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Positioning proficiency: How students and teachers (de)construct language proficiency at school

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Abstract

This study examines the social construction of proficiency and the discursive practices prevalent in linguistically diverse schools that afford or constrain participation in language learning communities. Drawing from discourse studies, positioning theory and a sociocultural framework, this study analyzed data from audio recordings and ethnographic observations of a fifth grade dual-immersion classroom. Analysis of moment-to-moment interactions and the construction of classroom language norms throughout the school year shed light on the ways that students and teachers work together to enact perceived proficiencies and position learners as (non)participants across different school contexts. Findings suggest that educators can orchestrate learning contexts that re-position students as proficient language users and sources of language expertise. This study contributes to research in educational linguistics by making the case for *perceived proficiency* as a construct to make visible the ways that language proficiencies are reified and shifted throughout interactions with others.
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1. Introduction

In schools where administrators and teachers are under increased political pressure to assess student proficiency and measure yearly progress of English language learner (ELL) populations, teachers and students are constantly organizing each other in ways that designate some as “limited proficient” and “re-designate” others as “fluent English proficient”.[1] The term proficiency has assumed a powerful grip on student and teacher educational destiny, yet definitions of proficiency are slippery and difficult to apply in a way that fully captures students’ engagement in language learning processes. Several studies have shown that ELLs’ proficiency[2] in English is a major determiner of their participation in class and ultimately their academic success (Dooly, 2007; Gebhard, 1999; Haneda, 2008; Harklau, 2000; Kanno & Applebaum, 1995; Valdés, 2001; Yoon, 2008), yet few studies have closely examined how that proficiency is constructed in school settings. To better understand the labels placed on students (i.e. ability or language proficiency levels), McDermott (1996) argues that it is “essential that we take into account the interactional circumstances that

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[1] These are common labels linked to results on English language development assessments, which are used for placement and designation of subgroup populations to measure adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act.

[2] Although previous studies have not used the term “perceived proficiency”, this paper makes the case that these studies are actually referring to perceptions of proficiency (rather than any single measure of proficiency), which determine academic success.

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position people in the world. . .” (p. 383). This study attempts to do this by investigating the construction of proficiency through discursive positioning during student and teacher interactions in one dual-immersion school. In this paper I analyze the discursive construction of learners' proficiencies and the ways these proficiencies are reified and shifted within a school context. Although similar discourse and positioning practices happen every day in classrooms around the world, educators and researchers have rarely theorized or analyzed the processes and consequences of these practices that construct perceptions of proficiency.

2. Conceptual framework

This study examines aspects of language proficiency that are relevant to a particular school context. I use the term proficiency because it holds currency in the local school context; however, the term may be imperfect since this study refers to the enactment and perception of a broader notion of communicative competence, including grammatical, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competence (see definitions in Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972; Lee, 2006). Scholars have suggested that proficiency is a term that lacks a “satisfactory operational definition” (Nunan, 1986). Seminal studies in SLA have found that modifications, foreigner talk and child-directed speech are common accommodations when interacting with others who are assumed to be less proficient speakers (Ferguson, 1971; Gass & Varonis, 1985; Giles, 1979; Hatch, 1983; Long, 1983); yet, the question remains as to how speakers perceive interlocutor proficiency. This paper argues for a reconceptualization of proficiency and offers an operational definition of *perceived proficiency* as socially constructed.

Proficiency is often described as a measurable, individual feature in SLA research, and the construct of perceived competence has been examined as individuals' self-reported perceptions of their own proficiency operationalized with survey measures that capture motivation and anxiety (Farhady, 1982; MacIntyre, 1994; McCroskey & Richmond, 1991; McIntyre & Charos, 1996; McIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Although the field of SLA has much to learn from individual motivational factors, this study contends that the social co-construction of perceived proficiency is especially important inside classrooms and in naturalistic settings where community participation is part of the learning context.

Recent research has suggested that learner perception of interlocutor proficiency more significantly affects the nature of peer assistance in interactions than measured proficiency (Watanabe & Swain, 2008). In their study, Watanabe and Swain (2008) examined how one learner interacted differently with peers of different proficiency levels (as measured by a standardized language assessment) during pair writing activities. While “measured proficiency” did not necessarily affect the nature of peer assistance in the interactions, how learners perceived each other's proficiency was more significant (Watanabe & Swain, 2008, p. 115). This study showed the importance of perceived proficiency in interactions; however, the authors acknowledged the limitations of their data analysis that did not focus on the construction of perceptions and was limited to one core participant in a controlled setting. Other scholars (Olmedo, 2003) have found that children, as early as kindergarten, make judgments about the proficiency of their peers. These studies have not problematized these perceptions nor examined the moment-to-moment evaluation of interlocutors' competence. Watanabe and Swain (2008) have called for future studies to address the situatedness of the perception of interlocutors' proficiency. My study responds to that call by looking at how perceptions of proficiency are constructed and shifted within the culture of a classroom. In this study, I offer a theoretically based argument for the social production of perceived proficiency drawing upon theories of positioning and discursive construction.

Building on the work of others who have called for closer attention to issues of learner identity and social dimensions of learner interactions (Block, 2003; Block, 2007; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Firth & Wagner, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Leung, Harris & Rampton, 1997; Norton, 2000; Peirce, 1995; Swain & Deters, 2007), this study closely examines the social construction of proficiency occurring during learners' participation in school discourse communities. To pull together linguistic and social dimensions of language learners' interactions, this study draws from sociocultural literature that that has expanded the notion of *acquisition* with the metaphor of *participation* to capture ways in which language is used within communities of practice (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sfard, 1998; Swain, 2000; van Lier, 2000). Using the participation metaphor to examine language learning in this study, I focused on how learners were positioned as (non)members of discourse communities, rather than focusing on learners as isolated individuals. Applying an ecological framework (van Lier, 2000), this study considers contextual affordances and the relationships among participants as necessary to understand proficiency and engagement with language practices. I argue that if we view language learning as involving participation in a community of speakers, we must attend to discursive patterns and positioning practices that promote participation or act as gatekeepers into these communities.

Drawing from the traditions of ethnography and discourse analysis (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1984; Schiffrin, 1994), I view data with a lens that assumes the performative nature of social reality: social conditions and contexts are constantly produced "locally by participants and intersubjectively ratified" (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 106). In order to understand the contexts and conditions that afforded or constrained language learning opportunities and interactions with peers at this school, I drew upon the work of linguistic anthropology that conceptualizes context as constructed by members through and across moment-to-moment interactions (see Castanheira, Crawford, Dixon, & Green, 2001; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Garfinkel, 1967; Giddens, 1979). Indexicality and reflexivity were theoretical assumptions from ethnomethodology that informed my research approach. Indexicality refers to how discourse is bound to the situational conditions and the language people use to position others (i.e. use of indexicals, referentials, pronouns, names, demonstratives, etc.). The assumption of reflexivity recognizes that action, talk, and context are reciprocally constituted and situated. The lens of positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) revealed ways that proficiency is situated, that is, dependent upon how one is positioned within a particular context. Rather than static or fixed, I argue that perceptions of proficiency are fluid as positionality changes. Positionality also allows for an analysis that examines both how students are acquired by particular positions and how they engage in positioning of self and others. Davies and Harré (1990) explain that an individual's identity and position are "constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate" (p. 35). Anderson (2009) suggested an expanded view of positioning theory that included an analysis of micro-level practices (face-to-face interactions), meso-level factors (school level categories), and macro-level (societal, ideological) factors. She illuminated these different levels through a comparison of discourse and participation patterns across five mathematical problem-solving activities.

Similar to Anderson's (2009) analysis, I did not limit data analysis to individual snippets of discourse without understanding the larger context in which "perceived proficiencies" are built up over time within a classroom culture.[3] My analysis is different than Anderson's because I draw upon ethnography (rather than bounded cases of classroom interaction) to interpret larger stories at the school, and I referred to different planes of analysis as personal, interpersonal, and institutional Rogoff, 2003 (Rogoff, Topping, Baker-Sennet, & Lacasa, 2002). Through my observations and participation in their daily activities throughout the school year, I grew attuned to the way students and teachers talked about and used language within the larger ecosystem of the school. My approach to the data analysis was informed by a larger picture of the classroom culture from ethnographic field notes and by close analysis of discourse from line by line transcription of student and teacher talk.

In this study I use the term *discursive practices* to capture how spoken and written text is produced and interpreted by participants in a particular context (see Castanheira et al., 2001; Palmer, 2009), and *acts of positioning* describe local social practices within the school that position students as members or non-members of discourse communities (Anderson, 2009; Gebhard, 1999). I drew up these concepts to analyze the data as I categorized forms of evidence and flagged key interactions. In the methodology section that follows, I identify key discursive practices as threads of the analysis (see Fig. 1). The constructs described in this conceptual framework were developed as I grappled with theoretical issues in the literature, shifted to close analysis of the data, and returned to the theoretical issues with new insight from the multiple layers of ethnographic and discourse data.

3. Research methods

3.1. Data collection

This research was a recursive process (as described in Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shurat-Faris, 2005), beginning with a consideration of conceptual issues, diving into data collection, observing what emerged as salient in the data, closely reading discourse, re-considering conceptual issues, and looking upon the data again. The research methodologies for this paper are modeled after ethnographic and sociolinguistic studies that include participant observation, interviews and audio recordings of classroom discourse (Freeman, 1998; Harklau, 1994; Palmer, 2009; Potowski, 2004;

[3] I began this research understanding that this dual language school was embedded within a highly contested sociopolitical context in which the use of languages other than English was largely prohibited for instruction in schools. For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen not to foreground this context in order to focus more closely on classroom practices at this school.

Levels of Analysis	**Acts of positioning**	**Discursive practices**	**Data sources:** Observation field notes in/out of class
Personal/ self (focal student)	Participation in discourse communities and activities (*note participation that requires non-dominant language use*) Non-participation or avoidance strategies Choice of target languages in relation to different interlocutors	Evaluating one's own abilities (in school talk, survey, interview) Repeating others' evaluations of one's own abilities (reported speech)	Audio/video recordings of focal students and grouptables Interviews Student questionnaire Student writing
Interpersonal	Participation/non-participation patterns in interactive activities Language accommodation (translations) Choice of target languages in relation to different interlocutors Social positioning of students as members of communities of practice -selection of partners -who plays with whom on playground -seating during lunch -social networks indicated in their surveys/interviews	Talk about proficiency enacted, ascribed and discussed in the company of others (i.e. what students and teachers say about their own and others' proficiency) Public declarations (at level of class, school) Explicit evaluations of language ability Implicit evaluations (recognizing abilities in activities) Teacher intervention in student interactions	Event Maps comparing participation patterns across activities with different participants
Institutional	Language based assessments -exemption from testing based on labels (LEP,RFEP) Pulling students out of class based on proficiency levels Report cards Tracking in reading groups ESL pull out Official transition to RFEP (letter and announcement)	Official naming/ labeling students (i.e. LEP, RFEP) Reporting of standardized tests in language proficiency based subgroups Reporting assessment of language growth/concerns to parents (parent teacher conferences) Talk that reflects ideologies about race, ethnicity, class, and immigration status (categories conflated with language proficiency)	

Fig. 1. Analytical framework for the social construction of perceived proficiency (forms of evidence).

Valdés, 2001; Yoon, 2008; Zentella, 1997). Following guidelines for interpretive inquiry, ethnography, and participant observation (Creswell, 2007; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Erickson, 1986; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994), my fieldwork included intensive long-term participation in the school, careful recording and documentation (field notes, observation protocols, event maps, analysis memos, interview transcripts, questionnaires, student work, digital audio and video recordings), and an analytical reflection about the documentary record during the data collection process. I visited the school two to three times a week, staying most of the school day, from August to June. During my school visits, I took on multiple roles as observer, participant, assistant teacher, small group leader and substitute teacher.[4] Informally, I came to know students and their families by giving rides, visiting homes, and meeting with parents and students at local cafes or taquerias. In addition to classroom, lunchtime, and recess observations, I observed extracurricular events, community forums, and parent–teacher conferences in order to explore ethnographically school conditions and social contexts that supported or constrained opportunities for two-way language learning. My interpretation of these data was triangulated with student interviews and surveys as well as interviews with teachers and parents in October, January, and May.

To capture language practices inside and outside of classroom, I used methods similar to Zentella's (1997) study and equipped focal informants with portable tape recorders to register the details of natural language use throughout the day in class, at recess, at lunch, and during other intervals. To capture data at the whole class level, I also placed audio recorders on students' desks supplemented by a video camera in the corner of the room. I shadowed six focal students taking notes to accompany the audio recordings, following shadowing or tailing methods described in Hawkins (2005) and Olsen and Jaramillo (1999). I used Hymes's "SPEAKING grid" (Hymes, 1972, p. 58) as an initial, crude analytical framework or heuristic to guide my observations, note taking and development of event maps. Hymes's description of key features of a communicative event calls attention to the (1) scene/situation, (2) participants, (3) ends or goals, (4) activity sequence, (5) key or mood, (6) instrumentality or forms of speech, (7) norms of interaction, and (8) genre. An example of how I adapted these features to create event maps can be seen in Appendix A.

To capture data at the whole class level, I placed audio recorders on students' desks supplemented by a video camera in the corner of the room. Over the year, I collected over three hundred hours of audio recordings from student shadowing and over fifty hours of collaborative classroom activities, supplemented by twenty hours of video.[5] All audio and video recordings were accompanied by daily, detailed field notes and analytical memos, which served to identify areas for more detailed transcriptions and shape further data collection. I listened to each of the recordings in their entirety while making analytical notes and selected recordings for detailed transcriptions that highlighted language exchange during student interactions. Upon a second pass of the data, I focused on recordings that revealed classroom participation patterns related to perceived proficiency, which became salient during the analytical coding process described below.

3.2. Data analysis

Drawing upon methods from ethnography (Emerson et al., 1995; Green & Bloome, 1997; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Heath, 1982; Spindler & Spindler, 1987) and grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), data analysis and data collection were an ongoing process, one influencing the other. My analysis was constantly informed by ongoing conversations with students and teachers about how they teach and learn language and how they choose to use language with whom. These conversations opened new directions for inquiry.

To deal with a large volume of data, I used the qualitative software package ATLAS.ti to developing coding schemes that connected across fieldnotes and audio recordings; and referring to methods from Emerson et al. (1995), excerpts from fieldnotes were connected with analytical points and explanations. I used Functional Pattern Analysis (Rogoff et al., 2002) to reduce the complexity of data from in-depth naturalistic observations by coding observations into larger

[4] As a former teacher in a dual language program in a border community, I could identify with the teachers at *Escuela Unida*, whose students were similar to my former students growing up in bilingual communities. Although I had the opportunity to develop close relationships with several students and their families, I was also acutely aware of my limitations, knowing that my role as an outsider in the community remained dominant.

[5] 6 focal students were audio recorded for full day (6–7 h per day) one day per month over 8 months = 300 h total for focal student shadowing. In addition, recordings from audio recorders placed in small groups on desk include whole class and centers (50 h), jigsaw activities whole class (3 times for1 h = 3 h), information gap activities (10 pairs, 2 h each = 20 h recorded), writing revisions/pair writing (7 pairs, 2 times, 28 h). All recordings accompanied by field notes and memos to guide selected transcription.

categories (as seen in Fig. 1), concepts, or definitions that reach across sources of data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spradley, 1980; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

One reoccurring concept that emerged from coding fieldnotes, memos, and participant interviews was talk about proficiency. Proficiency was a term used repeatedly by the participants at school, and the concept of *perceived proficiency* was also "observer identified" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 211) in analytical memos throughout the data collection process. Implicit talk about proficiency and positioning was harder to quantify, but it was clear that the data were "saturated" (Charmaz, 2006) with examples of talk about proficiency that positioned students as members or non-members of discourse communities.

My research process developed and deepened recursively. I re-read field notes and transcripts and coded these data with a focus on *perceived proficiency.* During the Ethnographic Research Cycle (Castanheira et al., 2001; Spradley, 1980) and process of abstracting themes (Rogoff et al., 2002), I refined my original research question – to examine school conditions and contexts that afforded or constrained opportunities for language exchange among students – and developed guiding questions to analyze the data further in order to look closely at the social construction of perceived proficiency. I developed the following sub-questions to guide more focused coding. These questions also guided my analytical framework, which can be seen in Fig. 1.

1. What do students and teachers say about their own and others' proficiency?
2. How do students and teachers choose which language (Spanish, English or both) to use with others? How does language choice reflect and reify perceptions of proficiency and/or grant/deny access to participate?
3. How do students participate differently across languages? What are the opportunities to use target languages?
4. How do students participate differently across different contexts (i.e. classroom settings, activities), using Hymes's framework to delineate contexts?
5. How do students and teachers recognize other students' participation? Are students positioned as experts, novices, "legitimate peripheral participants" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or non-ratified participants (Goffman, 1981)?

3.2.1. *Levels of analysis*

As an ethnographic researcher, I sought to be attentive to members' meaning-making as part of the un-parceled ecosystem of the school that is connected to local community and reflective of larger social structures. However, in order to begin to map out such a multilayered tangled system of actors and sociopolitical histories and environments, I found it helpful to begin using "foci of analysis" (Rogoff et al., 2002). Based on sociocultural activity theory, Rogoff et al. suggest that foregrounding the personal, interpersonal and community/institution planes at different moments in the analysis while keeping the other foci in sight.

To analyze my field-notes, focal student audio recordings, and interviews, I began by constructing a picture of my focal students' personal journeys throughout typical school days or daily rounds (Martin-Beltran, 2006). I considered student biographies that shaped their academic experiences and language development. I used event maps (Erikson & Schultz, 1981) to trace how students interacted with each other in various languages within a typical school day, using Hymes (1972) SPEAKING heuristic (described above in Section 3.1) and paying close attention to participation frameworks, footing (Goffman, 1981) and taking of the floor (Edelsky, 1981). An example event map of one focal student's day (see Appendix A) illustrates how I drew upon these concepts in my analytic framework. I took note of the participation norms and participation frameworks within the classroom which Schiffrin (1994) suggested captures "the set of positions which individuals take in relations to an utterance" (p. 243). I applied Goffman's (1981) notion of footing to delineate the participation framework and to recognize ratified participants and non-ratified participants. I also used event maps to develop a larger picture of how student experiences compared across the school year throughout different contexts. I flagged data for more detailed transcription that included talk about proficiency or illustrated moments when students were positioned as experts, legitimate contributors, or (non) ratified participants (see Appendix A for example event map).

Rather than making the individual the focus on my analysis, the *interpersonal* plane of analysis was the heart of my study. I focused analysis and transcriptions on moments of participation (or non-participation) in Spanish, English, and bilingual discourse communities as I examined student interaction, dialogue, and silence. With the audio and video recordings of collaborative classroom activities, I focused on interactional patterns coordinated between speakers to co-construct language learning opportunities. With a *community* and *institutional* focus of analysis, I examined interviews, field-notes from school meetings, and recordings of everyday talk that referenced the school and community setting.

I used these levels of *personal* (self), *interpersonal* (others) and *institutional* (school) to examine different positioning practices across participants and contexts. In this paper I have selected data from each of these levels to show how levels are interconnected. In the analysis I examined how these multiple levels can be simultaneously indexed in the moment-to-moment discourse of class participants. Fig. 1 explains forms of evidence at each of these levels that were identified during coding processes, which also served as an analytic framework to address research questions. In addition to the text and talk about proficiency, this analysis shed light on the social practices within the school that positioned students as proficient or less proficient speakers of the target languages. These acts of positioning were manifest in participation patterns, choice of language, choice of peer partners, social networks, and tracking by proficiency assessments.

In my analysis of ethnographic field notes, I attended to discursive practices and chose transcripts of classroom discourse for close analysis. In order to examine how perceived proficiencies were enacted in moment-to-moment interactions, I analyzed discourse turn-by-turn. I analyzed talk about proficiency that was enacted, ascribed, and discussed in the company of others.

My approach to analyzing classroom discourse incorporates insights from ethnography of communication, interactional ethnography, and critical conversation analysis (Castanheira et al., 2001; Freeman, 1998; Garfinkel, 1967; Palmer, 2009; Sacks, 1984; Schiffrin, 1994). Ethnography of speaking literature reminds us that we need to attend to an analysis of the contexts, within which utterances occur; therefore, I began with an analysis of larger patterns across the school day and year (using event maps) followed by a more detailed analysis of moment-to-moment interactions. To examine the process of the construction of perceived proficiency in the larger data set, I identified the following categories of discursive practices observed throughout the school year: practices of accommodation, naming, and declarations of proficiency. Although discursive practices are also "acts of positioning", I separated them for purposes of analysis (see Fig. 1) to give attention to the utterances as transcribed speech. I delineated acts of positioning to refer to extra-linguistic actions. These categories were based on participation and exclusion/inclusion patterns evident in the event maps (i.e. participation frameworks, observations of who is included/excluded). I re-coded the data for these categories and then selected excerpts of discourse to transcribe in detail and analyze moment-to-moment talk. This analysis revealed how classroom discourse reflected and constructed student positionality and identities as proficient (or non-proficient) members of discourse communities.

4. School context

This study took place in a dual-immersion[6] school; a language acquisition context where minority-language students and majority-language students[7] interacted in two languages in order to develop bilingual proficiency. The school, *Escuela Unida*,[8] was located in an agricultural region in central California. As a public charter school, *Escuela Unida* brought together students who might otherwise have had little contact with each other, due to housing segregation within the school district along linguistic, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. The student body was 90% Latino including recent immigrants and US born children, 10% White and mixed heritage students, 75% English language learners, and 87% receiving reduced or free lunch. The school used a 90/10 dual language program: students began kindergarten with 90% of their instruction in Spanish and by fifth grade reached a 50/50 balance in Spanish and English.

For this study, I chose to focus on one group of 30 fifth-grade students who represented a wide range of language experiences from emergent to proficient bilinguals. In this class, there were three newcomers from Mexico, who arrived to the US in the fourth and fifth grade, twenty bilingual children or heritage language speakers who used mostly Spanish with parents and varying degrees of English at home, and seven children who came from homes where they spoke primarily English. The class had four teachers: two Spanish-model teachers in the morning, one English-model teacher in the afternoon for the large group, and an additional English-model teacher for a pull-out group for newcomers. All

[6] Other terms used for similar programs across the US are two-way immersion (TWI), dual language, or bilingual immersion. For more information about TWI programs see (Christian, Howard, & Loeb, 2000; Freeman, 1996; Hayes, 2005; Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2003).

[7] In the US, *language-minority* students are also known as English language learners (ELLs). *Majority-language* students refer to those who speak English at home. The definitions of "language-minority student" and "native speaker" are a point of contention and ambiguity in educational research and practice. I use these terms here to make societal language and power relations explicit. In my research, I seek definitions relevant to local context.

[8] All identifying information and names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality of all participants.

teachers were veteran teachers. They demonstrated great commitment to the bilingual program and enthusiasm in their teaching. They were cooperative partners open to reflecting on their teaching and learning.

5. Findings

Although I began this research to examine opportunities for language exchange and learning among students in dual-immersion programs, as I compared field notes, analysis memos, and transcripts of student interactions, I found many contrasting cases, or missed opportunities. Upon closer examination of the learning context and classroom discourse, I found that student and teacher talk about each other's proficiency – which positioned learners as (non)legitimate speakers – was particularly relevant to language learning affordances. An important part of the terms and conditions created at school for language learning was found to be explained by *perceived proficiency* – the discursive construction and evaluation of interlocutors' communicative competence.

This finding corroborates conclusions of a recent study in a dual immersion program (Lee, Hill-Bonnet & Gillispie, 2008), which found that certain students and teachers were marked as either Spanish or English speakers (not bilingual speakers). The authors stated that "thickened identities have restricted opportunities for interactions in both languages" (Lee et al., 2008, p. 91). The present study takes this concept of assumed language proficiency one step further by analyzing the construction of proficiency at personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels. Using Functional Pattern Analysis (Rogoff et al., 2002), I identified patterns and specific acts of positioning and discursive practices that constructed student proficiency. Fig. 1 includes categories of positioning and discursive practices. The categories became salient through a comparison of different focal students' event maps and from the analysis of field notes about classroom culture. For the purposes of analysis, I categorized these practices using Rogoff et al.' (2002) different levels of personal, interpersonal and institutional, with the understanding that the levels are interconnected and part of moment-to-moment interactions. Students' perceived proficiencies were reified in the classroom through their own participation practices in school activities, yet participation was simultaneously constrained by peer language accommodation practices, social positioning of students as members (or non-members) of communities of practice, and by institutional categories that labeled students by language competence.

In this section I will begin by describing acts of positioning that occurred in the school and classroom context followed by a closer discursive analysis of key moments of dialogic construction and declarations of proficiency. Explicit declarations of language competence were found to be prevalent and powerful in the school that was under tremendous sociopolitical pressure from the state to show faster progress toward English proficiency. Despite *Escuela Unida's* efforts to promote the value two languages as academic resources (Martin-Beltran, 2010), the school was embedded in societal discourse about education that was driven by accountability measures focused on English. Consequently, English learners' proficiency was under more scrutiny. For example, students classified as ELL were tested three times a year more than non-ELLs.[9] The rite of passage at *Escuela Unida* whereby one became an "RFEP" (Redesignated Fluent English Proficient) was celebrated with an official letter to one's parents, a congratulatory note from teacher and principal, public recognition in front of the class, and exemption from the next English testing day. The principal and teachers devised a school-wide plan of differentiated reading time that separated students into small groups and based, in large part, on English proficiency scores. Small groups were taught by different pull-out teachers, including the reading specialist and ESOL/newcomer specialist. These institutional acts of positioning (see bottom left box of Fig. 1) situated students as more or less proficient. They also reflected ways teachers talked to each other and to their students. Even moments that were not official, ritual namings linked to testing or student placement, held power to transform a situation into one of participation or non-participation in language learning. For example, simply stating "she understands", "he does not understand", or "I don't speak" was in itself an important speech act, at once declaring and performing an act of exclusion or inclusion in present and future speech situations.

[9] Language majority students continued to hold a privileged position because it was assumed that they were proficient in English and, therefore, exempt from standardized testing of their English language skills. Although Spanish literacy skills were also tested, these test scores were not given equal weight in state evaluations of the school, and Spanish students were not exempt from these tests. Further research is needed to examine these inequalities.

This study found that declarations of perceived proficiency echoed throughout the school hallways as their reverberations had real consequences for student language learning. At the interpersonal level, turn-taking practices and class participation, coded from event maps, reified categories of legitimate speakers, as findings showed that those most likely to gain access to the classroom discussion floor were students who were already publicly declared and authorized by teachers as proficient speakers. On the other hand, this study found evidence of interactive activities that valued abilities beyond language, such as the activity center in the Spanish room or jump rope on the playground. These activities afforded opportunities for emergent language learners to construct their own terms for language learning and social relationships.

Similarly, acts of positioning at the interpersonal level were salient when students were given the opportunity to self-select their peers for collaboration or social groups. Students were positioned as members and non-members of social groups as they followed particular language norms, pulled each other in or out of games on the playground, chose seats at lunch, or invited select friends into gossip circles in the back of the classroom. My observations and event maps tracking participation frameworks were confirmed by interviews and surveys, which showed that social networks at school were often divided along linguistic lines, conflated with race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. While many students' family networks overlapped with school social networks (i.e. cousins in the same class), other English-dominant students tended to participate in distant social networks that were kept separate from school. To exacerbate this problem, during lunch – one of the most socially interactive periods during the school day – students were separated along socioeconomic lines.[10] I also found evidence that some social relationships, which began in the classroom and was engineered by teacher grouping, transformed interaction on the playground. Students who got to know each other during an interactive classroom activity were more likely to initiate play in the school yard. This social interaction on the playground offered continued opportunities to participate in language through play while developing social relationships.

Language accommodation practices at the interpersonal level were an implicit way of positioning students as participants or non-participants in discourse communities. Common accommodation practices included translation and/or modification of speech patterns for students who were perceived as less proficient. These accommodation practices were common in a setting where speakers could easily choose between two languages. There were occasions when I observed students' language practices shifting distinctly as they addressed different students during the same task. For example, during a class survey activity in Spanish class, I observed a Spanish dominant bilingual using Spanish to ask almost every student in the room his survey question, yet he strategically switched to English with a few students who were perceived as weaker Spanish speakers. These accommodations were also institutionalized when the teacher established a "buddy system" in English class with the intention of facilitating access to English content for the newcomers in class. "English buddies" often took on the role of simultaneous interpreter for the newcomers during large group instruction, translating all English interactions to Spanish. Analyzing field notes and event maps, I found certain students were consistently spoken to in the non-target language, resulting in further exclusion from the target-language discourse community. As illustrated in the description of the students and their excerpts of discourse that follows, social positioning and accommodation practices perpetuated the discursive construction of proficiency.

5.1. Selection of excerpts

For the purposes of this paper, I selected four excerpts from transcripts in which three students, Brenda, Estela, and Iliana, play a part positioning themselves and others as more or less proficient in their target languages. The excerpts illustrate the ways that these language learners enacted their own perceived (and consequently performative) proficiency in the company of and in collusion with others.

As I was triangulating data from student surveys, interviews with students and teachers and observations, I found that these three students, in particular, were repeatedly mentioned as learners who were "least proficient" in their L2. I

[10] This differentiated seating at lunch was due, in part, to a separate line for the students who bought their lunches (and received free/reduced lunch). Students from higher income families, who usually packed their lunches, sat at a different time and space.

began to look more closely at the data across event maps, notes of language use, participation frameworks, positioning and discursive practices in order to understand how these students' perceived proficiencies had become salient in classroom contexts and how their proficiencies were constructed in daily interactions.

I selected these girls' experiences to highlight together because they demonstrate the ways that their seemingly individual discursive practices are interwoven to create larger social patterns at the school and beyond. Observing the girls' different discursive positioning across the examples also illustrates the shifting nature of proficiency, the replication of discursive practices, and the intertextuality of utterances (Bakhtin, 1981). The excerpts selected here illustrate key discursive practices that emerged as recurrent themes during coding: practices of accommodation and uptake of others' public declarations of proficiency. These examples were not solitary; rather, they were connected to a network of social practices and representative of hundreds of examples that I observed repeatedly throughout the school year. After a description and interpretation of each vignette, I draw upon my ethnographic field notes to examine the way that these moments were connected to other school experiences and interactions to afford or constrain language learning.

5.2. *Focal students*

The focal students all share the school identity of "newcomers" in the dual immersion program because they entered after the majority of their peers began the program earlier in kindergarten. Brenda entered the program in the second grade, Estela in the fourth, and Iliana in the fifth grade. Whereas Estela and Iliana arrived with limited experience in English, Brenda arrived with limited experience in Spanish. They were classified by the school district as Hispanic, although their cultural heritage, ways of self-identifying, upbringing and social class differed dramatically.

The central construct explored in this paper – perceived proficiency – is part of one's ethno-linguistic identity, which is inextricable from issues of race, ethnicity, gender and social class. Social groups at the school and discursive practices about perceived proficiency were often defined by race and class lines that also existed beyond school walls. Students identified their differences using racial and ethnic descriptors like "*moreno*, blonde, *mexicano*, jewbu, *oaxaquito*, *filipino*", and manifested these differences in the ways they used language. For example, although a mixed heritage student (not a focal student here) was proficient in her parents' two languages (Spanish and English), she identified the cultural mismatch between herself and most of her Spanish speaking peers. As a result, she demonstrated a different kind of perceived proficiency than another bilingual peer who self identified as "*moreno* like my friends from Mexico". While I recognize the influence of institutional racism and societal stratification categories in schools, it is not within the scope of this paper to analyze these issues apart from the following contextual descriptions of the focal students. In future research I hope to look more closely at the racializing of their language-learner identities (see Motha, 2006). Instead in this study, I have tried to capture meso-level forces (e.g. teacher, student and school ideologies) that worked through participants and contributed to how perceived proficiency was constructed in their discursive practices and acts of positioning (see Fig. 1).

The first transcript comes from Brenda, who was often positioned as a member of several distinct social, ethnic, racial and language communities. Although Brenda's birth parents were Mexican, she was adopted as a baby by English speaking parents of European descent. Brenda shared dominant features with her Latina classmates (her olive complexion, thick black hair, and quickly developing adolescent body) yet Brenda affiliated herself with music, dress and speech styles that were more common among Anglo, middle-class youth in her community. She hung out almost exclusively with the other English dominant students. When responding to my student survey, she indicated that three out of four of her close friends were English-dominant and one was bilingual. At times Brenda and her English-dominant peers, who were the minority on the playground, chose not to participate in recess by helping in the school office. This removed them from their larger, Spanish-dominant peer group during a highly social time of the day. Analyzing her event maps throughout the year, I found that Brenda was often a non-ratified listener in Spanish class. She used avoidance strategies in order not to be caught speaking flawed Spanish in front of her peers or teacher. Her Spanish teacher was worried that Brenda's Spanish literacy skills were below grade level, yet Brenda seemed to fly below the radar of the English teacher who often forgot to mention Brenda when she spoke generally of students from "English-only homes".

The second excerpt involves both Brenda and Estela. Estela enrolled in *Escuela Unida* in the fourth grade with an inconsistent record of prior schooling in Mexico, which was cause for concern for both her Spanish and English teachers. Estela was described by her teachers as shy and unlikely to participate in class discussion in either English or Spanish. Comparing event maps of Estela's participation across time and space showed she was often a non-ratified listener in both Spanish and English large group situations; however, toward the end of the year she began to take the floor and participate more actively in small group situations, such as in her ESL pull-out group. Estela was often marginalized at school by students who recognized her distinct Oaxacan heritage, reflecting practices of marginalization common in the surrounding community among immigrants who perceived themselves as non-indigenous. Several teachers and the principal on one occasion asked about her indigenous heritage, that was signaled by her small stature, long thick black braid, dark smiling eyes and deep cinnamon skin. Although her mother told me she spoke to her children in both Mixtec[11] and Spanish, Estela claimed to speak only Spanish. Estela chose to spend most of her social time with fellow newcomers at school. She told me she rarely saw any students outside of school. When responding to a student survey, she indicated that three out of four of her close friends were Spanish-dominant and one was bilingual. Estela was part of an English as a Second Language (ESL) pull-out group for newcomers who met three times a week with a separate teacher during the regular English reading period.

The third excerpt focuses on Iliana, who arrived with her mother and siblings from Michoacán, Mexico the summer prior to this study to join her father, who had found a steady job in construction in the area. Prior to enrolling at *Escuela Unida*, Iliana attended five years of school in Mexico where she developed strong literacy and study skills. Although she was a new student, Iliana demonstrated confidence and leadership when working in groups, especially in Spanish class. In her mainstream English class, she was reluctant to participate in large group discussion but often led discussions in her small group, Spanish-dominant class. When responding to a student survey, she indicated that three out of four of her close friends were Spanish dominant and one was bilingual. Iliana was named more often as a "close friend" than either Estela or Brenda on the other students' surveys, suggesting a higher social status, which may have allowed more social mobility. Comparing Iliana's event maps (see Appendix A), I observed stark differences in the participation framework as contexts changed. For example, in large-group Spanish class she was a ratified participant, yet in a similar large group discussion in English class, she was a non-participant, which reified her positioning as a limited English proficiency student. However, in her small-group ESL class, Iliana was given more opportunities to become a ratified participant.

During the first week of school Iliana wrote a letter to her English teacher, Ms. Golden, that began with the following:

> "*Querida maestra: Quiero decirle que la clase que usted da me parese [sic] muy bien para los que hablan ingles pero lo lamento es que yo no le entiendo nada de ninguna palabra*. . .."

> "Dear teacher, I want to tell you that your class seems to be very good for those who speak English, but I'm sorry that I don't understand anything, not one word. . .."

With this introduction, Iliana recognized that this class was meant for "English speakers". She declared herself a non-participant of the English classroom discourse community. Using the words, "for those who speak English", she indexes *those students* as different from herself. This introduction shaped future affordances to use English with her teacher and peers, even though her English proficiency improved throughout the year. Her teachers did not ask students to re-introduce themselves after the initial getting-to-know-you practices at the beginning of the year, seeming to assume that identity is static and unchanging as a particular *kind* of student (see Anderson, 2009).

5.3. Uptake of others' declarations of one's own perceived proficiency

The first example comes from an occasion when I was equipping Brenda with a microphone and audio recorder. I was at the back of the room before Spanish class helping Brenda set up the audio recorder while her friends Heather and Miranda observed curiously.

[11] Mixtec or Mixteco refers to a variety of indigenous languages from Oaxaca, Mexico.

Transcript 1[12]

Speaker	Utterance
Heather:	You know you're not gonna hear Brenda speak much Spanish here. She speaks English most of the time
Brenda:	Yeah, @@ [laugh] my mom says I'm struggling in Spanish... if my grades don't improve in this class I might have to switch schools
Miranda:	They do cooler stuff in the [other school] anyway
Brenda:	[overlap] I'm not so good at Spanish

Despite the school's explicit additive bilingual policies, I observed many moments like the excerpt above where one language was placed in opposition to another language (i.e. she speaks English *instead of* Spanish rather than *in addition to*). In this excerpt Brenda's English-dominant friend Heather declared Brenda's lack of competence in Spanish, which was similar to Heather's description of her own Spanish proficiency. While her declaration excluded Brenda from the Spanish speaking community, Heather seemed to be expressing her solidarity with Brenda, further reifying Brenda's membership in the English-only discourse community. Brenda appeared to confirm Heather's declaration of her perceived low proficiency in Spanish and provided further evidence in the form of reported speech from her mother. Brenda invoked her mother's evaluation that she was "struggling in Spanish", and she asserted that her weak, perceived proficiency could lead to further non-participation, exclusion, or actual withdrawal from the school.

Referring to the levels of analysis mentioned in Fig. 1, one can see how the personal, interpersonal, institutional levels were all indexed in this excerpt. On a personal level, Brenda named herself a struggling Spanish speaker. At the interpersonal level, other students positioned Brenda in their descriptions, as did her mother and her teacher by way of grades. The institution or school is also embodied in this brief interaction, as the institution plays a role in tracking where she might be placed. We also see that a switch to another school was connected to the macro-level discourse concerning opportunities for language-majority students: they can choose to transfer to another school that is assumed to be in her dominant language.

Throughout the school year, I observed Brenda using avoidance strategies in her Spanish language production (talking around topics and inserting English words) possibly to protect herself from the continued evaluation from others that she was "struggling". During lunchtime when I initiated a conversation in Spanish, Brenda replied with, "Do we have to speak Spanish now? Spanish class is over!" Throughout the year, I observed several examples of resistance or non-participation (Norton, 2000) and several occasions where Brenda's struggles in Spanish became a public topic of conversation. Brenda's difficulties in Spanish class became salient during parent–teacher–student conferences, at report card time, and even during playground talk among the English-dominant girls when they discussed whether they would continue in the dual immersion program into middle school. These discursive practices shaped and severely limited Brenda's future affordances with Spanish language learning. Despite her difficulties and her resistance to using Spanish in contexts where she felt threatened, there were several occasions when I observed Brenda speaking Spanish confidently with Spanish-dominant peers. This shifting of perceived proficiencies is illustrated in the excerpt that follows.

5.4. Accommodation practices that position others as non-participants

The second excerpt comes from English class, during an interview activity where Brenda was supposed to follow an interview guide in English in order to gather information for a letter written to an English speaking recipient. Instead of carrying out the interview in English, Brenda demonstrated her bilingual competence by translating the written questions to Spanish in order to accommodate for her partner Estela. In this example, Brenda's use of Spanish both refuted and replicated Heather's earlier practice of positioning another student as a limited language speaker. In this context, Brenda disproved the declaration that she did not speak Spanish using Spanish quite competently with her peer, Estela. However, Brenda's use of Spanish positioned Estela as a non-participant in the English class activity, during which other students were using predominantly English.

[12] Transcription conventions: @@ indicates laughter. Methods for transcription were adapted from Ochs (1979). For clarity, I used the speech turn (by speaker) as the basic unit of analysis.

Transcript 2[13]

Speaker	Original utterance	English gloss (when needed)
1. Brenda	¿Qué idiomas hablas o entiendes?	What languages do you speak or understand?
2. Estela	Español, puro español. . .	Spanish, (just) pure Spanish
3. Brenda	OK	OK [*nods and writes 'She speaks Spanish' on interview guide*]
4. Melinda	And English too? [*Looking to Estela*]	
5. Estela	Un poquito @@	A little @@ [*looks down bashfully and giggles*]
6. Brenda	Should I write that?	[*She looks in doubt to Researcher*]
7. Melinda	What do you think?	[*looking to Estela*]
8. Estela	[*shrugs shoulders as if to say "I don't know"*]	
9. Brenda	OK, I'll put a little. . .un poquito	[*writes, '. . .and a little English'*]
10. Estela	A little	
11. Brenda	¿Cuantos hermanos o hermanas tienes?	How many brothers or sisters do you have? [*she continues the interview in Spanish*]

Throughout the interview, Brenda positioned Estela as a monolingual Spanish speaker. She did not allow space for Estela to demonstrate English skills. Unlike most students in the class who responded to the same question, "What languages do you speak?" with at least two languages, English and Spanish, Estela chose to report only Spanish. Brenda did not question Estela's single language response. With an additional question from the researcher, Estela reluctantly added "a little English" to her interview guide. Brenda switched to English to address the researcher signaling her distinct perception of this interlocutor's language proficiency in contrast to Estela's perceived proficiency. Brenda sought permission to proceed (in line 6) as if she needed the authority of the teacher/researcher to counter her own perceptions and challenge prior public declarations of Estela's limited language proficiency. This pause in the interaction or moment of recognition reveals the power that authority figures (i.e. teachers) may have to shape perceptions and further language affordances.

Even after her written recognition of Estela's knowledge of English, Brenda continued the interview only in Spanish throughout the class period. Although their conversation was in Spanish, Brenda recorded her responses independently in English. With these written responses to the interview, the students were supposed to co-write a letter to an English-speaking recipient. Since Brenda reformulated and translated all of Estela's words *for* her rather than *with* her, Estela was treated as a non-participant in this writing activity and, subsequently, was also excluded from dialogue with the letter recipient.

Similar to the excerpt above, we can see the intersection of the personal, interpersonal and institutional levels play out in the discursive practices illustrated in this excerpt. Estela's interpersonal interaction with Brenda created a context where it made sense to position herself as a Spanish-only speaker, showing how personal and interpersonal levels are recursive. The researcher intervened as a teacher at the meso-level, or level of the institution, to re-position Estela, yet this repositioning was complicated: Brenda's use of English with the researcher reflected macro-factors of language-majority privilege and meso-factors of the school language of instruction.

During this activity and several other class activities, Estela went along with her classmates' assumptions that she did not speak English. Estela successfully fulfilled others' expectations and her own declaration as a Spanish-only speaker. Because Estela was separated from the rest of the class during her ESL pull-out group, when she was speaking the most English, she rarely had the opportunity to demonstrate her developing English proficiency to members of a larger English community of practice at school. Consequently, her classmates and mainstream, English teacher maintained accommodations and discursive practices that co-constructed Estela's language identity as a Spanish speaker with limited English proficiency.

[13] Transcription conventions: The original utterance is written in the left column in the language it was spoken. When the original utterance was in Spanish I have provided an English gloss in the right column. Text in italics and brackets describes actions and gestures. Text in single quotes denotes written language.

5.5. The power of teachers' discursive practices

The following transcript is from 'announcement time' in English class when the students had asked the English teacher, Ms. Golden, to announce their grades on a social studies test. Throughout the year, students showed great interest in these announcements that compared students' academic performance in a public forum, which often overlapped with declarations of linguistic competence. As Ms. Golden began to announce the highest grades on the test, students called out names to predict the high scorers in class. No one expected Iliana, a newcomer from Mexico, to be recognized in English class.

Transcript 3

Speaker	Original utterance	English gloss (when needed)
1. Ms. Golden	Three people got an A+ on the states test	
2. Student	I bet I know who [*whispering*]	
3. Several students	Heatheeeer [*overlapping whispers and groaning*]	
4. Ms. Golden	Not the three I would have guessed	
5. Students	José. . .. [*guessing another student who has been recognized for good grades*]	
6. Ms. Golden	Una persona que no entiende ingles	A person who does not understand English
7. Students	[*Students looked surprised and focus their gaze on the newcomers who have lifted up their heads in response to Ms. Golden's use of Spanish*]	
8. Ms. Golden	Iliana, got an A+. Congratulations! Great work Muy bien Iliana!	Very good Iliana
9. Iliana	[*picks up paper bashfully*]	
10. Ms. Golden	The other two I wouldn't have expected either . . .Alberto and Julio.	
11. Students	Oooohhhhh [*taunting voices as boys go up to the front of the room to receive their tests*]	
12. Ms. Golden	I was impressed!	

In Transcript 3, the construction of proficiency is played out at the interpersonal and institutional levels among several classroom players who work together using language accommodation and public declaration of ability to reify possibilities for participation in the dominant discourse community. With their choral responses, students showed that they shared well-established expectations for who was most likely to get the highest grade in the class (lines 2–5). In line 4, Ms. Golden acknowledged that she, too, expected the ranking of top students to include her English-dominant students, whose names were called out by several students. In line 8, Ms. Golden code-switched to use Spanish signaling that she wanted to ensure that Spanish speakers would understand. This utterance included Spanish speakers in the conversation, yet simultaneously positioned the students as non-members of the English speaking community. Instead of describing Iliana as a student who was learning English, the teacher's discourse drew attention to Iliana's perceived deficit in English (*una persona que no entiende*, a person who does *not* understand). Discursive practices, such as accommodations through translation, promulgated assumptions that the students, for whom language must be translated, were non-participants in the English speech community. School policies that pulled-out newcomers from their English classes, separating them from the rest of the class to work with another teacher in a different room, reified their non-participation. However, within the small pull-out groups, perceived proficiencies shifted. New affordances were offered for language learning. The ESL pull-out teacher, Ms. Hawkins, assumed that each student would be able to participate in the small English community of practice they had established. Although she accepted Spanish from the students to show understanding, Ms. Hawkins contested the perception that these students did not understand English. Like the other teachers and students, Ms. Hawkins also engaged in public declarations of language proficiencies, which is apparent in the excerpt below.

5.5.1. "She understands!"

The following interaction occurred after Ms. Hawkins and her students made pancakes as part of a special hands-on reading response activity. It is interesting to notice how students take on different positions of translator/accommodator in relation to other participants. For example, in the following excerpt, Estela translated for Iliana; as seen in her interaction with Brenda (Transcript 2), this demonstrated Estella's understanding of the teacher's utterance in English, as well as repeating accommodation practices she had previously experienced in English class.

Transcript 4

Speaker	Utterance
Ms. H	Which one do you want to take for your sister?
Iliana	[*looks at the pancake in silence (2 second pause)*]
Estela	¿Cuál quieres para tu hermana? [*she translates the teacher's previous utterance*]
English gloss	Which do you want for your sister
Ms. H	She understands! [*admonishes Estela for translating and looks back at Iliana*]
Estela	[*Giggles and looks down*]
Iliana	[*Points to the pancake*]
Ms. H	You want to take this one?
Iliana	Yes
Ms. H	For your sister?
Iliana	Yes, this [*points to the pancake*] for my sister
Ms. H	Ok, here you go. I hope she likes it!
Iliana	Yes, thank you!

In this excerpt, Ms. Hawkins created a situation where Iliana was perceived as an English participant when she declared, "she understands!" This simple act of acknowledging students' emerging proficiencies had the power to shift language practices and created new affordances for learners. This created an important space where students had the opportunity to take ownership of the language they were learning.

In line 4, Ms. Hawkins declared Iliana's English skills as sufficient, and in line 6 the teacher transformed Iliana's gesture into an English sentence asking for further response. As a result, Iliana appropriated Ms. Hawkins's English words to respond in her own English phrase (line 10). This was an example of collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000) where language learning affordances were seized in the moment and opportunities were opened for the future by re-positioning Iliana as a participant in the English speaking community. However, positioning practices at different levels may also be contradictory. While at an institutional level Iliana was positioned as a non-participant in the mainstream English class occurring while she was pulled out of the room, she was re-positioned at the institutional meso-level by Ms. Hawkins, whose position of authority shaped positioning practices at the interpersonal level among the students. She intervened and redirected language accommodation practices or avoidance strategies in interpersonal interactions, and allowed students a space to position themselves as legitimate English users.

5.6. Shifting and breaking down perceived proficiencies

After practicing English in her small pull-out group, Iliana returned to class more confident about her English proficiency. In Transcript 5 below, Iliana demonstrated her desire to use her newly acquired English with her "English buddy" who was a fluent bilingual.

Transcript 5

Speaker	Original utterance	English gloss (when needed)
1. Cecilia	Oye, Ili, que tienes?	Hey Ili, what do you have? [*pointing to the paper plate covered with paper towel*]
2. Iliana	En la clase de Ms. Hawkins, we made pancakes!	In Ms. Hawkin's class "we made pancakes"[14]
3. Ceci	Lucky! Yo quiero un pancake pul-leease!	"Lucky!" I want a "pancake please!" [*she adds extra syllable to the word please for emphasis*]
4. Iliana	Sorry! It's for my sister	
5. Ceci	Ahh come on!	

Iliana's interaction with another student offers evidence that she was willing to create new affordances using new English words she had recently used with Ms. Hawkins. For example, she used the phrase, "for my sister" (repeated from the ESL pull-out context) with her 'English buddy' who was usually positioned as the informant/translator. Iliana

[14] Double quotes are used to indicate English code-switching in a phrase that began in Spanish.

assumed a different position of power upon her return to class as she brought with her a new perception of her English proficiency, not to mention a sweet-smelling, coveted pancake.

In the latter part of the school year Iliana worked to redefine others' perceptions of her proficiency as she began using English more conspicuously and confidently. During English class, Ms. Golden often initiated one-on-one interactions with her newcomer students in Spanish. I had never observed her calling upon Iliana to produce English in front of the whole group. However, in the face of those constraints, Iliana began to reshape her perceived proficiency in the company of Ms. Golden. In late April, Ms. Golden rushed over to me, the researcher, in excitement with Iliana and asked her to show off an English phrase she had spoken to Ms. Golden on her own. Ms. Golden told me proudly that Iliana's spontaneous use of English had "brought tears to [her] eyes". After that moment of official recognition or awareness of Iliana's developing English proficiency I observed Ms. Golden's discursive practices about newcomers' proficiencies shifting.

Although Iliana and other newcomers were improving their English proficiency throughout the year, this improvement often went unnoticed in a context where they were perceived as non-English speakers. It is evident that *perceived proficiency* could shift quickly across different situations when participants, and their positioning relative to each other, changed. However, the construction of a learner's *perceived proficiency* was slower to change if the positioning of participants and nature of activities remained constant. For example, as I examined patterns across students' event maps, I found that within large-group discussions, participation patterns established early in the year remained constant. These established patterns limited the number of students who were able to gain access to the floor during public class discussions and offered few opportunities for others to be recognized as legitimate participants in this speech community. Because newcomers' positions as non-participants in English were taken for granted, participation was treated as a great surprise rather than an expectation as evident in Ms. Golden's teary-eyed reaction.

6. Discussion

The examples of classroom discourse presented in this paper were intended to shed light on discursive practices and acts of positioning in which learners co-construct perceptions of proficiencies and consequent language learning affordances or constraints. This analysis illustrated the ways in which speakers and those around them work together to activate perceived proficiencies. None of these students could be considered a proficient speaker on her own; rather, her proficiency was enacted, ascribed and discussed in the company of others. These examples illustrate the dialogic nature (Bakhtin, 1981; Wong, 2005) of perceived proficiency, which is constructed in response to others' utterances and in anticipation of future responses (McDermott, 1996). The excerpts illustrated the ways that students replicate and refute discursive practices that label students as (non)participants of target language communities. For example, both Brenda and Estela replicated accommodation practices that they themselves had experienced, which ironically contradicted others' perceptions of their limited proficiencies.

This study suggests that future research in SLA needs to attend to *perceived proficiency* as a construct to make visible the ways that language proficiencies are constructed and shifted throughout interactions with others. The examples of discourse presented here demonstrate the positionality and the fluidity of proficiency within shifting school contexts. For example, in one situation Brenda and Estela were positioned as non-participants in their L2; yet, in another situation, they positioned themselves as L2 language informants and translators.

Data from transcripts highlighted the power that teachers' subtle, everyday discursive practices have to shape students' opportunities to participate in target language communities. Although the English classroom teacher intended to include newcomer students in large-group classroom discussions, the consistent use of the non-target language with these students and public declarations of limited language abilities created a context where newcomers' use of English was unauthorized. Alternatively, in their small group context, proficiencies were re-perceived and their use of English was authorized when the ESL pull-out teacher publicly declared the understanding of all group participants. These perceptions of proficiency shaped the quality and quantity of linguistic input or affordances (van Lier, 2000) available for language learners in this school setting.[15]

[15] This study does not intend to draw grand conclusions about dual-immersion programs, since I argue these practices could happen in any school. Despite the challenges highlighted here, this school provided invaluable opportunities for bilingual language learning far beyond experiences afforded to students in mainstream, monolingual schools.

Part of the active construction of conditions for learning can include a resistance to participate, a reactive resistance, or a passive process of acceptance of marginalization by target community members (Block, 2003). Brenda engaged in reactive resistance, not participating as the result of others marginalizing her or naming her flawed Spanish competency. Estela appeared to quietly accept her marginalization and to take on the identity of a 'non-participant in the English community', at least in public displays at school outside her ESL group. Brenda's non-participation and her perceived proficiency had different consequences than either Iliana's or Estela's: Brenda could frame her potential failure in Spanish class as an attractive option, an opportunity to go to another school. The English-dominant students recognized that they could easily move to another school because their dominant language was also the societal language common in other schools. There was a tension between the cultural capital gained in Spanish, which allowed greater access to local communities, and the cultural capital gained in English that promised greater political and economic independence. These everyday language practices and choices to participate reflect the way that societal power structures, such as the dominance of English, shape the way the students and teachers make choices about how they use language and position themselves as members of discourse communities.

7. Conclusions and implications

Although similar discursive practices about perceived proficiencies occur everyday in classrooms, educators and researchers have not often paused to theorize or analyze the processes and consequences of these practices. The power to shape language learning does not lie in a single declaration or in words alone, but in the way these declarations are connected across personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels to future opportunities to speak and to be spoken to as participants in the target language community. Findings from this study demonstrated how students enacted their attributed proficiencies and how they replicated practices of exclusion and accommodation that they themselves had experienced. This cyclical process was likely to continue to constrain future participation in the target language unless another participant, particularly a person in a position of power, i.e. a teacher, interrupted and redirected the construction of perceived proficiency to offer new possibilities for language learning. Building upon previous research (Goldstein, 1996; Norton, 2000) that has discussed the challenges of naturalistic settings where target language communities can create undesired constraints for language learning, this study demonstrates the importance of teacher awareness and re-direction of discursive practices.

During interaction, speakers are evaluating and forming perceptions of their interlocutor's competence, which this study named the learner's *perceived proficiency*. In light of these perceptions, speakers develop certain norms for speaking with this interlocutor which involve modifications, clarifications, accommodations, code-switching, or avoidance. In this context, I found that target language speakers not only modified the kind of language they used with more novice speakers, they also excluded them from language learning affordances all together based on the social construction of perceived proficiency. This study makes a unique contribution to the field of SLA because the data analysis (including close analysis of transcripts and participation patterns in event maps) revealed how perceptions and consequent speaking norms were built in moment-to-moment talk and over time within the classroom culture.

Although the idea of perceived proficiency is implicit in much SLA work, these perceptions have been unexamined in studies that assume that target-language experts and novices will learn from one another as they interact. Findings from this study suggest that any research examining interaction and proficiency in a social context needs to supplement individual, self-reported data with the notion of socially situated, perceived proficiencies. Many SLA researchers and language educators have focused on measures of proficiency according to individual performance of certain competencies (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Thomas, 1994), but in a social setting like a school – where students are constantly playing with boundaries of identity and community – this study makes the case that perceived proficiency is more relevant to explain the ways that participants are co-constructing terms for language learning. Although a learner's perceived proficiency is not necessarily an accurate representation of language competence, such perceptions are reified and enacted through everyday interactions that are an important part of the learning environment.

On the classroom level this study called attention to: (1) teacher and student discursive practices that work together to construct perceived proficiencies as part of classroom culture, (2) the power of these discursive practices to constrain, afford and change opportunities to participate in target languages, and (3) the ways that perceived proficiencies shift across situations. With this awareness, what can educators across diverse contexts incorporate into their classroom practices? First, it is my hope that teachers and fellow language learners will examine their own public declarations or naming of learners' proficiencies. Teachers are in a position to strategically empower learners by publicly declaring

and reifying their proficiency and to remind learners of what they *can* do to participate in the classroom discourse communities.

Another discursive practice that needs to be reexamined is that of translation or speech accommodation for others who are perceived to have limited language proficiency. In this context I found that reliance on translation was a powerful constraint not only because of translator's limited access to target language input, but also because this discursive practice perpetuated the positioning of students as non-legitimate participants. When translation practices became the norm during regular classroom activities, a student's perceived proficiency in the target language was viewed as static or unchanging, despite continuous language development.

This study also suggests that educators need to change the way they think about placement and proficiency levels of students that suggest inactive placement instead of movement and growth. In contrast to static labels, this study found that students' (perceived) proficiencies could shift quickly across different situations where activities, participants and their positioning relative to each other changed. Instead of allowing students to get tracked by institutional designations, teachers can take advantage of the shifting notions of proficiency by orchestrating different situations that allow students to take on alternating roles as proficient speakers and sources of language expertise. Finally, by understanding the discursive practices that may impact language learning in the classroom, teachers can actively create new language learning affordances for students who might otherwise be marginalized.

This study opens up new questions for further research in order to understand the impact that perceived proficiency may have on language acquisition. For example, one might ask what cues people use during interactions to form perceptions and to adapt language. How might affordances and interactions vary among speakers who have different perceptions of their interlocutors' proficiencies? For the purposes of this paper, I have not focused on larger socio-political issues nor have I teased apart issues of race, class, or ethnicity; although I recognize these issues are ultimately part of how students are positioned as legitimate proficient speakers. In future research the confluence of identity markers of race, social class and ethnic affiliation (Leung et al., 1997) must be investigated to further understand the construction of language identities and perceived proficiencies.

With a better understanding of how perceived proficiency is socially constructed, we can look more closely at what educators can do in order to improve language learning contexts. Ultimately this research has implications for teacher education as we prepare teachers to question and redirect discursive practices in their classrooms. This is not to suggest that teachers alone can sustain relationships or resolve conflicts between communities that have a history of segregation and social inequalities. However, teacher educators can ensure that teachers are aware of the classroom practices that reify learners' perceived proficiencies and language identities, which in turn, inspire or discourage future opportunities for language learning.

Appendix A. Example event map of daily round/school day of focal student Iliana (January 25, 2005)

Time and place	Situation Grouping Official language of instruction (LOI)	Activities	Participants Participants who are recorded and/or observed in close proximity to focal student *Interaction with target language-dominant speakers noted	Participation framework Who is included and excluded or ratified? How are participants named?	Languages used by focal student	Languages used by **others** addressing focal student
8:40 school yard cafeteria	Walking in pairs from bus Grouped with 4 girls around large lunch tables Free choice for language (LOI n/a)	Iliana arrives to school by bus Eats school breakfast Plays in school yard Line up at classroom door	Other students arriving on bus and at breakfast are mostly Spanish dominant (I's sister, cousin, Estela, Veronica, Javier) *NO interaction with English dominant students	Active vocal participant (ratified speaker and listener)	All Spanish	All Spanish
9:00 Spanish classroom/at desk	Whole class Desks pushed together to form groups of 4 Spanish LOI	Homework check: teacher walks around the room to give visual checks	Ms. Ferguson: Spanish teacher Whole class Iliana + peers at group table: Daniel: English dominant Miranda: bilingual Maria: Spanish dominant *Although she was sitting close to an English dominant student she did not interact with him	Teacher directed Listening participant/ratified listener Non-ratified listener of Daniel and Miranda's conversation as they use some English to each other	All Spanish	All Spanish
9:15 Spanish classroom/at desk	Whole class One group of 6 students went to the back of the room for the "independent math group" Spanish LOI	Math lesson Guided practice with math problems dealing with decimals and place value	Iliana + peers at "group table" David: bilingual (left to go work at independent group) Miranda: bilingual (left to go work at independent group)	Teacher directed Active vocal participant (ratified speaker) – raised hand and teacher called on her Listening participant: Ratified listener	All Spanish	All Spanish
9:35 Spanish classroom/at desk	Working in teams in small group, reporting out to whole class Spanish LOI	Small group Collaborative activity using hand-held white boards (recorder, reporter)	Iliana + peers at "group table" Blanca: Spanish dominant (joined table) Jason: bilingual (joined table) *NO interaction with English dominant students	Iliana assumed the role of active vocal participant (ratified speaker) – Iliana took on role as 'reporter' to explain how they got their answer to the class Iliana told her teammates what to write on board during group think time Iliana is positioned as expert Jason is excluded from group work	All Spanish	Mostly Spanish
10:05 Spanish classroom/at desk	Working (mostly) independently, seated in small group of 6 Spanish LOI	Independent student work on math exercises from book	Iliana + peers at "group table" Blanca: Spanish dominant (joined table) Jason: bilingual (joined table) *NO interaction with English dominant students	Iliana (positioned as expert) helped peers at her table	All Spanish	
10:30 Recess/playground	Free choice for language	Iliana joined a group of 4 girls who were speaking animated Spanish as they circled around Carla who was showing off the contents of her new purse	Iliana + peers: Carla: Spanish dominant Cecilia: Spanish dominant Vianey: Spanish dominant Maria: Spanish dominant *NO interaction with English dominant students	Independent student talk Active vocal participant (ratified speaker and listener) Talk was plentiful – at 27 turns per minute	All Spanish	Mostly Spanish The only English word they used was "ID" to refer to their school identification cards

Appendix A (*Continued*)

Time and place	**Situation**	**Activities**	**Participants**	**Participation framework**	**Languages used** by focal student	**Languages used by others** addressing focal student
10:45 Spanish classroom/at centers	Social studies/reading centers Teacher reported that she had grouped students heterogeneously (to provide balance of language proficiency and literacy levels) Spanish LOI	Centers: (1) geography: making a map of the American colonies and marking battles, (2) activity center: making an old fashioned toy, (3) writing center: writing definitions of vocabulary, (4) reading center: read Social studies chapter and answer final questions, (5) listening center: listen to the story and answer comprehension questions, and (6) teacher center: guided reading of social studies chapter	Iliana with teacher at guided reading center, "centro de la maestro Ms. Ferguson: Spanish teacher David: bilingual Johnny: Spanish dominant Carla: Spanish dominant Brenda: English dominant *SOME interaction with English dominant students 2 important authoritative sources of Spanish – the teacher and the Spanish Social studies text	Teacher mediated small group discussion Iliana was ratified speaker; (teacher called on her) Listening participant: Ratified listener	All Spanish	Mostly Spanish The teacher used cross linguistic comparisons in English to elucidate the meaning of unfamiliar words in the text Teacher provided opportunity for Iliana to build academic vocabulary in English supported connections across two languages
12:00 Cafeteria	Free language choice Note: students who buy lunch sit separately from those who pack lunch because they skip lunch line	Lunch	Iliana + Sonia (I's cousin): Spanish dominant Cecilia: Spanish dominant Carla: Spanish dominant Estela: Spanish dominant Ofelia: Spanish dominant *I never observed Iliana sitting next to any of the English dominant students during lunch. Instead, she stuck with her cousin and two girls who were also part of the newcomer ESL pullout group	During lunch today she listens and more than talks, but giggles and nods to show her engagement She is ratified listener/participant	All Spanish	Mostly Spanish
12:20 Lunchtime recess/playground	Free language choice	Began sitting on bench watching older kids and laughing at boys playing basket ball Iliana and friends joined in jump rope game This particular recess was unique because Iliana shared the same playful space as many of the English dominant girls	Iliana began with group above (from lunchtime) Iliana and Spanish dominant friends joined English dominant girls (Heather and Brenda) playing jump rope *1st significant interaction with English dominant students this day	Active vocal participant (ratified speaker and listener) Playful overlapping speech Iliana is included in jump rope game with English dominant girls Jump rope rhymes	Mostly Spanish	Began in mostly Spanish Transformed to bilingual situation during jump rope game including English dominant girls

12:40 English classroom	Whole class Desks pushed together to form groups of 6, students faced front of room English LOI	Announcements/news of the day Homework check Grades Behavior chart check	Ms. Golden: English teacher Iliana's group table peers: Cecilia: Spanish dominant bilingual Silvio: Spanish dominant, newcomer Ignacio: bilingual Maria: Spanish dominant Veronica: Spanish dominant, newcomer *NO interaction with English dominant students, but some talk in English with bilingual peers	Teacher directed discussion Listening participant Non-ratified listener (not recognized by teacher) English dominant students (EDS) dominate the floor, given or assumed more speech turns EDS called upon by teacher to speak (5 of 7 students) Iliana did not participate in large group. She laid her head on her desk and looked out the window until Ms. Golden gave them instructions to begin their next assignment	Mostly Spanish asking for some translations	Mostly Spanish although English used at her group table (not directed to her, as non-ratified listener)
1:00 English classroom	Independent work English LOI	Writing personal narrative (for district assessment) Students who finished worked on independent workbook activities	Ms. Golden: English teacher Iliana's group table peers (see above, 12:40) *NO interaction with English dominant students, but some talk in English with bilingual peers	Officially this was individual work time, however peers asked each other for help Iliana decoded teacher's speech to understand that she had given directions, then she turned toward her tablemates to ask, "Que dijo la maestra" (What did the teacher say?) Students raised hands to ask for teacher help Teacher talked briefly with Iliana (in Spanish) to see if she needed help	Mostly Spanish, asking for some translations	Mostly Spanish although English used at her group table The student sitting between the newcomers, acted as a language broker by translating and paraphrasing the teachers' directions
2:00 Recess/playground	Large group	Ms. Golden led game of "Chinese jump rope"	Ms. Golden: English teacher Iliana: Spanish dominant Heather: English dominant Vicente: bilingual Cecilia: Spanish dominant Cecilia: Spanish dominant Brenda: English dominant Estela: Spanish dominant *YES – interaction with English dominant students	Non-ratified listener as students and teacher use English to play the jump rope game Iliana participated non-verbally in the game After fifteen minutes of recess when they had been integrated around the Chinese jump rope, the students swiftly parted ways to return to English class	Mostly Spanish	Mostly Spanish although English used that was not directed to her, as non-ratified listener

Appendix A (*Continued*)

Time and place	**Situation**	**Activities**	**Participants**	**Participation framework**	**Languages used** by focal student	**Languages used by others** addressing focal student
2:15–3:20 ESL pull out classroom	Reading groups in rotating "centers" for students who stay in Ms. Golden's room Iliana leaves room with small group who sit around horseshoe table with Ms. Hawkins English LOI	ESL/literacy	Ms. Hawkins: English pull-out teacher (for newcomers)	Teacher mediated discussion	Mostly English	Mostly English
		Guided writing using sentence frames	Estela: Spanish dominant newcomer Veronica: Spanish dominant, newcomer Silvio: Spanish dominant, newcomer *NO opportunities for interaction with English dominant peers, but many opportunities to talk in English with Teacher, who is the English dominant model and authority	Noticeable silence and wait time that contrasted with large classroom of 30 Active vocal participant (ratified speaker) – raised hand and teacher called on her Ratified listener		
3:20–3:30 English classroom	Whole class Desks pushed together to form groups of 6, students faced front of room English LOI	Summary of the day Students write report that goes home for parents about what they did at school today Teacher provides model sentences on board	Ms. Golden: English teacher Iliana's group table peers (see above, 12:40)	Teacher directed, little or no student dialogue Students talk among themselves quietly at groups Iliana read aloud her "summary of the day" in English	Both English and Spanish	Both English and Spanish
3:30–5:00 Cafeteria classroom	Whole group mixed age	After school snack in cafeteria Girls scouts – making picture frames	Parent and staff volunteers spoke mostly Spanish Iliana, her cousins, her sister and other Spanish dominant girls *NO interaction with English dominant peers	Active vocal participant (ratified speaker and listener)	Mostly Spanish	Mostly Spanish

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