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A Phenomenological Look at Adult English-Language Development Through
the Lens of Students' Sense-Making Practices

by

Gabriela Segade

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Fall 2011

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Gabriela Segade

Abstract

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Gabriela Segade

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Berkeley

Sarah Warshauer Freedman, Chair

This dissertation examines the participation of adult English learners in a community college ESL course. The research synthesizes phenomenological views of human action with recent findings in cognitive sciences and cognitive linguistics to create a framework for understanding how learners' ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational histories shape their patterns of participation in the course. By using the learners' sense making as a lens, the study connects relevant structural and biographical factors to how students perceive and engage with language and instructional practices. The data collection relied on ethnographic techniques of participant observation and interviews coupled with extensive use of video and audio recording. Transcripts of students' interview responses and classroom interaction were analyzed through a combination of thematic and conversation analysis with an attention to metaphor and gesture. The findings indicate that a series of factors conspires to discourage students from focusing on unknown language, and that the needs of the language learner may at times conflict with norms of classroom interaction. The students' focus on saving face and attending to procedural aspects of course assignments often overshadowed purposeful engagement with language and literacy. Students who immigrated to the United States during their middle and high-school years were less likely to attend to language that they needed to learn and more concerned with presenting themselves as competent actors. The findings suggest that schools must better understand and address the emotional needs of adolescent English-language learners and build a school climate where limited English proficiency is not stigmatized. They further suggest that educators cannot rely on learners to draw attention to language that they need to learn. The instructional focus on process and strategies in ESL courses needs to be critically examined, particularly in regards to how it may detract from meaningful language and literacy use. Several of the conclusions of this research contrast with earlier empirical findings and point to the importance of investigating actual classroom behavior to balance the potential biases of experimental and interview only studies.

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Several people in the UC Berkeley community nurtured my intellectual curiosity and my independent streak. My adviser, Professor Sarah Freedman, always encouraged my desire to explore different disciplines and to work out my own ways of approaching intellectual problems. At the same time, she was an outstanding mentor who understood my lack of familiarity with the ways of academia. She took it upon herself to coach me on how to navigate a system I was not socialized into by virtue of birth into the right socioeconomic background. Her careful readings of early versions of this manuscript and her suggestions have greatly improved its quality. Dear Sarah, I owe you much more than I can say in an acknowledgements section. Laura Sterponi, Claire Kramsch, David Pearson, and Geoffrey Saxe, thank you for the questions you asked to push my thinking. The Berkeley Gesture Group, steered by Eve Sweetser, provided a forum for testing out some of the early analyses that evolved into this dissertation. The group discussions were fertile ground for my interdisciplinary interests, and the members' feedback and suggestions, particularly those of Eve Sweetser and Katharine Young, helped me familiarize myself with notions of embodied cognition, phenomenology, and cognitive linguistics which helped frame this study. My data analysis would not have been the same if I had not participated in Randi Engle's video research group, which taught me many of the tricks and ways of looking that can bring an artifact to life.

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Transcription Notation

There is virtually no limit to the number of utterance features that can be represented in transcribed speech. In the transcripts in this document, I tried to provide sufficient detail when it was relevant to the analysis but not so much that it impaired readability. Thus, I chose not to represent foreign accents except when I had strong reasons to believe that they might have been salient (or opaque) to addressees. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the research and expected audience, when I represented actual rather than target-like pronunciation, I used shallow orthography rather than International Phonetic Alphabet symbols. I used the following symbols to provide information about prosody and nonverbal behavior where these features could potentially illustrate speakers' intentions or thought processes.

X	Unintelligible syllable
.	Short pause within an utterance
...	Longer pause
:	The preceding sound is elongated
—	The turns before and after are latched to each other
-	Speaker self repairs without an intervening pause
//	Beginning of overlapping speech
\\	End of overlapping speech
{ }	Items within are a best approximation to the sounds heard
[]	Items within are researcher's clarifications
()	Items within describe nonverbal behavior
" "	Items within are quoted speech or text
formando	Items in bold are stressed relative to the surrounding speech
?	The preceding unit is uttered with rising intonation

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When do we stop learning? If we take learning in its broadest possible sense, as any adaptation to changes in our environment, the answer is clearly, “never.” The narrow view of education as what happens within the confines of institutions of learning at specific time periods in our lives has always been inadequate in accounting for the many forms of learning that take place in life. But in these times of ever accelerating change, the emphasis on learning as something that happens to children, adolescents, and young adults is becoming obsolete. We have no idea what the world will look like in twenty years, much less how to “educate ourselves” for that future. Workplaces and personal lives are constantly transformed by advances in technology and concomitant changes in the way we satisfy our needs and relate to one another. Keeping up with the world now requires constantly updating our knowledge and skills, incorporating new technology and new patterns of work and life. As migration becomes more common due to the increasing affordability of international travel and the displacement resulting from economic disasters and the continuing degradation of our environment, more people find themselves having to interact through the medium of a new language. These changes heighten our need to understand adult second language acquisition.

Learning a new language is a very complex activity, and while disciplinary constructions of knowledge try to isolate aspects of experience in order to focus on them in detail (a necessary moment in the study of social phenomena) cognition “in the wild” (Hutchins, 1995) does not respect boundaries between language learning and language use, pedagogy and acquisition, learner roles and other subject identities. Knowledge produced within the confines of laboratory experiments is often fragmentary, and knowledge arrived at by cross-sectional data of large groups of people often muddles the complexity of the many ways in which real social actors learn language in real world situations. Educators need to be able to understand how disciplinary bodies of knowledge—about grammatical development, age effects, the role of identity and acculturation, socialization into language practices, and cognitive constraints of the mature brain—converge in individual learners. Ultimately, what gets acquired depends on the *acquirers* and the particular biographical and contextual factors that shape their attempts to make sense of their world. What educators need is not only bodies of empirical knowledge and theories of language acquisition, but also what C. Wright Mills, had he studied issues of learning and teaching, might have called *the pedagogical imagination*: the ability to understand the larger patterns in terms of their “meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (1959, p. 5).

Over more than fifteen years teaching English as a second language (ESL) to adolescents and adults, I’ve become more and more interested in understanding how it is that students “get it” or don’t. Students *always* make sense, maybe just not the sense we expect them to make. For that reason, mistakes have always fascinated me because they provide a window into the meaning construction process through which learners arrive not only at the wrong answers, but also at the correct ones. I have found that, as an instructor, the most illuminating moments were those when I got students to show me *how* they had arrived at some meaning of a situation.

This dissertation is another attempt to get into students’ minds, but from an understanding that minds are not individual creations but emergent products of interaction with the materials provided by history and the affordances and constraints imposed by nature. It integrates several philosophical and empirical traditions—hopefully

not too many—to construct a framework for looking at second language learning through the lens of the learner’s sense making. I draw on phenomenological accounts of lived experience, embodied and situated notions of cognition, insights about language and thought from cognitive linguistics, language socialization theory, and empirical findings from second language acquisition research. From a synthesis of these perspectives, I approach the study of the process of second language learning among students in a community college ESL class, possibly one of most diverse populations of any learning context.

Because of its focus on lived experience, this research relies on naturalistic data collection techniques of participant observation and extensive interviewing. I supplemented these sources of data by using prompts to stimulate students’ recall of their experiences and elicit their perceptions, and I collected relevant documents and institutional records that could help me understand the students’ backgrounds and learning histories. I used thematic coding to identify the most promising sections of the data collected, and I then relied largely on multimodal conversation analytic techniques with particular attention to gestural and verbal metaphor. The result is a description of the students’ early experiences learning English, their experiences interacting through the second language, and the connection between their backgrounds and their patterns of participation in course activities.

The focus on learners’ histories and meaning construction allowed me to examine how students perceived the language and practices of the course and how their patterns of engagement made sense within the logic of their situation. This focus is interesting in itself, but, further, the ways in which learners engage with the language and pedagogical practices in the classroom have direct implications for how they attend to and use language, which, in turn, affects the extent to which they develop the types of English proficiency that can lead to success in college and professional employment. For largely working-class immigrant students like those I studied, proficiency in English could mean the difference between subsisting on the margins of society and gaining more control over their lives.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Much of what happens in schools boils down to educators doing things to students. Decisions about what gets taught, to whom, in what sequence, and in what way are made by teachers, curriculum developers, pedagogical specialists, and policy “deciders.” Because broad statistical analyses of student performance data are much easier to come by—in many cases required by state or federal bodies with power over how school funding is allocated, macro level quantitative data has greater weight than students’ first-hand accounts of their lived experiences when it comes to setting educational policy. Teachers, who by virtue of their roles closely interact with students, are not always able to understand the perspective of different students, partly because of the social distance between the teacher and student roles and partly because as experts, they are constrained and influenced in their decisions by large bureaucracies and the clout of received pedagogical “wisdom.” Even when researchers focus on students and conduct qualitative studies that try to give them a voice, students’ voices rarely find their way to the decision-making table. Qualitative studies are time consuming, and gaining access to classrooms and students’ lives requires a lot of dedication. Qualitative research into students’ experiences tends to be based on interviews, and here students’ perspectives necessarily get filtered through researchers’ perspectives and selection criteria of what’s valuable and interesting material for publication. I think it is fair to say that in general, students do not have much power to shape what happens in the classroom.

And yet, effective curriculum and pedagogical practice hinges on an understanding of how students perceive the programs they participate in and how their practices reproduce and transform patterns of success and failure. Seeing students as purposeful agents, and their acts as “acts of meaning” (Bruner, 1990), forces a recognition that how much students appropriate and transform what is done *to* them depends on their purposes and perceptions of what means are available to them in the horizon of possibility (Schutz, 1970) in which they are situated, and that those means are also shaped biographically, by the experiences they had earlier in their lives.

Man finds himself at any moment of his daily life in a biographically determined situation....it is the sedimentation of all of man's previous experiences, organized in the habitual possessions of his stock of knowledge....This biographically determined situation includes certain possibilities of future practical or theoretical activities which shall be briefly called the "purpose at hand." It is this purpose at hand which defines those elements among all the others contained in such a situation which are relevant for this purpose (page 73).

Only understanding this “biographically determined situation” and the meanings that students construct from their experiences in the classroom can we understand their actions, especially in seemingly paradoxical situations when disadvantaged students appear to perpetuate the social system that confines them to the margins of society.

Understanding patterns of student participation in educational institutions requires theoretical tools that allow us to see the logic in agents’ practices within the context of large-scale patterns of success or failure. How is it that a behavior that could lead to failure *makes sense* for a situated actor? The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu is one approach we can draw on to understand the nexus between recurrent social patterns and the purposeful,

individual actions that reproduce—and to some degree change—those patterns. Bourdieu conceptualized agents as occupying different positions in structured fields of activity, each field being to some extent a game with its own rules. Agents within a field develop a “feel for the game,” an expression that highlights the embodied and often unconscious nature of lived experience. Agents understand the structured, hierarchical nature of the fields they participate in, and as they attempt to advance their positions within them, they draw on *strategies*. Through their experiences in different fields, each with its own values and ways of behaving, actors develop a set of stable dispositions to perceive, act and evaluate in certain ways. These embodied dispositions are what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*. Because actors participate in different fields, and because their relative positions within those fields differ, they are differentially socialized and develop unique sets of dispositions. As they move across fields they carry embodied ways of being which may or may not advance their positions in new fields (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). I will work from this understanding of habitus and strategy as I look at how students of different ages and educational backgrounds attempted to make sense of the language they encountered and advance their position within their new academic communities in the community college setting.

Bourdieu did not believe—nor do I—that a phenomenological focus—that is, the focus on agents’ lived experience—entails a denial of the value of *objectivist* knowledge, an anti-naturalist stance, or the implication that actors are unconstrained by social and economic conditions of possibility. As Bourdieu explains, objectivist and subjectivist descriptions are “moments in a dialectical advance towards adequate knowledge” of a phenomenon (p. 3, 1972), one piece of the multidimensional puzzle we must construct to understand a slice of the social world.

The Nature of Language

“[Speech] is the subject’s taking up of a position in the world of his meanings.”
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. (p. 225)

In most of our daily engagements with the world, language is transparent to us. Fluent speakers seldom stop to think about how they will assemble language forms to direct the attention and influence the interests of others with whom they interact. Yet, it is hard to imagine carrying out the majority of our practical and intellectual activity without the medium of language. This amazing tool of ours is so powerful and so unique that it has led language scholars from varied theoretical persuasions to believe that it is the capacity for language that makes our species unique among all others and so successful at survival and control of the natural world (Mead, 1934; Bickerton, 1990; Deacon, 1997; Tomasello, 1999; Pinker, 1995). What gives language this extraordinary power?

To begin with, language endows us with the ability to regulate our own minds, to free ourselves from the tyranny of the here and now. Lev Vygotsky, in rich and insightful accounts of language and child development, described how, through the capacity to understand and manipulate signs, children gain the ability to evoke in their minds entities or events that are not present in their immediate environment (1978, 1986). This ability of signs to make present things that are not present in our environment is also what allows us to intrude into each other’s thoughts through the medium of signs, and what gives children

access to vast portions of the corpus of knowledge shared by the human groups to which they belong.

A language is a structured inventory of signs—phonetic or visual (written or signed) forms that evoke in their users perceptual images, emotions, patterns, and traces of experience of aspects of the world associated with those signs. The conventional, socially shared nature of language signs and of the cultural knowledge that they make possible provides speakers with a *stock of knowledge* (Schutz, 1970) or, in Herbert Clark's words, a *common ground* (1996). By using language in conjunction with gestures and aspects of the physical environment and drawing on shared knowledge, speakers are able to engage in joint projects and achieve results that would be beyond the power of individuals acting alone. When we use language in interaction, we direct our interlocutors' attention to some aspect of the world, present or absent, cultural or natural, and by establishing joint attention we are able to achieve congruent understandings of what is and what needs to be accomplished (Tomasello, 1999, 2003). Intersubjectivity is both the medium and the outcome of interaction. We rely on our intersubjectively shared knowledge of language and the world, and by communicating we read one another's intentions and reach common understandings, which do not imply agreement. Language use in interaction is thus triadic: it involves a focus on our own thoughts, our interlocutors' thoughts, and on particular features of our worlds.

In addition to the intersubjective, shared nature of language symbols, another aspect that is consequential for how languages are learned is their perspectival nature. Language allows us to express an amazing variety of meanings with great specificity. Each time we choose language forms from among those offered by our linguistic repertoire, we construe a certain situation in a particular way. The specificity and differentiation of language forms comes at a cost: the number of language forms necessary to produce an almost infinite number of perspectives on an equally vast number of situations is monumental, and, for learners, discovering how each combination of lexical choices construes a particular situation is a colossal task. It is no wonder that it takes years of exposure to and interaction by means of a language to become functionally proficient in it.

The patterned nature of language has so fascinated linguists that, for several decades, it became the main focus of linguistic study. Structural linguists starting with Saussure (1916; 1983), viewed *langue*, or the language system, as central to the nature of language. The same emphasis on regularity was taken up by linguists during the cognitive revolution, when the focus for Chomsky (1965) and followers of his approach became language competence, the description of the system of rules that resides in the minds of speakers of a language. In using language, speakers supposedly draw on this finite number of rules to produce an infinite number of possible actual sentences. Generative linguists inherited from structuralists the idea of the autonomy of syntax (Fauconnier, 1994). According to this approach, rules are not explained in terms of their functions and meanings but as a system of abstract categories and operations. For structuralists, rules seem to exist a priori and somehow find their way into speaking subjects to account for instances of language use. For cognitivists, they exist in the minds of speakers.

Structural and generative descriptions of language proved inadequate in describing observed instances of language use not only because language is not as regular as it's made out to be but also because they fail to address how grammar is used to make meaning. Rules tend to *overgenerate*—they predict a large number of forms that are not produced by

actual speakers. This is something usage-based and construction-based students of language have pointed out (Fauconnier, 1994; Tomasello, 2003; Langacker, 2008a), but it is also something any reflective language teacher soon discovers when learners of a new language, following language rules, begin producing a number of “non-native” constructions that nevertheless conform to the rules that supposedly govern them. “Grammar itself is meaningful, just as lexical items are” (Langacker, 2008b, p. 67), and the traditional grammar/lexicon dichotomy is actually a continuum of forms. At one end are the more abstract rules that are the focus of traditional syntax, the “core.” At the other end are single morphemes and lexical items. In between, there is a whole range of structures, including idiomatic expressions, standard collocations, and constructions of varying degrees of abstraction that combine specific lexical material with open slots for word categories and schemas (Goldberg, 2003; Tomasello, 2003; Langacker, 2008a). In fact, linguistic competence is based more on item-specific constructions and formulaic chunks than traditional grammar would predict, and there is evidence that even when actual instances of constructions could be predicted from patterns, the more schematic rules are stored alongside lexically filled prototypical examples. This enables speakers to retrieve language forms as pre-formulated chunks and allows fluent communication (Bybee, 2006). A study of written and spoken samples from a corpus found that as much as 55% of the language produced consists of prefabricated constructions (Erman and Warren, 2000).

If descriptions of rules from structural or generative linguistics seem to fall short in accounting for the actual ways in which language is patterned, they are even less adequate as a description of how speakers experience language. Rules may very well be represented at some level in our minds, perhaps as neural routines that integrate language forms with knowledge about the situation of their use and with traces of previous experiences in which we “reached out” towards the world in similar ways as we are now at the moment of speaking. However, as speakers in the world, provided we are speaking a language we are fluent in, we rarely think of rules (except when we are trying to follow prescriptive rules rather than actual usage); words present themselves to us in the synthetic moment of our acting in the world. In Merleau-Ponty’s description of perception and language experience (1945, 1964), when we look for language, we search our experience for words that will “secrete” the meanings that we pre-sensed to bring them to existence. The patterns of language live in our bodies and “recommend themselves to us” (1964, p. 88) in a context made relevant by our projects.

Merleau-Ponty may seem to be invoking magic when he describes the phenomenon of speech, but his formulation was rather prescient in that it anticipated descriptions of mind and language produced by recent research in the cognitive sciences. Until recently, representation was widely understood as operations with amodal concepts taking place in individual minds. In that view, language users comprehend a text—written or oral—by performing computations on abstract symbols and constructing propositional models of the situations described in those texts (Kintsch, 1998). Recently, researchers in embodied cognition (see, for example, Barsalou, 1999; Kosslyn, 2005; Zwaan, 2004) and philosophers who draw on cognitive linguistics, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, and American pragmatism (Dreyfus, 2002; Johnson, 2007; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) have increasingly questioned the prevailing view of representation. As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) argued in an influential articulation of the embodied and situated nature of mind, the separation of the thinking subject and the world and the dismissal of individual

experience are untenable. Research in cognition and language use has produced evidence that meaning is grounded in experience. “Representation” is at least partially constituted by perceptual and sensorimotor images (Boroditsky & Prinz, 2008). Perceptual symbols are “records of the neural states that underline perception” (Barsalou, 1999, p. 582). Images of experiences related to language forms play a central role in representation. When we see or hear the word “dog,” the modal perceptions of what dogs look, sound, and feel like are partially activated, together with associated affect and introspective states. Comprehending texts is not merely a reconstruction of its propositional structure—although it is possible that does occur to some extent. It is more akin to perceptual simulations of the situation they describe and preparation for relevant action (Barsalou et al., 2008). This conception of meaning is consistent with what Merleau-Ponty (1945) calls “the near presence of the words [we] know”:

I do not need to visualize the word in order to know and pronounce it. It is enough that I possess its articulatory and acoustic style as one of the modulations, one of the possible uses of my body. I reach back for the word as my hand reaches towards the part of my body which is being pricked; the word has a certain location in my linguistic world, and is part of my equipment. I have only one means of representing it, which is uttering it. (pp. 209-10)

While Merleau-Ponty devotes a lot of attention to the meaning of words, he also addresses syntax and constructions in similar ways. He views the patterns of language as the history of past acts of expression that have settled into a “sediment” of available meanings. This sediment establishes between speaking subjects a common world. Thus, language forms are not arbitrary conventions, but full of shared meanings and emotional content.

The predominance of vowels in one language, or of consonants in another, and constructional and syntactical systems, do not represent so many arbitrary conventions for the expression of one and the same idea, but several ways for the human body to sing the world’s praises and in the last resort to live it. (218)

In case it is not clear by now, the view of language I subscribe to also reconciles views of language as a “natural/individual” phenomenon on one side with entirely social conceptions of language. Parallel to the structure-agency dichotomy in sociological theory, there has been a tendency to describe language either as determined by social structure, thus neglecting to address individual variation and how it is that purposeful agents can see meanings in language choices, or as being “in the mind” of the speakers, thus falling into a seemingly solipsistic stance where individual meanings cannot be socially shared (Pateman, 1987). Embodied accounts of cognition are seen to struggle with producing explanations of language use that can account for both the socially shared as well as the embodied nature of language meaning. But saying cognition and meaning is embodied does not imply that it is an individual, asocial phenomenon. As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch clearly saw, “cognitive science stands at the crossroads where the natural sciences and the human sciences meet,” (p. 13). Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and Tomasello (1999, 2003), for example, are able to address cognitive questions, such as the ontogenesis of language, as socially situated phenomena. The social nature of language is also evident in Merleau-Ponty’s and Schutz’s descriptions of a language as the sedimentation of shared experience. Speech, in this view, is a taking up of other’s thoughts, “an ability to think according to others that enriches our own thoughts” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 208). I see

no reason to eschew issues of mind simply because one subscribes to the general principles of a sociocultural theory of second language learning or to the language socialization paradigm (for an attempt at a similar synthesis, see Watson-Gegeo; 2004). In a description of bodily-based models of speech (and gestural) interaction, Eve Sweetser (1998) puts it in these terms:

Our cognition is not only embodied, but physically and socially interactive with other embodied cognitive beings, and a rich area of cognitive activity is our understanding of social relationships; linguistic communication is constantly physically and socially situated in a broader frame of social and physical interaction, activities, and environment.... It seems impossible to set the linguist the task of choosing between seeing cognition as embodied or as situated. We could not be situated as we are without being embodied. (p. 1)

Our embodied nature constrains how we interact with the environment and with each other, and how we make meaning, but our experience as members of social groups also constrains meanings in the form of the materials handed down by history. Moreover, our embodied existence is not primary. Our experience of our bodies is also mediated by cultural practices (Hanks, 2000). Even perception, which on the surface appears to give us access to an objective reality, is shaped by the cultural and linguistic categories of the social groups we belong to. Bourdieu (1977) makes clear the social constitution of the habitus—which is a set of *embodied* dispositions—when he explains that while it generates “thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions,” these are limited “by the historically and socially situated conditions of [the habitus’s] production” (p. 95).

The view of language that I have just articulated seems to assume a proficient speaker. But how does the picture differ for someone who communicates through the medium of a partially known second language? To the extent that the second language and culture overlap with the first one, an L2 speaker can draw on the forms of the L1 and on the schemes of interpretation and recipes for action of his social group. Still, because different languages do not organize experience in exactly the same way, and because of the unique history of each social group, which makes available to its members a different stock of knowledge, second language speakers find themselves to some extent in the position of Schutz’s “stranger” (1944), for whom the host group’s knowledge does not have the authority or reliability of a tested system of recipes because “he does not partake in the vivid historical tradition by which it has been formed” (p. 502). Schutz takes the immigrant as the prototypical stranger because, unlike temporary visitors, immigrants want to be accepted indefinitely or at least tolerated by the host group. The perspectives and actions of members of the host group are much more consequential for immigrants than for temporary visitors. But strangers find that they cannot take the meanings of actions for granted. They have lost their bearings, and they must place everything in question.

Second language users, especially at the lower levels of proficiency and with limited exposure to it in meaningful and contextualized communication, experience the language very differently from proficient speakers. Again, phenomenological approaches can help us provide a vivid account of their lived experience. In a reversal of Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of how we experience language in reaching out to the world, non-fluent speakers of a language do not “possess its articulatory and acoustic style as one of...the possible uses of [their] body,” (1945, p. 210). Compared to the first language, the forms of the second language are experientially poor, bleached of perceptual and sensorimotor

schemas that give language its signifying power. Consider Schutz's description of the quality of first language forms:

Every word and every sentence is, to borrow again a term of William James, surrounded by "fringes" connecting them, on the one hand, with past and future elements of the universe of discourse to which they pertain and surrounding them, on the other hand, with a halo of emotional values and irrational implications which themselves remain ineffable. (p. 504)

That universe of discourse includes what cognitive linguists describe as the ways in which language construes an aspect of the world and the specific perspectives taken up in using specific language forms. Schutz's language here is reminiscent of Volosinov's description (1929/1986) of the dialogical nature of language. While Volosinov's articulation focused on a macro-level perspective, it still drew on concepts that illuminate why language can do much more than what dictionary definitions and grammar books can give us access to. Language we are familiar with is full of echoes of previous utterances, and charged with the anticipation of potential future responses. For second language speakers who rely for sense making on a few language forms that they have encountered a limited number of times and that are embedded in a largely unknown linguistic context, language cannot evoke the multiplicity of voices and ideological perspectives that it awakens in proficient speakers. A partially known second language is not part of the transparent equipment we manipulate in our concerned engagement with the world. It is very conspicuous (Heidegger, 1962) and must be thought about often.

Second language speakers often search their experience for language that will "secrete" the meanings they want to bring into existence, but even after settling for some choice of words, they are left with the feeling that they are not conveying all that they want to convey. In those situations, it is not rare to hear them say, with a mixture of melancholy and longing, that there is a word or expression in their first language that is much better at expressing exactly what they are trying to say. This goes to show that they have learned to discriminate a vast array of meanings with fair precision in their first language, and having embodied knowledge of those "I cans" makes them acutely aware of the limitations of their knowledge of the second language, which seems crude by comparison.

Language Development

Given the awe-inspiring complexity of the network of form-meaning mappings that constitute knowledge of a language, mastery of this inventory appears as one of the most remarkable feats achieved by human beings. Yet almost all of us manage to learn at least one natural language to the point where we can deploy our knowledge of it to interpret and act on the world with a high degree of predictability. How are children able to accomplish this highly complex task? And more relevant to this study, what are the implications for second language learners, who encounter a second language after having developed proficiency in a first language?

Generative linguists argued that only an innate ability for language—a language acquisition device, for example—could account for the nearly universal success of child language acquisition. But working out the nature of such a device proved extremely challenging given the great number of idiosyncratic language forms that do not appear to follow core rules of grammar, and attempts to leave out problematic cases rendered

modular theories incapable of accounting for the acquisition of much of actual language use. Usage and construction-based theories of language acquisition posit no such language-specific innate ability. Instead, they explain developing knowledge as emerging from the interaction between the language samples in the learner's environment and general learning mechanisms and cognitive constraints (Goldberg, 2003; Tomasello, 1999, 2003).

In many ways, the situation of a child acquiring a first language seems much more complex than that of an adolescent or an adult learning a second language. Children don't simply learn *a* language; they learn *language* at the same time. This entails learning to interact through the medium of symbols, learning that "vocal gestures" (Mead, p. 46, 1934) are significant and intersubjective—they have the same effect on the individual producing the symbol as they do on the individual to whom they are addressed. This, in turn, requires that the child see others as intentional beings. Children need to develop reciprocity of perspectives: they need to discover that they can use symbols to influence others' thoughts and behavior in the same way others use language to affect the child's attention. Adults learning a second language know all this. They have used their first language in this way for a large part of their lives.

Children learning their first language also need to learn the entire inventory of forms that constitute language symbols, and with it the entire system of typifications that constitutes the stock of knowledge of their social groups (Schutz, 1970). As children learn language forms, they also learn what aspects of the environment have been meaningful to current and previous generations of their social group, and how they have organized their experience in that environment through a system of categories. In other words, children need to learn what kinds of actions are customarily shared by their communities and what kinds of thoughts can be thought through the medium of language, and they learn to have these thoughts by the process of internalizing the conversations they have been part of (Mead, 1934; Vygotsky; 1978, 1986). Second language learners seem to have an advantage here as well. By the time they begin to learn a second language, they already have access to the stock of knowledge and the system of categorization of their first language group. So their task is "simply" to discover how the categories and practices of the second culture differ from the first. As complex as this is, though, there are commonalities across languages and cultures. By virtue of our embodied interactions and our shared biological needs, albeit satisfied in different natural environments, all human groups share some common experiences (Mead, 1934; Lakoff & Johnson; 1999). As Mead put it, there would be no food if there were no organisms that could digest it. Because of our common biological structure, all cultures have categories related to food. The existence of somewhat overlapping categories helps direct the second language learner's attention to relevant aspects of experience. There is also a great degree of contact between cultures in our world, especially since the explosion of mass media. So the newcomer has had at least some degree of familiarity with the second culture, which can help the learner make inferences through contextualization of new language.

Yet, in many ways, children benefit from a language-learning situation that is more accommodating to the needs of a learner. Their task is to learn the conventional form-meaning/function mappings shared by the community of speakers of their language, including the multiplicity of perspectives from which events can be construed by different but equally grammatical constructions. To be able to do that, they must be exposed to uses

of language that are meaningful and contextualized, so that they can discover the ways specific language forms are used to accomplish specific purposes. The language-learning task is facilitated by children's participation in a number of highly recurrent structured activities. These routines provide multiple opportunities with similar language exemplars in "usage events" (Tomasello, 2003; Bybee, 2006) that involve similar language forms and functions. Research has shown that children (and adults, to a lesser extent) are very sensitive to the distributional frequencies of language forms and contextual understandings (Goldberg, 2003; Tomasello, 2003). They are also highly skilled at reading the communicative intentions of those they interact with from a very young age. The common ground provided by predictable routines and children's intention-reading ability help them isolate specific aspects of the referential situation that are foregrounded by the language they hear, thus helping them solve the "packaging problem" (Tomasello, 2003) in learning language forms, the problem of what specific aspect of the situation correlates with what specific part of the language forms they hear.

Once children have been exposed to a large enough number of language exemplars in similar usage events, they rely on their pattern-identification skills together with the ability to understand intentions as the basis for the form-meaning mappings that constitute early world learning (Tomasello, 1999, 2003; Lieven & Tomasello, 2008). The next stage of language development is the comprehension and use of multi-word constructions, often consisting of a combination of a verb with one or more participants. Initially, children are fairly conservative in their willingness to generalize to new lexical items; they tend to use the constructions with the same lexical items that they have heard them used by others. Gradually, as exemplars of constructions that are similar are stored together as a group, the overlapping parts of the constructions get reinforced, while the items that vary become open slots. From the similarities between the words that fill these slots in the already known exemplars of constructions, a category of words that can take that slot in the construction develops. At this stage of development, the entire language inventory of children consists of clusters of "verb-island" constructions. Only later do these clusters become integrated into the more abstract network that constitutes adult language competence. To the extent the child experiences the same form-function mapping across exemplars, the representation of constructions becomes more schematic. For less frequent constructions, children seem to use analogical processes to infer novel ways to apply a learned construction. Finally the child is able to transform one type of construction into another type (for instance, a passive voice sentence into its active voice counterpart) through abstracting relations between constructions (Bybee, 2006; Tomasello, 1999, 2003; Lieven & Tomasello, 2008).

Second-Language Learning

Many of the same mechanisms that drive child language acquisition drive second-language development. But—I'll go ahead and state the obvious—adolescent and adult minds are very different from the minds of young children. I described above some of the great cognitive advantages that adults bring to the second language-learning task. Adults know concepts, they know language categories, and they know about the world. This may explain why some studies found evidence that, during the first few months of exposure to a

second language, adults develop proficiency at a faster rate than child second-language learners (Long, 2005; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle; 1978).

Knowledge and experience, however, come at a cost. The categories and ways of construing the world that our first language has taught us direct our attention to aspects of second language experience that may not be relevant to it. One clear example is phonology. During the first few months of life, infants can discriminate virtually all the phonetic contrasts in all natural languages, but by 12 months of age, by grouping similar language sounds through statistical inferencing, they have arrived at the categories for the phonemes of their first language, and, in the process, they have begun to unlearn all the sound distinctions by which other languages in the world make meaning (Kuhl, 2004). The patterns of the first language act like a filter on subsequent language experience. Adolescents and adults approaching a second language cannot hear differences in sounds that are not contrastive in their first language. Each experienced token of a language form has a much larger impact on the mind of a child than on the mind of an adult with well established representations abstracted from multiple exemplars (Bybee, 2008). Overriding the learned attention to the categories of the first language requires great time, effort, and appropriate kinds of input (N. Ellis, 2008).

The same is true for the categories that constitute word meanings. Second language learners will often find similar concepts or even word forms, especially when the first and second languages are closely related. But the apparent similarity may hide different category extensions. In addition, polysemous words often share similarities across languages for only some of their meanings. A Spanish speaker, on seeing someone kill an insect and call it a “bug,” may infer that *bug* is the English equivalent of *bicho*. However, *bicho* is a polysemous word which, in addition to applying to insects as undesirable guests in a home, can also refer to a grub or, informally, to a large animal. In the data I collected for this study, I recorded both a Spanish and a Korean student calling a worm a “bug.”

Learning constructions is just as challenging. Two different languages will have overlapping constructions or similarity between constructions only if they have a shared history or they are in close contact with each other, but construction-based language acquisition assumes great variation across languages (Goldberg, 2003). In addition, because many second-language learners approach the language as a word-learning and/or rule-learning task, they may not pay enough attention to the whole range of constructions that lie somewhere between individual lexical items and very abstract rules. As Talmy (2008) points out, there are many devices speakers exploit to direct the hearer’s attention and establish a perspective on a referential scene, and these functions are realized differently in different languages. If adult second language speakers attempt to literally translate constructions from the first into the second language, their speech will often be unintelligible.

Learned attention to the forms of the first language disproportionately affects perception of function words (N. Ellis, 2008). These closed-class words include the most common words in English, such as *the, of, and, a, in, to, it, is, to, and was*. Function words provide important cues to syntax and to the relationships between content words. But because they are very frequent in speech and semantically lighter than open-class words, they are unstressed and reduced, and thus more difficult to perceive, especially for adult second-language learners, making the task of constructing the language from input much more difficult.

In sum, there are reasons to believe that knowledge of a first language helps learn a second language, but there are also reasons to believe that it hinders. In addition, the contexts of acquisition of adult language learners are often less accommodating. While few people would use a complex expression to speak to a child or lose patience when the child fails to understand it, adults are expected to perform much more complex functions in the second language and in more diverse settings, which requires controlling the language that realizes those functions. And while child first language acquisition brings about an increase in communicative capacity, adults learning the second language are likely to compare their gains in second language proficiency, however impressive, with their much more powerful first-language inventory. Even though a few weeks of learning a second language can take an adult beyond the communicative abilities of an 18-month old, this accomplishment feels like a loss to a second language speaker used to communicating competently in the first language. The more developed the speakers' ability in the first language (as in the case of educated adults, writers, academics, and professionals whose fields rely on extensive oral and written communication), the most severe this loss must seem. To compound the self-perceptions of inadequacy, xenophobic attitudes towards second language learners abound, and English speakers can be unwilling to accommodate to the needs of adults who are not fluent in English.

One undeniable difference between adult second-language learning and children first (or second) language acquisition is the differential patterns of ultimate attainment between the two groups. While almost all children are able to become fully proficient in their first language and to eventually achieve native-like proficiency in a second language when given enough time of exposure, the second-language acquisition literature extensively documents the persistence of second-language features, particularly in phonology, morphology and syntax, among adult learners. While some have attributed these differences to a "critical period" for language acquisition which closes between the age of six and puberty (Long, 2005; DeKeyser, 2010), others see the inability of adults to reach native-like proficiency in a second language as the result of non-language specific gradual cognitive decline (Hakuta et al., 2003), the emergent result of normal processes of perception, language use, and language learning (Ellis, 2008), or complex combinations of all the above factors (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011).

A few other factors, some of which are very relevant in the community college context, have been found to affect the ultimate level of attainment of second language learners. Two such factors are socioeconomic status and one of its indicators, level of education. Not surprisingly, learners from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and higher levels of formal education reach higher levels of proficiency (Hakuta et al., 2003; Boshier, 1998; Muchisky & Tangren; 1999). The economic and social capital of these learners very likely gives them access to more learning resources, exposure to more academic and professional uses of language, and a milieu where sophisticated language use indexes cultural capital. Another factor relevant to ultimate attainment is the context of acquisition. Adults with different learning histories differ in how far along they travel on the way to full proficiency. Naturalistic learners are often at a disadvantage. Many adults who learn a language through exposure and interaction, but who receive no formal instruction, often stabilize at a basic level of proficiency, a phenomenon that has been called fossilization (Selinker, 1972) or, more recently, stabilization (Long, 2003). This stage is characterized by high communicative fluency but a relative absence of function

words and morphemes and the persistence of L1 phonological and syntactic features. Instructed learners, in contrast, are more likely to move farther along the path to native-like proficiency. And from comparison of different types of instruction, it appears that an attention to accuracy is at least in part responsible for the comparative success of classroom learning (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Another factor that works to the disadvantage of naturalistic learners is that, in spite of the negative attitudes to foreign accents in most out-of-classroom contexts, people rarely correct second-language errors in successful real-world language interaction.

The limited success of adult second-language learning relative to child language acquisition motivated several arguments that the second language cannot be acquired solely on the basis of exposure and meaningful participation through the language. Stephen Krashen (1982), who proposed that *comprehensible input* in the target language is a sufficient condition for second language proficiency development, argued that not only was explicit attention to language “rules” not necessary, it would also result in “learning” as opposed to “acquisition.” Only acquisition, according to Krashen, would lead to the implicit knowledge that underlies fluent performance. Explicit knowledge learned through attention to rules would not contribute to the development of implicit knowledge. Krashen was coming from an observation of the results of years of grammar-based language instruction, which produced learners who could talk very articulately *about* the regularities of language, but who could not speak the language fluently.

Since Krashen’s formulation, the issue of the interface between explicit and implicit knowledge has received much attention in the field of SLA, with several researchers arguing that some form of consciousness, awareness, or attention to form is needed to get to an advanced level of L2 proficiency (Schmidt, 1990; Long, 1991). An explicit focus on language forms may play a role in directing the learner’s attention to hard-to-acquire language features (N. Ellis, 2007). The range of proposals for doing so have included explicit error correction, recasts (or a repetition of a learner’s utterance but substituting correct forms), consciousness raising activities that direct the learners’ attention to form-function pairings in the language input, explicit introduction of target language patterns, and consciously guided practice (R. Ellis, 2001). However, no one seems to be proposing a return to the grammar-based approaches common before the turn to more communicative language teaching (and still very much alive in some classroom contexts). Rules are necessarily an abstraction – and unlike the categories and schemata that learners arrive at through usage-based learning, representations of explicit rules do not include information about prototypical instances, situational variations, and the same level of detail about how they construe situations. Attempting to become proficient in a language by learning and remembering rules, and then to use language in ways that are situationally appropriate, communicatively effective, or even grammatical is an interminable exercise in frustration.

Hubert Dreyfus’s (2002) description of expert knowledge as “skillful coping” could perhaps serve as a heuristic towards an understanding of the role that rules play in language proficiency. Dreyfus builds on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the *intentional arc*, which is the tight connection between agents and the world, such that, as they develop skills, their dispositions adjust gradually to achieve an optimal grip on the situation. According to Dreyfus, as we begin to learn a skill, instruction breaks down the task environment into context free features and simple rules that we can use to cope in the absence of sophisticated skills. In engaging with the world by acting through these rules,

we become more sensitive to situational features and begin to recognize different configurations of the field of activity. As we experience “a vast number of situations differing from each other in subtle, nuanced ways” (p. 369), more situations in fact than can be defined or described, and we feel the results of our actions, it becomes harder to act as detached rule followers, and our reliance on rules gradually will be replaced by situational discriminations that call for certain responses. We become experts only as our intuitive behavior replaces reasoned responses, and in our largely unreflective engagement with the world we see what we need to achieve and by what means. Dreyfus did not formulate this nonrepresentational model of skill development with language in mind, but the progression from reliance on rules that can direct our language use at the beginning of the acquisition process to the gradual development of the “feel” for the particular language that a certain configuration of the situation calls for echoes the contrast between explicit knowledge of language patterns and the implicit knowledge that underlies proficient language use.

Unfortunately, the issue of what kinds of explicit focus on form are necessary for adult language learning will be very difficult to disentangle, partly because notions of consciousness and awareness are extremely complex. It will require a careful examination of what we mean by explicit and implicit knowledge, and of ways in which these kinds of knowledge *can* and normally *do* interact. It will also require a better understanding of what we mean by terms such as awareness and attention to form. Hopefully, the integration of insights on the nature of lived experience gained from phenomenology, advances in general cognition, and a more detailed and nuanced understanding of second-language-learning processes and contexts will lead us to more productive discussions of what kinds of knowledge *about* the language and in what kinds of situations can speed up the process of second language development.

The Present Study

Community college ESL is an ideal environment to study how students’ life histories interact with their sense-making activity. Students at community colleges, particularly at urban institutions whose populations are extremely diverse in terms of socioeconomic status and educational backgrounds, bring with them very different learning histories. Some students have learned English in their countries mostly through a focus on memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules; others have come to the US as young adults, in some cases with the very few bits of English they had managed to pick up in public schools in their countries; and others arrived with no knowledge of the language and began learning it through exposure at their workplaces and communities, or at their US middle and high schools, where instruction can vary in terms of the attention to formal aspects of language. Through their histories before attending a community college, they have developed different language ideologies and “tool sets” that shape the ways they approach the language-learning task. Those who had extensive English instruction before arriving in the US, especially those who completed high school and some college in their first language, arrive with very strong textual practices and metalinguistic knowledge that they can apply to their learning of English. Others, particularly those who attended US middle and high schools, can be orally very fluent—although not necessarily accurate—and familiar with US schooling norms, which can help them navigate the culture of the community college. The

most socioeconomically disadvantaged among them have little schooling in their first languages, and have often lived in the US exposed to pidginized varieties of English in restaurant kitchens and housekeeping jobs, but may bring resilience and the great motivation that can be derived from the belief that English holds the promise of a better life.

To date, there has been little research on ESL learning in the community college setting (Bunch, 2008). The knowledge base that practitioners rely on has been constructed mostly from research on particular groups of students—foreign language learners, international students learning English in US universities, uninstructed learners acquiring language naturalistically—but conclusions drawn from this research may or may not be directly relevant to other settings. In addition, research has often isolated processes of acquisition from learners' backgrounds and learning contexts, and has created categories that constrain our understanding of second-language-learning phenomena. Dichotomies such as native speaker versus language learner, language use versus language acquisition, and teaching versus learning divide interrelated processes (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). In second language acquisition, the language learner is *also* a language user, and each instance of use is in some way an instance of learning. Pedagogical approaches cannot be considered adequate or inadequate without taking into account how students take up teaching practices and integrate them into meaningful activity. While this research will be directly relevant to the community college ESL context, because of the great diversity of the student population in urban community colleges, my hope is that it will also contribute to our understanding of other language learning situations.

This dissertation makes—and tries to live up to—the argument that using learners' sense-making practices as a lens to study second language acquisition processes can help us avoid many of the artificial dichotomies that have constrained our understanding of these phenomena. It is consistent with approaches to language learning that emphasize its socially situated nature, including ecological (Kramsch, 2002), sociocultural (Lantolf, 2000), and second language socialization approaches (Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003). It tries to extend these approaches by placing more emphasis on the learners' lived experiences of the second language to understand how background and contextual factors interact with their sense-making activities. In doing so, I hope to avoid making assumptions about how aspects of social structure or context shape learning processes. Instead, keeping a sharp focus on what students say and do, I want to let their words and actions guide my understanding of the 'consequentiality' (Schegloff, 2006) of their histories and social context to their language and learning practices in the classroom.

Students come to a learning situation with different life histories, educational backgrounds, goals for learning the language, and beliefs about what it means to be proficient in a language and how to get there. All these experiences and perspectives shape how they perceive the language and practices they are exposed to, and interact in complex ways with the language learning opportunities afforded by the context of an ESL course. Educators could benefit from a more sophisticated understanding of how learners' sense making transforms what is taught, and thus shed some light on how and why some students succeed more than others.

Research Questions

How do students from different backgrounds who participate in a community college ESL class perceive the language and learning practices they have been and are exposed to, both in and outside the classroom? How do the students' language and learning practices affect their opportunities to develop language proficiency?

Chapter 2 – Methods

My choice of setting and participants for this study of English language learning and the methods I used to collect and analyze information reflect a number of concerns. First, when students enroll in language programs, they are not able to leave behind their non-learner identities, their histories with the English language and with English speakers, their previous experiences with schooling, and the social and material conditions that constrain their behavior. In other words, when we look at learning in a natural setting we are no longer looking at *idealized language learners* but at whole human beings who happen to be trying to learn language, and who have many different understandings of what language and learning mean. Creating first person accounts of actors' lived experiences, to the extent that it is possible, requires collecting naturalistic data on learners engaged in *authentic* learning situations. And understanding how their actions *make sense* to them requires zooming into their actions and their words to observe in great detail how they co-construct the social reality of which they are part.

Second, English as a Second Language (ESL) students come in all shapes and colors, and the great diversity of their backgrounds interacts with how they make sense of their ESL classes. ESL courses in urban community colleges, with the amazingly diverse student populations they serve, are an ideal context to look at how students from different language and socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, and levels of education engage in the business of “doing school” and learning a language. Given that immigrant students are much more likely to begin their postsecondary education in community colleges than their American-born peers, and that community colleges have comparatively lower rates of degree completion and transfer, there are pressing questions about these institutions' ability to help students achieve their educational goals. To understand why instruction is or is not successful, we must look at what students do with the experiences these programs offer them.

Setting and Participants

The Institution – The research site is an urban open-admissions community college in the San Francisco Bay Area with a highly diverse student population. Roughly four-fifths of the approximately 13,000 students the college served during the year of this study were members of minority groups. Of the students who declared their ethnicity in the 2008-2009 academic year¹, 30.12% identified themselves as Hispanic, 27.29% as African-American, 16.9% as Non-Hispanic White, 15.96% as Asian, and 8.14% as Filipino (CCC Chancellor's Office Data Query).

Five area zip codes contribute almost 80% of the students to the college. Socioeconomically, the populations of those cities are comparatively disadvantaged. Their per capita income (\$18,000 to 35,000 annually), level of educational attainment, and median home prices are substantially below those of the surrounding communities (2000 US Census, 2007 ACS). Still, the area has a high cost of living.

Table 4.1 presents basic demographic data for the five cities that contribute the majority of the college's students. The general trend for this part of the county has been a

¹10.9% of the students declined to state their ethnicity

decrease in the percentage of Caucasians and to a lesser degree of African-Americans. As the demographic information shows, the make-up of these communities is highly diverse ethnically and economically, with a substantial proportion of working class and poor members.

Table 2.1 – Demographic characteristics of cities contributing a majority of students to the college population²

City	Per cap. income	% in poverty	% foreign born	% White	% Latino	% African-American	% Asian	% BA degree	Enrollee headcount
City 1	18,041	17.6	44.3	12.8	54.4	12.9	17.5	9.4	2647
City 2	25,421	16.0	32.7	19.3	35.4	27.0	15.5	18.6	2023
City 3	24,525	9.5	15.9	44.8	15.6	12.2	12.5	20.8	956
City 4	36,853	7.4	37.0	20.4	11.6	13.3	48.4	33.5	807
City 5	25,170	5.0	21.7	48.4	13.8	10.9	21.5	27.6	722

The Department - The ESL Department was among the three largest departments in the college during the semester of this study. Linguistically, the students represent many backgrounds, with the largest group being Spanish speakers. Some of the other common languages are Mandarin/Cantonese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Arabic, and Korean. While the students’ ages vary widely, the majority of students range from the late teens to the mid thirties. In recent years, the department has seen an increase in the number of Generation 1.5 students³. This is probably due to the recent implementation of the high school exit exam in California. Students who cannot pass the exam do not receive a high-school diploma. The college had recently offered CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam) preparation courses for which it had recruited students from local high schools. Many of the students attracted by the CAHSEE-preparation course also enrolled in ESL courses.

The ESL program offers courses at six different levels of language proficiency, from beginning to low advanced. The courses follow the traditional division into three skills areas (reading, writing, and listening/speaking) and grammar. While student-learning outcomes focus on one skill in each curriculum strand, instruction largely integrates all the skills. Completing the highest level ESL course qualifies students for the freshman composition course required for an AA degree.

The Course - The course I observed, Reading 3, was a high-intermediate level ESL-reading course, the fourth in a sequence of five reading courses offered by the department⁴. The goals of the course as stated in the official course outline were to develop a wide range of reading skills, from identifying main ideas and details, to summarizing, making inferences, using a monolingual English dictionary, and using library resources. The required textbook for the course was *World Class Readings 3*, by Bruce Rogers (2004) a high-intermediate

² The figures for cities 1, 2 and 4 are American Community Survey (ACS) estimates for 2007-2009. There are no ACS survey estimates for cities 3 and 5, but if they reflect countywide population trends, then the proportion of Latinos has probably increased by 7-9 percentage points, the Asian population has increased by 1-2 percentage points. The proportion of foreign born in the area has likely increased between 2 and 5 percentage points.

³ Students who have completed at least part of their K-12 education in US schools.

⁴ For historical reasons, the course numbers are not aligned with the levels offered by the department, so Reading 3 is actually the 4th reading course in the sequence.

level reading textbook. In addition, students were required to read *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros (2009), and several newspaper articles, mostly from *The New York Times*, provided by the instructor.

It is at this level of instruction that students begin reading more authentic texts (as opposed to pedagogical texts written for limited-proficiency English readers), and, if successful, make the transition into the more complex texts necessary for college and professional work. As the review of empirical studies of second language learning indicated, many naturalistic as well as some instructed adult learners never move beyond a basic level of proficiency. In that sense too, this course is an ideal site to observe the extent to which students are able to use the opportunities provided by this course to move into more sophisticated levels of language use.

The course was a four-unit credit course that met twice a week, from 9:10 to 11:50 am for fifteen weeks of instruction (in addition to Spring Break and final exams' week). It met in a fairly wide (39 ft.) but somewhat shallow (26.5 ft.) classroom furnished with 12 tables, each of which accommodated two students, and six individual desks. Since the class was initially larger, a few individual desks were brought in to provide enough seats. Because the classroom was wide, there were two aisles separating the rows of tables and individual desks. Due to this layout, six students were somewhat isolated on one side of the classroom, separated from the rest of the class by an aisle that led from the door in the back to the front of the classroom. A very long chalkboard covered most of the front wall. In the front right corner of the room was what the instructor nicknamed "the OHP graveyard," a long table with four broken overhead projectors. In the front left corner, there was a small filing cabinet and a few stacked chairs. Figure 1 shows the classroom layout.

The Students – Thirty-eight students enrolled in the course and thirty-three completed it. The students' backgrounds reflect the great diversity of the college's and the ESL program's population. Answers to a student questionnaire the instructor administered on the first day of class revealed students came from fifteen different countries: Brazil, China, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Korea, Mexico, Mongolia, Nicaragua, The Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Yemen. In terms of ages, with the exception of one student who was 51, the members of the class ranged from the late teens to the mid-thirties, with the majority of students falling into two main age categories: fifteen students were between 18 and 20, and eleven were between 21 and 28. According to the college's Office of Research and Planning, these two age groups constitute the majority of the college-wide student population. A third group of six students were 30 to 36 years of age. Most students in the class had lived in the US from one to eleven years at the start of the course, two students had been in the country for sixteen and seventeen years respectively, and two international students had arrived in the country less than a month before the semester started.

The students' educational backgrounds were equally diverse and representative of the varied needs ESL students bring to community colleges. Of the thirty-three students who completed the course, fourteen had attended at least two years of high school in the US, although some of them had interrupted their schooling before immigration. Many of them had completed all high school graduation requirements except the English portion of the CAHSEE and some were enrolled in CAHSEE-preparation courses at the college. The

students who had not attended US schools before enrolling in college ESL had reached different levels of education in their native or other countries. The student with the smallest amount of formal schooling had attended a rural Koranic school for four years in Yemen. Five students had completed elementary school and attended 1-3 years of secondary education in their countries. Three had completed their high school in their home countries, and the rest of the students had done some college, ranging from two years of undergraduate school to one year of graduate school.

The Instructor - The instructor of the course I observed, whom I will call Susan, is a veteran ESL teacher with more than 20 years working at this community college. As a long-term member of the faculty, she enjoys a reputation as a solid professional. During her tenure at the institution she served as division chair/division dean twice, but each time she decided to return to the classroom, a position she finds more enjoyable. In addition to teaching ESL, she teaches developmental reading and writing courses for students who are native speakers of English.

The instructor often expresses her commitment to ongoing professional development. She regularly attends workshops and institutes to continue improving her teaching. During the summer before this course, she attended a one-week summer institute on teaching reading. During the Spring 2009 semester—the semester I observed—she was implementing a number of pedagogical practices that she had learned in the summer institute. In addition, during the 2008-2009 academic year and as a follow-up on her summer training, she led a faculty inquiry group at the college. This group met regularly to discuss reading instruction across the disciplines.

Susan is Caucasian and was in her late fifties at the time of this study. She had learned Spanish over the years and had traveled abroad, mostly in Latin American countries. During the first class meeting she gave a brief description of herself to the class. She told students the classes she usually taught and said she had been a division dean for two years and had decided she really didn't like the job because she wanted to teach. She said she felt wonderful when she returned to teaching. She was "the happiest teacher on the campus because I was teaching again."

My Role in the Institution - At the time of this study I had been a member of the faculty in the ESL department at this college for six years, and I was on sabbatical leave. As an insider, I had both great advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, I had a level of familiarity with the program and the setting that would have been impossible to develop in a few months had I been a complete outsider. This familiarity made it possible for me to direct my attention right away to my research focus—the students' sense-making practices, since I didn't have to contend with having to make sense of the daily routine and the nature of the program and course. As a faculty member with the support of the college's president and the dean of the Research and Planning office, I also had access to facilities and institutional sources of data. The college also provided a stipend to help defray the cost of the research equipment. My familiarity with the faculty helped me secure the collaboration of the instructor.

On the other hand, conducting research in a setting where one is also a practitioner presents a number of conflicts and dilemmas. As Mehan (2008) points out in his work on Design Research, participant researchers don't walk around their setting with a hat that

clearly indicates what role they are playing at a particular moment. For this reason, participants may inadvertently share information that they would not divulge to a researcher. The question of what information I could consider in analyzing and writing up research results did not always have a clear answer. In addition, there was the issue of how my role as a faculty member in the department might affect the behavior of the instructor and the students.

I attempted to minimize the conflicts by securing the collaboration of an instructor who would not be likely to feel self-conscious or intimidated by my presence, and by setting and clearly articulating ground rules with all the participants. Susan had much more seniority than I did in the department, and had a combination of solid experience, an excellent reputation, and interest in learning from her own practice. When I approached her to recruit her participation in the project, I made clear to her that my research goal was to understand how students make sense of the language and practices they encountered in the course, and that, while the analysis could potentially reveal aspects of her teaching that she would not be comfortable with, I was not after an evaluation of her as an instructor but an understanding of how student practices interface with instructional practices. Susan saw my research as valuable because it would give her insight into her practice, but expressed concerns about how cameras in the room would affect student interaction. We agreed that I would be as unobtrusive as possible, and that we would monitor the classroom atmosphere and make adjustments if necessary. She also asked that I give her feedback whenever I thought she might make her practice more effective, and that I “help out” in class during group work and with locating suitable reading materials for the class. I agreed to these conditions, since I saw this as a way to interact with students during class in a way that was likely much more familiar to them than the experience of having a researcher listening in. In addition, Susan and I agreed that I would not reveal to her any information that the students made available to me during interviews or during conversations that were not clearly part of public classroom behavior.

Some of the students in the class had met me before the beginning of this course. Some had been in one of my classes or had met me at the learning center, where I usually spent two hours a week assisting students with questions or individual and small-group tutoring, an activity that gave me a lot of insight into how students experience other courses and assignments. During the first meeting of the course I spoke to the students to explain what my role in the class would be. I said I was interested in understanding how adults learn a second language, and that as part of my study I would visit the class every class meeting and I would videotape the sessions. I explained to them what my agreement with Susan was, that I was in no way involved in grading them, and that I would only include information in my study from those students who had signed consent forms.

My role in the class settled into one of observer-facilitator-language expert-resource for students and observer-colleague for the instructor. As I circulated during group work, some students, mostly those who knew me from earlier semesters or who saw me at the college’s learning center, often called me and asked me for help. Other students started doing the same later. Interacting with students in this way, I was able to make additional observations of group work and of interactions between students and the instructor. When I could do so unobtrusively, I took brief notes that I then used to supplement the video and audio records.

Data Collection

Viewing language as a social practice and comprehension as intention reading has implications for how we study these phenomena. As a sociocultural activity, language practice can only be understood within the context in which it emerges. For these reasons, I collected data that would allow me to understand the whole culture of this classroom so that I could situate the students sense-making practices within the logic of this particular course. At the same time, understanding intention reading requires that we take into account participants' perspectives and goals. What is relevant and salient to participants at a particular time relates not only to the logic of class activities but also to the stock of knowledge (Schutz, 1970) that they have accumulated through their unique histories. For this reason, it was necessary not only to see how students participated in the course, but also to understand where they were coming from and what sense they made of the events they were part of. To get to this kind of information, this study relied largely on qualitative methods which foreground connections between the historical-cultural setting of activities and the activities themselves. During the seventeen-week semester in which this study took place, I observed, video- and audio-taped class meetings, interviewed students, collected documents, and drew on institutional records and brief surveys.

Participant Observation and Recording – While actors do not narrate their interpretation of the situation at hand in the process of acting and interacting, this study is predicated on the premise that sense making is nonetheless available. In discussing the accessibility of speakers' conversational inferences, Gumperz (1999) explains,

Conversational inference...is part of the very act of conversing. One indirectly or implicitly illustrates one's understanding of what is said through verbal and nonverbal responses, by the way one builds on what one hears to participate in a conversation, rather than through talking about it in abstract terms. (p. 78)

And later adds,

We can never be certain of the ultimate meaning of any message, but by looking at systematic patterns in the relationship of perception of surface cues to interpretation, we can gather strong evidence for the social basis of contextualization conventions. (p. 84)

As participants interact, they make these contextualization conventions available to each other, and they draw on them to connect the ongoing talk to relevant features of the context and their shared knowledge. Just as participants are able to make inferences about the ongoing situation and each other's meanings and intentions, an observer familiar with the cultural conventions is often able to recover participants' interpretations from their conduct. To be able to observe the students' participation in class activities and how they made sense of the language and the practices they encountered, I attended 29 out of a total of 30 class sessions. However, the details of conversation are subtle and they move very fast, so in order to recover specific interactions and be able to slow them down to analyze them in detail, I relied on extensive audio and video recording of classroom sessions. I arrived in the classroom approximately fifteen minutes before class starting time so that I could set up the equipment and interact with students as they arrived. Since I had agreed to help the instructor by facilitating group activity and to be as non-intrusive as possible, I

relied largely on the recording equipment to create a record of events, and I took field notes when my doing so did not interfere with the flow of class activities.

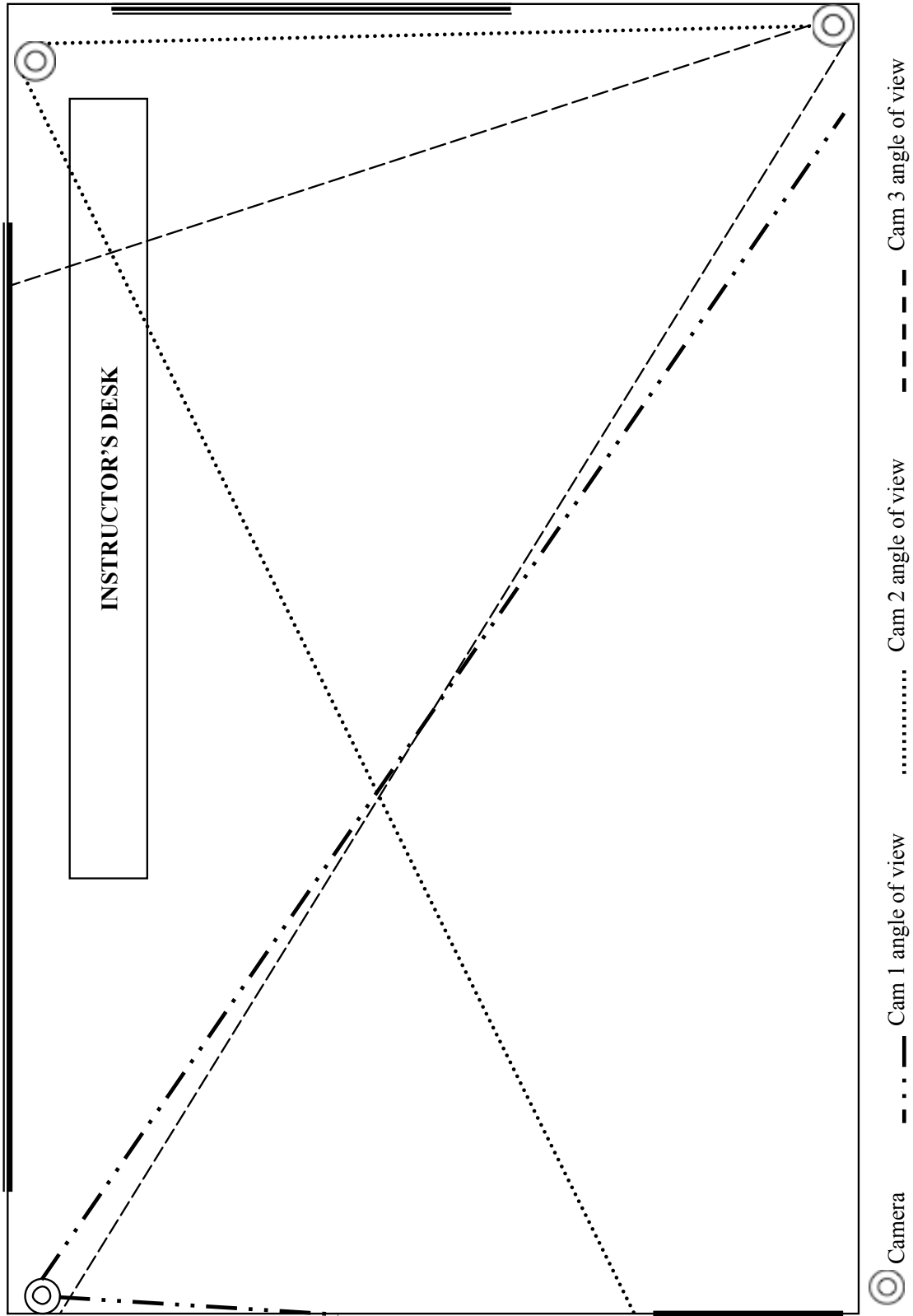
I wanted to capture as many of the students as possible on the video record because of my focus on their perspective and sense making and because of the importance of non-verbal resources in communication. Students of situated communication and problem solving have shown that gesture and features of the physical environment, together with language, constitute semiotic fields with different affordances that allow for different forms of expression (Hutchins, 1995; Goodwin, 1999). There is no question that gesticulation and facial expression carries a non-trivial part of the communicative load in face-to-face interaction (Kendon, 2004; McNeill, 1992; Goldin-Meadow, 2003). Gesture makes available information additional to that carried by the verbal message and this information is picked up by listeners and incorporated into their representations of the situations described by the speaker (Sweetser, 2007). The role of gesture is particularly important when language proficiency is either emerging—as in the case of young children—or compromised by disability (Goldin-Meadow, 2002; Goodwin, 2003). Second language learners have also been shown to rely on gesture to fill in language gaps, assist in word retrieval, and elicit the help of their interlocutors in getting their message across (Gullberg, 1998, 2006; McCafferty & Stam, 2008). To be able to use this rich source of information, I needed to record the students' non-verbal behavior. But because of the class layout, the number of participants, and my desire to be nonintrusive, trying to capture both the verbal and nonverbal behavior of a substantial number of students throughout class sessions presented a technical challenge.

Following Hall's recommendation to use multiple video cameras, "for contexts in which there are multiple, local scenes of multi-party talk running in parallel, with periodic public talk at a 'center,'" (2007, p. 10), I decided to have three video cameras: two in each front corner of the room trained on the students, and one in the back of the room focused on the area in the front of the class where the instructor spent over 90 percent of her time during teacher fronted activity. In this way I was able to see most of the students, including their faces, most of the time.

Although some recommend using a following camera to capture group interaction and facial expressions (see Hall 2007, for example) recently introduced high-definition digital cameras allow the creation of a detailed enough record to make a multimodal analysis possible even without zooming in to local scenes. Following some participants with a camera also implies leaving other participants out of frame, so the greater detail obtained in the record of some events comes at the cost of losing information on other participants. For these reasons, and to minimize students' awareness of the presence of the cameras, I decided to leave all three cameras in place during the entire semester. Figure 2 shows the camera placement.

Initially, I had planned to record the students' voices with the camera microphones and supplement this record with my notes. In addition to this information, I would rely extensively on interviews to get at the students' sense making. During week four, however, I took four wireless lapel microphones to class and asked four students to wear them to test the sound quality. Upon listening to the audio record produced during that session, I realized having the microphones in class allowed me to hear peer interactions that could give me access to a much more detailed understanding of students' perspective of the

Figure 2 – Video Camera Placement



language and class activities and how they used each other as a resource. This additional source of data would also allow me to triangulate and complexify the information I gathered through interviews by comparing it to how students behaved in the classroom. I continued to use the wireless microphones for the rest of the semester, creating audio records of 20 different class sessions. During these sessions I recorded four students and others with whom they interacted during class. For the first few class sessions, I gave the microphones to four of the initial six focal students. When one of the focal students was absent or arrived late, I asked another student to wear the microphone. For reasons I will explain in more detail below, I later decided to broaden the focus to more students, and began asking different members of the class to wear the microphones.

While the presence of cameras and other recording equipment undoubtedly has an effect on people's behavior, through the semester students seemed to become more accustomed to the idea of being videotaped. Their behavior suggests that they sometimes even forgot the presence of the cameras, judging from their candid comments and poses in front of the cameras, their frequent walking into frame with no appearance of shyness or concern for blocking the camera's view, and the evidence of what Goffman (1959) called "backstage" behaviors—behaviors that are not part of the students' public classroom performance. These behaviors included surreptitious comments to classmates about personal matters or the ongoing task that were not audible to the instructor, or gestures and actions that were not to be seen or heard by the instructor or even other students, including texting, yawning, and nose-picking.

The audio record reflects a slightly more complex picture. Different students showed different levels of self-consciousness about the presence of the recording equipment. Some students did not want to wear the microphones early in the semester, and while most of the students I asked agreed to wear them eventually, I was not able to convince two of them, who said they felt shy/uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the few students who did not want to wear the microphones still participated in activities, as most students seemed to believe that the microphone would pick up only the voices of those who were wearing them, something I never said or implied when I described the equipment to them, and that I only discovered after the end of the semester when I had enough time to review the audio records extensively.

There were several instances when students who were wearing microphones seemed to become aware of their presence and would attempt to "perform" what they thought was "good student" behavior. For instance, there was a couple who often sat together during class, and since they were both Spanish speakers, they communicated with each other mostly in their first language. When I asked the male, Arturo, to wear the microphone, he started speaking to his girlfriend in English. However, within a few minutes they became involved in the activity and switched to Spanish. It became evident from their behavior that Arturo had done the homework assignment and then Alexa had copied the answers from him. Even though they didn't say this explicitly, when the instructor asked them to check their homework answers, Alexa said in English to Arturo that she knew they had the correct answers because they all matched. Alonso agreed that that was true. The fact that they were making explicit what should have been shared knowledge for them and that they were using English to do so suggested that they were not speaking for each other's but for my benefit. A few seconds later, at the instructor's prompting, they began checking the answers, but now they seemed to be considering the

questions and discussing them mostly in Spanish. At some point, Arturo asked Alexa why she said an answer was correct, and Alexa replied "*porque tu me dijiste*" (because you told me so). At this point, they both seemed to become aware of the microphone again. Alexa laughed and buried her face in her arm, and Arturo switched to English and reread the question with a serious expression. Before long, however, they had switched back to Spanish, as the microphone again seemed to fade out of awareness.

Other students seemed very candid and unconcerned by the microphone. In one instance, Marilou asked Cindy, who was wearing the microphone, whether I would be able to hear everything they said. Cindy responded that it didn't matter because "She won't tell," referring to her understanding that I would not be sharing what I heard with the instructor because I had pledged confidentiality. In a few instances, one of the students who wore a microphone unclipped it from his collar and began interviewing his classmates about their opinions about the course. His classmates found this very amusing and often greeted me or played the "interviewee" role and made brief comments about the class. In another episode, a student realized she had been wearing the microphone after having spent about twenty minutes with her classmate guessing answers to an exercise they should have done for homework and joking about it. At that point, she called her classmate's name and, when she got her attention, she pointed to the microphone. Her classmate said "yeah, but" and shrugged. She didn't finish her utterance, but the "but" and her shrug suggests that she didn't think my hearing them was of much concern. From these and similar episodes, it was clear that students were aware of the recording equipment at times, but that when they altered their behavior as a consequence, they couldn't sustain the performance for long. The difference between the show they put on for the microphones and cameras and their more candid behavior when the recording seemed to phase out of awareness provided interesting contrasts between the actual behavior and what they thought was the ideal behavior of a student or research subject.

Due to technical problems, there were a few times when I could not collect video or audio with one or more of the cameras or microphones. By the end of the semester, I had collected 80 video files: 3 for each of 23 class sessions, 2 for each of 5 class sessions, and 1 for 1 class session. In addition, I had 20 audio files (each file contained 2-4 tracks, one for each microphone). The audio files recorded 27 different students at least three times, and 7 other students 1-2 times.

Interviews – To gain access to the students' perspectives of their participation in the class, I conducted a total of 28 interviews with 13 different students. Twenty-six of those interviews were video recorded. The remaining two were not recorded, but I took notes and then fleshed them out immediately after the interview. I turned those notes into a complete record later on the same day. I started interviewing during the fourth week of the semester and continued until the week after final exams. Initially I focused on six students from different language and educational backgrounds. Two of those students spoke Spanish, two spoke Hindi (one in addition to English and three other Indian languages), another one was a speaker of Mandarin, and the last one spoke Arabic. Two of the students were male and four were females. I also wanted the focal students to represent a variety of educational backgrounds, so I included in the set a student who had arrived in the US at age 4, one who had arrived in the 8th grade, two who had arrived during the 11th grade, and two who had completed some college education in their native countries. In terms of

observed classroom behavior, I selected students who seemed to be engaged enough in class and had attended class regularly up until that point because I wanted to avoid losing some of the focal students if they dropped the class and/or collecting data on students who were not making at least some effort to participate. Since I wanted to look at their sense making, I thought students who were very unengaged would not give me many opportunities to answer the research questions. During the first round of interviews, I discovered I was not able to elicit much information from one of the interviewees, the Hindi speaker who had been in the US since the age of four. She answered many questions with single-word answers, and my follow up questions were not yielding detailed information. I decided to keep her in the focal group but to also invite a seventh student with a similar background who I might be able to interview more effectively. As the semester progressed I started recognizing patterns in the data that suggested connections between students' educational backgrounds and age of arrival, on the one hand, and patterns of class participation, on the other. I then broadened the interviewee pool to include six more cases that might provide contrasting or confirming information for my emerging interpretations. By the end of the data collection period—one week after the final exam—I had interviewed the six students in the focal group three times, three other students twice, and four other students once.

The purpose of the interviews was to obtain information that would allow me to achieve a more or less phenomenological description of how students made sense of the language they encountered—to understand the language learner as *sense maker* in the process of constructing interpretations. But since this study is also based on the understanding that the sense maker comes to each situation with goals, dispositions, and cognitive structures that have been shaped by previous experiences, a large part of the first interview with students focused on eliciting a description of their goals and academic and language learning backgrounds. I asked students how they had learned English and in what contexts, how long they had been in the US, what other languages they spoke, and what their goals for learning English were (for complete list of biographical questions, see Appendix A)

Another set of interview questions elicited information about students as readers and as language learners. I asked them whether they read in their first language and in English, for what purposes they read, what they did while they read, and how they dealt with comprehension difficulties. Answers to these questions helped me understand the students' reading practices, but they rarely yielded specific examples of meaning construction.

Because much of the process of meaning construction is not made explicit under most reading circumstances, the interviews also had the purpose of trying to externalize it. I wanted to see how students interacted with the texts they were reading in class and out of class. I attempted to do this by having students read paragraphs from the textbook and tell me what they understood from the texts. A sample protocol for this part of the interview is included in Appendix B, but the process was by no means standard. As I asked students to read and tell me about their reading, their answers guided my subsequent questions, and the content of the texts determined the particular language forms we discussed. In general, though, I followed this sequence:

Asked students to read a paragraph out loud

Asked students to tell me, without looking at the paragraph again, what they could remember, if anything
Asked student to compare this reading with their typical experience reading out loud
Asked students to read the paragraph again and gave them a choice of reading out loud or silently
Asked students to tell me if they had been able to understand or remember anything else by rereading
Read the paragraph phrase by phrase and asked students to explain what each phrase meant
Asked students to tell me the meaning of specific language forms

Finally, because my focus was not exclusively on reading but on language development, I wanted to create opportunities to assess the students' listening comprehension and meaning making from oral language so that the patterns I found would not be restricted to those of making meaning from text. To collect some of these data, I showed students short video recordings of the instructor talking to the class and asked them to comment. The clips ranged from two to five minutes in length. I stopped the video every few seconds and asked students what the instructor was saying and what she was doing. With these questions I was trying to see how much actual language students could comprehend and to get at their interpretations of classroom situations. These sessions produced interesting results. Several students reported they were surprised when they watched the instructor on video, even though they had been present during the class meeting with the episodes had been recorded. Being able to watch a few minutes of a lesson during the interviews created an opportunity for them to reflect on typical class events, but also to detach themselves from the interaction. Several students commented that when they were in the classroom they were "doing what students are supposed to do," but watching the video clips outside the classroom enabled them to see it with different eyes, and to comment on the behaviors that the business of "doing school" elicits from students in the classroom. This part of the interviews helped clarify the nature of "doing being a student," which I will address in the third findings chapter.

I was initially concerned that when students saw the instructor and themselves on video they would feel uncomfortable and would alter their behavior in subsequent class meetings. For this reason, I reserved this form of data collection for the last round of interviews to minimize students' awareness of the cameras early in the semester. I thought that once students had gotten to know their classmates and established patterns of interaction and behavior in class they would probably be less uncomfortable with the idea of being watched. I also cropped the video footage so that only the instructor and a couple of students who were the focus of the class's attention could be seen. In that way, I cropped out of the frame most of the class, and prevented showing any "backstage" behavior that might make students concerned about being exposed during a candid moment.

While the goals of the interviews were similar for all participants, the amount of time I spent interviewing each one and the focus of each interview depended on each specific student. With students whom I interviewed more than once, I was able to focus on their personal histories and language learning backgrounds in the initial interview. In the second and third interviews, I followed up on questions I had raised on the first interview, but I also focused more on gathering information on reading practices and on observing them interact with course texts and video clips. For students I interviewed only once, I collected the same types of information but compressed into a one-hour period.

Assessing what someone knows *of* a second language *in* that language is not a straightforward task. Limited language proficiency can get in the way of expressing something one does know. Students often said they knew the meaning of phrases or expressions but it was difficult for them to explain in English what their understanding was. I tried to help students show their knowledge in different ways. When the interviewee's native language was Spanish, a language I'm fluent in, I gave the student the choice to use English or Spanish. All the Spanish speakers chose to use Spanish during the interviews, although many frequently code-switched. With non-Spanish speakers, I tried to offer students different tools for conveying meaning. I told them they could use gestures, sample sentences or phrases, descriptions of the meaning, descriptions of where they had encountered a word or expression before, drawings⁵, or use any other resource they had at their disposal. Students proved to be quite resourceful when it came to showing what they knew. Nonetheless the meanings they managed to express, and that I managed to construct from their expressions, cannot be taken as a faithful representation of knowledge. After all, as semioticians since Peirce have reminded us, signs produce more signs and one never has direct access to referents, and he wasn't even discussing language learners.

Artifacts and Other Records – In addition to videotaping and taking notes of classroom events, I also collected a number of written documents. These include the course syllabus, all class handouts and a copy of the final exam. I was also able to photocopy several sets of completed course assignments: a vocabulary exercise, a journal entry written in response to *The House on Mango Street*, several sets of questions students wrote about the novel, and the students' answers to the final exam questions. Some students also shared with me an essay that they had written in response to the novel. A few class activities involved students working in groups writing their conclusions on the board or producing posters that were displayed around the classroom. I took photographs of these posters and of the writing on the board.

A number of other documents I collected helped me understand the students' academic and personal backgrounds and their language-proficiency levels. These documents include the results of the students' ESL placement test, students' academic transcripts, and a survey of educational experiences and goals that I asked students to fill out in the final day of class. These data provided background information that I hoped would help me connect the observed behavior to their academic and life histories. Table 2.2 summarizes all the data records.

⁵ I always had paper and pens on the table during the interviews, in addition to the textbooks and any other course materials I planned to talk about.

Table 2.2 – Summary of Data Records

Class sessions	80 video files: 3 cameras for 23 class sessions, 2 cameras for 5 class sessions, and one camera for 1 class session 21 audio files (2-4 tracks/microphones each) recording a total of 27 different students 3 or more times and 7 students 1-2 times notes taken during class observations
Interviews	24 audio files of individual student interviews 2 sets of interview notes (I interviewed a total of 13 students: 6 students were interviewed three times, 3 students interviewed twice and four students interviewed once)
Other documents and artifacts	Still images of: classroom environment, posters created by students and/or instructor during class, blackboard images, screenshots of websites visited during class sessions Survey questionnaire about students backgrounds Handouts: all class handouts, copies of textbooks, copies of additional texts Selected student assignments: one set of journals, one set of vocabulary exercises, one set of student generated questions, final exams, other assignments that students volunteered to share with me
Institutional records	Transcripts and final grades for all students who did not withdraw by the third week of class Results of English language placement tests

Data Analysis

Preliminary Analysis - As soon as the course began, I started producing logs of the data I was collecting. After each course meeting, I watched the video records and produced a rough transcript of the contents. Since I wanted to be able to trace the language and concepts discussed in class in the data analysis, I wrote the transcripts in such a way that they could become a language corpus. These logs contain most of the language produced in class, except for exact repetitions.⁶ They also contain students' contributions when they are audible to the class. I produced a similar written record of the interviews. I roughly transcribed the dialogue to reflect all the content of the conversation. The initial transcripts did not reflect false starts, repetitions, and finer aspects of interaction that might not be relevant to the final analysis. The main events of each data collection episode became part of an event log that allowed me to index data and locate it more efficiently.

To begin to focus on how students' made sense of new language, I began a recursive reading of the logs looking for relevant events, by no means a straightforward task. From a usage-based learning perspective there is no separation between instances of acquisition and instances of use: in using a language, learners are constantly establishing and refining their patterns of language use—acquiring the language. Thus, all instances of language

⁶ Repetitions and reformulations are common strategies among language instructors, who use redundancy to make the language input comprehensible.

could be analytically relevant to my research questions. It was obvious that the focal phenomena would have to be narrowed down somehow. I decided to do so by identifying episodes where the learners' focus was explicitly on mapping language forms onto specific functions—which I called *meaning construction events*. As I began reading the data, I was also surprised to find many instances when students seemed to forego opportunities to create form-meaning mappings, even when the opportunity had been built into the structure of the activity by the instructor or the textbook. For instance, there were clear moments in classroom interaction or during interviews when it was evident that students did not know a language form. Instead of attempting to disambiguate that language form, however, they proceeded with the interaction, apparently working with their “best guess” about what was expected of them in the next turn. I decided to broaden my focus to also identify all those instances where students had clearly failed to read other participants' intentions because of a gap in their language knowledge, or where they had managed to act according to expectation but it was nonetheless obvious that they had done so in spite of language gaps. Alongside meaning construction events, then, I was also coding for instances of failure to establish meaning-form mappings.

As I found episodes that seemed richer in meaning-construction events or that made their absence conspicuous, I produced more detailed transcripts of these data segments for analysis. These transcripts contained all the verbal exchanges that could be recovered from the video and audio files plus the nonverbal behavior that was analytically relevant. A preliminary analysis of these episodes suggested a range of student participation patterns: Some students seemed to prioritize “keeping the interaction going” by demonstrating or even feigning competence, while others seemed more preoccupied with understanding the language involved in course activities, and took advantage of or even created opportunities to thematize form-meaning mappings. At this point, I decided to delve into these different participation patterns and see whether they could be attributed to participant goals or previous experiences.

Analysis of Interview Data – One way to begin to gain some access to how different subjects experience the process of making sense of a new language is to listen to how they describe it. Of course, describing our experiences entails reflecting on them, and reflection is not a faithful reproduction of the experience itself, but a re-production that transforms it as it makes it somewhat accessible, and it transforms it in various ways:

When I reflect on something, it has three relationships to what I just did: it does something less, it does something different, and it does something more. The more is easy. I am more conscious of something hitherto relatively unreflective. But of course what I have done reflectively does not exhaust or cover what I did unreflectively. It is less than that. It is also other than that. The capacity to do things without having to think about them frees me to think about things I am not doing or to think about what I was doing when I am no longer doing it. But the thinking (or speaking, which is a kind of thinking out loud) is not the doing; it's not even very like the doing. Thinking is different in kind from the act I am thinking about." (Katharine Young, personal communication)

But the transformation of action introduced by reflection and description is a distortion we have to live with. First, because there is no direct access to a person's unreflective experience as it unfolds, and secondly because reflection and language allow us to observe the subject as s/he "breaks into" that experience and figures out how to adjust action to achieve the "maximal grip" that Merleau-Ponty talked about. When we

listen to learners' reflections on their experiences with a new language we are also accessing their perspective on that experience from the vantage point of their projects and goals. As Young (2002) puts it:

Talking takes advantage of what gets uttered to take aim at its project from another angle; it is influenced by the solutions it hits upon to re-orient itself in its course. As a consequence of this, my own utterances can take me by surprise" (p. 60)

So to say that an experience and talk about that experience are different things does not necessarily imply obfuscation or adornment. In the talk itself subjects discover meaning that helps them reorient their action to approximate their goals. So in the act of listening we may be witnessing not only a partial account of the experience that was, but also an evaluation of where the actor is vis-à-vis her project and potential plans for future adaptive action.

Subjects' stories about their experience also expose normative practices. Retelling our doings involves attempts to smooth out moments of our lives that are not consistent with our expectations. In doing so, we often allude, at least indirectly, to what "ought to be." In a description of narrative analysis Kohler-Riessman (2002) refers to this function of storytelling when she says, "Respondents narrativize particular experiences in their lives, often where there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society," (p. 219).

Even with all the layers of reflection, metacognition, and revision that are afforded by language, subjects often unwittingly relate much "unedited" information through prosody and nonverbal behavior. While an actor may be looking for the best words to portray an experience so as to maintain a degree of faithfulness to events and at the same time adherence to normative ideals, prosody and nonverbal behavior open windows into the emotional import of events and actors' stances.

Following this reasoning, I decided to rely first on a thematic analysis to select sections of data that related to the students' early experiences with language, their ideologies about the first/second language and about language learning, and any descriptions of the process of language acquisition. I identified relevant sections of the interview data from the logs and then watched those sections of the interviews, fleshing out the transcripts. I then analyzed these sections not only thematically but also by examining prosody and nonverbal behavior. Some students had gone into extensive detail about their perceptions of the second language and their experiences as learners without much prompting. Others were more reticent, and that information had to be elicited through a number of different questions. But I was able to obtain data related to these topics from all participants, and I compiled these data in one document. I read this document looking for subthemes and interconnections between them, trying to "reduce the raw information" into a set of codes (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 69). Finally, I coded the interview data and identified sections that were rich in the themes I wanted to discuss in my analysis.

As I watched the videos and reread the transcripts of the interview data set, I began to notice two promising additional analytic tools: metaphors and quotations. Some of the metaphors used in describing learning experiences had striking similarities across students and even across languages. Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 1980) have studied the role of metaphor in thought. They argue that much abstract experience is conceptualized through metaphors that map sensorimotor experience onto more abstract domains. Conventional metaphors are not "dead." Far from it, they are "the very means by which we can

understand abstract domains and extend our knowledge into new areas....[Metaphor is] a tool for understanding things in a way that is tied to our embodied, lived experience." (1999, p. 543) Metaphor is not only accessible in verbal form, but also in gesture, and disregarding this nonverbal modality can lead to misinterpretations of the verbal metaphors that speakers use (Cienki, 2010). Speakers use gestures that can reveal systematic metaphoric mappings of one domain onto another (Sweetser, 1998). When speakers talk about one area of experience in terms of something else, they seem to select something that reflects their values and attitudes towards the target domain. When metaphors occur in systematic clusters, considered together, they can substantiate a certain interpretation of participants' lived experiences (Cameron & Maslen, 2010). Since the experience I am attempting to describe is highly abstract and often unreflective, I expected that interviewees' verbal and gestural metaphors would reveal how they construe some aspects of the experience of learning the second language.

The use of quotations in the students' descriptions of their language-learning histories caught my attention because they seemed to appear at emotionally charged moments, since they co-occurred with giggles, expressions of bewilderment, and sounds of suppressed laughter. Sometimes students transposed themselves to past situations and they revoiced their own inner speech. Sometimes they presented to me what seemed to be the voices of others who had shaped their attitudes towards the language. At other times, they quoted others but it was clear that the quoted words had never been spoken (Sams, 2010). Quotations are an important element in verbal presentations of our experience. In enquoting someone else's voice, we don't embed it in a neutral context. In Volosinov's words (1929/1986), when we look at a quotation, "we are dealing with words reacting on words" (p. 116) and there is often a dynamic relationship of great force between the two voices, even when the two voices may be those of the same person, a past and a present self. In quoting, the speaker is expressing an active response, and "internal retort" to the quote's factual commentary. Clark and Gerrig (1990) have argued that speakers quote when they want to demonstrate for the listener what it is like to live through the moments they are describing. Speakers' quotations attempt to reenact or revivify an event. As demonstrations, "quotations work by enabling others to experience what it is like to perceive the things depicted," (p. 765) and "are to be interpreted through direct [perceptual] experience," (p. 767). But the speakers are not trying to simply present what they witnessed. In quoting, speakers do not try to reproduce verbatim, but present typical interactions. They try to give a general picture or feel for what was meant, to enable the hearers to see for themselves. Some quotation-marking devices combined with mimetic and iconic features of the delivery allow the speakers to recruit our sympathy by "making the addressee co-present to the situation being evoked" (Jones & Schieffelin, 2009, p. 92). Through quoting their experiences, interviewees were offering me the opportunity to enter the scenes they had been part of, and by analyzing the polyphonic nature of quotations, I could witness aspects of *the students'* experience of those events.

Analysis of Classroom Audio Files – Chapter 4 combines the interview data I mentioned above with data from audio files of classroom interaction. To select sections of the audio record for analysis, I listened to the audio recordings for three classroom sessions, one at the beginning, one towards the middle, and one towards the end of the semester, and logged the content of the students' talk in the same way I had done with the instructor talk.

Through logging these three episodes I was able to observe what particular moments of classroom activities yielded the richest student data. Teacher-fronted interaction provided few opportunities for students to have extended turns or even several consecutive turns with one or more speakers, and often the students' words were whispered and unintelligible. Students spoke a lot more and produced more extended turns during group work, idle time before and after class, and times when the instructor handed out graded assignments. These moments became the focus of my analysis of the students' classroom talk. There were, however, a few instances when interaction in a whole class format was particularly animated, when more students participated, so I included these in the analysis as well.

To analyze student talk, I again attended to content, prosody, nonverbal behavior, and metaphor. I also drew on studies of conversation analysis that highlight the importance of sequential placement of turns within talk, and that emphasize how speakers construct meaning and establish intersubjective understandings during interaction (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992). I contrasted how different students participated in class activities, both in groups and in the whole class format, and I identified different patterns. Finally, I contrasted these patterns with what I had observed in the interview data to try to identify how their language-learning histories had shaped their subjectivities and identities as learners.

The next three chapters report the results of this analysis. In chapter four I discuss the students' early experiences in the second-language environment. Chapter five moves on to a description of how students represented their process of developing proficiency, the quality of their lived experience of the second language, and their struggles to establish intersubjectivity with interlocutors in English. The final findings chapter turns to a description of patterns of engagement with the language and the practices of the ESL classroom.

Chapter 3 – Early Experiences in the Second Language

Fear and Frustration

How learners experience their insertion into the second language environment, and their sense making of those experiences, affect their responses and subsequent adaptation. What can these students' experiences tell us about what it is like to be a non-English speaker in an English world? Students report a range of responses to their initial insertion, which vary depending on their level of English proficiency and age at arrival. Early experiences in the US were most difficult for those who arrived with little or no English, at younger ages, and who were immediately immersed in an English-speaking environment with little first-language support. This combination of factors makes non-Spanish speakers arriving during their middle and high-school years the group that seemed to struggle the most with the challenges of adaptation and learning the language. The students in this group were much more likely to describe having felt terrified during their first few months in the US. Those who arrived as immigrants at older ages also described a challenging transition, but their experience is presented more as one of frustration and depression at the loss of social status, and less in terms of fear.

Early Arrivals and US Schooling - *God, this is so scary. I don't speak any English. What am I going to find there? I don't want to go to school. It's so crowded. And what am I going to do when I'm in front of all these people and I can't talk to them? Is anyone going to speak my language? And if not, how am I going to find my classrooms? How am I going to know what to do?*

When I asked immigrant students who arrived during their middle and high-school years to recall what it was like to go to school for the first few days of class, many expressed fear: Fear of the unknown. Fear of what they would find. Fear of being mocked. Fear of being in front of people and not knowing what to say to them. Fear of not knowing what to do if they couldn't understand what was expected of them. Pilar, a 20-year-old Spanish-speaking woman from El Salvador said of her feelings about going to school for the first time: *"pues...al principio esta ahí, 'Ay, qué me encontraré?' No sabe."* (Well...in the beginning you are there, 'Oh, what am I going to find?' You don't know.) As many of the students I interviewed did, she often used quotations at a point where emotions seemed to peak in the narrative. In this example, she is revoicing her inner thoughts at the moment of going to school for the first time. She introduces the quotation in her present voice with "in the beginning," which helps me anchor this particular moment at a specific time in her immigration history, and then, with "you are there," she situates me at the particular time when she is thinking about going to school. Once she has established the frame, she introduces her inner thoughts with "ay," an interjection that construes the moment as emotional in a painful way, and in her quote "What will I find?" she identifies the content of her fears: not knowing what she will have to deal with in the school. The Spanish verb *encontrar* can be translated as "to find," "to meet," or "to encounter." When used in its reflexive form, with *se*, it can denote the reciprocal meeting between two or more people, as the English expression "meet each other." The construction *encontrarse con*, however, is often followed by a surprising, negative situation. In a Spanish language corpus

(www.corpusdelespanol.org), over 80% of the noun phrases and adjectives that occur after *encontrarse con* refer to a dangerous, difficult situation, or a situation in which the actors find themselves powerless. Pilar, in using this construction in combination with “*ay*” to describe how she felt when she went to school for the first time, conveyed her fear of finding a hostile environment where she might not be able to protect herself because she couldn’t speak. At another time during the interview she returned to her feelings about the first few days of class: “*Me sentía mal de que . usted veía personas así y no les podía habla::r . y se siente uno como “Ay, qué hago aquí?”* (I felt bad that . you saw people like so and I couldn’t talk.) Each of the images in the following sequence was captured while Pilar was articulating the underlined syllable of the text below it.



1 – *Me sentía mal de que.*
1 – I felt bad that



2 – *usted veía personas así y no les podía*
2 – you saw people like that and couldn’t



3 – *habla:r . y se siente uno como*
3 – ta:lk . and you feel like



4 – “*Ay, qué hago aquí?”*
4 – “Oh, what do I do here?”

Pilar’s gaze and her physical alignment, together with her quoting of her past inner voice, index the two spaces she is alternating between in this section of her account. She started her phrase looking at me, but as she tries to describe how she felt, her gaze shifts to the right, to the virtual space of her high-school classroom, and her hand goes out with an open palm to locate the people she will talk about next. She then shifts her gaze to me once again (image 2), but lowers her hand and holds her gesture to continue pointing to the people in her high-school class to which her speech refers. As she tells me how she felt, she wrinkles her nose (image 3) as she finishes the word *siente* (feel) and smiles nervously. She then holds the nervous smile as she revoices her anxious inner voice (image 4) wondering what

to do. As she quotes herself, she once again gazes toward the space of the classroom, situating herself there at the moment she is describing.

Hameed, a 19-year old male Arabic Speaker who arrived during his early high-school years, also shared his internal struggle on the first days of school in the US. Again, his use of quotation to voice his fear helps us situate ourselves in that moment:

Hameed: Like the first day, because I was worried because I didn't speak English I think, "Oh my God. It's crowded. Too many people." But I had a friend of mine—he used to help me teach all the classes (points to three different areas in the interview room). He told me, "Don't worry about it. You're gonna learn English." I was like, "I don't want to go to school."

Here, in quoting his own thoughts and/or words, in combination with the words of his "friend"—someone he had just met but who happened to speak Arabic—Hameed re-presents to us the highly charged nature of the experience of going to an English-medium school and not knowing English. Again, an emotional interjection precedes the quote: "Oh my God." And his thoughts/words and those of his friend allude to the source of his fear—his friend helped him by "help me teach all the classes," an ambiguous expression that his gesture helps disambiguate. His transposed points superimposed the virtual space of the school onto the real space of the interview room. By pointing in three different directions, Hameed indicated that his friend helped him orient himself, for example, by pointing out to him where he was supposed to go for his classes.

Depending on what students found—largely on whether their classmates and teachers spoke their first language—the fear of entering a new school was mitigated or intensified. Those students who discovered first-language peers, teachers, or teaching aides during their first few days in school felt great relief. In fact, Miguel's account of his early days in the US has little of the trauma that can be heard in the voices of other students. A male student from Honduras who first went to a high school in Miami, Miguel reports that school was fairly easy, among other reasons because he estimated that 70% of the student body at his school spoke Spanish. Even the teachers spoke Spanish. He says it was a bit harder when he moved to the Bay Area, but by then he had already been promoted to the second level English Language Development (ELD) class. He had also arrived with some English proficiency, enough to write journals from the first day and to understand some of the reading assignments. At the other end of this continuum were those students who were not lucky enough to have the help of someone who spoke their first language. Their stories are peppered with expressions of fear and trauma. A Punjabi-speaking student who arrived in the US during 8th grade described how she spent the first few weeks of class crying, and how her teacher would approach her to try to console her and ask what was wrong, but she could only sit there and cry because she knew no English words. There was no one in any of her classes who spoke her language, and she remained depressed and isolated until she discovered a Punjabi speaker in her building and began to get help from her with her homework. Still, in school, it took her until February of the first year to begin to feel that she could understand enough so she "didn't have to cry anymore."

G: When you didn't have anybody, were you able to participate in the class?

Harpreet: No, I just sitting in the class and just teacher looking at me I can't tell her anything. If I know that [what she's saying], I think I can't explain

...

G: How did it change? When you discovered Punjabi speaking friends, what happened?

Harpreet: I tried to . I'm thinking that I have friends I can live in the school now I don't have to cry if I have problem I can tell them.

Later Arrivals – *It is so difficult! I don't want to clean toilets or make tacos. I was used to a different kind of job. I can't have an interesting conversation with people because I can't show what I think and know. I have to depend on someone else to help me do everything outside the house. It's embarrassing to not be able to talk to my children's teachers. And I can't even help them with their homework. My kids know more English than I do. It's really tough. And English is so hard; it's traumatizing.*

Frustration and struggle, rather than fear, were more salient emotions in the descriptions of non-fluent immigrant students who arrived as adults. Gladys, a woman from El Salvador in her mid-thirties, used the words *difícil* (difficult) and *duro* (tough) over thirty times in a twenty-minute dialogue about her transition into the US. For her, the lack of language fluency had resulted in a significant drop in social status. She went from manager of an early-childhood education center in her country to janitor at an office building, where she often cried as she cleaned toilets and picked up garbage. Carolina, a female student from Mexico also in her mid-thirties, and a very reflective and articulate speaker in Spanish, described her struggle with English as *traumante* (traumatizing). She had learned English in her native country, or so she thought. Upon arrival she realized she couldn't communicate—an experience reported by many who had taken classes in schools or college before coming to the US. During a conversation we had about her language fluency, she mocked herself for having believed that she was speaking English to American tourists in Mexico.

G: *Y tu sabías algo de inglés antes de venir?*

Carolina: (Folded arms resting on the table) *Ay, si le digo se le va a hacer chiste.* (Laughs and leans back briefly. Returns to leaning on table) *Yo trabajaba en la Secretaría de Turismo.*

G: Uh-huh

Carolina: *Muchas veces tenía que atender americanos con información.* (Smiling) *Cómo me entendían eso sí no sé. Ahora que estoy aquí digo yo,* (Wrinkles her nose and eyes) *"Ay, yo hablaba inglés?"* (lowers her face and closes her eyes and laughs) *Qué Bárbara!"*

G: And did you know any English before you came?

Carolina: (Folded arms resting on the table) Oh, if I tell you you'll think it's funny. (Laughs and leans back briefly. Returns to leaning on table) I used to work for the Department of Tourism.

G: Uh-huh

Carolina: Often I had to help Americans with information. (Smiling) How they understood me, I really don't know. Now that I'm here I say, (Wrinkles her nose and eyes) "Oh, I spoke English? (lowers her face and closes her eyes and laughs) How crude!"

After hearing this, I told her my experience of having studied English for several years and finding out, upon arriving in the US, that I couldn't handle simple greetings.

G: *Cuando vine a los Estados Unidos dije, "Ay mi dios, qué vergüenza."*

Carolina: (Points to her face, laughing) *Así me sentí yo. Así me sentí yo. Como es posible que me entendieran? Todavía me decían*

G: When I came to the United States I said, "Oh, my god, how embarrassing."

Carolina: (Points to her face, laughing) That's how I felt. That's how I felt. How could they possibly understand me? They even said,

⁷ I have not been able to find a satisfying translation for this use of the word *bárbara*. While the meaning is related to the English words ignorant/crude/moronic, I cannot find a word that matches the Spanish one in meaning, register, and connotation.

"Thank you."

G: (laughing) *Y todavía te decían* "thank you"

Carolina: *Iban muy agradecidos.*

"Thank you."

G: (laughing) And they even said, "thank you"

Carolina: They left feeling very grateful.

When it came to describing her feelings about her daily life in the US with her limited English proficiency, her tone wasn't so jovial. Initially she felt tied to her house because she couldn't work or go to school. She talked of feeling frustrated and limited by her lack of language ability. She said that she tried to find an outlet for her knowledge by getting involved in her daughter's school. In the images below, as Carolina gets ready to talk about finding an outlet, she completes the preparation phase (McNeill, 1992) of her gesture by moving her hands towards her throat, her fingers almost touching the base of her voice box. As she reaches the word *desahogar*, she completes the stroke of the gesture: her hands go out quickly forward and outwards and her fingers spread, showing the direction of ideas moving out from her towards the world. She performs two more strokes of the same gesture, one as she gets to *un poco* (a bit), and a third, more relaxed one during the word *conocimientos* (knowledge).



1 - *Después como traté de*

1 - Then the way I tried to



2 - *desahogar un poco mis conocimientos...*

2 - find an outlet for my knowledge...

Carolina's word choice is significant. She referred metaphorically to what helped her cope—getting involved in her daughter's school—as a form of *desahogo*, a Spanish word that translates as finding an outlet for one's emotions or frustrations, but that is related to the word *ahogar*, which means "to drown" or "suffocate." The word conceptualizes the target domain INABILITY TO SPEAK A SECOND LANGUAGE in terms of the source domain SUFFOCATING. It seems all the knowledge and competence trapped in her body was suffocating her, and her gesture supports this metaphorical mapping by indicating that the end of suffocation was letting out all these pent up abilities. Getting involved in her daughter school helped her get out of the house and be more active, but it also reminded her of her language limitations.

The gesture that coincides with the word *frustraba/frustration* again suggests things pent up inside her. As she articulates the word, the back of her hands meet and her fingers move towards her body and then roll in (image 1), her hands iconically representing objects wrapped around themselves, which metaphorically stand for her trapped thoughts.



1 – *aunque al mismo tiempo me frustraba .*

1 – although at the same time I was getting frustrated .



2 – *porque no podía hablar*

2 – because I **couldn't** talk



3 – *y no podía decir lo que yo quería*

3 – and I couldn't say what I wanted

In image 2, as she verbally refers to her inability to talk, she gesturally represents talking again as a turning outwards of thoughts and information. Her eyebrows rise and her forehead wrinkles, probably a demonstration of how effortful it was to try to find and externalize words. In image 3, she completes the gesture by rotating her hands outwards and relaxing her open fingers, again releasing her message towards the world. Getting involved in her daughter's school didn't give her much satisfaction because she always depended on someone else to help her write and prepare her PTA presentations. The day she got her residency, she said, she ran to the college to register for English classes.

Carolina's gestures relates to a metaphor several Spanish speakers used to refer to their growing proficiency. As they became more fluent, they said they were *desenvolviéndose*. While the word translates as "managing" or "coping," the Spanish word is derived from *envolver*, which means to wrap up. *Desenvolverse*, thus, describes the ability to perform in a language as the ability to unwrap oneself, to free oneself from the restraints of one's lack of language proficiency. Several other related metaphors alluded to the experience of being mute. Gladys talked about how she got stuck when she had to read a long test and used the word *atorarse*. The word can be translated as "getting stuck" or "getting jammed," but it also means "to choke on food." Carolina and Pilar described themselves as tongue-tied (*mi lengua no se suelta/se me traba un poquito la lengua*) when trying to speak English. When I asked some of the students to read for me during interviews, they often referred to the effort of reading in English as physical pain. Carolina touched the base of her throat and said "*me duele acá*" (It hurts right here), and Pilar went into a coughing fit while reading, went to get a glass of water, and kept holding her throat for a while after she came back to the conference room.

I earlier contrasted the experiences of teenagers and adult immigrants, but the lived-experiences of immigrant students can also be contrasted with those of two Korean international students who arrived in the US in their early twenties, and who had studied English in their countries for several years. Patricia came to the US a few days before the beginning of the semester during which this study was carried out. She had finished her junior year in engineering at a Korean university and had studied English for several years. She had decided to spend a year abroad improving her English proficiency, which she considered essential for employment in professional jobs in her country. I asked her about

her arrival in the Bay area to be able to compare her experience with that of her largely immigrant classmates:

G: How did you feel in the beginning? When you just got here and you went to classes the first few days?

Patricia: Oh, of course I'm scared . I-I . my father is pilot so I travel a lot of countries . uhm Europe and uh . well all of countries . Singapore and Singapore and Canada . but it's not different I'm XXX . It's not travel . so scared and well how to speak . if I speak something they misunderstand and they will hate me

G: Oh

Patricia: I worry about it . few . few weeks . two weeks I didn't speak with someone but once past month two months I have confidence and I can speak a lot and raise your [sec] hand and speak something . is really really important thing really important to have a confidence to speak

Several aspects of this student's presentation of her experience are interesting. First, there is the "of course" in "Of course I'm scared." As if saying, "Who wouldn't be? Isn't it obvious that everyone in this situation is?" But then her fear is reframed in a positive light by being nested within an experience that is seen as an opportunity to further develop "confidence." It takes confidence to use language fluently, and being in the environment of an ESL college class (where students almost never laugh at their peers) provides an opportunity to develop that confidence. Finally, there is the evidence that only sixteen weeks after arriving in the US she was able to express her experiences clearly, if not accurately, which was made possible by the many years of English instruction she enjoyed before her experience abroad. Deploying her knowledge of English may take effort, but given the time and opportunity, she has the resources to do it. Her fear has a very different quality from that of those much younger students who arrived with little or no English into a middle or high school classroom.

Limited English Proficiency as Impaired Presentation of Self

For students who attended middle or high school in the U.S., the fear was fed by the perception that peer groups would make fun of them if they made mistakes. All but one of the students who did some of their K-12 schooling in the US brought up the embarrassment they felt because they couldn't speak English. The following excerpt of an interview with a young Salvadoran woman who attended two years of high school in the US talks about the fear of being mocked, and how that fear persists now that she is in college:

Pilar: *La-el mayor problema para-al menos pa' mi . cuando llegué aquí era-me daba mucha pena . hablar . porque hay gente que se burla . se burla de usted "Qué dijiste?" Y uno pues se siente avergonzada, no? Yo así soy . Y por eso a mí me costó mucho así para que se me quitara el miedo para hablarlo? Y aún así ahora todavía me da un poquito de miedo . Como pena . Me voy a equivocar o voy a decir algo mal . yeah*

Pilar: The main problem-at least for me . when I arrived was that-I was very embarrassed of talking . because some people make fun . they make fun of you "What? What did you say?" And you, well, you feel ashamed, right? I'm that way. And that's why it was very hard for me to lose my fear of speaking? And even so now I'm still a bit afraid of talking. Like embarrassed. I'm going to make a mistake or I'm going to say something wrong . yeah

Again the quote comes at a very emotional moment, being made fun of in front of others. The quote itself can show us much about the source of the student's fear. Pilar's words tell

us explicitly that her fear is about being mocked, but her quote, as a demonstration of her emotions and the words she heard or feared her classmates said, allows us to delve deeper into the nature of the threat and the fear. First of all, the mocking voice comes in the form of a question, which not only sarcastically draws attention to the error, and thus to the incompetence of the speaker, but also further puts the student on the spotlight by virtue of being presented as a question, a first part of an adjacency pair that produces the expectation of a forthcoming answer (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). In conversations with fluent speakers, this expectation would most likely be part of a mostly automatic routine exchange. But when the interlocutor is a non-native speaker with very limited proficiency in the language, putting them on the spotlight and forcing them to perform is more the equivalent of calling their bluff. The non-native speaker will most likely have to remain silent and be the unwilling target of cruel mockery because she does not have the linguistic resources to save face (Goffman, 1967).

Pilar's facial expressions in the images below also demonstrate her classmates' behavior. While she takes the point of view of her present self (image 1), she looks at me and refers to the mocking classmates in third person. When she pauses at the end of the introductory comment "they mock you," her gaze shifts to the left, her eyes open wide, she gets a hint of a sarcastic smile, and her eyes and head shift slightly further left twice. She has now taken on the point of view of someone mocking an ESL speaker. She then shifts her gaze to the right and produces a slight sneer as she quotes her past classmates' voices in "What did you say?" Once again, gaze helps Pilar indicate when she is speaking to me as her present self, or when she is taking on a different voice, either that of her own past self, as above, or that of a past classmate.



1 - *se burla de*
1 - they make fun



2 - *usted_*
2 - of you .



3 - "*Qué dijiste?*"
3 - "What did you say?"

A few details suggest that as her former classmate, Pilar addresses two different audiences. In image 2, she seems to be looking not at Pilar's past self, but at other classmates. Her gaze and face move left, and her eyes and head's subtle but quick shifts indicate she may be looking at two or more different people who have witnessed Pilar's error. In image 3, again taking her former classmate's viewpoint, she looks at Pilar's past self and questions her in a mocking tone. Once again, the idea of making mistakes in front of several classmates and becoming the target of their mockery seems to lie behind the fear of speaking.

For these students, limited language proficiency seems to have impaired their performance, and thus their competent presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). This idea is supported by my analysis of the word choice and metaphors that students used in their descriptions. When students spoke of their fears, they often referred to the idea of being in

“public,” of “seeing” and “being seen” by others, of “showing” or revealing themselves, and of their discomfort with asking questions or making comments “in front of the whole class”—an interesting metaphor in itself, since students are rarely positioned “in front of the class” when they ask questions or make comments. A lot of their expressions strongly suggest anxiety about being the object of the gaze of a potentially unsympathetic or even cruel audience, as if their lack of language proficiency rendered them defenseless—naked, one could say—in public.

Recall, for instance, the Arabic-speaking youth who talked about his first few days in school, when he said “Oh my God. It’s crowded. Too many people.” Why would the number of people be a concern to him? Because, as Goffman pointed out, public performance is a commitment (1967). When actors are not able to act out a “line” that confers them “a positive social value,” Goffman’s definition of face, they are unable to follow the “traffic rules of social interaction” and thus to earn the respect of the audience. Earlier in this chapter I described how Pilar felt self-conscious about her inability to talk to the people she met in her high school. Luis reported his feeling about being in the classroom early on in very similar words. His Spanish-speaking teaching aide had told him to try to understand the most important points of what he heard in the classroom. “*Y entonces yo me quedaba como (laughing) “Qué tengo que hacer? Qué es importante? No se nada!”* (And I would be like, “What do I have to do? What is important? I don’t know anything!”) Luis’s inner thoughts, which he makes accessible to me by enquoting them, respond to his TA’s urge to understand the main point with amused bewilderment. He laughs at the idea of trying to understand the main ideas in the absence of any language knowledge. His word choice constructs lack of language as leaving him paralyzed. The Spanish verb *quedarse*, which can be translated as “to stay,” “to remain,” or “to stall⁸” co-occurs with a group of adjectives that relate to the idea of being motionless or trapped (Eddington, 1999). Some common collocations are *quedarse duro* (become stiff), *quedarse petrificado* (become petrified), *quedarse trabado* (become stuck) and the most common and thus prototypical *quedarse inmóvil* (become motionless). In a Goffmanian frame, Luis’s lack of language ability turned him into an actor who has forgotten his lines onstage. The students’ anxieties seem to stem from their inability to perform a line, and thus project a valued self.

Other students had similar fears of public performance. In the following interview excerpt, Cindy and I discuss reading out loud. After she read a paragraph for me, I asked her how she felt and if this was the way she felt in general while reading out loud.

Cindy: You mean the pronouncing?

G: Yeah, reading it.

Cindy: Yeah 'cause I don't really like reading my . like by myself . I just read like quietly

G: So what happens when you read out loud?

Cindy: I fell is like unsafety I think

In Cindy’s case, her feeling of “unsafety” when performing in public in the classroom is fed at least in part by the school practices of her native country. She is a Mandarin speaker from Mainland China, and she explained that students don’t speak up in the classroom in her native country’s schools. During one of my interviews with her, I asked her to comment on some behavior I had observed in the classroom. The students had done a

⁸ This meaning is common in expressions such as “*Se me quedó el carro*” (my car stalled).

reading assignment at home, and had written statements of the main idea of the text. In class, they had discussed their main ideas, and they had chosen one of their sentences to write on the board. I had listened to the discussion and thought Cindy's sentence was the most accurate expression of the main idea. Yet, she had not gone to the board; instead, they had decided another student would go to the board and write the sentence.⁹ When I brought up that episode, Cindy had this to say:

Cindy: I don't wanna do that . like go to the board and write down the...

G: So you don't wanna do it?

Cindy: I don't wanna do that

G: So it has nothing to do with who had the best sentence.

Cindy: I don't wanna do that and then another . what's her name? Like she got long hair?

G: Analyne?

Cindy: Analyne . She don't wanna do that either we're like shy . I'm like "I won't do that"

G: OK, because I thought-I was interested because I read your sentence and I asked you if I could copy it and I thought your sentence was a much better main-idea sentence

Cindy: I don't wanna go to there . I don't like to show that.

A male Korean student in his mid-twenties also mentioned that he often did not ask questions in "public" but instead waited until he could talk to the teacher "personally," i.e. when the instructor walked by him during individual or group work or after class. He believed that was part of his experience in schools in his native country, but that he had changed after several semesters in the US:

Sung: But sometimes I: . sometimes some questions I didn't understand and . I asked her . the-the personally . not public . because in Korea usually we don't . we don't . we don't ask in the class

G: Uh-huh

[...]

G: Do yo--you just feel shy or or:?:

Sung: Sometimes I feel shy . but right now it's OK I changed a lot so sometimes I ask to teacher . in the class

Interestingly, there isn't a single instance in the data when he either asked a question or made a comment in a whole-class format. Instead, there is an instance when the instructor is eliciting answers, and after taking several student responses she directly calls on Sung. She had talked to Sung, she said, and he had a good answer. Having been summoned by the instructor to share his answer, he did briefly speak up, but this was the only instance in which he did so. So while his perception was that he had adjusted to the US classroom style and he had become more outspoken, his participation in this class did not offer any evidence of that. Cindy, on the other hand, is aware that she still does not speak much in a whole-class format. During an interview she told me "I don't really speak in class." In the following excerpt, again, we can see the use of quotation at an emotional moment, to demonstrate her internal struggle with the issue of class participation:

⁹ The student who went to the board was several years older and was verbally much more fluent.



1 - 'cause I . I don't know like .
actually sometimes when



2 - I was . when I was sit there



3 - and the teacher was asking .
actually



4 - sometimes I know the answer



5 - but I'm just afraid to raise my
hand



6 - I'm sh: . I'm tuh . uh: . "Ah,
should I do that?"

When Cindy starts telling me that she does not “really” speak in class, she looks at me (image 1). She then starts describing what it’s like to be in class when the instructor asks a question, and, in doing so, she transposes herself to the classroom space. She indicates this in a number of ways. First, she says “when I was sit there,” and as she says it, she lifts her weight from the chair in a subtle movement and drops it again, transitioning into the “sitting in the classroom” context. Her gaze also shifts. She looks away from me and towards the left (image 2), peering into the virtual space of the classroom. As she continues to consider the classroom situation, her speech tells me that she is placing herself at the moment when the instructor asks a question (image 3), and her head tilts, possibly reflecting her mental state—considering whether she should answer the question or not. In image 4 she turns to me again, and tells me that sometimes she knows the answer, as if to clarify that it is not just a matter of not knowing what to say. As she says this, she draws her left hand towards her chest, emphasizing that in her heart she is certain of the answer. In image 5, as she says that she is afraid to raise her hand, she mimes raising her hand and smiles. She then briefly glances towards the virtual space of the classroom and then, looking back at me, quotes her inner thought, “Ah, should I do that?” As she quotes herself, she very quickly raises her hand and then lowers it, as if she had started raising her hand and changed her mind midway. While in the excerpt of Cindy’s interview I reported earlier she referred to speaking up in class with an unwavering “I won’t do that,” this passage reveals that her attitude is much more ambiguous. Her internal dialogue seems to be at once pushing her to speak up and cautioning her that maybe it’s not a “safe” thing to do. In response to my probing “how come?” she sounds less sure that this is simply a matter of cultural background.

Cindy: I don't know . well . my friends think I'm lazy . but I don't know, I think I'm like a little bit shy . I'm afraid to show those . like . but . most of my friends think I'm lazy—I'm just lazy . but I'm not

Her juxtaposition of her friends' and her own view of things is also revealing. She is certain of the image she conveys to her friends, to whom their behavior is unqualified laziness. To herself, she is not as categorical, but she thinks it has something to do with shyness, and with the fact that speaking up in class requires her to "show those," another reference to the critical gaze of others in the classroom and the threat to face implied in speaking up. Interestingly, this passage also suggests that it is better to let one's friends think that one is lazy than to admit that one is afraid of being perceived as incompetent. Cindy's observable classroom behavior was consistent with the struggle she reported. She did sometimes provide answers to teacher questions in a whole class format, but these tended to be quick, brief phrases, usually when several students were speaking in a choral ensemble. Unlike a few vocal students, she never took the floor for an extended period of time to provide a long explanation or share an experience.

When students discussed what helped them get through their first few weeks in an English-speaking environment and begin to learn English, they mentioned that it had been very helpful for them when teachers or TAs had taken the time to explain things to them. In many of these passages, students used the words "*alone/a mi solo*" (to me alone), and "*aparte* (aside)," which again connotes the fear of the public gaze. Teachers might have explained things to them alone or aside for logistical reasons (getting the rest of the class to begin working on what they had already understood), but it seems that for these students the protection from the gaze of others provided by these more intimate encounters with sympathetic caretakers were a safe space away from the whole-class format.

Not all the students who arrived during middle- and high-school years and knew no English were as intimidated by the school environment. Rosie, a vivacious Mexican woman with an outgoing and (sometimes charmingly) irreverent personality, did not report such a difficult transition. I tried to find out what could explain her different response to her initial experiences. During an interview she reported that so many of her classmates spoke Spanish that the teachers were learning Spanish rather than the students learning English. Undoubtedly being in an environment where most people spoke her language and could translate for her must have given a completely different quality to the experience of going to an "English-medium school." But I still asked her what it was like when she could not understand what was going on. She shrugged and said "*Pregunto. Si no entiendo pregunto*" (I ask. If I don't understand, I ask.) I asked her if she didn't feel embarrassed asking questions in class. The following sequence shows Rosie responding to my question.



1 – *Pues sí porque a veces otras*

1 – Well yes because sometimes others



2 – *acaban "de dónde sacó que?.."*

2 – end up "where did she get that?"



3 – *"Y ésta por qué está preguntando eso?"*

3 – "Why is this one asking that?"

My question prompted Rosie to recognize that “*otras*” (other female classmates) end up asking how the students who asked a question came up with such an idea. “*De dónde sacó que*” (Where did she get that?), in image 2, suggests that asking a question may reveal that one has come up with an unusual understanding of what was said or done, and that in turn implies that one is not a competent communicator. As Rosie switches from reporting to me what her classmates sometimes did to a quote that shows her taking up of those classmates’ positions, she shifts her gaze to the left, reflecting a change from the real space of the interview room to the virtual space of one of her former high-school classrooms. In image 3, as Rosie formulates a more extended quote of a critical classmate, her gaze points down. Her classmate is not only referring to her as *ésta*, literally “this one,” a clearly derogatory form to refer to a person in Spanish, but they also look down on her for asking. As Pilar did in the example I discussed earlier, Rosie’s revoicing of her critical classmates refers to her (or any student asking a question) in third person. These students were aware of how classmates might mock them to their faces and also of how they might make fun of them behind their backs as they talked to other classmates.

Even though the fear was not nearly as pervasive for Rosie as it was for other students, she did report the same awareness of others’ critical gaze when speaking up in class. After describing her former classmates’ responses, she says, “*Pero ya luego como que le agarras el sentido a las cosas y como que le pierdes el miedo a las cosas, y ya!*” (But later it’s like you grasp the sense of things and like you lose your fear, and that’s it!) Because of her particular school environment and her personality, and possibly because she saw herself as an outsider in her family and her school, it was a lot easier for her to get through that period and lose her fear, but the fear, at least initially and to some extent, was there.

I mentioned earlier in this chapter that students who immigrated after their high-school years describe their earlier experiences as one of frustration and struggle with the language rather than fear. While their lived experience seems qualitatively different from that of those who immigrated during school years, their words exhibit to some extent a concern for the face they are able to claim for themselves with their limited English proficiency. Gladys, for instance, who arrived in her late twenties knowing no English, also reported that initially she wondered “*Qué están diciendo?*” (What are they saying?) But her description of her lack of proficiency with the language is not connected to a fear of speaking. She is very aware, however, that she needs to learn more English in order to be completely integrated into her daughter’s life. She mentioned that she only got four hours of sleep on average, and that people who work in the offices she cleans in her janitorial job ask her how she musters the strength to get up early to go to school.

Gladys: *Ahí me dicen "Ay, [name + affectionate diminutive], yo no sé como tú aguantas pararte a las siete de la mañana y tener la fuerza de voluntad para ir a la escuela." "Tengo que ir. No hablo inglés. Tengo una hija que está en la escuela. Tengo que ayudarle en sus tareas. Tengo que estar hablando con su maestra."*

Gladys: They tell me, “Oh, [name + affectionate diminutive], don’t know how you can stand getting up at seven in the morning and have the willpower to go to school.” “I have to go. I don’t speak English. I have a daughter who is in school. I need to help her with her homework. I have to talk to her teacher.”

These people she chats with at work are not Spanish speakers, and they tell her “*pero yo te entiendo bien y hablas bien*” (but I understand you and you speak well). So she does have

enough fluency to carry on daily conversations, but in her mind not enough fluency to engage in other forms of interaction about her daughter’s schoolwork with her teachers. Her description of herself as a non-English speaker in “*No hablo inglés*,” is contradicted by the fact that she is reporting conversations she has with English speakers. But her evaluation of herself as a non-English speaker is connected to prescriptive expectations of the type of English proficiency she should have to adequately express herself in those other contexts, and possibly also the type of proficiency she had in Spanish in her country, where she had completed some postsecondary education and obtained a professional job.

Like Gladys, another late arrival student, Asha, also seems aware that her English impairs her ability to present herself in a favorable light. Asha didn’t experience the same degree of frustration when she arrived in the US because she had been exposed to some English from childhood. Her father spoke English and wanted her to speak English. She had also attended two years at an English-medium university in Sri Lanka, so her ability to understand English went beyond daily conversations. Still, she often referred to her need to learn “proper English.” She said she needed to take classes because there were words she didn’t know, and that she sometimes made grammar mistakes.

Asha: Like I don't know the g- . the grammar and the correct . I never studied . correct method of . how to talk how to write in a proper way. I just read. Sometimes I make mistakes. Sometimes I read correctly. So the proper way like step by step I didn't study. I just read and listen to my father talking in conversation. Like that only learned by myself. I think that's not enough . to be . to know a language is not enough. So you should know—somebody should guide you. Somebody should correct you. Then only you'll be perfect in that language.

She was very aware of prescriptive notions of language proficiency, and that those notions, which she definitely subscribed to herself, cast her in a less than perfect light when she used English. At some point she also mentioned that she couldn’t help her son with schoolwork because she hadn’t learned “proper English.” In the following images, we see Asha’s response to her experience of not being able to understand her son’s school assignments.



1 - When I see my son’s homework



2 - huh . I . like I see stars



3 - in that . ah:

As she says “When I see my son’s homework,” she looks to the right (image 1). As several of the other students did, she seems to locate the virtual situation of trying to help with homework in a different space, and her gaze scans that space to conjure up a simulation of the experience she will talk about. She also indicates that she is locating that experience to her left gesturally, by extending her hand, palm up, towards that space, as if to invite me to see what takes place there. Asha then transposes the situation of helping with homework

to the interview space, and her notebook serves as a prop to represent her son's homework. She looks down to it (image 2) and suppresses laughter as she exhales loudly, her shoulders slightly jerking forward. Asha is a very devoted mother, and not being able to understand enough about her son's schoolwork to help him do better seems to be incongruous with the duties of her mother role. Her expression suggests some embarrassment, as she also lowers her head more and closes her eyes, and she says she "sees stars." In image 3, as Asha opens her eyes again and looks at the homework, she throws her hand up in a gesture of impotence and utters a painful "ah." Her problems with presentation of self are based on her idea that she cannot use the kind of English ("proper") that a woman of her background should use, and also on the fact that she cannot competently perform an important role that she believes she should perform as a mother.

The idea that her elementary school child was able to control language that she couldn't was clearly a source of discomfort not only for Asha but also for Carolina. In the following interview transcript, she describes how she felt when her daughter corrected her and her husband's pronunciation:

Carolina: Sí, mi niña me dice, "No mami, es así, y es así," y "A ver repite" y "repite" [...] A veces siempre corrige, no? Lo corrige a mi esposo, "No, es que hay una diferencia entre el sonido de esta letra y ésta." Y yo todo eso me trauma.

Carolina: Yes, my girl tells me, "No mom, it's like this and this" and "Come on, repeat" and "repeat." [...] Sometimes she always corrects, right? She corrects my husband, "No, there is a difference between the sound of this and this letter." And all that traumatizes me.

As she quotes her daughter, she portrays the role reversal not only in words but also in the tone with which she delivers her words. The voice of the child takes on the patient voice of a caretaker trying to encourage a child to improve her performance without hurting her feelings. The enquoted child's voice, with "*repite*," also insists that her parents repeat what she has said until they can get it right. This situation is for Carolina "traumatizing." During interviews, she tried to establish a competent image of self by talking about her language ability in Spanish, and how she wanted to do the same in English. She told me how in Spanish she was surrounded by a "certain kind of people" who used words that some others might not hear in daily life, and that she made it a point to find out what those words meant and to learn how to incorporate them in her vocabulary, and how not having those more sophisticated language skills in English made her feel tongue-tied and frustrated. Recall that she also described herself as "crude" in an earlier example because she had thought she was speaking English in Mexico and then discovered that her language competence was hugely inadequate for skillful communication.

For adult parents, especially those who had reached a certain level of education and who were articulate in their first languages, having to be corrected by a child is a "traumatizing" or embarrassing situation, and potentially a threat to one's face in the presence of other adults. This feeling was not unique to older students. Luis, who was still nineteen at the time I interviewed him and had attended a US high school, also reported similar interactions with his nine-year-old sister.

Luis: *Mi hermana chiquilla es la que s:-hah be más inglés. Y ya sabe, eh? Porque yo cuando a veces no se nada de digamos algo de*

Luis: My little sister is the one who knows more English. She knows, you know? Because sometimes when I don't know

las tareas le digo "Qué significa esto?" y ya me dice. Ella sabe. Me dice, (slides hands over the table three times, once on each "esto") "Oh, esto y esto y esto es." "Oh, gracias."

something, say about my homework I ask her, "What does this mean?" And she tells me. She knows. She says, (slides hands over the table three times, once on each "this") "Oh, it's this and this and this." "Oh, thanks."



1 – *y ya me dice... "Oh es esto y esto y esto."*

1 – and she already tells me... "Oh it's this and this and this."



2 – *Oh, gracias*

2 – Oh, thanks



3 – (laughs, his head sinks into his shoulders)

As Luis talks about her youngest sister as the most proficient English speaker in the family, he lets out a hint of a snicker in the middle of the word *sabe* (knows). He describes how he sometimes asks his sister questions when he is doing homework and doesn't know what something means. While doing so, his right hand's middle finger and thumb slide on the table, indicating the section of his homework assignment that he has asked his sister to explain. In image 1, he reports that his sister can already tell him the answer as he performs three quick swipes over the space where he has previously located his question. The three strokes of the gesture coincide with each of the "*estos*." Luis's revoices her sister in a way that shows her fluency with language by indicating that there are multiple parts to the explanation with his repetition of *esto* and with the quick, light movements of his hands as he performs the gesture strokes. In images 2 and 3, we see Luis thanking his sister with an embarrassed "oh" and then laughing and shrinking in size by raising his shoulders and lowering his head, humbled by the experience. Language in these cases seems to invert the power dynamics typical between parents and children or older and much younger siblings. Being corrected or instructed by a child puts once competence in question.

Goffman's concept of face can certainly illuminate many of the emotional responses of students who arrived in the US with little or no English. But it would be an oversimplification to attribute all of the students' struggles to concerns for claiming a positive face for themselves. Some of the challenges of their early days in the US boil down to a much more basic need to survive in a new environment. After all, language is not just a way to represent the world; it is a way to act in it and to gain a measure of control over it. When we arrive in a second language environment not knowing the language after having been communicatively competent adolescents or adults, we are thrown back to a time when we didn't know our way around, when we couldn't use language to display expertise that we didn't have, when we didn't possess the power of words to affect the world, and when we were much less aware of language's power as a tool for claiming face. Up until the moment of immigrating to a second-language environment, language has given us a way to

bring predictability into our lives by enabling us to learn and affect others' expectations and intentions, and to adjust our actions. Growth so far has been movement in one direction, into more control of the social and material environment through the power of the word. Suddenly plunging into a language-less situation is like losing control of the world by losing language, but retaining our awareness that such control *is* possible, that it *is* possible to influence what people think of us and how they act towards us by deploying our command of language. But we cannot do that now. Now we are handicapped. Hence the fear.

Lost in English

One way in which students conveyed the lack of control over their worlds is by using the common metaphor of being “lost” when they didn’t understand what was going on around them. If UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), then not understanding English is not seeing the signs that can help us navigate the world, and we are therefore lost.

When I asked Luis how much English he knew when he arrived in the US, he answered, “*O: . nada! Nada de nada. En blanco venía yo. Todo en blanco.*” (Oh, nothing! Nothing at all. I was blank. Completely blank.) He then proceeded to describe his behavior during his first semester in school as mostly just sitting there, staring at people wondering what they were saying. Later on, as he described his classes, I asked him which was the worst class for him in terms of his ability to comprehend:

G: *Y en general, cuál fue la peor clase donde estabas más perdido? Tu primer año. En qué clase fue donde estabas más perdido?*

Luis: (laughing) *Perdido perdido? En inglés.*

G: *En inglés?*

Luis: *En el ELD*

G: *En ELD!*

Luis: *Yo creo, porque nada entendía yo.*

G: And in general, which class was the worst, where you felt lost the most? During your first year, in what class were you lost the most?

Luis: (laughing) Lost lost? In English.

G: In English?

Luis: In ELD

G: En ELD!

Luis: I think, because I didn’t understand a thing.

While in this case I suggested the metaphoric use of “lost” to refer to the situation of not understanding anything around, most students used the metaphor to describe their complete lack of comprehension of what was going on around them, just as native speakers of English do to describe not understanding anything in a course or a subject matter.

Through a systematic metaphoric analysis (Cameron & Maslen, 2010) of sections of interview data that referred to learning and using English, I arrived at a series of dichotomies that represent English and the first language as two different spaces or geographical areas, each associated with different emotions. English is a land where one cannot read the landmarks and therefore gets lost, where one doesn’t know what to do, where one feels awkward or, as Pilar says below, “ugly,” where one may sit paralyzed in fear of acting inappropriately and being judged the wrong way. After all, as Patricia said, you can be hated for saying the wrong thing and being misunderstood. Four related

metaphorical dichotomies were BEING IN ENGLISH IS BEING ALONE¹⁰ and its correlates BEING IN THE FIRST LANGUAGE IS HAVING A COMMUNITY, THE FIRST LANGUAGE IS FAMILY, and ENGLISH IS STRANGERS.

In Pilar's words below, we see both the idea of being lost in an English-speaking environment and the experience of English speakers as unfamiliar.

G: *Y en las clases en general siempre había algún otro: hispano hablante? O al//guna vez te encontraste sola en una clase?*

Pilar: *//Sí. En la clase del CAHSEE?*

G: *Uh-huh*

Pilar: *Esa fue. Sí la tuve sola.*

G: *Sin ningún otro hispano hablante*

Pilar: *N:ope . y ya esa sí . pero la tome por un poquito [...] Pues lo bueno fue que no fue el primer año que estuve ahí en la escuela sino que ya fue el segundo año so ya sabía mas inglés*

G: *Sabías más inglés*

Pilar: *Sabía más inglés, ya mejor y me sabía desenvolver más ya. Pero sí se siente feo estar allá, "Y qué hago?" (laughs) sin nadie pues que conozcas [...] Se siente feo . se siente como perdido uno [...] Lo bueno es que sí tuve poquito esa clase . luego ya me la quité.*

G: And in general in your classes were there always Spanish speakers? Or //did you ever find yourself alone in a class?\

Pilar: //Yes, in the CAHSEE class?\

G: Uh-huh

Pilar: That was the one. I had it alone.

G: With no other Spanish speaker

Pilar: Nope . and that one, yeah . but I took it for a short time [...] But the good thing was that it wasn't the first year I was there in the school but the second year, so I already knew more English

G: You knew more English

Pilar: I knew more English, better already, and I knew how to manage better. But yeah, it feels ugly to be there, "And what do I do?" (laughs) without anyone you know [...] It feels ugly. It feels like you are lost [...] The good thing is that I had that class for a short time. Then I dropped it.

Something I find interesting in this description, in addition to the choice of the word "ugly" to describe the feeling of being in a class with no other speakers of her first language, was the likening of non-Spanish speaking classmates to people she didn't know. There were other classes where she didn't know anyone, at least during the first few days of the term, but it was when she described being the only Spanish speaker in the class that she brought up the feeling of being among strangers. Even though at this point she knew her way around a little better, the experience was so unpleasant that a few times she mentioned her relief at being able to drop the class when she no longer needed it because she had passed the CAHSEE. Again, the first-language world and its speakers are part of the familiar. And although I suggested the word "alone" first in this interaction, her descriptions of her experiences here and in other parts of our interviews suggest that she felt very much alone when there were no Spanish speakers with her, lost in a different world, a stranger in a strange land. Several of the students I interviewed about their middle and high-school experiences showed similar feelings towards English speakers and speakers of their first languages. When they talked about classmates, neighbors, or even teaching aides who spoke their native languages, they described them as friends, even if the acquaintance didn't go beyond classroom interaction or living in the same building.

Variations of the BEING IN AN ENGLISH-ONLY CONTEXT IS BEING LOST IN A STRANGE LAND metaphor appeared in the language and even in the gestures of other students. During an interview, Harpreet, the Punjabi-speaking student who spent several

¹⁰ In reporting these metaphors, I'm following Lakoff and Johnson's conventions for writing metaphors as SOURCE DOMAIN is TARGET DOMAIN

weeks crying during the eighth grade, mentioned that she had three siblings who had come to the US with her, but they were in elementary and in high school. When I asked her to confirm whether her siblings spoke English, she humorously referred to the fact that they were all lost:

G: But you were all learning English right, so you couldn't help each other?

Harpreet: nods

G: You were all in the same sad situation (laughs)

Harpreet: (laughs and raises her arms to the sky) we are like, (with a pleading tone) "Where we are? Why we are here?"



1 - we are like . "Where we are?"



2 - Why?



3 - Why we are here?"

She describes her predicament by asking the question "Where we are?" a clear allusion to being lost. Her gestures also reflect the powerlessness students experienced in this situation. As she quotes her siblings and herself, she raises her arms to the sky, as if pleading for help from a higher force. She then lowers her arms and puts on an expression of grief. Another student, Kavita, also talked about being "lost" in classes when instructors talk without writing or taking the time to slow down and explain: "that teacher just . was like talking and talking? Yeah and then like the grade I got C 'cause the teacher is just talking and then I couldn't understand? Like I got lost?" Patricia used a gestural metaphor that conveys a similar comparison of the first to the second language during a description of her reading practices. When she talked about how reading comprehension for her proceeded from reading in English, through finding the meaning of words she didn't know, to translating into Korean, to finally understanding: "It's like that . almost Korean people like that." She then explained the process her teachers taught her to follow: "we find the words . we don't about . find the words we don't know . and the::n . and the::n [the teacher] translates my country . my language then translate my language and then understand."



1 - find the words we don't know



2 - and the::n she translates . my country . my language ... my language



As she explained the Korean practice of reading aloud and translating into “own language,” she slid her open left hand, palm and fingers flat, from the periphery of her gesture space towards the center of her body. The gesture shows a conceptualization of translation as a bringing of ideas or objects from outside her space towards a more central place in her world, a “Korean space.”

It is fairly common practice among both ESL instructors and students to refer to the students’ first languages as “your/my” language, even when the students, as was the case with Kavita, have been using English for most of their lives. Kavita herself referred to Hindi as “our language” or “my language” although she had been in the US and speaking some English since she was four years old. References to using “your own words” almost invariably come up in instruction when students are expected to write summaries. In that context, “using one’s own words” contrasts with copying phrases or sentences from a text. This is an interesting expression, since the words can only be English words, and therefore shared by a large proportion of English speakers. Several students described the English they heard early on as really “weird/*raro*.” When I asked Cindy if she spoke any English when she arrived, she said she had learned in China, but not for communicative purposes, and so she was able to use it when she arrived because she discovered that real English was very *weird*.

Cindy: Actually we learned some but you know . maybe it's my fault, you know . not really, you know not really 'cause when I come here I found like... like I don't understand and I can't read . 'cause like really weird in the beginning

Luis and Pilar also spoke of new language as strange, and several students referred to getting to know a language in terms of developing familiarity. During an interview, Pilar described her difficulties with some reading selections and her need to study much more before an upcoming test by repeatedly referring to the language in those texts as weird:

Pilar: *Están medio raras esas palabras, totalmente diferente. Nunca había escuchado esas palabras [...] Sí, le digo, son bien raras . diferentes. Entonces voy a ver si busco más esas palabras para entenderlas un poquito más.*

Pilar: Those words are kind of strange, totally different. I had never heard those words. [...] Yes, I’m telling you, they are really weird . different. So I’m going to see if I can look them up some more so I can understand them a bit more.

Pilar’s many references to the strangeness of the words made it feel as if finding new language forms was akin to being faced with a strange creature, the nature of which is difficult to ascertain, and which must be approached and observed repeatedly to gradually understand it.

A very interesting example of the strangeness of the second language came up in a conversation with Gladys when she was telling me about her struggle reading a piece about Chinese films. She mentioned that she had had a very difficult time understanding who had done what in the story because of her total lack of familiarity with Chinese names:

Gladys: *Sobre todo la pronunciación, por eso es que no se queda. Porque si uno por ejemplo habla de Armando o de Martín, uno ya tiene el nombre relacionado, verdad? Pero así como que esos nombres, o sea, oye, para recordarme que hizo éste y que hizo el otro*

Gladys: Especially the pronunciation. That’s why it doesn’t stick. Because if you speak, for example, about Armando or Martin, you already have connected the names, right? But with these names, I mean, come on, to remember who did this and who did that

I find this interesting because, had *Martín* or *Armando* appeared in the text the student was discussing, they would have had referents as ambiguous as Ang Lee or Yuen Wo-Ping. Familiarity with Spanish names could help Gladys recognize that both people referred to by those names were male, but not much more. But she had access to that information because the text mentioned the sex of Ang Lee and Yuen Wo-Ping several times, as English forces us to do by having to choose between the pronouns *he* and *she* each time we refer to a single person. Spanish names would have provided very few if any extra clues to which particular person each name referred to. What this example illustrates is how the unfamiliar morphology and phonology of these Chinese names contributed to the overall feeling of strangeness. The unfamiliarity of the second language refers not only to the unknown referents/signifiers of language forms, but to the strangeness of the forms themselves. Even if the referent is unknown, the forms of proper names or even unknown words that conform to the first language's morphology and phonology have a familiar sound and look that makes them easier to recognize and remember, and in these ways less unpredictable.

The analysis of students' retrospective accounts of their early experiences learning English suggests that insertion into the second-language environment for most induces fear, lack of confidence, frustration, and, for those who do not speak the language at all and don't have any speakers of their first language to help them, even trauma. It further suggests this period is experienced as being lost in a world that cannot be understood well and cannot be controlled, and that the language is lived as a strange, unfamiliar space, where one is alone if not fortunate enough to have peers or friends who share one's first language. It is not surprising that students describe learning English as requiring the development of confidence and the loss of fear, as Rosie and Pilar did. But getting the sense of things requires being involved with the language to develop familiarity with it and to stop being alone in it. It requires pushing oneself to cope with the anxiety and the uncertainty because, as Pilar put it "*Si usted mismo no se vence su miedo, se queda.*" (If you yourself don't overcome your fear, you get stuck.)

Chapter 4 – The Quest for Intersubjectivity in L2 Communication

Grasping at Straws, and Grabbing Some Language Pieces

¿Qué dice? (nervous smile) Is he talking about this math problem? Sometimes when he talks about some math I learned in my country I think I know how to solve the problem, but I think, "Is that what she is saying?" How can I be sure? I'm trying to grab something here, trying to get a grip, but it's so hard. Sometimes a bit here and a bit there. And I don't want to ask because they won't understand me. I know some words, but how do I piece them together? How do I arrange them in a way they will understand? ¿Qué era esta palabra? I've seen this word before. What was it? (Loud inhalation through the teeth.) It's tough. It's really tough.

Learners who arrive in the second-language environment with no knowledge of English or with only the most basic level of proficiency must find ways into the wall of sound, the seemingly closed-in English system that is hard to chunk and make sense of. This is an effortful, painstaking process that students described as an early period of “trying to understand.” During these early stages students’ “situation models” (Kintsch, 1998), their representation of what transpires around them, is vague, as if the world were enveloped in a thick fog that severely impaired visibility. Their narratives of these early stages of language development include many references, both lexical and gestural, to trying to “grasp” or “catch” language. The grasping metaphors appeared to refer to three different levels. First there was grasping at the level of comprehending language forms as they heard them used by speakers. A second metaphorical use of grasping was related to the first one; it described grabbing language forms that they experienced in use and *being able to hold on to them*, that is, incorporating them into their language inventories. A third meaning was more implied, but it can be gleaned from their descriptions of their language improvement, and with it the mitigation of their feeling of being unmoored when interacting through English. This final use of grasping described emerging language competence as a way of anchoring themselves in the world. Part of the process of grasping the language included having to figure out how to “arrange” or “assemble” language pieces into constructions that were intelligible to themselves and to English speakers. In discussing comprehension, students described having to arrange the language pieces they recognized in a text into a plausible coherent whole. The assembling problem was also one of production: at times they knew what they could say in particular situation, but they were unsure of how to arrange the few language pieces they knew in a way that would make sense to English speakers.

Students who were lucky enough to find speakers of the first language (most often Spanish speakers), found that their L1 peers or teachers and teaching aids were powerful mediators who helped them navigate their social worlds and helped them gain entry into the language. Those who were not as lucky described patient and sympathetic teachers and other students who shared their plight in trying to understand, other English Language Learners (ELLs). Luis¹¹, who spoke no English when he arrived, described how he found a “friend” in an instructional aide who spoke Spanish and translated for him. However, he

¹¹ See appendix C for a complete list of the participants mentioned in the study and relevant demographic information

sometimes found himself in classes where teachers didn't or wouldn't speak Spanish. In the following excerpt of an interview, he describes how the goal for him there was *to try* to make sense of what was going on. The word *try* appears very frequently in descriptions of what it was like in the early stages of language learning.

Luis: *La primera [clase] la tenía con una maestra que no hablaba **nada** español. Bueno los dos . los dos maestros que tenía en inglés no hablaban nada de español. Pero trataban de explicarnos más o menos algunas palabras en español. Pero ellos me decían que no me querían hablar en español "pues si no, así te vas a quedar," me decían. "No vas a aprender nada. Y tienes que tratar la manera de entender lo que nosotros decimos." Como tratar de agarrar una idea de lo que ellos me estan diciendo, más o menos de qué se trata.*

Luis: I had the first [class] with a teacher who spoke **no** Spanish. Well both . both of the ELD instructors spoke no Spanish, but they tried to explain somewhat with a few Spanish words. But they used to tell me that they didn't want to speak Spanish "because if we do, you are going to stay just like this," they used to say. "You're not going to learn anything, and you have to try to find a way to understand what we say," like try to get an idea of what they were telling me, more or less what it was about.

The lexical choice *try* of course implies an effort to achieve something that is not to be taken for granted. One *tries to do* something when there is a real possibility that one might fail; otherwise one simply *does*. At another point in the interview, Luis explained that when he listened to his high school teachers he "*trataba de como pensar, 'Oh, dijo—habrá dicho tal cosa? No sé.' Tratar de—cómo se llama? Tratar de hace::r una como una predicción algo así.*" (I tried like to think, 'Oh, did he say such and such? I don't know.' I tried to—how do you say it? To try to make a prediction or something like that.) As they described their experiences learning English to me during the interviews I conducted for this study, two other students explicitly referred to their attempts to make sense. Neither one of them spoke Spanish, and they knew no speakers of their first languages—Arabic for Hameed and Punjabi for Harpreet—who could help them in school. Hameed talked about how in one of his classes he gravitated towards the Spanish-speaking group who had an instructional aide who explained things in Spanish.

Hameed: In the science class, there is a lady, but she speak Spanish thas problem, so my teacher was like wondering why I just tried to listen to her when she explained. He told me, "You don't speak Spanish you have to be on the other side (pointing to the left with open palm) of the class so I can, you know, make you to understand." "No- (pointing to the side where the aide was) she-I understand a little bit." He said, "No I want you to understand English not Spanish."

G: So she was there to help students who spoke Spanish?

Hameed: Yeah. And those students they were my friends from like the ESL classes, so: we were like . just trying to understand



1 - I just tried to listen to her



2 - you have to be on the other side"

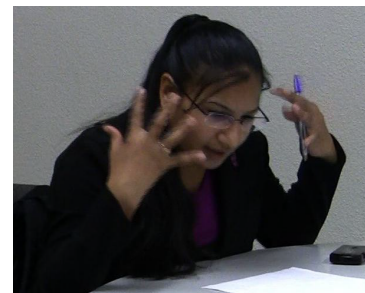
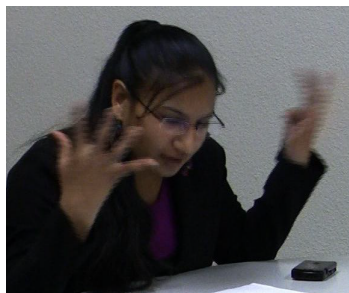


3 - . "No-she-I understand a little..."

In image 1, Hameed points to the Spanish-speaking teaching aide as he says he was trying to listen to her. As other students did when they recalled past experiences, Hameed shifts his gaze to the left and right as he refers to different spaces within the classroom. Hameed's teacher wanted him to join the English speaking side of the class so he could learn English, and Hameed locates the English-speaking side by pointing to his left as he quotes his teacher's words (image 2). But Hameed wanted to listen to the Spanish TA. It is possible that having a second chance to hear what the teacher had explained in English, now explained by the instructional aide in Spanish, would give him a chance to form a clearer impression of what was going on. He could "understand" a little bit, he said, probably from observing the interaction between the TA and the group of Spanish speakers. But Hameed later suggests another reason for wanting to join that side of the class. He saw himself as sharing a common plight, if not a common language, with Spanish-speaking students. They were all just "trying to understand." In fact, Hameed started to learn bits of Spanish, and by the time of this study he could maintain simple interactions in that language with his Spanish-speaking classmates. In the previous chapter I described the feelings of strangeness and loneliness associated with the second language in the early stages of learning. In light of that experience, it is not surprising that Hameed seemed to find some comfort in the company of Spanish-speakers, a group that shared with him a common position vis-à-vis the second language, that of strangers trying to penetrate it.

Harpreet referred to her experience in very similar terms when she talked about how she coped during the first few months. The gesture with which she represented her trying is full of energy and insistence, four quick beats with her hands indicating the barrage of oncoming language and her attempt to keep up with it, and her view of other ELL students parallels Hameed's in that she sees them as being "like her" and therefore sympathetic to her predicament and supportive of her attempts to understand.

Harpreet: And then I'm trying to listen with other people in English. They help me in my classes [...] In science class, teacher so: nice, she will help with like if I don't understand she explain me like how to do it and I (hands about a foot on each side of her head, palms facing her, move quickly towards her head, four beats) I trying to figure out what she's trying to say and then: . other students also trying to help me because they are other countries they are also like me



Harpreet: ...I'm trying to figure out what she trying to say...

These images show three moments of one single beat of Harpreet's "trying to figure out" gesture. Each beat's stroke coincided with one of the underlined syllables in her speech. Trying is indeed effortful, because breaking down the barrage of sound is no easy matter. Even for students who speak a related language like Spanish and use the same writing system, the morphological similarity of words is often masked by the phonological

alienness of the English sound system compressed into real-time speech. Their attempts to make sense often yielded a few chunks of language here and there, chunks they tried to hold on to and onto which they tried to hook an interpretation of what took place around them. It was in referring to this process that students used UNDERSTANDING A LANGUAGE FORM IS GRABBING IT and similar metaphors such as UNDERSTANDING IS CATCHING, both in their speech and gestures.

Eventually, this process of grabbing language forms, a few at a time, allows learners opportunities to grab, and hold on to, the language and thus find their bearings in the English-speaking contexts in which they participate. Pilar used this metaphor when she talked about the end of her second year in a US high school. Her ELD teacher told her she was ready to move on to ELD three, but Pilar decided to stay in ELD 2. “*Yo quería seguir en el dos para seguir con ella porque yo sabía que si seguía con ella lo iba a agarrar más.*” (I wanted to continue in the second level because I knew that if I continued with [the same teacher] I would catch more.) She had described this particular teacher as a good teacher, and her classes as the place where she learned most of her English, so she saw her staying in this particular teacher’s class as maximizing her opportunities to “catch more.” Luis also used the “grabbing” metaphor repeatedly during interviews, both for understanding bits of language as he experienced them in context and for developing some basic proficiency in English. He said when he arrived in his US high school, “*me pusieron en el primer nivel. Y ya ahí fui como agarrando como se decían poquitas cosas, no todo pero ya iba agarrando la idea de que era el inglés, verdad?*” (They put me in level 1, and there I started to grab/understand how one says a few things, not everything, but I was grabbing/getting the idea of what English was, right?)

The first sense of the verb *agarrar* in Spanish is to “grab firmly,” but the word is also used metaphorically in several Latin-American countries to mean *captar* or “understand” (Real Academia Española). This suggests that Spanish speakers may conceptualize understanding in terms of grabbing due to the influence of their first language. Research in cognitive linguistics has found that the way ideas, such as motion, are construed by the first language influences how speakers express those ideas in gesture (McNeill & Duncan, 2000) or a second language (Cadierno, 2008).

However, non-Spanish speakers used similar metaphors. Cindy, a Mandarin speaker, referred to how she used to look up all the words she didn’t know, but later in the semester she had stopped trying to “catch” all those words because it was too time consuming. Asha described how she started to learn English at home in Sri Lanka. English was her father’s dominant language, and he wanted the children to learn the language, but they did not receive systematic instruction in English. Her father exposed her to English by talking to her and giving her comics and other reading materials. She explained what she perceived to be a haphazard way of learning the language in the following excerpt of an interview:



Asha: English was like a second language to us so we never had time to learn properly, like from the basic we never learned. Just getting from here and there (gestures grabbing things from right and left) and all over the world, watching TV (points to the TV set in the interview room) we’ll (both hands move towards her head) get something. Like that only I got it.

This suggests that the experience of understanding is conceptualized as one of grabbing across a variety of first language backgrounds. Lakoff and Johnson have identified UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING as a common metaphor in English (1980; Johnson, 2007). If understanding an idea is like grabbing an object, ideas that are *beyond* us because we are not familiar with the language are also out of our reach and control.



Asha grabbed English from her home environment

Grabbing words and short constructions may give us something to hold on to in the early phases of second language learning, but if we are to move beyond the most vague understanding of what is going on and the most basic expression of our needs, we need to produce some language to gain some control over our environment. Sooner or later we need to move into longer stretches of discourse, and that requires a deeper knowledge of language routines and conventional ways of combining language pieces. The work of making sense of the language and using it in production becomes a more active construction process, where meaning is not so much grabbed, but actively built. When referring to this process, students used a variety of metaphors that described the process as assembling, arranging, sticking pieces together, and “giving sense” to unknown words or stretches of text. Luis, for instance, talked about the end of his first year in a US high school as beginning to understand

Luis: *más o menos una que otra cosa* (hands mime grabbing objects from the space in front of him) *y ahí le iba pegando* (two hands approach as if joining pieces picked up in previous gesture) *y entonces iba diciendo "Oh, dijo esto."* (swings right arm downwards and towards the center of his gesture space and snaps fingers)

Luis: more or less a few things (hands mime grabbing objects from the space in front of him) and there I would stick [them together] (two hands approach as if joining pieces picked up in previous gesture) and then I would say “Oh, he said that.” (swings right arm downwards and towards the center of his gesture space and snaps fingers)



Luis grabs pieces of English...



brings them together...



and assembles them

As many of the students in this study, Luis revisits his past self and revoices his inner dialogue as he tried to make sense of what his teachers were saying. He quotes himself at the moment of finally figuring out what his teacher said, and his gestures suggests his satisfaction at being able to understand, something that had been relatively rare until that point. While this gesture can sometimes be used to indicate that something is “a snap,” Luis’s focus on having to join and stick pieces together to get to that point contradict that interpretation of the gesture in this utterance.

Rosie described a similar process of putting the language together when she talked about how she learned English at work. The high school she attended had a high percentage of Spanish speakers and thus even many of her textbooks were in Spanish. But at seventeen she started working at a Burger King, where several of her coworkers didn’t speak Spanish. She gradually “gathered” language chunks “here and there” and “joined” them, often having to “tear down” what she had built and rebuild it again, and by the end of her sophomore year she was already “grasping” the language. Similar metaphorical expressions showed up when I asked students to tell me what they understood from a reading passage or to talk about their reading process. At a time when she was having difficulty explaining the meaning of a passage from her textbook, Carolina kept repeating the meaning of several of the words and tried to describe her situation model of the text meaning. While she seemed to understand most of the words, at some point she became frustrated and said, “*Ay, no puedo acomodar todo esto*” (Ah, I can’t arrange all this.) Luis talked about having to shape the meaning of a text. He started by reading the entire text while underlining words that he felt he needed to look up because he had no idea what they meant in context. He then looked up those words and reread the text, this time “*formando*,” or giving shape, to the meaning of the text (emphasis in interviewee’s speech).

In these descriptions of their early stage of language development, assembling complex conceptual/linguistic construction is construed as assembling smaller pieces into larger objects.

This conceptualization of meaning as something that can be gripped and handled is consistent with the feelings of insecurity, incompetence, and fear that the participants of this study expressed when they referred to early stages of second language development, when they knew almost no English. Gradually grabbing and holding onto language chunks could give them a measure of control over their environments. But grabbing second language forms is difficult, especially in conversation, because they are slippery and fleeting as fish swimming by, their outlines distorted by what seems to these students the murky water of the English medium.

In the Fog of the Second Language

In the students’ descriptions of this phase, there is a pervasive feeling of the vagueness of their experience of meaning conveyed in the second language. Many of the interviewees voiced this experience in quoting their thoughts as they faced English speakers and doubted whether they could really understand what they heard. Pilar, for example, talked about her high school algebra class as being one of the easier environments for her when she was in high school. She had learned algebra in El Salvador, so she was familiar with the language of mathematics that she saw in her US class. Still, hearing her teacher talk about the exercises she was working on brought on doubts about whether she

was really seeing what she thought she saw. She said, *“cuando le hablan así en inglés se le hace otra cosa en la cabeza y no sabe pero cuando ve el ejercicio como que se le viene un poquito así, pero cuando se lo explican, ‘Qué dice?’”* (When they talk to you like that, in English, you get a different thing in your mind and you don’t know, but when you see the exercise it comes to you a little bit, but when they explain, ‘What is she saying?’) I mentioned in the previous chapter that Kavita, a Hindi speaker, had felt lost in a physiology class she had taken at the college because she couldn’t understand most of what her instructor said. She said she was glad her ESL instructor was able to explain things clearly because otherwise she got lost in her classes. Cindy described a similar experience with a high school ELD class. She contrasted her high school teacher to the ESL Reading instructor in this study. She was impressed with her ESL Reading instructor’s ability to explain things clearly and “show” what she meant. She also appreciated that her instructor always wrote the homework on the board “because some teachers tell you. They don’t repeat it. I’m like, ‘Is that homework or . not?’” She later said she had decided to take more reading at the community college because when she was in high school “even we’re reading something it’s like...I’m not sure I’m understand or not.”

The vagueness of the second language is not a clearly bounded stage that students go through suddenly to emerge into a phase of complete certainty. Rather, it is a stage that pervades early experiences of the second language and gradually retreats as students become more familiar with certain domains and environments. Many of the students I interviewed and observed reported that, even though they could sometimes understand what was going on after a few months of exposure to English, their doubts continued. During the semester when they enrolled in the course I studied, many of them were still struggling with the meaning of complex texts, and reported the same perception that language was often vague or blurry. They often used metaphorical expressions that depicted their partial comprehension as an inability to see clearly. Luis, for instance, described his second year in a US high school in these words:

Luis: *Ya en ELD 2 pues ya . ya fui más, como más agarrando, escuchando? Ya entendía un poco más de la maestra. Ya nomás cuando uno decía “tienen que hacer tal cosa” . en inglés verdad nos decía todo eso, ya decía “Oh.” Ya entendía (squints) más o menos.*

Luis: In ELD two I already started catching more, listening? I used to understand the teacher a bit more. When she would tell us “you have to do such and such” . she told us all that in English, right? And I already used to say “Oh.” I was already starting to understand . (squints) more or less.

While beginning to understand felt like a great relief to students because they were not as lost and helpless as they had initially been, several verbal and nonverbal features Luis’s presentation reveal that he was by no means sensing a clear cut transition into the end of his struggle to make sense. While he quotes himself saying “Oh,” a common marker used to convey a change of state in the speaker’s understanding of the situation (Heritage, 1984), and in this way suggests that he has reached congruence with what the teacher said, he also squints and briefly pauses after the “Oh,” and then adds “more or less,” thus hedging his claim that he had grasped the meaning. His use of the Spanish imperfect aspect in *entendía*, and *decía* is also another clue to the gradual nature of beginning to see meaning in the language. The imperfect marks events as ongoing at a focused on time in the past or as habitual or recurring past actions (Silva-Corvalán, 1983). In this case, the effect is that the

events are presented as a developing process, a gradual movement towards more understanding. The use of *como* before *más agarrando* to qualify his grasp of the meaning of the language he heard is equivalent to the English expression *like*, which is often used, among other functions, to represent the subsequent characterization as an approximation or a likeness to the actual experience. Luis's squinting in this passage also suggests another metaphor frequently used when students discussed their grasp of the second language and also used extensively by English speakers: UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Johnson, 2007). Squinting helps us bring blurry images into focus. Carolina used a related facial expression during an interview when I explained the meaning of several words she had misinterpreted. As she heard my explanations of the actual meanings of words she had misunderstood, Carolina open her eyes very wide and stared at the text, suggestive of how eye-opening it was to discover the true meaning of the language forms in question.

Another way to gain access to the students' lived experience of the second-language fog is to listen to what they say when they are trying to demonstrate or clarify the meaning of a language form. When students tried to explain the meaning of words or phrases to each other in the ESL class I studied, they often gave a partial or inaccurate meaning. Explaining one's understanding of a concept is not simple even for very fluent speakers, much less so for students with emerging fluency in the language. We cannot assume that the students' explanations are a complete or accurate representation of their knowledge. But looking at what they do say and at *how* they say it can give us access to some aspects of semantic development in the target language. In some cases, it may even be possible to trace how the students arrived at their interpretations. In one instance, Marilou, a Tagalog-speaking student, explained the meaning of the word *essential* as "a small part." The context where the word appeared was a prompt that asked students to choose a word that was essential to understanding the main idea of an article they had read. In an earlier class meeting, however, the students had read a section of their textbook that included the word *kernel* and in a previewing vocabulary activity the text glossed the meaning of *kernel* as "a small but essential part." It is likely that the student had associated the words *essential* and *small* from that experience, and that when her classmate asked her what *essential* meant she recalled the context of the word as its meaning. It seems that she had not consciously tried to use the context of *essential* to deduce its likely meaning because, had she done so, she could probably have used "but" as a clue that the words *essential* and *small* are not similar in meaning, that the quality *essential* is somewhat unexpected of something that is also a small feature of an event or entity. *But* is a high frequency word that students at Marilou's level of proficiency are familiar with. This suggests that Marilou either did not attend to the relationships between words in the phrase "small but essential" or that her language skills were not sophisticated enough to allow her to make that inference. She seemed to be relying—consciously or unconsciously—simply on the situational co-occurrence of words to gradually construct meanings. Some examples suggest that students may arrive at the wrong meaning of a language form by drawing on more sophisticated meaning-making processes. Carolina, for instance, said that a *TV set* was a "place." The minimal context provided by the textbook did not make the referent completely unambiguous. It is possible that the student was already familiar with the meaning of a movie set or that she found the meaning of *set* in a dictionary and concluded that the TV set was the space where they film a movie scene. Speakers who have extensive

experience with the language are aware that the word *set* more frequently refers to a device used for receiving TV signals, but learners often haven't had exposure to enough language exemplars to be aware of the probability of certain meanings, and in familiar contexts people refer to a TV set simply as a *TV*, so it is possible the student hadn't even encountered the word *set* in that context.

Other examples of incorrect meanings that students' arrived at suggest that they were based on a partial understanding of the situation in which they had encountered the language form. During a classroom conversation, Miguel explained the meaning of the word *mined* in the sentence "Copper is mined in Chile" as "*enterrado o algo así*" (buried or something like that). I do not have a record of how the student came to such an understanding of the word *mine*, but it is plausible that someone had explained to him that mining involves taking things from the ground, and that he had grasped and held on to that aspect of the meaning and concluded the word meant something "like buried." In another example, on being asked what *synonyms* meant, Hameed said it was the opposite of something, and gave "good" versus "bad" as an example. While the word *synonym* is more frequent than *antonym* in English, in language classes they are often taught together, possibly setting up a situation where students, in experiencing both items in the same context, come to associate them and later have difficulty telling which is which. In this case Hameed seems to have remembered the meaning of one of the words, but had attached the meaning to the wrong sign. He then doubted himself and whispered "the meaning" with rising intonation. While the students' glosses often showed that they had grasped and held on to some aspect of a situation in which a word or expression could be used, it is not possible to determine if the students had experienced the situation directly or as a simulation constructed from an explanation read in a dictionary or heard from a more proficient speaker. As researchers in embodied cognition have argued, experiencing language forms activates representations of a situation associated with those forms. A learner who has read a dictionary definition or typical examples (which are often included in dictionaries written for language learners), could be deriving contextual features from a situation that was not lived first hand but experienced through language. In a classroom interaction between Cindy, a Mandarin speaker, and Vale, a Spanish speaker, situational features of the meaning of a word are apparent, but it is not possible to determine whether these situations were experienced through actual presence in a situation that involved the word *alleged*, or virtually, through simulations activated by explanations of its meaning. When discussing the meaning of the word *alleged*, Cindy glossed it as "to be denied," and Vale described it as "when sometimes people say something and you say, 'Yeah, it's true' and I say, 'No, it's not true.'" Again in this example we see how a new language form can be associated with features of a situation even when those features are not essential components of its meaning. The concepts Cindy and Vale seem to be referring to, "denial" and "disagreement," can be associated with an allegation, but they are not a defining component of the word's meaning, and the students' emerging understanding of the concept was not accurate enough to allow them to complete the task they were working on.

Several of these examples suggest that when students have had few encounters with a particular language form, the contexts where that form was first experienced greatly influence meaning construction. In fact, when students could not explain the meaning of a word, they sometimes gave an example of a context where they had encountered the word. A Spanish-speaking student who was asked by one of his classmates what *access* meant

said, “access like if you go . if you got access to a computer” and then added “you go to do it.” Another example that suggests there are strong contextual effects of early experiences on meaning construction took place during a unit on the topic of globalization. Susan, the instructor, started by eliciting a definition or examples of the meaning of the term.

Susan: Ok, globalization and antiglobalization. Have you heard these words before? Does anyone know? What does it mean? Can anyone give an example?

Daniel: Any of the countries groups together and the culture and the economic and the social groups together.

Susan: Uh huh. Globalization has something to do with sharing, integrating, combining... Different economies, different cultures from different parts of the world together. Can you give me a specific example of globalization?

Sergio: Internets.

Instructor: Internet.

After eliciting more examples of globalization, Susan asked the class whether they thought globalization was a good or a bad thing. A few students shared some of their opinions about globalization. The instructor then asked the class to free write for a few minutes about globalization and what might be some pros and cons. At this point, several students asked their classmates what globalization meant.¹² Either they had missed Daniel’s explanation and the instructor’s further description, highly likely given the students’ accents and difficulties with listening comprehension, or they hadn’t been able to hold on to the—highly complex and multidimensional—concept. When students shared their free writing with each other, Ashwaq, an Arabic-speaking student, said that globalization was when many people disagree about a political issue, which she probably inferred from the focus on pros and cons and the discussion of the controversy surrounding the topic. A Spanish-speaking student who was not familiar with the meaning of the Spanish cognate *globalización* said globalization was a big protest. She had inferred this interpretation from the image that introduced the chapter, a photograph of a large anti-globalization protest. The subsequent class discussion gave students a chance to flesh out their conceptualizations of the meaning of globalization, but this episode gives us an opportunity to look at one moment of the process of meaning construction. When not afforded the chance to clarify the meaning of language forms, learners will make meaning from what they have available to them in the context. And in the early stages of language development, not being able to clarify the meaning of new language forms is the most common scenario. After all, a lot of what learners hear is new language forms, and if they are to function and get things done, they cannot possibly stop to ponder the exact meaning of every word.

These examples illustrate what Michael Tomasello has called the “packaging problem” in language acquisition. For children acquiring their first language, the task of mapping language forms to meaning is very complex because it requires identifying which specific “aspects of a situation are relevant for a new word’s meaning” (p. 70, 2003). This problem seems to affect second language learners as well when they are acquiring language forms from exposure to them in context. Learners are not able to select all and only the relevant features that are part of a language form’s meaning from the context of one situation. The extent to which we attempt to do so and the features we do select

¹² This was captured by the lapel microphones, but was not audible to the instructor.

depend on the salience of the language and contextual features of the interaction, and salience is not uniform, just as knowledge of a language is not distributed uniformly among all its speakers. Salience, as Schutz compellingly put it, is determined for each of us by our stock of knowledge and interests at hand (1970). Thus, emerging language knowledge is skewed towards aspects of the situation—actual or simulated—of a particular language form, the aspects made salient by “our system of relevancies” (p. 74) from among those present in the situations where we first encountered those forms. Since members of a group to a large extent share the experiences of the social group, and since there are some commonalities to the experiences of different groups, some features of the context are likely to be salient to a large number of participants.

Emotionally charged talk or situations often draw our attention because they are likely to have significance to our wellbeing and survival. One vivid example from the data I collected for this study involves the word *meltdown*. The concept of a meltdown was addressed by the instructor as one of the many potentially new language forms that get identified and discussed in a language classroom. But the particular circumstances of its use led to strong interest on the part of the students. The instructor illustrated a meltdown by referring to an incident that had taken place a few days earlier. In addition to having cameras constantly recording her every move, the instructor was going through a difficult transition in her personal life. On that earlier day, she had become frustrated with several students who continued to chat while she was talking to the class and she had raised her voice at one of the students. She immediately apologized and, in a brief but emotional moment, explained that she was going through a difficult time and wanted the class to “be nice to her.” It was a fairly minor incident, but students are not often treated to a show of vulnerability by their instructors, and this particular instructor, with her many years of experience in the classroom and her extensive professional development, was usually in control of her emotions.

On the day the word *meltdown* became the focus of attention, the instructor illustrated one of the uses of *meltdown* by referring to that emotional episode:

Susan: Meltdown! Everybody remembers what happened a couple of weeks ago in class for me?

What’s meltdown?

Ashwaq: You got mad?

Leticia: Failure.

Harpreet: Angry?

The instructor referred to when she had “yelled” at them. She then explained that a meltdown is “a big failure, a big breakdown” and explained that meltdown can also refer to a big failure of a country’s or the global economy. The classroom audio and video data show that students became more engaged during this discussion. They asked each other what *meltdown* meant. Asha, who had been absent on the day that the instructor referred to, asked her classmate what had happened. As the instructor explained and provided illustrations of the concept, Ashwaq and Harpreet talked to each about their own explanation of the meaning of meltdown. Interestingly, although the text where the word appeared was about globalization and economic meltdowns, students did not pick up the economic or the more general meaning of a failure but focused instead of the emotional aspects of the context in constructing a signified.

Harpreet: (Softly to Ashwaq) What is that mean? Meltdown?

Susan: But meltdown means . a situation is gettin::g ...
Ashwaq: (fairly loud but Susan doesn't hear) //Lost?\\
Susan: //Really\\ bad
Ashwaq: (softly) lost
Harpreet: [give me a::]
Ashwaq: Lost
Harpreet: [give me a::] XXX . lost?
Ashwaq: Lost . if you're emotiona:l
Harpreet: Not happy?
Ashwaq: X . emotional . lost emotional

The emotional aspects of this word probably appeared much more consequential to the students, and from the instructor's description of her emotional moment Ashwaq seems to have made the inference that a meltdown is a situation where one "loses it." In this episode, one feature of the situation, because of its salience to students, was attended to and used to construct the meaning of the new language form, while other meanings/situational uses of meltdown that the instructor used as examples were not attended to the same extent.

So far I have mostly addressed meaning at the world level. This is partly reflective of the students' focus on words rather than on longer constructions. But there were also cases when students had difficulty with constructions above the word level. For instance, Sergio once had difficulty interpreting the meaning of a reading passage, and one of the problems was that he didn't seem to recognize the construction *as much* + noun + *as*. He insisted to Miguel that the sentence "No one in the set had as much influence over the director as Yuen Wo Ping" meant that no one had much influence over the director. In several examples involving constructions students seemed misled by their attention to single words, not recognizing that certain combinations of words are unique signifiers whose meanings cannot be derived by adding the contribution of each component word. During a class meeting when students were using their dictionaries to find the meanings of words in a text, Carolina noticed that the worksheet had a space to write down the part of speech of each target word. She looked at her worksheet for several seconds and mouthed "part of speech," then looked around. After a few minutes, she began to copy the sentence from the reading where each target word appeared. While *part of speech* was unfamiliar enough to draw her attention, she seems to have approached figuring out the meaning by putting together the meaning of the construction's individual words and concluded that she needed to write down the "section of text" where the word appeared. She was familiar with the word *speech* from at least one other context; she had prepared speeches for her oral communication classes, and she seems to have relied on analogical reasoning and inferred that in the context of this exercise, *speech* probably referred to the text, and *part of speech* probably referred to the section of the text where the target lexical item appeared.

My purpose here is not to conduct a thorough analysis of how students approach constructions, which would be an interesting pursuit, but would require much more space than I have. Instead, I'm trying to illustrate how it is that even—perhaps *especially*—language that seems familiar to students is often misleading because their emerging knowledge of language forms is not detailed enough to allow them to make the correct inferences. Emerging second language knowledge consists largely of language forms that are partially known, but whose representations in the mind of the learner may not include aspects of meaning that are crucial to the situation in which they are trying to interpret

those forms. In addition, there is a large number of language forms that are completely unknown, and forms that students think they know but whose meaning they arrive at by a process of analogical reasoning or statistical inferencing that does not produce the target like meanings and functions. The combination of all these sources no doubt contributes to the perceived vagueness of the second language as a whole.

In addition to the sketchy and contextually skewed nature of the knowledge of language students have encountered a limited number of times, students were tripped up by the morphological similarity of new words to other words they knew. A student interpreted the word *inequality* as “no quality,” a very reasonable inference, especially considering that when several morphemes combine to form complex words some undergo spelling changes or occur in allomorphic variations. Another student suggested that perhaps *refine* meant “something fine.” Frequently, a word in English can be morphologically similar to a word in the first language, particularly for Spanish speakers. One student thought the word *quite* meant “*quieta*,” or not moving. In this case, the word misled her twice. First, she read *quite* as *quiet*, and then she assumed the meaning was the same as that of the similar looking Spanish word. Another student thought the word *embodies* meant “to take over someone else’s space,” possibly because of its similarity with the word *invade*, especially in Spanish, where both *v* and *b* are pronounced as the voice bilabial stop /b/ or the voiced bilabial fricative /β/. Spanish-speaking students who haven’t learned to discriminate the /v/ and /b/ sounds in English often make spelling and word recognition errors in words with these sounds. These examples suggest that some of the difficulty learners have interpreting the meaning of text or talk stems not only from the large number of language forms they don’t know, but also from those that they *think* they know. Language that looks familiar, in the context of much unknown language, seems to exert a strong pull, and not having the rich situational and emotional associations that only come with extensive experience of language forms prevents students from arriving at the correct inferences.

When students talked about their uncertainty about meaning, they alluded to what they could not see in ways that suggest an intuitive understanding of the dialogic nature of language (Bakhtin, 1986), an awareness of not having access to all the “echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which [an utterance] is related” (p. 91) and which proficient speakers have access to. Sometimes, in discussing the meaning of an expression or a chunk of text, they concluded that they couldn’t be sure, but not because they had any evidence to the contrary. It seems that they just didn’t *feel* certainty because they couldn’t *feel* the meaning of the language they were focusing on. Carolina referred to her distrust of cognates and interlingual homophones, words that are morphologically similar across languages but that do not have the same meaning, which can be misleading to second-language learners (Degani & Tokowicz, 2010). She was discussing the word *characteristics* which does have a Spanish cognate (*características*) and expressed unease with just assuming that she could understand what the English word meant.

Carolina: *Características. Sí, yo se que son características. Me puedo imaginar todas esas cosas (indicates an area to the right of her visual field with her open palm), verdad? Pero hay este: palabras que no exactamente tengo que imaginarme eso sino que van*

Carolina: Characteristics. Yeah I know what characteristics are. I can imagine all those things (indicates an area to the right of her visual field with her open palm), right? But there are uhm: words where I don’t exactly have to imagine but that go

*mucho vas allá [...] que te dicen muchas cosas
. más que eso*

much farther [...] they tell you many things .
much more than that

Language learners have often had few experiences with much of the language they are exposed to and try to use, hence second language forms feel flat. They lack the complexity and nuance that they know a language can have from their first language experience. A language we are proficient in is also charged with emotion and traces of all our previous experiences with the language forms we have heard or read. They are like a thread that when pulled drags with it a whole fabric of shared experience. William James's notion of the "fringes" of words, which Schutz takes up in his phenomenological description of language, taps into something that naïve views of meaning often miss but that some of the students I interviewed understand very well. Words go much farther than what can be given by a simple definition.

Even as students' language proficiency developed, their feeling that the meanings expressed in English were vague persisted in some situations. In classroom interaction and other familiar contexts such as their work environment, where the language forms and interactional routines are predictable, they could "manage" interaction or "*desenvolverse*," cope. But when they needed to make sense of less contextualized language in novel environments, they still reported a lot of struggle. They seemed keenly aware that their emerging knowledge of English couldn't always be relied on. They knew from experience that words often didn't mean what they thought they meant, that sometimes they were pulled towards the meaning of a word that is morphologically similar to the target word but whose meaning is entirely or partly different, that words often meant much more than they thought. They knew or at least intuited that being able to feel all the "fringes" or the "echoes" in language involved a gradual process of development and that in the meantime, the vague memory traces of partially known language can be treacherous.

Pilar once referred to this process during an interview. She had told me that there was a lot of vocabulary that she didn't know in the textbook, and that made reading difficult. I asked her how she dealt with that issue:

Pilar: *Y a veces sí las miro en el diccionario pero todavía es un poquito difícil porque nunca—pues yo no estoy acostumbrada a usarlas, porque nunca—son nuevas pa' mi . algunas y luego: pues sí es un poquito difícil. Pero siempre trato como de entender el significado.*

G: *Y qué funciona para tí, cuando estas tratando de entender una palabra nueva? Qué haces?*

Pilar: *Así como si la tengo yo así y cuando escucho a otras personas hablarlo? Yo ya trato de darle el así como qué significa . es mas fácil saber qué significa para mi en español? Luego usted—si escucha alguien que la menciona usted sí ya se va familiarizando con la palabra*

...

Pilar: *porque hay unas que* (swipes her arm and open hand, palm down, downwards, as if

Pilar: And sometimes I do look them up in the dictionary but it is still a bit difficult because never—well I'm not used to using them because I've never—they are new for me . some of them and then: well yeah it's a bit difficult. But I always try to understand the meaning.

G: And what works for you when you are trying to figure out the meaning of a new word? What do you do?

Pilar: Like if I have it that way and when I hear other people speaking it? I try to give it meaning . it's easier for me to know what they mean in Spanish? Then you—if you hear someone using [the word] you can start to familiarize yourself with the word

...

Pilar: because there are some (swipes her arm and open hand, palm down, downwards,

dismissing something) *son palabras muy raras.*

G: *Sí, sí. Y las traduces pero después también te sirve oír como //la gente*

Pilar: *//Oír como la\ gente las usa para ya sí se le va quitando el miedo a uno de hablar.*

as if dismissing something) . they are very strange

G: Yes, yes. And you translate them but then it also helps you to hear how //people\

Pilar: //Hear how\ people use them to then, yes, get rid of the fear of speaking.

In this excerpt, we see again the conceptualization of the first language or well-known language as “familiar” juxtaposed to the strangeness of new words as the scary unknown. For Pilar, looking up a word in the dictionary or asking someone to explain is only the beginning of getting from strange to familiar. Each successive encounter with the words allows her to gather more information about the form’s function and connotations from its context, and this process gradually converts the word into a familiar object. Language is a tool for action, but learning to use a tool requires seeing how it is used in practice and to what effect; that is, tools derive their “logic” from contexts of practice. Only when we can understand the place of language in meaningful social action do we possess the ability to deploy that tool to act on the world.

During an interview, Carolina illustrates this process of mapping a word’s form with its function and full potential for meaning. When we were discussing a text, Carolina doubted about the word “actually.” I had purposely chosen to ask about the word because it is a false cognate. The word *actualmente* in Spanish means “in the present time, these days.” Speakers of Spanish as a first language who are at low levels of English proficiency often use the word *actually* in non-target like ways to perform the function the word has in their native language.

G: *Qué quiere decir actually?*

Carolina: *Actually? Actually...*

G: *Qué estás pensando? [...]*

Carolina: *Sí, lo que pasa es que lo escucho mucho ese actually, como “oh, no actually I wanted to say...”*

G: *Mh-hmh mh-hmh*

Carolina: *...es como . como “de verdad quise decir” o “verdaderamente” . algo así .*

G: *Mh-hmh. Mh-hmh. No dijiste actualmente, muy bien.*

Carolina: *Y sí cuando lo empecé a escuchar lo escuchaba mucho de mi niña . o de sus amiguitas . que lo usan lo usan en cada instante? Y “actually actually” . y . y le dije . “Hija, qué quiere decir eso? . es como actualmente?” . o sea las escuchaba hablar y no lo ubicaba eso . decía, “Por qué dicen eso? ¿Por qué dicen eso?”*

G: What does “actually” mean?

Carolina: Actually? Actually...

G: What are you thinking? [...]

Carolina: Yes, what happens is that I hear that “actually” a lot, like “oh, no actually I wanted to say...”

G: *Mh-hmh mh-hmh*

Carolina: ...it’s like . like “In fact I wanted to say” or “really” . or something like that

G: *Mh-hmh. Mh-hmh. You didn’t say actualmente, very good.*

Carolina: And yes when I started to hear it I heard it a lot from my girl . or from her little friends . who use it use it all the time? And “actually actually” . and . I said . “Daughter, what does that mean? Is it like *actualmente?*” I mean, I was listening to them talk and I couldn’t place it . I was, “Why do they say that? Why do they say that?”

Carolina’s description of her multiple experiences with the English word through time reveal her growing discomfort with her early understanding of the word and the dissonance it created when she tried to interpret the situation using the Spanish meaning. By the time of this interview, she still doubted her growing intuitions. She doubted before telling me what she thought the word meant, and when she responded to my follow up

prompt, she hedged her answer with “*es como*” (it is like). But she had already approximated the English meaning. Interestingly, she quotes a speaker saying the word in the English phrase, “Oh, no. Actually I wanted to say...” This probably allows her to simulate the situation and intended meaning of a speaker and retrieve the function of the word. While her knowledge of the word was target-like, it seems to have been partly unreflected on, embedded in the neural routines associated to the situations of its use, at least until she had to bring it to the level of awareness to demonstrate her knowledge in answer to my question.

One way in which I tried to understand the product of the students’ sense-making process was to ask them to read short passages for me and show what they understood that text to mean. As I explained earlier, in the section on methodology, I gave students many different options to show what they knew, including giving informal definitions, citing examples of how language forms might be used, miming, drawing, and translating into their first language. I then tried to reconstruct the passage the students had read, keeping intact all the words and expressions they had demonstrated adequate knowledge of, and replacing the rest of the passage with their interpretations. The following is one of the passages I used from this data collection instrument:

But what, exactly, *are* urban legends? For one thing, despite their name they do not necessarily concern big cities. A better name for them might be *contemporary legends*. The name urban legends—which was invented by folklorist Richard Dowson [sic] in the 1960s—was first used to distinguish them from legends of an earlier time, which primarily had rural settings. But in some ways the term *urban legend* is quite appropriate. Just as many medieval stories were set in forests, full of dangers and mysteries, many modern legends take place in big cities. Our cities sometimes seem as frightening as those dark forests did to our ancestors.

This was part of a text on urban legends that the class had discussed during four class meetings. The following version is the result of my reconstruction of Hameed’s understanding of the passage. In terms of proficiency and reading ability, Hameed was in the middle range for this class. Bold letters indicate Hameed’s explanation of the meanings of the words or phrases they replace, question marks indicate Hameed’s expressed doubts about his understanding of the meaning, and XXXX indicates an unknown word or expression.

But what, exactly, *are* **how they make something animals?** For one thing, **belong to someone?** their name they do not necessarily **have** big cities. A better name for them might be **a lot animals**. The name **how they make something animals?**—which was invented by **name** Richard Dowson in the 1960s—was first used to XXXX them from **animals?** of an earlier time, which **probably** had **like the way they talk?** settings. But in some ways the **period of time how they make something animals?** is quite **how they make something**. Just as many **fake** stories were set in XXXX, full of dangers and **something dangerous**, many XXXX **animals** take place in big cities. Our cities sometimes seem as **busy/crowded** as those dark forests did to our ancestors.

There are, of course, limitations to the conclusions we can draw from this exercise. It is difficult to determine to what extent the product is an artifact of the data collection. Nonetheless, this artifact gives us a way to try to see the cumulative effect of partially unknown language forms on the overall meaning of a section of text.

Meaning: Found in Translation

The indeterminacy of meaning is not exclusively a second language issue. Some semioticians and philosophers of language have attempted to demonstrate that all language is ambiguous. With his discussions of *différence/différance*, for example, Jacques Derrida (1982) has attempted to illustrate how language signs can never refer to an entity or phenomenon outside the system of language. Derrida takes up and extends Saussure's idea of *value*, the notion that language signifies only by virtue of the difference or opposition of each sign to all the other signs it is not and to the whole system of signification. Since signs point to more signs which in turn point to more signs, meaning is infinitely deferred.

Many discussions of language and signification have looked at ambiguity without necessarily going as far as the apparent epistemological relativism proposed by Derrida. In fact, much work in pragmatics is an attempt to articulate how speakers make sense of potentially ambiguous language forms in interaction, whether it be through conversational maxims, as in Grice's case (2006), or through relationships between language forms—illocutionary acts, their intended functions—illocutionary intent, and the response that they actually achieve—perlocutionary effects (Austin, 1962). But what prompted many of these analyses is that speakers *are* in fact able to make sense of language in spite of its apparent ambiguity. Speakers are able to identify what a language form does in addition to what it looks and sounds like. The phenomenological “natural attitude” (Schutz, 1970) applies not only to expectations about the world as experienced but also to language forms. Actors expect that they will continue to be able to affect their social worlds roughly in the same ways that they have done in the past by deploying the language forms that they have so far used for those purposes. Yes, there are cases when conversations can be ambiguous and speakers are forced to seek repair or confirmation, but by and large we are able to understand a vast majority of the language we encounter and use without constant doubts about whether we are “really” understanding what is going on. The apparent ambiguity of decontextualized language is largely an analyst's problem. In first language interaction, as long as we are interacting with a group we are members of and speaking of domains relatively familiar to us, that is, as long as we are not the “stranger” described by Schutz, speakers manage to operate with a fair degree of certainty.

Perhaps a good way to illustrate the vagueness of second-language meaning is to contrast it with how speakers experience their first and second languages. The students who participated in this study manifested their lived experiences with both languages in a variety of implicit and explicit ways. For instance, it was interesting to see the transformation of the students' interactional styles when they switched to their first languages in the classroom. Their first language exchanges were faster, less hesitant, and sometimes louder than anything they would have attempted in English. Pilar and Arturo, for example, sitting in the front and the back of the classroom respectively, spoke loudly in Spanish to each other. That was the only time I heard either one of them speak in a raised voice. The same was true of three Korean students who had a very quiet demeanor when they spoke English, and two of whom often refused to speak in class even when classmates or the instructor urged them. Students also projected a much more confident self when they had opportunities to explain their L1 knowledge. While most explicit demonstrations of the meaning of English forms were tentative, they seemed very comfortable explaining

the meaning of Spanish words or Chinese pronunciation to their classmates. In one example, Cindy helped another student pronounce Chinese proper names, including the names of cities in China. She then explained:

Cindy: You know why I know how to pronounce this? Shanghai is a part of China—is a city in China—I’m from China

Vale: Oh

Cindy: And Tokyo I X went to there

The students’ roles were reversed during another episode. Here Vale was able to explain to Cindy what several words meant because she knew them in Spanish. The two students were checking answers to a matching vocabulary preview exercise, and one question asked them to provide a word that had the same meaning as *invented*. Vale said she had answered *created*. Cindy had a different answer and asked Vale whether she thought her own answer could also be correct:

Vale: I know . uh . this one because invited [miscue for invented] . this one is almost the same word as in Spanish... and create is I think is that one

Cindy: You’re Spanish

Vale: Crear—yeah . crear o inventar . create or invited. in- how do you pro—say this one?

Cindy: Uh . in-vented?

Vale: Invented . Mh: spontaneously is almost too

While Spanish speakers at times treated cognates as suspicious because they understand that not all words that look similar across languages have the same meaning, in general students felt much more comfortable interpreting cognates, especially when the Spanish meaning was supported by the context surrounding the word. Unlike their demonstrations of English meaning, their explanations of cognates or first language concepts were not hedged by expressions like “it’s like” (*es como*) or “something like.” They were also not uttered with rising intonation. A completely different stance was often displayed when students attempted to explain the meaning of an English form. At times, when they replied to someone’s question about the meaning of a word, students even suppressed a snicker, as if it were comical that *they* were trying to explain what something meant.

Students also described the vague nature of emerging second-language meaning in explicit references to their first language. During an interaction with her classmate Kavita, when they were trying to understand the meaning of a new expression, Pilar contrasted her ability to **really** know the meaning of a word by looking it up in a monolingual English dictionary versus by translating it into Spanish:

Kavita: I don’t know what this word is . {empholize}

Pilar: Wh-what?

Kavita: Emp—

Pilar: —Emphasize?

Kavita: Uh-huh

(Pilar gets her dictionary and they look up the word together)

...

Kavita: To show that an opinion idea quality {etekstra} [reading “etcetera”] is expensively [miscue for “extremely”] important

Pilar: You don’t like actually . you don’t like to translate the words?

Kavita: Translate?

Pilar: Translate like . to your language?

Kavita: Oh, yeah . uh-huh

Pilar: It's like actually easy . 'cause you actually **know** what they . mean

Kavita: Yeah . that's true . yeah

Pilar's use of "actually" and her emphasis on "know" shows by implication that English definitions do not give her the firm grasp on meaning that Spanish words do, and that one can only really **know** when knowledge is articulated in the first language. She later tells Kavita that when she arrived in the US she was constantly looking things up in her Spanish-English electronic translator. Several other students reported that they often needed to translate English words to really understand them, including Miguel, who was a very strong reader and had achieved a very high level of proficiency, especially in written English. As I reported earlier, Patricia explained that Korean students are taught to translate English texts into their first language in order to understand them, and that even though she would like to "just English understand, not translate" she is still stuck at the stage of having to translate. She broke down the process of comprehending English texts into three discrete steps: first looking up the Korean equivalent of single English words, then translating, presumably at the discourse level, and finally understanding.



Patricia: ...translate the words .
then translate our



language . and then



. understand

When students encountered complex tasks or ambiguous contexts, they often switched to their first languages, even if sometimes no one around them could understand it. Arturo and Alexa, a Spanish-speaking couple who often sat and worked together, were once working on a passage and trying to determine whether a set of sentences could be considered correct inferences based on the information given in the reading. They proceeded by reading the sentence first in English and, if it seemed unproblematic enough, they quickly answered in English whether they thought it was correct or not. However, when they read a statement that was not unambiguously true or false, they often translated it into Spanish out loud and then discussed whether it could be inferred from the text or not. In another instance I had a long interaction with Ashwaq, trying to help her understand a very "tricky" question. (I quote and discuss this interaction in detail in the final section of this chapter.) It took many turns for Ashwaq and me to finally determine that she had understood the question and the answer, so she was very surprised when she finally "got" it. During the last few turns of our interaction she used several markers of surprise and of having arrived at a new understanding. Still, after thanking me, she said, "I have to think about it now in my language," and after a deep sigh she began speaking to herself softly in Arabic as she took notes on her textbook. In spite of all her "ohs" and "wows," she still felt that she had to use her own language to be able to hold on to the

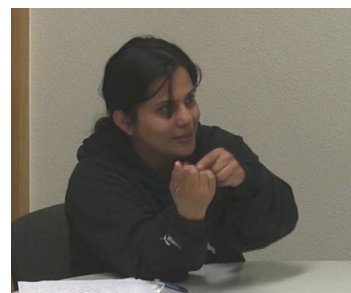
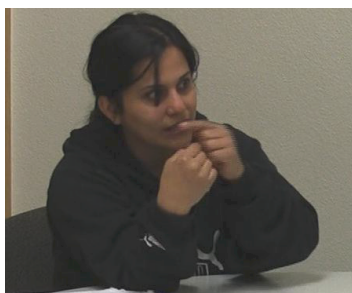
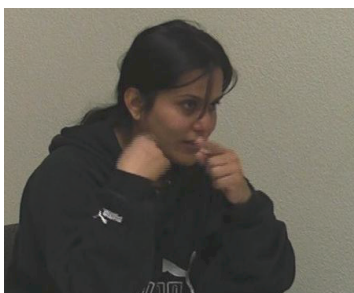
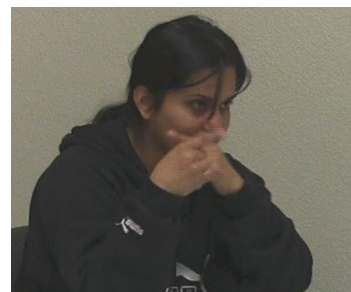
meaning of the situation. When the class went over the answers to the exercise and Ashwaq discovered that she had several incorrect answers she muttered, “Damn. Look how many I don’t know. I’ll translate every word.”

The dependence on translation for meaning making also seems to retreat gradually from different aspects of learners’ lives. From an initial period when everything must be interpreted through the system of the first language, students begin to surprise themselves sometimes simply understanding things. As their experience with the second language grows and the knowledge attached to it becomes saturated, they find themselves able to function without their first language in more contexts and situations. A very articulate and introspective student, Carolina, described this progression during an interview.

Carolina: *Hay un período donde uno empieza . como un trauma horrible . no sé si a usted le pasó de que estaba escuchando (puts index fingers on each side of her head close to each temple) y estaba traduciendo y es (spins fingers away from head and around each other) una maquina y (keeps spinning fingers moving them away from her) no alcanzo-no alcanzo-no alcanzo porque está usted todo todo todo tratando de hacerlo en español español español atrás del que está diciendo pero uno no es un traductor como para hacer eso...*

Carolina: There’s a period where one begins . like a horrible trauma . I don’t know if this happened to you that you were listening (puts index fingers on each side of her head close to each temple) and translating and it is (spins fingers away from head and around each other) a little engine and (keeps spinning fingers moving them away from her) I can’t reach-I can’t reach-I can’t reach because you are trying to do everything in Spanish Spanish Spanish behind the person who is talking but you are not a translator to be able to do that...

As she spoke about translating the language she heard to make sense of it, she illustrated her frantic attempts and her inability to keep up not only with iconic features of her speech, such as the repetition of words in quick succession, but also through her gestures, which show the quick spinning of her mind and the futility of trying to keep up as the English speaker gets farther and farther away from her.



This initial stage of trying to make sense by translating into the first language gradually gave way to just making sense of the second language, but the transition was not clear cut or even evident to Carolina, who surprised herself by discovering that she was no longer translating but simply understanding English.

Y llega el momento en que::: . tú ni siquiera te das cuenta-no lo sientes cuando ya no haces eso. Hasta después me paso a mí, que después yo decía, "Ah, qué raro...Qué pasó?"



And there comes a time when::: . you don't even notice it-you don't feel it when you don't do that anymore. It happened to me later, that I would say, "Oh, how strange. What happened?"

"No traduje." Pero fue con el tiempo, fue con el tiempo. Yo creo sí que sería como a un año de estar aquí.



"I didn't translate." But that was after some time, after some time. I think that it was about a year after I arrived.

Just before narrating this experience, Carolina asked me if this had happened to me when I moved to the US and started using English. It sure did. I clearly remember the exhaustion at the end of each day from the great cognitive effort that Carolina alludes to in her gesture—the frantic trying to keep up with speakers and make sense of their words, and the feeling that we are falling farther and farther behind as the gaps between what they are saying and what we are able to render meaningful through the process of translation keep growing. With time of exposure and extensive opportunities to experience the language, bits of English start to have meaning in their own right, in Merleau-Ponty's words to "secrete" their own meaning (1945), an expression that aptly describes how speakers do not have preexisting thoughts that they can then make visible to others by putting them in a language container. Instead, we often surprise ourselves by discovering our own thoughts as the language is called forth from us by the horizon of possibilities we see in the world. In Carolina's case, it first happened when she said some things, probably those she had been exposed to the most or those that had been more salient because of their significance to her purposes. It gradually spread from there, but at the time of the interview she said that she still found herself translating when she wanted to write something. In the classroom, she could still often be observed reaching for words, and she often unwittingly switched into Spanish when she was interacting with non-Spanish speakers.

Of course, while students may feel that they only really get meaning when they translate English utterances into their own language, it is very likely that the meaning they get is not what is intended or usually understood by proficient speakers of English. The situated, ideological view of language that I articulated earlier implies that even roughly equivalent words across languages have different histories and thus derive meaning from a different set of utterances and social experiences. But it is possible that finding an L1

rough equivalent to an unknown English form allows them to hold on to something that they can then refine through experiencing in interaction, as Pilar said when talking about how she became familiar with words.

The way students describe, illustrate, and enact their experience of meaning in their first and second languages suggests that the vagueness they attribute to English is not simply the intrinsic ambiguity of all language. They know what a familiar language feels like, and they know that English does not bring up in them the precise and distinct images that their native languages do. They know that they often don't understand or they misunderstand English speakers and text. They know that the process of "getting to know" and developing "intimacy" with a language is long and convoluted, and that words can mean a lot more than what they sometimes think they mean. They also feel that dictionary definitions are difficult to understand and give only a very impoverished, skeletal access to language forms' potential for signification and action. They know these things about themselves and they know these things about each other, and this awareness has important implications for how they communicate and attempt to make sense of language in the classroom.

The Challenge of Intersubjectivity

What semiotic description can capture the nature of interaction between two learners of a language communicating through the medium of that language? What exactly takes place when two learners of a language discuss the meaning of certain forms in that language? When proficient speakers of a language communicate, their focus is mostly on reading each other's intentions and arriving at a more or less shared understanding of how to act. Except for cases when we are trying to understand a new concept or language form, most of the time we take for granted the intersubjectively shared nature of form-meaning mappings. Misunderstandings can and do occur, because our positions within our social groups expose us to a slightly different corpus of the shared language. This results in the differential competence that Hymes wrote about (2001), which is not only a feature of heterogeneous speech communities but also of all large stratified societies. But speakers of the same community share enough of a common history to be able to predict what language can be put to what uses, and enough common communicative resources to request and offer clarification when necessary.

In the case of language learners, however, the picture gets a lot more complex. As I discussed in the previous section, by virtue of their limited exposure to English, learners' emerging language knowledge is less defined, less stable, and more biased by the context of previous experiences than that of more proficient speakers. When they speak to each other, they can't be as certain that their interlocutors understand language forms the way they themselves do, or that they themselves understand language forms the way most proficient speakers are likely to. Speakers who have had adequate exposure to certain contexts and language forms can act and communicate in those contexts with a fair degree of predictability. But the language classroom, if it is to fulfill its goal of giving students exposure to and helping them learn new language, must by necessity take learners out of their comfort zones and introduce them into new topics and contexts. When language learners communicate, particularly when they focus on the language they are trying to learn, they must read the intentions of their interlocutors to be able to manage the

interaction, but they must also focus on how the second language is intersubjectively shared by the community of its speakers. Sign use in this speech situation is no longer triadic but quadriadic. Interlocutors must consider language forms, the meanings/functions that they themselves attribute to those forms, the interpretant that their conversational partners map onto those forms, and the intersubjectively shared meaning of the community of speakers. Access to this fourth term of the semiotic situation, beyond the degree to which the learners' knowledge overlaps with that of proficient speakers, is provided by texts or sections of spoken discourse, by dictionaries and other reference materials, and by the instructor and other proficient speakers who may be present in the class.

At the time of this study, most students' language proficiency had improved to the point where they were able to communicate orally in routine contexts and understand most or at least much of what took place in the ESL Reading class, but many of them still reported their difficulty determining the meaning of text, especially the semantically and lexically dense readings in the course textbook. Gladys was a good example. She had arrived in the US in her mid-twenties and had worked in the country for eight years. She felt that she could communicate in her workplace. She reported that, when she told people at work that she was struggling in her English class, they said, "*pero yo te entiendo bien y hablas bien*" (but I understand you well and you speak well). But the nature of her work as a housekeeper exposed her to a limited range of language forms and functions, so she found her proficiency inadequate for engaging with academic texts. Due to the large number of "words" she didn't know, reading required a lot of focus and time. "*Tengo que buscar todo el meaning de las palabras....Tengo que detenerme y relacionarlas con lo que atrás he leído y y decir, 'dirá esto? O a lo mejor no.' Entonces ahí es donde empiezo a atorarme un poquito.*" (I have to look up the meaning of all the words.... I have to stop and relate them to the words I read earlier and say 'could it say this? Or maybe not.' Then there's where I start to get stuck.) Students who had formerly attended US high schools reported that they could understand all the instructions and directions they heard from the teacher (although some of the data I collected indicate that was not always the case), but they had difficulties with readings from the textbooks and with newspaper articles, mostly from the *New York Times*, that the instructor assigned.

When students worked in groups in class, they often had to share short writing assignments or answers to exercises. These discussions often focused on their understanding and responses to texts and explicitly addressed language forms to clarify their meaning. In clarifying meaning, students had to sort through a number of complementary and/or competing clues which included their own previous experiences with language forms, their classmates' articulations of their interpretations, the context (linguistic or thematic) of the text, their dictionaries and translators, the instructor, and myself. Of course, for students, not all forms of evidence were equally valid or accessible. While they seemed to largely trust that dictionaries gave them an "accurate" description of the meaning of language forms, they often reported difficulties understanding dictionary definitions or determining how a language forms could be used. While classmates in a small group setting were very accessible, because they were seen as a safe environment that presented few threats to face, students weren't sure their classmates' could articulate their understandings or, if they did, that those understandings were reliable indicators of how English speakers understood or used those language forms. As a result, students often

asked each other whether they were sure of the answer, checked whether they thought another interpretation or answer was possible, and, when providing the meaning of a language form, they established their authority by explaining how they knew the answer or by providing a fluent, clear definition of the word's meaning.

During an interview, Luis explained how he and his classmates dealt with the indeterminacy of text meaning in class when they checked their answers to comprehension questions in groups. He explained that when they had different answers to homework exercises, he asked his classmates to show him where they found the answer so he could examine the text to see the evidence.

Luis: *Pues yo le digo dónde vi [la respuesta], dónde la encontré, porque no puedo nomás copiarlo. Y qué tal si está mal? Entonces pues ya me dice (points to an imaginary text on the table) "Oh, que aquí esta." Y se ponen [sic] a leer y a . como a (both hands rounded, palms facing each other, fingers slightly spread, move circumscribing a small spherical space) tratar de: . (hand to chin, as if thinking) "Ah, entonces sí estás bien." Pero a veces yo pienso que estoy mal en una pregunta y le digo yo "yo pienso que está mal" y él dice "sí está mal" y él tiene otra pero en realidad yo estoy bien... Cuando le preguntamos a [Susan] ella dice "No, está bien." Y ahí explica por qué.*

...
Ella explica bien, verdad? Entonces sí le entiendo todo porque ella va diciendo y nos muestra donde (quick, strong, vertical point to imaginary textbook in front of him with index finger) dónde es que está . y la-la (holds hands together and rounded fingers pointing down, thumb and fingers opposed and about two inches apart, as if showing large print text in front of him; then separates his hands a few inches) . a veces la respuesta esta clarísima (points to text again) ahí y nosotros .

G: *Cómo te la perdiste, no?*

Luis: *Cómo me la per- (points to answer with open right hand, palm facing up) Cómo la dejé pasar si ahí esta? Ahí está. Si esto es fácil y y y pues aquí está.*

Luis: Well, I tell him where I saw [the answer], where did he find it, because I can't just copy. What if it's wrong? So then he tells me (points to an imaginary text on the table) "Oh, here is it." And they [sic] start to read and to . like to (both hands rounded, palms facing each other, fingers slightly spread, move circumscribing a small spherical space) try to: . (hand to chin, as if thinking) "Ah, then you are right." But sometimes I think that I'm wrong in a question, and I tell him, "I think that I'm wrong" and he says, "yes, it's wrong" and he has a different one but actually I'm correct....When we ask [Susan] she says "No, it's right." And then she explains why.

...
 She explains well, right? So I do understand everything because she gradually tells us and she shows us where (quick, strong, vertical point to imaginary textbook in front of him with index finger) where it is . and the-the (holds hands together and rounded fingers pointing down, thumb and fingers opposed and about two inches apart, as if showing large print text in front of him; then separates his hands a few inches) . sometimes the answer is super clear (points to text again) there and we .

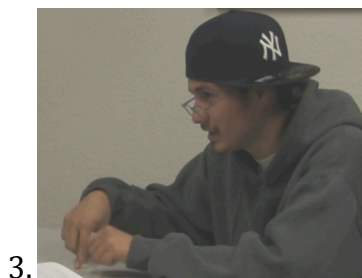
G: How could you miss it, right?

Luis: How could I mi- (points to answer with open right hand, palm facing up) How did I let it go if it's there. **It's there.** If this is really easy and and and it's here.

In this description, Luis's gestures illustrated a clear contrast between a initially fuzzy representation of meaning on the one hand and strong certainty on the other. His indexical gestures changed to reflect the sharpness of his understanding. Initially, when Luis talks about discussing an answer with his classmates, his hands circumscribe a fairly large, round area. His facial expression also conveys doubt. Meaning at this point is a mass they try to detangle.



Once the instructor has shown them the answer, his representation is much better defined, and he describes how Susan unambiguously locates the evidence in a specific part of the text with a very sharp, forceful point to that part of the imaginary text he has in front of him (image 3). The instructor's explanations helped them establish a clear referent. After the meaning of the text was explained to him he could "see" the answer, and the referent seemed so clear that he wondered how he could have missed it. He makes fun of his inability to find the answer earlier by pointing to the answer with both hands curved down, bracketing the text with his thumb and fingers (image 4). Finally, as he says the answer is "right there," he shows it with an open hand with his palm facing up and the tip of his fingers pointing to the place where everyone should be able to see the answer.



Kendon (2004) describes the open hand palm up gesture as an invitation by speakers to consider an object being indicated. One of the functions of this hand shape is to present information as self-evident, an interpretation that is consistent with Luis's use of this gesture to demonstrate his belief that the answer he had missed earlier is there in plain sight for everyone to see. While all these gestures refer to an object by pointing to its location, their shape seems to reflect different epistemic stances. Luis's characterization of his discussions with classmates illustrates the difficulty of "nailing the referent" when two learners communicate.

In the data I collected for this study, there are many instances of classroom interaction where students negotiate the meaning of a language form. However, few of those instances provide conclusive evidence that the students were able to reach a clear understanding of the meaning of the form. In determining when this is the case, it is important to remember that *claims* of understanding are not equivalent to *demonstrations* of understanding (Sacks, 1992). In conversation, one can claim understanding by using an explicit marker such as "yeah" or "oh" and a repetition of the previous utterance or part of the previous utterance. More often, speakers claim understanding simply by omission, by

not making overt requests for clarification and/or by producing a turn that moves the interaction forward (Heritage, 2007; Sacks, 1992). The forces of intersubjectivity (establishing a common understanding) and progressivity (moving the interaction forward) are balanced during conversation. In studies of first-language communication, speakers have been shown to sometimes choose to ignore minor lapses in intersubjectivity, such as lack of recognition of person or place reference, when such lapses do not interfere with their ability to continue the business of interacting (Heritage, 2007). Demonstrations of understanding involve performing some operation on the previous speaker's utterance to produce a new utterance that clearly identifies the referent, but these moves are far less common in conversation than claims of understanding (Sacks, 1992) because they slow down the forward movement of interaction (Heritage, 2007). For that reason, the absence of a demonstration of understanding in no way implies that the listener failed to understand, although this sometimes may be the case.

In the classroom interactions I analyzed, there are quite a few claims of understanding by commission and quite a few by omission—by continuing the conversation *as if* understanding had taken place. Sometimes prosodic features of an utterance or the subsequent conduct of the listener confirmed that what the speaker said had been understood. For instance, in one sequence in which I was involved, a student's elongated "ohs" and "wows" suggest that her mind had undergone a change of state as a result of our interaction. The problematic text was a comprehension question based on a reading passage. The passage mentioned that action choreographer Yuen Wo Ping, of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* fame, used many props as impromptu weapons in his action scenes. The comprehension question asked which of four given choices would **not** (emphasis in the text) be considered an impromptu weapon as explained in the text. The possible answers were "a bottle of wine," "a sword," "a television set," and "a large dictionary." This question is "tricky," as the students said, because it involved several negatives. First, an impromptu weapon is not a real weapon, so students had to focus on what was **not** an actual weapon. But then the question also asks which of those objects is **not** an impromptu weapon, thus requiring that students keep track of a double negative so that they could identify what *was* an actual weapon and thus not an impromptu one. When Ashwaq told me that she didn't understand the answer to that comprehension question, I began by clarifying the meaning of *impromptu* for her to help her notice the first operation she needed to make. In doing so, I established common ground (Clark, 1996) for our discussion of the correct answer. Then, I had her consider the eligibility of the different choices as **not** impromptu weapons:

- 1 G: ...Impromptu mea::ns . it's not . it's not planned that way . you just decide in the last minute
- 2 (grabs a pencil case and mimes hitting someone with it) "Oh I'm gonna hit you with this"
- 3 **Ashwaq:** Oh:::
- 4 G: So this (holding up a pencil case) is not a weapon . but I use it as a weapon now because I don't
- 5 have anything else right? . so . which one is **not** an impromptu weapon? So: can you use a bottle of
- 6 wine to hit some//body?\\
- 7 **Ashwaq:** //Yes\\
- 8 G: Yeah . and it's not a weapon, right?
- 9 **Ashwaq:** Oh::
- 10 G: Can you use a //sword to hit-\\
- 11 **Ashwaq:** //sword\\ yeah
- 12 G: Yeah, but is it a weapon?
- 13 **Ashwaq:** Yeah

14 G: It **is** a weapon
 15 **Ashwaq**: Yeah
 16 G: So it's not an **impromptu** weapon
 17 **Ashwaq**: Mh-hmh
 18 G: Right?
 19 **Ashwaq**: //What about\<\
 20 G: //It's a **real**\\<\
 21 **Ashwaq**: uh-huh
 22 G: A television set-I know, it sounds huge but you can (mimes pushing a tall heavy object) push it
 23 on the cart //and hit somebody so you\<\
 24 **Ashwaq**: //Yeah\<\
 25 G: Right?
 26 **Ashwaq**: Oh::
 27 G: So: . the important thing . impromptu means it's not a real weapon right? It's something that
 28 //is used\<\
 29 **Ashwaq**: //Yeah\<\
 30 G: on the moment there you just grab it an use it
 31 **Ashwaq**: So the bottle of wine? 'Cause you could use a dictionary—
 32 G: —So which one is **not** . an impromptu weapon ... right? ... You can use a bottle of wine . you can
 33 use a television s:-you can use a sword . //right?\<\
 34 **Ashwaq**: //Yeah\<\
 35 G: But a sword is not an **impromptu** weapon . //it's a **real** weapon
 36 **Ashwaq**: //Oh::::
 37 G: It's a **weapon** weapon that's the part that's //confusing you ...
 38 **Ashwaq**: //Wo:::::w\<\
 39 G: An impromptu\<\
 40 **Ashwaq**: //Oh an impromptu\<\
 41 G: but //it's used as a\<\
 42 **Ashwaq**: //Oh::::\<\
 43 G: OK?
 44 (G and Ashwaq laugh)
 45 **Ashwaq**: Thank you

In line 3, with an “oh,” Ashwaq claims understanding of the definition of *impromptu* that I offered and/or of my illustration of an instance of using an impromptu weapon. In lines 5-6, I try to force a demonstration of understanding by repeating the question and then asking her to consider the eligibility of a bottle of wine as a potential weapon. After I point out, in line 8, that a bottle of wine is not a weapon, Ashwaq follows with another claim of understanding in line 9, but what change of state could have taken place here? My previous turn had not introduced any new ideas, except that a bottle of wine is also not an actual weapon. She could be claiming understanding of that fact, but it is unlikely that she had considered a bottle of wine an actual weapon before my turn, so my stating that fact could not have induced a change of state. It is also possible that she had lost track of the double negative in the question prompt, and at this point she thought that in finding an example of an impromptu weapon she had also found the answer to the question. From lines 10 to 24, as I ask Ashwaq to consider whether each of the different objects can be used as a weapon and whether it is, in fact, a weapon, in addition to producing relevant answers to show understanding, she also produces several “continuation markers” (Sacks, 1992) that invite me to proceed with my explanation. Either her claim to having understood my initial definition and example of using an impromptu weapon was not reflective of complete grasp or, more likely, the complexity of manipulating a new concept

and a double negative prevented her from holding on to the form-function mappings she had attempted to grasp. If she had heard enough and wanted me to stop the explanation, she could have produced a clear demonstration of understanding at that point. I strongly suspect, though, that students often let their teachers (and researchers, in this case) get away with longer explanations than is necessary out of deference for their position of authority. But Ashwaq's gaze was intently set on my face and she was not nodding, two other indicators that she wanted to hear more¹³. Also, in line 19, Ashwaq attempts to introduce a new focus, a move which I ineptly failed to see coming and interrupted by overlapping, thus depriving myself of a chance to see the source of her still lingering doubts. However, what she did produce suggests she was about to ask me to consider another choice and to observe my response while I did so, which further indicates that she was still trying to achieve more certainty. In line 26, Ashwaq once again claims understanding with "oh." In this case, the placement of the claim, coupled with the lack of force in its uttering, suggests that what she may have understood at this point, if anything, was how one could use a TV set as a weapon. Several other students had been troubled by this choice because it seemed to them that a TV set does not afford such a use. Maybe she had the same doubts.

In lines 27-30, I again produce the definition of impromptu weapon. I cannot remember what prompted me to do so at that time, but I began my turn with and elongated "so," which prefaces a conclusion, and then I briefly paused. That Ashwaq did not use the pause to fill in the correct answer to the question probably sent me down the path of further repair, and I probably inferred that the problem was still that Ashwaq had not focused on the fact that what she had to identify was not a real weapon by an impromptu weapon. I then restarted with "the important thing," which further suggests I believed she was not paying attention to the impromptu nature of the weapon, and finally produced the meaning of impromptu in the form of a comprehension check, to see if Ashwaq was really aware of that. Ashwaq produces an overlapping turn in line 29 claiming she did understand what impromptu meant. In line 31, Ashwaq asks for further clarification by offering a potential answer, and then again demonstrating her understanding that one of the issues involved is the ability to use non-weapon objects as weapons by producing another example in "Cause you could use a dictionary." But if she could understand the idea of impromptu weapons, and she can identify examples of such a category, why does she return to the choice "a bottle of wine" instead of choosing the only item that was a real weapon? Having heard her question but apparently not her subsequent comment, I initiate further repair in line 32, now by making the negative in "**not** an impromptu weapon" more salient. After a pause, in the same turn, I responded to the second part of Ashwaq's previous turn by adding the two other items that could be used as a weapon but were not weapons. Before actually completing the word "set," I self-repaired and added that a sword can also be used as a weapon in line 33. I followed this with a comprehension check, a "right" with rising intonation, but Ashwaq was already claiming understanding of that piece of information with an overlapping "yeah" (line 34). The purpose of my adding the sword to the list of items that can be used as a weapon can be elucidated by what it built up to. My following turn, in line 35, introduced the idea that a sword not only could be used as a

¹³ Unfortunately, Ashwaq was not comfortable with being videotaped, so she asked me not to show images of her. She did consent to my using transcripts of her speech.

weapon but was an actual weapon, and by implication that the same was not true of the other three items. This seems to have finally done the trick, and in the next few turns Ashwaq produces a series of louder, elongated “ohs” and a “wow.” She further indicates that we have achieved intersubjectivity and what her change of state consists of by adding “impromptu” with a strong emphasis, thus claiming to have now understood what impromptu means *and* its implication for the understanding of the situation. After I moved away, Ashwaq turned to her classmate, Harpreet, who had stepped out of the classroom for a few minutes and had missed my explanation. Ashwaq explained to Harpreet the meaning of impromptu and the correct answer, providing additional evidence that she had reached understanding.

It is not always so easy to find evidence of comprehension in the students’ speech or actions. There are many instances in the classroom data set where it is unclear whether students understood or simply claimed to have understood. This is partly because claims of understandings can be made more or less persuasive by prosodic and gestural information. For instance, in the previous example, Ashwaq’s enthusiastic expressions of surprise, coupled with the fact that her gaze was intently focused on my face and there was a certain level of tension in her facial expression during the explanation, while she had a relaxed smile and her eyes moved around more once she had understood, convinced me that she had heard enough and I walked away—although it was only when I reviewed the audio files and transcribed them that I had conclusive evidence that that was the case. But students were not always as enthusiastic about claiming their understandings, and sometimes they were unequivocally ambiguous. In the following excerpt, Rosie gets Kavita’s attention by asking her what *kidneys* means and then by pointing it out in her textbook. Kavita locates the word and attempts to describe its meaning to Rosie, first with a brief point to her back, then by referring to the fact that there are two of them in the body, and finally by referring to a common situational use of the referent, organ donation. In line 7 Rosie utters a soft “oh,” and then, after Kavita mentions that it is “like” the body part, again another soft “oh” followed by an “OK.”

- 1 **Rosie:** (Points to the word in the textbook) What is that?
- 2 **Kavita:** (Reading the text) “and one of his kidneys had been taken out” . oh oh the thing right . over
- 3 here . (touches her back) kidneys is like . you know on the body they have like two kidneys . one::
- 4 you know they have two so one they donate them
- 5 **Rosie:** One?
- 6 **Kavita:** One he took it out
- 7 **Rosie:** Oh
- 8 **Kavita:** Like the body part
- 9 **Rosie:** Oh, OK

If Rosie is using “oh” as a marker of a change of state that accepts “prior talk as informative” (Heritage, 2007, p. 335), she is indicating to Kavita that she has found the information she was missing and has therefore identified the signified for the word “kidney.” But the sequential placement of the particle in this case raises questions about what it is that Rosie has understood. “Oh” is used to propose that a change of state has occurred *then and there*. But if Rosie was searching for the meaning of *kidney* and Kavita’s answer provided it, it must have happened earlier. There were two brief pauses in Kavita’s speech that gave Rosie a chance to show that no more information was needed or to use a

clarification or a confirmation check. One of them was after Kavita pointed to the area of her back where kidneys are located, and the other one after she said “on the body they have two kidneys.” Instead of indicating congruence or lack of congruence, in line 5 Rosie turned her attention to another ambiguous language form, “one,” which she uttered with rising intonation. Kavita’s next turn, “one he took it out,” may be an attempt to clarify “they donate them,” the stretch of speech that had followed “one” by providing a rough functional equivalent. (In order to donate a kidney, one has to have it taken out.) But it is hard to see how this paraphrase could have gotten Rosie closer to and understanding of the meaning of *kidney*. In the last turn of this exchange, Rosie again says “oh” and this time follows it with an “OK,” a marker often used to close a topic, initiate a new focus or as a transition between activities (Beach, 1995). It is possible that Rosie understood that a kidney is a body part and decided that was enough information for her purpose, or that she didn’t understand but decided that it was too much trouble and potentially face threatening to her classmate and to herself to try to disambiguate the term, and that she could proceed without it.

Absence of evidence, of course, is not evidence of absence. It is possible that Rosie understood what Kavita tried to convey. Still, the contrast of this example with the previous one indicates that there are different strengths to one’s claims of understanding. If we want to leave no doubt that we have understood an utterance, we can emphasize it with more stress, elongated vowels, nods, and so on. Of course, strong claims of understanding also raise the risk to face. If it were discovered or it turned out that we didn’t really understand, we would be more likely to come across as having purposefully misled the other speaker. What’s clear is that a claim of understanding could be made to show understanding, but it could also be made for other reasons. Moreover, even when a claim of understanding is convincing, it is not clear what it is understanding *of*, and misunderstandings are common occurrences in second language communication. Because of the focus on progressivity in conversation (Heritage, 2007)—that is, on moving the interaction forward so as to get on with business, demonstrations of understandings are not common in conversation, and forcing a demonstration of understanding seems to go against conversational norms. Nonetheless, these moves may be necessary to establish that congruence between speakers has been reached when learners of a language interact. Thus, what seems to be a conversational norm in the first language may need to be broken by language learners for the sake of learning to take place.

However compelling the argument on progressivity may be, it does not do justice to phenomenology’s focus on understanding people as purposeful agents for whom their actions have meaning. Garfinkel developed ethnomethodology because of his dissatisfaction with Parsonian action theory, which explained social action in terms that were completely external to the actor’s point of view (Heritage, 1984). In Parsonian theory, normative patterns determined action, and the agents own explanations for their actions were often dismissed. Actors were seen as “judgmental dopes” (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 67-8; Heritage, 1987). Claiming that progressivity moves actors in conversation is not that different from claiming that social norms act behind people’s backs, without their understanding of why they do what they do. It still leaves unexplained the “logic” that compels speakers to move the conversation forward.

I believe especially in second language conversation, attempts to move the conversation forward (or at least make it seem that the conversation is moving forward) may be connected to the speakers’ need to project a valued image of self. Because of the

vagueness of the nature of emerging second-language knowledge, when two non-native speakers interact, it is much more likely that they will misunderstand each other. Reaching intersubjectivity is likely to require multiple comprehension and clarification checks and explicit requests for repair. But attempts to maximize intersubjectivity in this way are risky. For one thing, they make public the fact that there has been a failure to convey and/or understand meaning. Once this is in the open, speakers may be held to higher standards in their demonstrations of understanding. Simply accepting a repair and trying to get on with the conversation will not do. An “oh” or a more explicit claim of understanding may be expected. Given speakers’ insecurity about their own language knowledge and difficulty understanding their interlocutors because of the prevalence of non-target language forms in their speech, there is also no guarantee that if an explanation is given it will be understood, or that the explainer has the linguistic means to paraphrase or to even try to understand the source of the communication breakdown. After the few “recipes” available for repairing misunderstandings are exhausted, speakers are on their own. They have entered uncharted territory, and their lack of ability to communicate is now in plain sight. Given the learners’ feelings that lack of communicative competence in English is an index of their lack of sophistication or of their incompetence, it is to be expected that they will take into account the risks and the likelihood of success of attempts to clarify meaning. Thus, progressivity may be partly understood as an actors’ attempt to avoid face-threatening and effortful negotiations of meaning when the hope of success is limited.

There have been compelling arguments about the role of learner-learner interaction in modifying language input and thus facilitating the learning of a second language (Long & Porter, 1985; Varonis & Gass, 1985), as well as calls for more careful investigations of the conditions under which negotiation for meaning takes place between learners and of how successful those negotiations are (Gass, Mackay, & Pica; 1998). When learners interact, they supposedly make accommodations that make language forms more salient and thus noticeable to one another. It is claimed that learners also correct each other and attend to language form more when they interact with other learners. However, some of this research has looked at learners in non-naturalistic settings, where their focus may be on satisfying researchers’ expectations and their behavior may not be affected by the many sources of motivation that affect their actions in real-life contexts with real-life consequences. Do learners in real classrooms engage in the same types of interactions? An understanding of the drive for progressivity in conversation, the students’ doubts about their own and their peers’ ability to recover meaning from instances of language use, and the anxiety about exposing their incompetence begs the question: To what extent do students rely on each other and on their instructors in trying to understand the form-meaning mappings of English? I will turn to this question in the next findings chapter.

Chapter 5 – Making and not Making Sense

Attention to Language in the Classroom

Because of my interest in how students made sense of the language they encountered and of the practices they were exposed to in their ESL class, I went into my data collection and analysis expecting that there would be unlimited opportunities to observe these processes. Sure enough, there were a lot of episodes when language was thematized in class or when form-meaning mappings were attended to. But there were also many examples in the data set of cases when students did not attempt to figure out language forms that they were not familiar with, and when students seemed to relinquish opportunities to make meaning from text. Granted, it is impossible for learners to attend to every language form they are not familiar with, except for those at the most advanced levels. There is so much unknown language surrounding beginning and intermediate-level learners that they must learn to function with a certain degree of ambiguity. When there are fifty unknown vocabulary items per page of text, as there were for some of the students in this class, trying to make sense of every word or construction requires not only effort and dedication but also a fair amount of study time. And for most of the students in this class, time was a scarce resource. Still, there were instances when it was clear that an unknown language form *should have been focused on* because its meaning was key to completing a task successfully, but it wasn't. I saw many episodes when it was clear that students were failing to perform well because they had ignored language that they did not know.

In the following excerpt of class interaction, the students were comparing answers to homework exercises. One of the exercises was about figurative versus literal uses of language. The textbook provided this introduction:

A word may have both a figurative and literal meaning. Look at these two sentences:

The carpenter *hammered* the nail.

The storm *hammered* the north coast of the island.

In the first sentence, the carpenter used a real hammer to hit the nail. Here, the word *hammered* has a literal meaning. In the second sentence, there is no actual hammer. The storm hit the island *like* a hammer. In this case, *hammered* has a figurative, or metaphorical meaning. (Rogers, 2004, p. 23)

While going over the homework, Vale, Lucía, and Rosie were sitting side-by-side at the same table. Vale and Lucía were working together, and Rosie was working with another student. At some point, Rosie turned around and asked Lucía what *literal* and *figurative* meant. I happened to walk by and stopped to listen to how Vale explained the concept to Rosie. When I realized she was not succeeding, I stepped in.

Lucía: is 94...

Rosie: (Turning to Lucía) *Oiga . yo no le entendí lo de la . esto . de figurative y literal*

Vale: (Leaning forward so she can be seen by Rosie, who is partially obstructed from her view by Lucía) It's . hu—

Rosie: —*En español por favor* (smiles)

Vale: *Literal . literal es como:: como: cuando tu figuras a::lgo ...*

Rosie: ... [exhales loudly, repressing

Lucía: is 94...

Rosie: (Turning to Lucía) Listen . I didn't understand . this . about figurative and literal

Vale: (Leaning forward so she can be seen by Rosie, who is partially obstructed from her view by Lucía) It's . hu—

Rosie: —In Spanish please (smiles)

Vale: *Literal . literal is li::ke li:ke when you use a figure about so::mething ...*

Rosie: ... [exhales loudly, repressing

laughter] *literal*?

Vale: *A ve-y el literal es como:: . a:y . es que a-aquí está en el ejemplo . el figurativo es cuando el . la: . el martillo golpea . así*

(Gabriela approaches behind the group and stops to listen in)

Rosie: Uh-huh

Vale: *Pero es un literal cuando una tormenta: . golpea algo* (pauses while looking at Rosie's face)

Rosie: (smiling) *Me puedo memorizar eso pero sigo sin entender*

Vale: *No?*

Rosie: *No*

...

Gabriela: You don't understand literal and figurative?

Rosie: Uh-huh

Gabriela: Ah... So literal is the real thing (joins hands at the finger tips, as if holding a round object, and does a second beat on the same gesture) . you know what a hammer is (another beat with same gesture).

Rosie: (scratching her nose with her thumb) Ah:: No

Gabriela: You know what a hammer is?

Rosie: (shakes head) No

laughter] *literal*?

Vale: Let's-and literal is like:: . ah:. It's here in the example . figurative is when the . the hammer strikes . like this

(Gabriela approaches behind the group and stops to listen in)

Rosie: Uh-huh

Vale: But it is literal when a sto:rm . strikes something (pauses, looking at Rosie's face)

Rosie: (smiling) I can memorize that, but I still don't understand it

Vale: You don't?

Rosie: No

This excerpt illustrates several issues that recur in the classroom interaction data. The first one, the preference for Spanish when trying to make sense of something, was foreshadowed by the description of the students' experiences of the first and the second language. When Vale tried to explain in English, Rosie asked her to do it in Spanish. Another issue is the difficulties that students often have clarifying ideas for each other. Often when students worked in groups they couldn't explain concepts or situations they read in a text in a way that satisfied their partners. When Vale tried to answer Rosie's question she had several false starts and hesitation markers, and ended up relying first on the same words she was defining, and then on the textbook example for an illustration. Vale was also uncertain about the meaning of the two expressions and seemed to have matched the signifier with the wrong meaning. Rosie appeared a bit surprised to hear that *literal* is when you "figure" something. But Vale went back to the explanation and demonstrated once again that she had confused the two words. We will see other examples of the difficulties students have in helping each other understand new language. A third issue is that of student stances towards understanding, which varied a great deal across students. Rosie's "I can memorize that, but I still don't understand it," delivered with a mischievous smile, and her short "no" in answer to Vale's confirmation check, are rather unusual moves—most other students in the class did not so directly expose the inadequacy of their classmates' attempt to help them make sense. It also illustrates a stance towards understanding: she wants a demonstration that presents the concepts in a different way so she can apply her understanding to something else; she wants to be able to arrive at a generalization of the idea. Not all students focused on achieving this level of understanding. The fact that she even asked the question is interesting, and the fact that she insisted even more so, because not all students seemed comfortable asking for explanations of what they didn't know, especially from partners they were not very familiar with. Finally, her question shows something else. She had read the textbook

description of figurative and literal language, she knew what it said, but she still didn't get the concept, and yet, she had not looked up the word *hammer*, a word that appeared six times (in different forms) in the short textbook description of the assignment. In other words, she was trying to understand the communicative situation without trying to understand some of the language that helped realize it. This is something that I found often in the dataset. Therefore, while I was able to look at how different students attempted to make sense of language or text, I also focused on the different degrees to which individual students attended to unpacking the new language forms that they encountered.

It is impossible to determine how often students ignored key language that they didn't understand, but I suspect the observed instances were the tip of the iceberg. It was usually when the instructor, a classmate, or I tried to help a student understand something that the gap in language knowledge surfaced, so there were probably many more instances when that was the case but it was simply not discovered. In the following example, Susan finds out that Cindy and Analyne had not attended to "an important word" in a statement when they were trying to determine if it was true or false. The students had compared answers and found they did not agree, but had decided to wait because they couldn't figure out who was correct.

Susan: (Reads prompt) "Yuen did **not initially** want to film the scene with the sword fight in the bamboo forest". OK what does initially mean? . Do you understand that? "He did not **initially** want to film the scene"

Analyne: Initial

Susan: Initially

Cindy: Uh n:

Susan: Initially means (taps the table to the left of her gesture space with the side of her open hand) at first

Analyne: Oh OK

Susan: In the (another tap) beginning . so that's an important word in that sentence

The instructor glosses the meaning verbally and gesturally by providing two synonyms, "at first" and "in the beginning" and by tapping the table each time to the left, a common gestural metaphor that maps the passage of time onto gesture space from left (for earlier events) to right (for later events). She then implies that Cindy and Analyne should have tried to determine the meaning of that word by declaring that it was important in that sentence. Two other students had difficulty with the same question, not only because they did not understand *initially*, but also because they did not know a word in the text that provided an important clue to the answer. The section of the text reads "Ang [Lee] had to convince the [choreographer] of the need for the famous swordfight scene" (p. 74). Hameed asked for help answering that question, and the interaction revealed he did not know the meaning of *convince*. Other examples include Carolina and Ashwaq trying to determine which of four items could be considered an impromptu weapon without looking up the word *impromptu*. Carolina also didn't know the meaning of *sword*, which was one of the four answer choices students had to choose from. Harpreet tried to find the best synonym for the word contemporary without looking up one of the choices, the word *modern*. Kavita and Pilar tried to figure out who had won a "Rookie of the year" award without figuring out what the word *rookie* meant. These are examples of a common pattern, but it does not show a behavior that is systematic across students or across task or conditions. Sometimes this behavior was not a reflection of the students' lack of attention

to language they didn't know but of lack of time. They had done the homework in a rush and had not had time to use a dictionary, so they had simply guessed. Still, when they checked answers in class and identified discrepancies, they had a second opportunity to focus on the new language, but they often talked about what answers were correct without making sure they understood all the relevant parts of the prompts.

If students often did not attempt to map new language forms to function, how did they operate? Earlier I discussed how language that was familiar exerted a strong pull on students, and this seemed to be the case when they were trying to participate in class activities or make sense of texts. They latched on to what they did know, and used it as the basis for their responses or actions. For instance, when the instructor asked what they could say if they wanted to cheer against someone, some students responded by providing the meaning of *cheer*. It is likely that they recognized the word *cheer* because it was part of the text they were discussing, and they had been primed for it by having seen it. Since when the instructor addressed vocabulary she often asked for demonstrations of understanding of its meaning, students probably assumed that this was the case in this instance. Susan insisted that she first wanted an example of what words they would use if they cheered against someone. At this point, students suggested that they would say, "go on" or "be happy again." Susan then repeated the question, this time stressing the word *against*. Finally, a student said, "boo." For several minutes, students had attempted to answer the instructor's questions by relying on their knowledge of the word *cheer* and their familiarity with a classroom routine—that of asking for demonstrations of knowledge. Their failure to integrate what they understood with the rest of the instructor's utterance, however, had misled them into producing wrong answers. Of course in real-time spoken interactions we do not have the luxury of putting the world on hold while we figure out what all the words mean, but the fact that many students answered in spite of their incomplete understanding of the instructor's language is an example of a widespread pattern of behavior: not attempting to make sense of language before taking action. This behavior was common when students read at home and in class, in spite of the opportunity to attend to language afforded by those situations.

I'm not trying to categorize this way of interacting as deficient. We all use top down processing to make sense of the language we hear, and we sometimes misunderstand speakers and give wrong answers. However, the high frequency of this occurrence among these students suggests that they did not balance top-down processing with enough evidence from bottom-up processing of language forms. In classroom interaction, the need to get things accomplished—the focus on progressivity (Heritage, 2007), probably discouraged students from asking for clarification. But the students seemed to do this as much, or even more, in reading, partly because texts exposed them to a lot more language they didn't know, and so their failure to consider the meaning of new language forms resulted in more infelicitous responses or failure to make sense of the text in a way that established an acceptable level of intersubjectivity.

As in the previous example, focusing on meaning at the local level while ignoring a large number of unknown language pieces often prevented students from understanding the connections between ideas. As a result, their comprehension of the macrostructure of texts, of global meaning, of author perspectives, of the multiple voices often present in texts, and of changes in frames of reference was often impaired. Limited global comprehension was frequently evident when the instructor explained answers to textbook

questions. While students usually listened to Susan as she discussed the meaning of question prompts and sections of text that provided evidence for one answer, few students were able to identify the correct answers on their own. When the instructor said “So they answer is...,” she sometimes paused, but few students were able to provide the correct answer at that point, in spite of having heard the instructor’s discussion of textual evidence. When Susan finally wrote the correct answer on the board, several students erased their previous answers and copied what the instructor had written on the board.

Difficulty recognizing frame shifts was frequent in both spoken and written language. A common instance was when students answered questions that were not actual questions. The instructor often demonstrated types of questions to the class, either when she was “thinking aloud” as reading a text, or when she wanted students to think about the types of questions they asked. Students recognized the syntactic and prosodic form of the questions, but did not recognize the rekeying cues (Goffman, 1974) that should have activated a different frame of interpretation. Often, when the instructor presented a question as an example of a type, students answered the question as if she had been soliciting an answer. In one instance, Susan was reading a passage and stopping to comment on it to demonstrate how she interacted with the text while she read. She had clarified that she knew the meaning of the passage, but that she was pretending not to understand some things. At some point she paused and wondered what *far cry* meant. A student responded that it was “something very different,” missing the fact that the question was not a request for an answer but an example of how readers might question what something means as they read a text.

When reading, many students tried to answer questions by focusing on short phrases, seemingly discounting the importance of the context or the entire communicative act in determining the meaning of the parts. Textbook writers know this, and they purposefully write questions that are likely to mislead students who rely on a few words in the text or the prompt to answer questions. Many students in this class fell into the trap. The course textbook often asked students to identify the main idea or focus of different sections. In one instance, students read a passage about the history of baseball in Japan—no, not the most compelling topic for the class—and then had to identify the topic of one of the paragraphs. The paragraph in question described the early years in the history of the sport. Towards the end of the paragraph, a sentence read “Not long after this, World War II threw Japanese baseball into chaos” (Rogers, 2004, p. 31). Several students chose the statement “A history of Japanese baseball after World War II” as the best expression of the main idea of the paragraph. It is clear in the audio records that students found the phrase “World War II” towards the end of the paragraph and took it as sufficient evidence, without focusing on contextualization cues that connected that phrase to the rest of the paragraph.

There was one slightly amusing example of failure to recognize the multiple voices of a text. During a few class periods, students read a passage about urban legends. The passage included several examples of urban legends embedded in a larger text that framed these as examples of “folk belief.” The legends were formatted as extended quotes—indented and in a smaller font size, and they were told from the point of view of a “typical naïve” storyteller who believes the events related in the story are true. The framing text was written in the detached, rational tone of “scientific discourse” adopted by many textbooks, and tried to strike a balance between conveying the idea that sophisticated thinkers do not fall for urban legends and at the same time encouraging cultural sensitivity

by emphasizing that all cultures have folk stories. But the voices of the storytellers seemed much more compelling to some of the students. They were written in a more conversational style, they were simpler syntactically, and they were narratives, which seemed to appeal to several students much more than the dry expository style of the framing text. On the day students discussed this story in class, Pilar and Harpreet worked together. When they finished checking their homework, Pilar started reading an urban legend, and became visibly more engaged. The story goes that an attractive woman befriends a man at a bar, puts drugs in his drink, and then takes him to a hotel room where the man becomes unconscious, and the woman performs surgery and steals one of his kidneys. After a few minutes reading silently, Pilar turned to Harpreet and told her she couldn't believe that the woman could be so cruel. "How did she do that? Man!" Harpreet then began looking at the story and asked Pilar, "Who took the kidney?" Pilar answered, "The lady." A text about space stations also confused students. A section of the passage described the differences between fictional space stations as they are depicted in movies and actual space stations. Some students missed the clues that indicated frame shifts between the actual and fictional stations, and they thought that a description of part of *2001: A Space Odyssey* referred to an actual space station.

This attending to text meaning at the local level can explain why, when I asked students to read for me during interviews and tell me what they understood, they seemed to come up with ideas that contradicted each other, and often they did not seem to attempt to resolve the inconsistencies. They didn't seem to focus on how different parts of the text cohere to some extent, and that a situation cannot be both "X" and "not X." Understanding the relationships between ideas in a text requires great familiarity with the language and the assumed background knowledge. Absent that, readers need a lot of persistence, hard work, and sophistication about sources of information to figure out what all the individual parts mean and how they contribute to the whole.

Reading and the Habitus: Practices and Stances Towards Sense Making

As I began looking for different patterns of participation among students, I was hoping to identify "types" that I might neatly connect to certain background factors. Unfortunately social reality is much too complex to allow that. Human interaction is an open system where multiple factors affect each other in unpredictable ways. The best we can hope for is to observe a behavior and try to explain it, and from that explanation to derive an understanding of the different forces at play behind the observed patterns of behavior. A categorization of practices in terms of types would be a crude oversimplification which might appeal to our need to control our worlds, but which would turn the real people I am trying to understand into caricatures.

Rather, then, what I will attempt to do is describe practices I observed and the stances those practices reveal as continua. I will provide illustrations of where different students fall within these continua, while trying to keep in mind that no student *always* behaved or spoke in a particular way, that different contextual factors were salient to students to different degrees in different circumstances, and that not all students who shared one particular experience, such as that of having done some middle or high school education in the US, responded in exactly the same ways. To illustrate how different students approached meaning making, I will start with an example of an interaction

between two students, Cindy and Vale, on a day when they were discussing the text on urban legends that I mentioned above. Cindy was a 19-year-old Mandarin speaker. She had attended a US high school for two years and two moths. Vale was a 21-year-old Spanish speaker from El Salvador and a mother of two. She had been in the United States for 8 years. During previous class meetings the two women had worked together, and Vale had noticed that Cindy changed several of her answers when she saw that Vale's were different. When they began to work during this class session, Cindy first looked at Vale's answers to a vocabulary exercise that they had done for homework:

Vale: How did you do?

Cindy: Ah, I don't know . (looking at Vale's answers) different . different . different... I think it's my problem

Vale: No . just wait and . leave it like that . maybe you are right and I'm wrong

In this brief segment of the interaction, Cindy displays a stance that I saw in several students. They seemed to distrust their ability to read text and find correct answers to comprehension questions. When they worked with other students, especially if they perceived those students as stronger readers, they rushed to change their answers without discussing them. Vale's reply displays a different assumption: One should not change one's answers without first trying to figure out if they are right or wrong, which in turns implies that one is often able to determine whether an interpretation of a text is congruent with that of the writer by carefully examining the text. The vocabulary exercise that the two students checked first was very challenging. These exercises presented 20-40 low frequency target words and required students to use those words to fill in the blanks of sentences that provided minimal context. All students found these exercises difficult. The one they reviewed on this particular day was even more so, and both Cindy and Vale had made several mistakes. When Vale saw the number of incorrect answers she had, she laughed, lowered her head, and hid her face in her arm, reacting to her disastrous performance. This, again, reflected that such a poor performance was not the expected outcome. This was not supposed to happen. She was supposed to be able to answer more questions correctly. Other ways in which students displayed this particular stance towards their ability to make sense of text was being puzzled when they chose the wrong answer, sometimes wondering aloud "How come I answered X?" and often rereading relevant sections of the text and the prompts to understand the source of their error before the instructor explained the answers.

A few minutes later Vale and Cindy compared their answers to comprehension questions:

- 1 **Cindy:** I put 'C' but I didn't find where . but I saw this is .
- 2 **Vale:** (Reading question prompt and answer 'B') "What does the author say about 'The Organ'
- 3 story? It is an example story that want people to be careful."
- 4 **Cindy:** (Pointing to the section of the text where the urban legend is quoted) 'Cause this is . this is
- 5 tell it's a true story and uh::
- 6 **Vale:** Well but they say:: (looks at text)
- 7 **Cindy:** Uh-huh
- 8 **Vale:** But in here say (reading) "the gruesome story warns us to be aware of friendly strangers not
- 9 to drink with just anyone"
- 10 **Cindy:** Oh

1 **Vale:** Because this (points to text) is what does the author said about this (points to text) . they .
2 when they: talking about the story:: (points to herself) I-I say “Oh this is true my roommate sister
3 actually knew the wife of the guy (laughing) it happened”
4 **Cindy:** (laughs)
5 **Vale:** So . (pointing to part of the text) this is not the author-the author say
6 **Cindy:** Maybe this (pointing to the text) is say uh this is a true story . the story’s author //thinks
7 this is a true\\ story
8 **Vale:** //Mh-hmh\\
9 **Cindy:** But //they didn’t prove it\\
10 **Vale:** (Pointing to text) //this is the autors-autor\\-author says about the story
11 **Cindy:** Like this (pointing to text) is the article-article author says about the story
12 **Vale:** Mh-hmh
13 **Cindy:** OK

Cindy starts by identifying her answer, letter ‘C’, which was “although not completely true, it is based on a true story,” and then admitting that she is not certain that her answer is correct because “she didn’t find where.” She does not complete the phrase, but presumably what she did not find was a section of the text that gave an explicit answer. She then attempts to read some evidence she found in the text, but hesitates, and Vale uses the opportunity to read the prompt and her answer. In line 4, Cindy gets to show Vale what she was referring to by pointing to the first line of the urban legend and indicating it claimed to be a report of a true event. In line 6, Vale acknowledges Cindy’s piece of evidence but implies that it needs to be considered in conjunction with other parts of the text. In line 8, she quotes a section of the passage that directly contradicts Cindy’s answer. Cindy indicates a change of state in her understanding of the answer with an “Oh.” Vale then tries to show Cindy that there are different voices in the text. In line 11, as she says “Because this,” she indicates what she is referring to by pointing to a part of the text, probably the framing expository text. She then comments on the text, “is what does the author said about this” (line 11). She couples the second *this* with another point, most likely at the embedded urban legend. In this way, she identifies where the perspective of the author of the expository text can be located. She then identifies the voice of the legend’s storyteller with the deictic “they,” a very appropriate choice, since the author of the framing expository passage describes urban legends in general and uses this particular one to exemplify typical urban legends and storytellers. At that point she makes a point-of-view change, which she indexes by pointing at herself, and with the change in pronoun to “I.” From this new viewpoint, she proceeds to tell part of the story as the storyteller. In this utterance, Vale also displays a sophisticated understanding of the dynamic interaction between the two textual voices she is describing. In the laughter that interrupts her telling of the story, the authoritative voice of the framing text’s author intrudes, showing Vale’s alignment with the opinion that sophisticated people do not believe in urban legends and that what she is enacting is an uncritical presentation of one. In line 15, Vale begins to summarize her point that there is more than one voice in the text by pointing to the legend and saying “this is not the author.” In lines 16 to 21 Cindy demonstrates her new and tentative (“maybe”) understanding of the two different perspectives represented in the text by pointing to the two different “authors” in the text, first the urban legend’s storyteller, and then the writer of the textbook article, and metonymically identifying each voice with the section of the text that represents it.

The contrast between Cindy and Vale's understanding of the text illustrates again the difference between those who made sense of texts by focusing on the sections they could understand and ignoring the rest, and those who were able to reach a more thorough understanding by integrating the local-level meanings into a more global model of the situation. Was this a result of differences in reading ability? Or was it instead a result of differences in the degree to which they attended to and tried to resolve gaps in their knowledge? In Vale's case, the latter seemed to be the case. While her reading ability was average compared to other students in the class, and while she often recognized that the course assignments were challenging, she consistently did her work and showed a good understanding of texts. Cindy noticed that her partner often had the correct answers and once asked Vale how come her vocabulary was so good. Vale explained that it wasn't really that good, although she did have the advantage of being able to use cognates. Cindy then asked why she got so many "right answers." Vale explained that when she came home at night after work, when everyone in the house was sleeping and it was quiet, she spent several hours doing homework. Cindy replied, "You study hard," and Vale assented. When Cindy talked about homework during interviews, she said that her parents had taught her that she should always do her homework because that was "her job," so she always turned in her assignments, and she understood the importance of English proficiency, particularly in reading, for academic work. She wanted to transfer to a four-year school after community college and believed a strong reading ability would help her succeed. But when it came to doing her homework, she said she often rushed to finish her assignments and didn't check her work very carefully, "'cause on my mind sometimes is like blah blah blah blah finish it, and 'Oh: finish!' And I turn it in." In class, as she checked homework answers with classmates, Cindy was much less likely to take out a dictionary or reread and much more likely to ask one of her classmates to explain the answer to her. Vale, on the other hand, often took out an English or a bilingual Spanish-English dictionary and reread definitions and sections of the text when she had doubts. These behaviors again reflect the stance that meaning making is part of an active construction process that takes persistence with text and strategic use of tools. While Cindy also used tools—her classmates—to make meaning, this process was less likely to result in a change towards more self-reliant sense making.

Like Cindy, several other students, including Harpreet, Pilar, Analyne, and Kavita did not have the meticulous textual practices they needed to process these texts at a deep level. Other students, like Gladys, Ramiro, and to some extent Carolina, understood what practices were needed, but they didn't have the time to engage in them. Almost 70% of the students worked, and a few others had children and family responsibilities. For students in this context work means about 30 to 40 hours a week. They simply didn't have the luxury of that kind of time, unless they were willing to give up part of their sleep. But, again, many of them did not take advantage of class time to try to understand texts better. Especially younger students who had completed some education in the US often read a question and would talk to each other about the fact that they didn't "get it." It was as if they had the implicit belief that meaning is completely determined by texts and lying on the surface ready to be "gotten" rather than being the result of an active construction process that sometimes requires revising one's knowledge of the language or identifying and repairing one's lack of familiarity with the common ground assumed by the text.

Now contrast Vale with two other students whose belief in their ability to make meaning from text was even more marked: Miguel and Tae-Woo. Miguel's behavior exposed an almost complete faith in his ability to make sense of texts. Unlike Vale, though, his reading ability was clearly beyond that of his classmates. His comprehension of the texts he read in class was very thorough. The instructor once gave the class a rather complex *New York Times* article on immigrant students in college. Most students in the class could only understand isolated sections, while Miguel was able to summarize all the main ideas to one of his classmates. As the highly skilled performers Dreyfus describes (2002), Miguel was not able to articulate what made him such a strong reader. In interviews, he said he had always been "good in school" because it was easy for him. He never studied for this class, he said, because "it's not necessary to study for this class." When I asked him how he read, he said he almost never used a dictionary, except for when he found new vocabulary in a test or assignment prompt. He talked about how he read as if meaning were just sitting in the text in plain view and required no effort to construct, so his view of making meaning from text does not seem very different from that of less successful readers. The classroom data makes it obvious that Miguel rarely did his homework. (As I discovered, he was in good company in this regard.)

His classroom behavior, however, made clear that his sense making was not as automatic and effortless as he suggested. Miguel was one of the most persistent and meticulous readers in the class. Even though he could read fast, he often took longer to find answers to questions because he read the prompt and relevant sections of the text at least twice, and he skimmed the rest of the article to see if there was contradictory information elsewhere. He was almost never swayed by his classmates' opinions, but he always listened to them. He then reread looking for supporting textual evidence, and he presented this evidence to his classmates. In the next excerpt we see an example of Miguel's persistence with text. He is discussing whether a statement about director Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a correct inference based on the information in the text. Miguel is working with his classmate Sergio, who begins by reading the prompt. They then discuss if the statement should be marked as 'I' for correct inference or as 'X' for incorrect inference.

- 1 **Sergio:** (reads prompt) "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon was filmed entirely in the Gobi Desert"
- 2 **Miguel:** N:ope (turns page to the text)
- 3 **Sergio:** Where is it? (Turns page to text) . (Reads) //"Crouching Tiger Hidden dra\gon was
- 4 **Miguel:** //Where is it?\\
- 5 **Sergio:** (Begins reading a section of the text) "Ang Lee's first action film and the director wanted to-
- 6 number six . paragraph six
- 7 **Miguel:** Oh . (Reads the first half of the paragraph on page 73)
- 8 **Sergio:** It doesn't say XX about desert
- 9 **Miguel:** (While reading) Yeah it didn't say . so:: (skims to the end of the paragraph on page 74 and
- 10 then turns back to the previous page)
- 11 **Sergio:** No . it doesn't say anything (marks the answer)
- 12 **Miguel:** (Still reading the text) Maybe it is::
- 13 **Sergio:** [letter] x . for me . 'cause the only place that says about Crouching Tiger, Hide Dragon is
- 14 here
- 15 **Miguel:** No . it says right here (points to a section of paragraph 5)
- 16 **Sergio:** Oh . up-up there?
- 17 **Miguel:** also . yeah . (begins reading paragraph 5) "Probably the most critically acclaimed movie
- 18 Yuen has worked on is Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"—

19 **Sergio:** —But it says here “Whose other hits include *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Ice Storm*.”
 20 **Miguel:** (Continues reading from where Sergio left off) “This ground breaking movie won four
 21 academy awards (continues silently)
 22 **Sergio:** It doesn’t say a thing about—
 23 **Miguel:** —“*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* i-is set in an-ancient China . It details the story of
 24 magical sword named Great Destiny, which, in the course of the movie, is stolen. *Crouching Tiger,*
 25 *Hidden Dragon* is successful language film of all times”—
 26 **Sergio:** —But down here it says about desert but they’re talking about the other movie . (reading)
 27 “based . on the first part of a five part pre . pre world war II Chinese novel by Ang Du Lu . the movie
 28 features an imaginative plot and **sub** plots .
 29 **Miguel:** “And //exotic scenery\\ .
 30 **Sergio:** //exotic scenery\\ including colorful images of the Gobi Desert” . the only time they are
 31 talking about desert
 32 **Miguel:** (still looking at the text) Yeah:
 33 **Sergio:** (turns page to the exercise) [letter] x
 34 **Miguel:** (turns the page and writes the answer)

In line 2, Miguel states the answer to the question. He probably remembers the text because it had been discussed in the previous class meeting, but rather than mark the answer at this point, something many of his classmates would do, he turns the page and begins looking for textual evidence. In line 5, Sergio begins reading a section of the text and then directs Miguel’s attention to it by identifying it as “paragraph six.” Sergio determines that the paragraph doesn’t provide any information about the setting of the movie (line 8). Miguel agrees in line 9, but continues reading to the end of the paragraph and then moves back to earlier sections of the text. At this point Sergio seems to feel that he has enough evidence to choose an answer and he writes it down. As Miguel keeps reading, Sergio (line 13) tries to persuade him by stating his answer aloud and stating that they have already read the only relevant section. By then, in line 15, Miguel finds another section that talks about the movie, and he directs Sergio’s attention to it. In lines 19 and 22, Miguel continues reading from where Sergio left off, even after Sergio presents more evidence for the merits of his answer by saying that this section has started to discuss two different movies, *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Ice Storm* (line 18). Miguel interrupts him in line 23 to read a section of the text that addresses the setting of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a movie which shows not only that there may be additional evidence but that the focus of the paragraph has turned back to the movie they need to focus on. In line 26, with a “but,” Sergio introduces more counter evidence by saying that although there is a section that mentions the Gobi Desert, it refers to other movies, which indicates he had not picked up the change in focus in the text that Miguel had identified in lines 23-25. Sergio begins to read the section that refers to the Gobi Desert and pauses before reaching the end. Miguel picks up reading from that point and Sergio overlaps and finally gets to the mention of the Gobi Desert. Miguel seems now more convinced, but he continues to look at the text a few more seconds as he says “Yeah:.” He did not feel satisfied with an answer until he finally saw that the text mentioned the Gobi desert, but only as one of the settings for the movie. His persistence with this question in spite of Sergio’s many attempts to convince him that there was enough evidence earlier is an example of the kind of stamina that he usually displayed when interacting with text.

I mentioned above that Miguel said he rarely uses a dictionary when he reads. This claim was also loudly refuted by his classroom behavior. He showed up to the majority of class meetings carrying an advanced learners’ dictionary, and he used it extensively, not

only when he was working on vocabulary activities, but also when he was reading and answering comprehension questions. Often, when the instructor reviewed answers with the whole class, Miguel multitasked by keeping track of what the instructor said while he looked up additional words in his dictionary. He especially did this when he discovered that one of his answers might have been wrong. Since the instructor asked students to write their answers to questions on the board, he saw his classmates' answers before he knew if they were correct. Even so, when one of his classmates had written a different answer on the board, Miguel reread the prompt and relevant sections of the text, and he began looking up words that might help him confirm his answer or understand how he arrived at the wrong interpretation of the passage. His confidence in his ability to make sense of text was so strong that he didn't wait for the instructor to explain the answer. He worked ahead.

Before returning to a more detailed description of students whose behavior reflected a different stance towards meaning making, I'd like to briefly focus on Tae-Woo. This student was from Korea, and he had completed his high school education in his native country, where he had learned some English in school, mostly by studying grammar rules. Because of this and the greater challenge that learning English represents for students from very different first language backgrounds, Tae-Woo's oral fluency was very limited. He struggled to speak and to understand classroom talk. He considered his knowledge of vocabulary as somewhat limited, but his opinion may have been based on his desire to control the large vocabulary that would have allowed him to express meanings as precisely as he wanted to. When he discussed his main problems with reading homework assignments he said that there were too many words he didn't know, and that slowed him down quite a bit because he needed to look them up. When one of his classmates asked him what kind of dictionary he used, he said he used two different dictionaries. Comprehending texts was clearly not easy for him. Yet, when he read, he persisted until he could arrive at a clear answer. He didn't seem to see a point in choosing an answer if he had doubts, so he used his dictionary, the instructor, and me to fill gaps in language knowledge. Once he made up his mind about the meaning of the text, he was very confident that he was correct. The few times when he expressed uncertainty about the meaning of a passage, it wasn't so much that he had not understood the language in the text, but that he felt the text was ambiguous: the situation was underspecified by the language in the text. For instance, in one case, he was asked to browse through the chapters of *The House on Mango Street*, without reading them, and try to make a prediction about the content of the book. He said that the chapters appeared to be individual stories. One of his group members wanted to add more information to their answer, and asked him whether they could say they were stories about the main character's family, and Tae-woo replied "maybe," shrugged, and smiled. Without enough evidence, he would not make a categorical claim, but when he determined the answer to a question, he knew he was usually right.

In fact, Tae-woo was so confident about his interpretations that he once even disagreed with the instructor's answer. In the following excerpts of a long class discussion, Tae-woo, Carolina, and Harpreet discuss their answers to one of the inference questions on a text on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. One paragraph in the passage explains how the actors appear to fly during several fighting scenes in the movie, but they are actually suspended from wires that are manipulated by people on the ground, a choreographic

technique called “wire work.” The last sentence of that paragraph states that “[a]lthough many viewers assume that this flying is created by computer tricks, the only computerized special effect is to conceal the safety wires” (Rogers, 2004, p. 72). In one of the exercises that followed this passage, the students are asked to evaluate the following statement as a possible inference: “Without computers, the safety wires used in wirework would be visible on the screen” (p. 78). Carolina and Harpreet agreed that this was a correct inference; Tae-woo thought it wasn’t.

1 **Harpreet:** ...number four is yeah
2 **Tae-woo:** I think this [letter] x
3 **Carolina:** [letter] i
4 **Harpreet:** Yeah they can do without computer remember . and they do without computer . they
5 can show the . the thingy
6 **Carolina:** Oh yeah yeah yeah yeah . yeah . it’s [letter] i... yeah they use the compu-they use the
7 computer for::
8 **Harpreet:** Yeah . to not see: the
9 **Carolina:** Yeah
10 **Harpreet:** Yeah
11 **Carolina:** (Looking at Tae-woo’s answer) Four wrong? . what is . wrong?
12 **Harpreet:** //Wrong?\
13 **Tae-woo:** //[wrong]\
14 **Carolina:** No . here he say: some//thing:\
15 **Tae-woo:** //Yeah yes . he say\
16 **Harpreet:** It’s ending of the paragraph
17 **Tae-woo:** But before that time ... we don’t know . how-how they: . how they . how they do . we
18 don’t know actually
19 **Harpreet:** Uh-huh . actually maybe it could be [letter] x
20 **Tae-woo:** XXX
21 **Harpreet:** Because . before they don’t have a computer right? How they .
22 **Carolina?:** (To Gabriela, who is walking by) [we have a question] . for number 4
23 **Gabriela:** Yeah
24 ...
25 **Tae-woo:** I think . I think it’s this: .
26 **Gabriela:** You think it’s: . it’s a true-it’s a correct inference?
27 **Tae-woo:** //No\
28 **Carolina:** //No he’s\
29 **Gabriela:** Ok . so why do you think—
30 **Tae-woo:** —We don’t know
31 **Gabriela:** Uh-huh . what-what else could be true? . So: . (pointing to text) he says “without
32 computers the safety wires would be **visible**” . so if they hadn’t used computers . so you would
33 see the wires . right? . So you say “well you cannot conclude that” . right?
34 **Tae-woo:** //I think\
35 **Gabriela:** //How come?\
36 **Tae-woo:** I think (clears throat) before . before using computers . the:y . there’s some .
37 **Gabriela:** Right so **with** computers—
38 **Tae-woo:** —other way
39 **Gabriela:** With computers they erase the wire . but it says **without** computers . **without**
40 computers . //the safety\
41 **Carolina:** //without\
42 **Tae-woo:** This time . this time the::y consil-conceal wire . by computers .
43 **Gabriela:** OK
44 **Tae-woo:** but I thi::nk without-without computers ...
45 **Gabriela:** They could do it in some other way?
46 **Tae-woo:** Yeah

47 **Gabriela:** OK . OK . so you're saying "Well you don't know maybe there's another way to hide
48 them"?

49 **Tae-woo:** Yeah . we don't know

50 **Gabriela:** I think it's a tricky question . I think that's true maybe //you could hide it in some
51 other way\\

52 **Carolina:** //No:: . but he:re\\ in this part sa::y: . "While too many . viewers? . as::-as::-assuhm?—

53 **Gabriela:** —Assume

54 **Carolina:** Assume? . that this flying is created . by computers trick .

55 **Harpreet:** Tricks

56 **Carolina:** The only com-computer-computer?

57 **Gabriela:** Computerized

58 **Carolina:** computerized . special effe: . effect is to . conse:l?

59 **Gabriela:** Con//ceal\\ . yeah

60 **Carolina:** //The safe\\ty wires—

61 **Gabriela:** —you are saying they used computers . right?

62 **Carolina:** Mh-hmh

63 **Gabriela:** to hi::de . the wires right? . And Tae-woo says . "well in this movie they used computers
64 but maybe: . without computers . maybe there's another way . to hide the wires" . that's what he's
65 saying

66 **Tae-woo:** Yeah

67 **Carolina:** (laughs) So it's crazy

68 **Gabriela:** I know I know . I'm confused about it . we'll see what Susan says

69 **Carolina:** //OK\\

70 **Gabriela:** //XXX\\ a very good point . maybe there's another way to hide them . put **bushes** in
71 front of the wires, right? . **Bamboo**

72 **Harpreet:** Maybe they have a sim-a similar color than they have in back

73 **Gabriela:** Ri::ght (moves away)

Trapped inside his body as he was by his low verbal fluency, Tae-woo shared his answers with classmates using a series of grunts, nodding or head shakes, and sometimes one or two-word utterances and prosody, especially exaggerated stress, to bring relevant facts to the attention of his classmates. In this exchange he seemed a bit bolder, but still he found it difficult to make Carolina see his perspective. By line 17, he managed to give a hint of his line of reasoning by saying "But before that time," thus showing he was considering what it was like when there were no computers. This hint of an argument is enough to sway Harpreet. This was fairly common behavior for her. She often changed her answers as soon as she saw that other students had a different answer without waiting to hear why. She is at the opposite end of the continuum of stances towards ability to make sense of text, for specific reasons that I will discuss later. But Harpreet's oral comprehension was outstanding, and she could think critically about information presented orally. In this case, the students are working with a text that was already discussed in the previous class meeting, so Harpreet is familiar with the content, and she is able to provide evidence for her answer. She also sees the implications of what Tae-woo is considering, that if choreographers were able to conceal safety wires in some other ways before computers, they probably have the same ability now. After I tried to figure out Tae-woo's reasoning and help him articulate it more fully in lines 25-49, Carolina still did not seem to get the connection between Tae-woo's point and the movie discussed in this text, and she repeated the information presented by the text in lines 50-58, which she seemed to believe was clear evidence that the inference was incorrect. Carolina and Tae-woo seem to have been working with different assumptions about the sentence presented by the exercise. Carolina

seems to be reading the it as “*other things being equal*, without computers, the wires would be visible on the screen.” But Tae-woo seemed to think the *other things being equal* clause is unwarranted because it is not explicitly articulated by the exercise; therefore, one cannot conclude that the director would have done nothing else to conceal the wires. Later, when the instructor went over the answers to this exercise, she said that the statement was a correct inference. Tae-woo whispered to his classmates “we don’t know” a few times. At this point, Carolina asked Tae-woo to tell the teacher what he thought. Tae-woo refused, saying “I can’t” several times and then “I don’t care.” Carolina decided to tell the instructor herself, much to Tae-woo’s dismay, who was now exposed and would have to talk to explain his position. Even after his explanation Susan remained unconvinced, and said the statement was not a logical inference. Tae-woo softly protested to his group members, repeating “we don’t know.”

Tae-woo’s confidence in his ability to make sense of text was also matched by persistence in his engagement with text. He looked up much of the language in the texts he read and when he wasn’t satisfied with what he gleaned from dictionary definitions, he waited until the instructor or I walked by, and he asked us to explain. At the time of this writing, Tae-woo is still a student at the college, now taking English 1A, Freshman Composition. We often run into each other at the learning center where he reads for his English class. He annotates his texts extensively, and he circles and translates or glosses a large number of words, but there are still a few language forms that he cannot make sense of because he is not familiar with the historical uses of particular language forms or other cultural knowledge assumed by the authors. Not happy with the few gaps in comprehension that remain, Tae-woo comes to my desk to ask for help unpacking the meaning of those few language forms.

Tae-woo and Miguel are examples of students who share a certain stance towards sense making, and this stance seems to be accompanied by a set of practices that demonstrate persistence with text, a willingness to suspend coming to a conclusion until they have gathered enough evidence, and extensive use of resources to support their sense making. One might be tempted to justify their confidence in their ability to comprehend text on their higher competence as readers, but while reading ability must contribute to readers’ confidence, not all the students who displayed this stance were outstanding readers. Some were average or even slightly below average. So while confidence may be the result of proficiency, it can also be the result of other factors. Their behavior also raises the question of the relationship between their stance and their reading practices. Are their reading practices the result of their stance towards sense making? Or is the stance the result of patterns of engagement with text? The answer is probably both. Because students believe that they can understand text, they are probably more willing to persist when they read, and because they persist when they read, they are more likely to be successful in their attempts. So these students are caught in a virtuous cycle of practices and attitudes that reinforce each other. Saying that some readers understand more than others or that some read more carefully than others is not much of a revelation. The interesting question is *why?* How did they get to be this way in the first place?

I don’t believe this question can be answered in the same way for all the students in this group, which in addition to Miguel and Tae-woo also includes Ashwaq, Patricia, Ramiro, and, to a lesser degree, Vale and Carolina. They don’t seem to have a lot of common traits or experiences, and their descriptions of their language learning and

schooling histories are varied. But one thing common to most of them is an experience that they did **not** have. Except for Miguel, and Vale for a few months, none of these students attended US middle or high schools. At the same time, many of the students who attended US middle or high schools displayed very different stances towards meaning making and towards guessing, and they had different patterns of engagement with text. Could it be that there is something in the experience of attending middle and/or high school in the US that influenced the way these students approached the learning of language and literacy practices? To understand whether that is the case, we need to first look in more detail at the patterns of course participation of this latter group.

Doing School: Performing with Limited Understanding

I mentioned earlier that these students were less likely to address gaps in language knowledge in their course work. Rather, they attempted to perform with their limited understanding of the language they encountered, and often in ways that hid what they didn't know. These students were relatively less likely to have sustained discussions about text and language meaning. When they encountered difficult tasks, they were more likely to skip challenging sections, and when they compared answers to homework exercises and found discrepancies, they were more likely to decide to wait until the instructor gave the correct answer instead of attempting to solve the discrepancy by themselves. When they read or reread a text trying to find answers, they were more likely to "match" phrases in the text to phrases in the question prompts. A few students seemed so painfully insecure in their ability that they simply copied other students' answers to questions without attempting to understand what text evidence supported them. Analyne and Harpreet sometimes cheered and clapped when they found out that one of their answers was correct. Hameed gave an example of that lack of persistence with text when he told a classmate why he hadn't finished the reading assigned for homework. He told Raju that he had started to read the text but that he had stopped because it was confusing. He was referring to the first chapter of *The House on Mango Street*, in which the protagonist, Esperanza, talks about moving to her current house. The short vignette compares the actual house the character lives in with the house she had dreamed she would move to. The shifts in perspective from descriptions of her old house, to those of the house Esperanza dreamed of and the actual house in which she lives were lost on Hameed, who thought the writing didn't make any sense.

Hameed: The one I don't understand . first of all she was talking about a beautiful white house . with there're like lot of trees on it . and . you know and . finally . she starts explaining something us like the house wasn't you know really good and something like that . I was . wondering . "Oh my god . why" . I mean . make me confused ...

Frustrated by the multiple inconsistencies he perceived in the story, he soon gave up. Cindy described a similar experience when she was reading a newspaper article that was assigned for homework. She told a classmate before class that she had attempted to read it but she found it very confusing, but when she joined another group of classmates to discuss questions about the main ideas of the article, she relied mostly on what she had understood and on ideas from the pre-reading discussion they had had during the previous class meeting. Despite her classmate Marilou's many attempts to read the article first, Cindy

kept pushing for answering the questions quickly and did not attempt to reread the article to understand it better.

- 1 (Marilou and Melanie are reading)
2 **Cindy:** Are we doing the second one? .
3 **Marilou:** Huh?
4 **Cindy:** Are we doing the second one?
5 **Marilou:** I'm still . uhm . reading some of it because I don't really understand some of it
6 **Cindy:** Which part?
7 **Marilou:** About the . the money they spend on Access
8 **Cindy:** Oh
9 **Marilou:** (continues reading)
10 ...
11 **Cindy:** Oh really . like this part? 'Cause this part—
12 **Marilou:** (reads softly) —“The United States also spent—
13 **Cindy:** —spend like one thousand dollars or: . two years . w-the thing . this is—
14 **Marilou:** —but this one uh:
15 **Cindy:** Yeah it-it's trying to show like why did . like US government like...
16 **Marilou:** Mh-hmh...
17 **Cindy:** spend that much money::... But . I think the questions is . what do you think?
18 **Marilou:** That is based on our opinion
19 **Cindy:** Uh-huh
20 **Marilou:** So we have to understand first this article and then let's talk about it
21 (Cindy, Marilou, and Melanie read. After a few seconds Cindy looks at the classroom clock and
22 resets her watch.)
23 ...
24 **Cindy:** What did you find?
25 **Marilou:** I'm jus:t .
26 **Cindy:** You're just //trying to . like where\\
27 **Marilou:** //Just trying to\\ (draws two circles outwards next to her right temple with her right
28 hand open palm facing in)
29 **Cindy:** Pretending that (laugh)
30 **Marilou:** No I'm just trying to answer based on my opinion
31 [...]
32 **Melanie:** (bangs the article on her table with a closed fist) I don't get this
33 **Cindy:** Which one?
34 **Melanie:** All of it
35 **Cindy:** All of it? . Actually . you know it's just . a article . you don't need to...

Not only does Cindy not attempt to reread the article to understand it better, she also doesn't seem to understand why Marilou is doing so. As Marilou persists, Cindy tries to figure out what she is trying to do, first by asking, “What did you find?” (line 24) and then by suggesting she is “pretending” (line 29). I'm not sure what Cindy thought Marilou was pretending to do, but her interpretation of Marilou's behavior is reflective of what several students, especially US educated ones, did in class. Despite a limited understanding of the language and some of the practices that surrounded them, they acted as if they knew what was going on. Melanie, who had been absent the previous time, was also trying to read, and in line 32 she expresses her frustration at not understanding. Cindy consoles her in line 35 by implying that she doesn't really need to understand because “it's just a article.” What Cindy may be referring to here by “just” is that the purpose of reading this article was to answer two questions about the main idea and then to come up with their own questions about the text. The textbook readings, in contrast, are not “just” articles. The course tests

included comprehension questions about the main ideas of the textbook reading selections and about the target vocabulary of each unit. Further support for this interpretation is that Cindy often rushed to answer worksheets, as she did in this case. While Marilou felt that she needed to understand this better before writing about it, Cindy just wanted to get the assignment over with quickly.

Two very striking examples of performing without understanding are Kavita and Harpreet. Kavita always did her homework before class, and as Pilar and Asha discovered, her answers were almost always correct. Yet, when she discussed her answers with classmates she could rarely say why she had chosen a certain answer or present any text evidence for her choice. In fact, when she heard that her classmates had a different answer, instead of going to the text to resolve the discrepancy, she was often swayed and changed her correct answer to an incorrect one. Her poor performance in tests and in-class readings suggests that Kavita had the help of a tutor when she worked on her homework, and that was why she was able to get all the correct answers. Her test grades ranged from 'C' to 'F'. When she answered comprehension questions in class, her reliance on textual evidence was minimal. She built elaborate explanations around few, often decontextualized facts from the text. During a discussion of *The House on Mango Street*, Kavita's group had to answer the question "What do you think happened to Angel Vargas?" This question referred to a chapter about Rosa Vargas, a woman with "too many" children who was abandoned by her husband. The vignette describes how the mother cannot control the children and the neighbors eventually stop watching them and attempting to keep them out of danger. Angel Vargas is the name of one of her children. These are the last few lines of the chapter:

...nobody looked up not once the day Angel Vargas learned to fly and dropped from the sky like a sugar donut, just like a falling star, and exploded down to earth without even an "Oh." (Cisneros, 2009, p. 31)

Pilar and Kavita, who were working together that day, had to answer the question "What do you think happened to Angel Vargas?" Pilar was confused by this section of the text. She wasn't sure what happened to the character. Kavita told her group members how she interpreted the episode:

Kavita: ... when she:: [Rosa] . went to the angel XX . she-uh . like something magic happened . like she: . like she could uh . take care of the kids . her kids and she was happy . that time .

Pilar: When-

Kavita: When the Ange::l .

Pilar: When the Angel Vargas?

Kavita: Yeah

Pilar: I don't understand what-what—

[...]

Kavita: like s maybe something happened that day //I think\\

Pilar: //But who\\ . who is it? . Angel Vargas? (Looking at her classmate Christian) Who is he?

Christian: (shrugs)

Kavita: (reads softly) ... I think it's like uh . oh maybe uh

Pilar: It's . like it's person? (laughs)

Kavita: Is a person . XXXX? From where she lives . or something

Pilar: I mean . I-I don't get that one

Kavita: Yeah like . over here . XX she was uhm: . she was poor and some maybe that day like . uh: . she got . maybe like . she got maybe something . something . something good

Pilar: Something good?

Kavita: Good happened

[...]

Kavita: It's like X like money: . like she's getting the money? It's like you know like uh::

Pilar: It say like . like—

Kavita: —I think from the sky.

Pilar: Yeah to drop

Kavita: Yeah it's like a money . coming .

Pilar: But it said here...

To build her interpretation, Kavita may have taken some of the figurative language literally and missed the irony of the positive connotations of the words “sugar,” “sky,” “learned to fly,” and “falling star.” Her take on the event has little connection to the rest of the chapter, which foreshadows a tragic end by talking about the children climbing trees, running between cars, and often getting hurt. Granted, this was a difficult question for the other two group members as well, but unlike Kavita, they withheld a conclusion because they felt they didn't have enough evidence. Kavita showed similar approaches to making meaning from text in several other class sessions.

Harpreet was similar to Kavita in her apparent difficulty interpreting text. The ways Harpreet behaved when she checked homework answers with classmates showed the extent of these difficulties. During a class session when she worked with Ashwaq and Carolina, Ashwaq seemed to find Harpreet's behavior inconsistent with the goals students supposedly have in a language class. She had noticed earlier that Harpreet had erased an answer when she saw that it was different from Ashwaq's, and she had told her that she shouldn't erase her answers until she discussed them and made up her mind about whether they were correct or not. The following are several excerpts of that group's discussion.

- 1 **Carolina:** OK . “How much [miscue for how many] . [...] brothers and sister does Yuen have?” .
- 2 Eleven
- 3 **Ashwaq:** Eleven and he's the twelve . num-page five
- 4 **Harpreet:** How you found eleven? I found four
- 5 **Carolina:** uh-huh in line five
- 6 **Ashwaq:** No here! Look . page [miscue for line] five
- 7 **Harpreet:** XX four . four of his brothers
- 8 **Ashwaq:** Where is it?
- 9 **Harpreet:** Here
- 10 **Ashwaq:** No it says “Yuen was born in 1945 in yahzy [Guangzhan], China, the adults [eldest] of
- 11 twelve
- 12 **Harpreet:** Children . twelve children
- 13 **Ashwaq:** Children yeah . he's the adult
- 14 **Harpreet:** He had twelve children not . they're asking about his brothers (reads questions) “How
- 15 many oldest brother and sister does Yang chu [Yuen] has?” Oldest.

Line 7 in this transcript is an example of some of the problems Harpreet had with comprehension. She takes “four . of his brothers” as evidence that there were only five siblings in the family. Her mistake may be due lack of familiarity with the meaning of the construction, or it may be simply due to the fact that she read the text quickly looking for a mention of siblings and a number. Having found a passage that had both, the word “brothers” and the number “four,” she may have simply assumed that was the answer and

looked no further. When Ashwaq reads more relevant evidence in lines 10-11, Harpreet interprets “the eldest of twelve children” as a reference to Yuen’s children, not the number of siblings. Again, Harpreet may be unfamiliar with the function of an appositive phrase. Moreover, the whole sentence begins “Yuen was born in 1945 in Guangzhan, China, the eldest of twelve children” (Rogers, 2004, p. 71) so the appositive was separated from its referent by several words, and Harpreet would have had a lot of difficulty unpacking the functions of all this language. Instead, she seems to have latched on to the word “children,” and perhaps seeing that most of the text referred to Yuen’s professional life, she assumed that “children” could not refer to him but to children he had.

1 **Ashwaq:** number C . (sighs, reads prompt) “What role . do . computer play in wire . work?” Wire
 2 work? (turns pages to read text) They are used to hide . forty-forty-three
 3 **Carolina:** [letter] A
 4 **Ashwaq:** (Looking at Carolina’s book and then turning pages of her own book to see her own
 5 answer again.) What did you put? [letter] A?
 6 **Harpreet:** For number five? I put [letter] A too
 7 **Ashwaq:** (Reading answer A) “They make actors seem to be in the air rather than...” It says OK .
 8 forty: . forty . -three . OK it says here . Ok (reads line 47) “the way of the sword,” which in turn is
 9 based on the //samurai style\\ of combat (keeps reading softly)
 10 **Harpreet:** //No . this one my answer\\
 11 **Ashwaq:** (very softly) I don’t know . I’m confused . (louder) maybe yours is right . I don’t know . but
 12 I know . I wrote . mh: ... forty-three . I can’t find it forty-three . maybe I mix//ed up—it says that
 13 they have\\
 14 **Harpreet:** //XX (reading) “What role do\\ computers play in work fire [miscue for wire work]?”
 15 Like what things they play in the . computer . see line 35?
 16 **Ashwaq:** 35? . Oh forty-three is right he:re . hold on—“Although many viewers assume that
 17 (softer) by computer X [inaudible] the only computerized special effect is to cons ... safe-see? . Look
 18 . “that //this filling [miscue for flying]\\ is:
 19 **Harpreet:** //Computers . right here . computers\\
 20 **Ashwaq:** Yeah . it’s right here . “the only com:pu . terized special effect is to conceal the safety
 21 wires . right here . it didn’t say to make actors: . fly . maybe they make actors fly XX . but you know .
 22 keep yours and I’ll keep mine so we’ll see what’s .

In this part of the group discussion, Ashwaq finds out that she has a different answer from her two partners. She looks for confirmation for her answer, rereading the line number where she found relevant information (lines 7-9). By mistake, she reads a different line. Harpreet overlaps with Ashwaq’s turn and tries to convince her that her answer is correct, probably emboldened by the fact that Carolina had also chosen letter ‘A.’ Ashwaq starts to doubt herself here after finding out that the line she is reading does not relate to the question, so she concedes that she may be wrong. However, she adds “but I know” (lines 11-12) and pauses again. Here she is hinting that she chose an answer for a reason, as she usually does, and so goes back to looking at the text. Harpreet then rereads the prompt, “What role do computers play in wire work?” (line 15), substituting “work fire” for “wire work.” This was another sign of Harpreet’s reading difficulties. When she read for me during interviews, she first became very distressed, as she did when she had to read in class, often using delaying tactics to gain some time to rehearse. After reading the prompt, she paraphrases its meaning as “like what things they play in the computer” (line 15), and directs Ashwaq’s attention to line 35. When Ashwaq looks at line 35, she realizes that is the line she had been reading when she meant to read 43. She then locates line 43, and reads the text (lines 16-18) interjecting her own voice in line 17 to say “see?” indicating

that she has found conclusive evidence in support of her answer. Harpreet again points out that line 43 talks about computers (line 19). Ashwaq rereads the key part of the text and decides to keep her answer, which was in fact correct. In spite of her tenuous understanding of the text, and her knowledge that her performance is close to random, Harpreet finds ways to participate in any way she can. An example that almost reaches the absurd follows:

Ashwaq: (Reads question) "Which of those... (continues silently)
Harpreet: Number . what number is that? . Number 6? I put [answer] C
Ashwaq: C?
Harpreet: uh-huh
Ashwaq: Where is it?
Harpreet: I just guessed because I didn't find the answer in the:

While all students relied on more or less educated guesses, they often indicated their uncertainty about the answer when they compared answers in groups. When their answers were a blind guess, they often said so instead of sharing it. Harpreet often broke this unstated norm. As in the example above, she reported the answer that she chose, and when she was asked to explain where the evidence was, she said that she guessed because she didn't find the answer in the text. That this behavior is a departure from the ideal is clear in how some students respond to Harpreet's behavior. In the following excerpt, Ashwaq is in the middle of explaining to Harpreet which of four items could be considered an impromptu weapon. I had just helped Ashwaq understand the question, but Harpreet had stepped out of the classroom and had not heard the explanation. In the few turns that preceded this transcript, Harpreet had not shown much patience with Ashwaq's explanation and had tried to get her to say the letter of the correct choice. In line 57, she repeated the same move by asking if the answer was letter 'B.' At this point Ashwaq first gives up her attempt to help Harpreet figure out the answer and says "Yeah it's a B." Almost immediately she shows a mixture of bewilderment and amusement at Harpreet's lack of interest in understanding the question.

1 **Ashwaq:** //It says "which is not . not impromptu . is not—
2 **Harpreet:** —uh-huh so this is .
3 **Ashwaq:** No . a TV set you can . you can hit with it . uhm . you can do with a bottle of wine you can
4 do this . but this is a real weapon . it's not impromptu . prompt //is not\\\ .
5 **Harpreet:** //Oh::\\\ . so is it B?
6 **Ashwaq:** Something that . it's not . uh-huh . yeah it's a B-you just wanna mark B?-You don't wanna
7 know what it is? (laughs)
8 **Harpreet:** OK (sounds frustrated) B is a real weapon //so this is the\\\
9 **Ashwaq:** //No . you have to\\\ understand

Pilar, even though she often did only a cursory reading of course assignments, also seemed to share the belief that one shouldn't just guess. When Pilar worked with Harpreet, she showed frustration when Harpreet repeatedly reported answers she had simply guessed. The expectation that one shouldn't simply guess was implicitly articulated by Cindy when she and Vale went about choosing the answer to a question through a mixture of elimination and guesswork. After they eliminated two choices, Vale read a third choice, "First appears? I don't think so." Cindy laughed and said, "We are just guessing." Her laughter suggests she sees their behavior as incongruous, and the use of "just" implies that

normative practices require more than just guessing. And yet, there are many other examples that demonstrate many students' strategies for performing in class were based on guesswork.

When Language Does not Become Conspicuous

During an interview, Asha talked about how little homework she had been doing for the ESL class. She explained that she couldn't stop feeding her children or taking care of her home. She also couldn't stop doing the homework for the math class she was taking because it was very challenging. If she didn't keep up with it, she would soon be lost and have to drop out. However, in her ESL class, she could "manage" without studying. Although she regretted this attitude because she was not learning English, she often didn't get to her ESL Reading homework. She could still go to class and perform her student role. Not having time for homework does not explain why students continued to ignore language they didn't know when they were in class, but Asha's idea of being able to "manage" the ESL class without having to pay close attention to all the language became a metaphor that helped me understand the patterns I was seeing among other students.

Carolina, as frustrated as she was by her lack of fluency in English and surprised at how superficial her classmates' understanding of text was, sometimes found herself not noticing language she didn't know until it was an impediment to action. During a meeting when I asked her to read a passage for me and to tell me what she understood, she was surprised at how many words and constructions she didn't know or had misunderstood. She described the experience as eye opening:

Carolina: *Este:: como más o menos entiendes el contexto no le das importancia a esas cosas y de hecho muchas veces el maestro te dice, no? "No importa que no entiendas una dos o tres palabras, mientras entiendes el contexto esta bien." Es como que uno se queda contento, no? Está bien. Pero sin embargo ahorita a mí me hizo reflexionar ésto, no? De que cuántas palabras no conozco, y este: . y a lo mayor estoy entendiendo algo pero no estoy comprendiendo así como es tan simple . esta frase, no? "For one thing."*

Carolina: *uhm:: since you more or less understand the context you don't pay much attention to these little things and in fact many times the teacher tells you that, right? "It doesn't matter if you don't understand two or three words. It's OK as long as you understand the context." And it's like you feel satisfied, right? It's OK. But now this made me reflect, right? About how many words I don't know, and uhm: . and maybe I'm understanding some things but I'm not understanding something as simple as this phrase, right? "For one thing."*

A phenomenological framework can illuminate what Carolina is getting at here: the process through which much of the language we don't know becomes transparent. As Heidegger (1962) helped us see, in our concerned engagements with the world, we are not aware of the "equipment" we make use of. As long as our actions allow us to fulfill our purposes, much of our conduct and our interaction with our environment through the use of tools remain at a pre-reflective level. Schutz's (1970) description of the stock of knowledge we draw on to act in and on the world makes clear that the level of understanding of any aspect of the world we seek depends on our purpose at hand. We only need to understand and know so much to be able to act. If we acknowledge that language learners are not one-dimensional characters but whole human beings trying to engage the world to advance their projects, we can understand why language that learners

don't know does not always stand out as such. In order for gaps in language knowledge to become conspicuous, those language forms must hold the key to their achieving a firmer grip on the world.

Students' behavior was consistent with this view of language and action. They were much more likely to focus on language when not doing so meant they couldn't continue to function or after their lack of attention to new language resulted in failure to act appropriately. Once, while explaining how to use a dictionary effectively, Susan spoke about parts of speech multiple times. She even wrote it on the board. Most students who had learned English in US middle and high schools or through exposure but without much formal instruction were not familiar with the meaning of *part of speech*, but none seemed to ask the instructor or their classmates. Susan then handed out a worksheet where students had to identify the part of speech of a word in a sentence and find the definition in a dictionary. At this point, several students turned to classmates or to the instructor when she walked by and asked what the phrase meant. This is just one example of a pattern that recurred many times. Another instance was the day when the students were asked to free write their ideas about globalization. Some students asked their classmates, but their classmates could not explain the concept. The instructor was in the front of the classroom and the class was settling down to write, so even though some students had not reached an adequate understanding of the concept, they wrote nonetheless. When Gladys was sharing her writing with a classmate, Susan approached them and listened. The instructor realized that Gladys had not understood what globalization meant and she pointed it out. After the instructor moved away, an embarrassed Gladys picked up a dictionary and looked up the term. She read the definitions and examples softly and then showed her dictionary to her partner and said, "*Por ahí hubiera empezado.*" (That's where I should have started.)

The transparency of language that does not get in the way of our projects means that, unless students are very deliberate and focused on their goal of learning language, in their dealings with the world they are not likely to even notice language they don't know. As long as they can function, as long as their gaps in language knowledge do not keep them from participating in class activities, unknown language continues to be transparent, in Heidegger's terms. It only becomes conspicuous when it gets in the way of their getting something done, whether this is completing a course assignment or achieving a valued presentation of self.

Process Focus

Doing "Being an Ordinary Student" - In their ways of engaging in course activities, most students, even among those who maximized opportunities to attend to language, seemed to sometimes get caught up in the procedural aspects of doing school. Their focus on attending class, doing assignments, taking tests, and completing worksheets seemed disconnected from the students' goals in learning English and improving their reading. Even activities that are designed to direct students' attention to language forms and functions sometimes were performed in ways that were counterproductive or at least unproductive as learning practices. Many students did what was required or just what would make it *seem* that they they were doing what was required. Even mature students who persuasively articulated their need to learn the language as an end in itself sometimes found themselves caught up in this mode of performance. Asha described to me how she

often did only the vocabulary exercises because she could complete them in about fifteen minutes, but she didn't do the assigned reading. But when she got to class, she often copied homework answers from Kavita instead of using this time to try to read at least part of the assigned text. She was not the only one. Copying was rampant. During the ten minutes before class when I set up cameras and audio recording equipment, I was able to observe how many students "borrowed" each other's work and copied it.

During interviews, students admitted that, at best, they only did what was required. Miguel, for instance, said that he wished he had more hours of class because it would help him learn English faster. I pointed out that he also had homework, and that he could find other ways to practice, and he responded "*porque a veces uno como que . simplemente hacer tarea*" (because sometimes it's like . you just do your homework). Cindy expressed a similar perception.

Cindy: ... well I: . well I just you know finish the homework and I just try my best for the school work . and then I: . well that's all I do like . maybe sometimes I . well I don't really do like any XX I think . just finish [school work]

In a later interview, one of her comments alluded to the quality of her experience of class sessions. I had shown her a video clip of the instructor talking to the class to stimulate her recall of that session's events. After watching the video she showed surprise.

Cindy: Did you let [Susan] like see this (laughs)

G: No . I will but why were you thinking about that?

Cindy: 'Cause I saw that like before and then today I'm like seeing this you know video and I think it's funny

G: It's funny?

Cindy: Wow!

G: It looks different when you watch here?

Cindy: It's different . it's a different feeling . 'cause when I sit there I'm a student you know I just maybe sit there and I don't really watch her I'm just like sit there and listening and I'm like "OK, OK" And now (rising and falling intonation) "Ohoh:."

Probably because of the novelty of the situation and because I had asked Cindy to comment on the video clip, she watched the instructor much more actively. While doing so, she was struck by how different the experience felt from when she had seen the same events in class. It's interesting that she mentions that in class she "sits there" and is "a student." *Just sitting there* suggests a passive mode of class participation. Also, she is a student in many other places as well, but what she seems to be suggesting is that the student role takes over and then she's passively receiving rather than *watching*. When she quotes her inner voice responding to class events, she introduces it with the quotative *be + like*, which often emphasizes the attitudes reflected in the quote rather than the propositional content or the actual words (Jones & Schieffelin, 2009), and what she quotes, "OK" repeated once, is often a marker of readiness to leave the current topic of activity and transition to a new one (Beach, 1995), suggesting a disinterested following of different points that sharply contrasts with the amazement reflected in her quote of her response to watching the video "Ohoh:."

Carolina had a similar reaction to watching a video clip of the instructor. Even though she described herself as very motivated to learn and came across as a very

reflective and independent thinker during interviews, she found that as a student she performed a more passive role.

Carolina: *Pues estás en la clase y sí estás escuchando lo que ella dice y a lo mejor estás haciendo todo pero lo estás haciendo como dicen sistemáticamente o porque así tiene que ser, no? O porque estás siguiendo simplemente estás siguiendo instrucciones, no? Pero ya el hecho de verlo así reflejado en algo, ahí esta la clave. Es que lo analizas. Y en la clase no tienes esa capacidad de análisis. Solamente haces las cosas porque las tienes que hacer. ¿Sí me entiende?*

Carolina: Well you are in the classroom and yes, you are listening to what she is saying and maybe you are even doing everything, but you are doing it how do they say, systematically, or because that is the way it has to be, right? Or simply because you are following directions, right? But when you see it reflected on something, that's the key. You analyze it . and in the classroom you don't have the analytic capacity. You only do things because you have to do them. Do you understand what I mean?

Carolina here describes a passive going through the motions without much reflection or analysis. "You only do things because you have to do them," or, as Harvey Sacks described it, you are "doing 'being ordinary'" (1992). Public performance requires that we mold our experience into the behaviors that we ought to be having. In classrooms, students are supposed to take tests, write assignments, and answer questions. As long as the behavior appears in character, there will be few unpleasant surprises. In this context, what is supposed to be a meaning-making activity sometimes gets transformed into the set of processes that constitute doing school. Even actions that supposedly focus on sense making, such as trying to figure out the meaning of a word, can be performed in ways that remove them from the contexts and purpose of the meaningful activity of which they are part. Take for instance the following classroom dialogue, in which Carolina asks her group whether they can explain to her the meaning of the word *mythology*.

- 1 **Analynne:** (reading) "Other companies borrow from mytholo-mythology-mythology. Nike
- 2 shoes..." [reads to end of the paragraph]
- 3 **Carolina:** Somebody can explain me about motology?
- 4 **Analynne:** What?
- 5 **Carolina:** Motology
- 6 **Analynne:** Motology
- 7 **Carolina:** What does motology mean?
- 8 **Analynne:** (turns her textbook page and reads)
- 9 **Carolina:** mytology
- 10 **Analynne:** (looks through one of her folders, takes out a small piece of paper, and reads) It's uh .
- 11 {unshen} [ancient] mythms [myths] in general and the beliefs that they re-repres-repres-ack .
- 12 represent .
- 13 **Carolina:** OK
- 14 **Analynne:** I don't know what's that mean but . I think it's like a geek uhm
- 15 **Carolina:** Imaginary?
- 16 **Analynne:** It's not imaginary but it's like a geek uhm . myths . it's like a . the names and stuff
- 17 **Carolina:** Oh, OK.
- 18 **Analynne:** (puts the piece of paper back into her folder)

In out-of-school purposeful reading, the action of looking up the meaning of a word is part of the activity of reading a specific text with some clear goal in mind. The specific actions through which we accomplish our purpose are subordinated to our goal and task constraints. One of the things we can do when we need to understand the meaning of a

word is look it up in a dictionary. As we read the definition, we evaluate our understanding of it in relation to whether it helps us accomplish our purpose of retrieving the information we need from the text. In this process, if we decide that the definition is a helpful tool, we adopt it and adapt it so that we can manipulate it towards our goals. We may write down a version of a definition we find if we think that we will need it again, perhaps because we will have to reread the text at a future time and suspect that we will not be able to remember the meaning. If we do write down a meaning, most likely we will do it either on the text that we are reading or on a note that we will keep in the text. If, on the other hand, the meaning helped us meet our purpose of understanding the text and retrieving the information we sought, we may not write it down. Now contrast that to the situation above. The activity these students are engaged in is reading a text and “thinking aloud,” a practice that I will discuss in some more detail later. Within this activity, there are two subordinated actions of interest here. One is the action of helping someone understand the meaning of a word. The other is the action of finding the meaning of a word that we as readers need. First of all, unlike many reading situations outside classrooms, the activity of reading in this case does not have the primary purpose of retrieving information from the text. Instead, students are reading to demonstrate that they can perform the activity of “thinking aloud.” Within this context, the actions of figuring out the meanings of a word and of helping someone else understand are not subordinated to the activity of retrieving meaning from text. The action of looking up a word becomes an activity in itself, the purpose of which is to do what students are supposed to do when they find new vocabulary—look up a dictionary definition and write it down. This seems to be what Analyne has done, and she has filed her definition in her folder. She now *has* the meaning of the word. When Carolina asks if someone can explain the meaning of the word *mythology*, Analyne seems to recognize it, so she looks at the text again. Upon locating the word, she seems to remember that she has looked it up. She then finds the piece of paper in her folder and reads the definition to Carolina.

The wording of the definition and Analyne’s difficulty pronouncing it suggest that she has copied exactly what she found in the dictionary. How much has she understood from this definition? It is impossible to know for certain. In line 13 she says she doesn’t know what that means, but then adds that she understands there is a connection to “geek,” possibly a mispronunciation of Greek, but again, it’s not possible to know whether she knows what *Greeks* means. She repeats the word *myths*, so she may have an idea of what *myths* are. Finally, she adds that the word has to do with names. She could be referring to the many famous characters in Greek mythology, but the text the class was discussing was about company and product names, so she could also be saying mythology is related to the names in the reading. It is possible that she wasn’t able to integrate the definition she found with the text in any helpful way and she just focused on the meaning she already had from the text. Seen as an independent activity, finding the dictionary definition could be considered partially successful, given that she seems to have made some sense of the meaning. Seen as the action of finding out what a word means to be able to make meaning from text, it appears much less successful. It is hard to see how the definition of the word can help her understand that some companies are named after mythological figures, and, in turn, how much understanding this piece of information would help her with the meaning of the text she is reading. But Analyne seems satisfied enough with the results to report them to her classmate, possibly because she is engaging in a practice in the way “an

ordinary student” does. In terms of helping her classmate understand the meaning of a word, the action does not appear to have had the desired result. Given Carolina’s great difficulty with understanding oral language and Analyne’s mispronunciation of several key words, I doubt much meaning was conveyed. Carolina suggests that in responding with a simple “OK” and with it her willingness to move on. After Analyne recognizes that she is not sure she understands what the definition means (line 13) and adds that it’s “like a geek,” Carolina requests a comprehension check in line 14 by asking if it means “imaginary.” Analyne indicates that is not the meaning, and adds the idea of myth, now with the correct pronunciation, and also the idea that it is about names. Carolina now utters a soft “Oh” followed by another OK, and her nonverbal behavior does not suggest a clear change in the state of her understanding. Probably, Analyne’s definition and subsequent explanation were not very helpful. But considering this action as part of the process of reading together while thinking aloud, the students have read, a question has been asked, an answer has been provided, and the answer has been declared satisfactory. All the formal steps that must be followed have been followed, and from that point of view, the participants have managed to be ordinary students.

Because of the goals of the course I observed, students often encountered texts that were more complex than the ones they were familiar with, and also new genres and new practices for interacting with text. During these new activities, the concern with procedural aspects was even more evident. Even when students engaged in similar activities in other contexts, they seemed to pay little attention to how the new practices related to things they already knew or to meaning-making as an important purpose for reading. For instance, students were asked to make predictions about the content of texts before they started reading. One instance of that practice was the pre-reading activity students worked on before they started reading *The House on Mango Street*. Students had to complete a worksheet with prompts such as “What do you think the novel will be about after reading the back cover?” Below the prompt, there was room for three answers, introduced by “First prediction,” “Second prediction,” and “Third prediction.” When the students read the framing questions, they immediately started talking about what they thought would be the content of the book. After sharing their ideas, they turned their attention to completing the worksheet. At this point, they started wondering how to answer the questions. Several students said they were not ready and they needed more time. Many whispered the word *prediction* to themselves or said it to other members of their groups with rising intonation. After having told her classmates five different ideas about what she thought the reading would be about, at the time of writing, Cindy told her classmate, “Ah: . maybe you can go first...prediction?” It seems several students had difficulty making the connection between what they needed to write down and the predictions they had made when they discussed what the novel would be about. The fairly authentic action of anticipating what a book might be about from its cover was now transformed into a “school task,” and in the process it had become something they were not sure how to do.

Asking Questions as an Explicit Process - During the semester, the students listened to the instructor talk and read about the importance of asking good questions to understand texts better. They heard the instructor describe different types of questions that readers can ask about texts, and they read a worksheet that explained four question categories and

provided examples of each. The four kinds of questions were: “right there,” “pulling it together,” “author and me,” and “on my own” (see appendix D for a copy of the classroom handout). Both before and after the class meeting when they were introduced to question types, students were asked to write questions about the texts they read.

During a class period, the class previewed and read half of an article about a US State Department program that funded English classes in Egypt. The article focused on how through participation in this program Egyptian youth learn to appreciate American culture and learn tolerance for different beliefs and traditions. Since they didn’t finish the article in class, students had to finish it at home and think about two questions that the instructor had given them. During the following class session, students answered the instructor’s questions and wrote two additional ones. The prompt for the student-generated questions was “Now that you’ve read the article, what things do you wonder about? Write at least two questions that this article makes you think about.” Christian, Kavita, and Pilar were working as a group. As they discussed the answer to the instructor’s questions, it was clear that they had not finished reading the article at home. After reading the prompt, Kavita says “I guess . I don’t read all,” but she starts formulating a question:

- 1 **Kavita:** How does . I mean . why does the government bring the money?
- 2 **Pilar:** Mh:
- 3 **Kavita:** Right?
- 4 **Pilar:** Yeah . what was it?
- 5 [...]
- 6 **Kavita:** How does government brings: . the money . for:: . OK how does government . ah:: . brings: .
- 7 ah-where does government get the money: . for: . to pay . the:: . after school programs?
- 8 **Pilar:** Mh::
- 9 **Kavita:** Something like that
- 10 **Pilar:** Oh
- 11 **Kavita:** So it would be like . how does government rerreng-no . how does government . arrange the
- 12 money for after school program?
- 13 (Kavita and Pilar start writing. Christian opens his notebook and begins copying what they write.)
- 14 **Pilar:** What does arrange . mean?
- 15 **Kavita:** Do they give . like . to collect . everything like . to . to:: like . get the money collected and
- 16 then give it to the: Access program: . like to the school . so:: . to have XX . XX?
- 17 **Pilar:** Yeah . so OK
- 18 **Kavita:** So [speaking slowly as she writes] how does government . arrange the money:: . uh . for .
- 19 how should I say OK . how does government arrange the money to::-wait . I don’t know how to
- 20 write X senten—oh . how does government arrange the money for sch-program . or .
- 21 [...]
- 22 **Pilar:** The money for the after-school program
- 23 **Kavita:** Uh-huh . so we need . two questions . for after-school program? . So we need one more
- 24 question.

Kavita’s prefacing of the discussion about the question with the announcement that she had not really read the article is a first indication that this action may not be oriented towards helping her understand what she read. As the group comes up with a question, none of the members seem to look at the article to identify sections that were confusing or that raised questions about the language or about the program it describes. There is no hint in their interaction that the question needs to be connected to a need to know a certain part of the article or to understand a specific aspect of the events. In addition, the question itself seems to shift, and the shifts are not subordinated to a concern for how best to get at

certain information. The first formulation of the question, in line 1, suggests Kavita is concerned with the reason why the US government sends money to Egypt. This could potentially reflect an interest in the political motivations for the program, but that was exactly the second question that the instructor had asked: "Why do you think the US government spends money on [this program]?" The group had already discussed that question. So it is more likely that Kavita realizes that she is asking the same question that the instructor asked, and she tries to figure out a variation that will turn her question into a different one. The purpose here is not to reformulate the question so that it better addresses her need to know, but so that it better conforms to the requirement of being a student-generated question.

In line 3 Kavita asks for Pilar's assessment of the adequacy of the question, and in line 4 Pilar first agrees and *then* asks what the question is. In lines 6-7, Kavita's question changes focus again, first to the process by which government funds are sent to Egypt, and then to the source of the funds. In line 9, after Pilar's "Mh:," Kavita adds "something like that." This again suggests that she is looking for any of a possible number of examples that qualify as a "student's question." From line 11 on, the focus switches to the form of the question rather than the content, as Kavita and Pilar consider how to phrase it and Christian simply copies what they have written. When they finish their negotiation of how to write down the question, Kavita declares that they need one more question. Again what was conceived as an action that would help students with the activity of reading and making meaning from a text has become an end in itself, and instead of needing to *understand* or *find out* something, the students simply need one more question.

When the students started reading *The House on Mango Street*, they spent two class sessions working on writing different kinds of questions about the novel. After being introduced to the four types of questions mentioned above, students read the first twenty-five pages of the book for homework. During the following class meeting, students worked in groups of three to four and wrote one question of each kind on poster paper. They then posted their questions on the walls around the classroom and walked around to read and comment on each other's questions. Daniel, Analyne, and Carolina worked together that day. At the beginning of the group activity, Daniel said, "We need four types of question" and read the category names. Carolina pointed to a page in the textbook and asked:

Carolina: What about something like this?

Analyne: What is that? "Right there" question?

Carolina: Yeah.

Analyne: Who have...

Carolina: He looks like uh . her family? ... *O* ... She has a typica:l...

Analyne: Who-I mean . we can say . who has the:: ... who had the:: ... who has a hair like broom?

Carolina: (laughs)

Analyne: We . it say "my papa . my papa has . my papa's hair is like a broom"... We can put that "right there" question

...

Analyne: Is that a right . which-I mean "right there"?

Daniel wrote down the question on the poster paper, and the group turned to writing an example of each of the remaining three categories. For each type, the group considered candidates and discussed whether they fit the category description. One person introduced a potential question with "We could say..." and either the same or another group member

raised questions about the category, such as “Can that be a question for this? (pointing to a question category),” or “does [the answer] have to be in the book?” A few times a member of the group read part of a category description, such as “The reader has to use information provided in the text and his background knowledge,” and another member responded “Oh, yeah. We can’t do that.” As they considered more questions and accepted few, Carolina and Analyne became more doubtful and frustrated. After they came up with an “author and me” question,” Carolina transitioned to the last category by saying “On my own.” At that point, the instructor announced that they had five minutes left to finish their questions and post them on the board. Carolina and Analyne moaned and laughed. They continued:

- 1 **Analyne:** (Reading the handout) “The question is not...
- 2 **Carolina:** Maybe the . the: . the house dream?
- 3 **Analyne:** You can say “What’s your house dream?” . “Your dream house?”
- 4 **Carolina:** Your dream house.
- 5 **Analyne:** I don’t know (goes back to reading the description of the question type)
- 6 **Carolina:** Does Esperanza...
- 7 **Analyne:** We can say “What is your dream house?”
- 8 **Carolina:** Wha:t...
- 9 **Analyne:** What do you think?
- 10 **Daniel:** //XX\
- 11 **Carolina:** //Does Espe\ranza...
- 12 **Analyne:** like **anything**—
- 13 **Carolina:** —has... Oh yeah . can the family... Can Esperanza’s family have a a: . her dream house?
- 14 **Analyne:** But it says . it doesn’t need to be: ...
- 15 **Carolina:** Yeah

Again in this excerpt Analyne and Carolina are focused on determining what the nature of the question category is, and evaluating whether particular examples are legitimate members of that category. The two women collaborate by reading sections of the handout, proposing a topic for a question, helping each other formulate the question, and consulting on whether they have produced the kind of question needed. In lines 11 and 12, as Carolina and Analyne try to evaluate the question, Analyne suggests that they ask whether Esperanza likes “**anything**,” implying once again that what is at stake here is not to address a need to know something about the text but a need to display that they can write questions according to category specifications. The discussion continued in this vain for a few more minutes. Eventually, Analyne called me and asked me if one of their questions was a good “On my own” question. I said I thought it was. Analyne seemed very excited. She said, “Yeah!” She and Carolina laughed, and Carolina sighed and said, “Finally!” Analyne said “Yeay” again and clapped.

The three other groups I recorded that day had a similar experience. For one of them, recognizing the category extensions—all the questions that can be considered members of one question category—was even more problematic because, while they seemed to understand the description of the question types, they had difficulty determining how right there a “right-there” question should be or how much the student need to rely on background knowledge in an “own-my-own” question. When Rosie proposed “What’s Esperanza’s family names?” as a “right-there” question, Hameed countered that it was an example of “pulling it together” because the answer was not one single piece of information “because father’s and mother’s and this and this.” At some point, Raju managed to come up with a question that seemed to fit the criteria for the

category. He proposed they ask “What is Mimi’s dog’s eyes’ color?” Rosie shot down this question, however, because she thought it was “stupid.” She argued that asking a question about the eye color of a dog of a minor character in the novel was too far removed from the main events. While this additional criterion made it even more difficult to complete the task, it at least showed a certain awareness that questions are also supposed to be the kinds of questions a reader might want to ask. But Rosie was a rebellious, critical thinker with little deference to authority, and apt to subverting tasks. Most other students showed no such concern for the authenticity of the questions to a real world reader. The group spent most of their time trying to come up with an example of the first question type and as a result couldn’t finish their poster. In another group, Cindy became so confused by the exercise that after she proposed a question to the group she asked, “Is that correct?” Without a pause, she added “I don’t know . I’m stupid . I don’t think so.”

The exercise had been challenging, no doubt, but had it been an exercise in understanding the text better, an exercise in understanding what kinds of questions can help readers engage more deeply or meaningfully with a text, an exercise in recognizing category intensions and extensions, or an exercise in understanding how to satisfactorily perform a specific student role? Here again, none of the questions seemed to be motivated by the need to understand the text better or by wanting to find out their classmates’ interpretations or opinions about the text. The action of looking for questions seemed to be part of the activity of producing a display of their understanding of the different question categories. Judging the appropriateness of the questions was not done in the context of how much they wanted to know the answer, how well it communicated their doubts or their needs to their peers, or how it might help someone understand a key section of the text, but on how well it matched the criteria that described the question category. None of the students I recorded asked about or expressed an opinion about how categorizing questions this way related to reading for understanding either. As I watched and listened to the video and audio records of this session, I wondered what kind of sense students had made of this activity.

Sense Making as an Explicit Process - A similar focus on process at the expense of meaning making was evident in another reading practice that the students learned in the course. The students were often asked what reading strategies “good readers” use, and many of these practices were grouped into an activity called “think aloud.” The instructor explained that when good readers read, they actively engage with text. In trying to make sense of the text, they use their background knowledge, ask questions, make predictions, connect the reading to their own experiences, reread, paraphrase, and summarize, among other strategies. After introducing the activity, Susan demonstrated it a few times by reading a text aloud and using some of these strategies. The instructor also gave the students a think-aloud worksheet (Appendix E) that listed all the possible strategies. She then asked students to read aloud several times and practice some of these think alouds. As they prepared to do so, Susan encouraged students to look at the worksheet “so that [they knew] what to say.” When students practiced this activity in groups, they mostly read sections of text without stopping to reread, comment, or ask questions. After much encouragement from Susan, a few started to use a few of the strategies. The following is an excerpt of Pilar’s reading of a text with think alouds. The words from the text are between quotation marks; Pilar’s comments are in bold letters:

"Baseball has been part of the Japanese landscape since 1873. According to many sources, it was introduced in that year by an American teacher, Horace Wilson. It appeared on the heels of the social, political, and technological turmoil" **I wonder what that is.** "in Japan known as the Meiji Restoration" **Huh! I wonder what that is.** "Some observers think that the game caught on in part because it embodied"—**I wonder what that word. Embodies? Huh!** "the spirit of *wa*, the principle of self sacrifice for the good of the group. The sport was first played by schoolboys. Primarily used as a teaching tool, baseball was played quite rigidly in Japan, as if it were a martial art" **Ah, that's interesting.** [reads five more lines of text without stopping] Most teams in this league were sponsored by newspapers" **Sponsored by newspapers? So that means they help them?** "hoping to increase sales or by railroads hoping to transport fans to their teams' ballparks. In 1939, the schedule changed from a split season (spring and fall) to a single fall season. Not long after this, World War II threw Japanese baseball into chaos." **Oh that's bad.** [continues reading to the end of the paragraph without stopping].

Like Pilar's, most student comments were questions about the meaning of words or concepts, which rarely got answered by the readers or by their partners before the reading resumed (Hameed: "What does it mean sacrifice?" Kavita: "I didn't understand the last one.") Students also made dubious expressions of interest in the content of the reading, such as "that's interesting," "that's bad," "Oh, World War II." Other comments were almost exact repetitions of examples they had heard from the instructor when she demonstrated the strategies (Cindy: "'The heels of' we learned before." Hameed: "This reminds me of how I played in school.") Virtually none of the comments students made during think alouds elicited a response or a discussion that resulted in a clarification, transformation or evaluation of the reading. In some ways it seems the students did not intend their comments to do so. When they said they didn't know the meaning of a word, they rarely looked at their peers or paused to see if they would get a response. When they evaluated the content of the text, as in "that's bad," they didn't specify what made them think so or looked at their classmates to see what they thought. The focus was on getting on with the task of reading and, for some, demonstrating think aloud strategies. In the students' attempts to make sense of these strategies, what was meant to be an enactment of the process of meaning construction from text was transformed into something very different. In authentic reading we automatically and largely unconsciously activate meaning. To do so, we flexibly draw on a variety of strategies to repair failure to reach congruence with the author of the text. The strategies we use are dependent on the particular text and purpose for reading. In these students' attempts to engage in what "good readers do" this practice became a series of deliberate, stereotyped, and decontextualized actions. The strategies they used were not solicited from their bodies by the reading context as part of their attempt to make sense. Instead, they read a text for the purpose of doing some of the things that a good reader does, and they selected strategies from a decontextualized, generic list.

There is much sad irony in this explicit focus on decontextualized processes. As I discussed earlier, several students in the class needed to develop deeper involvement with text and more extensive and strategic use of resources. The pedagogical practice of explicitly teaching "think-aloud" strategies is an attempt to help students who are not actively engaged in constructing meaning by providing some models of how that can be done. And yet, the way they are transformed in transmission has the unintended consequence of distancing students from meaningful interaction with text.

This situation is doubly ironic. Students engaged in many of the strategies they “practiced” in much more organic and authentic ways when they were not in class or when they were off-task. When the class was about to start reading *The House on Mango Street*, in the time it took Susan to introduce the pre-reading activity, say that they would be making predictions about the book, and pass out the handout, Tae-woo looked at the front cover, read the back cover, looked at the table of contents, read the dedication, and skimmed the preface. He then threw the book on the table and said “bo:::ring.” He had thus engaged in a thorough pre-reading of the book with the purpose of determining whether he would like what he was about to begin reading, and had gotten the answer he was looking for. Students also knew about the practice of looking for textual evidence and even demanded it from each other when they had a purpose for it. One day when Carolina and Ashwaq were discussing scholarships, Ashwaq said she wouldn’t apply because “what teacher is gonna write a letter for me?” Carolina hadn’t read that a letter of recommendation was required. She pulled out the handout she had used to prepare her materials and she asked, “Where is the requirement for the teacher?” Within a few minutes they had found relevant sections of the brochures and they had determined that while they looked similar, they were for different scholarships. Students could also ask questions about text. I reported earlier that Harpreet had asked Pilar who had stolen the man’s kidney in the urban legend she was reading. During a later class meeting, when Pilar found out that Kavita had read part of *The House on Mango Street*, she bombarded her with questions without stopping to think about whether they were adequate: “Are they Mexican?” “Why is she getting married if she doesn’t want to?” “The street is called Mango?” Cindy often connected the reading to her own experience even though she said she didn’t do that during think aloud. She once “deviated” from the think-aloud activity to share something about Taiwan with Vale. She put her textbook down and, in contrast to the slow pace and the detached tone she had used for her think-aloud strategies, she leaned closer to Vale and said quickly and with excitement, “OK, let me tell you something. You know why Taiwan is like popular for baseball?” She then proceeded to explain the historical reasons why baseball had spread from Japan to Taiwan. Afterwards, she picked up the textbook and “went back to the task” of interacting with text. When Hameed read the article about the US State Department’s English program in Egypt, he had very piercing questions and critical comments that he shared with his group. He asked why the US didn’t try to improve its image in the Middle East by helping poor people financially instead of bombing them and then trying to teach them English. But later, when they had to write questions as part of the assignment, it didn’t occur to him to ask that question. It was as if the content were too real and the issue too serious to be part of a school assignment.

And that seemed to be how most students approached school practices. Few of them—Miguel, Patricia, Rosie—seemed to try to reconcile what they were being asked to do in school with the role those actions probably play in purposeful reading. They often deviated from the task when they deemed it unhelpful, or adapted it in ways that made more sense to them. For the rest, it was as if framing something as a school practice mystified the process. When I asked Asha if she and Vale’s think-aloud strategies were like the ones Susan used, she said they weren’t because Susan did it in a “professional” way. By their being incorporated into the class, the fluid, largely automatic sense-making practices that readers use had become a process that must be performed in prescribed, normative ways. Even students who said they used reading strategies naturally when they read in

their own language seemed to succumb to “performing student roles” when they did the same in class. Rather than seeing themselves as readers who already know how to make some sense of text, and classroom activities as an exploration of practices that might help them become more comfortable and effective in their sense making, their focus on process divorced class activities from personal meanings and purposes.

Classroom Performance and Presentation of Self

I would like to end this examination of how students engaged with the language and the practices they encountered in the ESL Reading class by returning to an issue that emerged from the analysis of the students’ early experiences learning English: the challenges of managing one’s presentation of a valued self with limited language proficiency. Remember that several students expressed self-consciousness or frustration about speaking English, especially “in front of others.” This concern surfaced in the classroom in a variety of ways.

Several students, especially younger students who attended US high schools, exhibited a great deal of anxiety about speaking up in class. When students had to report to the class about what they had discussed in groups, they bickered with each other about who should do it. No one wanted to report. Tae-woo had not attended a US high school, but he felt tongue-tied because of his low oral fluency. He pleaded with his other group members, Asha and Claudia, to report to the class. Both women had already done it once and it was his turn, they argued. Tae-woo kept finding different arguments and several times said “I can’t. I can’t do that.” Some of this anxiety was also evident during group work. Christian described himself as very shy and appeared extremely so. During group work, he sat facing the front of the classroom instead of his classmates, and he hardly talked. That part of his self-consciousness was connected to speaking English became clear when he worked with Kavita and Pilar. While he spoke with Pilar in Spanish sometimes, he rarely spoke in English. If he was asked what he thought about what his partners said he simply said, “You are right,” and if they asked him how he would answer a question or what he would add he often said “No” or “Nothing.” He was pretty diligent with his written work, and when his partners asked to read what he had written they discovered that he had “good answers.” Gradually, he came to interact with Kavita through Pilar, even when he spoke English, probably because sharing a common first language with her eased his insecurities. When Kavita and Pilar were struggling to come up with questions about *The House on Mango Street*, Christian asked Pilar, “How about if she put X be embarrassed of living . in a really old house?” By “she” he meant Kavita, who was doing the writing. The two women tried to joke with Christian, but they couldn’t break the ice. Eventually the situation became so awkward for Kavita that she started talking to Christian through Pilar. Once when they were sharing their answers to homework questions, Kavita asked Pilar, “What does he have?”

Christian was an extreme case, but other students also became very self-conscious working with classmates they didn’t know. Daniel, a recent arrival from Hong Kong, seemed fairly comfortable with other Asian males, but he hardly talked when he worked with female partners, and when Carolina and Analyne insisted that he speak, he moaned and held his head between his hands, but said nothing. After Cindy worked with Vale and Asha for a few class sessions, she didn’t want to change groups. She then became comfortable with her new group: Analyne, Marilou, and Melanie. Once, however, the

instructor asked her to work with Ramiro, a Salvadorian male in his early fifties. Cindy became very obviously embarrassed. She blushed, giggled, and fanned her face through most of the interaction.

The students' concern with how they were perceived by other members of the class translated into a series of strategies for managing their presentation of self. These strategies seemed to focus on finding opportunities to participate in ways that allowed them to display competence and hide what they perceived as their inadequacies. Since many students felt insecure about their language competence, hiding their inadequacies sometimes meant giving up an opportunity to learn language that they didn't know. One common manifestation of this phenomenon was strategic volunteering. Students volunteered to provide answers when the questions were simple and had a short answer, and when they knew the risk of being asked to expand their answers was minimal. The instructor often asked students to volunteer to write the answers to textbook exercises on the board. Most students raised their hands, and with only one exception, they calculated the timing so that they would be chosen to answer a question they were certain they had answered correctly. When students raised their hand they showed excitement when they were selected to answer the right questions. If they were not picked for the question they wanted to answer, they often lowered their hand and said something like "I don't wanna go anymore." The exception was Miguel, who once volunteered to answer a question he had not even answered yet, further proof of his faith in his ability to understand texts. Other students had to answer questions they were uncertain about only when their volunteering strategy backfired. Sometimes a student raised her hand for a particular question and the instructor called her for a different one. In these cases, students quickly consulted with several classmates, ideally those who usually seemed to have the right answers, and tried to determine what the correct answer was before writing it on the board. Students were much less likely to volunteer for open-ended questions, especially if they thought there might be follow-up questions. Once Marilou did volunteer to read to the whole class an answer she had written as homework. When she finished, she turned to Cindy who was sitting next to her, and she said "I got so nervous." Her voice was quivering. Once, after Harpreet volunteered to answer a question in a whole class format, Pilar, who was sitting next to her, whispered, "On the . on the level 2 [class] . you didn't wanna speak remember? . You were like me . you were shy." Harpreet replied, "I know."

Students also showed competence by "appropriating" other students' or even the instructor's answers. While students worked in groups, Susan and I circulated and helped them. In some of these instances the instructor had to provide extensive help and sometimes ended up telling the students the answer and showing the evidence. Given that the instructor had the final say over what answers were correct, students couldn't go wrong by volunteering to answer a question after they had heard the instructor's answer. Harpreet, Analyne, Hameed, and Arturo volunteered to answer questions they had discussed with the instructor or with me. Pilar, apparently thinking that this was not completely honest behavior, confronted Harpreet by telling her "that was the one the teacher told us." Harpreet tried to save face by saying that she had already guessed the answer before talking to the instructor. The question asked what word was a synonym for *contemporary* and the answer was *modern*. Harpreet said she had been able to guess because of the 'm' and the 'o' in *modern* and the 'm,' 'o,' and 'p' in *contemporary*. Sometimes the appropriation could be more adequately characterized as "misappropriation." I

mentioned earlier that students often copied answers from each other. Sometimes they reported these answers as if they had figured them out themselves. Analyne often looked at Marilou's answers and then announced to Cindy or to the instructor that she "got it." In one instance, Cindy asked her "Where?" referring to which part of the text showed the correct answer. Analyne answered by pointing to Marilou's notebook.

"Borrowing" other people's answers allowed students to participate even when they were unable to understand a text, but it was not the only way students tried to hide their inadequacies. Harpreet, for instance, seemed to have serious difficulties decoding text, probably caused by an undiagnosed reading disability. When she read to me, the sounds she produced bore little resemblance to what was printed on the page. Sometimes she read a four-syllable word as only one or two syllables, and she skipped many words. She seemed to have difficulty recognizing letters. She once asked a classmate if the first letter in *kernel* was a 'k' or 'r.' In spite of these challenges, she seemed to have no difficulty making inferences on the basis of information that she heard from her classmates and instructor. She was very engaged and showed more conviction about her answers on the day students were discussing inferences. This was probably because this type of questions was more difficult for everyone in the class, and so other students were discussing sections of the text more, and thus making the information available to Harpreet in spoken form. Because she was extremely sharp-witted and vivacious, she was fairly successful at hiding her reading difficulties from her classmates, partly by relying on the strategies described above. After copying many of her answers from classmates, she then volunteered to answer them when the instructor asked in a whole class format.

Several students also used vagueness as a strategy to hide what they didn't know. Early on I noticed that some students sometimes used a lot of words without communicating very specific ideas. Kavita seemed to often use this strategy to appear to defend a certain answer during group work. Once she supported the answer she—or her tutor—had chosen in these words: "yeah I mean . in here . it says that . like . I put [letter] i . I agree . yeah . I put [letter] i." As in this example, there were often no concrete details that would commit her to a certain understanding of the text, or reveal her lack of understanding. Cindy often spoke in a similar way, and so did Hameed. Sometimes students showed great skill at hiding that they didn't know or misunderstood something. In one instance, Marilou had misinterpreted a prompt in a homework activity. The assignment asked her to state what difficulties she had in reading a text. During class, Cindy was rushing to complete her homework assignment, and she tried to get ideas by reading Marilou's answers. In the following interaction, Cindy tells Marilou that she doesn't understand part of what Marilou wrote:

- 1 **Cindy:** (pushes Marilou's sheet towards Marilou and points at a section) What's your different
- 2 part? . difficult?
- 3 **Marilou:** For me: like: . uhm: based on my opinion right?
- 4 **Cindy:** Uh-huh
- 5 **Marilou:** Uhm: because the ambassador of the United States like they want--she wants to ended
- 6 up the-the access from the students . after the three years they said . it's over
- 7 **Cindy:** So difficult is uh: . your difficult is-can you say that again? 'Cause I didn't understand.
- 8 **Marilou:** Uh . for me it was difficult for me because the students . they still want to continue in the
- 9 Access .
- 10 [...]
- 11 **Cindy:** But why you feel it's difficult?

- 12 **Marilou:** Yeah that's it
 13 **Cindy:** But why . like-'cause difficult for **you** (showing her the words on Marilou's worksheet)
 14 **Marilou:** Difficult?
 15 [Cindy asks Melanie, but Melanie hadn't done her homework, so Cindy goes back to Marilou]
 16 **Cindy:** (Reads worksheet) Like what's so hard for you (To Marilou, pointing to that section of the
 17 worksheet) //I think it's hard for you to reading this?\
 18 **Marilou:** //hard XX reading?\
 19 **Cindy:** Which part is hard?
 20 **Marilou:** //actually:\
 21 **Cindy:** //I don't think\
 22 **Marilou:** Just say . just tell it that . "I don't find any difficult . any difficulties in this reading"
 23 **Cindy:** OK... Ok wo-just uh . I will write like: . uh: (speaks slowly as she writes) I . think . this: .
 24 article . I think this article is: . not .
 25 **Marilou:** Difficult.
 26 **Cindy:** that . hard for me... Oh what did you do for the last one?

Marilou's confirmation request in line 3 already suggests that she is not sure what the question asked her to do, but she seems to have decided to take a chance and answer it. Line 5 makes clear that she misunderstood the intent of the question when she answers by referring to the information in the article. She seems to have interpreted the question as a prompt to identify an unfortunate event in the article. After a few turns discussing the content of the article, Cindy brings the focus back to the prompt by asking Marilou why she feels that's difficult (line 11) and then exaggerates the stress on "you" (line 13), perhaps to show Marilou that she needs to focus on what was difficult for her, not for the people described in the article. In line 14 Marilou repeats difficult with rising intonation, inviting Cindy to elaborate. After Cindy explains that the prompt refers to what aspects of the article made it difficult for Lindsay to read (lines 16-17), Marilou repeats part of the question and then produces the continuation marker "Mh-hmh." Cindy insists one more time with "what part is hard?" in line 19, and Marilou responds with "actually" elongating the last vowel sound. While Marilou hints at doubts a few times, conspicuously absent from this interaction is a marker of change of state, such as an "oh," or overt recognition that she had misunderstood the question. She also did not ask Cindy to explain to her how they were supposed to answer the question.

Another manifestation of this strategy was an unwillingness to admit to classmates that they had made a mistake. When some students were corrected, they made conversational moves that suggested that what their interlocutors said was what they had meant all along. Hameed used this strategy when Sergio, irritated by Hameed's repeated attempts to show off, put him on the spot by asking him to answer a question:

- Sergio:** What uh . what is Access?
Hameed: Access is uh . OK, Let me read . "A kind of small program where they learn English"
Sergio: Only English?
Hameed: Because . yes, it's Americans.
Sergio: Nothing else than the English?
Hameed: Oh, ah-you know, language is mean life . it's mean . you know . culture . it's mean everything else

Hameed had copied the answer from a classmate, but he still provides it to Sergio as if it were his. When Sergio tries to call Hameed's bluff by asking "Only English?" and then again with "Nothing else than English?" Hameed gets the idea that his answer is missing

something, and he adds a few more details but implying that those things were included in his original answer and that's why he hadn't said them explicitly. In the excerpt that follows, Susan was helping Cindy and Analyne, who had not been able to answer a question. At least for Analyne, the problem may have been partly caused by the fact that she didn't know the meaning of Farsi

- 1 **Susan:** and it sounds like **stupid** . in //Farsi\\
- 2 **Cindy:** //in Farsi\\ (laughs)
- 3 **Analyne:** What is Farsi?
- 4 **Susan:** Farsi? (to Cindy) Do you know what Farsi is?
- 5 **Cindy:** Yeah Farsi is a . country in: .
- 6 **Susan:** It's a language
- 7 **Cindy:** Yeah . it's X is uh . there are . include like many like countries . it's . I think it's near Africa?
Or near: .
- 9 **Susan:** Actually Farsi is the language spoken in . Iran
- 10 **Cindy:** Iran
- 11 **Analyne:** Oh

In line 2, Cindy repeats "Farsi" and laughs, implying that she knows what the word means. Perhaps for this reason, when Analyne asks what Farsi is, Susan asks Cindy if she can explain. Cindy answers that Farsi is a country, hesitating briefly before the word *country*. She may have inferred that Farsi was a country because it is preceded by the preposition *in*. In line 6, Susan corrects her and says it is a language. Cindy then tries to save face in line 7 in a characteristically vague turn. She first adds "yeah" to Susan's correction, and then tries to reconcile her previous answer with Susan's by saying that "there are . include like many like countries." She then guesses that it's in Africa but right away adds "or near" and pauses suggesting that she may be ready to correct herself. When Susan says Farsi is spoken in Iran, Cindy repeats Iran. Again, there is no "oh" to acknowledge that she has been corrected. Sometimes when a student asked what a word or expression meant, another student would answer, and it was clear that some of these answers were guesses. I mentioned earlier that a student, Marilou, had told her classmate that the meaning of *essential* was "a small part." Her classmate didn't seem convinced, perhaps because she couldn't believe that the instructor would be asking for a word that is "a small part" of the meaning of an article they had read and were summarizing. Marilou then opened her dictionary and looked up the word, and when she found the definition she told her classmate, "Yeah, a very important part." "Yeah" is not what one normally says when a previous claim is directly contradicted by new evidence. Guessing answers in conversations with classmates did not carry a great risk to face since classmates didn't know the answers to the questions they asked. But in rare instances when they were corrected, however, several students used "yeah" when one would normally expect an "oh" or "really?" Kavita was another student who often used this strategy. When she was reading the back cover of *The House on Mango Street* with Pilar, Kavita said that the story was about a girl who didn't want to leave the neighborhood she grew up in. A few minutes later, Pilar read information that contradicted Kavita's interpretation and told her "I don't understand . so she **does** want to move."

- 1 **Kavita:** Uh?
- 2 **Pilar:** from the house . right?
- 3 **Kavita:** She doesn't ... right? . OK (Reads) "Mango Street is a semina:l ."

4 **Pilar:** (Reads) “Greatly admired novel of a little girl growing up in the Latino section of Chicago...
5 **Kavita:** Like when she was still little girl? . She . grew . up . in the Mango Street?
6 **Pilar:** Mh-hmh (keeps reading silently)... See? (Reads) “Esperanza doesn’t want to belong . not to
7 her rundown neighborhood”
8 **Kavita:** Yeah she doesn’t .
9 **Pilar:** She doesn’t wants to belong to the neighborhood?
10 **Kavita:** Yeah . because it’s-over there’s like XX and: ... it’s like . Esperanza is a Latino:: . Latin-Oh
11 how do you say it?
12 **Pilar:** Latino
13 **Kavita:** Yeah . Latino girl? And: . the neighbors: in the Mango Street is like they don’t expect them
14 or something

After Pilar confronts Kavita with the inconsistency, Kavita says again “she doesn’t” (line 3) and starts reading the back cover of the book. Pilar then begins reading aloud. Kavita adds information that does not contribute to an understanding of whether the character wanted to stay in her house or not. This was another form of strategic ambiguity that students used, especially when the instructor asked them to answer in front of the class. When they didn’t seem to understand a question or know the answer, rather than ask for clarification or say they weren’t sure, they answered with any information they remembered from the reading, however unrelated to the questions, perhaps hoping that at least part of their answer would address the question asked, a strategy that I called “everything and the kitchen sink.” This seems to be what Kavita does above in line 5.

When Pilar finds the section of the text that clearly contradicts Kavita’s interpretation and reads it aloud, Kavita says, “yeah, she doesn’t” as if that is what she had been saying all along. In lines 10-14, she tries to save face by providing an explanation for why the character doesn’t want to live in that neighborhood, another attempt to show that she had in fact understood. Unfortunately, again, her explanation has little to do with any information she has read in the text. During an interview, Cindy also described using the “everything and the kitchen sink” strategy when working in groups. She said that when she compared answers with her classmates and had to decide which answer to share with the class, they usually reported the longer answer because it was more likely to contain the right information. Hameed also followed this strategy often. Once when he volunteered to write an answer on the board, the instructor took him by surprise by deviating from the normal routine. He had written the definition of the word *stuffed* which appeared in the sentence “His feet were fat and doughy like thick tamales, and these he powdered and stuffed into white socks and brown leather shoes” (Cisneros, 2009, p. 39). Next to the word, he had indicated that it was a verb. Susan asked Hameed how he knew that *stuffed* was a verb. Hameed answered “because uh: ... it’s . stuffed .” At this point, a couple of people in the room said “e-d,” and Hameed said “because the e-d . yeah.” He then overheard another classmate say “powdered . verb” and, probably deciding not to take his chances by giving only one answer Hameed added, “He powdered . that’s mean verb . and uh stuffed . should be verb because it’s uh: . it’s belong to powder and they talk about the shoes.”

Not all students used strategic vagueness to appear more knowledgeable. This behavior was one of the different strategies students used to perform in the class in spite of their gaps in language knowledge. Older students didn’t seem to draw on this strategy, probably because they were less uncomfortable when their mistakes were exposed. Still, when the instructor’s and their classmates’ attention turned away from them, they usually

whispered to their group members and laughed at themselves softly. Even some young students, like Christian and Pilar, avoided talking or providing an answer if they had any doubts that they might be wrong. So they didn't seem to feel comfortable "pretending" that they knew. Their strategy was to keep a low profile and to speak up only when they were sure of the answer or couldn't avoid it without disregarding the instructor's directions in front of the whole class.

The participation strategies that mostly younger students who had attended high school in the US used to perform student roles maximized their opportunities for appearing competent or, as some of them would say, to avoid appearing "weird" or "stupid." They reflect a great concern for how they were viewed by their classmates and their instructor. It seems that some of these students had internalized the critical voices of the high school classmates who mocked them. They seemed to judge themselves, and sometimes others, by a view of second-language speakers as deficient. A few verbalized the oppressive voice of the former classmates—real or imagined—who made fun of them. They laughed or sounded embarrassed as they corrected themselves, sometimes unnecessarily because no mistake was made.

Pilar: It's in the . twentieth. I mean—(sarcastically) line twentieth (laughs) **Twenty!**

Cindy: Maybe she has some like a trouble in school . she—maybe she will have some **problems**, not trouble.

Analyne: How does Esperanza react when she find out that his father . grandfather uh . he died? ... We should say **feel** in this one . not react.

Hameed seemed to have not only internalized the voice of his mocking classmates, but also to have adopted their oppressive role. He sometimes ridiculed classmates by telling them "You gotta learn English to understand," or "You gotta go back to Mexico."

In some contexts, their desire to be seen as competent, "normal" people encouraged students to attend to language forms so they could avoid error. When students engaged in collaborative writing activities, such as writing questions on a poster, they focused on the language and helped each other find effective vocabulary and correct their grammar. Sometimes, not always, this resulted in an improved product. When students had to report the ideas they had discussed in groups in front of the class, they collaborated in similar ways. More often, their concern with how they were viewed discouraged engagement in language and literacy practices that would have helped them improve their proficiency. Because admitting they didn't know or had made a mistake was embarrassing, their need to save face discouraged them from doing so, which in turn deprived them of opportunities to learn.

Concerns for saving face also seemed to peak when students were asked to engage in practices they were unfamiliar with, perhaps because they were then entering uncharted territory. They did not have a clear sense of what constituted "normal" behavior in these unfamiliar situations. Think-aloud strategies were particularly embarrassing to some students. For one thing, they had to read aloud, and many of them had difficulty pronouncing low-frequency words, so this activity exposed many of their language gaps. In addition, being asked to engage in a public performance of a task that was new to them seemed to create a lot of anxiety. When Susan introduced the strategy to the class, a few students, including Hameed and another Yemeni student, said they sounded like "crazy

people.” The first time Pilar had to use think aloud strategies in class, she told her group members, “You go first. I don’t like think alouds. They are weird.” Cindy also described them as weird during an interview. This perception may help explain why most students resisted them and simply read without stopping.

During a class session when students were discussing *The House on Mango Street*, Cindy described a scene in the book in ways that parallel the students’ concerns for saving face and appearing competent. In the chapter, the main character, Esperanza, goes to a party in a new dress, but she has to wear a pair of old shoes because her mother had forgotten to buy a new pair. In class, Cindy and Marilou discussed how Esperanza must have felt in that situation. As I compared this excerpt to those where Cindy described what it was like to use think-aloud strategies or to speak up in class, I was struck by the similarities: the embarrassed tone, the feeling of being observed, the fear of being seen as stupid, the identification with Esperanza as the focus of a critical gaze. These students described Esperanza not so much as trying to do “being ordinary” but as trying to “not be weird.”

Cindy: OK . I think she’s: . she’s X . her . she has like [beauty] dress but her shoes is weird . and then . (laughs) and then . also uh: he-she thinks that . she looks funny . she don’t wan like people laugh her ... and then . actually if it’s me I don’t want do that either ‘cause the shoes is weird

Marilou: Yeah

Cindy: But I dress . I dress up like uh how like you put like skirt or all those things but . shoes is weird . it’s stupid

Marilou: I know

Cindy: I won’t do that

Marilou: (Reading her response) Mine says because she don’t have a new shoes right? And then she she is . she was so shy dancing in the prom [sic] because . it’s really awful . like everyone’s saw her dancing with a **new** dress and with an **old shoes** she’s like “Oh my god I’m gonna go [now]”

Cindy: (giggles) “Oh, I can’t talk . I can’t talk”

And, yes, Cindy did say, “I can’t **talk**” (emphasis mine), when she voiced Esperanza’s inner thoughts in the last line.

Histories and Goals Meet the Context of the Classroom

Why did and didn’t students pay attention to the language they didn’t know? Each person is unique, and his or her actions must be explained by a particular combination of factors and experiences, but the research I reported here suggests that a few common forces are at work. While almost all the students shared the goal of learning English and becoming stronger readers, they approached this task in different ways. Some students came to this class with literacy practices that resulted in prolonged engagement with text and a perception of themselves as capable sense-makers. Miguel, the only student in this group who had attended high school in the United States, differed from other US-educated students in several ways. His parents were college educated; they had more social and cultural and capital. One example of this is that at the time of deciding what school Miguel should attend, they sent him to a school outside his neighborhood because the local school had a record of poor performance. Most poor and working-class immigrants do not have the know-how or the means to select a good school for their children. Unlike other students in his age group, Miguel also knew some English when he arrived in the US, so he could start reading and writing right away. This probably allowed him to make some sense

of what was going on around him, unlike those who had to rely mostly on guessing. Patricia, Tae-woo, and Sung, all from Korea, had years of English instruction. Although this didn't result in fluency, they were familiar with formal approaches to language study, and they were also used to textual practices that involve close reading of texts. Sung had completed an undergraduate degree at a Korean university. Patricia was a junior in engineering at a prestigious Korean university, and the main purpose of her year abroad was to learn English. She didn't work, and she didn't have much of a social life, so she spent all her time studying English, looking up every single word in every text. Other adult students shared the benefits of a strong academic background. Carolina and Ramiro had degrees from universities in their countries. Being an educated person was a very important part of Carolina's identity, and she saw a high level of English proficiency as part of that. But both she and Ramiro had the busy lives of working-class adults. Carolina had a child and Ramiro worked full time and had a family. They didn't have as much time to dedicate to school, and so they found themselves cutting corners, or class. Gladys even had to cut hours of sleep.

For all students alike, learning English as opposed to a foreign language meant that they could not neatly separate English learning from the rest of their lives. They had to function in English, and that meant becoming accustomed to ignoring some of the language they didn't know. To the extent that they could "manage" their lives without focusing on language, learning English required a very deliberate and sustained effort. Students who attended US middle and high schools were initially forced to cope with little or no English. During this period they had to function with the bits of English they picked up and by learning to read the signs of the world around them, particularly those who spoke no Spanish and therefore had no classmates or teachers who could help them make sense of what was going on around them. There was no question of trying to figure out all the language they heard or read, and they still survived. Not only did they survive, but they also managed to complete most high school graduation requirements. The schools they went to did not require the kinds of deep processing of language and text that higher education does. They were able to complete writing and reading assignments and they were getting passing grades, and it seems that their teachers did not hold them accountable for showing a thorough understanding of text or even of assignment requirements. It was only when they got to college that they discovered they didn't understand what was expected of them in their papers. Kavita talked about how in high school she had good grades in her writing assignments, but when she started ESL in college her instructors questioned the relevance and the depth of what she wrote, and she often failed. Analynne said that when she submitted work in high school, she often received a passing grade and no guidance or feedback on whether her work met expectations. As long as she was in class and she submitted work, she passed. In college, she passed some of her ESL classes, but in the two semesters after this study took place, she failed her advanced ESL writing class twice in spite of having been present for every class meeting and completed all the required assignments. Miguel and Rosie talked about how they didn't really learn to write in high school, and the assignments were "a joke." They breezed through their last two years of high school because they had learned everything in their home countries. Hameed said that when he was in high school he also enrolled in adult school to learn English because in high school the students "were doing too much," meaning that there was too much play and too little work. After their initial period of shock when they arrived in the

US, the students started to be able to “manage.” In some cases, the oral fluency they developed in school gave them an inflated perception of their language ability compared to other college students who were more recent arrivals. They seemed to be able to use a lot more English. They had not been able to understand every word in the beginning and they still did OK, so there was probably little motivation to change, unless that motivation came from a different source.

In college, some of them kept using the same strategies that got them through high school, being in class regularly and submitting most of the assignments, without feeling that they would be held accountable to the text, or at least not in a way that could lead to their failure in the class. When Harpreet was in her high school math class, when English was completely inaccessible, she solved problems without reading the description. This strategy worked for her in high school. She got mostly ‘A’s and ‘B’s with a few ‘C’s. In this class, like Kavita, Marilou, Analyne, Hameed and to some extent Cindy, Harpreet completed assignments without a thorough understanding of what was expected from her. She relied mostly on her limited ability to read text, guessing, using the structure of exercises to help her find correct answers, and copying from her classmates. She passed.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Discussion of Main Findings

Once we begin to look at real human beings as they engage with the world rather than at idealized language learners, we are forced to see attention to language in different ways. A second language is initially very conspicuous for learners. By making the world they are trying to penetrate opaque, unknown language shows itself as an obstacle that must be overcome. But as learners find ways to navigate their new worlds, partly by learning to read some of the language and partly by developing common ground with the host community and learning to read other signs, unknown language that does not interfere with speakers' projects fades into the horizon of what does not need to be attended to right now. This is in direct contradiction to one of the basic tenets of SLA, that input must be comprehensible (Krashen, 1982) in order to be acquired. The problem with this assumption is that it does not take into account the many ways in which the communicative situation can be comprehended without a need to comprehend the language itself. The goal of communication is to affect others' minds and coordinate action, and to do that, we need to be able to read others' intentions, but not necessarily all the language they use. Reciprocity of perspectives and para- and nonverbal modalities can tell us much more than what the verbal message does by itself. An embodied, situated speaker creates around herself a virtual world. Her gestures, facial expressions, body alignment, prosody, and interaction with the material environment project a real or hypothetical experience that envelops the addressee. Our embodied nature thus allows us to encroach upon one-another. It gives us pre-reflexive access to other human beings' experiences through what Merleau-Ponty called intercorporeity (1962; Young, 2011). Our bodies' many ways to grasp and convey meaning sometimes eliminate the need to understand language itself. If language acquisition is the successful mapping of language forms to communicative functions, then, what is required is not so much *comprehensible input* but *comprehended language* – not just grasped intentions and communicative situations, but an understanding of how particular chunks of language realize specific aspects of a communicative situation, including the speakers' perspectives and intentions.

This issue intersects with several of this study's findings. The group of community college ESL students described in this dissertation shared the goal of improving their English proficiency to improve their positions within the worlds they inhabit. Their participation in the course, however, was shaped by their unique biographies and aspects of the classroom microcosm that were made salient by their purposes. For many of these students, this translated into patterns of engagement that deemphasized attention to gaps in language knowledge and even deprived them of opportunities to learn. As they read texts, completed course assignments, and participated in class activities, they focused on completing tasks and managing interaction and attended to unknown language only when it impeded action. Having survived a time when their language proficiency was much more limited, long term residents saw their language gaps as less of an impediment at the time they participated in this course. This belief and their increasing ability to cope probably made unknown language forms less conspicuous; to some extent, they stopped noticing what they didn't know. Even if they did notice, attention to language both in reading and in conversations with their classmates would have slowed down the business of performing

their student roles. Given their limited understanding of each other and the texts they read, negotiations of meaning were difficult, so their participation in class activities often emphasized procedural aspects, especially those that would count as demonstrations of participation, such as completing homework, taking tests, and taking turns at going to the board and reading out loud in groups.

Many of them did complete assignments at least some of the time, and they constructed some meaning from the texts they read and the language they heard. This undoubtedly resulted in some gains in language proficiency, but certainly not as much as if they had all focused on language to the extent that Patricia and Tae-woo did. In terms of their patterns of engagement with text, it is difficult to see how their participation in this course transformed the students' reading practices in ways that will transfer to college courses or professional environments. This study was not designed to look at issues of transfer, but we can draw some tentative statements. The transformative potential of literacy is tied to the practices of which language and literacy are integral parts. The skills we develop from our use of language and writing will be transferrable only to the extent that future practices overlap with those we have engaged with in the past (Scribner & Cole, 1981). The students who read the texts, persisted, and were able to find answers to their questions will probably take away a greater ability to find evidence in texts to answer questions, but these were patterns that students came into the course with. It is possible that some of the students who read more superficially, who showed less persistence with text, and who often deferred to the instructor or other students to identify correct answers may have altered their practices. Pilar, Luis, and Asha, for instance, said during interviews that they had started to read more slowly and carefully during the semester. There is no evidence in the classroom data that this was the case with most students. It is unlikely that most of these students learned to engage in the sustained reading and use of resources that are needed to process complex academic texts.

The transparency of language that does not interfere with action, already implicit in the natural attitude, was exacerbated by the students' need to project a competent image of self in the classroom. Because of their difficulty managing a performance that would convey competence or at least normality with the limited tools afforded by their emerging language proficiency, many students, especially younger ones, avoided extended or open-ended turns. Many also avoided exposing what they didn't know to their classmates when working in groups. Conversational competence includes the ability to contribute to the forward movement of the business at hand. Each digression or interruption from the main activity increases the risk to face. The loss of face is greater when it highlights what could be seen as an inadequacy on the part of one of the speakers, such as a speech impediment or a very thick foreign accent. I believe anxiety about public performance is not unique to second language speakers. Many young college students experience it—although those of us who have spent decades in classrooms and who often lead classes tend to forget it. However, limited language proficiency compounds that anxiety. Among these students, these fears were connected to attitudes about non-target like English that students had encountered in middle and high school and/or to prescriptive notions of what constitutes "proper" English. In addition to being in an environment where they are not completely familiar with the recipes for action, and thus more at risk of coming across as socially incompetent, students had internalized negative attitudes towards foreign language features in their English. In the case of students who immigrated in their middle and high

school years, a time when their identities were in flux and when they were very vulnerable to the opinions of their peers, the mockery they were subjected to may have left more than a passing effect on their self-confidence, with implications for how they engaged in course activities and thus on how much they were able to improve.

The need to save face may not only discourage students from seeking opportunities to understand what they don't know but, even more troubling, it may also encourage them to develop coping mechanisms that may hide special learning needs. Students may rely on tutors or on friends to complete assignments, thus depriving themselves of an opportunity to identify their needs and address them. When this is the case, students can keep moving through the educational ladder for some time, perhaps until it is too late. Again, the fear of another source of stigma may be at work here. Recognizing special needs may be threatening to the students' self esteem, but I doubt that it could be more difficult than thinking that there must be something wrong with them because they cannot achieve academic success on their own. Getting appropriate support could also result in increased competence, which would in turn likely result in increased self-confidence.

The focus on performance over sense making was not limited to language. As students were introduced to reading strategies, there was little evidence that they were incorporating them into meaningful, purposeful practices. When students wrote questions about text, read while thinking out loud, or previewed a text, there were few attempts to make sense of what they were reading, to negotiate understanding, or to share perspectives. The focus was rather on the observable behaviors that were expected of them as students in those activities. Thus, actions that in out-of-school reading are "solicited" (Dreyfus, 2002) by our purposes in our engagement with text became ends in themselves, explicitly focused on an applied as part of the activity of trying to "be a good reader." This and their focus on procedural aspects of performing student roles in the class suggests that students were not taking charge of the activities they encountered in the classroom and evaluating them/adapting them in ways that maximized their ability to transfer these practices to purposeful reading situations.

This research does not report the case of a novice or unreflective instructor using untested teaching techniques. The cooperating instructor had many years of teaching experience and a long history of participation in professional development activities. Many of the activities she implemented in the course I studied were developed by a prestigious educational non-profit organization that does extensive training on these techniques, and the instructor herself has become a trainer. The organization's teacher training institutes are based on research published in peer-reviewed reading research journals. The instructor was also very receptive of feedback, and tried to adjust her instruction based on the preliminary findings of this study (although many of the findings were not clear until after the course ended). So what happened? And what hope is there that an average instructor can address some of the unproductive patterns of meaning making and participation that I observed?

I believe the answer to these questions lies partly in understanding the nature of knowledge construction. The road to understanding complex processes has many detours and dead ends, not only in education. (If you think the "hard" sciences are any better, consider the ever-changing nature of medical advice based on current research.) Pedagogical knowledge, as a disciplinary construction, is shaped not only by observed phenomena but also by the social and economic conditions that constrain scholars. The

need to train new teachers and to improve the success of schools creates a demand for descriptions of knowledge and practices that can be transmitted. But descriptions of what expert speakers or readers do and actual behavior are very different beasts. As Dreyfus (2002) compellingly articulates, “rules” are very inadequate as accounts of skillful coping. In creating explicit descriptions of what is a complex, largely intuitive process, we transform knowledge into something else. Moreover, in trying to generalize from observed behavior so that knowledge can be applied to different contexts and situations, we always construct an idealized, somewhat normative description of a process that is in actual, purposeful action varied and flexible. Yes, readers do sometimes predict when they read. Yes, they do sometimes stop to wonder what they just read and reread it. Yes, they do sometimes (always, really, if they are making meaning) build a situation model of the text by connecting it with their own experience. And yes, certain questions help readers notice aspects of a text that would otherwise go unnoticed, and thus make readers process the text at a deeper level. But when and how readers engage in these behaviors depends very much on the constraints and the affordances of the text and the reading situation. In addition, many of these practices are unconscious. I never stop to think about what I know about a topic; the words on the page elicit from my body simulations of things I have experienced, *whether I want it or not*, and these simulations *are* the words’ meaning, at least to a large extent. I don’t first think about the meaning and then go in search of some relevant experience to hook it to. If I predict what might happen as I read, it is because my experiences have taught me to anticipate that certain events are associated with others, and my body *cannot help but* respond to that anticipation. I never stop to think, “what is the author about to say now?” If I tried to deliberately stop my reading to predict what will happen, connect what I read to my own experience, or ask a question at random points, my ability to make sense of the text by experiencing it would be greatly impaired.

Then there’s the issue of how someone learns a practice. Understanding an explicit description of what a skilled performer does is not the same as knowing how to do it. Rules and descriptions can guide us—provided that they are fairly accurate re-presentations of actual experience, but we must jump in and begin to practice what we are trying to learn, and the practice must have real purposes and consequences so that our bodies can begin to discriminate the almost infinite configurations of the environments in which we act and adjust its behavior to gain a greater and greater grip on the world. In the act of appropriating practices, students will inevitably transform them in idiosyncratic and unpredictable ways.

Implications for Educational Practice

What can educators take away from the results of this study? The findings of this research question the assumption that language learners will notice and bring to teachers’ attention language that they don’t know. This may be the case in foreign language learning contexts, which were the focus of a large proportion of the second language acquisition research that constitutes the second language teaching knowledge base, but it wasn’t the case in this study. Educators need to be aware that in the second language situation, unknown language is less salient. Instruction needs to disrupt the comfort with unknown language that students eventually develop when they become accustomed to having it all around them. It must make language conspicuous. In practice this would involve looking

at how we make language and text comprehensible, and assessing the extent to which in doing so we are making it possible for students to understand what a text says or what speakers intend without understanding the language it relies on for making meaning. Using images, gestures, mime, and redundancy are very effective techniques to get ideas across with students who have limited language proficiency, but at some point performance must hinge on comprehension of the language itself. Making language conspicuous would also require that we ensure that course activities and assessments gauge language proficiency and not ability to perform by other means. Most of the students in this study performed better in parts of tests that required them to match individual words to their meanings or recall the content of passages. They were able to do so because they had heard discussions of the text in the classroom and because they had memorized the list of target words. But most students had difficulty in the section of the test that required them to understand a text on the same topic that they had not seen before.

Because some of this study's data about language attitudes and early experiences is retrospective, conclusions about schools as a context of reception for immigrant students are tentative. However, there is enough reason for concern that attitudes about second language speakers, especially in schools, stigmatize and marginalize language learners. These attitudes reflect ingrained and widespread notions based partly on xenophobia and partly on elitism, and they will be difficult to change. But schools could do more to instill in students the value of multilingualism, and the understanding that a foreign accent is not a stigma but an index of rich cultural experiences. Schools need to create safe spaces for all students to explore without fear of ridicule, and this includes spaces for immigrant students to use language. While a few students may be able to flourish despite the mockery of their native-speaking peers, more introverted or shy students may be too intimidated to risk participation. Our opportunities to learn are drastically diminished when we are paralyzed by a fear of mistakes.

The issue of mockery and the concomitant dread of mistakes make painfully clear how limited the influence of thinkers like Freire and Dewey has been on educational practice. All our emphasis on exploration, inquiry, critical analysis, and appreciation for learner centeredness notwithstanding, schools overwhelmingly remain places where "experts" make decisions about what students will learn and how. Classrooms are still mostly places where students need to figure out what teachers want to hear and produce the right answers. Pedagogical texts and literacy activities that have little connection to the students' lives and purposes persist. This is a problem not only for those of us who sympathize with the understanding of education as an emancipatory project. It is also misguided for practical reasons. Each learner is the product of a unique configuration of historical factors. No pedagogy can be successful that does not assume that communication and adjustment go both ways. Educators need to be as receptive and responsive to students as students are to educators. So at a more basic but much more ambitious level, we need to open up our classrooms to the world so that the practices and the language of school have real meaning and consequences. As the students in this course did, when students read something because it interests them, they will be more likely to persist until they understand what it means and how it is useful to them. When language and literacy are directly connected to students' lives outside of schools, when they can see what happens in the classroom as their own purposes and not "just doing school," they will take a more active role in educating themselves, and they will guide us in educating them.

The implications for teacher education include—but go far beyond—the need to develop an understanding of the nature of skillful coping, skill acquisition, and second language interaction. Educators need to critically examine the relationship between accounts of what experts do and the actual behaviors that produce expert performance. Rules and descriptions of behavior can be heuristics to guide student behavior so they can take the plunge and begin a practice, but they cannot become rigid prescriptions. We must apprentice our students into language and literacy practices by engaging with them in meaningful, purposeful activity. In the process of doing so, we can observe their approximations to skillful coping and flexibly adjust our guidance so that it is geared towards helping them reach a maximum grip on their world. This implies that we must take every pedagogical prescription we receive from teacher training courses or workshops tentatively. As we adopt practices, we must evaluate them and adapt them through detailed observations of how they play out as students make sense of them in classrooms. We must be oriented not only to the expert voices of researchers and teacher trainers but also to the equally expert voices of our students. In addition, we can create an environment where students see themselves as experts in their own development and feel safe about sharing their perceptions of practices with us. This has to come from a place of great humility for educators, because students can distinguish acts of condescension from real respect for what they think.

Our willingness to be critical, receptive, and open to learning from the field is as crucial as are teacher training and development. In addition to understanding what language and practices need to be “taught” and how, we need to learn from our students how instructional practices interact with other aspects of our students’ lives through their sense making. We need to develop what I referred to in the introduction to this dissertation as *the pedagogical imagination*—an understanding of how students make sense of their experiences in the classroom in the context of the larger social patterns that affect their lives.

Implications for Research

By using the lens of students’ sense-making to understand their patterns of engagement with the language and practices of an ESL course, I was able to observe several issues that have been addressed in the SLA literature as they played out in a classroom. This point of view complicates some of the arguments that have been advanced in the field, and suggests the second language acquisition knowledge base needs to incorporate more studies of what actual learners do in real classrooms. Understanding the nature of group work in actual classrooms, the extent to which students negotiate meaning or attempt to save face in ways that interfere with language learning, needs to inform our arguments about the benefits of peer interactions and the conditions that can make group work successful. Studies that analyze learner interactions in laboratory or similar conditions, where participants are very aware of data collection instruments and the structure of the research activity, could well produce findings that reflect what learners do when they are participating in the activity of being “ordinary research subjects.” In classrooms, students’ language learning goals are embedded within the context of ongoing relationships with their peers and affected by the anticipated consequences of their behavior for their educational outcomes. For similar reasons, this research also highlights the importance of

conceptualizing second language learners as *actors with multiple identities* that become more or less salient in different settings. Firth and Wagner's argument (1997) that the field of SLA needed to stop isolating the learner identity was not a splitting of hairs. Focusing on people as language learners carries with it the implication that they will behave in ways that maximize their learning goals at all times, but as the findings of this study demonstrate, that is not necessarily the case.

This study also highlights the need to look at immigrant adolescents and their process of adaptation, and the types of school environments that can minimize the trauma of being uprooted at a time in life when identities are in flux. It may be the case that we need to be particularly attentive to the needs of students who speak less common languages, because their insertion into the second language environment can be even more traumatic than that of students who speak more common languages such as Spanish. It is possible that the lack of resources at their disposal to attempt to make sense of the English they were exposed to resulted in a high tolerance for gaps in their language knowledge, or that it induced a sort of learned helplessness with regard to their ability to make meaning from complex texts. We also need to investigate to what extent the climate of the schools students attend—particularly in regard to attitudes towards language learners—can shape the ways in which they cope with their transition into a second culture and their subsequent language learning practices. In this study, several students' shyness or introversion interfered with their ability to focus on language they didn't know. Two notable exceptions were students who came from relatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. It would be interesting to study the intersection of socioeconomic background with students' ability to adapt to the second language environment. It could be that besides the cultural and social capital inherent in higher socioeconomic backgrounds, the sense of entitlement often associated with privilege makes students better able to cope with the relative drop in social status associated with many immigration experiences.

The findings of this study also raise the need to help educators understand the nature of language and reading competence. We need to question the propositional-representational frame that induces us to think anything that can be done can be put into words, and that those descriptions can subsequently and unproblematically become the basis of instruction. Theories and empirical studies that illuminate the embodied, intuitive nature of skillful coping can produce a better understanding of the role of explicit knowledge in language and literacy instruction.

Finally, this study contributes to the discussion of several methodological issues. The interview data presented one view of participants that often contradicted what students did in the classroom. Had I relied on interviews and based my classroom data collection on field notes, I would have come away with a very different perspective of how the students participated in the classroom. The cognitive load imposed by note taking detracts from our ability to observe what is going on, and it only allows us to capture a small proportion of what transpires in the complete, multifocal context of the classroom. Students altered their behavior when the instructor or even I approached them, or when they became aware of the recording equipment. By having cameras and wireless microphones in the classroom for almost every class session, I was able to observe what happens when the conflicting demands of performing student roles, attending to task requirements, and interacting with classmates, the instructor, a researcher, and even their cell phones make recording equipment fade out of awareness. Students could not sustain

the performance for the cameras or the microphones indefinitely. But had I used recording equipment for a few sessions, I would have had much less access to what students do when they are not being observed. This finding makes an argument for extended observations and recording of how students behave “in the wild” (Hutchins, 1995) in addition to listening carefully to what they have to say or what they do in experimental settings.

Coda

March 30, 2009

The class is checking answers to a homework exercise. Hameed sits quietly while some of the classmates behind him and in front of him work in pairs. The instructor approaches.

Susan: (looking at Hameed) Is everybody comparing answers?

Hameed: We already compared . they are the same

Susan: All the same?

Hameed: All the same

Susan: All of them?

Hameed: Yeah

Susan: OK:: . ok so would you do me a favor?

Hameed: Sure

Susan: Would someone in your group put number 2 on the board? The meaning and the part of speech? Please decide who's gonna put it on the board

Hameed: OK . we'll see . (Susan walks away. Hameed turns to his classmates.) Who got the:: good writing . OK . number 2 . meaning to put or push something . into a small space . (to the student in front of him) Is that what you have?

[Hameed continues to poll his classmates to see what answers they have]

[...]

Hameed: (to Raju sitting behind him) What do you have?

Raju: Which one . number 2?

Hameed: What's the meaning? The definition?

Raju: *Stuff* is a:: ... (Points to Rosie) It's her answer I copied from [Rosie]

Hameed: What did she say?

Raju: I don't understand (laughs)

May 13, 2009 - Last day of instruction

A few minutes before class starts, Susan approaches Harpreet and asks her a question.

Harpreet: Good. I think I will pass.

Susan: Good. What about the reading part? Do you feel like this course helped you with the reading part?

Harpreet: (exhales loudly; tilts her head to the left and then the right) ki:nd o:f

Susan: OK (laughs) . alright . (walking away) OK

Ashwaq turns to Harpreet and whispers something about passing the class.

Harpreet: I'm gonna be so:: happy

Somewhere in the middle of the classroom, Kavita, Asha, and Vale sit in a row. Vale looks at Asha's textbook.

Vale: Oh . you have different answers

Asha: I don't worry about it

Kavita: (Laughs)

Asha: (To Kavita) Thank you

Kavita: You're welcome

Later in the class session, the instructor distributes a questionnaire asking the students what strategies they used at the beginning and end of the semester, and how helpful these strategies were. Hameed turns to Luis and asks him a question.

Luis: I don't know (looks at Gabriela standing in the front) ... you can ask her (points to Gabriela with his chin)

Hameed: Oh yeah (a bit louder) Miss uh . Gaby ... Gabriela . (puts his microphone closer to his mouth) hey Gabriela can...

(I approach his table)

Hameed: What does mean this one?

Gabriela: To visualize means to see in your mind.

Hameed: This one?

Gabriela: Predict means to guess what's gonna come later.

Hameed: (Whispering) Oh, OK.

At around the same time, Harpreet and Carolina, sitting in the center of the classroom, call Susan. Susan approaches them.

Harpreet: What is this?

Susan: Visualizing means making a picture in your head

Harpreet: And this one?

Carolina: (Exhales loudly, suppressing laughter)

Susan: Predicting means guessing

At the end of class, students get their last unit test back. Carolina looks at her grade and at her errors. She did very well in the section where she had to match target words from the chapter to their definitions, and on the three comprehension questions about the content of the textbook reading selection. In the third part of the test, there was a new passage followed by comprehension questions. Carolina turns to her classmate and, pointing to the third section, says, "*Esta cochinada me arruinó todo!*" (This filthy thing ruined everything for me.)

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Appendix A

Initial Interview Protocol

Personal background

Where are you from? What countries did you live in before coming to the United States?

How long have you lived in the United States? How did you come to the United States? Did you come alone or your family? What members of your family live in the US? What members live in your home country?

What do/did your parents/caretakers/immediate family members do? How old are your siblings? Are they in school? What school? How long did they attend school?

What languages did you speak in (name of native country and other countries participant has lived in)? If more than one language, when (in what contexts and for what purposes) did you speak those languages?

Did you attend school in your country? What kind of school? What was the highest level of education you reached in your native country (and other countries participant has lived in)?

Language learning history

Where and how have you learned English? If through formal study: For how long? In what educational context? What were English classes like? What kinds of activities did you do in your language classes? How much English did you know when you came to the US?

If through exposure in naturalistic settings: In what contexts were you exposed to English? If at work, what kinds of job-related duties did you have to perform using English? For how long?

What made you decide to come to this community college to learn English?

Out-of-school contexts of language use

What languages do you speak at home and with whom?

If you work, what languages do you speak at work? What kinds of job-related duties do you have to perform using English and (name of first or other languages used)?

How often do you use English (and other languages spoken) in your free time? Are there any other places where you speak English?

Beliefs about language and language learning

What do you think is the best way for you to learn English?

Do you do anything, besides the work assigned for your classes, to try to improve your English? If so, what?

How do you feel about speaking English? How do you feel about speaking (name of first language)?

Goals for learning English

What is your purpose for studying English? What do you plan to do once your English proficiency reaches the level you want?

How well would you like to learn English? What kinds of English skills would you like to learn? (What kinds of things would you like to be able to do in English?)

The reading class – reported reading practices

Tell me about the Reading 3 class. How are you doing in there? What are some things you are learning in the class? What are some of the most difficult things for you in the class? Why are they difficult? What grade are you getting in the class so far?

So far you have completed [number of readings] readings. How difficult are the readings for you?

The first time you do one of the readings, how much would you say you understand? 40%? 60%? 100%?

In general, how do you read? In general, how do you read your assignments for the Reading 3 class?

In a typical page of your textbook, how many new words are there for you? What do you do when you find words you don't know? (If it doesn't come up, follow up: Do you use a dictionary? When? What do you do if you don't understand?)

Which of the readings has been most difficult for you? Why?

When you answer the comprehension questions at home, how many questions do you answer correctly?

When you check the answers with your classmates in class, do you usually understand why your incorrect answers were wrong? What about when the instructor explains the answers to you?

Other comments or questions

Is there anything else you want to tell me that you think might help me understand how you learned/are learning English and how you are doing in this class?

Do you have any questions about this research?

Appendix B

Reading Diagnostic – Stimulated-Recall Procedure

Reading diagnostic and stimulated recall of reading experiences and practices

I would like you to read a short passage for me. First I would like you to read it out loud because hearing you will help me better to understand how you read.

[Participant reads a passage]

Before looking back at the reading for now, tell me what you remember about what you read. What was it about? [Let participant say what s/he remembers] Is there anything else you remember?

What usually happens when you read aloud? Is it similar to your experience this time? How is it different from reading silently? What do you think makes it different?

Now I would like you to read the passage again and see if you can understand and remember anything else from the reading. This time you can choose how you read it. You can read it aloud or silently. Take all the time you need.

[Participant rereads the passage]

What else did you understand this time? [Let participant say what s/he remembers] Do you remember anything else?

Now I would like to read the same passage a phrase at a time and ask you what you understand from that phrase. I will also ask you to tell me what you think some words mean. Sometimes we know the meaning of the word, but it is hard to show what we know. You can use any of the following things to show me what you understand:

Use a number from one to five to show how comfortable you are with the word. One means you don't know the word at all; five means you are very confident that you know what the word means.

If you can, define or explain the meaning of a word

Tell me an expression or a situation when people use the word

Tell me another word or expression that is similar in meaning to this word

If you can, draw or act out or use gestures to show the meaning of the word

Tell me anything else you know about the meaning of the word or how it's used

Translate it into your first language

[Comprehension questions – use 'a' when student read something that was already read in class and 'b' when student read a new passage]

a. Now let's look at the exercises. Which of the comprehension questions did you answer incorrectly? What did you answer? What made you think that was the right answer? (Follow up questions about the language of the prompt and the relevant section of the text to identify the source of students' interpretations.)

b. Now please answer these three questions. You can look at the reading again as many times as you need to. (Follow up with questions about why they answer what they did)

Do you have questions about what we did? Is there anything else you would like to tell me that may help me understand how you read or how you learn English?

Stimulated recall of class events

I am going to show you a short video clip of a recent class session. In the video, the instructor is talking to the class about [excerpt of content of video clip]. I will stop the recording a few times and ask you to tell me what you understood from that section.

[After stopping playback] What did the instructor say here? Why do you think she is telling you that? What is she trying to get you to do/understand?

(Example of follow-up questions based on events on the video clip) Do you do think-aloud when you read on your own? Why (not)? Do you do them when you read in your own language? What happened when you did think-aloud in class? Why do you think that happened?

Appendix C
Background data of participants mentioned in this dissertation

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Native country	L1	L1 schooling completed	Date of arrival	English education	Educational goals
Arturo	19	M	Mexico	Spanish	7 th grade	07/05	2.5 years at US high school	Study computer programming Get a college degree
Claudia	20	F	Mexico	Spanish	7 th grade	2002	4 years at US high school 1 year at this site	Not sure whether he'll get a degree Interested in graphic design
Hameed	18	M	Yemen (rural)	Arabic	8 th grade	06/04	3 years at US high school (took a year off for "home schooling" to work at the family store) 2 semesters at this site	Get an MA
Carolina	36	F	Mexico (rural)	Spanish	First year of MA program	Late 2006	Several semesters at university in Mexico (did not become fluent) 2 semesters at this site	Take college courses
Daniel	18	M	Hong Kong	Cantonese	12 th grade	12/08	2.5 years in US high school	Take college courses Interested in math
Alexa	19	F	Mexico	Spanish	Almost finished 9 th grade	11/05	From 3 rd grade in Korea Minor in English in college Private lessons at home	Get a good job after finishing university degree in Korea – Engineering major
Patricia	21	F	Korea	Korean	Junior year in college	12/08	Elementary and high school in her country	--
Melanie	19	F	Philippines	Tagalog	--	--	2 semesters in college in El Salvador 1 semester at a community college	Learn English very well to get a job Trained as a science teacher
Ramiro	51	M	El Salvador	Spanish	Graduated from college	08/03		

Pilar	20	F	El Salvador	Spanish	Started 10 th grade	Mid 2005	2 years in US high school 2 semesters at this site	Study child development first, then business – possibly accounting
Gladys	36	F	Mexico	Spanish	10 th grade + vocational school	03/00	2 semesters at this site in 2001 4 terms at this site from Summer 07	Get a better job Speak to her daughter's teachers Participate in cultural activities
Christian	18	M	Mexico	Spanish	6 th grade	2003	4 years at US high school	Get a degree and a good job
Luis	18	M	El Salvador	Spanish	7 th grade	Late 2005	3 years at US high school	Learn more English Interested in graphic design or computer science
Sung	26	M	Korea	Korean	Finished college	08/07	6 years in middle and high school in Korea 2 semesters at this site	Learn more English
Marilou	23	F	Philippines	Tagalog	3 rd year of college	08/07	Since kindergarten in the Philippines	Get a nursing degree Be more fluent
Leticia	32	F	Mexico	Spanish	8 th grade	03/00	3 semesters at this site	Learn English because she lives in USA Be able to speak for herself and her family
Rosie	19-20	F	Mexico	Spanish	10 th grade	08/05	3 years in US high school	Wants to be rich—not sure how. Wants to transfer to UC
Vale	21	F	El Salvador	Spanish	9 th grade	09/01	No answer	No answer
Asha	35	F	Sri Lanka	Tamil/ Sinhala/ English/ Hindi/some Punjabi	2 nd year of college	2006	linformally at home (father educated in English) 2 years English-medium university in Sri Lanka	Learn "proper" English Help her sons with homework

Harpreet	19	F	India		Punjabi	Started 6 th grade	2003	4.5 years at US middle and high school	Get a BA. First interview: pharmacy technician; second: lawyer; third: unsure
Sergio	33	M	Brazil		Portuguese	3 rd year of college	08/99	1 year adult school 1 year at a community college	Unsure Improve skills in English
Lucía	36	F	Mexico		Spanish	9 th grade	10/93	1 year at this site in 2001 1 year at another community college	Be a court interpreter
Ashwaq	28	F	Yemen		Arabic	4 years in Koranic school	1998	2 semesters at this site	Own a business
Miguel	18	M	Honduras		Spanish	½ of 11 th grade	08/06	High school in Honduras – was able to write journals when he got to US 2 yrs at US high school	Learn English well first Get a nursing degree and study to become an EMT
Kavita	19	F	India		Hindi	none	1983	All her schooling in US	No career goals Will get married
Raju	22	M	India		Hindi/Punjabi	½ of 7 th grade	2004	2 yrs in US high school	Wants to take Physical Therapy courses
Analyne	18	F	Philippines		Tagalog	6 th grade	07/04	Middle school in the Philippines 4 years in US high school	Be an English teacher (changed to EMT in Fall 2011)
Saran	25-26	F	Mongolia		Mongolian	Graduated from college	05/06	2.5 years at community college 1 semester at this site	Learn “professional English” Get a good job
Cindy	19-20	F	Mainland China		Mandarin	9 th grade	04/05	3 years at US high school	Transfer to 4 year school Interested in science
Tae-woo	24	M	Korean		Korean	12 th grade	08/07	2 semesters at this site	Wants to live in the US and go to the university in the US

Appendix D Class Handout

◆ Questioning

handout

The Four Types of Questions

Excerpted from *Reading for Understanding*

Here is a simple piece of text to read:

David woke up fifteen minutes late. As soon as he saw the clock, he jumped out of bed and headed for the shower, afraid he'd miss the bus again. He looked in the dryer for his favorite jeans, but they were actually still in the washing machine. "Dang! I told my sister to put my stuff in the dryer! Now what am I gonna wear today?" After settling for a pair of baggy shorts and a Hilfiger rugby shirt, he grabbed a bag of chips and a soda from the kitchen, and searched frantically for his history book. When he found it, he put it in his backpack, along with his breakfast, his hat, and his lucky deck of cards. As he ran to the bus stop, he told himself, "I will not stay up late watching wrestling anymore!"

- - - - -

Right There question: A question whose answer is right in the text—all you have to do is locate it and copy it down.

- What did David do as soon as he saw the clock?
- What did he tell himself as he ran to the bus stop?

Pulling It Together question: A question whose answer is in the text, but you have to pull it together from different parts of the text—you can't simply copy it down from one place.

- How did David get ready to leave the house?
- What did David look for before he left the house?

Author and Me question: A question whose answer is not in the text itself. The reader has to use the information provided in the text and his/her own schema to figure out the answer. In other words, the author provides information that can help answer the question, but does not provide the answer itself.

- Where was David going that morning?
- At what time of day was David getting ready to go?

On My Own question: A question whose answer is not in the text itself. The reader does not have to have read the text to answer the question, but reading the text will likely inform his/her answer to the question.

- Should teenagers be able to watch television on school nights?
- Should parents always wake their kids up in the morning?

Appendix E Class Handout

These scaffolding tools are meant to be adapted. Feel free to revise and experiment with them.

<p style="text-align: center;">Types of Think-Alouds</p> <p>Predicting I predict that... In the next part, I think... I think this is...</p> <p>Picturing I can picture... I can see...</p> <p>Questioning A question I have is... I wonder about... Could this mean...</p> <p>Making connections This is like... This reminds me of...</p> <p>Identifying a problem I'm confused about... I'm not sure of... I didn't expect...</p> <p>Summarizing So what it's saying is... The big idea here is... I think the point is...</p> <p>Using fix-ups I'll reread this... I'll read on and check back...</p> <p>Other</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Think-Aloud Checklist <i>Make a tally mark each time you hear one of the following:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Predicting</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Picturing</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Questioning</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Making connections</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Identifying a problem</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Summarizing</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Using fix-ups</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Other</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Types of Think-Alouds</p> <p>Predicting I predict that... In the next part, I think... I think this is...</p> <p>Picturing I can picture... I can see...</p> <p>Questioning A question I have is... I wonder about... Could this mean...</p> <p>Making connections This is like... This reminds me of...</p> <p>Identifying a problem I'm confused about... I'm not sure of... I didn't expect...</p> <p>Summarizing So what it's saying is... The big idea here is... I think the point is...</p> <p>Using fix-ups I'll reread this... I'll read on and check back...</p> <p>Other</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Think-Aloud Checklist <i>Make a tally mark each time you hear one of the following:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Predicting</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Picturing</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Questioning</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Making connections</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Identifying a problem</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Summarizing</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Using fix-ups</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Other</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Think-Aloud Checklist <i>Make a tally mark each time you hear one of the following:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Predicting</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Picturing</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Questioning</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Making connections</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Identifying a problem</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Summarizing</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Using fix-ups</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Other</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Types of Think-Alouds</p> <p>Predicting I predict that... In the next part, I think... I think this is...</p> <p>Picturing I can picture... I can see...</p> <p>Questioning A question I have is... I wonder about... Could this mean...</p> <p>Making connections This is like... This reminds me of...</p> <p>Identifying a problem I'm confused about... I'm not sure of... I didn't expect...</p> <p>Summarizing So what it's saying is... The big idea here is... I think the point is...</p> <p>Using fix-ups I'll reread this... I'll read on and check back...</p> <p>Other</p>

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Adapted from *Reading Strategies and Practices* by Tierney, Readence & Dishner (1995) after Davey (1983) "Think-aloud—modeling the cognitive processes of reading comprehension" in *Journal of Reading*, volume 27, p. 184-193