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Dual Language Teachers’ Use of Conventional, Environmental, and Personal Resources to Support Academic Language Development

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This article reports findings from a study that investigated the ways in which first-grade dual language teachers drew on various resources to instructionally support academic language development among Spanish-English emergent bilingual students. Classroom observations, semistructured interviews, and document collection were conducted over a period of one school year. Findings indicate that: (a) teachers had differential access to personal and environmental resource streams; (b) teachers drew on multiple, interactive resource streams; and (c) there were some tensions within resource streams. Findings have implications for the preparation of teachers who will work in increasingly linguistically diverse classrooms in which academic language is much needed.

INTRODUCTION

The number of language-minority children in our nation’s public schools has grown tremendously over the past 20 years and continues to increase annually. More than one in nine children nationwide qualifies for ESL (English as a Second Language) services due to low English proficiency (Goldenberg, 2008). These children speak more than 400 different home languages and have varied schooling experiences, but more than 50% were born in the United States and nearly 80% speak Spanish as a home language (Capps, Fix, Murray, Passel, & Herwantoro, 2005).

Even among language-minority children, Spanish speakers struggle academically, generally doing poorer in school and exhibiting higher dropout rates than children from other immigrant groups (Goldenberg, 1996; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Language issues are undoubtedly compounded by the fact that immigrant families from Mexico and Central America generally come from lower socioeconomic and educational backgrounds than other immigrant groups (Capps et al., 2005). Most Spanish-speaking children receive all of their
instruction in English (Goldenberg, 2008; Malagon & DeLeeuw, 2008), but a growing minority are enrolled in dual language (DL) programs, in which comprehensible input is provided in two languages. Spanish speakers who might otherwise not be able to access academic content have the opportunity to become bilingual and biliterate—they become emergent bilinguals (O. García & Kleifgen, 2010).

Much of the research on dual language programs has focused on the equitable distribution of instruction in English and the minority language across the curriculum (Amrein & Peña, 2000; Lindholm, 1990; Lindholm-Leary, 2001), but some have argued that quality of instruction and language use have been underinvestigated (Escamilla, 1994; Freeman, 1996; Hadi-Tabassum, 2006; Valdés, 1997; Wiese, 2004). As a result, little is known about how academic language—the decontextualized register of language necessary to participate in the literate community of school—is supported within dual language programs. Multiple studies have underscored the importance of academic language proficiency for the success of all children, and the need to study it specifically within ELL populations has been identified (Arreaga-Mayer & Perdomo-Rivera, 1996; Bowers, Fitts, Quirk, & Jung, 2010; Freeman, 2000; Goldenberg, 1996).

Empirical evidence supports the notion that instructional practice matters for emergent bilingual student achievement, regardless of language of instruction (Lyster, 2007; Ramírez, 1992). In order to understand and contextualize the instructional practices of DL teachers and their potential to improve bilingual academic language outcomes for students, it is necessary to identify the conventional, environmental, and personal resources these teachers have access to and how they use them (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003). The issue of resources is an important one because there is a wealth of survey data highlighting the many ways in which teachers of emergent bilingual students are underresourced (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005; Gándara & Rumberger, 2006), but the field lacks concrete information about the formal and informal resources teachers have and how they harness them specifically to target bilingual academic language development. In this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What resources do first-grade dual language teachers access and use in their academic language instruction for emergent bilingual students?
2. What factors mediate their ability and willingness to use these resources?

RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO TEACHERS

The availability of resources is only one of many factors that influence teacher practice, and as such its effects are likely to vary from teacher to teacher, even within a school or program (Charalambous & Hill, 2012). Additionally, resources can both enable and constrain certain instructional practices. Previous work in the study of resources for the education of language-minority students has shown that this can be especially relevant in dual language school settings (Elfers et al., 2009), where resources may be unevenly distributed. An essential question guiding the current study was, “what resources matter, how, and under what circumstances?” (Cohen et al., 2003, p. 134). Cohen et al. (2003) proposed a framework that includes three broad categories of resources available to educators: conventional, environmental, and personal. These categories—which are referred to as streams in this article—were used as an analytic tool to identify the resources that three focal teachers had available to them and to make connections to
the instruction they provided for academic language development. Each of the resource streams made a contribution to instructional practice, and deeper analysis revealed intersections and tensions among them. This suggests that teachers’ uptake of resources is complex and mediated by various factors, such as knowledge, experience, and relationships with colleagues. Figure 1 illustrates the relations among the three resource streams considered in this study. The dotted arrows indicate that conventional resources do not directly influence instructional practices. Rather, their use is mediated through teachers’ personal and environmental resources, which also interact with one another. It is these personal and environmental resources that have the most direct influence on instruction, as represented by the solid arrows.

These relations will be discussed in greater detail throughout the findings.

Conventional Resources

Conventional resources are those traditionally considered in discussions of educational resources—most notably services and materials that can be purchased. This stream includes curriculum and associated materials, facilities, time, formal certification, and professional development (PD) sessions. Professional development here refers to structured learning opportunities that are facilitated by someone other than teachers and is distinct from professional learning, which is the process of teachers gaining knowledge and changing practice as a result (Easton, 2008). It is somewhat straightforward to document PD opportunities afforded to teachers but considerably more complicated to document the professional learning that may occur as a result of such opportunities.

While conventional resources are a necessary foundation for the work of teachers, they are not inherently related to student learning and are insufficient by themselves to support the complex work of teaching (Charalambous & Hill, 2012; Cohen et al., 2003). Instead, they matter only when they are effectively used in the service of providing enhanced instruction. Within the area of second language education in particular, conventional resources have been widely studied, especially in terms of professional development and access to level-appropriate materials (Bowers...
et al., 2010; Gándara et al., 2005). Nonetheless, some of the most important resources that contribute to student learning—such as teachers’ content knowledge (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008; Shulman, 1997) and knowledge about language (Bigelow & Ranney, 2005; Fillmore & Snow, 2002)—are not captured by the notion of conventional resources.

Environmental Resources

Environmental resources include professional leadership and collaboration, as well as relationships with colleagues, families, and students. Such resources provide guidance for instruction, opportunities to understand academic norms, and collegial and community support (Russell, 2012). These resources can operate at a global level, as in the case of different levels of leadership and cohesion among them, or at the local level, as in the case of student-teacher classroom interactions. Environmental resources—in concert with personal resources—can either enable or constrain the use of conventional resources, as shown in Figure 1. For example, a district may provide curricular materials as a conventional resource. However, teachers’ ability to effectively use those materials will likely be influenced by opportunities to collaborate (or not) with colleagues who are knowledgeable about the materials and the content they contain.

Personal Resources

In the current framework, personal resources include teacher will, skill, experience, and practical and theoretical knowledge (Cohen et al., 2003). Some researchers have identified ethnic identity, attitudes, and orientations toward bilingualism as additional personal resources that can be harnessed in instruction for language-minority children (Galindo & Olguín, 1996; Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Monzó & Rueda, 2001; Rader-Brown & Howley, 2014). Indeed, it may be that educators who are ethnic minorities have cultural resources that are not available to other educators. In terms of attitude, it has been argued that, “effective instruction of linguistically diverse students relates directly to teachers’ dispositions toward their students and their backgrounds” (Lee & Oxelson, 2006, p. 456). Cohen et al. (2003) agreed, noting that teachers’ use of resources is likely influenced by their understanding of children’s abilities, which may be related to perceived language proficiency. It is also true that whether a teacher is bilingual or not could affect their personal orientation to bilingualism in ways that would lead to more supportive instruction for language-minority children (Rader-Brown & Howley, 2014).

In any case, the personal resources that teachers bring to their practice mediate conventional resources and teacher instruction (Figure 1). For example, teachers’ experience in diverse (or non-diverse) classrooms can influence their willingness to learn from PD sessions, and their beliefs about their students’ capabilities can make them more or less likely to implement strategies learned through professional development.

The critical knowledge and skills that effective teachers of emergent bilinguals need differ in some ways from those needed for successful instruction of mainstream students, especially since the academic language needs of emergent bilingual children go beyond those of the general student population. As such, researchers in the field of ESL have begun to outline a knowledge base for teachers of children learning two languages simultaneously. It includes: an understanding of first and second language development, how the processes are similar and different, and
what to expect from second language learners as they progress through the stages (Dejong & Harper, 2008; Fillmore & Snow, 2002; Lucas & Grinberg, 2008); a clear understanding of what constitutes academic language and how it develops, as well as the ability to identify the academic language demands of the curriculum (Fillmore & Snow, 2002; Gándara et al., 2005; Gibbons, 2002; Harper & Dejong, 2004; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Valdés, Bunch, Snow, Lee, & Matos, 2005); an understanding of how to differentiate instruction based on individual students’ language proficiency levels; and knowledge of how to scaffold students linguistically within their zone of proximal development (Krashen, 1982; Vygotsky, 1978).

The mere existence of a professional knowledge base in second language education is not necessarily a useful resource for teachers, however. What matters is how that knowledge base is taken up and subsequently harnessed in instruction. In the current analysis, the interrelatedness of resource access, use, and instructional practice was explored, leading to the formation of a practice-based theory of linguistic knowledge necessary for successful academic language instruction in primary-level dual language programs.

This integrated approach to studying personal resources and their use corresponds to some extent to what has been called “pedagogical content knowledge,” or the intersection of teacher knowledge and actual practice (Ball et al., 2008; Shulman, 1987). This knowledge is pedagogical in the sense that teachers not only know their content well but also how to make it accessible to students. Pedagogical content knowledge guides teachers as they plan lessons, organize instruction, frame tasks, and evaluate student work. Recently, scholars in the field of second language learning have proposed an extension of this construct that focuses specifically on critical language awareness. This has been termed “pedagogical language knowledge” (Bunch, 2013; Galguera, 2011; Lucero, 2013). Bunch (2013) argued that pedagogical language knowledge goes beyond just knowing about language—as might be the case if language were considered the content in pedagogical content knowledge—and is not separable from the disciplinary areas in which teachers teach. Rather, pedagogical language knowledge “can be construed as knowledge of language directly related to disciplinary teaching and learning, situated in the particular (and multiple) contexts in which teaching and learning take place” (Bunch, 2013, p. 307).

METHODOLOGY

This article reports findings from a qualitative case study of a team of first-grade dual language teachers. Although it examines the work of only three teachers over one school year, the focus in the larger sense is on how an in-depth investigation of resource use can provide insight into the work of other teachers of language-minority and dual language teachers. The study was conducted in a public K–5, 50:50 dual language (DL) elementary school in the Pacific Northwest; of the 440 students enrolled, 25% spoke Spanish as a first language; 42% of students received ESL services, and 69% were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

At the time this study was conducted, the school was in its second year of implementation of the DL model, and it had been implemented through first grade. The program was structured such that DL students spent half of the day learning in Spanish and half in English. Languages were separated both by classroom and by content area, in line with the “one teacher, one language” model. There was one Spanish-medium teacher, who taught literacy and social studies, and two English-medium teachers, who taught math and science. All teachers self-identified as White,
native English speakers, so their ethnic and linguistic identities did not differentiate them and were not explicitly attended to in this study. All three teachers participated in this study, and pseudonyms have been assigned to all of them.

Señora Molly Gregor was in her second year at the school and taught the kindergarten and first-grade Spanish literacy and social studies block. She provided all instruction in Spanish and also conversed with children socially only in Spanish. Sra. Gregor was a White, native English speaker with almost 10 years of experience as a high school Spanish teacher in a nearby district.

Mr. Brad Riley was in his seventh year at the school. He shared his job with another teacher and was only responsible for teaching math and science. He was a White, monolingual English speaker who conducted all instruction and conversation with students in English. He had little formal knowledge about language acquisition but had worked in linguistically diverse settings for a number of years and had many questions and concerns about the language development of his students. He expressed frustration about his lack of knowledge and did not feel like he had anyone to ask.

Ms. Rebecca Cortez had been teaching at the school for 7 years and had several years of previous experience as a fourthgrade teacher. She was a White, native English speaker who was married to a Mexican man, so she spoke some Spanish. She conducted her class primarily in English but frequently used Spanish to clarify and reinforce concepts for children: “I always do a little bit just to, just to, like I’ll say what I’m saying once in English and once in Spanish, just to help cement it a little.”

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary sources of data for this study were: classroom observations, interviews, and relevant documents. These diverse data sources highlighted the resources that play a role in teachers’ instruction, as well as their relative importance, such that those appearing across data sources carried greater weight than those that appeared in only one data source. Through iterative analysis, therefore, resources that were of the greatest importance for these teachers were accorded the appropriate influence.

This study was conducted over one school year (2009–2010) using a participant-observer framework (Becker & Geer, 1969). The primary investigator was a former teacher at the school (before it included a dual language program), as well as a bilingual Latina herself. She knew two of the teachers personally before beginning data collection. The degree to which she participated in classroom activities varied, but in general she was most likely to interact with teachers or students during small-group work time.

Entire units were observed, rather than only individual lessons, in order to examine changes in the teachers’ instruction at the macrolevel, as children became more proficient in the register of the content area and in academic language overall. The length of units ranged from eight to 14 lessons, and they were taught over three to six weeks (social studies and science respectively). The theoretical importance of observing sequences of lessons has been articulated in the research (Ball et al., 2008; Christie, 1995; Gibbons, 2003). Lin (1993), for example, discussed how observing cycles of activity in classrooms allows a researcher to understand how key events are shaped by and related to other events within the same cycle. Christie (1995) noted that shifts in language use occur across lessons as students build knowledge together.
Key observational events analyzed for this study included whole-group instruction, interactions with individual students about unit content, and the facilitation of small-group work, as well as student-to-student interaction in cooperative group work. These interactions not only played an important role in second and academic language development, but research suggests that language-proficient students potentially constitute an environmental resource for teachers serving ELL students (Cohen et al., 2003; E. García, 1996; Gersten & Baker, 2000).

Semistructured interviews with all participants were conducted at the beginning of data collection to get an overview of their understanding of academic language and its development in young emergent bilinguals. Each classroom teacher was then interviewed either once or twice more, usually at the beginning and end of the unit observed, in order to clarify hunches regarding instruction and to ask teachers directly about observed classroom practices and link them more closely to available resources.

All classroom observations and interviews were audio-recorded, and more than 50 documents were collected. Documents ranged from instructional and professional development materials to samples of student writing.

The first step in the analysis of all data sources was open coding to identify the academic language demands of the first-grade curriculum in order to understand how teachers made decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. Next, emerging patterns related to teachers’ resource use and instruction of academic language were identified by grouping data collected from observation field notes, interview transcripts, and documents into categories (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In terms of observations, at the whole-class level, all relevant instructional moves were coded whether they were specifically targeted at Spanish speakers or not. At the pair and small-group level, only instruction pertaining to Spanish speakers was analyzed. Quantitative counts of each type of instructional move teachers made during classroom observations were measured in order to identify patterns of instruction in a concrete, measurable way. Through this process of analytic coding (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998) and quantitative counting, it was possible to highlight the themes that appeared most frequently and significantly across data sources.

FINDINGS

Three main findings emerged from the analysis of conventional, environmental, and personal resources (Cohen et al., 2003) in terms of individual teachers’ access and use. This stance is consistent with Cohen et al.’s (2003) position that “because resources become active when used in mutual instructional adjustment, they are unlikely to have a fixed instructional value” (p. 138). The value of any resource, therefore, depends how it is used in planning and teaching. Of particular interest was how focal teachers harnessed various resources to provide academic language instruction for Spanish-speaking first graders. The findings outlined in the following sections are: (a) teachers had differential access to personal and environmental resource streams; (b) teachers drew on multiple, interactive resource streams; (c) there were tensions within one of the resource streams.

Differential Access

This section begins by considering focal teachers’ differential access to personal and environmental streams. In some cases, this meant that one teacher had access to resources that were
not available to the others at all. In other cases, what differed was the level of access to a given resource. Conventional resources such as trade books, curriculum materials, and PD opportunities were also distributed differently within the program; however, research has shown that conventional resources are only weakly correlated with instruction and even less with student learning (Cohen et al., 2003). Therefore, differential access to personal and environmental resource streams seemed more likely to directly influence teacher practice around issues of academic language development. In this section, the resources that were most salient and useful for each of the teachers within personal and environmental resources are described.

**Personal Resources**

Personal resources include content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and personal and professional experience (Cohen et al., 2003). They are important because they are the filter through which teachers process new learning and interactions with others around instructional practice. The three focal teachers relied on different personal resources to help them understand academic language and to provide appropriate instruction to support its development. Señora Gregor, for example, had the most experience teaching and learning language and cited it as her main source of information about language development. When pressed about how she learned specific instructional moves to support language development, she stressed experience first and foremost, saying, “I can’t say that it’s come from any . . . I don’t remember any coursework in my university days of how to promote oral language.” She did note a PD session offered early in the year but indicated that it served more as a reminder and extension of what she already knew rather than the primary source of her knowledge about language.

In contrast, Mr. Riley’s most salient personal resource was his knowledge base as an experienced first-grade teacher. He had taught the science unit several times before and therefore felt confident about the content and conceptual understanding he expected students to develop. Despite the fact that he had taught at this school—a traditionally linguistically diverse school—for several years, he did not have strong foundational knowledge about language development. He was aware of gaps in his knowledge and expressed frustration about it, especially with regard to academic language, saying “I’d like to know more, but I don’t think like anybody has sort of a rubric or a framework for kind of what norms are and what we’re expecting (from kids).”

Like Sra. Gregor, Ms. Cortez was mostly influenced by her professional experience. However, it was not her experience as a teacher of language but rather the several years she spent as a fourth-grade teacher. She explained that her intentional instruction of academic language was the result of preparing fourth graders for high-stakes state tests: “Kids in those tests over and over again skip over little obvious details because they just don’t think they need to say it, because it’s obvious.” Her language-specific instruction was intended to help students clearly communicate their understanding in a way that would help them be successful throughout their academic careers, not only in first grade.

Looking across first-grade teachers, then, it was notable that all three of them cited professional experience as a primary personal resource. This became analytically important because each of them had different levels and kinds of experience and therefore approached academic language instruction from different starting places. Additionally, this differential access made them more likely to take up conventional and environmental resources differently, and this is exactly what they did.
Environmental Resources

Environmental resources include professional leadership, colleagues, and students—essentially the people a teacher works with or learns from (Cohen et al., 2003). They are important because they provide teachers with guidance for instruction as well as collegial and community support around shared academic norms. Environmental resources can operate at a global or at the local level.

Señora Gregor’s most solid environmental resource was the composition of the student population in her immersion class. She looped with students from kindergarten to first grade, so she knew them quite well. Additionally, she had the most balanced class in terms of language proficiency. Thirteen of her students were native Spanish speakers (with varying levels of English oral and reading proficiency), and 14 were English dominant (with almost no Spanish oral or reading proficiency before they began the program). This configuration was beneficial in terms of grouping students for oral interactions—she frequently paired and grouped students based on their stronger language.

Mr. Riley had a less-balanced class linguistically, but unlike the other two teachers, he had access to a key environmental support in the person of the district ELL teacher, David Goldberg. Mr. Goldberg facilitated an academic language PD session early in the year and offered to support willing teachers as they went through the process of incorporating language objectives into selected lessons. Mr. Riley volunteered and therefore worked one-on-one with Mr. Goldberg to plan and enact two lessons during the science unit.

The most salient environmental resource for Ms. Cortez was also her access to a leader in the area of language development but at the school rather than the district level. An ELD teacher, Carol Brekke, was assigned to work with first grade, and her official role was to provide a mix of teacher and student support, and she did so in Ms. Cortez’s classroom. The main ways she provided support were by sitting with individual students or pairs as they completed tasks or by taking notes on Ms. Cortez’s instruction to share with her later.

It should also be noted that in terms of environmental resources for all three teachers, the principal was a strong leader in her advocacy for emergent bilingual children and their need to receive high-quality language and content instruction. She had made it a schoolwide priority for teachers to learn more about academic language. This manifested not only ideologically but also practically when she arranged for Mr. Goldberg to facilitate the aforementioned daylong PD session in the fall. She explained her decision to provide such training by saying, “we hadn’t had much around language, oral language development. And we hadn’t had much around academic language. The focus had been almost entirely on written language development and working on helping children become readers or writers.” This PD session serves as the backdrop for the second major finding of this study.

Interactive Resource Streams

A teacher’s capacity to provide rich instruction is not a fixed attribute but rather the result of interactions among multiple resource streams. Teacher practice is influenced by the resources they have access to as well as how they use them (or not). This is true with regards to resources
in all three streams. As Cohen et al. (2003) argued, teachers have little control over the allocation of some resources, but they can “notice or ignore them, capitalize on them or leave them unused” (p. 127). Given this conceptual orientation, it was unsurprising to find that teachers drew on multiple, interactive resource streams. A thorough analysis of the ways in which the streams interacted for different teachers highlights the importance of understanding the many possible ways that resources can be harnessed as well as the challenges associated with doing so.

In a previous section, disparate personal and environmental resources were shown, and here follows a discussion about how a shared conventional resource was taken up differently due to the multiplicity of resource streams teachers accessed and used. Sra. Gregor’s and Mr. Riley’s responses to an academic language PD session serve as an illustrative example, highlighting that their different understanding of the training led to inconsistent instruction of academic language across first-grade classrooms, which may have compromised the goals of the dual language program.

Mr. Riley and Professional Development

Mr. Riley had several years of experience working with language-minority children. However, the fall PD session with David was the first time he had received professional development on academic language, and his knowledge of its meaning and relationship to content was still developing. Logically, he considered himself a teacher of first-grade science rather than a language educator. Nonetheless, he was interested in learning more about language and cited this as his reason for volunteering to work with David on an ongoing basis. Within personal resources, therefore, he had the will to learn and a deep knowledge of science content.

When Mr. Riley was asked about what he learned from the PD session, he said “the big thing was making sure I had two objectives in teaching, and one of them is the science target, and the other one is the language development target.” Planning was the central focus of the PD session, and therefore Mr. Riley was accurate in his assessment of its content. However, when pressed to give me a specific example of a language development goal, he did not move beyond general statements: “You know, to be able to use the science words and say a whole sentence.” He seemed to equate academic language with complete sentences without recognizing it as comprising complex, decontextualized, and explicit language (Cummins, 2000; Gibbons, 2006). Mr. Riley had little initial knowledge to build on, so he struggled to use what he learned from the PD in two main ways: getting specific about the vocabulary—both content-specific and general—that was relevant to the unit and might be worth explicitly teaching, and actually integrating language objectives into his instruction. Quantitative data indicate that he was the least likely to integrate content and language and was the only teacher for whom no instances of explicit instruction of language were recorded. From a resources perspective, then, it seemed that Mr. Riley’s limited understanding of academic language and his lack of experience in teaching it—his personal resources—hindered his ability to expand upon what he learned from a PD session—a conventional resource—to support the development of academic language for Spanish-speaking emergent bilingual students. Instead, he continued to privilege science content, which was something he had much more familiarity and experience with.
Señora Gregor and Professional Development

In contrast, Señora Gregor’s deep professional knowledge about language was evident even in her early interactions with other teachers. For example, she acted as a leader during grade-level discussions, helping other teachers identify academic language in passages. She also had a more complete understanding of the functions underlying the academic language she wanted students to use. In an interview, for example, she explained how she wanted students to be able to define concepts in the cultura unit and the actual language forms they might use to do so (i.e., “Cultura quiere decir _______” [Culture means _____]). She also identified predicting as one of the central goals students would need to accomplish with language during the unit. When contrasted with Mr. Riley’s very general language development goal of being “able to use this stuff effectively in a whole sentence,” it became clear that Sra. Gregor was better positioned by her personal resources to understand the nuances of academic language, even though both teachers attended the same PD session.

In addition, observations of Sra. Gregor’s instruction suggested that she had a more complete understanding of how to integrate language into content instruction. The integration of content and language was an instructional move that was characterized as her go-to move—one that she felt confident about and used frequently. She also engaged in the explicit instruction of language more often than Mr. Riley (who never did so), but not as often as Ms. Cortez. From a resources perspective, therefore, Señora Gregor’s personal experience as a language learner and professional experience as a language teacher led her to process the PD differently than Mr. Riley (and likely many other teachers in the building). Instead of staying at the planning level, she was able to use her new knowledge about the elements of academic language to provide integrated and more explicit instruction to her emergent bilingual students.

Tensions Within Environmental Resource Stream

In addition to interactions among conventional, environmental, and personal resource streams, another key finding of this study was that there were interactions within the environmental resource stream that manifested as tensions. The most salient tension was the way in which school-level and district-level staff supports did not complement one another. In particular, there was a discernible difference between the perceived contributions that Ms. Brekke, the school-level ELD teacher, made to the program and those that the district-level ELL consulting teacher made. They were considered by focal teachers to have different, noncomplementary roles and were recognized as resources (or not) very differently by teachers.

As noted earlier, Ms. Brekke was assigned to work with the first-grade team exclusively. In practice, however, she really only worked with Ms. Cortez and very occasionally with Mr. Riley; she did not work with Sra. Gregor at all. The principal explained Ms. Brekke’s lack of participation in the Spanish portion of the dual language program in the following way:

I think because [name] doesn’t speak Spanish, she tends to shy away from Molly’s corner of the world. And it’s not a criticism, it’s just, you know, “Molly is doing her thing in Spanish and you know, I don’t understand it, so . . . .”
This lack of equitable environmental support for English and Spanish-medium teachers is worth noting, but the more interesting issue was how even Ms. Cortez failed to see Ms. Brekke as a meaningful instructional resource.

Ms. Brekke indicated that she was conflicted about her work in first grade and concerned that the language development issues she viewed as critical were seen as extraneous by Ms. Cortez. She therefore felt like she was imposing every time she entered the classroom and often sat only with individual children rather than supporting instruction in any systematic way. She acknowledged feeling “underappreciated” and “frustrated” by the limited role she played in first-grade classrooms.

In contrast, Ms. Cortez indicated that she wanted Ms. Brekke to be more assertive in offering expertise around language development for her bilingual students. She said, “I know that she knows exactly what I should be doing.” However, there was a lack of communication between the two that likely arose from the limited conventional resources of time and structure. The two were supposed to arrange a regular time to meet but still had not done so by April. Ms. Cortez took responsibility for that, saying she felt “maxed out” and unable to set aside a consistent time each week.

Their relationship was further complicated by Ms. Cortez’s perception of the district consulting teacher, Mr. Goldberg, as providing the kind of structured support she needed. She indicated that she appreciated Ms. Brekke’s unwavering commitment to supporting emergent bilingual children but nonetheless felt that she was not getting explicit enough help from her. In order to improve her instruction across content areas, Ms. Cortez felt that, “I really need someone to present it to me like David.” This was particularly telling, given that her only interaction with Mr. Goldberg was at the October PD session, yet she viewed what he had to offer as the kind of help she needed. When asked if she thought it was possible for Ms. Brekke to provide the kind of structured support she sought, Ms. Cortez reiterated that Ms. Brekke should be more assertive in offering her services. This was unlikely to happen, though, since Ms. Brekke felt unwelcome and undervalued.

This tension between district- and school-level English language supports was familiar to Mr. Goldberg, who noted that classroom teachers he worked with often sought him out rather than working directly with their school-level colleagues. He explained that, “even if their ELD teacher is telling them the same thing, they’d rather hear it from somewhere else.”

Further questions about this tension could be raised about the way in which the PD session was planned and presented. The principal wanted staff buy-in and therefore asked Mr. Goldberg to work with volunteer teachers over the course of the year. Yet it might have been more fruitful to have Mr. Goldberg co-plan and facilitate the PD session with Ms. Brekke and other ELD teachers. Since all three focal teachers viewed the PD session as having value, Ms. Brekke’s participation could have gone a long way toward positioning her as an equally valuable on-site resource.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined dual language teachers’ use of conventional, environmental, and personal resources in the instruction of academic language by analyzing the various resource streams to which they had access and the ways in which their use of resources was enabled or constrained.
by various factors. Through this analysis, three primary findings with regard to resource use were generated, all of which have implications for practice and point to areas for future research.

The first major finding was that teachers had differential access to environmental and personal resources, and thus they understood academic language and enacted instruction differently. Environmental resources were allocated such that Mr. Riley benefited the most from a district-level ELL consulting teacher, Ms. Cortez worked mostly with a school-level ELD teacher, and Sra. Gregor worked with neither. In terms of personal resources, all three teachers cited professional experience as primary, yet they had varied experiences and therefore different levels of knowledge and confidence about academic language instruction. Although they had been teaching for an average of 10 years, none had received specific coursework in ELL methods and had differing depths of knowledge about both the theoretical construct of academic language and pedagogical practices that would support its development. This suggests that scholars in the field need to carefully examine the knowledge base that teachers of language-minority and emergent bilingual students need, as well as how to prepare teachers within teacher education programs. In particular, theoretical and practical knowledge about academic language need to be integrated rather than taught as separate constructs. In other words, teachers need to develop pedagogical language knowledge (Bunch, 2013; Galguera, 2011; Lucero, 2013)—which integrates knowledge about content and language with daily instructional practice. Pedagogical language knowledge allows teachers to “purposefully enact opportunities for the development of language and literacy in and through teaching the core curricular content, understandings, and activities” (p. 298).

In the past 15 years, prominent teacher education scholars have proposed “what teachers need to know about language” (Fillmore & Snow, 2002) in order to work effectively with second-language learners. Likewise, a number of strategy-oriented language acquisition programs like SIOP (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008) have become available to school districts. What’s missing is a link between the theory and practice that would support teachers in developing flexible pedagogical language knowledge. It is becoming increasingly common for university-based teacher education programs to require foundational and methods courses in second-language acquisition and instruction. Therefore, a productive area for future research is to qualitatively and longitudinally follow new teachers graduating from such programs as they move into classroom placements—both mainstream and dual language—and investigate how their practices are related to this coursework. Will their practices look appreciably different from those of the focal teachers in this study? What are the long-term academic language benefits to students of teacher education coursework in second-language education, if any? Designing research to address these questions can go a long way toward helping us incorporate meaningful ELL coursework into teacher education programs, to the ultimate benefit of language-minority students.

The second major finding was that all three teachers had some combination of conventional, environmental, and personal resources, but the specific combination had a significant influence on the academic language instruction teachers were able to provide. The interactivity of resource streams was analyzed through the illustrative example of a professional development session on planning language objectives. All focal teachers considered the PD a resource, but they took away different understandings based on their personal knowledge and access to environmental supports. For example, despite his work with the district ELL consulting teacher, Mr. Riley expressed frustration about knowing how much language support to provide to students while also keeping the cognitive load high. From a pedagogical language knowledge perspective, he did not have the tools to instructionally facilitate language development in any systematic or consistent way.
Señora Gregor, on the other hand, was better positioned by her personal resources—training and experience as a language teacher—to understand the nuances of academic language and described the PD session as a reminder and extension of what she already knew rather than a source of new knowledge. She was better able to integrate theory and practice because she had more deeply developed pedagogical language knowledge than Mr. Riley did.

In the field of inservice teacher education, it is often taken for granted that PD builds on teachers’ existing knowledge without adequately accounting for the personal resources—including attitudes and identities—they bring to such experiences (Lee & Oxelson, 2006). This assumption may work against the goal of providing rich, valuable professional development to teachers. What is needed instead are ongoing opportunities for teachers to learn at a level that complements their existing knowledge, beliefs, and experiences and consequently improves their instruction for language-minority children (Elfers et al., 2009; Gándara et al., 2005). Further research should also examine the role of personal resources that were not explicitly investigated in this study, such as teacher identification with an ethnic minority group or language-minority status.

The third main finding was that there were tensions within the environmental resource stream. Notably, school- and district-level supports did not work together, and this contributed to differentially supportive academic language instruction in different classrooms. It is worth remembering that school and district supports are not inherently aligned, and yet they both have much to offer teachers. This is especially relevant in terms of how professional development initiatives are presented and sustained. In this case, it would have been fruitful for the district ELL consulting teacher and the school-based ELD teacher to co-plan and co-facilitate the PD session so that the two resources could have been viewed as complementary rather than contentious. Broader implications of this finding are the need for coherent systems of support for DL programs and better communication among those who provide instruction to language-minority and emergent bilingual children.

This study had one main limitation: The dual language program was only in its second year of implementation. Therefore, the resource use of these teachers may not be characteristic of those in more established dual language programs, where there may be more experienced teachers or greater schoolwide knowledge about language development. Nonetheless, the three teachers had varied personal and professional backgrounds that informed their resource use, which is likely the case in most elementary dual language schools. Therefore, this limitation does not undermine the key findings of the study.

Overall, this study focuses attention on the need to attend to the various resources that teachers of language-minority and emergent bilingual children have, as well as how a deeper understanding of such resources—and how they interact in complementary and noncomplementary ways—can inform the fields of pre-service teacher education, professional development, and dual language program coherence.

REFERENCES


