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Who’s Holding El Marcador? Peer Linguistic Mediation Gone Awry in a Dual Language Classroom

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Within dual language education programs, well-structured peer interactions can facilitate the learning of language and curricular content simultaneously. Research has found that even very young bilingual students can engage in peer linguistic mediation to help less proficient classmates participate in small group work. In this article, I analyze two academic discussions among emergent bilingual first graders in a Spanish-medium dual language classroom. This analysis demonstrates that, contrary to previous research, the language used by students did not facilitate learning. Rather, it foreclosed the possibility of effective communication across languages. Findings suggest that peer linguistic mediation is influenced by multiple factors and cannot be taken for granted. Questions are raised about the ways in which emergent bilingual students are grouped and the skills they need to successfully mediate their peers’ learning. Implications from these findings go beyond dual language education to apply to mainstream classrooms with minority language speakers in them.

Key words: bilingual education, dual language education, linguistic mediation, peer interaction, Spanish speakers

INTRODUCTION

As the number of language minority students in U.S. schools continues to grow, a small but increasing number of dual language (DL) programs have been developed to serve their unique learning needs. In dual language education, sometimes called two-way immersion, language minority and language majority children receive content instruction in two languages: English and a minority language, most often Spanish. Dual language programs can either be 50:50, wherein instructional time is divided equally; or they can be 90:10, wherein more instructional time is
devoted to the minority language initially, with the proportion decreasing over time. In general, however, DL programs share three essential features: first, they are considered enrichment programs and are additive in nature; second, they attempt to enroll approximately equal numbers of speakers from both language backgrounds; and third, content instruction is provided in both languages (deJong & Howard, 2009). To those ends, DL is a way to provide comprehensible input to language minority children who might otherwise not be able to access grade level academic content. A key goal of most DL programs is the development of bilingualism and biliteracy in all children (deJong, 2002; Fitts, 2006; Howard, Sugarman, Christian, Lindholm-Leary, & Rogers, 2007) since they learn a second language while also receiving instruction in cognitively-appropriate academic content.

Dual language classrooms are potential spaces where teachers and students interact to jointly construct knowledge. Language is heavily implicated since it is the primary medium through which teachers and emergent bilingual students communicate (Gibbons, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Throughout this article, I use the term emergent bilingual to describe the Spanish-speaking children enrolled in DL programs. In doing so, I follow the lead of García and Kleifgen (2010), who argue that “a meaningful education will turn these English Language Learners not only into English proficient students, but more significantly, also into bilingual students and adults” (p. 3). Dual language educators who recognize this emergent bilingualism create opportunities for all children to build on existing academic strengths and linguistic knowledge in ways that reinforce their cultural identities as well (Palmer, 2008a).

Consequently, students act as linguistic resources (partly through linguistic mediation) for peers who are less proficient in the target language, whether English or the minority language (Lee, Hill-Bonnet, & Raley, 2011). All children therefore have the potential to serve as expert models (Angelova, Gunawardena, & Volk, 2006; Christian, 1994; Ruíz, 1984). In order for students to learn from one another, it is widely accepted that they need multiple opportunities to engage in oral interactions with peers who are proficient speakers of both languages (Martin-Beltrán, 2009). Research has shown that teachers can support such interactions by structuring them so that there is a need for authentic communication about academic content that is both developmentally and linguistically appropriate (Gibbons, 1993, 1998; McDonell, 1992).

However, successful peer interactions among students of varying language proficiencies in a target language may require linguistic mediation (the use of language as a tool to make meaning and facilitate communication), and that can be challenging for children. In this article, I present a fine-grained analysis of two small group academic discussions in a first grade Spanish-medium dual language classroom to highlight the fact that linguistic mediation did not occur in ways that facilitated language or content learning for either majority or minority language speakers. This analysis can help us understand the instructional contexts and practices that might enable productive linguistic mediation on the part of emergent bilingual students. This research is needed because even studies that report successful DL peer interactions do not identify the practices that make such success possible (Angelova et al., 2006).

**LANGUAGE MINORITY STUDENTS IN DUAL LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS**

In recent years, dual language education has emerged as a context of study for various researchers. Some of this research 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), while other studies have placed quality of instruction at the forefront (Escamilla, 1994; Freeman, 1996; Hadi-Tabassum, 2006; Wiese, 2004). Still others have attended to the ways in which emergent bilingual students access and use the linguistic resources their peers bring into the classroom (DeNicolo, 2010; Olmedo, 2003; Palmer, 2008a).

In this third line of research, concerns have been raised about whose academic and linguistic resources are valued and whether English-dominant and language minority children have equal access to them (deJong & Howard, 2009; Freeman, 1996, 2000; Hadi-Tabassum, 2006; Hickey, 2001; Palmer, 2007, 2008b; Shannon, 1995; Smith, 2002; Valdés, 1997; Wiese, 2004). For example, Valdés (1997) has argued that because many DL programs were developed as a way to counter white flight in urban schools, there is an inherent power imbalance that positions English dominant students as the reason for programs’ existence and therefore the primary concern of teachers. One potentially serious consequence of this power imbalance is that the minority language that teachers model may not be age-appropriately academic because of the difficulties English speakers have in understanding and therefore participating (deJong & Howard, 2009).

Echoing this concern, other researchers have found that the amount of the minority language spoken both by teachers and among students in DL classrooms is less than one would expect (Ballinger & Lyster, 2011; Hickey, 2001; Potowski, 2004). The percentage of instruction that is supposed to occur in the minority language ranges from 50% to 90%, depending on the grade level of students; during that portion of the school day, all or most communication could be expected to occur in the target language. Nevertheless, teachers have been found to code-switch from the minority language to English at a high rate (Escamilla, 1994; Palmer, 2009b), thus reducing the overall amount of target language heard by all students. Given the sociolinguistic value of code-switching among bilinguals (Martínez, 2010; Poplack, 2000; Reyes, 2004), some have recommended that DL classrooms be more accepting of code-switches and even instruction that more closely mirrors the ways in which languages are mixed in bilingual communities (Palmer, 2009a). However, strict language separation remains the norm in most DL programs, and was the expectation in the program highlighted in this article.

When the language use of peers interacting with one another in DL classrooms has been investigated, a similar trend is evident. Potowski (2004) found that fifth grade students used Spanish only about half the time they were in the Spanish-medium classroom, even when the participants were native Spanish speakers. In a similar study, Hickey (2001) found that on average, only 37% of student utterances in an Irish-medium DL preschool classroom were in Irish. Both studies found that language minority students were more likely to use English when participating in a conversation with at least one native English speaker, regardless of whether other minority speakers were also involved. Given the range of ages and languages represented in these studies, it seems likely that issues of language equity are a concern for those who implement DL programs, especially when students work in small groups.

These findings point to the need to recognize that DL programs, like all forms of public schooling, “operate within a social and historical educational context in which the hegemony of English is an everyday lived experience for Spanish speakers” (Fitts, 2006, p. 340). There is reason to question the assertion that both majority and minority language groups will benefit equally from dual language instruction, since it is possible that “equal learning opportunities and access to native language models are not automatically equally distributed in TWI programmes across the two languages and the speakers of those languages” (deJong & Howard, 2009, p. 93).
Linguistic Mediation in Dual Language Classrooms

This study was grounded in sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), which takes as a starting point that human learning is the result of social processes. According to this theory, children develop intellectually as the result of joint activity and conversation with others (Gibbons, 2006). A primary venue for this intellectual development to take place is small group interactions in which proficient speakers of the target language engage in linguistic mediation. Mediation is a central construct in sociocultural theory, and linguistic mediation in particular is the use of language as a tool to make meaning and facilitate communication. Linguistic mediation has been defined in various ways in recent educational literature (DeNicolo, 2010; Gibbons, 2003; Olmedo, 2003), and I use it here to describe the linguistic moves made by dual language first graders as they participated in small group academic discussions with peers of varying language proficiencies. These moves had the potential to either support language development and further the conversation, or to foreclose meaningful conversation in the target language.

Some recent research has documented instances of successful peer linguistic mediation among Spanish and English-speaking students (Angelova et al., 2006; DeNicolo, 2010). This is consistent with much of the second language acquisition literature, which finds that conversations among students are a crucial contributor to enhanced second language development (García, 1996). When learners are challenged to orally negotiate meaning, their ability to produce comprehensible output improves, likely also improving their understanding of the concepts themselves (Hayes, 2005; Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick, & Wheeler, 1996).

Recent qualitative research has highlighted the potential benefits of linguistic mediation on the oral participation of students within dual language programs specifically (Angelova et al., 2006; DeNicolo, 2010; Hayes, 2005; Martin-Beltrán, 2009). Bilingual children as young as five can and do “make judgments about the bilingual proficiency of their peers, monitor each other’s comprehension and production skills, and provide scaffolds to maximize the comprehension and communication of their classmates” (Olmedo, 2003, p. 43). In a study with older children, DeNicolo (2010) studied peer interactions among fourth graders in a dual language program and found evidence that students consciously engaged in linguistic mediation in ways that enabled less proficient classmates to participate and therefore improve their understanding. This successful mediation also had the effect of promoting bilingualism and biliteracy as worthwhile goals beyond what might be possible in other classrooms. However, DeNicolo’s study was based on observations done in English-medium classrooms, whereas the data presented in this article is from a Spanish-medium classroom.

The findings outlined above suggest that peer interactions can facilitate the development of sophisticated language and high-level conceptual understanding simultaneously (Gibbons, 2002, 2003; Martin-Beltrán, 2009). However, it should be noted that successful linguistic mediation rests not only on language proficiency, but also on equity and symmetry (Van Lier, 1998), as well as the organization of interactional spaces (Hayes, 2005; Lee, Hill-Bonnet, & Gillispie, 2008). Although it is true that students typically use more (and more sophisticated) language in cooperative learning situations than in teacher-fronted interactions, the benefits of such grouping may be limited by language proficiency and status issues (deJong & Howard, 2009; Planas, 2011).

In terms of proficiency, it may be difficult for students to communicate with one another when they have widely divergent levels in the target language. Complicating matters, research on ESL learners has found that expert and novice roles are not fixed because of changing language
proficiency. This fluidity of roles is especially prevalent in dual language environments and enables learners to take turns being experts and novices (Lee et al., 2011; Storch, 2002). As possible way to address issues of proficiency imbalance, Lantolf and Thorne (2006) suggest that “near peers” who are at similar developmental levels linguistically but have differing content knowledge may in fact be best positioned to support one another’s learning.

In terms of status, “unequal discourse partners tend to find it more difficult to orient their interaction toward symmetry” (Van Lier, 1998, p. 175), leading to a situation where they disregard one another’s contributions. Similarly, in an adult ESL classroom Storch (2002) found that some pair interactions were marked by one partner’s inability or unwillingness to engage with the other partner’s contributions. This led to disagreement and ultimately a lack of consensus, which is relevant to the findings presented in this article.

Finally, existing research suggests that the goals students are expected to achieve make a difference in language mediation practices (Lee et al., 2008). One interesting nuance of Potowski’s (2004) study was that when she analyzed small group language use by type of task, she found that when students were on task, defined as “directly related to the official activity assigned by the teacher” (p. 100), their Spanish use in the Spanish-medium classroom was 68%, compared to only 17% in off task interactions. Others have also found that the language choices teachers make and their communication of language use expectations influenced student language choices as well, even when they were working in student-facilitated groups (Ballinger & Lyster, 2011; Palmer, 2008a). This research suggests that well-structured activities with appropriate teacher and peer linguistic mediation can influence which language is valued and expected during such interactions. It is clear, however, that we cannot take linguistic mediation for granted, even within small group discussions (Sfard & Kieran, 2001).

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The findings reported in this article are from a larger qualitative case study conducted in three 50:50 first grade dual language classrooms over the course of one school year (2009–2010). The public elementary school studied is located in a racially diverse neighborhood near downtown in a large city in the Pacific Northwest. At the time of the study, it enrolled approximately 440 students. Twenty-five percent of those spoke Spanish as a first language, and an additional 40% spoke other languages at home. In a typical year, 42% of students at the school receive ESL services, and 69% are eligible for free and reduced lunch.

The Dual Language Program

At the time that this study was conducted (2009–2010), Hurley Heights was in its second year of implementation of the dual language education model. It had only been implemented through first grade, and all three first grade classrooms participated in this study. The program was structured in such a way that DL students spent half their day learning in Spanish and half in English, with content areas and teachers separated by language. There was one Spanish-medium teacher, Señora Gregor, who taught literacy and social studies, and two English-medium teachers, Ms. Cortez and Mr. Riley, who taught math and science. In the mornings before lunch, DL students
were divided amongst the two English-medium classrooms for math and science instruction. After lunch, all DL students went with the Spanish-medium teacher for literacy and social studies instruction. Because of this structure, all three first grade teachers were technically dual language teachers and had some responsibility for those students.

The official DL program followed at Hurley Heights was the one teacher-one language model, such that teachers were expected to adhere to monolingual standards in their classrooms. They also strongly encouraged their students to use the target language whenever possible, but all three teachers recognized the linguistic limitations facing students, and made accommodations in various ways. For example, the Spanish-medium teacher allowed English-dominant students to converse with one another in English, and always responded (in Spanish) when children spoke to her in English. She encouraged children to express their ideas in whichever language they could, and did not actively discourage code-switching. Importantly, however, I did not observe any instances of her using English or code-switch with students. She maintained a wholly Spanish environment in both instruction and informal conversations with students. In contrast, one English-medium teacher was a low intermediate Spanish speaker and would often use Spanish vocabulary to explain concepts to students who struggled to understand her instruction in English.

There were 27 students in the program, and a majority of them had been in the program since kindergarten. Based on home language surveys, 13 were native speakers of Spanish, 13 were native English speakers, and 1 had been exposed to both languages since birth and was considered a simultaneous bilingual student. As is typical of such programs, the oral and reading proficiency levels of students varied widely, ranging from those who were beginning speakers of their second language (either English or Spanish) to those who were fluently bilingual and biliterate. Most of the Spanish-speaking children in the program were born in the US to immigrant parents from Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, among other places.

Participants

Señora Molly Gregor, was a White, native English speaker who was completing a master’s degree in education during the data collection period. She provided all instruction in Spanish, and also conversed with children socially only in Spanish. She was in her second year of teaching young children, and had almost 10 years of experience as a high school Spanish teacher in a nearby district.

The focal group of five students described in this article was called grupo cuadrado (the square group), and Table 1 shows their characteristics. At the time of this study, grupo Cuadrado sat together for all subjects and therefore knew each other quite well. In general, Señora Gregor changed student table groups about once a month in her classroom. She explained her grouping strategy in the following way:

I try to have a person that’s pretty strong academically that’s a native Spanish speaker and then at least one other native Spanish speaker within each group. And then a strong academic reader-writer in English in each group. Those are like the three people I want in each group—so like two strong academic people for each language and then at least one other native Spanish speaker to help, just with the vocabulary and be another model for the other English speakers at the table.
In many ways, *grupo cuadrado* embodied Sra. Gregor’s ideal group. Jaime was one of the most successful and participatory Spanish speakers in the class, and Cyrus and Xavier were top students in English, and were also among the most likely to try using Spanish. Abigail was an average English speaker with low Spanish proficiency, and Jesenia was a native Spanish speaker who struggled in school overall, especially with reading.

### The Cultura Unit

The unit from which these data come was a social studies unit on *cultura* (culture) taught in Spanish in November and December 2009. The unit was created by the first grade teachers using a Project GLAD™ (Guided Language Acquisition Design) framework. GLAD is a “curricular model of professional development dedicated to building academic language and literacy for all students, especially English learners” (National Training Center, 2012), and is used in many schools in the Pacific Northwest. The teachers at Hurley Heights had attended GLAD training workshops where they learned how to design units that promote content and language acquisition concurrently. Vocabulary development is a key feature of GLAD, and throughout the *cultura* unit, students were introduced to key content vocabulary such as *cultura* (culture) and *ancestro* (ancestor), as well as general academic language like *predicción* (prediction) and *sinónimo* (synonym). Following the GLAD model, Sra. Gregor guided students to learn these terms through a process of inquiry and discussion rather than simply stating their meanings.

Also within GLAD units, teachers encourage students to interact orally about curricular content, and the teacher’s role is to facilitate such interactions. However, there is considerable flexibility in the strategies teachers use to do so, and Sra. Gregor’s tendency was to identify clear goals for group activities and model target language structures. On the first day of the unit, she introduced predicting as a skill that students would be practicing, especially with regards to learning new vocabulary. She explained it in the following way:

Hoy vamos a hacer predicciones. Van a adivinar, van a predecir. Saben lo que quiere decir predicción? O predecir? . . . no sabemos la respuesta, pero vamos a decir lo que pensamos, si tenemos un idea. Quizás tenemos razón o quizás no.

[Today we’re going to make predictions. You’re going to guess, you’re going to predict. Do you know what prediction means? Or predict? . . . We don’t know the answer, but we’re going to say what we think, if we have an idea. Maybe we’re right or maybe not.]
She then conducted a type of fishbowl modeling with a small group in front of the class, asking all children to imagine that this was their group. She told them they should “poner las cabezas todas juntas” [put their heads together], think about whether they had heard the word before, and decide what it might mean. She prompted them to ask one another questions like, “qué crees?” [What do you think?] or “puedes decírnos que piensas?” [Can you tell us what you think?], and indicated that they should decide as a group which prediction was the best. However, she did not indicate how they would know which was the best nor how to come to consensus if they did not agree.

During that first lesson of the unit, she guided children through the cycle of predicting the meaning of the word *cultura*. For the first discussion analyzed in this article, which took place in the fourth session, she wanted students to follow the same process to make a joint prediction about the meaning of the word *ancestro*. As such, she framed the task in the following way:

Van a escribir, ‘creemos que ancestro quiere decir . . .’ y la predicción del grupo. En este momento, todos los marcadores están cerrados porque todos están hablando de que quiere decir ancestro. Cada persona de la mesa va a decir, ‘creo que ancestro quiere decir . . .’ Cada persona en la mesa va a hablar. Luego, van a escribir, ‘creemos que ancestro quiere decir . . .’ Hablen primero y luego van a escribir.

[You’re going to write, ‘we think ancestor means . . .’ and the prediction of the group. Right now, all of the markers should be closed because everyone is talking about what ancestor means. Each person at the table is going to say, ‘I think ancestor means . . .’ Every person at the table is going to speak. Then, you’re going to write, ‘we think ancestor means . . .’. Speak first and then you’re going to write.]

In these instructions, Señora Gregor clearly identified the linguistic goal of predicting and highlighted the language students should use in generating their predictions. She also indicated that discussion was a key element of the exercise, and that groups should agree on one idea that a group member would then write *en marcador* (in marker) and share with the whole class.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data presented in this article were collected as part of a larger study designed to investigate DL teachers’ instructional moves to support the academic language development of Spanish-speaking students. I did not initially set out to analyze small group peer interactions, but as noted earlier, in GLAD units students are frequently grouped for discussion and therefore many of the observations I conducted included small group discussions. Overall, I observed nine sessions of the *cultura* unit, audiorecorded all sessions, and later coded the transcripts using a process of open and subsequently focused coding.

To analyze the conversational data for this article, I carefully reviewed the transcripts and detailed field notes I took as I sat in on *grupo cuadrado* conversations. In addition, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with Sra. Gregor in which I asked about her reasons for grouping students in particular ways, choosing writers and students to orally share, and other instructional issues. A focus on linguistic mediation within small groups made sense because those skills were more likely to be needed when children were engaged in discussion and the teacher was only marginally involved (Olmedo, 2003).
The *grupo cuadrado* discussions presented in this article are from the fourth and fifth sessions of the unit, and took place in early December 2009. The first discussion lasted about 7 minutes and was analyzed as part of the larger transcript from the full 40-minute lesson. The second discussion lasted 11 minutes and was part of a 45 minute lesson. I conducted in-depth analyses of these conversations because of their rich potential to elucidate the dynamics of peer linguistic mediation in this dual language classroom, and because they were representative of the types of conversations had by this group throughout the unit. I present only a small portion each conversation due to space constraints. I consider this intentional reduction of the data to be a “principled selection of a limited number of representative activities, discourse samples, and focal research participants from a much larger study” (Duff, 2002, p. 294) that addresses a specific theoretical issue within a particular setting (Merriam, 1998).

**FINDINGS**

Of interest in the analyses presented here was how Spanish and English-speaking students participated in sharing ideas both with each other and eventually with the whole class. In the unit on cultura, Sra. Gregor expected groups to reach consensus, thus solidifying the need for linguistic mediation among students with varying levels of Spanish oral proficiency. The goal of the group discussions presented here was for students to develop their understanding of a new vocabulary term, *ancestro*. As such, Sra. Gregor wanted students to engage in oral discussion and share only one written idea that they all agreed on. This was problematic for *grupo cuadrado*, who could neither agree on a definition nor engage in effective peer linguistic mediation. The choices made by these dual language first graders foreclosed meaningful conversation and content learning rather than facilitating it.

The first issue of note with regards to linguistic mediation in this classroom was the lack of parity between the two languages during small group discussions. Despite the fact that students were in the Spanish-medium class and Sra. Gregor’s consistent modeling of Spanish, English was the language used for most peer on-task and off-task interactions. As Table 2 shows, only 23 of 141 total turns across the two discussions were in Spanish, accounting for roughly 16% of all turns. This mirrors findings from other studies investigating student language use within DL programs (Ballinger & Lyster, 2011; Hickey, 2001; Potowski, 2004). Notably, even the Spanish-dominant students more often spoke in English than they did in Spanish. This was especially true in the second discussion, when Jaime and Jesenia together contributed 22 English turns and only 6 Spanish turns.

Because of my interest in language mediation, I also calculated turn by individual student across both discussions. Results are shown in Table 3. It is clear that Cyrus (English speaker) was a dominant voice in the conversations, and his contributions were overwhelmingly in English, with only one code-switched turn and no Spanish turns. Jaime and Xavier were the next two most contributory, and again, most of their turns were in English.

It would be easy to look at Tables 2 and 3 and draw the conclusion that English carried disproportionate weight in this classroom, and that therefore English-speakers might logically dominate small group conversations in terms of quality in addition to quantity. However, when I examined student interactions beyond the number of turns, a different pattern emerged. Namely, Spanish speakers found ways to communicate their ideas in both languages, often doing so at the expense
of engaging English speakers as equal participants in the construction of meaning. As will be seen in the conversational data that follows, Jaime used Spanish, English, and code-switching strategically such that his contributions carried more weight than the numbers suggest. Perhaps more importantly, in-depth qualitative analysis shed greater light on the ways in which the potential of peer linguistic mediation was unrealized in this group’s discussions. For example, from the beginning of the first conversation, there were competing definitions of *ancestro*, with Jaime advocating one and Xavier and Cyrus arguing for the other. The following predictions were shared at the beginning of *grupo cuadrado*’s discussion. Note the two very different ways in which students were thinking about *ancestro*; one definition was suggested by Xavier and Cyrus (both native English speakers), and a very different one was put forth by Jaime, echoed by Jesenia and Abigail (two native Spanish speakers and one English speaker):

“Like, um, the fossils of Lucy at the Science Center. Monkeys, monkeys. And also human monkeys, early ancestors.” (Xavier)

“Alguien que murió.” [Someone who died] (Jaime)

“Before us there was these weird animals that looked sort of like monkeys.” (Cyrus)

“¿Una persona muerta?” [A dead person?] (Jesenia)

“I think it means someone who died.” (Abigail)
At this point, Sra. Gregor was listening to student contributions, but she did not indicate her agreement or disagreement with individual predictions. Instead, she reminded them that, “tienen que decidir en una sola predicción. ¿Qué predicción van a escribir?” [you all need to decide on only one prediction, which prediction are you going to write?]. Before leaving to listen in on another group, she informed them that she would give them a short amount of additional time to decide, then return with a marker for one student to record their group prediction. She reminded them of the goal of the group activity and provided procedural scaffolding to keep them on task, but she also left the group to mediate their own learning, using their limited linguistic and conceptual resources to do so.

There is evidence from recent research that students can and do consciously engage in linguistic mediation to enable participation from all speakers (DeNicolo, 2010). However, such peer mediation is influenced by multiple factors and cannot be taken for granted (Lee et al., 2008; Van Lier, 1998). In this situation, grupo cuadrado did not seem to have the skills they needed to support one another in Spanish or in deepening their understanding of the academic concept with which they were presented. As the conversation continued, it became apparent that students were not communicating across languages in productive ways:

Xavier: No, but I mean like Lucy the fossil at the Science Center.
Jaime: Actually, es que una familia se murió. Es que un familia se murió. [Actually, it’s that a family member died. It’s that a family member died.]
Jesenia: ¿Por qué? [Why?]
Jaime: Uh-huh. That’s cause you don’t know. I asked my mom yesterday.
Abigail: We still need to write . . .
Xavier: I like ancestor. I like mine.
Cyrus: Uh, yeah, Xavier, yours is kind of like mine.
Abigail: Okay, but we don’t know how to say that.
Sra. Gregor: (returning to group) ¿Qué quieren decir? [What do you want to say?]
Abigail: Um, what Xavier said.
Xavier: Un mono. [A monkey.]
Sra. Gregor: ¿Qué dijo Xavier? [What did Xavier say?]
Xavier: Like . . .
Sra. Gregor: Me dices en español. [Tell me in Spanish.]
Abigail: He doesn’t know how to say it in Spanish.
Xavier: Un mono. [A monkey]
Sra. Gregor: Un mono. Es español. [A monkey. It is Spanish.]
Cyrus: Sort of like a monkey, but not exactly a monkey, cause they sort of look like a howler monkey.
Xavier: They’re cavemen.

This portion of the discussion illustrates the complex nature of the interaction as students in the group attempted to negotiate about which of the two definitions they would share with the class. In terms of language proficiency, Jaime was the most fluent bilingual child in the group, and therefore his role was very important. Because of his high proficiency in both languages, he arguably could have acted as a bridge between the ideas of the English speakers and the Spanish language skills they needed to express them. However, he did not do so. This issue was raised
within the group when Abigail reminded her fellow English speakers that “we don’t know how to say that” and then told Sra. Gregor (who returned with a marker for Jaime to write) that Xavier “doesn’t know how to say that in Spanish.”

Competence was certainly a factor in this instance of linguistic mediation gone awry, but it was not the only issue. In DL classrooms, the linguistic choices children make can be considered bids for status and ways of enacting membership in certain language communities (Martínez, 2010; Potowski, 2004). These linguistic choices were evident in the way that Jaime persisted in giving his definition in Spanish, and code-switched to English only to tell his peers, “that’s cause you don’t know.” He used code-switching as “a valuable linguistic resource . . . for various communicative purposes” (Martínez, 2010, p. 126), as well as to reinforce Spanish as the language of power in this classroom and his own status as a proficient Spanish speaker (Lee et al., 2011). Reyes (2004) considers this a “situation switch,” in which a child code-switches to indicate a shift from academic to non-academic content, and in this case it communicated Jaime’s disinterest in engaging his English-speaking peers in academic conversation. If he had been genuinely interested in Cyrus and Xavier’s contributions, he could have explained his definition and reasoning in English or compromised and listened to theirs, but instead he chose to promote his own idea, and continued to do so exclusively in Spanish.

The final part of the conversation follows:

Xavier: ¡Es un mono! ¡Un mono! No, un mono persona. [It’s a monkey! A monkey! No, a monkey person.]
Abigail: It’s a mono persona! [It’s a monkey person!]
Cyrus: It sort of looks like a howler monkey! No, see, I’ve seen a picture of one.
Xavier: See, it sort of is.
Jaime: Es una persona que se murió. That’s cause you don’t know. [It’s a person who died. That’s cause you don’t know.]
Xavier: It’s like a person and it’s dead now. So it basically is that.
Cyrus: Yeah, it’s sort of a person like thing, except it climbs on trees like howler monkeys.
Xavier: But let’s write mono.
Cyrus: Yeah, since it’s really monkeylike.
Jaime: We did it now.
Jesenia: Una persona muerta en nuestra familia. [A dead person in our family.]

The definition *grupos cuadrados* eventually shared with the class was “una persona que se murió” [a person who died], exactly as Jaime had written it. This fact provides further evidence that despite a lengthy conversation and the introduction of a competing (and equally valid) definition by two English-speaking boys, there was no linguistic mediation that would have made possible a meaningful exchange of ideas. Instead, only the voice of the one student who controlled el marcador was heard.

As noted earlier, this dynamic was typical of this group, and their discussion on the following day followed a similar pattern, despite the fact that children made different language choices. As a follow-up to the previous day’s lesson, groups were asked to discuss with one another where their ancestors came from. Again, Jaime took the marker and decided on his own where
each of the English-speaking group members’ ancestors were from, rather than helping them to communicate their personal knowledge in Spanish. A very small portion of the 11-minute conversation is presented here as another illustrative example of peer mediation gone awry:

Cyrus: I don’t know where my ancestors came from. I have no idea.
Jaime: Where does your grandma and . . . where does your grandpa live?
Cyrus: My grandma . . . I have two grandmas and I have one grandpa.
Jaime: Okay, which one? Where do they live?
Abigail: Which one do you want to write about?
Cyrus: I’m going to write about my dad’s grandpa. I think he came from . . .
Abigail: No, where did you, where did you . . .?
Jaime: Wait, where?
Cyrus: He came from Penn State, I think.

Once again, Jaime took control of the marker, and once again, he used it to control the message. Unlike in the first conversation, however, he tried to engage Cyrus in English when discussing where his ancestors came from. The barrier to mediation in this conversation seemed more likely related to Jaime’s limited knowledge about the United States. He didn’t understand Cyrus’s (admittedly confusing) reference to Pennsylvania, so he substituted a place he did know: his own country of origin. He was able to maintain control of the message because of the vague parameters around group discussions and peer mediation set by the teacher in this dual language classroom, and his position as a powerful Spanish-speaker holding el marcador.

**DISCUSSION**

Overall, the members of grupo cuadrado showed little ability to compromise and there were few attempts at linguistic mediation. They were not able to create a bilingual interactional space in which all students could contribute to a consensus opinion (Lee et al., 2008; Planas, 2011) or share their own knowledge and experiences. The lack of linguistic mediation in grupo cuadrado raises questions about the grouping strategy employed by Sra. Gregor. On one hand, she grouped students mindfully and sought to place highly proficient speakers of each language together. On the other hand, the broad range of proficiency levels in a given group may not have been conducive to helping the English speakers communicate a conceptually abstract idea. The asymmetry in Spanish proficiency may have led Jaime to disregard his classmates’ ideas altogether, rather than try and mediate them. The issue of appropriate grouping has been frequently addressed in the literature, and researchers like Hayes (2005) argue that:

> If children with different language proficiencies are to guide each other in the mutual process of language acquisition, the teacher is faced with the task of encouraging these children to engage each other, and giving them the desire to converse in target languages. (p. 94)

However, it seems clear that merely encouraging students is not enough to ensure that effective linguistic mediation will occur. Rather, explicit instruction and appropriate structures need to be provided as well.
In the findings from her study of student talk within a dual language classroom, Martin-Beltrán (2009) highlights three teacher strategies that supported successful linguistic mediation: creating a classroom context, modeling, and appropriate intervention (or nonintervention) in peer-to-peer interactions. In the focal classroom, Sra. Gregor set the context and gave clear directions about the goal of the small group activity. She modeled how to make a prediction and intervened briefly in the group conversation to try and keep it on the right track. However, she did not provide instruction in building consensus that went beyond listening to one another’s contributions, nor did she model how to engage in a linguistically mediated interaction that would support the equitable participation of all students.

The task likely played a role in the lack of successful mediation as well, since it was a highly conceptually and linguistically demanding for first graders. This was only the beginning of the second year that students were in the DL program, and the English speakers in *grupo cuadrado* did not have the language skills to carry out the task exclusively in Spanish. Therefore, it is not surprising that they communicated mostly in their more efficient language, English.

The analysis also points to the importance of balancing oral language and writing within small group work when linguistic mediation is a desired practice. When I asked Señora Gregor about her reasons for selecting certain students to write, she referenced the GLAD model, in which each child in a group has an opportunity to write at some point and everyone has the responsibility to orally help the writer if he or she struggles. She noted in our interview that, “I want to make sure that someone who is not usually involved is going to be the writer. I would like to be more intentional with the writer.” This stance is supported by Van Lier’s research (1998), in which he found that having the less proficient speaker carry the burden of information transfer through writing can have the effect of balancing communication between partners with widely divergent language proficiency levels. In the two focal sessions, however, Sra. Gregor simply asked that someone who had not written recently take *el marcador*. In session four, Jaime chose to take the marker and his groupmates did not challenge him. This became problematic when he took the marker again the following day and changed Cyrus’s contribution completely, changing Pennsylvania to El Salvador because it better fit with his own understanding of where ancestors might come from.

Finally, it would be incomplete to analyze only the ways in which this situation negatively influenced the development of English learners. Because of the prevalence of English in the small group discussion, Jaime and Jesenia were denied an opportunity to engage in high-level discourse in their home language. This finding echoes concerns that others have raised about DL education, including the fact that minority language speakers in classrooms with English speakers often lack opportunities to use their own language for academic purposes (deJong & Howard, 2009; Hickey, 2001; Potowski, 2004; Valdés, 1997). The lack of effective linguistic mediation in this discussion was therefore a net loss for all members of *grupo cuadrado*.

Nonetheless, contrary to research that highlights the dominant role of English speakers in getting their message heard in DL classrooms, this study provides a compelling counterexample of a case in which a Spanish speaker maintained control of the message and therefore reinforced Spanish as the language of power in this classroom (Palmer, 2008a). This control was possible through a confluence of circumstances: Jaime’s strong Spanish skills; Señora Gregor’s consistent modeling and valuing of Spanish oral language use in the classroom; and the fact that Jaime was holding *el marcador*. As Palmer (2008a) argued, “it is teachers’ and students’ collaborative efforts within the discourse of the classroom to construct ‘academically oriented identities’ that can
make these successful settings for Spanish bilingual students” (p. 648). Indeed, Jaime did make language moves based on his knowledge of classmates’ proficiency (Palmer, 2008b, 2009b), but his primary move was to ignore their contributions and persist with his own, solidifying his own status and power in the classroom.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The data presented in this article provide further evidence that true collaboration and peer linguistic mediation within linguistically-heterogenous groups do not happen automatically (Martin-Beltrán, 2009). Mindful grouping is often recognized as one of the most important decisions teachers make when facilitating group work, but in this dual language classroom, it proved not to be enough. Language proficiency was a key criterion that Sra. Gregor used in grouping students, but they lacked the skills or willingness to communicate across vast differences in Spanish communicative ability. As a result, eighty percent of turns in the two discussions were in English, and yet there was no attempt on the part of the proficient bilingual student in the group to make content more accessible to English speakers, even when he was speaking English. One possible way to deal with the challenge of diverse proficiency levels would be for DL teachers to group children with more similar proficiency levels in the two languages. Such grouping configurations are sometimes referred to as “near peers,” wherein one child has a level of proficiency slightly above that of others in one language while other children have slightly higher levels in the other language (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This grouping strategy might facilitate mediation in that all children would be able to communicate better in the target language, without experiencing the frustration that students in grupo cuadrado did.

Another factor that may have contributed to difficulties faced by this group was that the students were asked to perform the conceptually abstract task of predicting a new vocabulary term. Given the English speakers’ generally low level of Spanish proficiency, it was likely unrealistic for them to communicate the complex definition they generated in English. Even if Jaime had been invested in mediating his peers’ language, he may have been challenged to support them in a discussion requiring such complex language and ideas. Other recent research has also noted the need for teachers to attend to the nature of the task that requires mediation and the resources that students have to use in their groupwork (Angelova et al., 2006). In this case, Señora Gregor could have scaffolded the activity by sharing a brief read-aloud about ancestors to build background about possible meanings of the term as a springboard for group conversations. Such scaffolding would provide a complement to the inquiry and discussion cycle promoted by GLAD while also supporting students in accomplishing a challenging task.

The conceptual complexity of the task not only contributed to English speakers’ difficulty in having their ideas heard by the rest of the class, but it also disadvantaged the Spanish speakers, who missed an opportunity to engage in a rich, meaningful academic discussion in their home language. Such circumstances lessen the potential benefits of dual language education for those most in need of its linguistic and academic affordances. As deJong and Howard (2009) argue,

Teachers of the minority language must ensure that minority language speakers have extended opportunities to engage in challenging, rich language and literacy activities in their native language by using flexible cooperative groupings that include groups based on native and/or second language proficiency. (p. 93)
Finally, findings from this study suggest that teachers need to explicitly teach children how to engage in peer linguistic mediation in addition to providing opportunities for them to participate at a level appropriate to their proficiency. In dual language classrooms like the one described in this article, teachers may also need to prepare native speakers of the minority language for the expert role that they are well-positioned to fulfill (deJong & Howard, 2009). This is especially relevant in cases where bilingually proficient students may not want to cede control of the message, which seemed to be the case with Jaime. The fishbowl modeling that Señora Gregor provided on how to share predictions could have been extended to show various ways to engage all children, and especially to come to consensus when disparate opinions are expressed. A necessary complement to such modeling would be a discussion about why it is valuable to have multiple opinions expressed, and to negotiate meaning rather than to take it all on oneself. More research should be conducted on how effective linguistic mediation can be accomplished with young children of varying language proficiencies.

In conclusion, it seems clear that mindfully grouping students based on a host of factors, including, but not limited to language proficiency, is a start but not an end point in terms of facilitating successful small group conversations in which everyone’s contributions are valued and incorporated. Explicit instruction in peer mediation strategies is essential, and ongoing monitoring of group interactions can help teachers understand how students are using the two languages in relation to the academic content and language they seek to develop (Martínez, 2010; Storch, 2002). Such monitoring can also ensure that children are sharing the responsibility of crafting the message that will be shared both orally and in writing, rather than allowing one student to dominate multiple conversations as Jaime was able to do in this unit. To that end, further investigations of the features of effective peer linguistic mediation between language majority and language minority children are needed, as are studies on how teachers can instructionally support such efforts.

REFERENCES


