Cultural Modeling: Leveraging Bilingual Skills for School Paraphrasing Tasks

Marjorie Faulstich Orellana
University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Jennifer F. Reynolds
University of South Carolina, Columbia, USA

ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors use and further elaborate a cultural modeling framework to juxtapose two distinct yet analogous literacy practices:

1. The out-of-school practice of translating and interpreting across languages, or “para-phrasing”
2. The cross-disciplinary and school-based practice of paraphrasing or summarizing written texts

Data are from field notes based on two years of ethnographic observations conducted in the homes and classrooms of 18 fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-grade students; the students’ journals about their translation experiences; focus group discussions with the students; audiotapes of para-phrasing interactions that involved written text; interviews with the students’ teachers; and audiotaped process-focused literacy assessments that provided insights on how children read and interpreted two different kinds of texts, putting both in their own words. Through grounded theorizing, the authors first analyze the skills involved in the everyday para-phrasing or translation activities performed by immigrant youth. They then identify analogues between these skills and those required for practices of translation, interpretation, and paraphrasing as they are enacted across disciplines and in an array of discourse practices. Finally, they examine classroom practices to identify points of leverage between home and school practices. The authors contribute to the elaboration of the cultural modeling framework by exploring a set of language and literacy practices that frequently occurs in immigrant communities and yet has been little explored to date, and by considering how schools can better engage the skills of bilingual youths.

To introduce the discursive processes that we will examine in this article, we share the perspectives of fifth- and sixth-grade students as they discussed the challenges of paraphrasing written text, or “putting something in your own words.” (All names are pseudonyms.)

Katrina: Oh my God, I hate that. I hate that a lot. ‘Cause, it, put it in my own words. I don’t get it. [LA Tape #12]

Emilia: Sometimes it feels hard because I, like when I write it I, like sometimes I forget what I’m gonna write about and like, think I might write the wrong thing. [LA Tape #11]

Well I translate for my mom bills, because she doesn’t understand English that much. We take like an hour. But it’s worth it ‘cause she learns a lot of stuff... it’s hard in a way when they want me to translate in the letters that they send, bills, some of the words I don’t understand. It’s hard but it’s OK with me. [JRNL Monique #2]

These same students, and other bilingual youths like them, are often called upon to translate/interpret or “para-phrase” between English and Spanish for their family members. We use the term para-phrasing in this article to refer to oral translations of texts written in English—one aspect of the everyday translation or interpretation work that the children of immigrants do for their families (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003). This kind of para-phrasing, we will argue, is similar in important ways to the school-valued skill of paraphrasing discussed by Katrina and Emilia. Yet when we asked students about their experiences interpreting English texts for their families, most treated these out-of-school translation and interpretation practices as unremarkable. Another student, Monique, wrote matter-of-factly in a journal,
The aim of this article is to identify points of leverage from para-phrasing, as one component of bilingual youths’ largely untapped repertoires of practice, to school literacy practices. In the tradition of cultural modeling (Lee, 2007), we begin with ethnographic research, unpacking what is involved in everyday practices of paraphrasing. We then identify analogous modes of reasoning that are enacted, not in a specific discipline (as has been done in the cultural modeling tradition to date) but in more generalized practices of translation, interpretation, and paraphrasing across academic disciplines. Finally, we extend the cultural modeling framework through an ethnography of school literacy practices. This allows us to identify not only theoretical points of connection between paraphrasing and paraphrasing but also specific ways that the skills involved in paraphrasing can be leveraged in ongoing classroom practices.

Guiding Frames
We situate our project within a tradition of sociocultural research that explores the relationship between language practices in and out of school. There is considerable debate among sociocultural theorists as to whether or how school practices can be better connected to real-world engagements with text and discourse and how schools can accommodate alternative developmental pathways by building upon everyday language skills that are given little room for expression in the classroom. We begin by considering how other sociocultural scholars have examined the bridging of home and school practices.

Ethnographies of Everyday Language Practices
Researchers working within a sociocultural tradition have documented everyday practices in a range of community contexts, family constellations, speech communities, and ethnic groups (e.g., Alim, 2004; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cintron, 1997; Duranti, Ochs, & Ta’asê, 1995; Farr, 2006; González, 2001; Goodwin, 1990; Guerra, 1998; Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Zentella, 1997, 2005). These studies have helped to make clear that all people possess rich repertoires of oral and literate practices and have countered prevailing deficit views of the experiences and capacities of nondominant groups. For example, Cintron (1997) illustrated the verbal dexterity involved in the Spanish-language tradition of álbumes (sexual innuendos), while Goodwin (1990) followed the complex sequential organization of argumentation involved in everyday gossip and storytelling in African American youth culture. In addition, Alim (2004) revealed the flexibility with which African American youths switch style as they move between speakers who vary in terms of their gender, race/ethnicity, and experiences with hip-hop culture. Studies of the various practices that students use in everyday contexts and that document youths’ ability to shift registers, styles, and modes are helpful for countering the tendency to dichotomize home and school, a point that we will take up later in this article.

Some researchers working in this tradition often end their reports with discussions of educational implications. These researchers routinely exhort teachers and schools to recognize, validate, and build upon the linguistic repertoires and literacies that children and families display outside of school. We have done this ourselves in our early explorations of the practice of paraphrasing (Orellana, Reynolds, et al., 2003). Until recently (see, for example, Kinloch, 2005; Morrell, 2008; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002), researchers often offered only minimal specifications for how to connect out-of-school practices to schoolwork. Much early work focused on trying to align home and school practices by calling on teachers to alter the amount of “wait time” they allow between turns in classrooms (Au, 1980; Philips, 1983); the gendered nature of their classroom participation structures (Philips, 1983); the kinds of questions they ask and the manners in which they ask them (Ballenger, 1992); or the degree of explicitness versus mitigation in their delivery of commands (Delpit, 1986). But other scholars countered that school tasks can never be made like out-of-school tasks because they are permeated by the institutional norms, practices, and power structures of school (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Edelsky, 1996). As Street (1993) argued, the inherent cultural logic of school tasks involves the cultivation of students’ metalinguistic awareness that properties of texts can be “entextualized,” that language itself can be objectified due to its inherent structure.

Cultural Modeling
A different way of drawing connections between everyday practices and academic ones is found in the cultural modeling tradition established by Lee (1995, 1997, 2000, 2007). This tradition involves developing a deep understanding of the routine practices that students engage in outside of school, generally through ethnographic and sociolinguistic research in homes and community contexts, and then analyzing disciplinary modes of reasoning to determine the most generative ways of mapping these practices onto academic processes. By identifying commonalities in modes of reasoning rather than differences in the structure, purpose, or goals of home and school tasks, cultural modeling avoids the dichotomization of home and school practices. It highlights the generative role of cultural funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) and the specific ways that one set
of skills can be transformed for use in another setting. Cultural modeling also allows for the emergence of hybrid language and literacy practices and creates space for students to draw on the full repertoire of their linguistic and cognitive skills (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Manyak, 2001).

The cultural modeling framework is a vehicle for identifying substantive ways of connecting everyday language practices to academic skills and for building on the resources of students from nondominant groups whose linguistic skills often go unrecognized in schools. Unfortunately, sociocultural researchers have made very little use of this framework, drawing on it to analyze only a limited set of language practices, disciplinary modes of reading, and communities of practice. Most work in cultural modeling to date has involved the study of literature and has been undertaken with African American speakers of African American English. Lee (1995, 1997, 2000, 2007) has examined the rhetorical skill of “signifying” as it is deployed by many African Americans in the United States today. She detailed the nature, purposes, and varieties of forms that this practice of verbal irony can take and compared it to an array of related tropes used in literature: irony, metaphor, symbolism, and the use of unreliable narrators. Lee (2007) also illuminated common processes used to recognize and interpret signifying in discourse and irony in literature and showed how skills involved in the former interpretive context can be applied in the latter. In addition, Lee (2000) helped students to make more explicit their predominantly tacit knowledge of signifying practices and enabled them to apply this knowledge to the interpretation of literary texts.

Our aim in this article is to apply the cultural modeling framework to a new set of language and literacy practices, one that is common in a different population than that studied by Lee (1995, 1997, 2007). We base our understanding of this set of practices on research with Mexican immigrants living in and around Chicago, Illinois, USA; however, we see these practices, not as an integral part of Mexican culture, but as a response to the circumstances in which immigrants find themselves. We focus on the skills that are required as children of Mexican immigrants negotiate across languages and cultures, skills that may be deployed by children of other immigrant groups as well.

Following the cultural modeling tradition, we first identified a set of skills deployed within these children's everyday language practices of translation/interpretation or paraphrasing. We then contemplated the relationship between these skills and the modes of reasoning used across disciplines in practices of translation, interpretation, summarizing, and paraphrasing. In this sense, our use of cultural modeling differed from other approaches; we attempted to match everyday practices to a mode of reasoning or discursive practice used across academic disciplines, rather than to a disciplinary-specific mode or practice (as in Lee's, 1995, work on English literature).

After identifying analogues between academic and everyday language practices and theorizing how these practices might be better connected, we decided to extend the cultural modeling framework to identify potential points of leverage in existing school practices. We analyzed our classroom data to see the kinds of paraphrasing activities that the children in our study were asked to do in school. We believe that a grounded theorizing approach in the ethnographic tradition best served our inquiry into this largely unexplored area. Moreover, we wanted to expand on and connect with existing teaching practices in addition to building on what young people already do in terms of their language practices.

**Leveraging, Scaffolding, and Transfer**

Like Michaels (2005), we use the term *leverage* rather than more commonly used terms in sociocultural theory, such as *transfer* or *scaffolding.* Just as we do not want to suggest that different kinds of practices can be easily aligned by some mere tweaking of their forms, we do not wish to suggest that the skills involved in one kind of practice transfer automatically or effortlessly to different tasks or that everyday practices merely provide a foundation for the development of “real” skills. Further, scaffolding generally refers to moment-by-moment interactions in which an expert builds on the contributions of a novice; for example, a parent may scaffold a child’s language development during communicative interactions. We refer, instead, to more deliberate efforts to identify aspects of whole practices that can be examined with students while also drawing their attention to how these practices connect with disciplinary constructs and ways of thinking. The everyday practices become a base that can then be expanded on—leveraged or, as Michaels (2005) put it, “recruited as strengths” (p. 137)—in very specific ways toward the development of related but different skills. Differences between everyday and school practices (in their goals and purposes as well as their forms) are acknowledged, as is the fact that the skills displayed in out-of-school settings are not necessarily seen as strengths in school. The goal of leveraging is neither simply to celebrate students’ everyday linguistic virtuosity nor to transfer those skills in a direct way to school tasks but rather to expand students’ abilities to work with the various tools in their linguistic toolkits—the full range of practices that they use in both home and school contexts. Leveraging may simultaneously cultivate hybrid abilities that merge different elements from students’ repertoires of practice as these elements are displayed across contexts, tasks, and relationships. It involves a more deliberate version of the kinds of natural processes that happen as circumstances change and
people adapt their literacy practices to meet the needs of new contexts (cf. Street, 1984).

In the next section, we lay out what we mean by para-phrasing and summarize what we know about the nature of this practice in immigrant communities from our own and others’ research. We underscore how our analyses of this practice led us to consider parallels with the highly valued, academic language practice of within-language paraphrasing of text, and we theorize on the analogous nature of these two practices.

Translating, Interpreting, Para-phrasing, and Paraphrasing

There has been considerable interest in translation processes going back several decades (see, for example, Brislin, 1976; Gerver & Sinaiko, 1978; Gut, 1998; Hickey, 1998; Nida, 1978; Toury, 1995; Tymoczko & Gentzler, 2002; Wadns, 1990) but little empirical work on what translators and interpreters actually do. Much discourse and conversation analysis has largely concentrated on the mediation of conversation and has centered on practices of informal (Baynham, 1993), semiprofessional, community-based, and formal interpreters such as those used in police interrogations (Wadensjö, 1995), courtrooms (Berk-Seligson, 1990; Fenton, 1995), and hospitals (Davidson, 2000, 2001; Wadensjö, 1998).

Within the small body of work on natural translation, a term used by Harris and Sherwood (1978) for “translating done in everyday circumstances by people who have no special training in it” (p. 153), there has been little exploration of the specific demands of the practice. Instead, the focus has been on social processes such as how this practice functions in immigrant communities (Baynham, 1993; Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003; Shannon, 1987; Song, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999) or on its implications for learning and development (e.g., Curry, Perez, De Ment, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Tse, 1996; Valdés, 2002). Children’s practices of interpretation, which have also been called “language brokering” (Tse, 1996), “immigrant children mediation” (Chu, 1999), “informal interpreting” (Cohen, Moran-Ellis, & Smaje, 1999), and “family interpreting” (Valdés, 2002), have been explored mostly through a sociopsycholinguistic lens, centered again on oral interpretations in live communicative contexts.

Breaking with the tradition described above, in our earlier work, which was similar to Baynham’s (1993) work on mode switching, we identified the text-mediated nature of many interpreter-mediated situations and documented the range of texts, genres, and forms that immigrant youths engage with as they translate for their families in everyday situations (Orellana, Reynolds, et al., 2003). We also looked at how children engage in these practices, as well as how children are supported by the adults for whom they translate, and we documented a wide range of translation situations. This in-depth ethnographic work was important for generating theory about how immigrant youths’ linguistic repertoires could be built upon in school.

Our explorations of the literate nature of this practice led us to coin the term para-phrasing and to identify the potential intertextual overlap between it and the common term paraphrasing. We find the term para-phrasing particularly useful for considering analogues between it and the practice of summarizing texts in one’s own words and for highlighting the relationship between the out-of-school practice of providing oral summaries of texts written in English in the family’s home language (one of the many kinds of translation/interpretation activities in which immigrant youths engage) and the school practice of summarizing or paraphrasing written texts. However, to avoid excessive redundancy, we do use the term para-phrasing interchangeably with the more commonly understood terms translate and interpret. Following other literacy researchers in the sociocultural tradition (e.g., Farr, 2006; Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1991), we do not endorse a strict division between the oral and print-based dimensions of this practice (as some scholars attempt to distinguish between interpretation and translation) but rather work with an all-encompassing notion of text.

As we contemplated the parallel processes of paraphrasing and para-phrasing, we recalled Bakhtin’s (1981) arguments about what it means to appropriate the words (i.e., the forms of discourse) and ideas of others, to take a set of words and ideas and express them in “one’s own” words (p. 293). Bakhtin argued that a word “becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (p. 293). However, Bakhtin also suggested that words can never be fully imbued with one’s own intentions because some words are more authoritative than others. Language is imbricated with power relations:

The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher.... Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. It is a prior discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal (p. 342).

In settings where the intentions are dictated by those with more authority (e.g., teachers who tell students what to summarize or adults who decide what children will translate), such appropriation may reflect the challenge revealed in Bakhtin’s (1981) theorizing. Katrina and Emilia’s previously mentioned frustration with
school paraphrasing tasks underscores the challenge inherent in appropriations of this kind. Both students may have been aware of their own positions of relative powerlessness in relation to their teachers and the authority of school texts.

Turning to theoretical discussions of translation, we found that scholars such as Nida (1998) affirmed that practices of translation involve degrees of paraphrase. Thus, paraphrase and translation can denote a range of phenomena from the glossing of specific word meanings to the summation of entire texts both within and across registers and codes. In addition, Nida (1998) noted that translation requires conveying ideas, not just words, and that these ideas are shaped by implicit semantic, grammatical, pragmatic, and ideological dimensions. Ideas also must be appropriately framed within different linguistic registers for different audiences. Moreover, both translation and paraphrasing involve understanding a message and rewording it. In the first case, the rewording is completed across two different languages. In the second, the rewording takes place across two different registers within the same language. Some researchers have referred to practices of translation and paraphrase as semiotic processes of entextualization, in which discourse is excerpted from one context and transformed to fit another (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Silverstein & Urban, 1996).

What this brief review of the translation literature underscores is the impossibility of achieving an ideal paraphrase or paraphrase. Both practices require that the person doing the paraphrasing (or paraphrasing) appropriate another’s ideas and represent them in a different form for a (potentially) different audience. And form is always consequential to meaning. Intertextual and semiotic processes inevitably shape the function of discourses and texts. Thus, when the form of a message changes, meanings are necessarily transformed. This is true even in instances of direct quotation; speakers and authors always display their stance vis-à-vis the reported speech through shifts in footing and/or metalinguistic framing (Goffman, 1974, 1979). However, as Bakhtin (1981) pointed out, reported speech always contains the intentions of more than just its original author or speaker, even before it is re-formed by another: “Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions: it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (p. 294).

Before turning to our method of inquiry, we want to add one final note about the practice we herein refer to as “paraphrasing.” In the reading research literature, there are scant references to this term; indeed, in a perusal of language arts textbooks (e.g., Cooper, 2000; Durkin, 2004; Hennings, 1999), we found no mention of paraphrasing in the indexes. There are, however, frequent references to “summarizing” as a strategy for both building and assessing comprehension. We do not entertain the literature on summarizing here because it is, for the most part, focused on reading comprehension, for example, as one part of reciprocal teaching methods (Palincsar & Brown, 1986). We view summarizing as one aspect of a broader repertoire of practices that include various degrees and kinds of paraphrase.

Method of Inquiry

The data that inform this article were gathered over a two-year period in the homes of child translators, other places in which these children translated and interpreted for their families, and one K–8 Chicago public school that we call “Regan.” This school is located on the northwest side of the city. At the time of this study, it served a population of new immigrants that was 75% Latino (mostly of Mexican origin) and 25% Caucasian (mostly the children of immigrants from Poland). Data include thousands of pages of field notes based on participant observation in the homes and classrooms of 18 youths (6 boys and 12 girls) whom we identified as active translators for their families; transcripts of more than 80 audiotaped translation situations; journal entries written by the youths about their translation experiences; process-focused literacy assessments administered to the case-study youths and a comparison group; interviews and focus groups with these youths where we asked them to discuss their experiences translating and interpreting for their families as well as their experiences paraphrasing at school; and individual audiotaped interviews with the students’ teachers, focused on beliefs and practices regarding literacy instruction.

A team of researchers that included the authors of this article and three assistants conducted the school observations, which are the main focus of the current study. Throughout the spring semester of one year and through the fall semester of the following year, we observed in the fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-grade classrooms of youths whom we had identified as translators. All fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms were self-contained; the seventh-grade teachers taught by subject matter (we observed one teacher who taught reading and another who taught language arts). One of the teachers (Ms. Toman) who taught fifth and sixth grade was from Puerto Rico; she spoke both Spanish and English and taught a classroom that was considered “transitional bilingual.” The other five teachers, Ms. Wallace (fifth grade), Ms. Halliday (fifth grade), Mr. Harris (sixth grade), Mrs. Kowalski (seventh grade), and Mr. Joyce (seventh grade), all taught classes in English. Daughters of immigrants from Poland). Data include thousands of pages of field notes based on participant observation in the homes and classrooms of 18 youths (6 boys and 12 girls) whom we identified as active translators for their families; transcripts of more than 80 audiotaped translation situations; journal entries written by the youths about their translation experiences; process-focused literacy assessments administered to the case-study youths and a comparison group; interviews and focus groups with these youths where we asked them to discuss their experiences translating and interpreting for their families as well as their experiences paraphrasing at school; and individual audiotaped interviews with the students’ teachers, focused on beliefs and practices regarding literacy instruction.
being exposed. During each visit to these classrooms, we concentrated on examining language arts activities. We recorded our observations in notebooks, writing up full field notes later that same day. In one classroom, we were able to make digital audio recordings to supplement our jottings and to assist us in writing field notes. These digital audio-recorded interactions were transcribed. At least two fieldworkers shared observations of each classroom; thus, we were able to compare our impressions, confirm or challenge our assumptions, and engage in recursive processes of observation and analyses.

Our observations in each class focused on the nature of literacy activities and students’ engagement in them and on the explicit literacy strategies that teachers and students used to make sense of written texts. We were especially interested in how teachers and students addressed the challenges of paraphrasing, and so we looked for any talk about translating, paraphrasing, summarizing, retelling, or saying the same thing in different ways. This was our approach to identifying potential points of leverage for paraphrasing—again, an approach that, as previously mentioned, extends the cultural modeling tradition of theorizing about the relationship between everyday practices and disciplinary modes of reasoning.

In addition to this naturalistic data gathering, we administered a series of process-focused literacy assessments to 32 students (including those identified as active translators). The assessments asked students to read two passages out loud, one from Sandra Cisneros’s novel *The House on Mango Street* (the section titled “My Name”) and the other from a science text about the Ice Age. Students then wrote a summary of the science text in their own words and another, more informal piece of writing, a personal letter providing advice to incoming fifth- and sixth-grade students. We audio-recorded students as they read out loud and talked with them about their approaches to reading and summarizing texts, focusing on what they did when they encountered difficulties. This allowed us to see how they handled the challenges of paraphrasing and what strategies they articulated—strategies that we came to understand were not a regular part of the school’s language arts curriculum and thus not available for examination during our classroom observations.

**Data Analyses**

For this article, several sets of analytical procedures are important to detail. First, each of the out-of-school text-mediated episodes of paraphrasing that we recorded was submitted to a discourse analysis in which we examined the social and discursive strategies that children used to parse, make sense of, and interpret information for others; the supports that others provided for the children in their endeavors; and how participants positioned themselves in and through language in relation to one another. We selected 1 of 47 episodes that involved the oral interpretation of written text (from a total of 88 recorded translation episodes) to illustrate the demands involved in the translation of extended written texts. Our ethnographic research revealed that translation episodes vary across many dimensions including genre, familiarity with and difficulty of the texts undergoing translation, and the supports that coparticipants provide to the translator. However, in this article, we do not attempt to detail the wide range of translation practices documented through our ethnographic work as we have already done elsewhere (Orellana, 2001, 2006; Orellana, Dorner, et al., 2003; Orellana, Reynolds, et al., 2003; Reynolds & Orellana, 2004). We also do not claim that the example we have selected is entirely representative of all of the translation episodes that we recorded, but it is “typical” in that it shows a young child processing a complex English text with minimal support from coparticipants. We selected this example because it is one in which the translator makes particularly visible her processes for interpreting the text as she voices out loud some of her mental strategies.

Our next set of analyses centered on school practices of paraphrasing. Our aim was to look at academic practices that might be in some ways analogous with translating (i.e., summarizing, retelling, paraphrasing, and other tasks that involve finding equivalent ways of expressing words and ideas). We did not want to presume that we knew what these tasks looked like in schools in general or in these classrooms in particular; thus, we used an inductive approach to ethnographic analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). To this end, we read and reread field notes and developed analytical memos to capture the patterns and processes we saw at work in each classroom, as well as across classrooms.

After compiling all examples of this loosely defined practice of paraphrasing from across classrooms, we continued working to develop grounded analyses of the nature and purposes of paraphrasing in these classrooms. We asked ourselves several questions: Did the paraphrased text consist of words, phrases, sentences, extended text, or discourse? Who initiated and/or provided the paraphrase (the teacher or the students)? Was the paraphrase done orally or in writing? Throughout, we attended to whether and how children’s home language skills were leveraged in making sense of words and ideas.

Finally, we probed how students talked about and contended with the challenges of paraphrasing in the literacy-assessment interviews and focus groups. We examined transcripts for metacommunicative statements or strategies concerning paraphrasing, summarizing, retelling, and translating words and texts. We looked at these in relation to the contexts in which the information was elicited by considering whether students’ observa-
tions about paraphrasing followed the researcher’s request to summarize the science passage in their own words or the researcher’s request for students to explain what they did (i.e., what strategies they used). In the case of the focus groups, talk emerged out of open-ended conversations with students about their experiences at school.

Results

Para-Phrasing at Home

In order to make clear why we see out-of-school paraphrasing as an important practice for cultural modeling, we examine how one participant in our study, Estela, reads and interprets an official-looking letter that arrives in the mail. (Readers who are interested in additional examples of text-based paraphrasing by other participants in our study are referred to Orellana, Reynolds, et al., 2003.) At the time of this recording, Estela, the oldest of three siblings, was 10 years of age. Her family had emigrated from the Mexican state of Guanajuato to the Chicago area just a few years earlier. Estela was one of the youngest of our case-study participants, but she assumed much responsibility in her household for paraphrasing tasks of this kind.

In this paraphrasing episode, the participants are Estela and her parents. The text that Estela translates is a letter from the Illinois Office of the Secretary of State regarding a car crash; it includes a form that the family has to fill out and return. Written in a legalistic register, the letter assumes that the reader has knowledge of liability insurance and forms of payment. In addition, it requests information describing the crash itself. Estela does not have any prior knowledge about where the letter comes from or what it requires of her family. She develops a theory about its contents and relative importance in the process of reading and translating the text.

True to her own style of paraphrasing, Estela reads parts of the text aloud in English before formulating a Spanish translation. This process, we argue, is what most clearly reveals paraphrasing (across languages) as a form of paraphrasing (revoicing in one’s own words). It makes visible Estela’s real-time processing of the meaning of the text. The task is motivated by an important goal—figuring out what her parents need to do to respond to the authoritative demands of the letter and communicating that to her mother.

Estela reads the first half of the first sentence of the letter from the Office of the Secretary of State quickly and with confidence. (See Figure 1 for Estela’s reading and translation of this first sentence.) The second half of the sentence, however, poses some challenges. She sounds out unfamiliar expressions/words (i.e., the term prompt) and repeats the core message of the sentence (i.e., the importance of giving attention) to clarify its meaning for herself. Only then does she go on to translate for her mother, saying, “Dice que, uh, le pongas atención a este aviso” (It says that, uh, you should pay attention to this notice). This translation summarizes the content of the sentence but omits some detail, which perhaps pragmatically lessens the force of the original text. However, Estela’s translation of the next conditional sentence, which issues a warning to her parents about impending consequences if they fail to fill out the form and return it within the next 15 days, reveals her understanding that the text represents an authoritative institution not to be ignored. (See Figure 2 for Estela’s reading and translation of this second sentence.) As Estela proceeds with the English text, she renders the Secretary of State the “security of state,” but this mistake does not appear in the translation. Rather than attempting an equivalent transla-

---

Figure 1. Estela Para-Phrases the First Sentence of a Letter From the Illinois Office of the Secretary of State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estela reading</th>
<th>Estela translating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important that you give pro-</td>
<td>Dice (It says)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miss attention to</td>
<td>uh, le pongas atención (uh, pay attention)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attention to this notice</td>
<td>a este (to this)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aviso (notice)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This excerpt, while divided into reading and translation columns, is organized sequentially. Our English translations of Estela’s Spanish translations are included in parentheses directly after her utterances in the second column. The following orthographic symbols indicate paralinguistic and prosodic phenomena: Line breaks indicate pauses at in-breath points, a comma indicates a micropause of one tenth of a second, and a dash indicates a self-interruption. [T Estela 11-29-01]
tion, she develops a theory of the letter’s purpose by interpreting other context clues: If her parents do not fill out the form within a timeline of 15 days, something like losing their license will result.

Estela then proceeds to read the remainder of the letter and revises her first interpretation that the letter is about driving in general. (See Figure 3 for Estela’s reading and translation of the rest of the letter.) The letter explains that the office has received information about a car crash in which Estela’s family was involved. In compliance with the Illinois Safety Responsibility Law, they must provide information about their insurance policy, how the accident happened, and any damages incurred. Instead of translating the convoluted bureaucratic prose word-for-word, Estela infers the significance of this passage and summarizes it for her parents: The office already knows that the family crashed the car.

After Estela has established the origins of the letter and what it demands of her family, she guides her parents through the form. At key points where Estela needs assistance, her parents participate in the process of interpretation. In the following excerpt, Estela struggles with how to translate the expression “the owner of the car.”

Excerpt 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estela reading</th>
<th>Estela translating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>if- if you: fall to-</td>
<td>Dice aquí (It says here)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if you fail to complete with</td>
<td>‘hh que sí (‘hh that if)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>within fif, teen days of the date</td>
<td>que sí (that if)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘hh of this notice</td>
<td>que si no, no (that if no, no)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the security of state</td>
<td>no llenas este! (you don’t fill in this!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entre de quince días? (within 15 days?)</td>
<td>Um?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Estela’s mother: de quién es el carro (to whom the car belongs)

Estela: Uhm, de quién es el carro. (Uhm, to whom the car belongs.)

Note. This excerpt, while divided into reading and translation columns, is organized sequentially. Our English translations of Estela’s Spanish translations are included in parentheses directly after her utterances in the second column. The following orthographic symbols indicate paralinguistic and prosodic phenomena: Line breaks indicate pauses at in-breath points, ‘hh indicates instances of audible in-breaths, information contained in brackets describes participant actions that were observed but not audible on the recording, a comma indicates a micropause of one tenth of a second, a dash indicates a self-interruption, a colon indicates a sound stretch, a question mark indicates rising intonation, and a period indicates falling intonation. [T Estela 11-29-01]
father enters the scene and asks her to find out if the letter provides information about forms of payment, the possibility of sending a check, and to whom they should write the check. Estela skims the document and locates the pertinent information.

This paraphrasing example is instructive for several reasons. It reveals paraphrasing as a form of, although not the same as, paraphrasing for all the reasons previously adumbrated. In other words, translation is like other interpretive practices in that it is an inherently selective process. Child “para-phrasers” make choices about what to include in their translations and decide when to render meanings explicit and when to maintain their ambiguity. Their decisions to use particular strategies are driven largely by their goal of making sense of this material for their audiences. Moreover, Estela’s exchange with her mother illustrates one child’s skill at parsing difficult texts by mixing strategies, as well as the support that coparticipants often provide.

With this understanding of children’s out-of-school, everyday practices of reading texts written in English and paraphrasing them for their families, we now consider the opportunities for and demands of within-English paraphrasing in school. We begin with the assumption that school paraphrasing tasks will look quite different from real-world practices of translation/interpretation, especially in the roles that coparticipants play, the purposes and goals that guide these two activities, and the particular nature of the power relations that inform them. However, in what follows, we lay out the variety of ways that within-language paraphrasing happened across classrooms at Regan in order to consider how these practices might be extended, modified, or changed to better leverage bilingual students’ everyday language practices, particularly those practices involved in out-of-school paraphrasing activities.

**Paraphrasing in School**

Our first aim in examining the classroom data was to understand the range of literacy practices both within and across classrooms at Regan. Just as we want to build on what youths are already doing in everyday language practices, we also want to build on and connect with what teachers are already doing in school. Thus, we begin by describing the general nature of language arts instruction at the school as constructed from observations and interviews, before moving to more focused analyses of classroom paraphrasing practices.

**The Range of Literacy Practices**

All fifth- and sixth-grade students read short stories, worked with lists of spelling and vocabulary words, and completed grammar exercises. In addition, Ms. Wallace had her students do extensive journaling, while Ms. Halliday encouraged students to write short stories about a stuffed animal that served as the class mascot. Mr. Harris had his students do what he called “morning work” at the start of each day; this included working on vocabulary definitions and math problems that were generally linked to science and social science themes. Ms. Toman felt students needed to know English words in their native language in order to internalize them; she often had students look up words in a Spanish dictionary and checked students’ understanding through back-and-forth translations. She did this, she said, to see “if they really understand.” Ms. Toman also engaged in frequent explicit talk about language and cultural differences and employed gesture, pantomime, and body language to help students understand particular words.

Seventh-grade classes were divided into reading, language arts, and content area classes. Mrs. Kowalski, devised her own reading curriculum and tailored...
Word Paraphrasing Practices

When we looked at the classroom observation data for specific examples of paraphrasing, summarizing, and retellings of extended text, we found very little. Instead, almost all of the examples of paraphrasing that we identified in our fieldwork were paraphrases of single words—that is, paraphrases of word definitions. This accords with what other researchers have found—that language arts classrooms privilege vocabulary building (Jiménez, 2003; Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003).

In situations where the focus of classroom instruction was preparation for standardized testing, emphasis on word paraphrasing was even more prevalent. To prepare students for standardized math tests, Ms. Halliday posted 80 math words on the board and went over their propositional meanings one by one with the students. At one point, she exclaimed, “I forgot one!” This comment elicited a groan from the class. One student commented to the first author, “She’s gonna make us study all those words.” When the first author began to copy the math words into her notebook, this same student said, “You’re copying all of them down? Those are a lot of words.” The student then pointed to another bulletin board that had other vocabulary words posted on it and said, “There are more over there” [FN Halliday 04-05-01].

In another fifth-grade classroom, Ms. Wallace engaged in a long review of students’ answers to the vocabulary section of a practice test, following an Initiation–Response–Evaluation sequence (Mehan, 1979) in which she initiated questions and then evaluated the students’ answers. She used stress and slowed speech to distinguish the target words to be paraphrased (italicized in the transcript for clarity).

Excerpt 2

Ms. Wallace: Number one.
To accept payment.
Raise your hand if you know what it means to accept payment.
Luís, what is that one?
Luís: If someone pays you?
Ms. Wallace: Take a look here.
Look for the answer.
Luís: Oh, um, pass over? I mean, agree to take?
Ms. Wallace: OK, if you accept it, you agree to take it.
[FN Wallace 04-26-01]

In this response, Luís authored his own paraphrase by creating a personalized hypothetical scenario in which “someone pays you.” Ms. Wallace, in her evaluative turn, did not validate Luís’s attempt to paraphrase in his own words. Instead, she instructed him to seek out the authoritative candidate offered in the test: “Take a look here. Look for the answer.” Luís complied with her request; his final self-corrected answer parroted the correct answer, albeit in a mitigated fashion, with upward intonation: “agree to take?” In her final turn, Ms Wallace accepted his answer, saying, “OK,” and then expanded her talk by juxtaposing the two phrases in parallel fashion within a conditional sentence: “If you accept it, you agree to take it.” Ironically, in doing this, she adopted Luís’s original strategy of posing the answer using a personalized, hypothetical scenario.

Points of Leverage in Word Paraphrasing

In noting the prevalence of word paraphrasing in school, it is important to point out that we found ourselves focusing on this very task when we probed students about their literacy strategies during the literacy assessments. Indeed, we often asked students to describe strategies they used to make sense of “hard words.” This bias only came to our attention once we had read transcriptions of student comments during postassessment interviews. In our discussion of implications, we call for practitioners and researchers alike to think about where vocabulary fits within the larger set of demands involved in paraphrasing. At the same time, we also want to note that not all ways of focusing on words are the same. In the next section, we describe word-focused practices that we believe offered important points of leverage for students’ bilingual para-phrasing skills.

Wordplay

As part of his teaching persona, Mr. Joyce used wordplay in the form of irony, parody, and sarcasm to frame many of his interactions with students during language arts textbook exercises. Some of his jokes involved the manipulation of phonetic and semantic forms related to
terms of address and students’ names to engage them in teasing exchanges. In exploiting the poetic function of language, Mr. Joyce regularly drew the students’ attention to linguistic forms in both English and Spanish and played with elements of translation. He did this despite the fact that he was not fluent in Spanish. It is important to remember that fluency in students’ home languages is not necessarily a requirement for successful leveraging of students’ home language skills. The following examples from different days of classroom observation are illustrative of this phenomenon. They also reveal that these exchanges tap into the children's own creative capacities to play with form and meaning, something that usually only happens within the sub rosa spaces of classrooms.

In the first example, a boy named Fritz left his desk to obtain a sheet of paper without having asked permission to do so. (Note we modified the plays on words that involved names in order to maintain the confidentiality of the children's identities. These modifications retain the flavor of the originals as much as possible.) Mr. Joyce scolded him for not remaining in his seat and then quipped, “Don’t have a fits about it.” After this, Mr. Joyce turned his attention to another student, Bobby Fryer, and announced to the class, “We know what you’re gonna do Bobby, you’re gonna be a cook when you grow up.”

A third student, Brianna, who had been closely monitoring Mr. Joyce’s comedic plays on students’ names, corrected him, saying, “Fryers are not the same as Cooks.” Mr. Joyce acknowledged that Brianna was right to call him on this [FN Joyce 10-24-01].

On another day, a seventh grader named Marcelo approached Mr. Joyce to ask for help: “Mrs. Joyce. Oops I mean Mr. Joyce...what’s co-owner?” Mr. Joyce retorted by using a feminized and anglicized version of Marcelo’s first name, “Marcy-o.” He then answered the question, telling Marcelo to write down his parents’ names. Mr. Joyce followed this paraphrase with another joke, telling Marcelo and the entire class in a half-serious tone, “Put down Mr. Joyce. Everyone put down Mr. Joyce. That way I can have access to your money” [FN Joyce 10-03-01]. The subtext of this joking exchange reveals that not knowing a word’s definition(s) can have serious real-world consequences.

Turning to a different classroom, we often witnessed Mr. Harris take an interest in his sixth-grade students’ ability to para-phrase between English and Spanish, and he offered various opportunities for students to display their skills during meaningful and purposeful social interactions, not simply through workbook exercises. On one occasion, Mr. Harris asked the class how to say “How was your vacation?” His sister had been on a trip to Mexico, and he wanted to be able to ask her this in Spanish. The class obliged him and turned the activity into an opportunity to display their clever wit by transforming the meaning of words via sound-play in Spanish. Immediately, the room was abuzz with students’ voices as they discussed how to ask the question. One student went up to the board and wrote the following translation: “Como te fueron tus vacaciones?” (How did your vacations go?). Others called out that this translation was incorrect. One boy in the back started to joke, “¿Como te fue tus cacas vacaciones?” (How was your [baby-talk word for shit] vacation?). Other students joined him in further wordplay, calling out, “Te cagas mucho” (You [slang for the word defecate but not as offensive as the word shit] a lot), “Cuando se cagaron” (When they defecated), and “¿Cuando fue que te agarraron de?” (When was it that they caught you [from]?) [FN Harris 01-10-01]. These plays on words and shifts in register are reminiscent of the albures (sexual innuendos) noted in Limón (1994) and Cintrón (1997) and mentioned earlier in this article: The carnivalesque humor of both the students’ word play and the albures is partly predicated on the similarities between everyday words and taboo ones.

In these scenarios, Mr. Harris and Mr. Joyce create a space where metalinguistic play with form and students’ other sub rosa verbal practices are brought into the “third space” advocated by Gutiérrez et al. (1999)—that is, space where youths’ commentaries (often made in resistance to the “official” classroom script) can be integrated into an instructional conversation. We note that these forms of language play are not specific to para-phrasing. Moreover, we never witnessed children displaying their bilingual skills in these sorts of clever, tongue-in-cheek ways during high-stakes family para-phrasing activities such as Estela’s translation of the letter from the Illinois Office of the Secretary of State. We did, however, observe children engaging in everyday sorts of “translation play.” Thus, we see bilingual wordplay as part of a larger set of skills that bilingual youths can potentially draw on as needed or as appropriate to the context and goals of a given activity, be it out-of-school translation or classroom literacy tasks. The question then has to do with how much room is given for the display and further cultivation of the full range of bilingual youths’ para-phrasing skills.

Cognates and Common Roots

Another word-focused practice that effectively leveraged youths’ bilingual repertoires in general and their paraphrasing skills in particular took advantage of language cognates and Latin or Greek morphology common to English. Ms. Wallace, for example, modeled the appropriate use of Polish–English cognates to help a Polish immigrant student choose the correct multiple-choice answer on a vocabulary exercise. The exercise prompt read, “Whistle a pretty melody.” The choices in students’ booklets were (a) tune, (b) dress, (c) bird, and (d) picture. Ms. Wallace called on a student who answered, “a, tune?” Ms. Wallace ratified this response: “The answer is
a, a tune.” A Polish immigrant student then appealed to Ms. Wallace to supply a definition for the word tune.

Excerpt 3

Student: What’s a tune?
Ms. Wallace: Tune is a melody. Part of a song. Melodia.

[FN Wallace 04-26-01]

Here, by offering the Polish translation, Ms. Wallace specifically leveraged Polish students’ home language knowledge, but she also created space for Spanish speakers to draw on their own home language skills. Spanish-speaking students murmured, “melodía,” the Spanish cognate, amongst themselves. The phonological similarities between melódia and melodía facilitated this.

Beyond Word Paraphrase

In this final section of our classroom data analyses, we present one of the few exceptions in our corpus of data to this general pattern of focusing on word paraphrases. This example derives from one of Mr. Joyce’s seventh-grade language arts classes in which students worked on the skill of combining sentences. These exercises constituted a form of paraphrase in that they required students to combine two separate ideas into one sentence that presumably preserved the original meaning of the separate sentences. We observed three periods of this same lesson, which varied slightly in form (e.g., in one period, the students shared their answers on the chalkboard, while in the other periods their answers were shared orally) but not in substance. During all class periods observed, Mr. Joyce emphasized that there were no wrong answers, “just ones that sound better,” and that the students needed to rely on certain kinds of words to complete the exercises: “You gotta use words like so, then, because, and, but to combine your sentences.” In addition, Mr. Joyce modeled how to combine two sentences, a specific kind of sentence-level paraphrasing.

At the beginning of each lesson, Mr. Joyce read aloud the following two sentences: “The zoo keeper wouldn’t let us in.” “A monkey had escaped.” He then asked students, “Which happened first?” One of the students called out, “The monkey escaped.” Mr. Joyce ratified the student’s answer and then combined the sentences for them: “The funny looking boy looks tall.” Mr. Joyce’s acceptance of these different answers seemed to reflect the idea (implicit in the textbook exercise) that “essential” meanings are easily preserved in sentence-combining forms of paraphrase. He concluded, “Everyone of these is correct. You just have to decide what sounds the best.” We note that Mr. Joyce offered no explicit discussion of how to gauge what “sounds better,” other than to hint that chronological order might have mattered in some sample sentences. He did use stress to indicate in his model answer which connecting word he considered appropriate. U.S. native English speakers might have been able to interpret this subtle paralinguistic strategy as a relevant contextualization cue (Gumperz, 1992); however, it might have gone unnoticed by students who were more attuned to Spanish stress and pitch patterns. Further, we would argue that determining what sounds better is predicated on assessing the purposes of the paraphrase for the audience at hand.

Different students produced the following combined-sentence answers. The answer in 1a imitates Mr. Joyce’s model by asserting a causal relationship between two distinct facts.

1. The boy looks funny. The boy is tall.
2. The man is a wrestler. The man is strong.

During one period, students wrote candidate answers on the board in response to the following two sets of exercise sentences, among others:

1. The boy looks funny. The boy is tall.
2. The man is a wrestler. The man is strong.

Mr. Joyce read the written answers aloud. He gave brief consideration to how single words can indeed change meaning, commenting on 2b, “You can do that [i.e., change the word he to man]; it doesn’t change the meaning” [FN Joyce 10-01-01]. Mr. Joyce did not, however, examine the subtle changes in meaning that ensue from other word insertions. For example, he did not explain how the students had created a causal relationship that was not present in the original set of sentences (as in 1a) or how there was a subtle shift in meaning in the paraphrase “funny looking boy.” Mr. Joyce’s acceptance of these different answers seemed to reflect the idea (implicit in the textbook exercise) that “essential” meanings are preserved in sentence-combining forms of paraphrase. He concluded, “Everyone of these is correct. You just have to decide what sounds the best.” We note that Mr. Joyce offered no explicit discussion of how to gauge what “sounds better,” other than to hint that chronological order might have mattered in some sample sentences. He did use stress to indicate in his model answer which connecting word he considered appropriate. U.S. native English speakers might have been able to interpret this subtle paralinguistic strategy as a relevant contextualization cue (Gumperz, 1992); however, it might have gone unnoticed by students who were more attuned to Spanish stress and pitch patterns. Further, we would argue that determining what sounds better is predicated on assessing the purposes of the paraphrase for the audience at hand.

Discussion

Students’ Paraphrasing Strategies

During our classroom observations, we never saw students being asked to summarize, retell, or paraphrase a piece of text beyond the word or sentence level. Again, this is not surprising given documentation of the
reductionistic nature of instruction in most language arts classrooms (e.g., Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Mehan, 1979). We turned to our other research data to examine the practice more closely. We looked at the literacy assessments we had administered to youths in which we gave students the task of paraphrasing extended text and talked with them about the challenges of doing so.

Like many researchers (Anderson & Hidi, 1988/1989; Kirkland & Saunders, 1991; Taylor, 1986) and teachers, two of the students, Emilia and Katrina, whose comments were taken from this battery of data and discussed earlier in this article, recognized that paraphrasing is hard. Another student, Fernando, further elaborated on the challenges of paraphrasing the passage about the Ice Age:

The climate has always had a profound effect on life in America...in my own words it’s hard to do. Like, climate has always had a profound effect on life in America. That’s like hard to put in my own words...I would put, um, the weather has always changed in America...I would put like, mmm, like basic words then, change a lot of basic words. [LA Tape# 9]

Other students reported similar strategies and reactions:

Monique: I just put the basic, basic things. I’d put like some basic things. But like that would be copying...That’s why I didn’t want to do it like all. [LA Tape #10]

Katie: And write, um, kind of the, write something, just summarize it, like summarize it. Was a little bit hard 'cause you almost get the words, like almost copy some of them, but I think I copied all of them, I don’t know (laughs). [LA Tape #12]

Jorge: (I would) probably grab a dictionary...try to make something up...that sounds intelligent. [LA Tape #11]

Strategies included copying a text verbatim but changing some words and looking for synonyms in a dictionary or a thesaurus. Other named strategies involved structural maneuvers, for example, using the title and topic sentence from the first paragraph to begin the summary and limiting the paragraph to a finite number of sentences (between 3 and 5). Some students reviewed each paragraph to check for proper names, dates, and statistics (with less concern for the cohesion of these); a few specifically sought out details from the beginning, middle, and end of the text. In addition, a small number of students added information that was not in the text, which seemed an interesting approach to making the text their own.

As an example of what happened when students tried to follow the rules they articulated to us, we share both Fernando’s written and oral summaries of the passage about the Ice Age.

The first sentence of the science passage: The climate has always had a profound effect on life in America.

Written paraphrase: This passage told me how ice sheets covered America back 20,000 or 30,000 years ago. [Fernando originally had written something else, but he erased it when the fieldworker stressed that he had to write this in his own words]

Oral paraphrase: The weather has always changed in America.

Fernando’s written paraphrase did not summarize the text; instead, it focused on what information he learned from the text. Fernando’s oral paraphrase began by preserving the passage’s thesis sentence. He simplified the syntactic structure, including some of the original words while changing, as he said, “a lot of the basic words.” He substituted weather for the specialized term climate and reduced and simplified the phrase “had a profound effect on life” to “changed.” Through his paraphrasing, Fernando transformed a bold and clear statement into a more neutral, less specific one that arguably does not preserve the essential meaning of the original text but that does create something that is not likely to sound plagiarized.

The literacy-assessment interviews and focus groups also revealed that students were aware that audience matters. Indeed, students seemed to implicitly recognize what sociolinguists know, that no two audiences are ever the same or equal (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). Further, students seemed to implicitly recognize that the power relations between themselves and their audiences (teachers) were asymmetrical and that these asymmetries profoundly shaped the forms that their paraphrases could take. One student, Charity, told us that the personal letter was easier to write than the summary of the science text because “I’m the one writing it” [LA Tape #5]. This student seemed to realize that she had little say in how texts were paraphrased in school contexts, even when she was asked to render these texts in her own words.

Students’ apparent awareness of the fact that their words do not really count potentially impedes their abilities to develop communicative competency in these activities (Hymes, 1972). During focus-group interviews with our case-study para-phrasers, we discovered how prevalent this perspective was when one child stated that she wanted the teachers to know that the students were smart. In a follow-up discussion on paraphrasing and plagiarism, the second author asked Josh what strategies he used to paraphrase. Josh replied that he knew that his teachers believed he was not smart. He narrated a hypothetical scenario, adopting the voice of a teacher evaluating his paraphrasing skills.

Excerpt 4

Josh: So I put in like my big words. You know it’s like,
“Hey, y’know he's not very bright.”
Y’know,
“How do you know these words?”

Jennifer: m hm
Josh: and so I just thought I’d use small ones.

The subtext of Josh’s comments suggests that he is aware that teachers read students’ texts with an eye to surveillance and that they hold deficit notions about students’ abilities. “Big words” signal to teachers that students have not used their own words because the teachers do not believe students own such words. Josh’s solution is an avoidance strategy. He escapes judgment by using so-called “small” words; these are words that he knows will not draw undue attention from teachers. Josh’s metaphoric use of “size” to describe two different linguistic registers underscores the authority attributed to the purportedly professional linguistic register with its corresponding esoteric lexicon, which can only be spoken legitimately by “big” people (i.e., adults).

When another fieldworker probed to find out if Josh in fact knew the words to which he referred, Josh quickly responded that he knew some of them. A fellow student, Tony, ratified Josh’s perspective, claiming, “I know them but I know that the teacher will suspect that I don’t know them.” Thus, these students felt that they had to downplay their knowledge of big words in order to avoid unpleasant encounters with teachers who believed the students possessed a limited English lexicon.

This is the paradox of classroom exercises involving degrees of paraphrase, and it is of course what makes this practice so different from real-world analogues like paraphrasing. Teachers ask students to summarize texts and paraphrase words in order to check their reading comprehension and to evaluate their mastery of subject matter. But the teachers maintain the right to determine how texts are appropriately paraphrased; it seems that students’ authority is secondary. All of these student meta-commentaries reveal how school-based activities that involve “putting text in your own words” are more often experienced as written and oral intertextual practices that reproduce authoritative discourses rather than the internally persuasive ones envisioned by Bakhtin (1981).

**Contrasting Paraphrasing and Para-phrasing**

Our ethnographic research in classrooms helped us to go beyond understanding the analogous nature of paraphrasing and paraphrasing in a purely theoretical way and to contemplate the challenges of leveraging the one practice for the other. In particular, listening to children helped us to recognize what is often taken for granted about these practices and to unpack why the practice of paraphrasing school texts is inherently hard. It is difficult, if not impossible, to put an authoritative text in one’s own words, especially when the quality of the paraphrase will be judged by a figure of authority (i.e., a teacher). To transform a text into something that is internally persuasive almost invariably demands a refraction or distortion of the original meaning because to preserve the original meaning involves taking up words—and ideas—that are not one’s own. Yet students are expected to uncritically reproduce authoritative discourses and not to refract the meaning of these discourses at all.

Considering the practices of para-phrasing and paraphrasing as analogues, in the tradition of cultural modeling, also helps us to identify more precisely why school practices of paraphrasing seem particularly hard—indeed, more difficult than the seemingly comparable processes involved in para-phrasing bureaucratic texts like the letter Estela translated from the Illinois Office of the Secretary of State. On the surface, it might seem that para-phrasing is easier simply because children can search for one-to-one correspondences of words and grammatical forms across languages, while in paraphrasing, direct one-to-one correspondences do not exist for most words within a single language. To paraphrase using a single code without using the original words almost invariably means that the original meaning will be transformed. But as we noted in our introductory discussion, the idea that one-to-one correspondences exist across languages is largely illusory, and verbatim translations are virtually impossible to achieve. Further, even if such correspondences were theoretically possible, in practice they would be difficult to accomplish as youths would need to have access to the entire lexicon of each language. In the paraphrasing example we analyzed, Estela abandons the strategy of seeking one-to-one correspondences across languages when she does not know the English words contained in the Secretary of State’s letter and instead relies on other strategies to get at the gist of the letter and communicate it to her parents.

Another, less obvious distinction between these two practices has to do with the two codes involved in paraphrasing. If children do provide nearly word-for-word or sentence-by-sentence glosses when they translate, using closely corresponding words in Spanish for the English text (what is sometimes referred to as “literal translation”), no one will accuse them of plagiarizing. Estela is free to focus on understanding the passage and conveying its meaning to her parents. She does not have to worry about how she performs that understanding for them. Nor does she have to treat language as an object. As a matter of fact, in folk theories of translation and interpretation, translators/interpreters are assumed not to have a hand in shaping the meaning of a text/utterance at all; instead, they serve as passive conduits through which meaning passes (Reddy, 1993). Para-phrasers do not
have to contend with a listening audience that stands ready to accuse them of “copying” the authoritative text; indeed, their audience expects their translation to be verbatim. There is no mystification of the authoritative discourse inherent in the text undergoing translation, and Estela is not expected to revoice the text as if she were its author. (In this case, Estela and her parents know that Estela is not and could never be the voice of authority demanding proof of car insurance.)

Further, as we learned from Josh and Tony, the performances that students must render in school are intricate; when they paraphrase a text, their choices of “other words” are additionally constrained because they must monitor themselves with an eye to what the teacher may presume they do not know. Words may become sites of struggle if students, who are aware of their teachers’ presumptions about their limited lexicons, feel inhibited from using the “big words” needed to adequately complete paraphrasing tasks. School practices of paraphrasing are pervaded by a sense of surveillance in a way that home para-phrasing practices are not. In all fairness, we should note that para-phrasees do not escape evaluation by the adults for whom they translate. Youths may be evaluated on their home language skills, their English-language capacities, and their behavior in these encounters (Reynolds & Orellana, 2004); however, they do not have to worry that they will be judged as plagiarists.

A further distinction between the practices of paraphrasing and para-phrasing is that the latter is usually done for specific, live, and familiar audiences. When children take an English text and translate it for their parents, they can tailor their words to their parents’ understandings of the issues. Further, parents can and often do facilitate that understanding and scaffold the process (which, in turn, is not viewed as “cheating” as it might be in school). By contrast, during school paraphrasing tasks, students are expected to write for an absent, unspecified, and unknown audience. They have no information about what this audience knows or would want to know—information that could serve to guide their work as paraphrasers. In point of fact, the students’ audience generally consists of their teachers, but they are not expected to take the teachers’ knowledge on the topic into account when they write. (If students know that their words will be shared with their peers, they have a second audience to contend with, further complicating their positionality; however, as with their teachers, they are not expected to work with this audience in shaping their paraphrase.)

In addition to being shaped by an audience—an audience that may actively scaffold as well as influence the interpretive process—para-phrasing involves a much clearer purpose than do most school paraphrasing tasks. In para-phrasing a written text, youths do not have to make sure that they include all of the details of the original message; instead, they can focus on what they need to know in order to respond to the message. Thus, the children’s para-phrasing can be selective, targeted, and supported by the real-world purposes behind the text.

Finally, para-phrasing enables children to tap into a broad range of their linguistic repertoire, while in-school paraphrasing practices do not typically encourage or even allow children to do this. Even in bilingual programs, students typically work either in their home language or in English (with language divisions occurring across subject matter or time of day); they are rarely encouraged to draw from the full repertoire of their linguistic toolkits, much less to use translation or code-switching as part of their meaning-making processes. Indeed, school paraphrasing activities are structured in ways that ignore bilingual students’ strengths.

In noting these differences between paraphrasing and para-phrasing, we underscore two points that have been articulated by some other sociocultural researchers: (1) that school and out-of-school tasks are driven by fundamentally different purposes and (2) that understanding an activity requires knowing something about the people, purposes, goals, and tools that are utilized within it. These claims are far from common knowledge, and we believe that the kind of unpacking that we are doing here is critical for identifying how youths may be supported in developing advanced academic language skills. Mr. Harris expressed this very point during our interview with him. He noted that scaffolds contained within language arts textbooks were geared toward breaking texts and words down into parts but were not helpful in modeling how to put things back together. According to Mr. Harris, language arts textbooks require students to do so much microanalysis that they “can’t see the forest for the trees” and sometimes are even prevented from “seeing the forest for the leaves” [1 Harris 09/01].

In other Regan classrooms, teachers and textbooks emphasized similar reductive and mechanical techniques of paraphrasing. Further, in discussing how to paraphrase extended text, teachers often focused on forms that were easy to recontextualize, such as proper names, statistics, dates, and quoted speech. This may make paraphrasing seem easier than it is—just a matter of substituting some words for others while keeping the “key elements” intact. Teachers may inadvertently spend more time engaged in word-paraphrasing activities at the expense of more holistic, meaning-based, and syntax- and genre-level transpositions. In high-stakes scenarios, even the strategy of paraphrasing in your own words was abandoned as in the case of Ms. Wallace directing her students to look only at the answers provided in the authoritative textbook/test.

The differences between these practices of paraphrasing and para-phrasing are important because they point to the challenges in aligning, connecting, or leveraging
real-world literacy practices for school learning, and we want to avoid minimizing these challenges. But probing the nature of both sets of practices is also critical for building bridges between them. By digging beneath the surface of each practice and seeing the range of forms these practices take, we can illuminate similarities as well as differences, and this in turn can help us to identify how these similarities might be built upon to support the development of academic skills. Moreover, this can help us create room for the expression of a wider repertoire of linguistic and cognitive strategies, as well as the emergence of hybrid forms.

**Contributions to Cultural Modeling Theory**

Cultural modeling research has played a critical role in identifying ways to build on the skills that students from nondominant groups develop through their engagement in everyday cultural practices. It has done this principally by identifying theoretical relationships between modes of reasoning and discursive skills that are used in everyday life and in specific disciplines. The focus has been on the ideal nature of disciplinary practices. This is important because school practices often diverge from the forms of practice that professionals use within their disciplines (e.g., from the ways that scholars think about history and literary theory). By examining disciplinary modes of reasoning, cultural modeling theorists can push school practices in directions that better align with how things are done by professionals in the world.

Our work contributes to this body of research by extending it to a largely unexplored social practice—the everyday work of translation and interpretation performed by the bilingual children of immigrants. We also apply the cultural modeling framework to a different population of youths than has been studied by cultural modeling theorists to date. We do not claim that the practices we describe are “cultural” in the sense of being linked to a group on the basis of an essentialized racial/ethnic or national identity. Instead, we work with a dynamic, practice-based notion of culture that underscores the interpretive and hybrid nature of the social practices that people engage in as part of their daily struggles for survival (see Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). In this way, we push the field to expand its ideas about what counts as a cultural practice.

We also extend the cultural modeling framework by moving beyond an analysis of the theoretical linkages between everyday and scientific practices—the relationship between paraphrasing and the ideal form of paraphrasing. Recognizing the impossibility of ever achieving the ideal form of paraphrasing (the impossibility of ever making others’ words one’s own, as suggested by Bakhtin, 1981), we looked instead to school practices to see how paraphrasing is concretely realized. Through ethnographic

---

**Notes**

1 The following orthographic symbols indicate paralinguistic and prosodic phenomena in Excerpt 1: Line breaks indicate pauses at breath points, a comma indicates a micropause of one tenth of a second, a colon indicates a sound stretch, a question mark indicates rising intonation, and a period indicates falling intonation.
The two authors contributed equally to this manuscript. The research reported here was supported by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (1 RO3 HD39510-01) and the Spencer Foundation. Thanks to Valentina Pagliai, Melissa Pashigian, Cynthia Strathmann, Tim Sundeen, Ellie Zucker, four anonymous reviewers, and the editors of RRQ lor their detailed and constructive feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript.

**References**


Cultural Modeling: Leveraging Bilingual Skills for School Paraphrasing Tasks


Submitted November 12, 2006
Final revision received August 24, 2007
Accepted September 18, 2007

Marjorie Faulstich Orellana teaches in the Department of Education, University of California, Los Angeles, USA; e-mail orellana@gseis.ucla.edu.

Jennifer F. Reynolds teaches in the Department of Anthropology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, USA; e-mail jenrey@sc.edu.