Practicing Collaborative Relations of Power: English Language Learners' Perspectives

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Practicing Collaborative Relations of Power: English Language Learners' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Using narrative inquiry, small story approach and collaborative relations of power as a conceptual framework, this study explores English language learning students' perspectives on what makes learning difficult for them and what diminishes their motivation from learning. The findings from the study show a significant gap from a larger study which investigated the teachers' perspectives on English language learning students' academic challenges. The paper highlights the importance of educators to attend to English language learning students' input on their learning in school success. The conceptual framework is intended to be dialogical which aims to work against most often invisible but inequitable educational and social structures in place.

The student-centered constructivist approach to learning and teaching has been advocated in the field of education for many years. For example, Dewey (1916) and Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learners actively participate in their education and construct new knowledge based on their prior experiences and knowledge, whereby teacher becomes a facilitator. While some researchers argue that minimal guidance during instruction does not yield satisfactory outcomes (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006), most educators support the idea of the importance of students' active role in their learning. According to student-centered, constructivist approach, students are placed at the center of the educational matters, whereby their role shifts from a passive receiver to an active co-constructor of knowledge. Not only does the process of student-centered learning vary, but can mean different things to different people. Nonetheless, one common aspect that constitutes the definition of student-centered learning is that

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students are considered active participants that construe and construct their own understandings (Cook-Sather, 2009; David & Sumara, 2002; Good & Brophy, 1994).

Ironically, however, students rarely have the opportunity to share their perceptions of potential or existing impediments to learning such as disengagement and lack of motivation (Levin, 2000). Notwithstanding the efforts of the researchers who argue for the importance of including students' perspectives about their own learning needs (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2009; Mitra, 2004; Rodgers, 2006; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004), they are rarely asked to share their experiences and perspectives on their learning. In other words, while educators agree that schools exist for students, their education is usually based on direction from teachers and administrators (Levin, 2000). Despite many schools struggle with improving students' academic outcomes, very few institutions seek or value students' experience and opinion (Mitra, 2004).

The researchers and scholars who are committed to students' input in their learning point to the empirical evidence confirming the presence of a positive correlation between an increased prominence of student voice in the school culture and improved student outcomes (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Mitra, 2004). Some researchers go as far as to argue that educational reform cannot succeed without more direct involvement of students in all aspects of their schooling because "teachers are not the producers of learning; in the end it is students who must do the learning" (Levin, 2000, p. 163). In this regard, Rudduck (2007) argued that "student voice is most successful when it enables students to feel that they are members of a learning community, that they matter, and that they have something valuable to offer (p. 587). Cook-Sather (2009) stated that it is only through taking students' perspectives seriously that educators and students can move forward in increasing our capacity to become "critical thinkers, engaged human beings, and responsible participants in the world" (p. 2).

Following the findings of these researchers with respect to their conviction that listening to students' perspectives on their learning is essential in ensuring that classrooms and schools are places where "students want to be and can learn" (Cook-Sather, 2009, p. 3), this study explores English language learning students' perspectives on what makes learning difficult for them and what diminishes their motivation to excel academically in the context in which the language instruction is not their home language. The United States is currently experiencing an unprecedented increase in cultural and language diversity especially with a remarkable increase in the number of English language learners (ELLs) among the school-age group (Pettie, 2011). During the past 15 years, the number of ELLs has nearly doubled to about 5.5 million, and by 2025, it is estimated that nearly one in every four public school students will be an ELL (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2007; Winke, 2011). Yet, despite their growing number, it seems that ELL students' needs are not adequately met. This conclusion is evident in these students' lower academic achievement levels, with many states reporting higher dropout rates among ELLs compared to non-ELL students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011; Sheng, Sheng, and Anderson, 2011).

Given the present circumstance, the importance of this study, which aims to explore ELLs' perceptions of their learning needs and difficulties, lies in several areas. First, in recognizing that the rapid growth in the number of linguistically diverse students across the nation and that their level of academic performance is now a concern for all educators, this study will provide valuable information that may assist in addressing these issues. To this end, the researchers will investigate students' own perspectives on their learning in general, and their learning challenges in particular. Next, given that ELLs' perspectives on their learning are currently understudied, listening to the experiences of ELLs becomes critically important toward not only reforming the classrooms and education, but also enabling the ELLs to feel empowered which in turn may help achieve full academic potential. Finally, as this study is conducted in a small town in the Western state, it will appropriately reflect the needs of the ELL population in rural areas in the Western state. According to the national Center for Educational Statistics,

the ELL population in the Western states has more than doubled from 1995 to 2005 (NCES, 2006), and that number is expected to continually grow. The conceptual framework below discusses the importance of narrative and small stories in people's identity formation and learning and the structure of power on which this study is based. The conceptual framework is intended to be dialogical and aim to work against often invisible but inequitable educational and social structures in place.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Narrative, Small Stories, Identity, and Learning

According to Taylor (1992), a person's understanding of who they are constitutes one's identity. However, he also argued that a person's discovery of her/his identity does not occur in isolation, but is rather negotiated "through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalized, with others" (Taylor, 1991, p. 47). Taylor's views did not mean that one's identity is formed by others, but rather crucially depends on her/his dialogical relations with others and being recognized by others. Of particular relevance to the present study is the notion that ELLs' sense of themselves in relation to others around them constitutes their identity. In other words, the recognition by their teachers is crucial in how they see themselves as learners in classroom and other educational contexts. In this regard, Krashen (1982/2009) and Cummins (2000) argued that, when students' experiences are valued and validated in classrooms, their level of learning is more likely to be maximized.

Because of the dialogical nature of the construction of one's own identity both within oneself (how one understands who one is and experiences the world) and with others in her/his relations with them (how one perceives how others view them), this study also adopts the philosophical belief underlying narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Bell, 1997, 2002). According to this paradigm, human beings live their lives in a storied form; thus, the stories we tell ourselves and others and living out those life stories, make each human being unique. In this regard, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) contended that people are storytelling organisms who lead storied lives. Thus, people's lives and experiences should be explored through narrative inquiry, i.e., the study of the ways humans experience the world. For the field of second language education, narrative can provide teachers the possibility of understanding their students' experiences in new ways (Bell, 2002). For instance, factors that impact ELLs' experience in school and learning are embedded in their stories they tell; therefore, narrative is an important tool for the second language research (Bell, 1997, 2002).

Additionally, this study focuses on small stories of four participants, and what we refer by small stories is "telling of ongoing events" and "these tellings are typically small when compared to the pages and pages of transcript of interview" (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 123). However, according to Bamberg (2004, 2006), what is powerful about the small story approach is its significance for exploring the relationship between narrative and identity, "narrative construction of self," (Bamberg, 2004, p. 368) as opposed to longer narratives that may be oriented toward life histories. Following this line of thinking, the small stories that the ELLs tell about what they experience in school serve as data in this study. This is deemed appropriate, due to the aforementioned premise that narrative and the small story approach in particular, as it is understood and negotiated with oneself and other, is indispensable not only for understanding students' identity but also for ways to explore more productive learning.

2.2. The Structure of Power: Empowerment Framework

While narrative can provide a powerful tool in second language teaching and learning, whose narrative are heard and whose narrative actually matters and counts are inevitably linked to the system of domination and power structure (Bell, 2002). Moreover, it is easy to confuse the dominant narrative (i.e.,

teachers' narrative) with universal truth without an effort to expose and listen to the alternative narrative: that is, in this study, the ELL students' small narratives.

In his framework of the societal structure of power, Cummins (1996, 2009) distinguished between coercive and collaborative relations of power. Cummins (2009) defined coercive relations of power as "the exercise of power by a dominant individual, group, or country to the detriment of a subordinated individual, group or country" (p. 263). Therefore, if the only narrative that is heard and counted is the narrative told by teachers of ELLs, coercive relations of power is in play. Cummins (2009), however, also maintained that collaborative relations of power could serve to enable or empower, rather than to marginalize. More specifically, according to Cummins, within collaborative relations of power, "power is not a fixed quantity but is generated through interaction with others" (p. 263). From this perspective, power can be mutually generated in interpersonal relations. Following this argument, this study aims to expose the participating ELLs' narrative in an effort to advocate the significance of students' perspectives in their learning.

In his earlier work, Cummins (1996) observed, "The power relationship is additive rather than subtractive. Power is created with others rather than being imposed on or exercised over others" (p. 15). In other words, the more empowered an individual becomes; the more power is generated for others to share. Particularly important aspect of Cummins' framework of collaborative relations of power for this study is his assertion that, in these empowering classroom contexts where power is seen as additive and collaborated, by exposing and listening to the narratives that the ELLs tell, the relations of power can become collaborative which in turn can serve to enable, not constrain, the range of identities of ELLs. More specifically, by attending to the ELLs' perspectives on what makes learning difficult for them and what diminishes their motivation from learning, the more likely the ELLs will become empowered in their learning and the more likely the teachers of the ELLs will contribute to equitable learning environments for their students.

2.3. Mismatch between Teachers' and Students' Narratives

While this study focuses on the participating ELLs' perspectives on what makes learning difficult for them, the first author of this study (Shim, 2014) previously reported the findings from a larger yearlong study, of which the present work is a part. The larger study investigated teachers' perspectives on ELLs' academic challenges, and the readers can refer to the full article for more details. However, to demonstrate the extent of incongruences between the perspectives of teachers and the ELLs on student learning, the next paragraph presents a few conclusions of the teachers' perspectives.

First, the participating teachers believed that frequent use of the first language delays the learning of English and attainment of the fluency that the teachers deem essential for ELLs to succeed in their education and lives. The teachers also believed that ELL parents' inability to see the value in their children's education is a limiting factor for ELLs' academic achievement. In this regard, the teachers downplayed the possibility that ELL parents may know and care as much or more about their children than the teachers. The next two beliefs are of a more sociological and productive in nature. The teachers thought that a misalignment between ELLs' cultures and school structures is a factor contributing to ELLs suboptimal learning. In this regard, some teachers also felt that unprepared teachers are another factor adversely affecting ELLs' learning.

It should be noted, however, that the goal of the present study is not to undermine or disrespect teachers' perspectives. Rather, the aim is to expose, listen, respect ELLs' perspectives and explore any gaps between the ELLs' perspectives on their learning and those of their teachers, in order to envision the likely potential for the ELLs' empowerment in their identity and learning through the collaborative relations of power. The researchers' belief is that although coercive power relations between dominant

and subordinated groups occupy the social space in the wider society and influence classrooms, there are degrees of flexibility and choices in how teachers interact and engage with ELLs and negotiate identities with those students. Shifting from coercive to collaborative power relations may involve re-examining of the normalized assumptions about educators' beliefs, such as the view that ELLs' use of their first language interferes with their academic success. Clearly, existing research shows that the highest academic achievement occurs among students with the strongest linguistic skills in home language (Block, 2007; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Attending to ELLs' voices instead of blindly insisting theirs perspectives only will help educators re-evaluate their views about using one's first language and other related viewpoints.

3. Methodology

As aforementioned, this research is a part of a yearlong study that involved teachers working with ELLs in the geographic area described below. The findings from the larger study that investigated teachers' perspectives on ELLs' academic challenges are fully reported elsewhere (Shim, 2014). The authors of this study would like to clarify that our investigations of academic challenges of ELLs and their learning does not stem from a deficit point of view; rather, it is rooted in an assumption that students who are learning academic contents in second language may have unique challenges that English only speaking peers may not experience.

3.1. Setting

This study was conducted in a town located in the south-central portion of a Western US state, home to primarily rural ranching communities and in an English Only state. The town has a population of 9300 residents. Due to many employment opportunities linked to the state penitentiary and coalmines in the town, in the last two decades, the town's predominantly White population has become increasingly diverse, with the greatest increase in the number of Latino residents, but also including individuals from China, Thailand, and the Philippines. Consequently, the ELL population in public schools has more than doubled since the 1990s.

Two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school provide for the education for the local student population. All four schools implement a pull-out program for ELLs, whereby, during each school day, the ELLs are taught English during one to two hours dedicated to other main/content-area subjects taught to the rest of their class. Currently, 26.6% of the total student population is Hispanic, and Asians and Native Americans account for 4.1% of the student enrollment. Moreover, 11.8% of the total student population qualifies for the English as a Second Language (ESL) services, and over 15% of the total student population lives in a home where one or both parents do not speak English as their first language.

3.2. Participants

Two middle school students and two high school students volunteered to participate in this study, all of whom lived in the US for 3 to 4 years. All participants self-identified Chihuahua, Mexico as their place of origin. In order to protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality, in this work and any subsequent reports, all participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms. Their demographic data is presented below.

Table 1.
Demographic data of the participants

Name	Grade	Frist Language	Years in the United States	Home Country
Juan	7	Spanish	4	Chihuahua, Mexico
Carla	7	Spanish	3	Chihuahua, Mexico
Carlos	9	Spanish	3	Chihuahua, Mexico
David	9	Spanish	3	Chihuahua, Mexico

3.3. Procedure

The data for this study was collected through twelve semi-structured individual interviews with students, even though not all are directly quoted in this study. Drawing on the criteria established by Bamberg (2004, 2006) and Georgakopoulou (2006), we focused on small stories that index in a compelling way that revealed the participating students' views on their learning in school setting.

Each student participated in three interviews with the researcher, with each interview lasting about 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted between September 2012 and February 2013, and aimed to elicit small stories that would answer the questions guiding this study: How would you describe your learning experiences in school? What do you experience as the factors that contribute to your academic challenges? What do you experience as the factors that diminish your motivation and learning? Again, what must be noted here is that the questions regarding what students perceive as their learning difficulties is not to label these students as students who naturally face learning difficulties. Rather, the assumption is when the language of instruction is not students' first language; students may experience unique difficulties due to the language barrier. All interviews were conducted in English, and detailed notes were taken by the first author. All interviews were also tape-recorded, and were subsequently transcribed by the first author. The notes were compared with the transcribed data and with the second author to check for consistency and/or contradictions.

3.4. Limitations of the study

First, this study focuses on the small stories of the 4 ELL participants, and the participants were selected purely on a volunteer basis. Second, the time-limited nature of the individual interviews did not allow us to collect more in-depth narratives. While the narrative and small story approach in which we carefully studied the stories of the 4 participants provide an important and powerful insights into their identities and learning experiences in school, a larger number of participants with more number of interviews coupled with a few focus group discussions may have allowed us to tease out more complex stories. Therefore, while we believe the present study makes an important contribution in exposing ELLs' narratives about their learning and contrasting them to the narratives of their teachers, caution must be used in interpreting and generalizing our findings.

3.5. Data Analysis

Ongoing open coding strategy of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to identify and analyze the themes within individual and across the four students' stories. The researchers looked for the themes among what the students believe to be the major challenges contributing to their learning, impeding their motivation, and undermining their learning potential. This enabled the researchers to look for patterns among the factors contributing to ELLs' academic challenges. As in all analyses, the

researchers brought particular perspectives and views to the process, which shaped what was seen (and not seen) in terms of data categories. Moreover, because the stories the ELL students shared during the interviews pertain to their own perspectives, their responses and themes that emerged cannot be generalized. However, the findings from this study do illuminate the importance of attending to the ELL students' beliefs and perspectives about their learning and academic challenges, in order to provide more equitable educational opportunities for ELLs.

4. Findings

While the details of the small stories the participating students shared were certainly not identical, there were many similar dynamics of importance for the present study. It is particularly noteworthy that the students' views on the factors that likely contribute to their academic challenges and diminish their motivation and learning are almost entirely different from those of the teachers working in the same district (Shim, 2014). As previously emphasized, the students' stories presented in this study are unique to the participating students. Nonetheless, they reflect a possible mismatch between the teachers' and students' perspectives on the factors that contribute to academic success. The main study findings are presented below, and are organized into different themes, reflecting those that emerged in the data analysis. Each theme is accompanied by one or more examples of the stories told by the ELL students.

4.1. Theme One: Teachers are mean!

> Carlos indicated that most of his teachers were *not very nice.*
> Most of my teachers aren't really nice. They don't give me enough time to read and write down things and when I tell them that I need more time, they don't even listen. Some of my teachers are mean, and they don't explain things. When I tell them that I didn't understand, they tell me to pay attention. It's not that I don't pay attention. I just don't understand sometimes because of my English. Last week, in one of my classes, I told the teacher I didn't understand and she told me to ask a friend. What kind of a teacher is she?

> Juan told a similar story:
> I don't think my teachers like me. They are mean and stuff. When I ask them questions, they say nothing. They just look at me like I am stupid. Understanding directions is hard for me since my English is not that good, and I like teachers who tell me directions to me over and over again until I get it. But sometimes I don't even want to try when my teachers look at me like I am dumb and I just want to give up.

> The stories told by Carlos and Juan reveal their frustration with their teachers, as the teachers do not seem to understand the ELLs' academic needs. Research studies show that ELLs need extra time and repetition to process and learn academic content (Echeverria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). However, both Carlos and Juan noted that their teachers do not provide enough time for them to process the course materials and do not repeat parts of the instruction when asked to do so. They both experienced and described the teachers' treatment as mean and not very nice, and they felt misunderstood and disrespected by their teachers. In their view, the teachers see them as lazy, while they tried really hard and all they needed is more time and repetition of instructions. Carlos indicated that he felt misunderstood by his teacher, who believed that he was not paying attention. This was far from reality, as his limited usage of English was causing the difficulty in learning. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) make the case that "stories function as arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life or community as lived" (p. 8). This suggests that the storytellers, Juan and

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Carlos, are using their stories to reflect upon their classroom life and their relationship to their teachers in which they do not feel that their teachers respect them. In this regard, some researchers report that when students' do not feel valued by their teachers, students feel powerless and demotivated which in turn delimit their academic and personal growth (Mitra, 2004). Relatedly, Juan also believed that his teacher viewed him as stupid and dumb, thereby failing to appreciate that his limited English was the reason behind needing repeated instructions. Carlos thus questions the teacher's credibility, as he does not think that he should have to ask his friend for help during class. In Juan's case, he expressed his feelings of discouragement and desire to give up learning because his teachers are making him feel stupid and dumb.

When the first author asked them if they had teachers they thought were nice, Juan expressed:
I like teachers that take extra time to explain vocabulary and explain again when I don't understand them. Like in my language arts class, the stuff we learn like plant adaptation is hard but I like it because the teacher explains words to me over and over again and I get it.

Carlos similarly expressed:
I had a few teachers who are really nice who don't get mad when I tell them I don't get things and they explain again.

As can be deduced from the stories told by Carlos and Juan, both appreciated the teachers that were willing to take the time to explain the course materials without judging them. Thinking in this way, Strucker et al (2001) propose:
Reach me with more than words from textbooks—but words from the soul and the mind connected to the heart. What got you to teach me? Wasn't it to reach me? . . . Relate to me, debate with me, respect me. Stop neglecting me (p. 162).

Similarly, Cruddas and Haddock (2003) found that when students' views were not respected by teachers and that if that lack of respect did not change, then schooling experiences for students could not improve.

4.2. Theme Two: Telling Our Stories

Carla expressed that her teachers do not let her talk and she does not think learning is fun when she cannot talk. She stated that "I know that my English is not great, but I still like to talk.
I wish my teachers would let me talk to my friends and do group work but it's like they don't want to hear me talk.

When the first author asked Carla to elaborate on her comment, Carla went on to say,
I think, because of my English, my teachers would rather have me stay quiet and say nothing. When I don't say anything in class, I don't feel like I am learning anything.

David told his story in this way:
I wish we get to talk about and write stories of our own life so that we can talk about our life with other people. I think school is more fun in that way. Right now, we mostly write and talk about things that I am not that interested in. In my English class now, the teacher is making us read Shakespeare. I wish I can write about my life in Mexico instead because when they read and talk about Shakespeare, I don't understand. I want teachers to teach better.

According to Krashen (1982/2009), language acquisition and learning requires meaningful interaction in the target language in which ELLs are provided with learning opportunities where they connect with their life experience. Perhaps the required curriculum necessitates teaching Shakespeare. However, to facilitate a learning environment in which ELLs may feel more engaged and valued, it might be necessary for the teacher to make an effort to differentiate her or his instruction in a way that reaches out to their linguistic needs. Moreover, involving students' personal stories and background would not only help them connect their learning to their background experiences but also help them feel a sense of belonging to the classroom community (Echeverria, Vogt, & Short, 2008). The stories Carla and David shared reflect their view that their learning is sometimes disconnected from their lives. In their view, having more opportunities to talk and share their life stories would benefit their learning.

Moreover, Norton (2000) makes the case that language, identity and language learning commitment is implicated in the investments that teachers have in the practices of classrooms. This concept can be applied to this study to conclude that the ELL students' language learning and their commitment in learning can be partially affected by their teachers' investment in willingness to listen to their students. As Cruddas & Haddock (2003) warn us, the dominant culture of schooling often prevents teachers from listening to students' creative ideas, and yet, if teachers carefully listen to their students, they can gain deeper insights into students' learning. The ELL participants' small stories in this study reflect the following:

> Sometimes I wish I could sit down with one of my teachers and just tell them what I exactly think about their class. It might be good, it might be bad, it's just that you don't have the opportunity to do it (Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001, p. xii).

4.3. Theme Three: Boring ESL Class

> Carla told her story about her ESL class in the following way:
> ESL class is boring because we don't do nothing. I don't really like the teacher because even when we are doing nothing, she doesn't let us talk. And when we do something, sometimes it's same thing over and over.

> When the researcher asked Carla to describe the kind of activities they do in the ESL class, she stated,
> The teacher sometimes makes us write down different words, like ten times each. It is so boring and I know everyone hates it.

> David shared his related story on the subject, saying,
> ESL class is where I can fall asleep and not get into trouble. Sometimes the teacher gets mad at me but he doesn't say anything, just looks at me. I don't really care and the teacher does nothing.

> Carlos stated,
> I think my ESL teacher thinks [that] I know nothing. She tries to teach me stuff I learned a long time ago in Mexico. I am not stupid, you know.

One of the most common misconceptions about linguistically diverse populations is that English language proficiency is linked to intelligence (Cummins, 2000). Indeed, the stories shared by Carla, David, and Carlos show that they are not being challenged cognitively and academically by their ESL teachers. Moreover, according to Cummins' (1979) interdependence hypothesis, the knowledge ELLs have in their first language transfers to their second language. However, the three ELLs stories above illuminate that

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their ESL teachers do not always provide pedagogical contexts in which ELLs are encouraged to make active transfer between what they know in the first language to the second language. Furthermore, in his Input Hypothesis, Krashen (1982/2009) argued that ELLs should be provided with language instruction that is one step beyond their current language ability. Unfortunately, the ELLs' stories presented here show no sign of them being challenged to learn more advanced materials.

In their study, Sheng, Sheng & Anderson (2011), showed that one of contributing factors for ELLs' low academic performance which sometimes and ultimately lead to dropping out of school is the fact that teachers have low academic expectations for them. In this regard, Bergh et al. (2010) examined the relationship between white teachers' prejudiced attitudes toward racial minority students and their expectations of academic achievement of those students. They reported that the implicit measure of teacher prejudiced attitudes showed that "teachers generally hold differential expectations of students of different ethnic origins" (p. 518). These researchers further reported that the relation between lower teacher expectations and the lower math test scores of ethnic minority students were correlated; thus, teachers' prejudiced attitudes at least partially explained differing achievement gap sizes across different groups of students.

5. Implications and Discussion

According to the existing research findings, student voice can serve as a catalyst for change in schools and teacher-student relationships, which leads to positive changes in teaching, curriculum, and assessment (Cook-Sather, 2009; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck & flutter, 2000). For example, Ogbu (1992) underscored that school success depends not only on what schools and teachers do, but also on what students do. In the second language education field, narrative is considered to be an important tool for researchers and teachers to understanding the learning experiences of ELLs (Bell, 1997, 2002). This study aimed to highlight the importance of perspectives that subordinated group students (ELLs) bring to school. Students' narratives in this study showed that their perspectives on, and attitudes toward, their learning are very much influenced by what teachers do and do not do. This study also showed that student small stories on what they perceive as their challenges in learning are sharply different from those of their teachers. Without an awareness and recognition that ELLs' perspectives can contribute the more productive and equitable learning environment, teachers' may unintentionally but dangerously perpetuate the coercive power relations in which the dominant ideologies of language and learning that are often plainly wrong (e.g., using student's home language is counter-productive to their learning and ELL parents' are not invested in their children's education).

The small stories that the participants told in this study are powerful stories that may threaten teachers' identity. More specifically, much of the literature on good teaching states that teachers must be learners, and we contend that the learning for teachers should extend beyond knowledge in content areas to paying closer attention to students' views and perspectives. This process of learning to listen to ELLs and inviting their input through collaborative power relations may make teachers vulnerable and uncomfortable, as it may involve giving up their control and authority. Indeed, Oldfather (1995) argues that "learning from student voices…requires major shifts on the part of teachers, students, and researchers in relationships and in ways of thinking and feeling about the issues of knowledge, language, power, and self" (1995, p. 87). It might be helpful for educators to pay attention to the ELLs' small stories in this study, as they are instructive and even theoretically sound. All four ELL students in this study used the opportunity to assert what they see as challenges in their learning, which indicates that they take their learning seriously and want to learn. All four ELL students alluded how their learning is impacted by how teachers perceive them and how they are positioned by teachers as powerless with not much control. While the students' views of their teachers may not appear favorable, presenting them in this

study are meant to provide a new way of thinking about teachers' ways of interpreting ELLs' challenges in their learning which will directly influence their pedagogical practices.

Re-invoking the purpose of using ELLs' small stories and the Cummins' framework of empowerment, the central goal of this study is intended to be dialogical between ELLs and their teachers and serve as a force against inequitable educational and social structures in place. The researchers of this study recognize that the major problems facing multicultural and multilingual education are historical, social, and systemic and that problems of inequality are usually not caused by something one teacher did. However, we are inevitably constructed within and complicit with the very structures of power within which inequality exists and sometimes flourishes. Thus, if change is to occur, it will be largely a function of how we individuals act (or do not act) in relation to each other (Shim, 2009). What this means for this study is that how teachers interact with ELLs and the degree to which teachers value ELLs' narratives through collaborative relations of power not only matters but it is necessary for promoting academic, social and personal success of ELLs. This is instrumental in not only empowering ELLs at the micro classroom level, but also at the macro-level educational structure. In other words, even in the existing system of domination and in the most coercive systems, teachers do have the power of choice and teachers' agency can effectively combat coercive relations of power in working with ELLs at both micro classroom level and broader educational level. Doing so requires rethinking about what teachers think they know and entertaining the possibility of repositioning ELL students as valuable knowledge holders in our classrooms.

To genuinely engage and respect our ELL students' voices also seem to mean teachers respect and empower students' entire beings. Juan stated in his interview: I like school when I feel smart and when my teachers care about me and listen to me. Practicing collaborative relations of power with ELLs in classrooms, we can possibly create more democratic educational contexts for ELLs where they like school and feel smart.

6. Conclusion

Our study supports the importance of attending to the small stories that our ELL students tell. The small stories in this study served as a productive means for the ELL students to construct and reveal their identities. Our hope is that through collaborative relations of power in which teachers too become learners, the dominant power structure gest disrupted and the ELLs' participation increases; thus, promoting more empowering and effective second language teaching and learning. We contend that such findings are relevant not only in second language teaching and learning but in education more broadly.

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