

# The Communicative Burden of Making Others Understand: Why Critical Language Awareness Is a Must in all ESL (and Non-ESL) Classrooms

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This working paper examines students' linguistic perceptions and communicative competence in the context of a super-diverse ESL classroom. Through the use of discourse, filmic, and ethnographic analyses, I show the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt sources of multilingual students' linguistic self-perceptions. I argue for the need to explore students' ideas and experiences of language through a pedagogy that focuses on knowledge about language and, in particular, knowledge about the ideological dimensions of language: what is known as *critical language awareness*, or CLA. I make the claim that it is in multilingual students' everyday interactions in which others, often native speakers of English, react in ways that are internalized by students as evaluations of their own linguistic skills. These evaluations I refer to as *metacommentary* (Rymes, 2014). Thus, I argue that a pedagogy of critical language awareness is necessary not only to make explicit the ways in which such interactions function, but also to provide emergent multilinguals with powerful learning opportunities where their experiences of transnationalism/immigration and plurilingualism can truly be used as a resource for learning. Not only can this lead to productive pedagogical interventions, but harnessing students' critical metalinguistic awareness can also be a powerful tool to scaffold language learning and beyond.

## Introduction

Many urban areas in the United States receive immigrants from all over the world, creating super-diverse (Vertovec, 2007) contexts. In schools, this has generated an increasing population of emergent multilingual students who, despite the diversity in their language and cultural backgrounds, are officially categorized under the same term: English Language Learner. With accountability pressures exacerbated by the No Child Left Behind Act, the educational focus for students is centered on what they lack (English), as opposed to what they know.

Emergent multilingual students possess the experience of being/becoming bi- and multi-lingual; they become fluid code-mixers and code-switchers, using language in creative ways, and they live in multilingual households and often become interpreters for their families. And yet, ethnographic engagement in a multilingual classroom in a northeastern city of the United States revealed that

students felt ashamed of their English-language skills, internalized the bulk of responsibility for not speaking English well, and often did not assert their multilingualism as a resource. Through conversations, interviews, and filmic participation, students' perceptions of their own linguistic abilities seeped through, revealing not only their attitudes towards language but also exposing a wealth of knowledge of different codes and varieties that otherwise went unnoticed.

This paper examines students' theories of language in the context of a super-diverse ESL classroom, where the countries of origin represented included Haiti, Liberia, Mexico, India, Ivory Coast, Pakistan, and Vietnam, among others. Through the use of discourse, filmic, and ethnographic analyses I will show the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt sources of multilingual students' linguistic self-perceptions. I will argue for the need to explore students' ideas and experiences of language through a pedagogy that focuses on knowledge about language, and in particular, knowledge about the ideological dimensions of language: what is known as *critical language awareness*, or CLA. Not only can this lead to productive pedagogical interventions, but harnessing students' critical metalinguistic awareness can also be a powerful tool to scaffold language learning and beyond. More specifically, I make the claim that comfortable learning environments in which teachers hold a positive stance towards bilingualism and pedagogically embrace students' diverse experiences as resources for learning may not be enough to foster students' sense of their own linguistic knowledge and communicative competence. This is so because it is in multilingual students' everyday interactions that others, often native speakers of English, react in ways that are internalized by students as evaluations of their own linguistic skills. These evaluations I refer to as *metacommentary*, which Rymes (2014) defines as "commenting on communication" (p. 1), illustrating what counts as communicatively relevant in any interaction. What speakers interpret as metacommentary on their linguistic skills may be explicitly stated (e.g., 'you speak funny') or more often, implicit in the interaction (e.g., gestures which indicate difficulty in understanding). Thus, I argue that a pedagogy of critical language awareness is necessary not only to make explicit the ways in which such interactions function, but also to provide emergent multilinguals with powerful learning opportunities where their experiences of transnationalism/immigration and plurilingualism can truly be used as a resource for learning.

### Literature Review

Educational scholars working from various fields have documented the skills and knowledge that multilingual immigrant students bring into US schools. The oft-cited concept of funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992), for example, sought to counter the deficit theorizing of Latino households by ethnographically documenting the many resources and the wealth of knowledge embedded in the family households of Mexican American children in the Southwest. This concept has spurred much academic research, although some scholars are critical of simplistic applications of the concepts that can be counter-productive by creating essentializing views of Latino and other minoritized communities (e.g., Oughton, 2010). Educational scholars have also pointed out the invisibility of immigrant, multilingual students' skills in the mainstream classroom. In her study

of child translators, Orellana (2009), for example, illustrates the complex linguistic and interactional demands that translating for family members requires. Indeed, the author shows that not only is this practice “translating” or “interpreting,” it is also often “transcultural and intergenerational work” (p. 26). In fact, because of the complexity of the task of interpreting, which involves synthesizing information and deciding on-the-spot what is critical for the message, Valdés (2003) argues that this skill should be considered part of a definition of giftedness in schools. This ability is one that involves a high degree of cognitive capacity and information processing skills, yet it is one that goes largely unnoticed in schools.

In the realm of literacy studies, Campano and Ghiso (2011) position immigrant students as cosmopolitan intellectuals, whose experiences of transnationalism should be used productively as resources for learning and particularly for engaging with texts that might reflect some of their own experiences. Part of this stance involves taking “[students’] claims about the world seriously” (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013, p. 33). This argument rests on Moya’s (2002) concept of *epistemic privilege*, defined as “a special advantage with respect to possessing or acquiring knowledge about how fundamental aspects of our society (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) operate to sustain matrices of power” (p. 38). Campano and Ghiso (2011) have used this concept productively to theorize the vast amount of knowledge, insights, and resources minoritized and immigrant students and their communities can offer, arguing that “by virtue of their diverse vantage points and transnational negotiations,” immigrant students are “uniquely positioned to educate their peers and teachers about the world” (p. 166). I would extend that argument to language: not only can multilingual students teach their teachers and peers about their own language(s), but they can offer insights into the different ways their language operates in different social situations.

In short, scholars have theorized in various ways the skills and knowledge that multilingual immigrant students possess. The funds-of-knowledge approach, recognizing children as intercultural interpreters and translators, and immigrant students as cosmopolitan intellectuals, are but a few of these ways. In my own quest for theorizing the epistemic privilege of the students I observed and worked with, I turn to scholars of language and communication. I claim that part of the epistemic privilege that immigrant, multilingual students can claim is that of understanding how language and communication can work differently in various social settings. This knowledge is partly tacit and is evidenced in the communicative competence students performed. This performed, embodied knowledge stood in stark contrast to the English speaking incompetence that students reported. One way of understanding the source of these feelings of incompetence is through the report of communicative encounters in students’ narratives. I now turn to a review of these important concepts.

Rymes’ (2010) notion of *communicative repertoires*, defined as “the collection of ways individuals use language and literacy and other means of communication (gestures, dress, posture, or accessories) to function effectively in the multiple communities in which they participate” (p. 528), is central to the view of language that informs this analysis. Abandoning a more restrictive view of language in favor of the broader notion of communicative repertoires allows us to see the multiple, creative, and talented ways in which multilingual students navigate their daily communicative lives. Moreover, one aspect that is important to consider is the way

people accommodate their repertoires to their interlocutors, especially because the “directionality of accommodation—or, who accommodates to whom—varies” (p. 532). This directionality in accommodation is not random; particularly not for students from immigrant backgrounds who occupy a precarious and often minoritized position in society. In fact, in a related line of thought, Lippi-Green (1997) extensively and critically theorizes the “uneven distribution of the... communicative burden,” (p. 67) which she attributes to a language subordination process—an ideological process through which the dominant language majority maintains the status quo through the subordination of minority language speakers. She posits that in every communicative encounter, interlocutors make the choice of accepting or rejecting the *communicative burden*, that is, the *responsibility of mutual comprehension to ensure a successful communicative act*. Accent becomes a major player in this decision:

When speakers are confronted with an accent which is foreign to them, the first decision they make is whether or not they are going to accept their responsibility in the act of communication. What we will see, again and again...is that members of the dominant language group feel perfectly empowered to reject their role, and to demand that a person with an accent carry the majority of the responsibility in the communicative act. Conversely, when such a speaker comes into contact with another mainstream speaker who is nonetheless incoherent or unclear, the first response is usually *not* to reject a fair share of the communicative burden, but to take other factors into consideration. (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 70)

In the analysis that follows, the idea of the communicative burden will be important to think about, paying particular attention to the ways in which the students who participated in this project reported their various communicative encounters. As I demonstrate below, it may not be that members of the dominant language group are rejecting their role as interlocutors per se, as much as some interlocutors are feeling the responsibility for taking on the communicative burden based on interactional cues from the conversation.

The variability or asymmetries in communicative accommodation that both Rymes (2010) and Lippi-Green (1997, 2004) discuss is related to the communicative strategies that speakers use in interaction. Thus, individuals have a command of particular communicative repertoires based on their histories and social positions, and come into contact with others who may or may not share these repertoires. These communicative instances carry special significance to my multilingual participants, as they often reported to me in conversations and interviews about their experiences of immigrating to the United States. Thus, I analyze what students say about their own experiences and encounters with others by looking at their metacommentary. As mentioned, metacommentary are comments about language, or more broadly, about the communicative exchange between interlocutors that are selected as relevant. Metacommentary is part of the general range of metalinguistic acts, that is, acts that typify any aspect of language use, and can include a variety of paralinguistic acts, such as gestures (Agha, 2007). As is demonstrated below, these students’ narratives of their problematic communicative encounters included metacommentary and metalinguistic acts that allow one to understand and more carefully analyze their experiences as young people learning English in the United States.

Finally, an idea central to the view of multilingual students as knowers is Hymes' (1972/2001) notion of *communicative competence*. Arguing forcibly against Chomsky's view of competence as the unconscious knowledge solely of grammatical rules, Hymes defined the notion of communicative competence as the tacit knowledge of language and its use in communicative situations, including the understanding of when something is possible, feasible, appropriate, and done, in addition (but not in subordination to) the knowledge of grammatical rules. Finally, it involves the idea of performance "which takes into account the interaction between competence (knowledge, ability for use), the competence of others, and the cybernetic and emergent properties of events themselves" (Hymes, 1972/2001, p. 65). Understanding these "properties of events themselves" involves fine-grained sociocultural knowledge of particular speech situations, which speakers acquire through the process of language socialization. In the pages that follow, I argue that because of the tacit nature of this knowledge and of communicative competence, a pedagogy that allows students to understand and discover their own competence and abilities for themselves might prove to be a more powerful learning experience that surpasses the effects of teachers' positive attitudes alone.

### Methodology

The analysis presented in this paper draws from ethnographic data collected during the 2011-2012 school year, in which I became a participant observer in a high school "English for English Language Learners" classroom. The class was composed of 22 students with very diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, where the countries of origin represented included Haiti, Liberia, Bangladesh, Sierra Leone, Mexico, India, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Jamaica, and Pakistan. I joined an on-going, team-ethnographic research project, that had as its goal to observe, document, and inquire into the multiple and creative ways in which students in this multilingual environment deployed their communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2010). Throughout the course of this study I participated in research team meetings with the other graduate students observing at the site, during which we discussed field notes, observations, and patterns of interest with the principal investigator. These discussions have contributed to the insights presented in this paper.

The data I collected include field notes from classroom observations, interviews with students and the teacher, paper documents, and audio and video recordings in the classroom as well as after school in students' homes and workplaces. Additionally, throughout the year I conducted filming for different purposes. During the fall, I created a short documentary profile of the teacher and the learning environment he created in his classroom. Starting in January, I began a collaborative ethnographic film project in which several students participated. I was interested in creating a "day in the life" documentary film about three different students in the class to learn about students' experiences outside of school. Several different students expressed interest, and to follow up I began shadowing some of them to their afternoon classes and after-school activities.

Throughout these different phases of data collection, the general thrust guiding this inquiry was to explore and document the experiences of the students in and out of school. Given the diversity of the students in the class, I wanted to explore

specifically the knowledge, skills, and experiences students brought with them to this classroom and how to productively engage with them in order to bring about significant learning experiences. As I began sifting through the data, I noticed the salience of language in students' narrations of their experiences of immigration and their first days of school. I thus looked for instances in the data in which students mentioned communicative encounters as well as language difficulties. At the same time, I coded for instances in the data in which students discursively or performatively showed communicative competence and knowledge about language(s) and their use. The insights presented here are patterns I observed that come out of a recursive analysis of field notes, documents, film clips, and interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1989).

Finally, film is an important methodological and analytical tool I have used that has greatly contributed to the analysis and interpretation presented here. In fact, it is because I incorporated film into my methodology that I am able to make the argument I present in the following pages. By having a filmic record of classroom sessions, interviews, and afterschool activities, I was able to log and transcribe significant classroom events and was able to analyze a vast amount of linguistic and semiotic data in detail. The first iterations of this analysis were in the form of *filmlets*, or short films edited to make a theoretical point, that were presented at two conferences and in several graduate school classrooms. The feedback and discussions that resulted from those viewing sessions have also contributed to the development of this analysis.

### Research Setting/Classroom Context

*As the camera pans the classroom, the screen displays students sitting in clusters in different parts of the room, hunched over their laptops, wearing their headphones. The room is silent, aside from the barely audible music coming from earphones and the humming that students produce to go along with their song of choice. You could see music videos on YouTube on many of their screens. The teacher, Mr. P, is sitting on the ledge next to Jamie's desk, helping her trouble shoot where she got stuck on her iMovie project. Here and there, you can hear students talk with a friend next to them or in their groups, often alternating between different languages... (field note, November 11, 2011)*

The classroom in which this ethnographic study took place is part of Riverdale High School,<sup>1</sup> one of the largest schools in the country and the only high school for this school district. It consists of several large buildings. Two friendly female security officers greet students and visitors at the entrance lobby. The walls of the entrance lobby display the names and faces of "famous" alumni of the school, and the hallway leading down to the classroom displays historic pictures of the high school's graduating classes, dating back to the 1920s.

One of the classrooms on this floor was home to Mr. P's English for ELLs class, although this was not Mr. P's own classroom (Mr. P was a floating teacher, without a permanent classroom of his own). The classroom was arranged in five rows of desks, and the classroom was equipped with its own projector and screen.

<sup>1</sup> The school name, as well as the names of the teacher and students, are pseudonyms.

The wall opposite the door had two large windows on either end, and the wall was painted a sky blue with white fluffy clouds. There was a small separate room in the rear of the classroom that served as an office for the teacher that normally occupied this space.

Mr. P is a tall, White teacher of Polish descent, and a native of the area. He is in his thirties, and has been a teacher for about 10 years. Mr. P had been collaborating with the principal investigator for this research project for about five years at the time that I began my research. At a recent conference, where the research team presented some of our work, he expressed that his goal in his classroom is to create a “comfortable learning environment.” Mr. P has described his teaching style as very “relaxed”: he allows students to sit where they want, to use their language as needed, and when working on individual projects, allows them to listen to music in their earphones as long as it’s not distracting. On a typical day, Mr. P starts teaching in the front of the room with the students listening from their desks. The first half of class is usually spent in this fashion, and depending on the unit and the major project for the unit, the students will typically engage in individual work for the second half of class. Some days there may be a more teacher-centered lecture and other days may be almost entirely devoted to individual student work, but these are the two typical participant structures in this classroom.

Most students seem to have positive attitudes towards the class and Mr. P, which they have expressed to me on various occasions. Several students shared with me explicitly how they liked the freedom they have in the classroom, specifically to pursue their individual projects. Faraz, a student from Pakistan, especially enjoys having a space in which to share his personal stories. I observed Mr. P on several occasions talk about subjects that might normally make teachers feel uncomfortable, such as sex, racism, and using the N-word. Students participated in conversations without raising their hands, contributing to the informal and candid nature of classroom talks.

In many ways, Mr. P expressed and embodied a language-as-resource (Ruiz, 1984) stance in the classroom. During an interview, he explicitly stated how he regarded his students’ bilingualism as a resource and tried to emphasize this as much as possible. This was evident in his practice in a variety of ways. He often allowed and encouraged students to use their own languages to write (especially to brainstorm or to write initial drafts of a writing assignment). He often pointed out when students understood French (during *Persepolis*) or Spanish (during another video in which Spanish was spoken). In formal assignments he would encourage students to draw on the linguistic and cultural resources available to them. For example, one of his major projects for the year was a music video assignment, in which he asked students to research music from another culture (whether their own or a different one). This meant that much of class time researching was spent on YouTube watching music videos from different countries and in many different languages and language varieties.

With assignments like these, which called on students’ multiple literacies (media, internet, music, linguistic literacies), Mr. P’s classroom enacted a pluriliteracies approach, which encourages not only multilingualism but also multimodality and “emphasize[d] the integrated, hybrid nature of plurilingual literacy practices” of all students (García, Bartlett, & Kleifgen, 2007, p. 217).

## Findings

## Perceived English Competency

...most of us don't speak English that good, we like, have a hard time communicating with other people...who speak really good English. (Ali, senior in high school from Sudan, interview, March 20, 2012)

Given the positive learning environment and the language-as-resource orientation that Mr. P embodied in discourse and practice, it was surprising to learn that many of the students in this classroom felt embarrassed about their English speaking skills or often characterized them as "not good" or "not good enough," as the excerpt from Ali illustrates above. This was not evident during class observations, but became a recurring pattern in interviews or one-on-one/ small group conversations. In fact, I had the opposite perception of Ali from my classroom observations. He participated often, and in almost every class I observed during the year, Ali spoke up to answer one of Mr. P's questions or to share his thoughts during class discussion. Compared to several other students in the class who rarely, if ever, spoke up during class discussions, Ali could be considered outgoing. Therefore, it was only through interviews and interactions with Ali and the other students that I realized their feelings towards their English proficiency.

Talar, a student from Bangladesh in his senior year, expressed similar feelings about his English through an email. Students had been working on personal narratives, and several students had been sharing their narratives with me. When we ran out of class time for Talar to share his story with me, he simply sent it as an attachment from his iPhone. In my response, I gave him praise for his writing, posed some questions, and offered suggestions for editing. I ended my email by thanking him for sharing his story. He replied as follows:

I didn't have any plan to share my story with someone except for Mr. P. Because I know I may have some error with grammar in some sentences, but I shared my story with u czz I know if I have any error in my writing you'll understand that I may have some error because I'm an ELL student. (Talar, personal communication, March 7, 2012)

Talar's narrative, in fact, did not contain many errors in grammar. It was evident that a language learner wrote it, but it was nonetheless a well-written piece. As a former teacher who has worked with language learners, and as a student of educational linguistics and second language acquisition, I find it quite natural that students who are learning English not speak it perfectly, and make mistakes in writing, speaking, and pronunciation. It is part of the learning process, and a good sign at that, but it seems that these students have formed a perception that they should be speaking perfect English in a short amount of time, or at least better English than they thus far speak. Faraz, a student from Pakistan, expressed on several occasions how he was ashamed that he didn't speak "better English," given the amount of time he had spent in the United States. Faraz had immigrated to the United States about four years prior to this research, spending the first two years in New York City, surrounded by friends and family from Pakistan with whom he continued to speak Urdu. Faraz expresses a feeling of embarrassment in his writing journal, where he writes:



So when I living then slowly slowly I felt good and normally and then I went my new school in US I am nervous because I never speak English I am feel embarsed and shy. (Faraz, notebook composition, undated, collected March 2012).

This excerpt is part of a longer narrative in which Faraz is describing his first experiences in the United States. As can be expected of an individual who is faced with the task of speaking a foreign language for the first time with native speakers, Faraz felt “embarrassed and shy” speaking English. However, from the time of the initial encounter that he narrates in his journal until the present time, Faraz’s attitudes towards his English seem to have remained largely the same. In an informal interview at his house, Faraz explained to me that during his time in New York he did not care too much for school, that he would cut classes at times and would not complete his homework. He was also enrolled in a school with a large Urdu-speaking student population, and was always speaking Urdu with his friends. He reported that his attitude towards school changed from indifference to strong focus and motivation when he realized a friend of his who had been in the US for a shorter amount of time already spoke better English than he did. Thus, in his transition from New York to this northeastern suburb, he explained that “then...I came here and I said, now I just (.5)<sup>2</sup> pay attention, my study first, because I no speak very well. And then I did four years ago I just lived in here and no speak very well.” Faraz continues to explain further in the interview about his realization that his oral English is not as developed as his friend’s, who has been in the United States for a shorter amount of time. This he describes as the impetus for him to focus on “his studies.”

What is significant about Faraz’ account, however, is that the onus of responsibility for speaking better English (or failure to do so) falls entirely on him. The problem with this line of reasoning is that Faraz, like many language learners in this classroom, does not have much interaction with native English speakers during the course of his day, which points to the isolated experience that many immigrant students face as they come to the United States. Immigrant students tend to have fewer opportunities to interact with fluent English speakers both in and out of school: they may be tracked in ESL classes with other peers who are also language learners, and in their own communities are surrounded by family and friends with whom they continue to communicate in their native language (e.g., Bartlett & García, 2011; Harklau, 1994; Valdés, 2001). The opportunities for Faraz to practice his oral English skills and interact with fluent speakers are very limited: very rarely did he speak up during class discussions, and with his friends he mostly spoke in Urdu. Faraz seems to get along well with some of the other boys in the class who do not speak Urdu, with whom he speaks in English, but these interactions are often part of unofficial classroom time (i.e., side-conversations during group work, transitions, or break time) and from my time observing, were infrequent and often short in length. In his household, he uses Punjabi to communicate with his parents and older brother, and speaks in Urdu with his younger siblings, with the exception of Harun, one of his little brothers with whom he will interact in English at times. Faraz works many hours in his father’s business, a fast food franchise located in the shopping district in his township. His interactions there

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<sup>2</sup> (1.0) indicates pause in seconds

involve speaking with customers and taking their orders, with the exception of the friendly customer with whom he will engage in more sustained conversations. The way Faraz answered my question regarding the languages he speaks is quite revealing in this English interaction<sup>3</sup>:

S: So, what languages do you speak?

F: Like, 3-4 languages.

S: Which ones?

F: Urdu, Punjabi, and ah, Mohajeri

S: And English? (I ask with a tone of surprise, wondering why he hadn't mentioned it since it's the language we were using to communicate)

F: Yeah, English little bit (gestures with hands and nods head from side to side, smiling as I laugh)

S: (laughs) Which ones do you use the most?

F: Most...(looks up) (2.0) Punjabi and Urdu. Most (gestures with hands from side to side).

S: When do you speak them?

F: Punjabi with my mother, father, and my cousin. And sometimes friends, but, mostly I'm friends with Urdu.

S: When do you use English?

F: ahh (.5)...like.(1.0) with you. And with like, my like, nobody knows about Urdu, and then I speak English.

S: mhm. (1.0) How about at school?

F: ah yeah. school..ah..English. I think so is English, sometimes Urdu. yeah

S:=and [with your]

F: =like mixed

S: friends?

F: yeah. English Urdu mixed. (Gestures with hands). (interview, March 18, 2012)

Two things stand out in this interview. First, it is significant that Faraz doesn't list English as one of the languages he knows, *even as we are conducting our interview in it*. It is only after I suggest English, as I laugh, thinking of the irony of this situation, that Faraz admits to speaking English "a little." Clearly, Faraz is learning English and is able to use it to communicate productively with me about his experiences. Secondly, when asked with whom he speaks English, his first answer is with me. This lends support to the finding from the larger team ethnography that found that students who are labeled ELLs have limited opportunities during the school day to interact with native speakers; both because they are usually surrounded by other multilingual international students and because there seems to be little opportunity for interaction with native English speakers. At other times, however, the lack of interaction with fluent or native speakers could be a result of

<sup>3</sup> S: Sofia, F: Faraz. For a list of transcription conventions please refer to Appendix A.

unsuccessful or negative experiences. Perhaps, even in my own initial interactions with Faraz, I could have (unintentionally) made him aware of his own limitations in his English speaking ability by asking for frequent repetitions.

Like Faraz, another student who expressed to me this frustration of not speaking better English after a certain amount of time was Adela, an alumna of the same high school. Adela arrived in the United States as a junior in high school with no proficiency in English, and initially needed to look up everything she wanted to say word-for-word. Now, she can understand everything people say to her, but says that she still thinks in Spanish and mentally translates from Spanish into English when she speaks. While this is a common process among language learners, she believes she should have learned more English by now and that it is her fault for not having done so. This is a central idea I will come back to in the final section, as it is fundamental for beginning to understand and theorize the provenance of students' negative perceptions of their skills and proficiency.

As I have illustrated above, students negatively evaluated their English skills and proficiency, accepting the onus of responsibility for communication as entirely their own, as opposed to viewing communication as a negotiation among a pair or group of interlocutors. At the same time, students rarely, if ever, recognized or reported their bi-/multilingualism as an asset or resource, even if they displayed an impressive amount of knowledge about language and a performative competence when communicating in multilingual settings.

### Students' Knowledge about Language and Displays of Communicative Competence

I was filming in the corner of the classroom on the day Mr. P was introducing a unit on Shakespeare. During the first half of the class, Mr. P gave a lecture about how things have changed over time, emphasizing that one of the things that has changed the most is language. The following excerpt is taken from my notes on the video of this lesson and excerpts of the conversation that ensued between students:

*Students are variously engaged throughout the lecture, all are sitting quietly at their desks. Some are texting or looking at their cellphones. Right before the break, Mr. P poses the following question to the students: does anybody know where English comes from? Where English started? I am standing in the corner next to the desks of Elmer and Sami, two teenagers from Haiti, and Ali (the student I've quoted above) who is from Egypt and Sudan. As soon as break begins, Ali sits lost in thought, then asks— "I wonder what was the original language of my country..." I turn my attention (and my camera lens) to Ali and ask him, what does he mean? As Ali and I begin to talk, Elmer and Sami are alternating between speaking with each other in Kreyol and attending to Ali's question*

A: (turning towards Sami and Elmer, who are sitting in the two desks in front of him) What's you guys' original language?

E: Haiti? Original language (turning back) We have two languages, French and Kreyol.

S: (inaudible)

A: Naw man, so French just came here (1.0).No like, the first language-

E: We can't tell, because::

Sa: We don't know (?)

S: What do you mean, Ali?

A: Like the first language, since like, people came together to make the country. I don't even know mine, cuz some Arabian people came from Asia to my country, and then my country like (became) a Muslim-Islam country, we start speaking Arabic like our own, own, like I don't even know, I don't even know what language we used to speak. I know like Arabic is way way older than English

...

E: (addressing Sami) I don't even know it cuz my dad trying to understand it like I can get some words, but I don't get it

S: You don't get what?

E: It's like, another language, it's kinda of a dialect, from Kreyol (1.0) that, usually like, Sami speak it, I don't

Sa: Why does Sami speak it and you don't?

E: It's not even a language

Sa: Like in Haiti, you can't talk, there's some stuff [you can't talk in front of-

E: [(laughing) in front of people]

Sa: your parents

....

S: So you speak in that dialect-your parents don't understand that?

Sa: Its like, most of the youth, its like, for young people.

E: Its not for young people! my grand[ma speaks it! my grandma speaks it!

S: [because when my grandma's young, they used to speak it, so their parents they don't understand it.

E: But it's an old language, it's a dead language!=-

S: =but every generation use it as youth, when they get old they don't use it anymore. (field notes & film clip, April 10, 2012)

In the transcription above, Ali shows curiosity over how Arabic<sup>4</sup> came to be the language of the countries in which he's lived: Sudan and Egypt. Sami and Elmer discuss their different experiences with a dialect that they debate as to whether it is a "youth code" or not. These are exciting opportunities that could lead to powerful inquiries about the world around them, inquiries that could be conducted and communicated orally and in writing through English, in a similar way in which Alim (2010) describes a project in which African American students conducted ethnographies of their language and communication. Inquiring systematically and

<sup>4</sup> As one reviewer aptly pointed out, "Arabic" means very little as a language label, as it can refer to one of many varieties of Arabic (e.g., Classical, Sudanese, Modern Standard, etc.). In our conversations, Ali used the term "Arabic," and although he was probably referring to a specific form of Arabic, I take up his general term in my text since I failed to inquire further into the matter and cannot claim to know more than what he explicitly stated at the moment.

ethnographically into one's language practices is a major part of what I include under the term critical language awareness, which is an idea that I will come back to in the discussion.

The conversation captured in the video clip transcribed above displays Ali's, Sami's, and Elmer's knowledge about language as well as their communicative competence. In the classroom, students often spoke with each other in different languages and dialects. Students from various African countries could not only communicate in French but also often in one or more language varieties from their respective hometowns or villages. Additionally, many students had the ability to translate from their native languages to English.

In their homes, students were often surrounded by oral and written speech in several languages, including English. In Faraz' home, for example, three languages were spoken: English, Urdu and Punjabi. Faraz explained that his multilingual home life was due to the fact that his parents spoke to him and his older brother in Punjabi, but spoke to their younger siblings in Urdu. Faraz' little brother, Harun, was often characterized as having great English skills which he admitted proudly to Faraz who was interviewing him on his iPhone. Faraz at times had to mediate communication between Harun and his parents since Harun's Urdu was limited and his parents' English was not as extensive as his own. Faraz' family often watched media on Pakistani cable television channels, and there were also several Muslim prayers displayed around the house in Classical Arabic, which Faraz had the ability to recite. Faraz spent the majority of his time after school and on weekends working at the fast food franchise that his father owns. On the days I spent with him after school in his job, I filmed and observed him confidently speaking with customers in person and over the phone in English, then seamlessly communicating with his brother, who also worked there, in Urdu.

Julia, a participant in the ethnographic film project, and her sister, Adela, are also bilingual and biliterate. They used both Spanish and English at home in communicating with each other in speech and in writing and there were texts and media in both languages throughout the house. Indeed, if we were to make a list of the cumulative knowledge and experiences of the students that made up Mr. P's class, we would come up with an impressive list of languages and ways of speaking that made up students' communicative repertoires. Nonetheless, Mr. P having highlighted this bilingualism as an advantage and a resource (both through his discourse and learning units) might have little effect in a world in which students understand the importance of English. In other words, students understand how much more they might need to speak English in the United States, and how Urdu might be of little use outside their home and their communities. However, because communicative competence involves much more than knowledge about a code, simply highlighting bilingualism as an advantage and a resource for students might be of little effect unless students also understand how much more they know beyond just their languages. Therefore, creating experiences in which students explore and examine the competence that comes with knowledge of a code—the tacit sociolinguistic and communicative knowledge that comes with being socialized in a particular speech community—might allow them to come to understand their bilingualism differently and to come to appropriate and assert the wide range of their communicative repertoires. And perhaps, instead of apologizing for their so-called "bad English," students can come to expect others

to make a greater effort to understand them.

### Implicit and Explicit Metacommentary on Students' Communicative Ability

Thus far, I have described the knowledge and competence that students displayed in their behavior outside of school and during unofficial classroom discussions. I have also illustrated the negative feelings they expressed towards their English proficiency and the responsibility they felt they had to make themselves understood. These, again, were expressed even when the teacher had created a classroom environment that not only recognized their bi/multilingualism, but constantly sought to bring out these talents and value them. In attempting to understand why this could be so, a central question emerges: where might these feelings come from? Where and how are students getting these messages? A deeper analysis of the interview data reveals this aspect of students' experiences that I believe begins to answer this question.

In the transcript below and on other occasions, Julia mentioned to me her unsuccessful attempts at socializing with her American classmates, highlighting this experience as follows:

S: Y te llevas con los Americanos?

J: No, ellos, ellos son bien diferentes, son, cerrados, y si tú no les hablas, como que ellos no te hablan, o no sé. A mí me han tocado compañeros que parecen así que no, **como no les hablo bien, como que, ya no me vuelven a hablar**. Y eso a veces hace sentir mal no. Bueno, continuamos.

[S: And do you hang out with the Americans?

J: No, they, they're very different, they're, exclusive, and if you don't talk to them, like they don't talk to you, I don't know. I have had classmates that seem like, **because I don't speak to them correctly, like, don't really talk to me again**. And sometimes that will make one feel bad. But well, we move on.] (Julia, interview, March 19, 2012)

The reason Julia reports her classmates won't speak to her again is that she doesn't "speak to them correctly." What is it in her interactions with *los Americanos* that leads her to conclude that it is her incorrect English that is the barrier to future interactions? What interactional cues is Julia picking up on that allow her to come to this conclusion? Whatever these were, what is significant is that she interprets these cues as metacommentary on her English-speaking ability and, consequently, attributes her classmates' hesitation or refusal to interact with her as a result of her imperfect command of English. Lippi-Green (1997) posits that dominant ideologies circulate at the institutional levels, and I wish to show that these dominant ideologies become materialized in acts of everyday interaction. In other words, it is the cumulative effect of everyday interactions, such as the one described above, through which students read interactional cues that either implicitly or explicitly serve as metacommentary on their English skills.

Adela, Julia's sister, provides another example of how interactional cues are construed by her as implicit metacommentary on her ability to speak English.

As she is recounting her experience of not being understood, she mimics the expression she perceives on people's faces as they speak with her, as shown in the following image:



Then Adela goes on to explain:

A: y yo pues, *¡si lo estoy diciendo bien! ¿por qué no me entiendes?! Pero no, si, es mi culpa* porque no, todavía no aprendo a contarme mis frases, y ya tengo, pues tres años aquí y pues si, entre comillas como que me da coraje conmigo misma, porque, o sea yo ya tengo tanto tiempo aquí, y **no sé hablar, no, la gente no me entiende.**

[A: And I'm like, **I'm saying it right! Why don't you understand me?! But no, it's my fault** because I still haven't learned my phrases well, and I have been here, well three years, and well yes, I get mad at myself because, well I have been here for so long, and **I don't know how to speak, no, people don't understand me.**] (Adela, interview, March 19, 2012)

Adela describes two aspects of communication in her report: her utterances and people's ability to understand them. Yet, instead of analyzing them separately, and attributing people's inability to understand her to their unfamiliarity with her accent, or perhaps to the low volume of her voice, she attributes it to her incorrect phrasing, than assumes the total burden of the communicative exchange by saying "*es mi culpa*" [it's my fault], because she hasn't "learned her phrases well," as she states. Adela's statement powerfully illustrates Lippi-Green's words on who takes the responsibility of the communicative burden. Furthermore, it illustrates how Adela has internalized the idea that she must assimilate to the language majority and accommodate to others.

Unlike Adela's and Julia's account, not all of the instances of reported metacommentary were implicit. Several of the young men from West Africa

reported interactions in which other students would make fun of their English. These negative evaluations on students' manner of speaking are clearly explicit metacommentary—that is, they explicitly call attention to the part of these students' communication that is relevant: their accent. In fact, two students spoke at length about how such interactions caused problems for them, in which they would engage in physical fights due to the anger caused by these provocations. This, however, may only be a surface manifestation of deeper discriminatory practices for some students; namely, when those that are being made fun of are African immigrants by African American classmates, these may be the product of deeper processes of racialization and debated notions of belonging—important issues which are beyond the scope of this paper (for a deeper analysis of this issue see Smalls, 2010).

While I did not personally observe any of the interactions that students shared with me, having this empirical data would be beside the point, because students' reports on these interactions illustrate the way they have interpreted and internalized these exchanges, regardless of how others would describe them. This is the central idea of the value of looking at students' metacommentary as insights into the ways students make sense of their communicative encounters. Taken together, this range of implicit to explicit metacommentary cumulatively creates the interactional experiences that students reported to me during our interviews. It is important to point out that these linguistic experiences emerged as a very significant part of students' overall experiences.

### **The Potential of Critical Language Awareness in the Classroom**

The purpose of critical language awareness (CLA) in the classroom is to teach students explicitly about language, especially its ideological and social dimensions (what it does in the world, whose interests it serves, etc.). According to Fairclough (1992), a critical view of language “highlights how language conventions and language practices are invested with power relations and ideological processes which people are often unaware of” (p. 7). Clark and Ivanic (1999) add that:

CLA as a curriculum aim is not only relevant but even crucial to modern life: people need to understand the ideological nature of discourse in order to gain control over the way in which their communicative practices contribute to the maintenance or contestation of particular representations of the world and relations of power. (p. 67)

Given the aforementioned ways in which communicative encounters that immigrant multilingual students have can be impacted by different attitudes and ideologies towards accent and difference, this goal seems quite fitting. Moreover, CLA projects are designed to emphasize students' inquiries, discovery, and self-awareness. For example, in his chapter on CLA, Alim (2010) describes a sociolinguistic project in which African American students conduct ethnographic studies of their own speech behaviors. He explains how this project immediately

validates the language practices that students engage in outside of the classroom—for example *rappin* or *battlin*—by allowing the students to see their speech behavior taken as a subject of analysis...and [to] better



understand the linguistic landscape of their social worlds. These worlds are not marginalized in the classroom, or ‘checked at the door’, but they are viewed as valuable cultural and linguistic spaces for learning. (p. 218)

Throughout this paper and in my argument, I use the term *critical language awareness* to refer to the pedagogical practice of giving students the tools—and the metalanguage—to talk about language and communicative practices and what they index about the speakers and their world. This approach can make explicit much of the tacit knowledge students have accumulated throughout their multilingual and transnational histories. This, in fact, becomes one way in which to understand the ideological dimensions of language that Fairclough (1992) and Clark and Ivanic (1999) stress.

Students who are labeled “English Language Learners” are uniquely positioned to theorize about the role of language in society and have had experience living and languaging in complex sociolinguistic environments, where more than one language serves as a vehicle for communication. Appadurai (2006) claims that research should be considered not a privilege of the highly educated few, but as a right for all citizens to the tools of inquiry that could help improve their own situations. Taking Appadurai’s idea of the right to research, along with the epistemic privilege that immigrant multilingual students can claim can lead to powerful inquiries in the form of ethnographies of communication in students’ communities and households, such as the one Alim (2010) describes. Additionally, having students recognize their bi/multilingual and intercultural knowledge and skills could allow them to see the many opportunities in the diverse field of translation, whether that be in literary translation, medical or court room interpreting, or myriad other services bilingual individuals are uniquely positioned to provide. But perhaps more significantly, CLA has the potential to change the stories people tell about language. By studying how communication works, students will be able to reflect on their communicative experiences and change not only the way they interpret these scenarios, but how they talk—metacomment—about them.

The idea of the asymmetries in the directionality of accommodation is important in understanding the linguistic experiences and everyday interactions of immigrant multilingual students. Even though these students were in classes with other international students, they were still immersed in a large high school where the majority of students were native English speakers from the United States. The positive classroom environment that one or several teachers can create among a group of students labeled “ELLs” cannot protect students from the less-than-pleasant encounters they will have with native English-speaking peers or individuals who, consciously or unconsciously, might not be so keen on taking on their share of the communicative burden; in other words, they may not feel the shared responsibility for ensuring successful communication and thus may not be doing their part. Teaching emergent bi/multilingual students about language and communication, as well as the ideological dimensions of language that serve to uphold certain power relationships, can be one step towards creating a greater awareness of their own skills and resources and the right they have to expect others to make efforts to understand them.

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## Appendix A

### Transcription conventions and symbols used

- (.) indicates noticeable pauses; numbers indicate length of pause by beats
- [ ] indicate overlapping speech
- a dash indicates cut-off speech
- :: colons indicate elongation of the preceding sound
- ( ) descriptions in parenthesis explain gestures, laughter, and other paralinguistic and nonlinguistic information
- = indicates no break between turns and /or speakers