Finding Diego: A Bilingual Student Integrates School, Language, and Identity

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ABSTRACT
This article presents a mixed-methods case study of Diego, a bilingual teen who completed public school in Florida. During adolescence, Diego negotiated multiple identities: successful student, Mexican American, bilingual, and typical U.S. teenager. Diego provided interviews and bilingual (English/Spanish) writing (narrative/expository) in 2008 (at age 12, Grade 6) and in 2012 (at age 16, Grade 10). A qualitative analysis of his interviews and a quantitative linguistic analysis of his writing reveal central elements of Diego’s language development as related to academic English and identity. Educational implications for working with bilingual adolescents are discussed.

KEY WORDS
adolescent; biliteracy; English language learners; Latino/a children and families; migration/transnationalism; secondary

Um, my first week I didn’t know what to do or say ’cause I didn’t understand English. I didn’t have no friends at all. It was like, hard for me; it was like seeing kids and I didn’t know what to do. They were all doing work and I was just sitting there without doing anything…. I felt left out too…. After I hit that grade, eighth grade, my life was changing again. In a good way though. My grades were going up, more friends. In ninth grade, it was, after that I decided that school was definitely my thing. I started doing good in school and I am doing good in school. (Diego, age 16, 2012)

This interview excerpt suggests the evolution of Diego, a bilingual adolescent of Mexican heritage who completed public high school in Florida. Through a mixed-methods case study, this article provides an understanding of the multiple and dynamic layers of language and identity encompassed by Diego over the course of his adolescence. A qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with Diego in Grade 6 (2008) and Grade 10 (2012) is integrated with a linguistic assessment of his bilingual narrative and expository writing at both points. Together these analyses offer a portrait of Diego’s academic English language development and multiple identities as a bilingual, multicultural, and ultimately successful student.

Introducing Diego, a bilingual learner

Diego, a recent graduate from a public high school in an urban area of Florida, represents the diversity of the English learner (EL) population in the United States. When we first met Diego in an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom he was 12 years old and in Grade 6. He considered himself a “niño mexicano” (Mexican kid) and strongly identified with his family’s heritage, language, and traditions. Diego often wore rosary beads around his neck and a wristband of the Mexican flag. Diego was born in Florida; however, his family relocated to Hidalgo, Mexico, when he was 5 years old. Thus, he attended kindergarten through Grade 4 in public schools in
Hidalgo, where he did not receive English language instruction in school. When he was 10 years old, Diego’s family returned to Florida, where he continued the fourth grade and experienced, for the first time, the need to use English in both social and academic contexts.

In Grade 6, in an interview conducted entirely in Spanish, Diego claimed that learning English was easy and described himself as bilingual. At that time, he spoke primarily Spanish with his friends at school as well as with his family at home. His mother and grandparents also spoke Otomi, one of the nearly 70 indigenous languages spoken in Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, 2009). Diego reported that he used to speak Otomi with his grandfather and in school in Mexico but had forgotten it since returning to the United States. Like many ELs, after 2 years in U.S. classrooms, Diego had achieved proficiency in conversational English but had not yet mastered the academic language register, defined here as the more complex vocabulary and grammatical structures utilized in school discourse, textbooks, and assessments as well as the specialized language of academic disciplines, such as math, science, and social studies (e.g., Bailey, 2006; Silliman & Wilkinson, 2015). For example, in Grade 6, Diego’s writing contained numerous errors in sentence structure and was generally void of punctuation and paragraph separations in both Spanish and English (Danzak, 2009). In Grade 10, Diego incorporated some elements of academic language (more complex phrases and sentences) and expressed more confidence with academic English. This was evidenced by his writing, which demonstrated increased length and marked improvements in linguistic complexity. As a bilingual who self-identified as a “serious student” in 2012, Diego required both academic challenges and English language support to continue to build his abilities and confidence for school-related activities.

The conceptual framework for this case study lies at the intersection of school success, emergent bilingual identity, and the specialized language of schooling. First, the idea that academic English is the language of power in the United States (Barletta, Klingner, & Orosco, 2011; Nieto, 2010) is played out through the central role of academic English in the sociopolitical context of U.S. schooling. Diego was faced with successfully managing this register to succeed in his academic pursuits. Second, the notion of cultural and linguistic hybridity, i.e., “third space” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36), “in-betweenness” (Sarroub, 2002, p. 130), or liminality (Iannacci, 2008), conceptualizes Diego’s appropriation and negotiation of multiple identities in social and academic settings.

### Academic language proficiency: The language of school success

Participating fully in classroom activities requires thinking and talking in ways that incorporate academic language, including more precise and specialized vocabulary and syntactic structures. From elementary to high school, such skills are the sine qua non of school success (Wilkinson & Silliman, 2008, 2010, 2012). Specifically, academic language is the language of classroom talk, textbooks, tests, and other curricular materials (Bailey, 2010) and also encompasses the specific linguistic and discourse features associated with academic content areas such as social studies, mathematics, and science (Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2007; Yore et al., 2004). Each discipline incorporates its own specialized academic language and thus calls on students to learn new ways of thinking and communicating.

In contrast to academic language, the everyday oral language register is the first language that all young children acquire to become competent and cooperative conversationalists in their social interactions with family, peers, and others. This primary language development results in the ability to communicate in everyday life situations. Unlike developing proficiency in everyday, oral language, developing full proficiency in academic language takes at least a decade of schooling, if not longer, for all students (Berman, 2007). Bilingual students like Diego, who arrive in upper elementary or secondary school, are faced with the daunting task of catching up on years of academic English to which they have had little or no previous exposure (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). This challenge was played out in a longitudinal study (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco, & Páez, 2008) on the development of academic language proficiency of adolescent ELs. This investigation revealed that after residing in the United States for nearly 7 years, only 19 out
of 274 students (7.4% of the participants) scored at or above norms for age-equivalent English speakers on a standardized English language proficiency test.

Of course, using standardized measures designed for monolingual English speakers is likely not the most effective way to evaluate the language abilities of bilingual students. Indeed, many researchers of bilingualism are currently arguing for a paradigm shift in education from a monolingual framework to one that is bilingual or plurilingual, encompassing each student’s multiple linguistic resources in a fluid and integrated way, including in the area of writing (Apraiz Jiao, Pérez Gómez, & Ruiz Pérez, 2012; Canagarajah, 2013; Horner, Lu, Jones Royster, & Trimbur, 2011; Velasco & García, 2014). In addition, from a critical perspective, academic language can be considered a means of maintaining power differentials, essentially determining whose language is central and whose remains on the periphery of what is considered school success in the dominant paradigm (Menken, 2013; Street, 2003).

**Language and identity**

A critical element of school success involves identity—that is, the extent to which each student sees himself or herself as a successful participant in the classroom context. This is especially relevant for students from immigrant families like Diego, who may experience a feeling of in-betweenness (Sarroub, 2002, p. 130) in U.S. classrooms. That is, these students negotiate home language and cultural practices with the dominant, academic language (English) and social practices of school. Iannacci (2008), who used the term liminality to describe the sense of living between cultures, described how bilingual students express their identities and empower themselves through code switching at school. To support bilingual students, teachers can create classroom environments that represent third spaces (Bhabha, 1994), encouraging students’ use of multiple linguistic-cultural resources in learning contexts.

Indeed, students’ identities play a role in language and literacy learning, particularly in relation to engagement and motivation (Danzak, 2011a, 2011b; Jiménez, 2000; Norton-Peirce, 1995). In the context of school, academic language and literacy serve as means of acquiring access and experience; therefore, they represent sources of symbolic capital in the classroom/school community (Christian & Bloome, 2004; Toohey, 2000). This implies that similar to monolingual English-speaking students, those ELs who possess the experience, tools, and resources to acquire academic language proficiency early on are more likely to meet the demands of school. For those students who lack symbolic capital and thus become excluded from the cultural practices of schooling (i.e., literacy instruction), success is elusive or nonexistent (Danzak & Silliman, 2005; Christian & Bloome, 2004). Similar to Diego, many ELs come to the United States with a positive outlook on learning English and quickly acquire conversational skills. However, without strong support to both engage and develop their academic English language proficiency, these students are at risk for diminished interest in school, lack of engagement in the central activity structures of schooling (e.g., whole-group participation, peer and dyadic instruction), and ultimately declining levels of school success and completion.

In sum, the literature on language and school success leads to the conclusion that academic English language instruction needs to occur through additive language- and literacy-learning strategies (Valenzuela, 1999) that take into account students’ primary linguistic and cultural resources, using them as integrated supports in second language acquisition. In this way, teachers also acknowledge students’ bilingual identities and provide them with opportunities to draw on their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992), including language and cultural experience as applied to their own learning processes.

Diego, for example, was generally unmotivated by schoolwork in Grade 6; however, when given the opportunity, he was eager to demonstrate his writing skills in compositions about his favorite soccer star, the celebration of Cinco de Mayo, and his first day of school in the United States. Providing ELs with opportunities to engage in meaningful, authentic language and literacy practices is a key to unlocking their academic English language potential as well as their motivation to succeed in school.
Methods

The purpose of the present study was twofold: (a) to learn how Diego’s feelings and attitudes toward English and language learning, including writing, remained constant or changed from 2008 to 2012; and (b) to assess the consistencies and/or changes that occurred in Diego’s writing, in both Spanish and English, in 2008 versus 2012. The following research question guided this inquiry: How did Diego’s language and literacy learning experiences and/or practices influence his identity as a bilingual writer from 2008 to 2012, and how was his bilingual writing (Spanish/English) influenced by his changing identity?

The present inquiry can be described as a mixed-methods case study. The approach is mixed methods because both qualitative and quantitative data and analyses are incorporated (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Regarding the case study, it can be said that Diego is an “intrinsic case” (Stake, 1995, p. 3), as the emphasis is on his particular case rather than a phenomenon he represents. Diego is also a “common case” (Yin, 2014, p. 52) because in many ways he represents a typical EL in the public school context: Spanish speaking, of Mexican origin, and with diverse school experiences. Stake (1995) noted the common motivation for a case study as “We would like to hear their stories” (p. 1). Here we wanted to understand Diego’s story, as well as his academic language and identity development, as a Mexican American, bilingual student growing up and attending middle and high school in the United States.

Data collection: 2008

We met Diego in 2008 when he was 12 and attending Grade 6. Diego participated in a prior mixed-methods study of bilingual narrative and expository writing of Spanish-speaking ELs that took place in his ESOL classroom (Danzak, 2011b, 2011c). Diego was among six of 20 participants randomly selected to serve as focal students in this study. The focal students were interviewed about their language and literacy learning experiences and how these had impacted on their identities as bilingual writers (Danzak, 2011b). Interviews were semistructured (Bernard, 2006): guided by a protocol designed a priori but flexible enough to address other topics or delve more deeply into points of interest. Interviews, conducted in the students’ language of choice, were audio recorded and transcribed by the first author. In 2008, Diego opted to complete his interview entirely in Spanish. This interview lasted 16 min and resulted in a transcript of 19 double-spaced pages.

All participants, including Diego, composed two narrative and two expository writing samples, each in English and Spanish, for a total of eight language-specific, formal texts as well as 10 journal entries written in the students’ language of choice. Structured prompts were provided for both the formal texts and the journal entries. One full class period was dedicated to the composition of each text. Students’ writing was collected and transcribed verbatim for analysis. See Table 1 for topics of the formal writing samples used here for analysis.

Data collection: 2012

In Spring 2012, with the goal of exploring how he had developed in his writing and sense of identity, we followed up with Diego, who was then age 16 and in Grade 10. At this time, Diego completed a more in-depth interview and composed a new set of bilingual writing samples outside the classroom. The first author (bilingual, Spanish and English) met with Diego at a public library after school to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Diego’s writing for quantitative analysis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Genre</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expository</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Each topic was written in both English and Spanish; total number of texts = 8.
conduct the interview, which was again semistructured and designed to inquire about Diego’s language and literacy learning experiences since middle school, his current language and literacy practices in varied contexts, and his attitudes and feelings toward these practices and bilingualism in general. Diego’s goals for the future were also discussed. During the interview, Diego had the opportunity to review and comment on his 2008 interview transcript. The 2012 interview was also audio recorded and transcribed by the first author. In 2012, Diego elected to conduct his interview almost entirely in English. This interview lasted 1 hr and 10 min and was transcribed in 40 double-spaced pages.

At the close of the 2012 interview, Diego was given instructions and prompts to complete his writing samples independently at home. He produced one narrative and one expository sample (a choice of two topics was provided for each), each written in both English and Spanish, for a total of four texts (see Table 1). A few weeks later, the first author met Diego again at the library to pick up his writing samples, which were composed by hand. Diego was paid $50 for his 2012 participation. Written parental consent and student assent were given for participation in both 2008 and 2012.

**Qualitative data analysis**

All of Diego’s written texts and both interview transcripts from 2008 and 2012 were included in the qualitative data analysis, which was supported by NVivo Version 9 software (QSR International, Doncaster, Australia). A thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Grbich, 2007) was applied to identify and code themes and subthemes. For Corbin and Strauss (2008), themes are categories that “represent relevant phenomena and enable the analyst to reduce and combine data” (p. 159). Creswell (2013) described the process of classification, in which data are organized into a few or several general themes, as “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 186).

As the themes and subthemes were identified and coded, data displays such as networks and cognitive maps (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were developed. Inspiration Version 8 concept-mapping software (Inspiration Software, Beaverton, OR) was used to create various data displays. This process allowed us to discover what was important to Diego in 2008 versus 2012 and the trajectory of his feelings, attitudes, goals, and identities over time.

**Quantitative data analysis**

For the quantitative analysis, Diego’s handwritten texts were transcribed into Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts software (SALT Software, Madison, WI) and segmented into T-units following Danzak (2011c). The texts were then coded for elaborated noun phrases (ENPs; Danzak & Silliman, 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2008; Ravid & Berman, 2010), clause types were identified, and clausal density was calculated (Nippold, Mansfield, Billow, & Tomblin, 2008). ENPs and complex clauses are central features of the academic language register (e.g., Schleppegrell, 2007). These subsequent analyses enabled comparisons of the Diego’s writing by language choice (English/Spanish), genre (narrative/expository), and time (2008/2012).

**ENP measure**

ENPs increase sentence complexity through pre- or postmodification of nouns, packaging attributive information (Scott & Balthazar, 2010). Examples of ENPs include the following, from less to more complex (head nouns are underlined): China’s history, a lifelong dream, the brightly colored buildings, the many technological advances the country has made (excerpted from the expository writing of a 16-year-old bilingual student in Grade 10; Danzak & Silliman, 2014). For the analysis of Diego’s writing, a combination of ENP coding from Eisenberg et al. (2008) and Ravid and Berman (2010) was developed and applied. ENP codes, their explanations, and examples are summarized in Table 2.
Clausal complexity measure

Following Nippold et al. (2008), subordinate clauses in Diego’s writing were classified and coded as nominal (a clause that holds the position and function of a noun in the sentence), relative (a clause that describes a noun), or adverbial (a clause that modifies a verb, expressing time, conditionality, or purpose) (see Table 3). Clausal density was calculated by dividing the sum of all main and subordinate clauses by the total number of T-units.

Findings

Qualitative outcomes

The first relevant finding is that Diego’s language preference shifted from Spanish to English over the two periods of interaction. In 2008, classroom interactions between the first author and Diego were conducted in both Spanish and English, his interview was in Spanish, and 9 out of 10 of his journals were composed in Spanish, by his choice. In 2012, research contacts with Diego (phone calls, meetings) were consistently conducted in English, his interview was in English, and his writing appeared to be composed first in English and then translated into Spanish.

Major themes that emerged from the interviews and writing across both years were the following: language, school, family, soccer, and expectations for the future. Figure 1, a data display, maps the relationships among these major themes (in squares) and their related subthemes (in ovals).

Language and family

In the area of language, Diego experienced a marked shift from 2008 to 2012 regarding his self-confidence and competence in English. Although he considered himself bilingual in 2008, by 2012 he expressed a deeper understanding of what it meant to be able to navigate the various aspects of his life in two languages. For example, he mentioned several times in 2012 that he did not use Spanish very much anymore outside of the home environment:

Table 2. Classification of ENPs with examples from Diego’s writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENP</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Examples From Diego’s Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre1 Det/quant + HN</td>
<td>my homeroom, another friend, a lot of people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre2 (Det/quant +) modifier + HN</td>
<td>Those 2 soccer players, el equipo mejor (the best team)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre3 (Det/quant +) &gt;1 modifier + HN</td>
<td>el siguiente jugador (the next best player)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post1 HN + phrase</td>
<td>a team called Barcelona, unas cosas del traffic (things about traffic)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post2 HN + relative clause</td>
<td>business that need it, a time I was proud of myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post3 HN + phrase with embedding of additional ENP(s)</td>
<td>tricks with the soccer ball, a vision of my future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post4 HN + relative clause with embedding of additional ENP(s)</td>
<td>otro niño que tambien el iba a esa escuela (another boy that also went to that school), todos los signos de traffic que yo todavia no sabia (all the signs of traffic that I still didn’t know).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ENP = elaborated noun phrase; Pre = premodification of HN; Det/quant = determiner/quantifier; HN = head noun; Post = postmodification of HN. aHNs are underlined; embedded ENPs are italicized.

Table 3. Classification of subordinate clauses with examples from Diego’s writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clause Type</th>
<th>Examples From 2008</th>
<th>Examples From 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adverbial</td>
<td>When I start 1st period I didn’t know what to do …</td>
<td>When my name was called to take the exam I felt nervous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominal</td>
<td>When I start 6 grade I didn’t know where to go.</td>
<td>Thats what I want for my future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>me confundia con otro niño, que tambien el iba a esa escuela (They confused me with another boy that also went to that school).</td>
<td>and with that money I would donate it to business that need it …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Example clauses are in italics.
I don’t really talk Spanish now. All I talk like in school and with my friends is all English now … Except with my parents sometimes, especially with my mom, I have to talk in Spanish to her, or family. (Interview, 2012)

Effectively, in both 2008 and 2012, Diego identified his family as the origin of his multiple language experiences.

With respect to his bilingual identity, near the end of the 2012 interview we reviewed Diego’s 2008 response (in Spanish) to the question “What does it mean to be bilingual?” At this point, Diego strategically code switched (e.g., Reyes & Ervin-Tripp, 2011), responding in both Spanish and English to demonstrate and perfectly contextualize his application of the two language systems, again noting his family as motivation for his continued use of Spanish:

Bilingüe es … bilingüe es aprender dos lenguajes. Poder hablar dos lenguajes. Es español o English [Bilingual is … bilingual is learning two languages. Being able to speak two languages. It’s Spanish or English]. And it still is. You know, um, I think I’m bilingual. I am bilingual, ‘cause I can speak in Spanish and English. Yo puedo hablar con la familia en español [I can speak with my family in Spanish]. Which, I have to [laughs]… I am bilingual. (Interview, 2012; italics indicate Diego’s word/phrase stress)

Another shift in Diego’s understanding of language relates to the process of acquiring English as a second language. Although he reported in 2008 that learning English was “bien fácil” (very easy), by 2012 he had realized that this was not really the case. When asked to reflect on his biggest challenge so far, Diego concluded,

The language was the hardest part. You know, you have to understand, learn the language … ’cause I got here and didn’t understand, didn’t know what to do. I don’t know how I passed it, the grades, I just did some of the work, but I didn’t understand it. I was like, school, fifth grade, I didn’t know what to do. Say like projects, I also, I didn’t do them, because I didn’t know when it was due, what we had to do and, I don’t know, I just didn’t know what to do. Until now: It’s easier. So it went from hard to easier. (Interview, 2012)

Thus, while Diego’s abilities in English grew, so did his understanding of what it meant to learn a second language and be a bilingual language user in varying contexts.
School and family
The analyses revealed that for Diego, his self-identification as an engaged and successful student was the most significant difference over time. In 2008, Diego maintained a tight circle of Latino friends, spoke primarily in Spanish, and was tempted by gang involvement. However, as he reflected in 2012, when he changed schools in eighth grade, found a new circle of friends, and continued to feel supported by his parents, his goals and sense of self changed dramatically:

People like, gang involved—friends. You know, I was also getting involved in that, like in sixth and seventh grade ’cause of the friends that I hang—it depends on what friends you hang out with. I was with Hispanics, you know, and they got mostly like gang involved. So I was almost, like getting involved to that. And you can’t, you can’t, like, it’s hanging out with them the whole time. In school, they don’t even care about it…. So they were telling me to get involved: to do this, drink this, smoke this, and stuff. I really never did it though. I just think that it was gonna waste my life like that, easy. And you know, I have a family. My parents are really good. So getting involved to that … wasn’t helping me at all. (Interview, 2012)

Instead of gang involvement, in high school Diego found other opportunities to participate in diverse aspects of academic and social life:

In ninth grade, it was, after that I decided that school was definitely my thing. I started doing good in school and I am doing good in school. My friends, you know, I joined Multicultural [a student club]. I joined it, new people and stuff like that. I have friends from other countries, you know. I made friends from say Albanian, and like Russian, Asian, like that, you know. I even—I date out of my race. (Interview, 2012)

His diverse group of friends led Diego to surprise himself by participating in unexpected sports:

Like I said, I changed. I mean I actually don’t hang out with my own race now. I do, see like for sports and stuff like that. I play more like, I’m getting into involved like, hockey [laughing] … I never seen a Mexican played hockey before. (Interview, 2012)

In addition, with new confidence in his ability to speak English, Diego had overcome his “shyness” to the point that he participated in the drama club: “Acting [laughing], I just thought that it was kind of, weird. Why would people join that? That’s what I used to say, and I was like, ‘Why?!’ It wasn’t my thing until acting. I love acting now” (Interview, 2012).

Although he was fluent in conversational English, Diego still attended the ESOL program to support his academic English, which “helps a lot”: “Vocabulary, making sentences, reading from the book, you know, um, dialogue with the text and stuff like that. That’s what we do. And after you do that you get it” (Interview, 2012). It is perhaps not surprising that Diego identified biology as his most difficult class, in part because of the specialized language:

It’s kinda hard for me to learn all that stuff. Chromosomes, and stuff like that … Vocabulary, yeah. Big words that I don’t understand. That’s the hard thing for me, you know? I have to pass that class and stuff, so I have to keep focusing on it. (Interview, 2012)

However, he enjoyed English and World History and demonstrated his ability to make connections between the two, as well as his growing capabilities in academic English, through his motivation to engage with a classic text:

… I read the book The Odyssey. In English, I read it and I loved it. I’m like, I actually loved it. I guess it was like a little book, short, and I liked it. After that, World History helped to understand better what was going on. And after that I read, uh, I checked out a book, The Odyssey. Like, longer version, and stuff, so I am reading it now. (Interview, 2012)

Connecting school, family, and the future
Embracing his identity as a successful student, including the appropriation of academic English, appeared to be the most important change for Diego over time, as exemplified by the following comment:
Yeah, I am the first one to go off to college…. My mom, ‘cause like, my sisters dropped out. In middle school, they dropped out. They left home and they was pregnant. And, you know, my mom wasn’t really proud of them at all. So, from here I’m the oldest kid right now, and I wanna make my mom proud. That’s why, staying in high school, I wanna make my mom proud, you know, see me graduate with a diploma, do better than my sisters. And that’s what I wanna do: at least the first one out of my family to actually graduate. (Interview, 2012)

Once again, Diego identified his parents as a source of support:

My dad graduated. He’s supporting me a lot. He says, every time I get good grades he says, “Keep it up and I know you can do better.” And I try and try, you know, to do what I can, and I get good grades. My mom, she says it’s good, it’s good. (Interview, 2012)

Looking into the future, in 2008, Diego was set on becoming a soccer superstar or another sort of superhero:

My goals about my future, Im goin to live in mexico in a big house im gonna be a soccer player or if a dont make it to be a soccer player am goint to be a police officer then in the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation].

(Expository, 2012)

This being said, at age 12 he still recognized that he wanted to have a more stable, comfortable life than what his family had experienced: “My American dream is to work in a office and not in the sun like construction jobs or fixing roofs like my family” (Autobiography, 2008).

In 2012, Diego’s dreams for the future appeared more realistic, although he still hoped that soccer could be a part:

I wanna finish school here, and then … go to college, because yeah, I wanna graduate at say, CEO [chief executive officer], and I want to go to [state university] for like soccer, ‘cause this year, I don’t know, soccer has been like everything for me. (Interview, 2012)

Again mentioning the important role of his family and the value of hard work, in his 2012 expository essay Diego wrote the following (errors preserved):

A vision of my future is to go to college and to study something about business and have my own business of sales…. Im going to work hard and all that hard work is going to be worth it. Life isn’t easy and you need to make something out of it. When that happens Im going to thank my friends and especially my family.

(Expository, 2012)

At the time of this writing, Diego had graduated from high school and opted to join the U.S. Army.

**Quantitative outcomes: Writing measures**

Based on the two measures applied (ENPs and clausal complexity), the analyses showed that both Diego’s narrative and expository writing became more complex from 2008 to 2012. As his texts increased in length, his phrase and sentence structures also became more diverse.

**ENPs**

Diego’s 2008 narratives were characterized by simple, Pre1 ENPs—that is, premodification of head nouns with determiners or quantifiers (e.g., “6 grade,” “any friend,” “a lot of people”). In 2008, Diego tended to use postmodification in expository texts only: for example, (a) Post2, consisting of a head noun with a relative clause (e.g., “a team that a [I] always like”); and (b) Post3, composed of a head noun plus a phrase with additional embedded ENPs (e.g., “tricks with the soccer ball”).

In 2012, Diego’s use of varied types of ENPs increased in both genres, especially in English. For example, his English narrative included complex mixing of both pre- and postmodification of nouns classified as Post3 and Post4 ENPs (e.g., “the first 20 questions of road rules,” “The first time I took the exam”). His English expository text also contained Post2 and Post3 ENPs (e.g.,
“business that need it,” “soccer like a career”). Diego’s use of ENPs across language, genre, and time is summarized in Figure 2.

**Clausal complexity**

Regarding types of clauses and clausal density, Diego’s writing also became both more diverse and more complex over time. His total number of subordinate clauses went from four to seven per text in 2008 to 14–21 per text in 2012. Diego’s clausal density score also increased from an average of 1.30 in 2008 to an average of 2.03 in 2012. Thus, in 2012, Diego was not only writing more but also embedding more information in each sentence, thereby increasing the linguistic complexity of his writing, a feature of academic English writing. This was the case for both Spanish and English narrative and expository texts.

For example, in his 2008 narratives, Diego used singular adverbial clauses such as “When I have another friend” and “Cuando yo iba al baño” (When I went to the bathroom) in his narratives. In his 2012 narratives, he incorporated multiple clauses: “The first time I took the exam [adverbial] I was feeling nervous because I didn’t studied [adverbial].” Similarly, in his 2008 expository, he stated, “I admire Ronaldinho because he is very good at soccer [adverbial],” whereas in 2012, his structure became more complex: “Cuando eso pasa [adverbial] le voy agradecer a mis papás porque ellos son los que me ayudaron [adverbial] [relative]” (When this happens I am going to thank my parents because they are the ones that helped me). See Figure 3 for a summary of clause types and clausal complexity scores.

**Conclusions and discussion**

With regard to academic language, the findings of this study show that Diego is making strides toward mastery of this register. His advancement in academic English is clear in his 2012 interview, which highlights his newfound identity as a successful student focused on achieving the academic goals of attaining good grades, graduating from high school, and going on to college. Diego’s progressing academic English skills are also revealed in the growth demonstrated in his narrative and expository writing in both English and Spanish, as his ENPs and subordinate clauses increase in both diversity and complexity over time.
In the context of in-betweenness, it is clear from the interviews that even at age 12 in 2008, Diego embraced his dual cultural identity and bilingualism. However, a more mature Diego in 2012 recognizes and clearly articulates that he can apply different linguistic and cultural tools strategically to successfully participate in the diverse areas of his life (e.g., family, social, academic). Diego also emphasizes the importance of his family as both a cause and an effect of his bilingualism: He speaks Spanish to communicate with his family; they support his acquisition of English and his school success. His ability to write with similar levels of linguistic complexity (ENPs, clauses) in 2012 suggests that academic English may be informing his sentence and discourse structure in Spanish, as he now appears to translate his English writing into Spanish. This is likely a result of Diego’s English-dominant school experiences.

Overlap of in-school and out-of-school languages

Speaking primarily English in the school setting has encouraged Diego to become increasingly involved in diverse extracurricular peer groups and activities, such as clubs and sports. Social English has served as a resource that provides Diego with increased access and opportunities to participate in school-based practices both in and out of the classroom. Building on this social language foundation, Diego’s acquisition of academic English is affirmed, in the 2012 interview, by his expression of an evolving identity as a successful student with aspirations of higher education and confirmed by the quantitative examination of his writing. In sum, increased English language proficiency has allowed Diego to achieve greater symbolic capital (Christian & Bloome, 2004) in both social and academic contexts, thus increasing his access to participation and engagement both in and out of school.

At the same time, Diego has continued to use Spanish at home, solidifying his identity as a bilingual and Mexican American. In both his interviews and his writing, Diego expresses strong ties and gratitude toward his parents, indicating how much they have supported him and his desire to make them proud. Diego’s parents are clearly instrumental in encouraging him to learn English, stay out of trouble, work hard in school, and strive for a successful future.

Implications for classrooms and teachers

This study is limited to one bilingual student who acquired academic English and came to regard himself as successful in school. However, what we have learned from Diego has implications for the education of ELs, particularly at the adolescent level.
Diego’s case underscores the fact that bilingual students, particularly at the secondary level, need significant time and support to acquire academic English (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Although many of these students are formally identified as ELs and entitled to services such as ESOL, they spend most of their time in regular classrooms with teachers who are content area (but not language) experts (e.g., experts in math, science, social studies). Bilingual students need opportunities to practice what they learn in class with English-speaking peers through interaction/collaboration in both social and academic contexts.

The question arises: What constitutes an integrated schooling experience for adolescent bilinguals? To achieve this goal, all teachers, regardless of the grade or content area they teach, must know about language diversity and the unique challenges and opportunities that bilinguals face in school. Students, especially emergent bilinguals, will learn disciplinary content only if they understand its particular language. Content area teachers are thus responsible for helping them acquire the specialized registers of academic language and apply them appropriately.

Finally, a key implication of the work presented here is that secondary educators can embrace diverse schools and classrooms as opportunities to collaborate in rich and productive ways with colleagues, including ESOL teachers. Such collaboration is more likely to yield the most effective educational services for emerging bilingual students who struggle with academic English language and literacy and, consequently, school success.

References


