Translating Competence in a Critical Bilingual Classroom

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This article describes the work of a bilingual educator who “translated” herself from a teacher working within the deficit structures of bilingual education to an individual who worked creatively within those structures so that she and her students could resituate themselves in positions of authority and value. This one-year study of a bilingual classroom included discourse analysis of translation. This study offers educational anthropologists an understanding of translation as both a revision and an invitation to communicate through and beyond language. [bilingual education, U.S. Latinos, power, translation, discourse]

I had the following conversation with two bilingual faculty members at Plena Middle School (all names are pseudonyms) where I carried out an ethnographic study of a bilingual learning community in the U.S. urban Northeast.1 Ms. Susana and Ms. María were discussing a third Latina teacher, Ms. Marcela, who had just stormed out of the room after teaching a Shakespeare unit to Ms. María’s ninth-grade students. Ms. Marcela, a Latina, worked in the mainstream “English” track and rarely spoke Spanish. Ms. Marcela had been invited to teach one period of English literature in the new ninth-grade bilingual program, but less than one month into her assignment, she decided to discontinue her involvement in the bilingual program, citing students’ behavior as cause for her decision. The following exchange illuminates Ms. María’s orientation toward the bilingual education of her Latina/o students.

Ms. Susana: Ella es anglotada. [She is “anglotada.”]
Author: Angotada [sic]? What’s that?
Ms. S: (Ges on her knees and mimics a bow.) Es agringada [She’s gringa-ized]. She doesn’t want to be Latin! She doesn’t want to have anything to do with the bilingual program, that’s her problem!
Ms. María: I mean look at the things she’s teaching! You teach what you want to teach but you have to teach what will work for them, what will speak to their lives.

For Ms. María, bilingual education was not just about translating the English language curriculum into Spanish but also about translating the culture of the curriculum to conform with students’ identities and interests. Similarly, when Ms. Susana rephrased and translated a word like “anglotada” in our interview, she was doing more than translating information from one language to another. Rather, her translation conveyed information about identities, ideologies, and relationships between

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speakers, hearers, and translated material. In this transcript Ms. Susana and Ms. María translated through words, gestures, and examples both the referential and ideological meaning of "anglotada," conveying their stances as "full Latinas," as evidenced by support for bilingual education and culturally relevant curriculum choices.

As anyone who has experienced working in more than one language can attest, translation involves more than the autonomous, technical conversion of words from one language to another. Rather, the act of translation is deeply connected to one's cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic ways of being in the world, requiring "a holistic re-rendering informed by previous renderings and responsive to the context in which the new version is being produced" (Cook-Sather 2001:181). Illuminated in the transcript above and throughout ethnographic fieldwork for this study of a bilingual learning community, Ms. María personified a more expansive definition of what it means to be—literally and figuratively—a translator. She and her supporters, including Ms. Susana, not only translated curriculum into the Spanish language but also translated themselves from teachers who worked within the deficit structures imposed on bilingual education in the United States to individuals who worked creatively within those structures, so that they and their students could resituate themselves in positions of authority and value.

Despite tremendous setbacks and controversy, bilingual programs that aim to maintain and develop students' heritage languages, such as the one at Plena Middle School, continue to operate in many parts of the United States. Where bilingual programs do not exist, there are often bilingual individuals at the district or school site whose explicit responsibility is to translate material and information between English and the home language of students and their families. In this article I analyze how one bilingual teacher with a critical empowerment ideology for teaching put her politics into practice during a translation event in the classroom.

To illustrate Ms. María’s practice as a figurative translator of bilingual education from a deficit to an empowerment orientation, I focus on a literal translation event that occurred in her classroom. As is the case with most teachers, English-monolingual outsiders frequently entered Ms. María’s classroom to share information with her students. Through the lenses of ethnography and discourse analysis I examine how Ms. María, her students, and the visiting monolingual English-speaking administrator, Mr. Feldman, interactively fractured norms of discourse between interlocutors of unequal status. This study of changing discourse rules within the context of a single translation event is significant to the goals of educational anthropology as the study illuminates the complexity and fluidity of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic relationships in moment-to-moment interaction.

Many studies have located linguistic practices in bilingual encounters as parts of larger systems of social inequality. Less common are analyses of moments of "reimagination" in which discourse is examined for its potential for resistance rather than containment (Niranjan 1994:36). In this article I analyze how Ms. María, her students, and Mr. Feldman communicated about high school requirements in an uncommon, critical, and hopeful way, where roles between translator, information provider, and information receiver were more fluid than static, more empowering than disempowering. This microanalysis contributes an expansive definition of translation as revision and invitation that could be used in the preparation of all teachers who may or may not speak more than one language.
Translating Words and Access

Translation in the United States has received pedagogical and policy attention as schools increasingly serve and are held accountable to children and families who speak a language other than English at home. Where language rights are concerned, translation is considered essential for communicating content, ensuring that non- or limited-English-speaking parents and community members have equal access to school participation and involvement (Delgado-Gaitan 1990). The orientation to translation as a right suggests that one possible solution to Spanish speakers' disenfranchisement may be through the conversion of English content into Spanish, what the 1968 Bilingual Education Act was designed to address (see Santa Ana 2004:90; Nieto 2000:6).

However, scholars in language education have long recognized that recoding from one language to another itself does not necessarily imply equal access to information (Gee 1996; Street 1993). Rather, translation involves interpretation and revision as words are situated in context. Who is translating what, how, to whom, and to what end? These are questions that must be asked in order to contextualize translated events from written standardized tests and school newsletters to parent meetings and bilingual programming decisions.

When educating children for whom English is a second or additional language, there has been great debate concerning if, when, and how to use languages other than English. In terms of translation of curriculum, the debate has centered on the separation or concurrent use of English and an additional language (Irujo 1998). Arguments for language separation vary. Some advocate a sink-or-swim immersion approach to accelerate English language acquisition. Others more concerned with bilingual development believe separation will safeguard time in the school day for the non-English language. Proponents of the concurrent approach argue that language separation is unnatural and discourages students' full comprehension, self-expression, and development of self-esteem. Regardless of whether separation or concurrent use of more than one language prevails in the classroom, questions remain about how bilingual language use functions interactionally as "an instrument for forming and transforming social order" (Ochs 1996:416). That is, regardless of program structures and language policies, what do bilingual educators do interactionally with students and other colleagues to revision themselves as those with voice, power, and potential for change? Additionally, how do educators create possibilities for bilingual students to do the same?

Translating Roles, Relationships, and Power

Translation is a process of indexicality in which, from moment to moment, words collaboratively shape who we perceive ourselves and others to be. Language choice and switches between languages and the indexes (e.g., pronouns, gender and deference markers, accent, and deixis) used in each code also point to social facts about participating speakers and hearers (i.e., their competency, group membership, oppositional alignment, conformity, and so on; Hanks 2001:119–120; Silverstein 1976). Analysis of indexical discourse markers such as pronouns, conversational turn-taking, and language choice in translation illuminates how referential as well as ideological meaning can be communicated simultaneously. There are many studies concerning the way indexical modes in English link speech to wider systems of
inequality in social life (Silverstein 1976). Although there are several studies focused on the interactional effects of discourse markers in cross-cultural communication, few analyze speech events using more than one language. For example, a study by Larson and Irvine (1999) focused on how a white teacher and her African American students used pronouns such as “we,” “you,” “that,” “him,” and “it” in ways that interactionally reinforced students’ exclusion and alienation during a lesson on Martin Luther King, Jr. Keogh (1997) also studied the use of pronouns in the written and spoken communication between principals of three Australian secondary schools and the parent communities and found that principals used singular first-person “I” and plural “we” in ways that constituted their authority and the superordinate position of the schools over the families served. Focused on turn-taking, Duff’s (2002) ethnography of communication in a Canadian social studies classroom found that despite (or perhaps because of) the Anglo teacher’s inclusive, multicultural intentions, the non-native English-speaking (NNES) Asian students were marginalized during classroom conversation and described in interviews as socially limited by their native English-speaking peers.

Because of their explicit focus on language choice as well as language use, translation events provide unique opportunities to render visible social processes of exclusion or inclusion between interlocutors of unequal status. Davidson (2001) carried out one such study focusing on interactions between English-speaking doctors, NNES patients, and medical translators. Despite the fact that these encounters should have taken substantially more time than those between doctors and English-speaking patients, they did not. Davidson (2001) found this was so because interpreters failed to translate important negotiations of status, identity, and voice between doctors and NNES patients for the sake of accuracy and expediency (Davidson 2001:171). In this way, interpreters acted as gatekeepers, protecting physicians from being challenged and allowing them to uphold unethical institutional practices that denied NNES patients’ voice and agency (Davidson 2001:176–177). In sum, translation intended as a service may actually have furthered NNES patients’ alienation, isolation, and voicelessness.

These studies of discourse in cross-cultural encounters highlight the ways in which teachers, principals, and translators contribute to the marginalization of cultural and linguistic minorities. Each study illuminates how macro-level societal inequities are constituted in or by micro-level interaction between interlocutors of unequal status or power. Missing are studies that highlight moments of “reimagination” in which discourse is analyzed for its potential for resistance rather than containment (Niranjana 1994:36). The present study looks at moments in a single translation event when rules for discourse between bilingual students, a bilingual teacher, and a visiting monolingual English-speaking administrator were disrupted and new embodiments of translation were momentarily achieved.

The Study and Context

I began this study with the assumption that bilingual language practices are influenced by the social context in which they occur and the ways in which social variables (gender, class, culture, race, ethnicity, and power) intersect to shape inequalities (LeCompte and Schensul 1999:46). This inquiry stems from a critical and social literacies paradigm whereby classroom interaction is understood as situated within
the larger social and political context of local and nonlocal (national, international) communities. These interactions and relationships are intimately connected to the production and distribution of symbolic and material resources that perpetuate or challenge the current social order (Heller and Martin-Jones 2001:12). By spending one year as a participant-observer in Ms. María’s classroom and outside it in students’ homes and in the larger urban community of University City, I documented the micro interactions in this bilingual context that challenged conditions that have perpetuated the socioeconomic and political disadvantage of many members of the U.S. Latina/o community.

This is an ethnographic, interpretive study where the emphasis has been on making visible the “invisibility of everyday life” (Erickson 1986:121). It is beyond the scope of this article to share all I have learned from explorations in this bilingual learning community, but analysis of the critical dimensions of Ms. María’s identity and practice helps to situate and inform the more focused analysis of a translation event that unfolded among Ms. María, her students, and a visiting administrator, Mr. Feldman.

The School

This research took place at Plena Middle School, located in one of the lowest-income areas in University City, also the area of the highest concentration of Latina/o residents (Goode and Schneider 1994). Approximately 95 percent of Plena’s students were from low-income families; 66 percent of the school’s 1,443 students were classified as Latina/o, 32 percent were African American, and 2 percent were classified as either white, American Indian, Asian, or “other”. In contrast, according to the University City School District Profile, only 14.4 percent of Plena’s faculty and staff were Latina/o, 44 percent were white, 40 percent were African American, and 1.6 percent were Asian.

Located at a busy intersection in North University City, Plena for years was the target of mass amounts of graffiti and vandalism. However, in the fall of 1995 the school was relocated to a new building several blocks away on Easter Avenue. The sleek modern design of the new school building, its bold, blue exterior with gold stars, has been referred frequently to as “the Shining Star of Easter Avenue,” just as Puerto Rico is familiarly called the Shining Star of the Caribbean. There were many emblems of Puerto Rican pride throughout the school: Outside on the campus patio there was a large statue of baseball hero Roberto Clemente; inside, a bright pink, blue, and yellow Caribbean mural greeted visitors. Five years after the school was built, the floors and light wood doors still shone like new. Compared to many of the older schools I had visited in University City, each classroom at Plena felt spacious and light, filled with shiny metal chairs and brand-new desks and tables. Despite the new look and feel of the school, many of the same problems from the “old” Plena school still haunted the new one. A high percentage (51.1 percent) of Plena students still scored below the “basic” level in reading compared to local and national scores (40.4 percent and 29 percent, respectively).

However, when scores on the APRENDÁ test, the Spanish-language version of English standardized reading, math, and science tests, were disaggregated, a different picture emerged. Students in the bilingual program who took the APRENDÁ test surpassed their peers in reading, math, and science as measured by the Normal Curve Equivalent. This notable difference in test score outcomes was due in part to
Plena’s nationally recognized bilingual program. The higher scores indicated the program was making a difference for bilingual students taking the APRENDA test who came from the same low-income circumstances as their peers taking the equivalent Stanford-9 test. In fall 1999, Plena’s bilingual program was selected by the U.S. Department of Education as the top middle school bilingual program in the state and among the top in the nation (Plena News 1999). One of Plena’s bilingual teachers, Ms. María, the focal teacher in this study, was credited with having turned the bilingual program around when she arrived in 1995. Ms. María’s leadership changed the bilingual program structure from a transitional model to a 50-50 maintenance-developmental model in which bilingual students were encouraged to develop both Spanish and English separately through content-area instruction in different languages (mathematics, technology, and literature in Spanish; social studies, science, and literature in English). In addition to teaching, Ms. María became the school’s bilingual program coordinator. Ms. María’s classroom was the primary setting for this study.

Data Collection

I observed the lives of Ms. María and her ninth-grade students and I participated in them. I began the 1999–2000 school year by visiting the classroom once a week for a half or full day, taking notes about everything from how students were dressed and where Ms. María placed her desk (she moved it five times during the year) to how students interacted around reading and writing and how Ms. María carried out whole- and small-group instruction. I recorded notes in a hand-sized field journal I thought was discreet until October when one of the students described me as “the teacher with the little notebook.” By the end of the school year, one student, Marilyn, described me to a visitor as “the biggest student in the class.” This is an appropriate way to describe my role. I spent the year with my notebooks, tape recorder, and occasionally a video camera in Ms. María’s bilingual classroom with her 28 students, learning about them and with them, and about ninth-grade literature, literacy, algebra, and world history.

In all I recorded over 40 hours of classroom discourse, 10 hours of interview data with students and Ms. María, and hundreds of pages of field notes. I also collected numerous artifacts, including student work, classroom assignments, and school newsletters. During my fieldwork Ms. María’s students interacted with a number of other adults at school. In the first year of this program Ms. María aimed to be the primary Spanish language arts teacher and to have students learn other content matter from her colleagues. She had varying success sending students to colleagues to take mathematics, social studies, and English language arts. For many months during the year she taught all core subjects except science and had adult visitors teach various subjects in her classroom. She also invited adult administrators to her classroom to help clarify distinctions between the middle school program and the new ninth-grade track they were just beginning. One afternoon in November, Mr. Feldman, a white, monolingual English speaker in his fifties who worked as an assistant principal, came to deliver an institutional message about appropriate and creditworthy behavior in the high school setting. Out of numerous exchanges between Ms. María, her students, and “outsiders”, administrators (such as Mr. Feldman), visiting teachers in the bilingual middle school program (such as Ms. Susana), and teachers who
worked in the mainstream English track (such as Ms. Marcela), I analyze the speech event with Mr. Feldman. Despite having collected limited data on Mr. Feldman, I believe this exchange best illuminates the multifaceted, interactional dimensions of Ms. María as a critical, bilingual educator and “translator” in the literal and figurative sense.

**Researcher as Translator**

In this study I experienced the classic tension between insider and outsider. I was alternatively perceived as a teacher and student, a “gringa” fluent in Spanish, several years younger than Ms. María and older than her students, and found variably in Ms. María’s classroom, at a faculty meeting, or getting my nails done in the community with a student and her mother. I am the figurative translator of events in this classroom and the literal translator of transcripts in both Spanish and English.

In terms of selection, an ethnographer of education chooses what elements of one’s study illuminate larger concerns. Translation was not the original focus of this study on the larger culture of bilingual learning communities, but through analysis, I found exchanges with monolingual outsiders to be significant. The translation event with Mr. Feldman was one of several that illustrated Ms. María’s bilingual advocacy on a discoursal level. My selection of data has identified the richness of a focused case as well as possibilities for greater breadth in future analyses of translation discourse.

I also have selected my own translations of Spanish. When Spanish was used, I checked my transcripts with a native Spanish-speaking assistant; however, ultimately I am responsible for all transcriptions and translated material. Inevitably, these transcripts include varying degrees of interpretation, revisioning, and remaking, in order to present text and analysis to the reader.

**Ms. María’s Room 101**

Upon entering Ms. María’s ninth-grade classroom, Room 101, I immediately noticed the affectively warm environment. The classroom had an intimate, homey feel, with carpets, couches, and pillows. Some students worked at round and rectangular-shaped tables with four to five students each. Others sat in the book area where there were two couches, many multicolored pillows, a round table, and tall bookshelves. Still other students were sitting at one of the nine computer workstations that lined the back wall of the room. Many of the computers were connected to the Internet and one of three printers. In addition, one computer was connected to the television screen and was used for lessons. Ms. María also had a workstation complete with a new computer, fax machine, modem, and outside telephone line. This highly technological and learner-centered workspace was remarked upon by many who entered the classroom environment.

Ms. María’s bilingual classroom was recommended to me by a district administrator, who often referred to her as one of the district’s best bilingual teachers. It also was recommended because it represented a successful, grassroots effort to expand developmental bilingual education from the middle school into the high school grades; such programs are rare at the secondary level. The bilingual program was targeted at Spanish-dominant newcomer students as well as students who had acquired oral fluency in English but lacked grade-level literacy skills in either language. Twenty-eight students and their parents supported the ninth-grade bilingual program to remain
within the Plena Middle School building because there were no bilingual services at the local high school. The high school’s reputation for being dangerous also contributed to families’ decisions to enroll their ninth graders at Plena.

Twenty-five of Ms. María’s 28 students were from Puerto Rico, and the class as a whole represented approximately one-third of those who had graduated from the eighth-grade bilingual program in 1999. Several of their classmates had graduated from middle school with sufficient command in English literacy to be placed in charter or magnet schools throughout the city. Others went to the all-English program at the local high school. Many of these 28 students might also be called “at-risk,” a term coined out of the deficit perspective that views low-income minority students as more prone to academic failure. Although I do not agree with the deficit perspective, I do believe these students were exposed to a disproportionate amount of emotional stress and physical danger, including teen pregnancy, rape, and gang activity.

María Bendler-Hernandez

The creation of a new ninth-grade program must be understood within the context of Ms. María’s revolutionary life. María Bendler-Hernandez, “Ms. María” to her students, was born in Nicaragua where she received all her primary and secondary education, acquiring English as a second language. Her parents first sent her to University City in the 1960s to obtain her bachelor’s degree at Tower University, but also, Ms. María explained, because her parents did not want her to become involved in the burgeoning Sandinista revolution. Ultimately, against her parents’ wishes, Ms. María returned to Nicaragua and became an active participant in the Sandinista revolution as a journalist and educator. In 1991 she returned to University City to complete her journalism degree. She decided to give up journalism and return to teaching in order to have more time with her husband and children. She then received a master’s degree in education from another local university and began teaching at Plena in 1995.

From the time she arrived at Plena, María was credited with having turned the bilingual program around. She was both a teacher and bilingual program coordinator but these were only two of many different roles she assumed throughout the day. Ms. María was also a researcher, a teacher educator, a journalist, a grant writer, a curriculum writer, and a technology expert, and she acquired many other titles on a day-to-day basis. Many weeks during this study Ms. María took trips to the downtown school district office to advocate for her students or protest against harmful policies such as those that determined assessment policy or when a student should be expelled. One weekend I drove to University City’s downtown center and saw Ms. María on a megaphone at the head of a large group of protesters. She and others were protesting U.S. funding for the School of the Americas (SOA), said to have trained the most notorious human rights abusers in Latin America (SOA 2005). Though Ms. María left Nicaragua at the end of the Sandinista government, her revolutionary and activist spirit remained very much alive.

Translating Competency and Incompetency

A translator can provide access to oral or written discourse in one language to another. Depending on the orientation of the translator or translating institution, the act of translation can frame recipients as either competent or incompetent, as those who know and have the right to conversion from L1 to L2 or as those who need and
require costly and time-consuming services. In the first section that follows, I describe how teachers and students in Ms. María’s ninth-grade bilingual class worked within and against a macro structure that framed bilingual students as incompetent and bilingual education as a compensatory program to remediate students’ language deficiencies. The second section shows how Ms. María set the stage for students to realize their own power through bilingual discourse.

Translating a Compensatory Model to an Empowerment Model

The effort to extend the Plena middle school bilingual program to include a high school grade was successful in part because of the convincing argument that bilingual students would fail in the local high school where appropriate bilingual instructional services were not available for bilingual youth. However, observations and interviews with students about self-perceived ability levels revealed a complicated array of speaking, reading, writing, and listening abilities in Spanish and English. Only a fourth of the students in Ms. María’s class self-labeled as Spanish dominant in speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Others had more complicated proficiency levels in different domains. Mirella, for example, was a student who had recently arrived from Puerto Rico and claimed Spanish dominance:

No sé poner las conversaciones bien así, me siento más en español, hablando español porque mi mamá siempre está hablando español, ella no sabe inglés. . . . domino más el español.
[I don’t know how to have good conversations so that’s why I feel more in Spanish, talking in Spanish because my Mom is always talking in Spanish and she doesn’t know English. . . . I’m better in Spanish.]

Other students, such as Beatriz, said they were English dominant and preferred to use English to complete written assignments. Beatriz explained: “I choose English ‘cause it’s easier, ‘cause I don’t know that much Spanish.” Another student, Angela, said, “Since I don’t know how to read a lot of Spanish, . . . I have to pay a lot of attention to it.” Despite several students’ claims to English dominance, many of these same students, such as Catí, felt acquiring Spanish literacy allowed them to realize their full academic potential. In the following excerpt Catí explained the complicated relationship between proficiency, literacy, and place of birth.

If I learn how to write in Spanish I think I could write in Spanish more than I could write in English because I understand more Spanish than English. It’s weird because I been living here all my life and I understand more Spanish when somebody speaks it to me than English.

Thus, although ostensibly designed to give students access to high school content material in Spanish as they acquired academic English proficiency, in practice this bilingual ninth-grade classroom served students who had varying arrays of Spanish and English competency. This design was not accidental. Ms. María had a vision for a gifted rather than compensatory bilingual program, a privilege rather than a remediation. However, she also recognized she had to “sell” the program to administrators within a compensatory model, one that aimed to translate the standard curriculum and help students “catch up” in English rather than nurture full biliteracy. Ms. María explained:

The reason why this [program] was approved was because students needed the bilingual program so if students don’t need the bilingual program they don’t have to be here, alright?
The fact whether we do it [for Spanish- and English-dominant students] later on de facto, that's a different story. But she [the principal] is never going to accept it because it'd be politically incorrect.

When I asked the school administrator about a gifted bilingual program, she stated that such a program would be seen as unnecessary and therefore could not be supported. Thus, the school district and principal approved the program to support students who would otherwise fail in English-only classrooms.

Official sanctions against a gifted bilingual program did not deter Ms. María. With each struggle that affected her program goals or her students’ lives (e.g., teen pregnancies, child abuse, or a student’s arrest for carrying a weapon to school), Ms. María modeled perseverance and used literacy to cultivate a sense of possibility and agency. She often would roll her eyes and repeat a proverb to describe the bilingual struggle. “It’s swimming against the current,” she would say in English, or “La lucha nunca termina” [the fight never ends]. She would warn her students in Spanish not to “tocar los violines” or “to play a sob story” over their hardships. Rather, she advised students (often in English) “to use their disadvantage as their advantage.”

Ms. María’s students perceived her as an advocate, as someone unafraid to fight for bilingual language rights. This was apparent in the ways she approached her curriculum and the way her students described Ms. María. For example, when Ms. Marcela went back to teaching eighth-grade English instead of teaching Romeo and Juliet to Ms. María’s ninth graders, Ms. María began her approach to Romeo and Juliet by first showing West Side Story, a film about a rivalry between Puerto Rican and white street gangs. She was unafraid to use literature to address taboo subjects such as gang membership, racial discrimination, and rape, because she believed these topics were relevant to students’ survival. She began writing and publishing her own curriculum, including a unit on Tosca that she connected to a unit on a Puerto Rican novel by Rosario Ferré (1995) titled La Casa en la Laguna (The House on the Lagoon). Her curriculum engaged students at a high level of literary discourse that was also culturally relevant and appealing to students’ interests and concerns.

In these ways Ms. María was always engaging in what Cook-Sather (2001) refers to as “translation” on multiple levels: translation between English and Spanish, translation between texts and students’ lives, and the translation of self through her own and students’ engagement in translating and transforming definitions of bilingualism, bilingual education, and bilingual-Latina/o identity. That Ms. María worked as both literal and figurative translator was made abundantly clear in an interview with one of her students, Wilma. Wilma and I were talking about a mayoral community meeting that took place the night before at the school, in which two English-monomilingual women, unhappy with the lengthy Spanish introduction, shouted to the Latina speaker on the stage: “Can we have that in English?” and “That’s not fair to us!” Wilma responded:

Oh, they [the white women] lucky Ms. María wasn’t there ‘cause Ms. María would have said something, she would have... I know how they must have felt but, like one time, we went to this police thing, right? And Gabi [another student in Ms. María’s class] was talking and Gabi was like in Spanish (to Ms. María), “Missy, pregúntale ¿por qué?” [ask her why? ]—’cause she was talking about the court. “¿Qué hace?” [What does she do?] something. And then Gabi started laughing ’cause you know how they come up with weird things. So, she just started laughing so she [the police officer] was like “Um, excuse me.” The [police officer was] African American, “You don’t come talking Spanish in here, you talk to me in English.”
Oh man! Ms. Maríá was like, "Let me tell you something! They not talking in Spanish because they feel like it. Don't feel like they disrespecting you, okay? Because they don't know English. I'm trying to translate for them!" She [the police officer] felt dumb! She's like, "Sorry." You know she come on like, "You know you talk to me in, um, ay! in English." So she [Ms. Maríá] was like, so the teacher told her, "Excuse me! I'm going to tell you something right now. They not trying to disrespect you." She [the police officer] thought it was disrespect or something.

Wilma's anecdote reveals the impression Ms. Maríá made upon her students as a teacher who modeled the fight for voice and power in interactions with others who might be perceived as superior in social status or authority.

Culturally relevant curricular decisions have become fashionable when talking about critical education practice. This study adds to this work through thick description of an exceptional teacher and an instantiation of her critical ideology in her work as a literal and figurative translator. In this classroom even a fairly common speech event—translation for a visiting monolingual speaker—had a unique twist. This transaction illuminated the possibilities Ms. Maríá realized to more evenly distribute power along decontextualized continua of Spanish–English, monolingual–bilingual, and contextualized–decontextualized language uses (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000). Common practices carried out in uncommon, critical ways are worthy of attention to understand what moments of possibility look like within institutions and programs that might otherwise be considered reproductive rather than transformative.

Translation within an Empowerment Framework

Mid-fall of the first academic semester of the year, Ms. Maríá and the middle school administrators of the new ninth-grade high school program realized the need to be explicit with students about the differences between middle school and high school expectations, despite the fact that the ninth grade was physically located within the same middle school context. One afternoon in November, the assistant principal, Mr. Feldman, came to Ms. Maríá's class to explain the differences. He was both providing new information and warning the students to discontinue the practice of showing up late or not at all to the early-morning first-period science class.

In this interaction Ms. Maríá and her students also insisted on an empowerment model of translation, one in which roles between information givers, information receivers, and those who translated information from one language to another became fluid and shared. The roles were as follows:

1. Information provider (Arty Feldman)
2. Information translator (Ms. Maríá)
3. Information receivers (Ms. Maríá's students)

In the transcript that follows I identify where and how Ms. Maríá shifted from the role as translator, where students shifted from their role as monolingual Spanish information receivers, and where Mr. Feldman shifted from his role as monolingual English information provider. I analyze how Ms. Maríá, Arty Feldman, and Ms. Maríá's students negotiated points of tension regarding competency and power in moment-to-moment interaction.
Ms. María’s Students: Not Just Passive Recipients of Information. Throughout my fieldwork I noted that Ms. María’s students were often active participants in knowledge making. They often worked in small groups or independently on projects of their own choosing within guidelines established by Ms. María. Given students’ independent work habits and mixed language fluencies, it was interesting to observe their behavior early on in the translation event with Mr. Feldman.

Mr. Feldman began to explain that all courses in high school counted for credits that had the same value toward graduation. He compared this to middle school where courses such as art and physical education mattered less than core subjects such as reading and mathematics. In this section of transcript, a Spanish-dominant student, Luis, began to translate.

1 [Mr. Feldman]: Then you have expressive arts like art, gym, music, computers.
2 Ms. María: Después tienen los expressive arts que eran las computadoras, el arte, etc. [Then you had expressive arts like computers, art, etc.]
3 Mr. F: That did not count the same as your reading and math and so on.
4 Luis (Spanish-dominant student): No cuentan el mismo. [They don’t count the same.]
5 Ms. M: Que no tenían el mismo valor. Tú quieres traducir, dale bien. Yo termino. [That don’t have the same value. You want to translate, go ahead, do it. I’ll finish.]
6 L: No, no, no.
7 Ms. M: No please, help me, I’m telling you. Go ahead. Go ahead.
8 Mr. F: In high school every subject is the same. And it’s so you don’t pass or fail grade by grade. You don’t fail ninth grade, you don’t pass ninth grade, you don’t fail eleventh grade, or you don’t fail twelfth grade. Everything is done by credits; that means you need a certain number of courses to graduate high school.
9 Ms. M: Dale Luis. [Go ahead, Luis.]
10 L: (unclear response)
11 Beatriz (student with more balanced Spanish–English bilingual skills): Como en la escuela superior tú no, no es con nota, no tú, no tienes que tener crédito para pasar de grado. [Like in high school you don’t, it’s not with grades, you don’t have to have credit to pass the grade.]
12 Ms. M: Que hay que [So that/]
13 L: Es diferente. [It’s different.]
14 Ms. M: Es diferente porque antes te podían, podían no pasar el octavo, no pasar el séptimo. Aquí no, aquí tú siempre vas a pasar el grado lo que no pasan es la clase. Tienes que preparar esta clase. [It’s different because before you could not pass eighth, not pass seventh. Here it’s not like that, here you always pass the grade, what you don’t pass is the class. You have to pass the class.]

In the above transcript a change occurred in line 5, where the expected translation spot was filled not by Ms. María but by her Spanish-dominant student, Luis. Here, Luis captured the essence of Mr. Feldman’s message, “No cuentan lo mismo,” that courses in the expressive arts did not “count the same” as major subjects in middle school grades. The following lines 7 to 24 revealed negotiation of the roles of translator and information receiver. Ms. María moved from enforcing students’ roles as
information receivers toward accepting students’ roles as fluid and multiple—as able to receive information as well as provide their own translations.

By translating in line 5, Luis indicated his ability to translate for himself and distanced himself from what might have otherwise been an interactionally constructed subordinate role of a dependent monolingual Spanish speaker. However, in demonstrating his bilingual skills he also challenged Ms. María’s role as translator. In lines 7 to 9 she provided an alternative translation that the courses “don’t have the same value” and, using a level of tonal irony, challenged Luis to maintain the role of translator for the interaction. In line 10, Luis declined this role directly (“no, no, no”) and indirectly through silence, respecting the original roles of those involved and thus respecting his teacher. In lines 19 to 22, a more English-proficient student, Beatriz, stepped into the translation role. Ms. María did not challenge her to continue. Rather, she prompted both Luis and Beatriz to expand on the translation. Thus, Luis, invited back into the interaction, rephrased Beatriz’s contribution, “Es diferente” [It’s different], but did not expand on it. In line 25 Ms. María validated Luis’ contribution by repeating it and added the critical missing translation, that high school is different because you don’t pass or fail grades (as occurred in elementary and middle school); you pass or fail credit by credit, class by class.

This exchange established the power of students such as Luis, conveying the independence and bilingual skills of those for whom the translation was originally intended. Ms. María moved from challenging students such as Luis in line 5 to power sharing when she accepted bilingual students Luis and Beatriz taking on more active rather than passive roles in the translation event. In this way she and these two students co-created interactive roles that recognized English language learners’ abilities rather than disabilities. In this instance, translation can be seen as an invitation to interlocutors to engage in the revision of the text of the discourse as well as the text of themselves—who they are as “bilingual students,” “English language learners,” or “gifted” learners. These discursive invitations to revision identity are especially important in the context of bilingual education, where students and teachers often struggle against second-class status vis-à-vis their English-dominant “regular” education peers.

Ms. María: Not Just the Translator. Ms. María’s students were not the only ones to challenge roles in this interaction. Both Ms. María and Mr. Feldman distanced themselves from the constraints of their roles. Having known her students for at least one whole academic year before this interaction took place, Ms. María had a great deal of background knowledge about what students already knew and needed to know about their changed status from middle to high school students. There were several moments in the transcript in which Ms. María distanced herself from the subordinate role of teacher/translator to take on the superordinate role of administrator/information provider—providing new or additional information that Mr. Feldman did not and, at times, could not supply. One example took place at lines 31–58, when Mr. Feldman explained why each class, including art and physical education, carried equal credit importance toward high school graduation.

31 Mr. F: So that number one, every course you take that’s for a year or half year
32 depending on the number of hours is worth one credit. So you can’t afford
33 to mess up in any of your classes because you need the credits to
34 graduate.
Ms. M: Entonces en este caso el, no de, no es posible que, que reprimen, tienen que pasar todas las materias porque si no tienen todos los créditos no te puedes graduar. [So in that case it's not possible to be held back, you have to pass all your classes because if you don't have all your credits you can't graduate.]

Mr. F: Also,/ 

Ms. M: Ustedes [you all]/ 

Mr. F: So/ 

Ms. M: Hold it one second. Ustedes se acuerdan del año pasado por ejemplo que les digan si te reprobaban y no pasaban dos materias principales entonces no pasaban el grado, ¿okay? Podías pasar a noveno grado aún cuando perdieron una materia, ¿okay? Pero en este caso si tú no tienes los 23.5 cursos de crédito, no te puedes graduar de high school. Vas a tener que tomar el curso y tomar el curso hasta que lo pases, hasta que ya. [You all remember last year, for example, when they told you that if you failed, if you didn't pass two main subjects then you weren't going to pass the grade, okay? You could pass to ninth grade even if you lost one subject, okay? But in this case if you don't have the 23.5 credits, you're not going to graduate high school. You're going to have to take the course and take the course until you pass it.] 

Mr. F: In the last year we have, you could still fail one subject, one major subject and pass to the next grade. 

Ms. M: That's what I did. 

Mr. F: Oh, is that what you did? Okay. 

In line 43, Ms. María stopped the traditional role exchange by saying in English, “Hold it one second.” At this point she addressed the students directly in Spanish, providing background information about what she knew her students were familiar with from their time together the previous year. In line 55, Mr. Feldman unknowingly translated into English what Ms. María had just said to the students in Spanish. Ms. María interrupted him in line 57 and Mr. Feldman accepted this change in role: “Oh, is that what you did? Okay.” While maintaining her role as teacher, Ms. María distanced herself from a passive role to one that was more active, challenging Mr. Feldman’s superordinate administrator status. Perhaps she also distanced herself from an orientation toward students as those who “mess up” (line 33). 

In the following lines 59 to 71, Ms. María began by translating Mr. Feldman’s message directly but again broke with this role to mitigate the politically sensitive issue of competency and power, clarifying that all students, not just these bilingual students, needed four years of English:

Ms. M (translating Mr. Feldman in line 55): Por ejemplo, ustedes necesitan aprobar 4 años de inglés. [For example, you all need to pass 4 years of English.] 

Mr. F: You're going to have to repeat it and repeat it and repeat it until you pass it. 

Ms. M: Bueno, no ustedes, todo el mundo necesita cuatro años de inglés aunque el inglés sea tu idioma pues, no inglés como segunda lengua, cuatro años de inglés tienen que tomar, entonces tienes que haber pasado cuatro años de inglés y si te reprimen un año, tienes que repetir. Lo vas a tener que repetir, repetir hasta que pases 4 créditos de inglés. [Well, not just you all, everybody needs four years of English even if it’s in your language, you know, not English as a second language. You have to take four years of...}
In line 63 above, Ms. María again became an information provider before translating Mr. Feldman's message, which, without clarification, might have resulted in confusion. Ms. María made clear that when Mr. Feldman talked about needing four years of English he meant all students—native and non-native speakers of English—not only those who needed English as a second language. Mr. Feldman shifted from English-monolingual information provider to a more supportive role, adding the affirmative “Si” in Spanish.

Mr. Feldman: Not Just a Monolingual English Speaker. As evidenced in line 72 in the previous transcript and elsewhere in this speech event, Mr. Feldman also maintained a fluid role in this interaction, expanding his identity to include moments of bilingual language use and cross-cultural understanding. When Ms. María finished her turn by translating Mr. Feldman's message in line 63 above, he picked up his conversational turn using the Spanish word “Si” as a transition to explain the importance of having the right number of credits in the right places. This is the first occasion in which Mr. Feldman was heard to speak Spanish, albeit briefly.

The second occasion in which Mr. Feldman shifted his identity as a monolingual English speaker was when he acknowledged a message Ms. María delivered entirely in Spanish. I use bold font to highlight where Mr. Feldman followed what Ms. María was saying in Spanish and picked up on the same subject in English without requiring translation.

This year and in every course in high school you will get that and for every course you take the attendance will be given.

Entonces ahora es por cada materia que ustedes toman les dan la asistencia [So now they take attendance for each subject]—(to Mr. Feldman, in English) let me express something there, please. Por ejemplo en el caso de ciencias, de la 7:30 de la mañana, hellowoooh! Aquí hay mucha gente que no han estado ausente todo el día pero que Ms. Jimenez les ha puesto ausentes porque están apareciendo a las 8:00 de la mañana. Okay, entonces, por ejemplo en mi asistencia de lectura, las probabilidades son de que va a ser mejor la asistencia de lectura va a ser mejor que da a a las 8:30 en la mañana que la asistencia de ciencias. Pero cada materia tiene su propia asistencia, okay? [For example, in the case of science at 7:30 a.m. Hellowoooh! Here there are a lot of people that haven’t been absent all day but Ms. Jimenez has marked you absent because you showed up at 8 in the morning. Okay so for example it’s likely that my attendance in reading at 8:30 a.m. is going to be better than sciences. But every subject has its own attendance, okay?]

Okay.

Yeah, I’m glad you mentioned science because particularly in science a lot of you come late or a lot of you don’t go to class and come to Miss María so what happens is you’re marked present for the day but you can be marked absent for the course. You can be in school and not be in class and if you’re not in that particular class you will fail.
In this section of the transcript, similar to the Spanish-dominant student, Luis, Mr. Feldman—despite his monolingual English-speaking identity—demonstrated his ability to, at least partially, understand information in a language he did not dominate. In line 92, Mr. Feldman acknowledged his listening power, possibly picking up on any number of cues such as cognates (e.g., “ciencias” and “science”), the teacher’s name, “Ms. Jimenez,” or the hours of the day spoken in Spanish. In this bilingual setting in a Latina/o section of University City, so-called monolinguals can surprise others and themselves with how much they can “pick up” in a language they might not otherwise claim to understand. The continued study of how, when, and with what purpose English-monolingual teachers and administrators (self-identified or other-identified) make use of non-English languages in U.S. schools is a direction worthy of further investigation.

Finally, the last example illustrates a moment when Mr. Feldman took a risk and spoke a longer phrase in Spanish. It is at this moment where students responded favorably, with some hyperbole, to Mr. Feldman’s use of Spanish.

97  Mr. F:  So it’s muy importante [very important] okay not to screw up one time
98  because all that goes on class by class.
99  Student:  ¡Él, sí habla español! [He does speak Spanish!]
100 Ms. M:  ¿Viste? [Did you see that?]
101 Students:  (laughter)
102 Ms. M:  (laughs) You said “muy importante” and so he say [sic] you talk Spanish!
103 Mr. F:  Oh! Un poco [a little], right? (laughter)
104 Students:  Right!

At the end of the interaction when Mr. Feldman used a brief Spanish phrase, he distanced himself from an entirely English-monolingual identity. Ms. María played a key role here, translating students’ laughter as delight rather than disrespect. Here, “un poco,” a little bit, went a long way in the shift of roles and identities from fixed to fluid, a demonstration of competency, agency, and power rather than incompetence, passivity, and disempowerment.

Conclusion: ¿Y Qué? So What?

The present study has sought to document and describe the mechanisms at work in a translation encounter within the context of a critical bilingual educator’s classroom. I have examined the ways in which Ms. María’s beliefs influenced how she worked with her students and monolingual visitors such as Mr. Feldman. Examination of interactional moves during translation has characterized some of the challenges posed by using more than one language, and the assumed roles and identities associated with using more than one language in school. Neither Ms. María, her students, nor Mr. Feldman were contained by the roles and identities they were presumed to embody, but rather moved beyond them in powerful ways.

As an educational anthropologist I have found it useful to return to my ethnographic data from a year in this classroom and bilingual community to carry out more focused analysis on a single translation event to understand at both the macro and micro level how Ms. María and her students challenged the norms of discourse between interlocutors of unequal status, potentially signaling to themselves and others their full
participation rights in bilingual encounters. This study provides a counterexample to several cross-cultural and translation studies in which language use indexed the further marginalization of minority voices (e.g., Davidson 2001; Keogh 1997). If "classrooms indeed function as a kind of microcosm of the broader social order" (Auerbach 1995:9), then it is important to focus on classrooms that appear to disrupt—if only temporarily—that social order. What did it mean for an educator to be both a literal and figurative translator? How do the actions of Luis, Beatriz, and Mr. Feldman expand the metaphor of teacher as translator? To address these questions in bilingual teaching and learning, the metaphor of "learning to teach as translation" requires an expansive definition including but not limited to duplication, renewal, and revision (Cook-Sather 2001). In conclusion, I highlight two aspects of this definition: translation as revision and translation as invitation. Although my discussion of revision and invitation emerged from this study of a bilingual educator, I believe implications can be drawn for all educators working with bilingual populations.

Translation as Revision

Recognizing the numerous variables that influence success or failure of Latina/o bilingual students, educators such as Ms. Maria have moved beyond the simplistic focus of translating material into students’ dominant language. Although it may be helpful to translate materials and instruction in more than one language, Ms. Maria’s work as a bilingual educator included the revision of materials to make them accessible, engaging, and challenging for her students. Revision is the work of all quality educators: to know one’s students as individuals and members of communities and to revise curriculum to connect what is known to what is unknown. This is made clear through a focus on the “micropolitics” (Pennycook 2001:26) of a translation event between Ms. Maria, her students, and Mr. Feldman. On several occasions, Ms. Maria went beyond duplicating what Mr. Feldman was saying to significantly add and revise information. Ms. Maria did not merely translate an administrator’s information but revised his message to one better suited to her students.

Similarly, Ms. Maria did not merely translate the district’s and principal’s vision for bilingual education, but, rather, she presented a revisioning of bilingual education as a gifted program. Whether one is literally fluent in students’ home languages or not, all educators can be encouraged to acquire the cultural competence necessary to understand their students and revise curriculum accordingly. Critical, multicultural teacher preparation calls for explicit discussion and practice in the revision of institutional messages when messages convey ignorance, dismissal, or disdain toward local needs.

Conceptualizing teaching as revision is only one part of a classroom equation. An educator’s revisioning of herself is one that is in dialogue with others’ revisions—for example, of what it means to be a student, an administrator, an immigrant, or an American citizen. This study examined what it meant to disrupt scripted roles and invite others to actively participate in the revision of roles and responsibilities. Teaching is not only a revision of oneself but also an invitation to others to expand what is possible.

Translation as Invitation

There is considerable need in teacher education to highlight shared responsibility of all educators to invite themselves and others into dialogue despite language difference. Too often monolingual educators rely on translators to communicate
their one-way messages to students and families who speak another language. More emphasis ought to be placed on training students and teachers to assert new possibilities—*invitations* to communicate through and beyond language.

The translation exchange illuminated this invitation: when the act of translation and revision was shared among interlocutors, producing new versions of all participating selves. For example, when Luis and Beatriz interjected their own translations, they repositioned themselves in the conversation from passive recipients to agents in the translation of information and production of shared knowledge. Similarly, Mr. Feldman’s use of Spanish demonstrated a translation of words such as *ciencias* (science) and himself. Because Mr. Feldman picked up on cues in Spanish and interjected a few Spanish words, he re-presented himself as partially and contextually bilingual, and thus students may have read and interpreted him differently.

One might argue that a few words in another language can hardly be enough to shift one’s identity. However, a few words in Spanish alongside humor, spirit, openness, and heart have the potential to disrupt the English *monolingual habitus* (Gogolin 1994) against which speakers of other languages are frequently normed and to equalize the status and power of Latina/o students in U.S. schools. Bilingual teachers all too often feel unfairly burdened by the responsibility of being isolated advocates for their students. Significant in this study is how Ms. María shifted the dynamic during an interaction to create a context in which she, her students, and Mr. Feldman more equally engaged in translations of language and themselves.

As anthropologists, applied linguists, and educators we must strive to understand the potential for social actors to transform cross-cultural communication practices from those that are exclusionary to those that are inclusionary. Further study of how bilingual teachers and students engage in translation is needed to determine the frequency and quality of interactions that equalize participation, status, and power. In the debate over bilingual education, there ought to be less focus on preserving time and resources and more focus on preserving the dignity and humanity of all involved.

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1. Pseudonyms used for adults reflect whether they represented themselves by first name or surname in the school environment.

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