

Chapter 19

“What Up” and “TQM”: English Learners Writing on Facebook to Acquire English and Express Their Latina/o Identities

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ABSTRACT

Previous scholarship demonstrates that immigrant students are using digital technologies for unique purposes in their out-of-school writing. This study explores the writing on Facebook of four Latina/o immigrant youth who are English Learners. The findings show that the participants write on Facebook to further their English acquisition and express their Latina/o identities in ways not accessible to them in school. Their purposes for writing demonstrate there is much academic potential in leveraging social networking for in-school writing instruction for immigrant students.

INTRODUCTION

Alejandra is an 11th grade Intermediate English Learner in her third semester in a U.S. school. Since the time she started her Facebook page 17 months ago, she has posted 91 times. Her writing varies from English and Spanish codes, phrases, and sentences. She regularly posts “what up” to her friends using the newly learned words in English followed by “tqm” (te quiero mucho/*I love you a lot*), using a Spanish code to express love. Most of her writing occurs on Facebook, not for school assignments. Researchers have stated that we must begin to bridge students’ in- and out-of-school writing in order to improve our in-school instruc-

tion (Alvermann, 2009; Moje, 2002), particularly regarding the growth of technology students use outside of school (Hornberger, 2007; Warriner, 2007). Furthermore, there is a gap of knowledge in second language writing research regarding adolescents in the U.S. and what they are writing outside of school (Harklau, 2011). Literacy researchers and educators need to understand what Alejandra and other immigrant youth are writing and for what purposes so that we might adapt our second language writing instruction to account for new technologies these students use outside of school such as Facebook.

Facebook is a social networking site which has been defined as “an online site that presents a platform used by individuals [and] focuses on building and reflecting social relations in accor-

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dance with interests and/or activities” (Aydin, 2012, p. 1093). One in 12 people of the entire world’s population use Facebook (Siegle, 2011) and it reached its milestone of over one billion users in September 2012. How, what, and the frequency in which we write is being revolutionized by this phenomenon.

Although Facebook was created for Ivy League college students, it has quickly spread to other populations. According to a 2012 Pew Research study in the U. S., 72% of Hispanics use Facebook, more than any other race, and 71% of people with a household income of \$30,000 or less comprise the largest percentage of users by income (Brenner, 2012). Rapidly increasing Facebook use is facilitating new literacies and social practices for everyone, but has not adequately been studied with immigrant youth (Harklau, 2011; Warschauer, 2009), particularly Latinos (Sánchez & Salazar, 2012). Interestingly, the dynamics of this social networking site are helping immigrant youth facilitate a transnational space that meets unique needs in their lives created by the act of immigration. Therefore, this study specifically investigates the writing of Latina/o immigrant youth on Facebook. The questions used to guide this study are: 1) What are the participants writing on Facebook?; 2) How is second language acquisition occurring through their Facebook writing?; 3) How does their writing express their Latina/o identities?; and 4) What implications does this have for writing instruction for immigrant youth?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship employed to frame this study draws from out-of-school writing influenced by the New Literacy Studies, research of digital writing by immigrant youth, and studies that illustrate social networking sites used for educational purposes.

Out-of-School Writing

Many scholars in the field of literacy contend that students’ out-of-school writing practices should inform in-school writing instruction (Alvermann, 2009; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Moje, 2002). Discussions of out-of-school literacies (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 2000) often cite the seminal work of Scribner and Cole (1981) and their comparison of literacy of the Vai people in Liberia. Among their specific investigations was the Vai’s original writing system not used in school as well as their Qur’anic religious literacy. Scribner and Cole’s findings show that different literacies are associated with specialized forms of thinking; for example, Qur’anic literacy improved memory tasks whereas Vai script improved phonological discrimination. This study allowed for a broader definition of literacy, stating that literacy “is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script, but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (p. 237). Scribner and Cole’s (1981) research with the Vai people illustrate the power in studying literacies that are multiple, contextualized, and not associated with the dominant definition of literacy that prevails in school settings.

The New Literacy Studies (NLS) also provides a relevant theoretical foundation to this study of adolescent English learners’ out-of-school writing. The NLS is based on Street’s (1995) ideological model of reading which states that literacy is not a neutral process, but is always embedded in power relations. Furthermore, it is neither an individual act nor a discreet skill, discrediting the view that literacy is singular. Since literacy and language are always linked to various cultural and social practices, there is not one single literacy to master, but rather multiple literacies that are meaningful within their sociocultural traditions. Therefore, grounded in the framework provided by Street (1995) and Scriber and Cole (1981), the present study aligns with other studies of students’

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