in academic writing. The findings have implications for tutoring, conferencing, and other 1-on-1 work with bilingual students.

The diversity of youth in the US is increasing as evidenced by US census data that show that children living in foreign-born households rose from 16% in 2000 to 20% in 2010 (US Census Bureau, 2010). Along with the increase in immigration, linguistic and cultural diversity are increasing in US schools. Because of their experiences with immigration and education, US-educated students acquire diverse language practices. Many of these children speak languages in addition to English to varying degrees and have a range of experiences with school in their first language.

As the diversity of English learners increases, federal and local education policies in the US also focus more heavily on accountability. Related to the focus on accountability is increased conversation about college readiness. Conley (2007) points out that writing is one of the most significant academic skills necessary for college. In addition to the significance of writing, American Col-

lege Testing (ACT) (2010) has conducted research that found that only 33% of Latino 11th-graders scored high enough on the ACT to be considered ready for college.

Although the increase in accountability and on college readiness can be positive, it can also have the effect of focusing on a standard view of language (White & Lowenthal, 2012). A standardized view of language limits the possibilities for building on the diverse and complex language and cultural resources of linguistically diverse youth. The bilingual university students discussed in this study previously attended schools in the Chicago area, where diverse languages are an integral part of the schools. According to a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) report (2010), more than 40% of CPS students have some knowledge of a language other than English, and 86% of English learners are Spanish speakers. The report recognized that high school English learners have home language and literacy practices that can be built on in school as they develop English literacy. Despite the significance of language, the report acknowledged that students' languages and cultures have often not been sufficiently recognized and addressed in schools. Additionally, researchers have explored the implicit English-only practices in writing and composition in US postsecondary contexts (Horner, NeCamp, & Donahue, 2011), highlighting that US-educated multilingual writers may face educational contexts that marginalize their linguistic, cultural, and immigration identities in both K-12 and postsecondary contexts.

One-on-one writing instruction, occurring most frequently in writing centers, is an important context for supporting students in succeeding academically at the university. As Bawarshi and Pelkowski (2003) point out, because writing centers are situated at the margins of the university, they are positioned to assist marginalized students in navigating diverse discourses.

I developed an interest in learning more about one-on-one writing instruction for bilingual, Mexican students through a larger research project conducted at a Midwestern university with six, purposefully selected, bilingual, Mexican or Puerto Rican university students, all of whom considered themselves immigrants. Of the students I worked with, three talked about challenges they perceived in the university resulting from its being a different environment from the predominantly Mexican, bilingual communities they were from. One issue in particular that drew my attention was that the students voiced reluctance to use the university writing center. All of the students shared that writing was difficult for them and that it was an area they wanted to improve, but two of the six students specifically indicated that they chose not to use the writing center. One student's perception of the writing center was that "they don't really help you, they just tell you 'Fix it.'" Another student shared that she preferred to get help with her writing from people who were close to her rather than discussing it with a stranger at the writing center. She commented that she thought that if she went to the writing center she would "feel weird . . . they are probably making comments about that you really write ugly." Two students had little to no support to draw on outside of their writing instructor to help them with writing and one student discussed a sense of being on her own to deal with writing issues. One student had used the writing center and he indicated

that he had had a good experience, partly because the tutor he was assigned to spoke Spanish and was able to help him draw on his own linguistic resources. The above student comments highlight the need to learn more about bilingual, immigrant students' experiences with university academic support services.

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in US schools and the emphasis on standardization and accountability that have potential to limit opportunities for building on language and cultural resources, as well as evidence of low scores on standardized measures of writing, all call attention to the pressing need to explore the experiences of US-educated multilingual writers. It is especially important to explore multilingual writers' experiences in the context of one-on-one instruction because of its unique potential to assist writers whose linguistic and cultural identities may be marginalized in the university. The research question this study investigates is: How can biliteracy dialogues inform one-on-one writing instruction with bilingual, immigrant students in a monolingual university?

### **Review of the Literature**

It is greatly important to investigate the experiences of US-educated multilingual writers with language and literacy in more than one language and the extent to which they draw on language and cultural resources in university academic writing. Researchers have investigated the role of crosslinguistic transfer in second language writing in US contexts at the elementary level (e.g., Aidman, 2002; Buckwalter & Lo, 2002; Edelsky, 1982), high school level (e.g., Tarone et al., 1993), and university levels (e.g., Dong, 1999; Friedlander, 1990; Lay, 1988). Although open questions exist about the nature and extent of crosslinguistic transfer in second language writing, it is clear that bilingual writing experiences and practices are important considerations when approaching instruction for bilingual, immigrant university students. This is especially true for US-educated multilingual writers who may have experienced educational contexts in which they did not feel that their cultures and languages were valued as resources to draw on in developing biliteracy.

Lillis (2001) provides an example of this at the university level in which participants were constrained in what they wrote. Lillis provided examples from the participants' texts in which they wrote about bilingualism and bilingual education. In one instance, a tutor explicitly told a participant that her negative portrayal of bilingual education was inappropriate. Lillis interpreted this within the context of institutional discourse that constrained what students wrote about their cultural and linguistic identities.

Moreno (2002) also focused on issues that bilingual and bicultural students face as they engage in literacy in postsecondary contexts. She analyzed how higher education shapes possibilities for bicultural students' writing, and how bicultural students can explore their identities as they develop literacy practices that are expected in universities. Moreno's ethnographic study of a writing class whose topic was race and ethnicity focused specifically on the writing of a male, Latino student and his writing. Moreno also pointed out that her students perceived tensions and complexities in using their dialects

and languages and exploring their identities in the university, and she argued that “writing for many bicultural people is an important site of resistance and reconciliation” (p. 237). Moreno showed how the focal participant, Raymundo, shaped resistance in his texts, aligned himself collectively with other Latinos, and addressed issues of power in the classroom.

One-on-one writing instruction is uniquely capable of attending to students’ identities and the ways they negotiate their linguistic and cultural identities in writing in postsecondary contexts. Writing center scholarship has encouraged tutors to take a facilitative approach, in which writers are guided to develop their ideas. For example, Powers (1993) discussed the fact that many writing center tutors attempt to use Socratic methods with multilingual writers because they use those methods with their monolingual students and they work well with them. Powers suggested that that approach did not work well and that tutors instead needed to see themselves as “cultural/rhetorical informants with valuable information to impart” (p. 42).

Questions about cultural differences that arise within the context of one-on-one writing instruction are common in the writing center literature. Healy and Boshier (1992) question whether or not writing centers are the best model for assisting second language writers with improving their writing. They claim that the type of collaboration in which writing centers engage students may be too much at odds with the expectations of many of the second language writers who seek assistance with their writing. Moser (1993) noticed that second language writers at her institution would visit the writing center once or twice, but they were not interested in returning. She conducted a qualitative study to attempt to ascertain why second language writers at her institution showed little interest in using the services offered by the university writing center.

The participants in Moser’s study included five Haitian second language writers and three peer tutors whose first language was US English. She had 45-minute-long tutorials videotaped while the peer tutors worked with the students on first drafts of an argumentative essay. The researcher asked all of the participants to view the videotape of their session, and afterward she interviewed them individually. The interview was geared toward finding out the participants’ opinions about the sessions and ideas about how they could be improved. Moser states that the videotape data revealed that both the Haitian writers and the US tutors exhibited body language and gestures that indicated discomfort. During the interviews, the US tutors generally expressed that the sessions were frustrating, that they did not think that they developed good rapport with the students, and that they did not think the conference was successful. The Haitian writers, on the other hand, related that the sessions were beneficial for them and they did not indicate that cultural differences hindered the tutoring process. Moser (1993) states that her data show that the US tutors would have benefited from training on how to deal with the linguistic and cultural issues that arise during tutorials with second language writers. Part of the reason the Haitian students exhibited discomfort in the videotapes could have been because the collaborative nature of the sessions with peer tutors did not conform to their expectations of teaching and learning. Their subsequent posi-

tive reaction to the sessions during the interviews could have emerged because the sessions genuinely were helpful for them because the tutors provided them with grammatical and lexical information that they did not have access to. The peer tutors may have found that approach to be dissatisfying because it did not conform to their notions that good tutoring be collaborative and inductive.

Moser's study (1993) elucidates some of the issues that arise for both tutors and writers when there is a mismatch in expectations. Thonus (1999) investigates tutor-writer interaction more closely. She bases her study on the same premise that Powers (1993) highlights, which is that the conferencing methodology and theoretical perspective it is based on is not well suited to many conference situations. Thonus further contends that this perspective is not based on what actually occurs during conferencing, and that it is essential to conduct more research on conferencing in order to develop more accurate theories of conferencing on which to base models for training tutors and running writing centers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The context of developing language and literacy practices for US-educated multilingual writers is especially complex. Part of the complexity arises from the fact that these individuals are circumstantial bilinguals (Valdés, 1992) who, in the US, acquire English out of necessity due to situational factors, such as immigration. Because of external societal pressure to acquire English in the US, circumstantial bilinguals often lose their L1 through subtractive bilingualism (Lambert, 1975). In this context, individuals acquire language and literacy practices that are the result of overlapping national, linguistic, and cultural discourses. Benesch (2009) describes language users as "simultaneously interpellated by dominant discourses and creative inventors of newly formed discourses born of the postmodern diaspora" (p. 70).

To explore and further understand US-educated multilingual writers' experiences with overlapping discourses, I draw on the continua model of biliteracy (Hornberger, 1989; Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2003), as well as Ivanic's (1998) work on identity. The continua model of biliteracy consists of four continua—contexts, development, content, and media—that are influenced by how they are privileged in the society, with monolingual practices receiving higher status and bilingual practices receiving lower status. The continua model of biliteracy is valuable in understanding multilingual writers' identities and the social contexts in which they develop as writers. The continua model highlights the fact that multilingual writers grow up in the US, where their native language is a minority language and less valued in the society than English, and how that relates to experiences with language and literacy.

Ivanic (1998) argues that understanding writers' identities places acts of writing (and I would argue perceptions of writing also) in relationship to their social contexts. Pratt (1998) conceptualized spaces where writers' identities come into contact with new communities as contact zones, which she defined as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 173). Pratt pointed

out that texts produced in the contact zone may be ignored or misinterpreted and the stories that others tell about writers may override the stories that students tell about themselves. Because multilingual writers' stories may be ignored or misinterpreted, it is important to pay attention to the stories writers tell about their own experiences. Concepts about students' identities are important to consider when engaging in writing and writing instruction because literate practices, including the extent to which linguistic and cultural resources are viewed as valid for academic writing, are influenced by situated interpretations of literacy and literate practices (Macedo, 1994; Street, 1994).

### **Methods**

This study draws on narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to explore the participants' autobiographical selves (Ivanic, 1998) and how they relate to their writing and university writing experiences. This research builds on Bell's (2002) approach to narrative inquiry in which she explains that narrative inquiry is based on "the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures" (p. 207).

### ***Context***

This study took place at a highly selective research institution in the Midwest. The total undergraduate enrollment of students at the university who provided information about their race/ethnicity was 30,290. Latinos made up 15.8% of the state population, but only 6.5% of the university's undergraduate student population. This institution, like other highly selective universities, has special admissions programs, as well as programs to increase enrollment and retention of students from diverse backgrounds. For example, one participant took part in the Transitions program (pseudonym), which is designed to provide opportunities for students who do not meet the standard admissions requirements of the university, but who show potential to succeed at the university through an alternative admissions process.

### ***Participants***

To recruit participants for this study, a flyer stating the goal of the research was distributed on the university campus and to student groups. Thirty-two students responded to the flyer, and six students were purposefully selected to participate in the research because they were born in Mexico or Puerto Rico, had immigrated to the US at different ages, had graduated from high school in the US, and spoke Spanish as their first language. Two participants are the focus of this research. They were selected because they were born in Mexico, graduated from high school in the US, spoke Spanish as their first language, had participated in a bilingual education or ESL program, and were enrolled in a university writing course. Furthermore, the two participants had immigrated to the US at different ages, and one of them participated in a university program for students who did not meet minimum admissions requirements, and

the other enrolled through the general admissions process. In addition, one student was undocumented and the other was documented. The pseudonyms Diego and Nicolas are used to refer to the participants.

Table 1 provides information about the two participants and their backgrounds. As shown in the table, Nicolas completed some of his education in Mexico, where his home language, Spanish, was the same as the societal language. In the US, Nicolas attended a suburban, high-income high school, in which 15% of the students were low income, the graduation rate was 89%, and the average ACT score was 19.3. The other participant, Diego, completed all of his education in the US, where his home language, Spanish, differed from English, the US societal language. Diego attended an urban high school in which the percentage of low-income students was 98%, the graduation rate was 57%, and the average ACT score was 14.7.

**Table 1**  
**Participant Demographics**

	<i>Diego</i>	<i>Nicolas</i>
Immigration status	Undocumented	Documented
Birthplace	Mexico	Mexico
First language	Spanish	Spanish
Dominant language	Both Spanish and English	Spanish
Age of arrival in US	2 years	14 years
Schooling in Mexico	No	K-8
Schooling in US	K-12	8-12
ESL courses	K-8	8-9
High school context	Urban; lower income, lower performing	Suburban; higher income, higher performing
Year at university	Freshman	Freshman

### **Data Sources**

**Questionnaires.** Before meeting with the students to discuss their writing, I asked them to fill out questionnaires to provide information about their backgrounds: for example, place of birth, K-12 educational experiences, language dominance, and self-rating of Spanish and English. Additionally, I met with the students and had conversations with them in which I shared information about my background and interests in learning about multilingual writing instruction, and I learned more about their language and educational backgrounds: for



example, by asking questions such as “What has your experience been like at the university?” and “What were your experiences with language before coming to the university?”

**Literacy History Interview-Conversations.** I used Lillis’s (2001) methodological tool of “literacy history” interviews and drew on Mishler (1986) and Riessman’s (1993, 2003) concepts of interview as narrative, and Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) concept of “active interview.” The nature of the interviews was between an interview and a conversation, hence they are called “interview-conversations.”

I conducted three 90-minute, audio-recorded (and later transcribed) interview-conversations with the two students on their experiences with language, literacy, and writing. The interview-conversations were aimed at developing an understanding of the participants’ experiences and the meanings their experiences had for them. The first interview was about their previous experiences, the second was about their current experiences, and the third was a reflective interview in which participants were asked to think about the meaning of their experiences with language and literacy in light of the first two interviews.

**Text-Based Conversations.** The participants were asked to choose an initial draft of any piece of writing they were currently working on to discuss during at least two, 60-minute, audio-recorded (and later transcribed) text-based conversations (Ivanic & Weldon, 1999; Prior, 1998). The text-based conversations were similar to tutorials because I helped them with questions and writing issues. They are referred to as conversations, rather than interviews, because prepared questions were not used. The goal was to discover what the participants thought about their writing, and the issues they wanted to discuss related to it. I guided the conversations by asking questions about the writing assignment and by giving brainstorming strategies and suggestions. The Appendix shows the writing the participants selected. The findings presented are from Diego’s scholarship application essay and Nicolas’s paper titled “The Effects of One Language” written for the 2nd semester of the university’s two-part composition requirement.

### ***Data Analysis***

The analysis was driven by the study’s theoretical framework, with a focus on the participants’ understandings of themselves as Mexican and bilingual within the context of a monolingual university and how they drew on their linguistic and cultural identities in their writings and discussions of their writing. I drew on two analytical tools: narrative analysis and constant comparative analysis.

Narrative analysis was employed to analyze the literacy history interview-conversations by deciding where the stories were and how they were bounded. I drew on two of Reissman’s (2003) views of narratives: First, I documented accounts of the participants’ lives that unfolded over the course of one or many interviews. Second, I identified narratives that could be thought of as discrete stories told in response to questions. I conceptualized all of the narratives as interconnected and extended stories.



## Findings

First I will introduce each of the participants, and then I will provide vignettes that illustrate themes that I developed from the data.

### *Participants*

Both Diego and Nicolas were born in Mexico, but Diego moved to the US with his family when he was 2 and Nicolas came to the US to live with relatives when he was 14. Spanish was both Diego and Nicolas's first language, but they had different experiences with language. When I asked Diego about his previous experiences with language in a bilingual education program in school, he reported feeling that the purpose was to learn English and forget Spanish. He explained that studying at the university helped him to learn about his previous school experiences:

I didn't know it then, but I look at it now, and it's almost like the instructions are in Spanish, and the work pretty much has to be done in English. ... I see it very much as kind of "forget this language and let's move on."

Nicolas's experience, on the other hand, related more with developing proficiency in English. When I asked him about his previous experiences with language in an ESL program in junior high, he indicated that his family decided that he should repeat the 8th grade instead of starting high school so that he could improve his English skills and have time to acclimate to the culture of his new school. Nicolas regretted his family's decision, remarking that he "would've gone straight to high school" and now that he was in college he "can't really change anything." He expressed the desire to help other immigrant students learn from his experiences.

When asked about the 1st year at the university, Nicolas said, "I've been pretty much trying to make it on my own, working, studying, or whatever. ... And school is pretty hard. So it's been a new experience." The first thing Diego said when I asked him what his experience at the university had been like so far was that "being [his] 1st year this year ... it was challenging, coming from a working-class immigrant community." He saw how different the university context was and he found it to be a challenge, explaining that "the different number of students that are here, as far as like race and ethnicity, just interaction with them. Since [he didn't] come from a background where [he had] been exposed to that as much."

### *Diego: Negotiating What's "Appropriate"*

During a discussion of his writing, Diego focused on a statement of purpose he was writing for a summer internship program at a prestigious university. After some brief small talk, Diego told me that he wanted to discuss his essay for the internship application and I said, "Tell me a little bit about what it is that you're applying for." He explained that the program focused on issues of inequality and social policy, and it encouraged students of color and students of limited economic backgrounds to apply to the program.

During our discussion of the writing prompt and his ideas about what to write, Diego did not demonstrate confidence in his writing, but his references to his community and rich descriptions evoked his pride in his identity as a member of that working-class, immigrant community. After discussing the scholarship and Diego's ideas at length, I asked him if he wanted me to look at what he had written so far, and he said it was "just lists of words and sentences," "they don't necessarily make sense," and "it might be repetitive." Diego's description of his writing indicated his hesitance to share his writing. My response was to appreciate and respect what he wrote by showing that I could understand how the ideas connected to him, his interests, and the writing prompt. Diego's response to my reaction to his paper was:

I don't think I did it. I mean, I was just writing. ... And it came out unintentionally, but that's good. Sometimes I wonder whether things are appropriate, 'cause I know, in my papers at least, I've noticed people point out, when I write about my community, somehow mention it, or just an experience. I don't know if it's always appropriate, kind of to personalize.

Diego's statements give an indication that the contexts of biliteracy he has experienced have consisted of few examples of being encouraged to think about and through his immediate location. Rather, his accounts of his experiences consist more often of experiences with "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu, 1991), in which he felt that his experiences were not seen as appropriate.

As I thought about what I had been learning about Diego and the contexts of biliteracy he had experienced, I considered how I could focus on the content of biliteracy in our interaction. In doing so, I wanted to provide a positive response to him about the description of his community that he had written to reinforce the value of drawing on personal experiences and connecting them to discussions of broader issues. My response included, "So talking about these two things and relating it to broader issues and academic interests and issues, immigration, bring into the notion of how this is kind of like the place where people feel safe." Diego was silent for a few seconds after I said that. Then he said, "Can I say something?" and he explained:

I guess my intention was to kind of just like set the stage and kind of describe briefly the community and then just kind of to transition it to what I'm gonna talk about next, kind of the propositions and the more—I guess the different political aspect. I kind of wanted to talk about how people, even though they live here, and it's one of the largest communities, that they still live in the shadows and in fear.

After hearing Diego's response to my comment, I realized that I had glossed over the part in his writing where he mentioned that the people in the community "live in the shadows and in fear" and, instead, I came up with an interpretation that they feel safe there, which was not what Diego was trying to convey.

This relates to the situation Pratt (1998) discussed in which multilingual students may be glossed over in academic institutions.

In my next meeting with Diego, he wanted to discuss a scholarship application essay. The meeting began with Diego's telling me about his struggles in his Spanish class, and then he updated me on the previous scholarship essay he had discussed with me. Whereas the first session with Diego included an instance in which Diego and I had different interpretations that had to be negotiated, this tutorial contained instances of synchronicity in which Diego and I were working together with a shared purpose. In excerpt 1, Diego and I were discussing what to include in his essay and how to organize it. I provided an idea for how to decide what to include in lines 1 and 2, and in line 3 Diego overlapped with me, and I finished my idea in line 4. Then, in line 5, Diego extended what I was saying by mentioning transitions. The overlapping dialogue, the extension of ideas, and questions are indications of synchronicity. Diego was not passively waiting for me to tell him what to do or lead the conversation, but we both engaged in dialogue, and he asked questions.

*Excerpt 1: Synchronicity demonstrated by extending ideas and asking questions*

- 1 Jason: So if you can figure out which parts here that flow along with the previous  
2 sections—that might also be a good way to figure out—  
3 Diego: Okay  
4 Jason: —which parts you want to include.  
5 Diego: Yeah, definitely. The transitions, right?  
6 Jason: Mm-hmm.  
7 Diego: So it could flow better  
8 Jason: But to me, like this is about educational issues, getting parents involved in  
9 education. Isn't this part about educational issues down here?  
Yeah.  
10 Diego: Yeah. Kind of move that over here?  
11 Jason: It might fit well there, yeah.

In excerpt 2, in line 3 Diego comes up with an idea as a result of the conversation about his writing. I indicated that it was a good idea, and why I thought it was a good idea, and Diego's response was to say, "Let's move" it, indicating a shared purpose in improving the writing.

*Excerpt 2: Synchronicity demonstrated through sharing an idea and shared purpose*

- 1 Jason: So your academic goals are to double major in political science and  
2 Latino/Latina Studies, and pursue a master's.  
3 Diego: Yeah, I just had an idea. You know how as I'm talking about how—I guess

- 4            this is an academic struggle, and this is what 3 is asking. So  
              maybe not talking
- 5            about it here, but moving it back here and talking about how  
              that has changed.
- 6 Jason:    That's a very good idea, because you need to add more to that  
              one also.
- 7 Diego:    Okay, so let's move it. So probably a lot of this would go to the  
              back.
- 8 Jason:    Okay.

### ***Nicolas: Connecting to Academic Writing Through Previous Educational Experiences***

In one of my tutorials with Nicolas, he chose to discuss a three-page draft of a rhetorical analysis paper for a required freshman composition course. At the beginning of the tutorial Nicolas showed me the assignment sheet that provided step-by-step directions, and we discussed it at length. The assignment asked students to choose an article from a few options and to “say something about how effectively the rhetorical devices used in the article strengthened the argument for an audience.” Nicolas chose to write a rhetorical analysis about an article titled “Bilingualism in America: English Should Be the Official Language.” It was originally published in 1989 in *USA Today* and was included in a reader called *Exploring Language*, marketed for 1st-year composition courses in a four-article section titled “Should English Be the Official Language of the U.S.A.?” The assignment sheet contained the following headings:

- Due date
- Length
- Specifications
- Format: What is rhetorical analysis?
- How to conduct rhetorical analysis
- Rhetorical analysis: specific hints, helpful hints as you write your rhetorical analysis.

The “format” section detailed instructions on how to go about writing the paper. It indicated that the first paragraph should give the title of the article, the author’s name, and the thesis of the article, a few areas to be explored, and then the student should provide the thesis for the paper. The assignment sheet then directed the students to provide an overview of the article and to suggest who the likely audience of the article was. The assignment sheet indicated that after the first two paragraphs, the students should divide the paper into two sections, one for the “content” and another for the “expression” of the article, or how the content was presented.

Next, we looked at Nicolas’s draft and we discussed what he had done so far. His approach to the paper was to follow the steps the instructor laid out in order and to linearly follow the directions outlined in the assignment sheet. His draft contained exactly what the assignment sheet said to do, an introductory

paragraph that stated the title, full name of author, and thesis of the article, a second paragraph with a brief overview of the content of the article, and who the audience was. As we read through Nicolas's draft we also occasionally referred back to the assignment sheet. I went back to the assignment sheet and read out loud a section that said, "From there, focus separate sections on Content (evidence, examples, logic) and Expression (organization and language use) in the article and how issues in each of the categories were designed to reach a particular audience." At the point when I read that section, Nicolas said, "That's where it threw me off. Like I didn't know where to go from there."

Another one of the instructions on the assignment sheet indicated that the students' opinions about the subject of the article were not important in the assignment and should not be mentioned. This seemed to fit the purpose of the paper, which was to demonstrate the extent to which rhetorical devices used in the article strengthened the argument for a particular audience. However, Nicolas did have opinions related to the topic, and he talked about his perspective and experiences at great length during our discussion. Both Nicolas and I had strong reactions to the article, and our reactions were almost opposite.

When I saw the title of the article, "Bilingualism in America: English Should Be the *Official* Language," my immediate reaction was that I would disagree with the article. The article contained a short biography of the author, Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa. After reading the biography, I felt even more strongly that I would disagree with the article because it pointed out that he was a leader in the movement to make English the official language of the US.

Because of my own perspective that language is not only a right, but a resource (Ruiz, 1984), and because Nicolas is bilingual in English and Spanish, I believed that he would also see Hayakawa's article as a proposal that would infringe on the rights of bilingual people and immigrants. This was not the case. Nicolas agreed with points Hayakawa raised in the article.

As I read through the assignment sheet out loud with Nicolas I pointed out that the purpose of the assignment was to read the article and do a rhetorical analysis. Nicolas's response was,

Yeah, yeah, but I couldn't find any. ... I read the article like two times, and like, all I could find of it is just—he was saying—I could relate to it a lot, 'cause he was saying the truth to me.

The discussion with Nicolas about the article on bilingualism for the rhetorical analysis paper triggered him to think about his own experiences with ESL classes and school in general. The message he received from school was that he could not do things because he could not speak English well enough:

I thought I had the capacity to do it ... they don't think we have the capacity to do it, you know. He's like—they think that we cannot learn another language. That's what they think ... even if I was scared, I would've just honestly loved to go to an English class like a normal person.

Discussing the article with Nicolas brought up his negative impressions about his experiences with ESL. Nicolas's previous experiences interplayed with the article and the assignment that went with it. Nicolas voiced his interpretation of the article by saying, "He talked about the situation of immigrants, like how we're here and we're trying to learn, and we're not allowed to because we don't know English." The article indicated Hayakawa's stance that bilingual education programs segregate students because of a belief that they cannot learn in English. Both the part about segregation and the part about not being able to learn English struck a chord with Nicolas. His experiences before college were that he was put into ESL classes that he did not think helped him and that he was with other students from Mexico who spoke Spanish. Even his content courses were a lower-level track:

The education programs. And he talks about segregation. That's the most that I felt related to it, 'cause they shouldn't put us apart, man, they don't put us in the classroom. ... Yeah, and the other peers, they felt segregated 'cause the other peers were having these classes in English and all that, and they were all having Spanish or something like that. He has a point about that. He has a point about how you cannot learn English if you don't practice it as much as you can.

Discussing the article on official English in the US highlighted the interrelationship between Nicolas's personal experiences and background knowledge in constructing an understanding of the article. The assignment required much more than following a set of steps in order to complete it. It required understanding Nicolas's own perspective on the topic and thoroughly examining how the article affected him and how it might affect the intended audience. Nicolas pointed out that he understood the article on one level, but he knew that he still needed to key into other aspects of it:

To me, as soon as I read it, I was like, "Wow!" you know? And now, I read it three times, but I don't really pay attention to the little things, the little things are the things that kill me, but the big picture is there.

Although Nicolas pointed out that much of what the instructor had them do in class was "about reading and understanding" and the tutorials with his instructors were more for dealing with grammatical rules—as he put it, "the rules that I already, that I've just gotta implement"—after reading the article three times he still did not think that he had a good handle on the rhetorical devices used in the article. I brought up points to challenge the article. For example, I read the following sentence out loud, "At times, these have come dangerously close to making the main goals of this program the maintenance of the immigrant child's native language, rather than the early acquisition of English," and commented, "To me, in saying 'it's dangerously close,' I mean, that word 'dangerously,' makes it sounds like it would be really bad." Nicolas connected that with a discussion about rhetorical devices from his class, "Oh, 'cause we went

through this, too. Like twist the words ... those are rhetorical devices.” About halfway through the tutorial, he said, “Yeah. I’m kind of disagreeing now, now that I see through the article, I’m kind of disagreeing.”

Nicolas was extremely confident about his reading skills in both English and Spanish. However, after he read and we discussed the assigned article “Bilingualism in America: English Should Be the *Official* Language,” he said, “I get the big picture, the little things are the things that kill me.” As Nicolas engaged in reading the text, he employed a reading strategy in which he focused on the big picture rather than the details and he related the content to his personal experiences. Nicolas’s interpretation could be ignored within the context of the dominant culture of the academic institution. It is important not to ignore a perspective such as Nicolas’s and to bring multiple perspectives into conversation and explore how they are all a valid part of the phenomenon being discussed. These strategies have been effective for him, but as the experience with the bilingualism article pointed out, he needed to also focus on details in his readings, which he was also aware of.

Nicolas’s strategy of relating academic reading and writing to personal experiences led him to construct an understanding of the article that took into consideration his own experience with immigration and bilingualism, but not broader discourses within the society related to the English-only movement, immigration, and bilingual education that were relevant to consider in order to understand the way the article used rhetorical devices to lead readers to construct a specific understanding. This highlights the importance of, as Rallin pointed out, starting with “the student’s own reality ... starting with but moving beyond local worlds, making connections, and constantly negotiating with the global” (Rallin, 2004, p. 149), irrespective of those broader discourses or of my own interpretation of the article.

### **Discussion and Implications**

To understand the bicultural and bilingual resources immigrant university students may draw on in their writing, it is important to approach instruction from a stance of learning from students’ experiences and perspectives. To foster contexts in which writers’ knowledge and experiences are recognized and encouraged, I found two questions to be useful as heuristics to frame and guide writing discussions. The questions are:

1. How can I help students explore and draw on their bilingual and bicultural resources as they develop academic writing in English in the university?
2. What can I learn from my interactions with students that can improve my interactions with students and instruction I provide them?

Immigrant students’ previous experiences with literacy are a particularly important issue for writing center administrators and writing tutors to explore with bilingual, immigrant university students because they are not a monolithic group in terms of their language experiences. The bilingual, immigrant students discussed in this research, like many others, experienced contexts of



biliteracy in which they did not feel encouraged to draw on and express their experiences and languages in writing in school. Because of such previous experiences, students can have a complicated relationship with language, so explicitly encouraging students to draw on their languages may not work well. Others have written about these issues; for example, Bean et al. (2003) pointed out that students who speak US Spanish may avoid drawing on Spanish in a university context. Kells (2002) showed that Mexican university students internalized deficit views of their language practices based on prevalent myths about language. It is vital for tutors to both listen deeply to what bilingual, immigrant students share and to respond to it, rather than starting with an agenda to ask students to draw on their experiences and languages. When tutors use the concepts of the continua of biliteracy as a guide to understanding writing contexts, coupled with a stance of learning from what students are saying, there is potential to open up possibilities for students to build confidence in drawing on their bilingual and bicultural resources in their university writing.

In my tutorial with Diego, my initial response to his statement of purpose glossed over the deeper feelings of fear that Diego was trying to express in his writing by saying that the people in the community where he is from, including himself and his family, “live in the shadows and in fear.” This example illustrates the value of framing sessions within the content of biliteracy to guide the tutor or instructor to also learning from students and keying into their perspectives. One-on-one writing instruction can provide a context where students’ perspectives are recognized and encouraged. If Diego had not felt that he could correct my interpretation, our interaction would have been another situation in which his experiences were not validated in an educational context. Diego and Nicolas expressed that such experiences created the perception that writing in the university was challenging. Challenges such as this did not arise from their identities as bilingual or bicultural. Rather, Canagarajah (2006) has pointed out that difficulties can arise from institutional barriers to tapping into bilingual and bicultural identities as resources to express in their writing.

Diego also shared with me that he had used the university writing center and he indicated that he had had a good experience. One of the factors he raised that made the experience positive and helpful was the fact that the writing tutor he was randomly assigned to happened to be bilingual, and she helped him draw on both Spanish and English during the discussion of his writing. His experience demonstrates the ways that language can be used to create a sense of shared experience. In addition, it shows the potential for tapping into students’ language resources in the writing center context. It can be valuable to ask students to fill out a questionnaire about their language backgrounds so that tutors know that students may have varying experiences with languages in addition to English. Writing centers and tutors also can provide students with some information about the tutors’ backgrounds with language. These are some steps that can recognize students’ linguistic diversity and create inviting contexts for them to discuss and learn about language and writing.

Although the students in this study voiced apprehension about the prospect of getting help with their writing in a writing center context, writing

centers may be uniquely suited to help bilingual, immigrant students develop confidence in their writing. The one-one-one context of the writing center can provide a place where bilingual, immigrant students can feel that their backgrounds and experiences are heard, understood, and valued. This individualized focus on learning from students and valuing and encouraging students to draw on their bilingual and bicultural resources can help students feel the “power to speak” (Pierce, 1995). These experiences have potential to help students build confidence and find their voice in writing.

### **Author**

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**Appendix**  
**Writing Discussed During Text-Based Conversations**

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Diego</i>	<i>Nicolas</i>
Text-based conversation #1	Scholarship application essay Paper title: "My Community"	Course title: Rhetoric 102 Department of English Paper title: "The Effects of One Language"
Text-based conversation #2	Course title: Mexican American History Department of Latina/Latino Studies Paper title: "Midterm Paper"	Course title: Rhetoric 102 Department of English Paper title: "Immigrants: The Leverage on the United States Economy"
Additional writing	Letter written in Spanish for organization	Drafts of papers