

## Reading, writing, and learning English in an American high school classroom

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### Abstract

Commercial publishers have shaped reading and writing instruction in American schools through their interpretations of state-developed reading and writing standards and standards-aligned materials, which teachers then implement in English classes, including those serving multilingual learners. This paper uses microethnographic discourse analysis to examine how reliance on published texts for reading activities led a teacher to focus on correct answers and formulaic writing tasks, whereas teacher-created activities fostered greater engagement among multilingual learners. Focused on a ninth grade English class at a California public high school, this study's findings suggest that reading was used primarily in service of preparation for high stakes writing assessments, but teachers can adapt their instruction to better build on multilingual students' existing knowledge and curiosity.

**Keywords:** high school, curriculum, standards, English learners, multilingual

Reading and writing instruction in American public schools is shaped by *standards*, “concise, written descriptions of what students are expected to know and be able to do at a specific stage of their education” (Learning Standards, 2014, para. 1). For two decades, U.S. federal law required states to write comprehensive standards for all grade levels in English and mathematics, but did not specify what should be included in those standards<sup>1</sup>. In states with widely varied standards, teachers often found it difficult to plan their English courses to address myriad literacy standards while supporting all their students—both those who were already fluent in English and those still learning the language—within a single academic year.

Textbook publishers provided one solution to this teaching dilemma, designing books and supplemental materials to address the standards. In large states like California, the focus of the present study, published materials specifically aligned with the state's standards and were intended to prepare students for the state's annual standardized testing regimen (*Program Description*, 2003). In general, when a school district chooses to adopt a complete curriculum package from a publisher, teachers have little say in the content of that curriculum or into how the state assesses students' mastery of the standards (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997). At the local level, however, individual teachers still have control over their own classroom practices for implementing the curriculum and preparing students for assessments.

This study examines one teacher's literacy instruction in a standards-based mainstream ninth grade English class at a public high school in California. Taking a situated policy perspective on the integration of reading and writing in the curriculum, I analyze three days in Mr. Brown's classroom and identify how at times the teacher adhered closely to the district-mandated instructional plan, while at other times he adapted or supplemented it for the benefit of his diverse students. I argue that while textbook based lessons emphasized surface-level, testable 'right answers,' teacher-created approaches fostered richer, more personal connections to literacy concepts for multilingual<sup>2</sup> students.

### Reading and Writing Curriculum as Education Policy in the United States

Education policy has the power to determine what is taught in the classroom. The 2002 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, commonly called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), required states to develop comprehensive standards for all academic subject areas and design assessments to measure achievement of those standards. Multilingual students (including those called *limited English proficient* in federal policy) were particularly affected by the provisions of NCLB: English learners who had been in US schools at least three years were included in annual assessment requirements (Shaul & Ganson, 2005). In response to these requirements, textbook publishers created comprehensive curricular programs that emphasized, as one program claimed, "systematic, sequential, [and] complete coverage" of state reading and language arts standards and "assessment in a variety of formats, with emphasis on standards mastery" for all students (*Program Description*, 2003, p. 2). District-adopted, state-approved textbook packages have long shaped curriculum in American schools (Apple, 2001). Contemporary educational reforms stress institutional accountability, standardized testing, and "increased usage of packaged and commodified instruction, reinforcing worksheet pedagogic practices" (Luke, 2004, p. 1426). Teachers struggle both for and against standardized texts: they recognize that the books provide ready-to-use content for their classes, thus saving them time, but they also feel that overly scripted programs lead to the de-skilling of the teaching profession (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991).

NCLB's focus on the test performance of multilingual students and other groups who scored at the lower end of standardized measures increased pressure on schools to make sure their lower achieving students were prepared for annual high-stakes testing. In order to raise test scores, schools changed the curriculum to better prepare students for taking high-stakes tests (Hillocks, 2002; Menken, 2008). Such policies negatively affected teachers, who expressed frustration, for example, with an inability to give equitable instruction to individual multilingual students, due to a state-mandated curriculum focused on preparation for standardized tests and a scripted pacing schedule (Harper, Platt, Naranjo, & Boynton, 2007).

Preparing multilingual learners for high stakes standardized testing has also been shown to limit teachers' instructional practices to formulaic writing and reading for correct answers rather than broader purposes (Enright & Gilliland, 2011; Enright, Torres-Torretti, & Carreón, 2012; Gilliland, 2015). Most of the writing taught in US schools focuses on *survival genres*: "...those genres that secondary school students learn in order to pass high school classes and demonstrate a level of proficiency on high-stakes testing" (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2013, p. 80). Rarely longer than

a page, these texts primarily emphasize displaying factual knowledge of vocabulary and concepts rather than exploring deeper issues. In an example of this emphasis on survival genres from the same classroom as the present study, Enright et al. (2012) illustrated how the teacher focused a poetry analysis lesson on reading to find responses that would fit in an essay framework determined by standardized assessments and high-stakes writing assignments. The above practices affect multilingual learners in particular by limiting their opportunities to learn how to use literacy for the many contexts in which it functions within and beyond the classroom (Gee, 2014). Enright explains the danger for multilingual learners of this concentration on writing based on formulaic structures: "...little time is given to articulating the thinking behind the writing or the purposes behind the required features and forms of texts that [students] produce" (2013, p. 40). Instead, writing instruction is reduced to copying formulaic phrasing, leaving multilingual students unclear how or why they should use these structures in writing.

Textbooks do not completely control reading and writing instruction, however. Grant (2003) argues that teachers regularly extend their practice beyond the content and approaches provided in the required textbooks. What is taught, and how, also depends on teachers' individual approaches to their roles in the classroom and their responsibilities to multilingual students. Yoon (2008) contrasted one teacher whose discourse practices worked to include and encourage the English learners in her class with two others who positioned themselves as not responsible for the learning of multilingual students and did little to facilitate their inclusion in classroom activities. Harklau (1994) similarly observed teachers who rarely slowed the speed of their talk or their use of vocabulary and others who adjusted their speech to the students' comprehension and frequently gave students time to talk in small-group discussions. Teachers may hold assumptions about students' readiness or comprehension that restrict students' opportunities to learn academic language for writing (Gilliland, 2015). Their writing instruction may focus on telling students what to do, rather than how to use writing to communicate (Enright, 2013). Teachers sometimes explain their practices with reference to the overarching pressure they feel from school administration to prepare their students for policy-driven high-stakes assessments (Gilliland, 2015).

### *Theoretical Framework: Situated Perspectives on Language and Education Policy*

Literacy curriculum and instructional practices in schools are directly affected by larger educational and language policies. Building on recent recognition of the value of situated research into language policies and practices (Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007; Tollefson, 2015), this study considers local evidence of the effects of education policy on reading and writing instruction for multilingual youth in one high school classroom. Shohamy (2006) suggests that at the local level, official policies are often not enacted as intended, and that *de facto* policies, determined by local actors' ideologies about and interpretations of policy, are what actually control educational practice. Arguing that teachers have agency in enacting policy, Ramanathan and Morgan suggest that rather than being smaller versions of official policies, local practices are where higher-level policies are "directly experienced and sometimes resisted" (2007, p. 449). Methodologically, ethnography offers a deep understanding of how policy fits in a local context (Tollefson, 2015), since "...single cases afford glimpses into complex interplays between policies, pedagogic practices, institutional constraints, and migrations" (Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007, p. 459). Microethnographic discourse analysis (MEDA), the analytical approach used here,

provides a tool for connecting the moment-to-moment actions recorded in a classroom to the broader levels of policy that are constructed and maintained through interaction (Bloome & Carter, 2014). Through MEDA, this paper examines the role of language and education policy in the ways one high school teacher taught reading and writing to the multilingual students in his class.

## Research Questions

To identify multilingual learners' experiences of reading and writing instruction in an accountability-driven school district relying on a standards-based published curriculum, this study considers one teacher's instructional practices focused on the following questions:

- What does reading and writing instruction look like for multilingual learners in a textbook-based, standards-driven mainstream high school English language arts classroom?
- In what ways does the teacher's interpretation of curricular requirements support or limit multilingual students' opportunities to learn English academic reading and writing?

## Research Methods

### *Participants and Setting*

This study examines the practices and perspectives of one high school English teacher, Shawn Mr. Brown<sup>3</sup>, while teaching two sections of English 9, a core mainstream English language arts course. The data come from an ethnographic study of teachers and students at Willowdale High School, a comprehensive high school in a mid-sized city in central California, conducted during the 2007-2008 academic year. Of the 1600 students enrolled at WHS, 52% were of Hispanic heritage, 40% white European ancestry, and 8% other ethnicities. 22% of the school's enrolled students were classified as English learners (EL) and another 15% were redesignated<sup>4</sup> English learners. Most of the school's English learners spoke Spanish at home.

Several years before this study took place, in response to findings that tracking policies were denying many students access to college-preparatory courses (a nationwide issue noted in Oakes, 2008), the school had established a 'detracking' policy, eliminating all sheltered<sup>5</sup> and below-college-prep level English courses other than foundation-level English Language Development (ELD) courses. This practice meant that students still learning academic English were placed into courses alongside students fluent in English and were expected to complete the same assignments. During the academic year of this study, WHS administrators recognized the challenges of many ninth grade students adjusting to high school and piloted a ninth grade Academy, a cohort-based learning community where a group of students attended four core courses (English language arts, math, health, and science) together with the same teachers. With reduced class sizes in English language arts, but no ELD classes, EL-designated multilingual students received language support only from their core teachers. The Academy structure allowed our research team to follow students across all their core classes and to build

relationships with the teachers. Two sections of Mr. Brown's English 9 Academy classes are analyzed in this study. One had a total enrollment of 13 students, of whom 4 were still EL designated, 2 redesignated, and 1 fluent English proficient (FEP)<sup>6</sup>. The other section enrolled 15 students, including 5 who were EL-designated and 2 FEP. Some were recent immigrants, mostly from Mexico, while others had lived in the school district for most of their lives.

Willowdale Unified School District required ninth grade English classes to include a series of six Benchmark Assignment (BA) essays and two BA grammar tests. Students had to pass all eight BAs to pass English 9, regardless of their performance on other assignments. The BA prompts were taken from the Holt textbook series (Beers & Odell, 2003) and based on the genres in the state standards that were tested on the state high school exit exam. The high stakes nature of the BA policy meant that English teachers focused most of their instruction on preparing students for writing the six essays. (Enright & Gilliland, 2011 analyzes the effects of the BA policies on writing instruction.)

Mr. Brown, a white native speaker of English, was in his first year teaching at WHS, but had taught English 9 for four years at another California high school using the same Holt curriculum. Although he did wish to inspire students to read and write for fun, under the constraints of state and local policy, he saw his role as giving students the language and the formula for writing passing BA and high school exit exam essays. He explained that he felt the students would learn language inductively if he provided them with models and sentence frames to use in their essays (Gilliland, 2015). He had grown up nearby and received his teaching credential in English with a Cross-cultural Language and Academic Development endorsement from a local state university. This endorsement, required of all new California teachers since 2002, addressed issues of multicultural education more than second language learning, according to Mr. Brown. He also felt that his credential program had been so focused on the standards that it ignored other aspects of teaching. Mr. Brown's previous teaching and his educational background had led him to focus on making sure his students were prepared to take required high-stakes assessments, through whatever means necessary.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative ethnographic data were collected throughout the 2007-2008 school year by the principal investigator (a researcher at a nearby university), the author (then a graduate student), and three other research assistants. Data from the larger project<sup>7</sup>, which analyzed language and literacy opportunities for multilingual students in mainstream classes, included extensive field notes collected in three sections of each of the four ninth grade Academy core courses (math, English language arts, science, and health) as well as student written work, interviews with focal students and teachers, and audio recordings of class sessions. (Enright, 2013 and Enright & Gilliland, 2011 provide more information about the Diverse Adolescent Literacies project and the larger study.) Data analyzed in this paper include an audio-recorded interview with Mr. Brown and 26 days of field notes and audio recordings of observations in his English 9 classes. Print data sources comprise the Holt English 9 curricular package, including the student edition and teacher's edition textbooks (Beers & Odell, 2003), the teacher's pacing guide (*On Course*, 2003), and other workbooks and resource manuals supplementing the published curriculum, in



addition to a school district teacher handbook describing the English 9 Benchmark Assignments, derived from the Holt curriculum and the state standards.

For this analysis, I systematically selected three classes from the 26 days of classroom observations by first eliminating 11 sessions that had been taught by substitutes, primarily involved listening to guest speakers or watching videos, or were mainly one-to-one writing conferences. I then reviewed field notes from the remaining 15 class sessions and classified each session by its use of the Holt materials: those in which almost all of the activities were related to the textbook series (*Much use of the textbook*), those in which approximately half the class time related to materials from the Holt series (*Some use of the textbook*), and those in which the majority of class time was spent on non-textbook activities (*Little use of the textbook*). I treated the Holt textbook and materials as a proxy for curricular policy because of their close alignment to the state standards (*Program Description*, 2003), the focus on preparation for standardized testing in each chapter, the district's concern that teachers closely follow the Holt Minimum Course of Study, and the district's basing its own Benchmark Assignments on the Holt materials. I selected one class period at random from each of the three categories as a representative sample. The data analysis presented here focuses on three class periods in Mr. Brown's English 9 class: January 30, March 11, and March 14, 2008. Table 1 summarizes the reading and writing activities in each analyzed class session.

Table 1. *Reading and writing activities in analyzed sessions*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Use of Holt materials</i>	<i>Reading activities</i>	<i>Writing activities</i>
March 11 <sup>th</sup>	Much use of textbook	Primary and secondary sources; JFK assassination article	Vocabulary quiz; reading notes
January 30 <sup>th</sup>	Some use of textbook	Catalog poem; Extended metaphor poem	Comprehension questions; catalog poem
March 14 <sup>th</sup>	No use of textbook	Greek god biographies	Grammar quiz; Greek god poster

With an interest in identifying how Mr. Brown's instructional practices and multilingual students' learning opportunities were situated in educational language policy, I analyzed the three sessions through microethnographic discourse analysis (MEDA) (Bloome & Carter, 2014; Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005). MEDA takes an ethnographic approach to studying literacy practices in classrooms, considering language as both the content of classroom discussion (teaching students information and skills) and the means of achieving learning. The analysis process alternates between close examination of spoken and written discourse used in the classroom by the people present (teachers and students) and not present (policy documents and textbooks), and consideration of larger events created through discourse that make up a lesson. With ethnographic data, MEDA allows for identification of multiple levels of analysis, such as tracing the location of knowledge and power in discourse. While MEDA does examine discourse at the level of utterances, for situated policy analysis, its contribution is the ability to document where ideas that are talked about originate in the layers of policy surrounding classroom practices, including how the interactions define concepts of literacy and how literacy instruction can mask a hidden curriculum (Bloome & Carter, 2014).

Focusing on levels of policy as a powerful source of classroom discourse, I reviewed transcripts of the audio recordings of the three class periods, indexing key events when the classroom

discussion related to the textbook or to an upcoming Benchmark Assignment essay. At the discourse level, I noted Mr. Brown's talk with individual students including English learners. Looking for similarities and differences across the three class sessions, I divided each class period into a series of bounded events, almost all of which could be considered *literacy events* because of the central role of written language (Bloome et al., 2005). I then mapped the flow of literacy events and traced the apparent location of knowledge and power as *inside* the official curriculum (in the Holt materials, district Benchmark Assignments, or state standards) or *outside* (from students' prior knowledge, the teacher's knowledge of student interests, or other non-sanctioned sources, such as the internet or television). Three themes related to the location of knowledge and influence of policy governed Mr. Brown's approach to interacting with his multilingual students as they engaged with the content of each day's lessons: ensuring their completion of assigned tasks, adapting the curriculum to be accessible, and supplementing required curriculum to engage learners.

### **Findings: Reading, Writing, and Preparing for Assessments**

Observations of Mr. Brown's teaching revealed both a careful adherence to the mandatory curriculum and attention to the learning needs of individual students and the class as a whole. On the days where activities were located clearly in the textbook, he made sure that all the students had learned at least a minimum of the expected content. On the day where the textbook was not used at all, the activities still assessed students on or prepared them for content from the textbook and state standards. Nevertheless, in all three classes, Mr. Brown used his knowledge of the students' interests and needs to personalize the official knowledge with connections to students' lives and to answer their questions about the materials.

In this section, I first summarize the three classroom observations, highlighting ways that policy was situated among the activities, and then report on my analyses, organized by three themes related to Mr. Brown's approaches to teaching reading and writing. Appendix A provides analytical overviews of each class session indicating how levels of policy and individual knowledge are situated.

#### *Three Days in the Classroom*

*Much use of the textbook.* Curricular policy, in the form of activities taken directly from the textbook and the Minimum Course of Study, was evident throughout the class on March 11. The session began with students reviewing vocabulary words from the textbook for a quiz. Finishing the quiz, they silently read an explanation in the textbook of the difference between primary and secondary sources and were told to take notes on the reading (though few actually did). When about half the students had finished, Mr. Brown led the class in a discussion of the two concepts and then began a whole-class preview of an article, also in the textbook, about the assassination of president John F. Kennedy. Both readings were included in the teacher's planning guide Minimum Course of Study (*On Course*, 2003). The teacher's edition of the textbook (Beers & Odell, 2003) recommended that they be read during class time. The distinction between primary and secondary sources was part of Reading Standard 2.5 and a prerequisite to the school district Benchmark Assignment persuasive research essay. As such, this day's activities carried

considerable weight in the assessment processes at WHS.

*Some use of the textbook.* The lesson on January 30 started with a focus on the textbook as the foundation of knowledge but transitioned to an activity where students could draw on their own experiences while writing poetry. Mr. Brown began by reviewing the definition of the term *catalog poem* and assigned students to answer the textbook Literary Response questions about catalog poems and then write their own poems in the style of the two that they had read and were analyzing. The final task was to read an extended metaphor poem. Mr. Brown led a brief discussion defining *extended metaphor* before reiterating the requirements for the catalog poem. For the rest of the class period, Mr. Brown moved from student to student, answering questions about the textbook assignment and checking their progress in writing their catalog poems. Understanding different types of poetry falls under Reading Standard 3.11 (literary analysis). Although neither poetry genre was included in the Minimum Course of Study, the two textbook assignments contributed to preparation for writing the poetry analysis Benchmark Assignment, which specifically addressed several state writing standards. The textbook assignments, therefore, held higher stakes for the students than did writing their own poems.

*Working without the textbook.* Even this class on March 14, during which the textbook never made an appearance, helped to prepare students for the Benchmark Assignment grammar test and standards-based reading of excerpts in the textbook from Homer's *Odyssey*. When class began, Mr. Brown reviewed subjects, predicates, predicate nominatives, predicate adjectives, direct objects, and indirect objects using sentences he had written on the whiteboard. He then administered a grammar quiz on these concepts. The students next worked in pairs with texts Mr. Brown had printed from the Internet describing individual Greek gods. They designed posters that illustrated their assigned gods with at least seven facts about the characters and their relationships to the *Odyssey*. Mr. Brown walked around the room checking in with the pairs, answering their questions about word meanings and verifying that the gods did, indeed, do the outrageous things described in the handouts (such as Zeus giving birth to Athena through his brain). He encouraged students who knew about the Greek gods to keep talking, and he helped students who did not have prior knowledge make connections. While the posters themselves did not hold high stakes, analyzing characters' interactions and determining character traits were both state reading standards for literary response (3.3 and 3.4), key concepts tested on year-end standardized exams.

### *Theme 1: Sticking to the Required Texts*

Mr. Brown was aware of the expectations placed on him by the district and said he felt restricted by the imposed curriculum. On the days when his teaching closely followed the Minimum Course of Study, he assigned reading texts and writing tasks straight out of the textbook. His teaching at these times focused on ensuring that individual students were able to fulfill requirements and meet expectations in preparation for standardized assessments.

Mr. Brown supported individual students to complete their assignments. On January 30, he tried a variety of approaches to help Jasmin, a Spanish speaker classified as an English learner, understand the intention of Literary Response question 4. The question asked students to identify the tone of each of two catalog poems and explain their answers citing details from the poems.



Mr. Brown started by guiding Jasmin's labeling of the tone in Maya Angelou's 'Woman Work.' He appeared to be trying to get her first to understand the concept of tone in poetry. Through a series of questions that probed for progressively more abstract responses, he elicited an acceptable label for a feeling associated with the first poem. Mr. Brown next directed Jasmin to think about Naomi Shihab Nye's poem 'Daily.' Excerpt 1.1 illustrates the teacher's questioning in an effort to get Jasmin to identify the tone.

*Excerpt 1.1*<sup>8</sup>

- 1 Brown: Now, what do you think-- how is that different in this one? What does SHE say about her work? [2]
- 2 Jasmin: She does it every day.
- 3 Brown: She does, and how does she feel about it? [2] She says the days are nouns. What does she think needs to be XXXXX [5]
- 4 Jasmin: Um. Doing all that?
- 5 Brown: Yeah, right, so how is her feeling, what is her attitude about work?//
- 6 Jasmin: //Bored.
- 7 Brown: What do you think she feels?//
- 8 Jasmin: //Bored.
- 9 Brown: You think she's bored? What tells you that she's bored?
- 10 Jasmin: XXXXX
- 11 Brown: She says the days are nouns. The hands are churches. So how does she feel about the work that she does, does she think it's important or do you think she thinks it's useless?
- 12 Jasmin: Important?
- 13 Brown: Is she tired like the other speaker?
- 14 Jasmin: XXXXX
- 15 Brown: No, she doesn't sound tired, right, she sounds like she's kind of, she's used to, she's proud of the things that she does, right.

The teacher's multi-second pauses in turns 1 and 3 gave Jasmin the opportunity to think before speaking. Her questioning response (turn 4) and then quick answers latching on to Mr. Brown's request to label the tone of this poem, twice answering that she thought the speaker was bored (turns 6 and 8), indicate that she had thought briefly about the topic and possibly wanted to finish the exchange. These responses, however, did not satisfy Mr. Brown's request for textual evidence of her interpretation, suggesting in turn 9 the textbook prompt: "Cite details from each poem to explain the tone you hear in it" (Beers & Odell, 2003, p. 412). He repeated the two final lines of the poem and his question about the speaker's feelings (turn 11) and then immediately changed his question to offer Jasmin two choices in response. She gave the correct answer, but uncertainly (turn 12), prompting the teacher to ask her a yes/no question to make sure that she understood the difference between the tones of the two poems (turn 13). In turn 15, he summarized his own interpretation of the tone of Nye's poem. Excerpt 1.2 continues the interaction with Mr. Brown prompting Jasmin to move beyond just labeling the tones.

*Excerpt 1.2*

- 16 Brown: So how are those tones different? How are they different?  
 17 Jasmin: [quickly] She likes it, she doesn't like it.  
 18 Brown: There you go, good! Does that help? OK. The question says, um, "How would you describe the tone of each poem? Complaining, bitter, angry, accepting, loving, joyful?" What do you think?

Mr. Brown's final move was to push Jasmin from identifying the tones of each poem to comparing the two, as the assignment required. Jasmin succinctly summed up the differences in turn 17, but realizing that the question actually asked for labeling each tone and citing details (turn 18), Mr. Brown quickly read the text of the question aloud. Becoming conscious that several other students were waiting for his help, Mr. Brown did not wait for Jasmin to answer but instead paraphrased the directions and moved away.

Policy and a pedagogical focus on reading-to-write inform the above exchange. At the most immediate level, Mr. Brown wanted to make sure that students like Jasmin were able to understand the poems that he had assigned them to read. He knew that she was still classified as an English learner and needed extra scaffolding to follow grade-level reading assignments. He also knew, however, that he must prepare all his students to write their Analysis of a Poem BA essay. Tone was a key literary element that could be used to support a thesis about a poem's theme, as the assignment description in the textbook explained (Beers & Odell, 2003). If Jasmin could not appropriately label the tone of the poems and cite lines that provided evidence for her choice of those labels, she would lose points on several parts of the assignment rubric and could fail the BA. Holding students accountable for passing all BAs was part of the district's plan for accountability to the state standards. Mr. Brown knew that these standards would also be assessed on the year-end state tests, so it was in his best interest and that of the school and district to prepare his students to identify literary elements in poetry. He also knew, however, that Jasmin would not have been able to answer the textbook questions without support, so his scaffolding served to facilitate her performance.

Textbook reading was frequently linked in Mr. Brown's teaching to minor writing assignments (such as the catalog poems) or preparation for the Benchmark Assignments, which held much higher stakes than the daily activities for the students. On January 30, Mr. Brown's introduction to the day's activities included a review of the definitions of two types of poetry. The need for accurate definitions of genre terminology such as *catalog poem* or *extended metaphor* can be attributed to preparation for writing. Soon after, the students had to select a poem to analyze in depth for a Benchmark Assignment. They would need to define their poem with an appropriate label and draw on the specifics of the genre as possible 'key literary elements' in their analyses. Since Reading Standard 3.7 required students to 'recognize and understand the significance of various literary devices,' and Writing Standard 2.2c expected their essays to 'demonstrate awareness of the author's use of stylistic devices' (California State Board of Education, 2007), such appropriate labeling of genre could also help students when they were taking the year-end standardized test that assumed they had mastered all the standards. Similar patterns were seen on other days. As the next section illustrates, however, even in close adherence to the textbook, he used his knowledge of the students' interests to help them understand difficult concepts.

*Theme 2: Adapting the Curriculum to Students*

On some days where Mr. Brown's primary agenda for the class was rooted firmly in the textbook, he nevertheless strayed from the approach prescribed in the teacher's edition to help students access the material when he felt the textbook's explanations were inadequate. On March 11, he led students through a discussion about the differences between primary and secondary sources and a preview of a new reading text about the assassination of president John F. Kennedy. He deployed his knowledge of the students' fascination with campus fights, a concrete event, to help them understand an abstract literacy concept (the difference between primary and secondary sources) that would be essential to their success in writing the upcoming persuasive BA. Excerpt 2 illustrates a portion of the teacher's explanation to the class after he realized that many students did not understand the text they were reading.

*Excerpt 2*

- 1 Brown: All right, so check it out. Let's say there's a fight on campus and I see the fight. I witness the fight. I see what happens. And I go up to Gloria, and I say, 'Hey, did you see the fight?' She says, 'No, I missed it.' What am I gonna do?//
- 2 Students: //Tell her!
- 3 Brown: I'm gonna tell her all about it. This person did this, and it was awesome, whatever. Now. Because I was there to witness the event, and I'm telling Gloria about it, that makes me a primary source. I was there. I experienced the event.  
[...]
- 4 Brown: So let's take my example. I was there. I saw the fight. I tell Gloria all about it. Now Gloria wasn't there, keep in mind, so I told her what I saw. I'M a primary source. Then what is SHE going to do?
- 5 Students: Go tell her
- 6 Brown: She's going to go tell someone, too. She's going to go, 'Hey, Sam, did you see the fight?' 'No, I didn't.' 'Well, this is what happened.' And then Gloria tells Sam all about the fight. Was she there to see it?
- 7 Students: No.
- 8 Brown: No, she was not a witness. Therefore, she is a what? A secondary source.

Beginning in turn 1, Mr. Brown made himself the primary source as a witness to the fight and included a student in the class, Gloria, as the person he told about the fight. The students' immediate response in turn 2 indicated their clear engagement with his hypothetical narrative, so he continued in turn 3 to build the story, drawing on knowledge situated in the students' life experiences. Between turns 3 and 4, Mr. Brown asked students to repeat the textbook's definitions and examples of primary and secondary sources. While they were able to read these statements aloud, only one boy seemed to understand what was meant. In turn 4, the teacher resumed his narrative of the campus fight, extending the hypothetical story to cover Gloria's retelling of the original story to another student in the class who had not been present. At the conclusion of each part of his story, Mr. Brown restated the technical terminology emphasized in the textbook and state standards. This approach reached at least one student, a girl who called out "Ohhh!" once Mr. Brown had finished this explanation, as well as other students who

contributed to a list of factual information when Mr. Brown asked them what information he should include in a primary source report about the fight.

This extended example of the hypothetical fight on campus demonstrated how Mr. Brown put his stated teaching philosophy into practice: “You have to take into account the context of the students... what kind of experience and background do they bring into the classroom, and you’ve gotta build on that.” Even in this teacher-centered and textbook-focused class session, Mr. Brown engaged students in the required material by introducing examples from their own context, high school daily life. He also encouraged them to contribute to the discussion from their own prior knowledge. The presidential assassination that was the focus of the textbook readings piqued their curiosity, given the number of questions they asked during the preview of the article. Mr. Brown entertained their questions, answering with reference to the article they would read, recommended they look up a YouTube video on the topic, and encouraged students wanting to learn more.

While this portion of the lesson involved no writing and only minimal reading, it served to support students’ future writing of the persuasive Benchmark Assignment, in which they would have to use both primary and secondary sources in an essay arguing for a perspective on a controversial issue. Mr. Brown took the somewhat dry and abstract information in the textbook and interpreted it to be accessible for students while also sparking their curiosity to learn more about the topic on their own. Although the students may not have memorized all the steps to analyzing primary and secondary sources, this approach allowed them to ask genuine questions about a topic they may never have considered before, or that they may have only learned about as dates and facts in history class. Mr. Brown got the students excited about the topic, a necessary prerequisite to reading and analysis as well as preparation for the upcoming BA essay.

### *Theme 3: Doing Without the Textbook*

Some of the more engaging reading and writing activities for students occurred on days when Mr. Brown made space for learning activities that promoted the concepts covered in the standards without being based in the textbook. In the poetry-writing assignments for January 30, he let students write about their personal experiences. He expressed enthusiasm for the work of some multilingual boys who were sharing their writing with each other (and laughing at the school-related subjects), and urged them to “be proud of the stuff you write.” In addition to bridging the abstract concepts of poetry analysis to students’ experience, poetry writing has the potential to allow students who struggle with the academic language of the textbook assignments to tell their own stories in their own words. The problem with the way this particular class day was structured, however, was that students like Jasmin, the English learner who needed extensive support from Mr. Brown to complete the textbook assignment, ran out of time answering the comprehension questions and never got to the poetry writing. While she might have excelled at telling her own life story in poetry, she was limited to the formulaic writing tasks that had just one correct answer.

As an example of literacy integrated into non-textbook instruction, the lesson on March 14 involved more talking between teacher and students and among students than was present in the textbook-focused lessons. On this day, students negotiated with each other over the meaning of

the readings and over the content and design of their posters. They shared their findings with their neighbors, such as when a girl expressed her horror that Zeus, the subject of another pair's poster, had raped someone, given birth, and married his sister.

Of all the classes I observed, this was where Jasmin was most engaged. She and her partner actively read their handout for information and discussed how to design their poster. Jasmin and her partner, Susana, also an L1 Spanish speaker, were assigned Poseidon, one of the characters Mr. Brown had mentioned during his lecture.

### *Excerpt 3*

- 1 Susana: [suggests to Jasmin that they draw dolphins to represent the sea]
- 2 Jasmin and Susana [to Mr. Brown]: Can we draw that stick thing?
- 3 Brown: That's the trident. He always has his trident with him.
- 4 Jasmin: Like in *The Little Mermaid*?
- 5 Brown: You guys see *The Little Mermaid*? Yeah, that's Poseidon. And when he gets angry, he smashes it into the ocean floor and causes earthquakes.

Unlike in Excerpt 1, where Mr. Brown had to coax brief answers from Jasmin, in this excerpt, she and Susana were both absorbed in their project. Both girls remembered seeing their character in the animated film *The Little Mermaid*. They made the connection between the film and the poster they were designing based on a memory of seeing the character use the trident. In turn 5, Mr. Brown took up Jasmin's question and the connection she had made to elaborate on what they might remember from the film. Jasmin and her partner were able to use their memory of the film as a basis for creating their own images as they designed their poster. Had Mr. Brown not confirmed that they did have the appropriate knowledge, these two English learners might not have found a personal connection to their character or to the *Odyssey*.

The design of the *Odyssey* poster assignment also allowed students access to the material through a wider range of literacies. In this multimodal activity, wherein students needed to read for information, design a poster incorporating both written and visual information, and present their poster orally, students were engaged in many more ways than they would have been with the textbook's text-based list of gods and other characters. They used their oral English language abilities to discuss the text and plan the poster (a skill that Bunch, 2014, calls the *language of ideas*), and then used academic language to present written descriptions of the god and his characteristics in a way valued in school (the *language of display* [Bunch, 2014]). Jasmin and Susana showed that in this activity, multilingual students could be equally successful as fluent English speakers through collaboration and individualized talk with the teacher.

## **Discussion**

### *Reading and Writing in High School English Class*

For the multilingual students in Mr. Brown's English 9 classes, policy requirements forced reading and writing instruction to focus mainly on formulaic tasks in preparation for high-stakes



tests and writing assignments. When the students wrote answers to textbook questions, Mr. Brown provided scaffolds to ensure they could answer the questions. When they read from the textbook, he checked that they all got the main ideas. When Mr. Brown chose not to use the textbook, however, he seemed to do so for creative purposes, such as writing poems or making multimodal posters, in activities that were not included in the Minimum Course of Study or directly related to the district's Benchmark Assignment requirements.

Reading was always done in service of preparation for writing assignments or assessment, not for aesthetic purposes or curiosity. Many official assignments, such as the comprehension questions after the catalog poems, treated reading as having a fixed interpretation that could therefore be assessed through brief responses to questions assuming a single correct answer, much like the multiple choice questions students would see on the year-end standardized tests. Writing from reading was likewise formulaic, focused on displaying answers rather than analyzing issues. Enright et al. (2012) examine in detail how Mr. Brown's instruction of the extended metaphor poem reduced poetry analysis to a set of facts that could be replicated on the poetry analysis BA. These writing assignments align with the 'survival genres' Ortmeier-Hooper (2013) argues predominate in American schools.

The activities that extended beyond the required texts allowed for more meaningful integration of reading and writing in the English 9 curriculum. The Greek gods poster demonstrated how the students were capable of reading texts for the purposes of creating their own communicative, multimodal texts. Furthermore, rather than being read and assessed only by the teacher, these posters were displayed for and discussed by other students in the class and in other sections of Mr. Brown's classes. This activity allowed the students to use reading as a pathway to writing for real audiences. Being outside the official curriculum, however, meant that this type of activity rarely played into the high stakes reading and writing assignments that counted the most in English 9.

### *Curriculum and Multilingual Learners*

As *de facto* language policy, Mr. Brown's enactment of the Holt curriculum served to support multilingual students in ways not encouraged by the textbook, although his practices also limited what they and other students might learn about reading and writing. The March 14 *Odyssey* character poster project seems the best example from these data, engaging students multimodally in understanding and sharing more extensive informational texts than were in the Holt book, which provided the text of the *Odyssey* itself but little background. Drawing, collaboration, and teacher scaffolding helped multilingual students successfully learn content that was included in the standards. By including poetry writing along with poetry analysis on January 30, Mr. Brown opened up an additional pathway for language learners to experience the stylistic concepts in the poems they were studying. Unfortunately, scheduling creative writing after the textbook assignment meant that multilingual learners and other students who needed more time to answer the comprehension questions had less time to play with language in their own poems. The teacher's emphasis on exact (textbook) definitions of vocabulary words, grammar terms, and literary concepts also may have limited learning deeper meanings of these topics. While WHS had officially 'detracked,' Mr. Brown's mainstream English classes focused on these lower order literacy tasks, in contrast with those we observed in the honors classes (Enright & Gilliland,

2011), thus maintaining the segregation of multilingual youth into programs with lower expectations and greater emphasis on preparation for assessments, as has been noted for decades (Fu, 1995).

By encouraging students to collaborate while they reviewed their vocabulary words, shared ideas from their notes about the reading, wrote their catalog poems, and worked on their *Odyssey* posters, Mr. Brown gave multilingual learners valuable real-world literacy experience. Collaboration and sharing knowledge are important aspects of preparation for life beyond school (Brown & Duguid, 2000). These are not, however, practices encouraged in textbooks, state standards, or accountability regulations. To prepare for standardized testing, the district's Benchmark Assignments and periodic benchmark tests required students to demonstrate individual knowledge and test-taking abilities. They could not ask for help on tests, and only teachers and tutors were allowed to help them write essays. Federal and state accountability requirements counted only individual scores, an approach to assessment that ignores the much greater achievements that multilingual students are able to do when they share their knowledge in collaboration with other students.

## Conclusion

I cannot tell from these three days of data whether the students learned to identify the literary elements in catalog poems well enough to write a passing Benchmark Assignment essay or score as proficient on the year-end standardized tests, whether they understood enough about the differences between primary and secondary sources to analyze the story of the Kennedy assassination, or whether they actually learned about symbolism in the *Odyssey*, but their participation indicates that they were certainly engaged during class time. The multilingual boys who shared their poems with each other had fun playing with language. Jasmin, an English learner, received one-on-one scaffolding from Mr. Brown that made the textbook's academic register question about tone accessible. She and Susana also realized that they already had some knowledge of Greek mythology from prior experiences. Other students used Mr. Brown's individualized assistance as they answered textbook questions or wrote their own poems.

Federal policy intends for all students' learning needs to be considered when schools plan for instruction, but placing heavy emphasis on standardized test performance hurts multilingual students' learning opportunities. Curriculum packages that emphasized standards-based test preparation assumed that the texts, comprehension questions, and writing assignments would be appropriate for all. That assumption ignores the evidence presented in this study that a packaged curricular program works best when a skilled teacher determines how to teach it based on his knowledge of his students. In 2014, the majority of US states and territories adopted a shared policy called the Common Core State Standards, which integrates reading and writing into more complex critical thinking skills across disciplines (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015). Scholars question, however, whether the new standards will offer greater equity for students and teachers or whether they will replicate the NCLB-era emphasis on publisher-directed curricular programs and reductive perspectives on knowledge and language (Valdés, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014). Future research should consider how teachers are using, adapting, and differentiating literacy instruction in response to the new standards and curricular materials.

Microethnographic discourse analysis can reveal ways that local events are connected to broader levels of policy (Bloome & Carter, 2014).

For the present, this study shows the importance of allowing teachers flexibility in adapting curricular requirements to reach all their students, as well as supporting new teachers to develop an understanding of how to extend beyond curricular requirements in support of real-world literacy learning. With leeway in both time and outcomes, teachers can use their deep knowledge of their students to present material from multiple approaches to engage students and help them access grade-level language and content. Teachers need to get to know multilingual students as learners and adapt required materials to individual needs, while also supporting their ability to collaborate and write for real audiences.

As this study demonstrated, a teacher can teach reading and writing to the standards, using a mandated textbook-based curriculum, and still differentiate instruction for individual students. The curricular requirements, however, did restrict Mr. Brown's teaching and caused him to emphasize certain aspects of a day's activities over others, sometimes to the detriment of multilingual students' learning possibilities. Reading and writing instruction in his mainstream English classes were strongly shaped by education policies that were not explicitly language policy, but that determined students' opportunities to learn language for literacy.

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### Notes

1. This policy changed with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2014.
2. In this paper, *multilingual* refers to students who speak more than one language or dialect. Only some multilingual students in this study were still classified by the school as English learners, while others had been redesignated as English fluent, and still others had never been so labeled but spoke multiple languages.
3. All names of people and places have been changed.
4. Redesignation was based on students' scores on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) and the annual California Standards Tests (CST), plus school grades and teacher recommendations. Redesignated students had been classified as English learners earlier in their schooling but had since met assessment qualifications to be considered fluent English proficient.
5. Sheltered instruction addresses teaching both academic content and language to students classified as English learners. Although meant to cover the mainstream curriculum, it often simplified the content, providing English learners with a less academically challenging program of study (Fu, 1995).
6. *Fluent English Proficient* indicates that parents reported speaking a language other than English at home, but testing determined the student sufficiently proficient in English to

- access school curriculum without additional language support.
7. The Diverse Adolescent Literacies Project was funded by the Spencer Foundation and the University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute.
  8. Transcription conventions are listed in Appendix B.

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## Appendix A

### *Literacy Events and Location of Knowledge and Power*

Activities analyzed in this article indicated with underlining.

#### *January 11: Much use of the textbook*

Literacy Event	Activity	Location of knowledge			Outside		
		Official			S: prior knowledge	T: connect with students' experiences	T or S: additional resource
<b>Agenda: study flashcards, review with partner, take quiz, then do Cornell notes on reading</b>	1: Review definitions from book; banter with words from unit	p. 564				Banter on S conversation	
	2: Why learn vocab; setup for post-quiz reading	pp. 578-579	MCOS	Vocab: standards			
	3: Taking quiz	Quiz text from story					
<b>Vocabulary Quiz; Silent reading when done; quizzes returned</b>	4: Individual directions for quiz	pp. 578-579				(May be individualized)	
	5: Quiz return and offer to retake			Vocab: standards			
<b>Talk about primary and secondary sources with definitions from book and examples from school fight</b>	6: Definition of primary and secondary sources	p. 578 and T.Ed.	MCOS <sup>3</sup>	Reading 2.5			
	7: <u>Extended examples related to school issue (fights)</u>					<u>Example from real-life interest</u>	
<b>Teacher-led preview of reading: author, genre, photo, story of assassination, video, begin Evaluation Q1</b>	8: IRE preview	p. 580-581	MCOS				
	9: Students contribute stories about JFK assassination 10: T suggests students watch Zabruder video				Things seen on TV, internet		YouTube video
<b>Wrap-up: HW, agenda for tomorrow; return to Eval Q1; repeat HW and agenda</b>	11: HW and agenda	p. 580+					
	12: Effective first sentences	Q1 p. 580		BA rubric			

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Holt refers to the Holt Literature and Language Arts textbook (Beers & Odell, 2003); <sup>2</sup>On Course refers to

the planning guide in the Holt Literature and Language Arts series (*On Course*, 2003); <sup>3</sup>MCOS=Minimum Course of Study, indicated in the *On Course* planning guide.

*January 30: Some use of the textbook*

Event	Activity	Location of knowledge					
		Official (policy)			Outside		
		Holt: Textbook	Holt: On Course	District or State	S: prior knowledge	T: connect with students' experiences	T or S: additional resource
<b>Agenda for day</b>	1: Get out textbooks	p. 412					
<b>Review: catalog poem; New: extended metaphor; Instructions: writing catalog poem</b>	2: IRE review and intro to new type of poem	p. 412, 435	[NOT in MCOS]	Reading 3.11			
	3: Scaffold with Jasmin	p. 412 #2		Writing 2.2c			
	4: Scaffold "apostrophe"	p. 412					
	5: Scaffold poem writing	p. 412 and "Woman Work"					
<b>Individual and pair work; teacher checks in with students and reads poems</b>	6: Scaffold with Jasmin	p. 412 #4		Writing 2.2c			
	7: Scaffold poem-writing					Activities you do every day	
	8: T praise of poems					T praises skill	
	9: Check in with Jasmin	p. 435					
	10: Sharing poem						S poem
<b>Wrap-up: agenda for tomorrow and next week; announcement of essay</b>	11: Agenda	p. 435		Benchmark Assignment			

*March 14: Little use of the textbook*

Event	Activity	Location of knowledge					
		Official			Outside		
		Holt: Textbook	Holt: On Course	District or State	S: prior knowledge	T: connect with students' experiences	T or S: additional resource
<b>Agenda: pick up grammar packets</b>	1: Collect grammar packets	HOs from Holt					

<b>Grammar Review</b>	2: Sentences on whiteboard	Handbook pp. 57-61		T-created sentences
<b>Grammar Quiz</b>	3: Quiz	Quiz format from T materials, similar to Handbook ex.	Part of quiz similar to BA quiz on sentence parts	
<b>Casual talk as quizzes turned in</b>	4: Agenda for activity, week			T-created activity
<b>Orientation to new activity:</b>	5: Directions for activity			Instructions on WB
<b>Instructions, symbols, more instructions, partners select characters</b>	6: Commentary on characters			T-created info (internet)
<b>Pairwork; teacher checks in with pairs</b>	7: Write down notes		Literary response standards 3.3 and 3.4	T-created info (internet)
	8: Poseidon and symbols		<u>Movie: Little Mermaid</u>	
	9: The Odyssey	Holt Odyssey		
	10: Zeus			T-created info (internet)
	11: Poster design		S poster as model	
<b>Wrap-up: clean up, agenda for tomorrow</b>	12: Agenda			T-created info (internet)

## Appendix B

### *Transcription Conventions*

?	High rise (questioning tone)
,	Low rise (continuing tone)
//	Latching (utterance immediately following previous)
CAPS	Emphasis
'xxx'	Quoted text
[1]	Pause (in seconds)
[xxx]	Additional explanation
XXXXX	Undecipherable utterance

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