English Language Learners' Use of the Phrase "I Forgot"

A Window into the Challenges of Learning in a Restrictive Environment

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Introduction

From the beginning of the school year, I observed an interesting phenomenon in Ms. James'[1] 3rd grade class: Students would eagerly volunteer to share their ideas by raising their hands or calling out to the teacher, but when they began to share, they would quickly abandon their talk and announce, "I forgot."

Initially I did not think much of it. Everyone forgets what they intend to say mid-thought once in a while. Ms. James did not appear to think much of it either. She never pushed students to "remember," to remind students of the ideas being explored in the discussion underway, or to give students time to collect their thoughts. She simply moved on to the next student.

As I heard more students utter "I forgot" without sharing their ideas, and I noticed that "I forgot" was being uttered by the same group of students, I began to wonder: Had students really forgotten what they were saying, or did they say "I forgot" to cover up something else?

In this article, I explore how young English language learners (ELLs) use the phrase "I forgot" in small group discussions during a reading intervention and investigate how the use of "I forgot" acts as a reaction, or "front," to the restrictive language and learning contexts of these students' school. This article describes the problematic curricular contexts in some urban schools and explores the following: If "I forgot" does not actually mean that children have forgotten what they wanted to say, what underlies young ELLs' utterance of "I forgot" and what beliefs about learning and school are displayed?

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Restrictive Language and Learning Contexts

Ms. James' 3rd grade classroom in an urban Californian district is one example of the restrictive language and learning environments young ELLs face in some urban schools (Pandya, 2011). Like all classrooms, this one was complex in a multi-layered way. Issues of language (e.g., language of instruction), politics (e.g., NCLB Program Improvement [PI] school in an urban district), curriculum (e.g., prescriptive reading program), and pedagogy (e.g., lack of availability of English language models to use as instructional supports) are all huge challenges in and of themselves, but, more often than not, they come together in problematic ways in urban schools.

In 1998, California passed Proposition 227, which succeeded in dismantling bilingual education programs and replacing them with English-only instructional programs. While research had clearly demonstrated the value of bilingual instruction for ELLs (Brisk, 2006; Greene, 1998; Krashen, 1999; Willig, 1985), Proposition 227 meant that children could only receive bilingual instruction if their parents formally requested it.

This bureaucratic obstacle meant that the majority of ELLs found themselves in classrooms that used English-only instruction, thus exacerbating problematic instructional practices for ELLs (Gándara & Baca, 2008; Guerrero, 2004; Gutiérrez et al., 2002; Maxwell-Jolly, 2000; Revilla & Asato, 2002)

As the population of ELLs has increased in California and across the nation, schools have been challenged to serve their needs. For instance, only 60.3% of Californian ELLs graduate from high school. Given these low rates, schools are faced with an imperative to improve ELLs' achievement. Yet, they need to do so while also being forced to enact anti-bilingual initiatives such as Proposition 227. These conflicting mandates create significant pressure on both students to learn and teachers to teach English in as quickly as one year (Guerrero, 2004), despite definitive research that shows that academic English development can take from four to seven years (Collier & Thomas, 1989; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

For example, at Ms. James' school, conversation revolved around the best way to "teach" English to young ELLs. Questions asked included: Should the school group students for English language development (ELD) by English proficiency level or teach English in self-contained classrooms with a range of English proficiency levels? Should the school begin to "transition" students to English instruction earlier and provide less Spanish instruction? In this way, Ms. James' urban classroom was a powerful representation of the challenges facing both teachers and ELLs.

This broader English-only climate was heightened with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act in 2001 with its focus on standardized testing and, in California, the adoption in many districts of prescriptive reading curricula (e.g., Open Court Reading, Houghton Mifflin Reading). During this time, Ms. James' district adopted Open Court Reading. These prescriptive curricula were designed for native English speakers and have done little to address the achievement gap (Peck & Serrano, 2002).

Although a balanced approach to instruction is suggested in the materials, decoding and phonics appear to be emphasized in schools where scripted curricula are used (Peck & Serrano, 2002). Critics of the curriculum note the explicit instruction and its emphasis on discrete skills rather than deep meaning and understanding, arguing that it does not meet the needs of linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged students (Moustafa & Land, 2002; Peck & Serrano, 2002; Stritikus, 2006) or help ELLs

acquire English (Arya, Laster, & Jin, 2005; Cummins, 2000; 2007).

Methodology

The data explored in this article draw from a six-month intervention I implemented with seven students in Ms. James' classroom, a 3rd grade English-only instruction classroom in a public elementary school in a large urban Californian school district. The school is representative of Californian urban schools with majority ELLs and the restrictive learning environments described above. With a school population more than 90% Latino and greater than 90% ELL, access to peer English language models was scarce, making English language acquisition challenging.

In addition, Ms. James' class of 19 Spanish and one Cantonese-speaking ELLs had a range of English language proficiency and literacy levels. Because of Proposition 227, few students had benefited from primary language instruction and those who had received it experienced it inconsistently in lower grades.

For example, several students had bounced between bilingual and English-only classrooms before settling in Ms. James' room. Other students had been in English-only classrooms since Kindergarten. Regardless of their academic path, the importance of learning English and the role of English in academic success permeated the school culture, often at the expense of the native language resources of the linguistically rich student body.

Moreover, the school was at the time in NCLB-mandated Program Improvement status. This meant intense scrutiny and pressure to improve test scores while the school struggled with how to meet the needs of its ELLs while using the prescriptive reading curriculum mandated by California's Reading First Initiative. As with other "low-performing" schools, this mandate restricted the school to the use of the most prescriptive curriculum.

The intervention, a small reading group I implemented, was developed as a design experiment (Barab & Squire, 2004; Reinking & Bradley, 2008; Van den Akker, Gravemeijer, McKenney, & Nieveen, 2006). Building on socio-cultural theories of learning (Nieto, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978) and second language development (Frawley & Lantolf, 1985; Lantolf, 2000, 2006; Lantolf & Appel, 1994), as well as what is known about good reading instruction for ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008), I designed an intervention that included cooperative learning opportunities, discussions to promote conversations, and a combination of interactive and directive instruction (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008).

The intervention was specifically focused on and designed for giving students opportunities to talk about the texts they were reading. Between January and June, I met with the intervention group three times a week.

Theoretical Framing

Educators have offered numerous explanations, competing at times, of why young ELLs are not achieving in schools. Issues of school quality (Cosentino de Cohen et al., 2005; Rogers et al., 2009), teacher quality (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Rumberger, 2008; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010), adequate resources (Cosentino de Cohen et al., 2005), and the lack of a rigorous curriculum (Katz, 1999; Olsen, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999) have all been referred to when trying to account for the achievement gap that we have seen between ELLs and other students.

Other explanations include the failure to develop strong academic English skills as well as deficit views of ELLs and their families and communities. These deficit views have also served to perpetuate the idea that blame for lack of achievement lies within the student rather than in larger societal structures and institutions (Valenzuela, 1999).

However, in my analysis of the students' use of the phrase "I forgot," theories that interrogate the discourse patterns of classrooms and the language ideologies that I believe are at play in schools that serve large numbers of ELLs reveal a more complex picture of young ELLs and their understanding and engagement with their learning environment. I draw on various theoretical frameworks to understand how students' use of "I forgot" can help us better understand how young ELLs make sense of restrictive learning contexts.

Discourse Patterns, Language Ideology, and the Development of "Fronts"

Patterns of discourse have long been viewed in classrooms as important sites of communication between students and teachers. This communication tells us about how particular types of discourse are valued and their effect on educational opportunity (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979). Many classroom discourse patterns have been problematized as difficult for ELLs (Heath, 2000) and do not necessarily encourage the kind of talk that is conducive to language learning (Capitelli, 2010). Students quickly learn the expectations associated with these discourse patterns and how highly valued particular kinds of talk are in classrooms.

Students' actions in reaction to these expectations can be characterized as "fronts" (Goffman, 1959). In his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) conjectures that individuals develop "fronts" to present themselves through an identity that is valued by society. Goffman argued that analogous to the theater, interactions are made up of actors, a stage, and an audience.

Individuals, or actors, present "fronts" in order to influence the perception the "audience" develops about them. Most individuals choose "fronts" that are socially acceptable and valued and serve to assist the individuals in advancing their social position and how they are perceived by their "audience."

Additionally, these "fronts" may be sincere displays or they may be conscious attempts to dupe the audience. In other words, individuals may actually believe in the identity they are presenting to others or they may be aware that the identity they are performing is, in fact, only an act. Rather than the sincerity of these "fronts" by individuals being either consciously or unconsciously acted, a continuum exists along which individuals may begin to believe in the identity or "front" that they perform.

When considering young ELLs, this is particularly important in terms of their behavior in the classroom, the "front" they are displaying, and the relationship their "fronts" have to the language ideologies that permeate their learning contexts. In other words, the "stage" has been set and the "script" written for students before they ever step into a classroom. For ELLs, the "play" is particularly constraining.

Lippi-Green (1997) argues "the primary educational goal in our schools brings together the acquisition of literacy with the acceptance and acknowledgement of a Standard U.S. English" (p. 104). If we accept this as one of the goals of our schools, it becomes clear that ideologies about language have an impact on how language is taught to children and how the language children use is seen and understood. Much of the work around language ideology focuses on how language serves to sustain relations of domination (Bourdieu, 1991). Schools serve as important sites of

reproduction of social life and relations of domination.

Bourdieu (1991) uses the notion of symbolic violence to characterize institutions including the educational system. Bourdieu argues that violence is built into the institution itself and that this violence serves to sustain the existing relations of domination.

For example, schools recognize linguistic competence as the preferred competence rather than an arbitrary one. While I do not believe Bourdieu would suggest that all students need not acquire the linguistic skills to communicate effectively, his argument highlights the role ideologies of language play in our views of what language forms are legitimized and valued in schools.

Findings

I first noticed students uttering "I forgot" while I observed Ms. James' whole class literacy instruction where I began to realize that it was the same group of students using this phrase. These happened to be the lowest performing students as measured by school-wide assessments and standardized test data. These were also the students with the fewest opportunities to participate in their learning context in successful ways.

For example, decoding aloud was valued as Ms. James implemented the Open Court curriculum; during all reading instruction students were asked to read aloud to the class. However, a number of students were unable to "perform" in this way. Additionally, answering comprehension questions was valued. However, these same students struggled to make meaning of and/or engage with the grade level text being used making answering the teacher's questions challenging.

Many of the students I worked with in the intervention group were the same whom I had observed using "I forgot." "I forgot" continued to be used during the intervention group, but I became more concerned and focused on why it was being used and for what purposes. I heard "I forgot" uttered countless times during the whole class literacy instruction. When I started the intervention, the students continued to use "I forgot."

However, during the intervention and subsequent analysis, I examined more closely students' use of "I forgot" and identified three primary ways in which it was used: (1) as a "front" in reaction to their English-only learning context, (2) as a

mechanism to "save face" during classroom conversations, and (3) as a way to be heard in a learning context that highly valued oral participation.

In this article, I focus on one distinct way in which "I forgot" was used: as a "front" in reaction to the English-only learning context. The phrase was used in other ways, but this "front" was particularly important as it demonstrated the students' acute awareness of the explicit and implicit expectations in their learning environment. In order to show how this "front" was enacted, I examine closely one discussion that occurred during the intervention and highlight one student, Edgar's, use of "I forgot."

Edgar was an ELL student who had been in English instruction classrooms and had received the prescriptive reading curriculum (i.e., Open Court Reading) for his reading instruction since Kindergarten. Edgar was born in the United States, and his parents reported that they used Spanish exclusively at home. He had strong English skills (e.g., decoding skills, computation skills), but struggled with comprehension and conceptual understanding. He was easily distracted and spent considerable time talking with his peers. He did not appear particularly interested in the work the class was asked to do and would often complain about being bored or not being able to do the work.

Edgar had developed a false sense of what it meant to read. His decoding skills were strong, and he was often rewarded for his reading fluency, receiving awards at school-wide assemblies. As such, he understood reading as decoding quickly and he was confused and challenged by having to talk about text. I worked with Edgar on his comprehension and discussion of text in the intervention group.

"I Forgot" or "I Know What I Want to Say But It Is Not Okay to Use Spanish"

Given the school and classroom emphasis on English and the lack of support of the students' primary language use, it was not surprising to find that students did not use their primary language to better understand instruction. Although Spanish was the primary language of 19 out of the 20 students, students rarely, if ever, used their productive Spanish to make sense of the content being covered.

Specifically, students did not use Spanish to clarify with one another. Ms. James was not a proficient Spanish speaker, but did have some beginning Spanish that she used to communicate with parents.

Regardless, Spanish use was not encouraged or seen as a resource for learning and understanding. Ms. James never suggested that students use their Spanish amongst each other when they were struggling.

An English-only ethos dominated the classroom and school—at least where academic content was concerned. Students used Spanish with one another on the yard and in class when talking about non-school topics/non-academic topics. But a clear message was being sent about the language of schooling: English was the medium of instruction and learning. Without an explicit mandate, neither teachers nor students were consistently leveraging the instructional asset that Spanish could provide.

Edgar's reluctance to use Spanish is revealed in a conversation we had in the group after working with each other for a month. It represents one example of how "I forgot" became a "front" for "I know what I want to say but it is not okay to use Spanish." We had begun to read texts about electricity, and the students were highly engaged and excited about the texts and topic. The texts were lively and full of interesting illustrations.

The group was working on developing different kinds of questions about texts. Students had to differentiate between finding the answers inside the text of the book or coming up with the answer with information outside of the text (i.e., inference questions). The books on electricity had generated much interest and the students were eager to share their ideas.

During one conversation about electricity, the idea of electrical shocks surfaced. The students were all eager to discuss this idea and to make connections to their own lives.

RICARDO: I think because when the things it shocks you.

TEACHER: Hmmm.

RICARDO: And I think that its…

ALEJANDRO: It shocks me.

TEACHER: Mmm.

EDGAR: *Da toques* (shocks).

TEACHER: Hmmm.

From Ricardo's introduction of the idea of electrical shocks to the group, students, including Edgar, engaged eagerly with the topic. Edgar expressed his interest in Spanish, something relatively unusual in the group and in the classroom up to this point. His interjection of "*da toques*"

indicated his interest and background knowledge of the topic, but also showed that he might be more forthcoming about the topic in his primary language.

TEACHER: Well, we know that electricity is a kind of energy, right? So I'm not quite sure why it's hot but we know that energy can be hot, right? So it seems like what energy does in a light bulb—it's heating up the wire. And when the wire heats up it lets off energy and that energy becomes what? (silence from the group) The light.

EDGAR: The light.

JUAN: The light.

TEACHER: The light. O.K.

The conversation continued. I attempted to focus the conversation and asked the group clarifying questions about the topic we had been discussing before Ricardo brought up the idea of electrical shocks and the group quickly switched gears. Edgar remained engaged; he was clearly following the conversation and actively participating. This level of engagement was different than what I had observed in the whole class reading instruction and represented what I had been trying to cultivate in the intervention.

I was strategic about asking the students what they were interested in and what they wanted to read. They all expressed the desire to read about science and were frustrated with how much they struggled to read the grade level science textbook. As a result, I found non-fiction science texts with numerous illustrations that supported their reading and interests. Our conversations were animated and loud and despite the group often appearing and feeling unfocused, the students were more engaged in the texts and the ideas in the texts during the intervention than when they were during whole class reading instruction. Despite their engagement, many still struggled to make sense of the texts.

The conversation continued as the students eagerly wanted to share their own experiences with electricity, shocks, and their capacity to burn. Edgar remained interested and engaged and tried twice to get my attention to share. I did not respond directly to either of his attempts, leaving him to hold on to the idea he wanted to share.

TEACHER: So I have a lot of people that want something to say. Why don't we do this, because it will be our last time before we go to recess, why don't we go Edgar and then Alejandro, Juan, and Ricardo. Go ahead.

EDGAR: You burn when you get it get it in cause the light it is it is...*I forgot*.

TEACHER: OK.

EDGAR: Next.

TEACHER: Alejandro.

Finally, I acknowledged that they all had something to share and told them in what order they would be sharing. In the moment, I did not push Edgar to try and articulate his idea or encourage him to share his idea in Spanish. He indicated that I should move on as well. Despite my fluency in Spanish, it is not clear in the interaction if I was even aware that Edgar had used Spanish.

At this point, I had not yet begun to encourage the use of the students' primary language as a strategy to try and get students to talk more about text. It was only after reflection on interactions such as these that I began to encourage students to use their primary language when they became "stuck" while talking about text.

JUAN: My dad has this...

EDGAR: It cuts you...

JUAN: ...on his back hurted all the time they gave him this little machine...*que* (that) um...and then he...and then it had this big battery. Like four of them in it and then *um daba toques en el back* (give you shocks in the back) and then it made him feel...

TEACHER: Feel better?

JUAN: Yeah.

TEACHER: Hmmm.

EDGAR: *y las light tambien da toques* (and the light gives shocks too).

JUAN: My dad [did] it when he puts it on his hand and um he puts a lot of...

After Alejandro shared his idea, Juan began to share his idea, taking his assigned turn. Edgar had clearly been following Alejandro's story, commenting shortly after Juan had begun his turn. Juan continued with his story, which built on Ricardo's idea, about his father and shocks that he receives on his back for medical reasons.

Juan, unlike Edgar and the other students, used his Spanish regularly in the class both for social and academic purposes. Like many of the other students in the class, Juan's Spanish use for both personal and academic purposes could be characterized as code-switching.

Juan's comment about electrical shocks and his father introduced Spanish into the conversation for the first time since Edgar's initial comment in Spanish. I interrupted Juan by asking him a question about his story. By asking Juan about his story, part of which had been in Spanish, I signaled to Edgar that it was acceptable for him to share his ideas in Spanish.

Building on Juan's ideas and his use of Spanish, Edgar interrupted Juan's turn and began to share his idea in Spanish. Juan quickly interrupted Edgar and continued with his turn, which was not finished.

What happened in that small segment of conversation that gave Edgar permission to use his Spanish for academic purposes? Was it my engagement with Juan's ideas that signaled to him that using Spanish with me was acceptable or was it Juan's code-switching that made him more comfortable to share his idea? The answer is unclear.

What is clear is that Edgar had internalized the English-only ethos of his learning context, which was a challenge to change. Like all of the students in the classroom, Edgar had a great deal of background knowledge and experience that could be used to help him make sense of at least some of the texts he was asked to read. However, he did not necessarily have the English proficiency to express these ideas and experiences.

I suspected from the outset that if students had the opportunity to use their Spanish to make sense of what they were reading and discussing in English, they might have been able to show more of what they knew about topics and learn more from their literacy instruction.

However, Ms. James and Spanish-speaking students like Edgar were in a learning context that made the use of Spanish challenging. Ms. James did not speak enough Spanish to use it as an instructional tool. Ms. James' situation was not unusual, which raises the question: How can teachers who don't speak their students' first language support their students' use of this language?

With so much emphasis on developing English and an engrained misconception that by using your Spanish you must not be learning English, the students' first language was not being leveraged as the enormous resource it could have been. Edgar, as well as the other students, had come to understand that their first language was not a resource to be used at school for academic purposes.

Instead they developed a "front"—"I forgot"—to use when they could have been

using Spanish to contribute to academic conversations, make sense of ideas and texts, and help them develop their academic English. I began to encourage the use of Spanish in my intervention group when I suspected that it might help students make sense of what we were reading and discussing.

Some students began using their Spanish more frequently when we were together. Others, like Edgar, continued to struggle to use Spanish during our group, despite my support and encouragement along with the experience of peers using Spanish in the group. This lack of Spanish use was not surprising, but it was unfortunate given how they struggled academically in English despite possessing a valuable resource.

Implications

Conversations like this one and the ways in which students used "I forgot" prompted me to reevaluate how the group was organized and how I was supporting students' comprehension development. The use of "I forgot" was clearly significant and had multiple meanings. "I forgot" was used when a student's momentary language preference conflicted with the English-only language ideology of the classroom and school. "I forgot" was used as students attempted to be part of the conversation or as students revealed their struggle to make meaning of text.

What was clear was that "I forgot" was more complex than students simply forgetting what they had intended to say. But how can "I forgot" help us think about the restrictive teaching and learning contexts in which young Latino ELLs find themselves? The complexity of the learning environment was revealed through a close examination of the language used by struggling ELLs.

The students were trying to learn and Ms. James to teach in a highly prescriptive literacy curriculum and restrictive English-only setting. Ms. James felt pressure to conform to expectations based on standardized tests that were not designed for her ELLs. Additionally, students at times used "I forgot" as they tried to conform to the English-only learning context.

Given that similar settings exist in many places in California and elsewhere, teachers need support in how to improve the mandated curricula to better meet the needs of their students. How can monolingual English-speaking teachers use their students' primary language to facilitate their ability to learn English? How can teachers modify prescriptive curricula to address the needs of their linguistically diverse students?

These are challenging questions to answer if young ELLs' needs are going to be met. This is particularly the case given the major shift underway with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As teachers develop instruction for the CCSS, they can and should use students' skills in their first language to build their English language proficiency.

This does not have to mean teaching exclusively in Spanish (or Tagalog or Cantonese), but it can mean letting students use their first language on their own or amongst their peers to make sense of the content they are learning in English. For monolingual English-speaking teachers, this requires a leap of faith: believing that your students are building on their first language to comprehend their second language.

It also requires teaching differently: allowing students to talk with one another about what they are learning and thinking; "training" students on how to work together collaboratively; and developing a pedagogical repertoire that combines interactive and directive instruction.

Many teachers have this pedagogical versatility and recognize that the "one-size-fits-all" curriculum mandated during the NCLB era does not work for their linguistically diverse students. However, the changes that are required to better meet the needs of all of our students are not just changes for teachers to make. Many teachers like Ms. James are aware of the curricular and learning limitations of teaching prescriptive curricula.

Policymakers need to make shifts as well. The curricula developed for the CCSS may prove to be an improvement over NCLB era curricula, but successful implementation will be challenging while English-only mandates such as Proposition 227 persist. Such mandates squander valuable linguistic resources and undermine the learning needs and strengths of young ELLs. All of our educational policies and curricula need to be designed and implemented with ELLs at the center, not on the margins.

When "I forgot" is taken at face value, false assumptions can be made by policymakers, administrators, and teachers about students' assets and challenges. My analysis of "I forgot" indicates that students routinely labeled as underperforming and underachieving had more to say than the surface indicated. Understanding what is underneath "I forgot" highlights the complexity of young ELLs' learning contexts, reminding us as educators that our policies and curricula are not yet serving their needs.

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