

## Reconceptualizing What Counts as Language and Learning in Bilingual Children with Disabilities

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In this paper, I present a case study of one representative bilingual student who is required to embody a fixed identity that situates him as learning disabled in a socially induced process in his classroom. This case study is situated in a two-year ethnographic study with 138 first-grade dual language learners. The study interpretations draw on frameworks of disability studies and poststructuralist feminine queer theory. Data collected include audio files from class sessions, children's oral stories, children's collages and digital products, and exit interviews with children and teachers. Findings surfacing from this student's story show that cameras can be used as a semiotic tool to stimulate culturally grounded dialogues. Furthermore, the data indicate that a perspective of multicompetence stimulates agentive manifestations, and in particular manifestations of relational agency in creativity, criticality, and translanguaging. Teacher implications are presented at the end of the paper.

*Keywords:* agency, bilingual special education, creativity, criticality, multicompetence, multimodality, technology, translanguaging

**Building** on the definition from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), schools tend to accept the standard that children with a specific learning disability (SLD) are intellectually average or above average and that their disability is caused by differences in how their brain processes information. According to the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY, 2009, p. 1), "their brains just process information differently."

The persistent need to classify these different ways of learning as disabilities inevitably involves a subjective process that results in remediation efforts and limiting learning opportunities (Wong, 2013). These learners surely experience the consequences of not fully belonging in the learning situation (Becker, 1963). In this paper, I present a case study of one representative learner; through his story, my intention is to contribute to naturalizing human differences in school settings. In this way, this research study seeks to advance the understanding of the complex paths by which emergent bilinguals who might have a disability make use of the linguistic and semiotic resources available to them (Laursen, 2013).

### Theoretical Frameworks

The present study draws from post-structuralist feminist discourses, and in particular the work of Robert McRuer (2006), who, from a disability studies perspective on queer theory (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; de Lauretis, 1991; Halperin, 1995), considers that able-bodiedness "masquerades as a non-identity, as a natural order of things" (McRuer, 2006, p. 1). In this way, able-bodiedness, which I interpret as having a body fit to perform in current learning contexts, remains "unspecified and disembodied" (p. 1)—or, in other words, invisible, as it is assumed

bodies are able, or fit, for the existing learning experiences. For McRuer, the demand to produce students with measurable skills and who can write in a traditional and orderly sense creates a system of compulsory able-bodiedness that “produces disability” (p. 2) because those who do not have a body fit to perform in these existing learning contexts will be deemed (dis)abled.

Considering the able-bodied status as always temporary (confined by the passing of time), disability studies researchers resist the system of compulsory able-bodiedness and demand access to a public space where “full participation is not contingent on an able body” (p. 30). The learning experiences and the products I describe in this study are rooted in the notion that the learning demands of compulsory able-bodiedness are constructed in relation to economic, social, and cultural factors, and that, because they are socially constructed and historically contextualized, they can be changed.

### **Meaning Making**

The activities and products I utilize were generated in a series of curricular invitations that contextualized processes of meaning making in children’s experiences. The invitations opened up spaces for children’s agency in the language and literacy classroom. *Agency* is defined by Taylor (1977) as the capacity to identify the goals at which the individual is directing one’s action, and, as Edwards (2005) explains, in terms of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), agency can be analyzed in a relational sense as the “capacity which involves recognizing that another person may be a resource” (p. 172). Thus, agency is one of the themes I analyzed.

Within this framework, I aim to provide evidence that the proposed learning experiences allowed all children, independently from their able-bodiedness or lack thereof, to specify or embody the circumstances of their realities and make them visible as they performed their race, ethnicity, and class within “historically accumulated scripts” (Martínez-Álvarez & Ghiso, forthcoming).

### **Emergent Bilinguals and Agency**

Inevitably connected to race, ethnicity, and class are the languages and languaging practices (García, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzmán, 2006) that children bring to the classroom. Elementary school children who speak more than one language (henceforth called emergent bilinguals) (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008) bring to the classroom a plethora of cultural resources and linguistic understandings. As taking agency of one’s own learning experiences has been shown to facilitate bilinguals’ negotiation of their languages as separate and mixed entities (Martínez-Álvarez, submitted June 2014), it is crucial to explore the interconnections between language and agentivity in children’s situated learning efforts. There is a prevailing tension, however, between children’s agentive use of their language and culturally relevant knowledge and current neoliberal educational policies. Neoliberal policies prioritize testing and accountability and attempt to separate those who can from those who cannot. This compulsion to prioritize test results as means to classify children makes it impossible for teachers to embrace diverse meaning making and ways of building with multiple modes, media, and non-privileged knowledges (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996).

### **Multicompetence**

In an attempt to integrate emergent bilinguals' home and community resources and ways of languaging as tools for meaning making in school, participating children were invited to use a digital camera as a semiotic tool to document their family and community experiences. Then, the photographs and videos were joined in the language and literacy class with other technology and materials. The resulting multimodal processes and products became semiotic resources for culture-embedded languaging experiences as children embodied dynamic bilingual/bicultural identities. By semiotic resources, I refer to "actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes, whether produced physiologically—for example, with our vocal apparatus, the muscles we use to make facial expressions and gestures—or technologically—for example, with pen and ink, or computer hardware and software—together with the ways in which these resources can be organized" (van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 285). Thus, semiotic resources encompass not only written text, but also other modes and languaging practices that combine for meaning making. I therefore approach the multilingual practices of the first-grader portrayed in this study from a multicompetence perspective (e.g., Cook, 1991). The concept of multicompetence approaches multilingualism holistically, including multimodality (Siegel, 2012) and translanguaging or practices of bilinguals not limited to language (García, 2009, p. 44). Furthermore, Wei (2011) has documented that exploring the multicompetence of bilingual children can reveal their particular learning experiences, which certainly involve agency, but adds that multicompetence involves such pertinent aspects as creativity and criticality.

### **Creativity and Criticality**

I view creativity as the "ability to choose between following and flouting the rules and norms of behavior, including the use of language, and to push and break boundaries between the old and the new, the conventional and the original, and the acceptable and the challenging" (Wei, 2011, p. 374). Using five elements that have been adapted from the literature, I have analyzed creativity in multimodal compositions for (a) complexity in format; (b) richness of imagery; (c) richness of text; (d) amount of text; and (e) expressions of feelings and emotions (adapted from Martínez-Álvarez, Ghiso, & Martínez, 2013). Criticality, on the other hand, is "the ability to use evidence appropriately, systematically, and insightfully to inform considered views of cultural, social, and linguistic phenomena, to question and problematize received wisdom, and to express views adequately through reasoned responses to situations" (Wei, 2011, p. 374).

### **Multimodality and Translanguaging**

Despite the fact that the benefits of multimodality and translanguaging practices have been documented, a monomodal and monolingual approach still prevails in most instructional invitations (Dyson, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Siegel, 2012; Soltero-González, Escamilla, & Hopewell, 2012). Accordingly, to further develop the field of bilingual special education, I explore not only agency but also creativity and criticality, and how these manifest via a learner's meaning making practices with multimodality and translanguaging. In this way, I attempt to engage the proposed perspective of multicompetence as a mediator to normalize or disembody the cultural, linguistic, and learning human differences in school settings.

Woven into the next sections is the story of Esteban (a pseudonym), a first-grade emergent bilingual child situated as learning disabled, and the ways in which he uses the linguistic and

semiotic resources he brings in the classroom for multimodal meaning making. Before presenting Esteban's products, I offer information on the type of activities in which the children engaged while working in this project, as well as the methodology followed and the way data analysis was approached.

### **Photography and Materials for Multimodality and Translanguaging Compositions**

The activities I describe here were implemented and revised during a two-year, primarily qualitative, study (Martínez-Álvarez & Ghiso, forthcoming). The study drew on ethnographic tools (Heath & Street, 2008), and the participants were first-grade emergent bilinguals across several public bilingual schools, where I worked with a colleague and three graduate research assistants. All researchers and graduate assistants were bilingual in Spanish or Greek and all but one had histories of immigration to the United States. The study involved a total of 138 first-graders working in groups of 20–22 children each who were studying in two public elementary schools in a diverse neighborhood in New York City. The children engaged in the activities in each group for one semester while in their regularly assigned classrooms. Both schools followed similar alternating-day dual language instructional structures, and all participants were Spanish-English emergent bilinguals. Most of the children's families and many of the children themselves had emigrated from Latin America, and all of the students qualified for a free or reduced-price lunch.

#### **Photography**

Within this context, photography was recognized as a semiotic tool that could be employed for centering children's out-of-school experiences within the languaging and cultural explorations in school. Consequently, each participating student received a low-cost digital video/photographic camera to capture his or her family in daily living and community establishments and experiences. In this paper, I refer to community establishments that were either captured by many different children or that children were able to recognize as important landmarks in their bilingual and bicultural lives. Children's photographs and videos were then utilized for multimodal and translanguaging composition in printed and digital forms as next described.

To start the process of meaning making with their semiotic resources, children worked in groups and pairs with a subset of self-selected images to tell oral stories about the photographs they chose to talk about and that were printed. These discussions provided opportunities for follow-up sessions on joint inquiries that extended personal narratives to community issues and social justice concerns, including exchanges on translanguaging practices based on readings of multicultural and multilingual books.

#### **Other Materials**

After these initial explorations, students continued the analysis of their resources by creating paper-based comics with talk and thought bubbles, digital comics using ComicLife, and Audio Note iPad applications for photo analysis. Children also had a chance to draw their homes and engage in conversations around the linguistic and cultural practices in these familiar spaces

while also adding to a collaboratively constructed map. A final exploration consisted of the creation of a “collage of myself” with different paper-based materials such as the photographs and Post-it® notes. At the end of the instructional sequence, students’ multimodal compositions were bound into a book, and a celebration for students to share their work with families and with one another was organized. In terms of linguistic code, the instructional activities took place in both English and Spanish, depending on the assigned language for the period where the explorations were occurring. Children were allowed and encouraged to utilize any one or both languages for meaning making.

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

Throughout the study, data was collected in the form of audio files from all exploration sessions, children’s stories, taped informal conversations about and during the activities, and exit interviews with children and teachers at the end of year one and two. All audio data were transcribed using notations from the system developed by Gail Jefferson (1984), which were pertinent for my particular dataset (see the Appendix), and translated to English. Words in italics denote ungrammaticality in Spanish.

### **Selection**

I selected Esteban’s case because his learning trajectory was purported to be one of struggle. Esteban’s perceived difficulties with learning were conveyed to our team not only in terms of the test scores he had been receiving in school but also in terms of how teachers—as well as his classmates—situated him, as later revealed in the data. Teachers reported Esteban’s English as at a Level 2, which according to New York State guidelines falls within a below-proficient performance level. In addition, at the time of our investigation and until the end of the first-grade school year, Esteban was described as having the lowest literacy scores in his class and making little or no progress. Literacy in Esteban’s school was measured by a teacher-administered reading running record and a writing sample, which was rated using a schoolwide rubric.

When talking to his teachers, Esteban was described with such statements as “He does struggle . . . sometimes just to understand. Sometimes he talks about other things. He’s not really on topic.” Esteban’s teachers explained that in order to help him learn, “he is being held over; he is repeating first grade.” In terms of the dual language program, the teachers stated that they were uncertain about whether Esteban should continue to learn in two languages, noting, “It’s really hard to tell if it’s helping him to have two different languages in which you could try to communicate or if in a way it’s too overwhelming at this stage . . . He might be moved to another class.” According to the teachers, Esteban’s classmates “notice, and they are very aware, very perceptive” about his learning difficulties.”

In this manner, then, teachers and classmates situated Esteban as a student who had difficulty when learning, and who could have a learning disability. Teachers explained this as “we would like to evaluate him in September because he might have some learning issues and he has a lot of trouble.” This description suggests the existence of social processes forcing Esteban into embodying an identity as a disabled learner. It has been my experience that such processes often lead to special education eligibility meetings and subsequent identification with

a specific learning disability under IDEA criteria. This common outcome was the reason I chose to delve into the data I had on Esteban's learning processes.

### **Analysis**

The selected data was analyzed thematically (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), looking within and across sources to understand how Esteban interacted as he worked on the multimodal compositions, implementing his bilingual and bicultural semiotic resources. I followed a qualitative context-sensitive process with an etic level of analysis followed by an emic approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, I identified a set of four constructs of multicompetence (agency, creativity, criticality, and translanguaging). These constructs, as well as the importance of attending to the sociocultural practices in which children's semiotic resources were situated, arose from the literature in bilingual education and my own work in the field as the initial themes for the analysis of the data. From this point, I employed what Miles and Huberman (1994) name an "etic" approach by grouping the data into the four initial predefined themes (the constructs) and matching the observations noted in the data. From this general level, I transitioned to interpreting the distinctions rooted within this first categorization, conducting a more contextualized or "emic" level analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The more contextualized analysis sparked two additional themes, which I had not initially considered: a particular form of agentivity called relational agency, and the construct of sense of place. I now offer a summary of the resulting six constructs to provide a better sense for how these are woven into each other and into the findings.

### **Constructs**

In this section I reiterate the definition of the resulting constructs and how they were operationalized for this paper. I begin with agentivity and then I summarize the constructs of creativity, criticality, translanguaging, and relational agency, which can all be portrayed as manifestations of agentivity. I end by summarizing the construct and the operationalization of sense of place.

**Agentivity.** Agentivity manifests as the child shows signs of intentionality in deciding what is important to capture and share. This intentionality is made visible as he or she shares multiple photographs from a chosen space or community landmark. Intentionality is also demonstrated when the child situates the audience by capturing multiple perspectives of the same space and guides the reader's gaze via a variety of elements such as linguistic description or notes pointing to the different parts of a documented landmark. Expressions of agency include creativity, criticality, and translanguaging.

**Agentivity manifested as creativity.** As cited in the literature review above, creativity is defined as the "ability to choose between following and flouting the rules and norms of behavior, including the use of language, and to push and break boundaries between the old and the new, the conventional and the original, and the acceptable and the challenging" (Wei, 2011, p. 374). Moreover, I operationalized the construct of creativity in terms of the five elements described by Martínez-Álvarez et al. (2013): (a) complexity in format by integrating imagery, text, and add-ons (i.e., Post-it notes or pieces of paper); (b) richness of imagery, demarcated by number of elements (i.e., contexts and/or people); (c) richness of text, which refers to multiple

contexts or scenarios expressed through multimodal compositions, (d) amount of text (visual, oral or written); and (e) expressions of feelings and emotions.

**Agenticity manifested as criticality.** The concept of criticality I utilize in this inquiry is “the ability to use evidence appropriately, systematically, and insightfully to inform considered views of cultural, social, and linguistic phenomena, to question and problematize received wisdom, and to express views adequately through reasoned responses to situations” (Wei, 2011, p. 374). In my analysis, criticality was employed as stances where different forms of questioning (i.e. visual or oral) commonly accepted aspects of a majority culture and/or values took place.

**Agenticity manifested as translanguaging.** I adopt García’s (2009) notion of translanguaging or practices of bilinguals not limited to language, including language varieties, which are used to amplify the communicative potential in an event. Furthermore, translanguaging may facilitate a social space for bilinguals, which provides a surface for aspects from children’s personal histories such as experiences, contexts, and ideologies to emerge on (Wei, 2011). Thus, I disclose translanguaging events as one of the manifestations of bilinguals’ creativity and criticality.

**Agenticity manifested as relational agency.** Following Edwards and Mackenzie (2005), I use relational agency in this study to name the capacity to participate in the learning space alongside others, which does not incite dependency; instead, I perceive this form of agency as a cultural manifestation of historical traditions through which social values and the well-being of the group are privileged over that of a single individual (Valdés, 1996). Relational agency is manifested in my work by the child’s ability to “offer support to and ask for support from others” (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005, p. 294).

**Sense of place.** The construct of sense of place can be defined as the “meanings of and the attachments to a place held by a person or a group” (Semken, 2005, p. 149). Specifically, sense of place is manifested through children’s explanations on the meaning of their relation to a place as they point to different parts or spaces within their selected place (through imagery, text, add-on elements, and oral description).

Sense of place is significant for children like Esteban, who are bilingual and bicultural, as it influences how people observe the natural environment. In this context, place is distinguished from space by being constructed socially and locally (Tuan, 1977). In fact, as shown in the findings section, a given locality or landscape can hold different meanings for different persons or cultures (Gruenewald, 2003).

### **Esteban’s Case**

As I have explained, for this case study I drew on the data involving one of the children, Esteban, who participated in the invited activities during the first semester of our second year working at this site. Esteban is a first-grade emergent bilingual who, like most of the children in this investigation, spoke Spanish at home. As previously discussed, Esteban’s teachers and classmates situated him as a student who had difficulty when learning, and who could have a learning disability. He, however, showed high engagement during our time together and worked diligently in all our curricular invitations.

#### **Esteban Positioned as Having a Learning Difficulty**

The fact that other children situated Esteban as having difficulty learning was confirmed in the data collected during my work in the classroom. For example, during one of the sessions I read a sentence from a comic produced by another student (Keny), stating “Mi abuela vive en Méjico. ¡En Méjico no hay juguetes!” (My grandmother lives in Mexico. In Mexico there are no toys!) After several other first-graders had expressed different opinions about this statement, I turned to Esteban and asked what he thought about this idea of Mexico not having toys. Excerpt 1 gives the conversation that took then place involving the teacher (T), Esteban (E), and Samantha—another student (S):

### Excerpt 1

01 S: Él no sabe nada de eso. (He does not know anything of that.)

02 S: Eh Esteban, coge la tijera. Yo siempre le digo qué *haga*. (Eh Esteban, get the scissors. I always tell him what *do*.)

[several lines omitted]

06 S: “Lo tenemos que ayudar, yo y Estrella” (“We have to help him, I and Estrella”)

07 T: Ohh (.) Esteban, tú estás de acuerdo con eso? (Ohh (.) Esteban, do you agree with that?)

08 E: Sí, es que no solo . . . Es que:: si yo hago la tarea ¡pero yo hice mucho! (Yes, it is that it is not by myself . . . It is: if I do the work, but I did a lot!).

In this first excerpt, line 02 shows Samantha stating that she has to tell Esteban what he has to do, and in line 06 this is reinforced as she asserts that they “have to help him.” Esteban appears to assume this identity of a disabled student, as shown in several of his expressions. An example is in his self-evaluation on line 08, when he states, “it is that it is not by myself.” Thus, as shown by the dialogical exchange, Esteban’s classmates had already decided that he could not learn, and even Esteban is beginning to develop this self-perception of lack of ability.

From this excerpt, then, I offer Esteban’s case as presenting a representative bilingual learner who has been forced to embody a fixed identity that situates him as disabled in a socially induced process. Through Esteban’s story I found that taking a multicompetence perspective can turn learning differences, such as the ones that are portrayed in the presented conversational exchange, into agentive manifestations of creativity, criticality, and complex translanguaging explorations. I now present a more detailed explanation of these findings as I tour through Esteban’s work from a multicompetence perspective.

### Esteban Showing Agentive Manifestations: Creativity, Criticality, and Translanguaging

Esteban took a camera home twice, which resulted in 22 products, 19 photographs, and three videos. His 19 photographs featured two scenes—a park that is located near Esteban’s school, and a restaurant where his aunt fed him and his siblings while his mother took English classes. These two sets of photographs are keenly distinct, but share an identifiable intention as Esteban enacted agentivity, taking us in a tour of both contexts and deciding what was important to share.

The first set takes the viewer into a walk to the park. There are only two photographs in this set that include only one person, Esteban. In these photographs, he is shown climbing a structure at the park as his gaze is on the camera. The rest of the photographs are of different sections of the park, including the sign with the name of the park, an overview of the entire

playing space, and then five stills portraying spaces in the park that Esteban decided to photograph.

The second set, taken at a meal in a restaurant, includes four close-up photographs of Esteban eating chicken, three photographs of his brother either waiting for the food or eating his vegetables, and one photograph of Esteban's baby sister, who is sitting in a stroller and raising her hand. The remaining photograph is the only one in this set not including a person; instead, it shows, in a purposeful shot, the remains of the food after the meal was finished (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Esteban's Photograph Showing Food Remains



As one can see in this description, Esteban was very intentional in deciding what photographs to bring to school. While children with learning disabilities are often described as having difficulty staying on a topic, Esteban was able to demonstrate his own decision-making ability visually.

Employing these photographs, Esteban created several multimodal products and engaged in multiple conversations, demonstrating, as I explain next, complex multicompetence. Figure 2 shows one of Esteban's first products, the collage, which once again centered on a single theme: The park.

**Figure 2.** Esteban's Collage Featuring the Park



In this collage, Esteban positioned and organized five of his park photographs into two columns—the one on the left showing three stills and the one on the right showing two. All of the images were shown in the horizontal position, even when this did not match the real positioning of the representation (see photograph in lower right side of his work, where the pig was photographed as if standing on its head). Esteban seemed to be more concerned with the design of his collage than with representing accurate positioning. He also decided to add two green Post-it notes and two stars, on which he has written messages (partially deleted here for purposes of confidentiality) and one Post-it note flag pointing upward.

We define the creativity shown on this product and the process behind it in terms of two of the elements included in our data sources and analysis section. First, Esteban includes three modes of representation—imagery, text, and Post-it notes—which are highly integrated, demonstrating layers of complexity in format. Second, in terms of richness of imagery, Esteban selected five photographs and three differently shaped notes (for a total of five add-on notes), all of which contribute information for the reader to better understand this composition.

Esteban put together, via this collage, a puzzle—almost a map—that visually informs the viewer of the name of the park (top right), an overview of the landscape of the park from far away (bottom left), what he likes to do at the park (climb the structure), and then two closeups that Esteban selected for us: a train (top left), and a part of the climbing structure showing the shape of a pig (bottom right).

The centrality of situating the audience in this park as a space and not just a visual representation that was casually chosen points to the importance of the construct of sense of place. Sense of place is manifested in Esteban’s imagery, written text, and add-on elements. Moreover, in an oral conversation sparked by the collage, Esteban further explained his relation to this park place. For example, he orally described that in the photograph featuring himself at the top of a structure, “Yo estaba tocando por arriba” (I was touching up there). He also stated that all the other photographs are from the park, and that the blue arrow points to “éso era por allá” (that was around there) as he moves the sight of the audience to the space beyond his collage to properly situate the sign for the name of the park.

In addition to the visual information that communicates the important role of sense of place, Esteban explains in his written text the following ideas: First, the name of his friend, which for confidentiality purposes I erased and whom I call Alex, was written on the first green Post-it note. He refers to this friend again on the Post-it note on the bottom, “yo y Alex fuimos al *prke*,” which translates as “I and Alex went to the park.” In this statement, Esteban writes the word *park* in Spanish by combining the English word with the standard Spanish version—“parque”—in an example of phonetic codeswitching (Escamilla, 2007; Gort, 2012). Further information in relation to translanguaging in Esteban’s world is made evident by the sign with the name of the park, which is in English, while Esteban added the rest of the text in Spanish. This is an example that points to the dynamism of languages children like Esteban experience daily. In addition, Esteban wrote “*el ten no a se nada*” which he explained in an oral text in relation to his collage stood for “the train does not do anything.” This sentence poses a complaint, or a critique, on the decision of placing this structure in the middle of the park and one, Esteban seems to suggest, that offers little action or entertainment.

In addition to this collage, Esteban utilized his second set of photographs to compose a sequence, a series of visuals that narrate a specific event. This is shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Esteban’s Sequence Featuring the Meal



This sequence of images, whose text has been modified to delete identifiable information, features the meal at the restaurant in a creative rendering of a sequence of three related photographs, several text segments using translanguaging, and additional drawings that Esteban had decided to include. For example, Esteban’s brother, shown on two photographs, speaks first in Spanish as he waits for his meal and asks through a thought bubble “*¿Cómo me cacs foto?*,” which Esteban orally explained as “How do you take pictures of me?” In the second photograph, though the same boy is shown speaking, this time he is switching to speaking in English: “I can It sad Juan” (modified visually for confidentiality), which, using only English phonics, stands for “I can eat, said Juan.” Esteban goes back to Spanish as he labels the drawings he places where the fourth image of the sequence should be positioned (names have been deleted for confidentiality). When I asked Esteban why he is switching across languages in this product, he explained that he was in the English room when he wrote the English featured in his sequence.

One final and very interesting element in this multimodal text is the bubble on the upper right corner of the sequence. In this bubble, Esteban orally explained that he had written, “I

want to fly away.” When I showed surprise by this statement, Esteban clarified that this is what the chicken they were eating is saying. In this sentence, Esteban is portraying the voice of the cooked chicken, and in inserting this joke, he is hoping to make the reader laugh and have fun with his work. This creative insertion of humor was motivated by a previous group conversation that took place as Keny was explaining his own work. In one of the photographs that Keny used, there was a person getting a haircut. Keny proudly read the text accompanying this photograph “yo quería hacer pelón” (I wanted to do bald). The group of children listening to Keny started to laugh, including Esteban. As Excerpt 2 shows, this is the situation that inspired Esteban as he wrote his own joke, expressing that the chicken wants to fly away.

### **Excerpt 2**

01E: A ha. Como yo con Keny dijo “yo quiero estar pelón”. (A ha. Like I [was] with Keny when [he] said “I want to be bald.”)

02T: Hm?

03E: Keny dijo “yo quiero estar pelón”. (Keny said “I want to be bald.”)

04E: Y todos mis compañeros *dijo* “ahaha” (0.5) (And all my classmates say “ahaha” [0.5])

The exchange presented in Excerpt 2 illustrates Esteban’s relational agency, as this creative form of playing with the language to make others laugh (line 04) involves the recognition that Keny’s joke was what inspired his (line 01).

There were other instances in which Esteban demonstrated relational agency through his use of the resources that others had brought to the learning space. The digital comic he created, shown in Figure 4, displays one of his previously used photographs, along with three images that were taken by another student. Esteban decided to borrow these resources when he found out that this was allowed. When asked why he had borrowed these three photographs, Esteban explained that he liked them and that “yo quería usarla [la foto]” (I wanted to use it [the photograph]). In the case of the photograph at bottom left, Esteban orally clarified that he had been there and was familiar with the portrayed train station and the space that surrounded it. Once again, the abstract and representational space is situated in his very immediate reality, which adds to his sense of place. In this way, this photograph is transformed into a semiotic resource.

**Figure 4.** Esteban’s Digital Comic



This digital comic adds information about Esteban’s creative identity, not only because he is using others’ photographs, but also because he is titling this comic “Adventure” and inserting a speech bubble that bleeds down the visual, contributing to the interest and meaning of the intriguing title.

I end this presentation of findings with a series of excerpts from exchanges that took place in small-group discussion. Excerpts 3–5 reinforce the limitless potential opportunities that these kinds of multimodal invitations present for criticality as Esteban, once again, demonstrates relational agency.

The conversation featured here sparked while I was interacting with one of the formed groups of two using LITE Note-Taking, an application that allows children to scribble and/or draw on photographs as well as record oral conversations using iPads. The photograph the group was analyzing came from one of the students’ captured images, which showed a boy playing video games. Next to the photograph I had written the question “Do all children have the same number of toys?” The group included six children, including Esteban (E). The pseudonyms of the other participating students are Sandra (S), Ben (B), Nina (N), Fani (F), and Kira (K).

The opening of our discussion took place with Sandra explaining that her mother had bought her many presents and that she liked this, and was very happy because she can play act like teachers with them. Sandra added in Spanish the following idea, which has been translated to English as “Some children don’t because they are poor and they don’t have parents, so we have to keep them and not throw toys. I feel happy because my mother is the best mom.”

At this point, Esteban adds that he also has many toys, and the following exchange takes place:

**Excerpt 3**

03E: Y después tenía *mucho* juguetes. Y después mi mamá estaba

- 04: comprando unos juguetes y estaba feliz . . . También mi papá. (And afterwards I had many toys. And then after that my mother was buying toys and [I or she] was happy . . . Also my dad.)
- 05T: ¿Tú piensas que es bueno que te compren todos los juguetes? (Do you think that it is good that they buy you all the toys?)
- 06E: Mmmm, solo cuatrocientos juguetes. (Mmmm, only four hundred toys.)
- 07B: ¡Qué se le explota la casa! ¡Se le explota la casa! [Sounds of an explosion] (The house, it is going to explode! The house, it is going to explode!)
- 08 N: Aunque no me compren los juguetes todos, no importa. Yo todavía
- 09: estoy feliz. (Even if they don't buy me all the toys, it doesn't matter. I am still happy.)
- 10T: ¿A ti te compran todos los juguetes que quieres tus papas? (Do they buy you all the toys you want—your parents?)
- 11F: No mucho. Porque a veces no tienen plata. Entonces, me siento un
- 12: poquito triste pero mi papi me dice que me va a comprar uno mañana. (Not very much. Because sometimes they don't have money. Then, I feel a little sad but my father tells me that he is going to buy one tomorrow.)
- 13N: Yo no me siento triste si no me compran. Porque cuando . . . es solo una
- 14: cosa. Y un juguete es una cosita y tú cuando ya eres grande, esos ya no
- 15: va a querer juguetes. (I don't feel sad if they don't buy me. Because when . . . It is only a thing. And a thing is a little thing and when you are a grownup, those toys you are not going to want.
- [several lines omitted]
- 18F: Mi papá también a veces tiene menos dinero pero ellos usan su dinero
- 19: para comprarme cosas que yo quiero porque ellos me quieren. Y me
- 20: siento tan feliz porque yo . . . Pero a veces no tengo dinero comprar
- 21: juguetes. Y no importa, tú todavía tiene estar feliz . . . Con Dios. (My dad also sometimes has less money but they use their money to buy me things that I want because they love me. And I feel so happy because I . . . But sometimes I don't have the money to buy toys. And it doesn't matter; you still have to be happy . . . With God.)

In Excerpt 3, Esteban's expressions in lines 03–04 (my mother was buying toys and [I or she] was happy) and 06 (only four hundred toys) portrayed an ideal of happiness as it accompanies material acquisition. Immediately after, stories of economic hardship cut into the conversation (shown in Fani's words in lines 11 and 12 and 18–20). Esteban listens as his classmates indirectly challenge the initial direction of the conversation by defying the connection between happiness and material possessions (see line 08). Furthermore, Nina in line 14 rationalizes in her own words that a toy is just a little thing that you will not value when you grow up, and in such an agentive move, she minimizes the value of being able to buy large amounts of material things such as toys.

As children continued to work with their iPads in pairs, Esteban witnessed yet another thought-provoking conversation. The exchange began when Kira made a personal connection and wrote the following sentence using the iPad application “mi abuela vive en *Méjico*” (my grandmother lives in Mexico). Kira then expanded upon this idea in the following exchange:

#### Excerpt 4

01K: Mi mamá me dijo que en Méjico ella, mi papá también me dijo . . .

02: . . . que en Méjico hay chivos y y::: todos y:: chile y

03: agua (.) de la lluvia. Mi mama dice que (.) en Méjico no hay juguetes (My mom told me that in Mexico she, my dad also told me . . .

. . . that in Mexico there are goats and and::: everything and:: chili peppers and water (.) from the rain. My mom says that (.) in Mexico there are no toys)

04T: ¿No hay juguetes? ¿Por qué no hay juguetes? (There are no toys? Why are there no toys?)

05K: Porque allí no hay allí no hay. Sí hay juguetes, pero no son de verdad

06: juguetes, son (.) solo es tierra y: roca. <En Méjico ello no tienen dinero

07: (2.0) y ellos no pueden comprar lo que ellos quieren.> (Because they aren't there, they aren't there. Yes, there are toys, but they are not real toys, they are (.) only dirt and: rock. <In Mexico they don't have money (2.0) and they can't buy what they want.>

As Kira states in Excerpt 4, she assimilated ideas about Mexico from stories that had been orally transmitted to her. This is the case for many of the children with whom I worked in this study, who left their family's country at a very young age or were born in the United States. These children might not have any physical experiences in their family's land of origin, but hold mental images on how these lands are.

Esteban has quietly observed these two conversations as they presented a position in contrast to his initial idea of finding happiness in accumulating toys. At the end of this session, I went back to Esteban and asked him whether he thought all children had the same quantity of toys. He answered no, and then explained that while using both of his languages:

#### Excerpt 5

01E: Es que un ni . . . Es que no tienen dinero va . . . Na' mas no compras . . . Si

02: algunos niños tienen dinero pueden comprar. Pero yo tengo Mario Kart

03: Seven. Tengo Mario Kart Seven juego y un Mario Kart Seven Toy. Que si

04: tienen más o menos pueden comprar poquitos juguetes. (That if a bo . . . If it is that they don't have money, he is going to . . . You don't buy any more . . . If some children have money, then they can buy. But I have Mario Kart Seven. I have Mario Kart Seven, the game, and a Mario Kart Seven Toy.)

Excerpt 5 presents Esteban grappling with his initially stated ideas (see line 03) and those of other classmates (such as in lines 01–02 and 04), and thus revising his initial opinions in light of the ones he had witnessed. Enthusiastic at this new direction in Esteban's position and to further explore Esteban's criticality, I asked him in Spanish, "Is it fair that some children can have many toys while others can have none?" Esteban then forthrightly stated, "No, es que es muy injusto que si compras muchos" (No, it is very unfair if you buy many).

The power of these peer conversations where transnational knowledges and culturally entrenched values are naturally shared and used as resources for meaning making and criticality cannot be overstated. Themes that are present in these excerpts include religion, money and socio-economic status, or materialism. These themes are critical matters in relation to the life of many Latino children living in the United States. The data I have presented show

how the participating children have to balance competing ideas between the home and the school cultures. The young protagonist of this case study, Esteban, shows the ability to recognize and integrate the understandings others bring forth. This is possible only when participation in such high-level discussions is not contingent on an “able body” (McRuer, 2006, p. 30). If emergent bilingual students with disabilities are removed from dual language programs and/or from general education classrooms, then enriching opportunities such as the ones I have presented—where relational agency enhances criticality (and consequently creativity)—are not likely to take place.

## Conclusions

In Esteban’s case, the richness of my understanding of his meaning making processes came from conducting a cohesive analysis inclusive of all his multimodal compositions. Because of this analysis, Esteban’s visual texts were complemented with his written and oral stories, all of which were purposefully valued equally. In this way, rather than privileging any particular mode and then adding some patched and consequentially irrelevant information, Esteban’s strengths were made evident by the hybrid integration of his knowledge as he was allowed to draw from all his semiotic resources.

The camera children took home acted as a powerful yet easy tool to use. A camera, after all, can be used to just reproduce reality. One of the most significant characteristics in the pedagogical invitations is that the camera was implemented as a semiotic tool that helped participating children make meaning of their embodied realities.

In addition, the follow-up activities in which the children were invited to participate were crafted to provide opportunities for working with all available semiotic resources—for example, the curriculum included both paper-based and digital choices. In all cases, the invitations were designed to be open-ended, and multiple materials for visual manipulation were presented. In terms of visual manipulation, the activities included both paper-based materials with markers, crayons, Post-it notes, cut-out speech bubbles, and glue sticks, among other materials; digital-based tools, where children were guided to learn to add a variety of effects to make their comics more attractive or to fully experiment with analysis of their photographs, were also part of the range of opportunities.

As I discussed when I was presenting the findings, some of the constructs I found were present in the existing literature: multicompetence manifested in creativity, criticality (Wei, 2011), and translanguaging (García, 2009). There were also, however, less explored concepts, which flourish from the analysis. This was the case of sense of place, a concept I have used in my research in geoscience (Martínez-Álvarez & Ghiso, forthcoming), which was nicely demonstrated by Esteban’s puzzle of the park and the oral description of his intentionality. Another less documented construct, relational agency, arose from Esteban’s use of Keny’s photograph as a semiotic resource.

As I analyzed the data, multicompetence was manifested fearlessly in terms of agency as Esteban showed signs of intentionality in deciding what is important to capture and share. For example, Esteban chose the park and the meal at the restaurant, and then brought in multiple spaces within these two landmarks. He also guided our gaze by using a variety of elements in the form of written and oral texts and stick-on shapes.

It soon became clear in my analysis that one kind of agency Edwards (2005) classifies as relational was prominent in Esteban's work. As such, Esteban's agentivity was strongest in the relational component. This is deployed as he played with the language to write jokes based on Keny's idea, using some of the semiotic resources Keny had brought in and finally revising his perspectives based on those of others. It might be the case that emergent bilinguals favor relational agency—in particular, bilinguals from Latino backgrounds whose cultural and historical traditions have cultivated more intensely social values and the well-being of the group over that of a single individual (Valdés, 1996). Thus, bilingual Latino children might present inclinations toward behaviors that engage relational agency.

In terms of the constructs with which I began, criticality was naturally situated in my work with this young group of learners. In this context, Esteban became a mediator for my own learning on how criticality as a manifestation of agentivity can be enhanced with first-graders who are bilingual and bicultural. In the case of his critique on the train in the park, which he explained as not doing anything (while occupying such an enormous space), Esteban questions a reality and makes meaning using multimodal compositions. In this case, the photograph becomes the evidence that informs the audience. Then, in the dialogue of discussion on the amount of toys children have or would like to have, criticality became a united effort as children uncovered the vast understandings they held in the form of knowledge that has been passed onto them from their parents and grandparents. Unfortunately, these kinds of understandings are often left outside when the children enter schools that favor monolingual and monocultural views and teach from values rooted in assimilationist perspectives.

Finally, creativity was Esteban's way of playing with translanguaging and multimodality as he switched languages purposefully within and between sentences and words, and presented as well samples of the linguistic repertoires available in the community.

I end this paper with implications for novice teachers as they enter the classroom with renewed energy to improve the educational experience for all learners.

### **Educational Implications**

Education must respond to children immediately and effectively while respecting their diversity. This means that there is a need to understand variances as ordinary rather than extraordinary. The question should always be: What do we need to change/do so that children like Esteban, who are labeled and treated as disabled in the regular educational system, become educated and balanced citizens? This question offers more opportunities for Esteban's growth, in contrast to the typically posed question: What is this child's disability?

The analysis of Esteban's work from a multicompetence perspective offers a powerful alternative paradigm for reconceptualizing what counts as knowledge and content with bilingual children who present differences that might be labeled as disabilities. A multicompetence perspective allows teachers to recognize translanguaging, creativity, and criticality as children enact their agentivity in relation to others who share their embodied race, ethnicity, and class.

This process supports children as they draw upon a range of tools and knowledges to engage existing semiotic resources for meaningful learning explorations. By implementing the process, children are enabled to enact more dynamic and flexible identities as learners. As a result of being labeled with a learning disability, a student's whole language learning experiences, as

were the collage or the digital comic presented in this paper, might not be prioritized. Most students so labeled will most probably be relegated to a focus on discrete skills such as teaching phonics and fluency drills.

When remediation is seen as a mere effort to normalize and “fix” disabled bodies (Baglieri & Moses, 2010), then it is easier for educators to take agency in developing curricula that may lead to more inclusive and anti-oppressive teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Peterson & Beloin, 1998; Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004; Trent & Dixon, 2004, Ware, 2006) and that value perspectives and knowledge emerging from children’s homes and lived experiences (Asante, 1991; Blanchett, 2006; Conyers, 2003; Ginsberg, 2007; Moll et al., 1992).

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### Appendix: Transcription Notations

(.)	Micropause	A brief pause, usually less than 0.2 second.
(# of seconds)	Timed Pause	A number in parentheses that indicates the time, in seconds, of a pause in speech.
<text>	Less than/Greater than symbols	Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual for the speaker.
:	Colon(s)	Indicates prolongation of a vowel sound (extra colons indicate greater lengthening).



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