



JULIA MENARD-WARWICK  
*University of California, Davis*

## The Words Become One's Own: Immigrant Women's Perspectives on Family Literacy Activities

■ This article explores the perspectives of 2 Mexican immigrant women enrolled in an English as a Second Language family literacy program in California. Through describing the women's participation in storybook reading and writing short compositions, the article illustrates how these learners were able to expand on their current literacy practices in order to adopt new school literacies they could share with their children. To this end, the article explores the learners' histories with L1 literacy practices and discusses the ways that classroom participation in new L2 genres was congruent with these women's sense of their own identities, and their goals for themselves and their children. In so doing, the article contends that Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) theories of language can provide helpful guidance for teachers who want to build on the strengths of adult learners in such programs.

So when I began to have children...I began to want to learn so I could teach them....So then they were little and I couldn't. (*Entonces cuando yo ya empecé a tener los niños...empecé a tratar de querer aprender como para enseñarles...Entonces estuvieron chiquitos y no podía*) [Interview, 10/25/02].

In the above interview excerpt, Trini, a Mexican immigrant woman in California, explains why she decided to enroll in an English as a Second Language (ESL) family literacy program<sup>1</sup>. In recognition of the ways that reading and writing practices are shared between generations, family literacy programs have become increasingly widespread in adult basic education, including English as a Second Language. By teaching parents, most programs hope to facilitate the literacy development of their children. However, beyond this common core, programs vary widely in philosophy and design.

I begin this paper by reviewing the controversy between "strengths" and "deficit" models of family literacy instruction, examining the literature on family literacy in the light of my experiences as an adult ESL instructor and researcher. Then, based on a qualitative study of a California ESL family literacy program, and informed by Bakhtin's theories of language (1981, 1986), I will share the perspectives of two Mexican immigrant women on some family literacy activities in which they were able to participate from a position of strength. In the current climate of increased standardization in adult education (Kutner, Webb, & Matheson, 1996; Van Duzer, 2002), I contend that bringing learners' perspectives into the public conversation on family literacy has become all the more important. To this end, I examine the following research questions: From the perspective of these adult learners, in what ways were their classroom literacy activities congruent with their home literacy practices, identities, and goals? What aspects of their experiences and identities afforded them access to new practices and genres? How were they appropriating these practices and genres and populating them with their own intentions?

### My Journey Into the Literature

Since observations and interpretations in qualitative research are seen as "socially situated in the worlds of the observer" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 12), I explain in this section

how my own perspective on family literacy developed both through my work in the field and my reading of the literature. I had entered ESL teaching in the 1980s, as a young woman of Anglo-American descent, competent in Spanish, and interested in the cultures of immigrant communities. It was after my own children were born, and while teaching ESL to adult immigrants at a community college in the 1990s, that I became concerned about the special language-learning needs of immigrant parents. I could see the challenges that my adult students faced in maintaining their family's home language and culture while at the same time supporting their children's educational attainment in U.S. society. I thus began looking for guidance to the literature on family literacy (e.g., Mulhern, Rodriguez-Brown, & Shanahan, 1994).

However, as I read this literature, I found some of it rather disturbing. Although nearly all of it recommended focusing on the strengths of parents rather than on what was wrong with them, a lot of it was contradictory. I still have an old newsletter article which I read at that time titled "Family Literacy—The 'Strengths Model'" (Potts, 1991). According to this article, "the strengths model (is) established on the premise that all families bring to the learning situation abilities, positive attributes, and traits that can nourish and enhance the learning process" (p. 1). Also, according to this same article, "most of these pre-schoolers (in family literacy programs) have suffered developmental blows, perhaps from the lack of stimulation and early encouragement" (p. 2). Even though the immigrant parents in my classes might be having difficulty helping their children with English-language homework, I had no reason to believe that these young people were "suffer(ing) developmental blows" as a consequence.

The books and articles I read during the next few years clarified the field somewhat, but they raised new challenges. Most of these were reports on specific programs, seen by the authors as particularly innovative, positive, and focused on family strengths (e.g., Auerbach, 1989, 1992; Delgado-Gaitán, 1996;

Handel, 1999; Janes & Kermani, 2001; Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999; Riojas-Cortez, Bustos Flores, Smith, & Riojas Clark, 2003; Taylor, 1997). These books and articles detailed particular pedagogies, comparing the "strengths" approach of their own programs with the "deficit" approach of programs that primarily focus on what's wrong with the families they serve.

Likewise, in a review article, Auerbach (1995) contrasted "intervention" programs, which claimed to prevent a wide range of societal problems by "breaking the cycle of illiteracy" in "undereducated families," with alternate approaches focused on multiple literacies and social change, often influenced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (e.g. 1999). In these programs, literacy is not seen as a unitary skill or even as a set of skills (such as word recognition), but rather as an array of often multilingual textual activities connecting to different facets of a family's life, from Bible reading, to writing letters to absent relatives, to comparing prices in supermarket sales circulars. In Freire-influenced classrooms, literacy additionally affords opportunities to collectively reflect on social realities and consider alternatives. Such programs assume that "people learn best when learning starts with what they already know, builds on their strengths, engages them in the learning process, and enables them to accomplish something they want to accomplish" (Auerbach, 1992, p. 9). Thus, meaningful education takes place through *dialogue*, in which educators aim to understand learners' "perception of themselves and the world" (Freire, 1999, p. 76).

Although Auerbach wrote as though interventionist and social change-oriented approaches were necessarily distinct from each other, a follow-up study of 100 randomly selected programs found in most cases a contradictory combination of "strengths" and "deficit" practices and discourses within the very same programs (Elish-Piper, 2000). For example, one program's mission statement claimed to "empower families to take control of their lives and learning" (p. 189). However,

a teacher in that program told the researcher, "If they don't seem to be trying hard to do the things we tell them to do, we encourage them to drop out" (p. 189). Indeed, in a 1996 ethnography of 10 Mexican immigrant families, Valdés rejected the family literacy movement entirely, seeing it as an attempt to foist mainstream values on culturally different communities. She wrote that all programs "directed at families...are designed to change families" (p. 197) and thus risk "seriously damag(ing) the delicate balance that immigrant families maintain" (p. 200).

All of this controversy was on my mind when I began working on my doctorate in 1999, and especially when I began conducting research in ESL family literacy classes in the San Francisco Bay Area. These classes, which primarily served Latina immigrants, were state-funded under a provision of Proposition 227, the antibilingual-education 1998 California voter initiative. Along with restricting schools' ability to educate children in their home languages, Proposition 227 additionally appropriated \$50 million a year for 10 years to teach English to immigrant parents and other community members. This program, Community Based English Tutoring (CBET), can now be found throughout California. Thus, the family literacy classes that I was observing were financially rooted in a deficit model that saw continued use of the Spanish language in education as "an educational dead-end" contributing to "low test scores" and "high drop-out rates" among Latino children (*California Voter Guide*, 1998). Moreover, I was still seeing messages from the larger family literacy movement that could be interpreted as promulgating a deficit perspective, as in this excerpt from a 2003 press release: "The messages communicated in these undereducated families often reflect the parents' own low self-esteem and limited expectations for themselves and their children" (National Center for Family Literacy).

The adult learners I was observing, mostly Latina immigrant mothers of young children, showed no evidence of having low self-esteem or limited expectations. Moreover,

they seemed committed to bilingualism for themselves and their families. The program they were attending was not highly innovative, not incorporating much of a multiple-literacies or social-change perspective (Auerbach, 1995). Nevertheless, judging by the program's ability to attract and retain this population of students, it seemed to be meeting their needs and goals. In attempting to understand these paradoxes, I found particularly helpful the writings of the Russian scholar of language Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986), which I was reading in my doctoral program. In Bakhtin's conception of dialogue, different discourses, like the conflicting strengths and deficit perspectives in the family literacy movement, are *inevitably* interacting and competing with each other, as Elish-Piper found in her survey of programs (2000). On a broader scale, Bakhtin saw the centralizing forces of a standardized, "legitimate" language (such as "academic English" in California schools) to be in constant struggle with the myriad varieties of language (*heteroglossia*) that naturally exist in the world. For Bakhtin and similar scholars, the standard language is not intrinsically better but simply has more political and economic power.

Bakhtin did not make a sharp distinction between written and spoken language. Rather, he saw language concretely realized within specific *genres*, or "relatively stable types of utterances" (1986, p. 60), varying from the military order to the novel, and characterized by thematic content, linguistic features, and compositional structure. According to Bakhtin, we learn linguistic forms in connection with particular spoken and written genres. While language is neither fixed nor unitary, through the learning of "relatively stable" genres, human beings are enabled to participate in particular social groups.

Bakhtin's dynamic view of language corresponds to the views of those literacy scholars who recognize that, like language, literacy is not a unitary and easily quantifiable skill (e.g., Street, 1984). Rather, there are a wide variety of "literacies," or types of literacy, appropriate

to different social contexts, as in the multiple literacies approach to family literacy instruction discussed above. Moreover, this approach sees literacy as a *practice*, that is, something that people do to accomplish social goals. From this perspective, “school-based” literacy is just one among many literacies, albeit one that is widely valued. Thus, teachers who adopt this approach can build on literacies that adult learners already have and help them take on new literacies that may be valuable to them and their children. From a Bakhtinian point of view, this process of taking on new literacies will involve interacting with new genres of text, and finding “ever newer *ways to mean*” (1981, p. 346 [italics in the original]; cf. Greenleaf & Katz, 2004) in new social contexts. In other words, Bakhtin emphasizes learners’ creative abilities to reshape existing genres to their own purposes.

Describing the process of learning new varieties of language under dynamic conditions of struggle and change, Bakhtin writes:

The word in language is half someone else’s. It 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. (1981, p. 293)

Bakhtin did not see this process of appropriation as something that happens easily, nor once and for all time. Rather, he wrote, “Our speech is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness’” (1986, p. 89). For some immigrants living in North America and developing L2 literacy, the literacy practices promoted in local schools (including adult ESL programs) may at first appear to be *entirely* someone else’s. Other immigrants will find many literacy practices in English to be similar to L1 literacies they mastered in childhood. However, it is the task of the adult ESL instructor to assist all learners in finding L2 words and practices that they will want to “appropriate” and “populate with their own intentions,” that is, use for their own needs

and goals. This is possible only when teachers respect the learners’ “intentions,” their desires to grow and change and explore new opportunities—as well as to maintain what is valuable in their own cultures and backgrounds.

Therefore, drawing upon both Freire’s and Bakhtin’s ideas of dialogue, as well as Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and appropriation, I examine the perspectives of two adult learners on their ESL classroom literacy activities and the extent to which they were congruent with their home literacy practices, identities, and goals; the aspects of their experiences and identities that afforded them access to new practices and genres; and the ways they were populating these practices and genres with their own intentions. The goal of my research, unlike most of the writers cited above, was not so much to develop or promote new pedagogies, but rather to understand learners’ perspectives on fairly ordinary family literacy activities in a fairly ordinary program.

### Methodology

This paper details part of a larger qualitative study that was carried out in 2002-2003 in a CBET-funded ESL family literacy program, which I will refer to as the Community English Center (CEC) (Menard-Warwick, 2004, 2005). Situated in a multiethnic urban working-class neighborhood in the San Francisco Bay Area, the CEC primarily served immigrant women from a variety of Latin American countries. I spent 180 hours as a participant-observer volunteer classroom assistant in CEC classes, detailing my experiences in ethnographic field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). As a classroom volunteer, I primarily circulated through the room during pairwork and small-group activities, helping students who were having difficulties; occasionally I led small groups or tutored students individually.

My formal research activities at the CEC involved observing and audiotaping classroom literacy activities as well as conducting interviews with students. I chose participants partly based on the rapport that I had devel-

oped with particular individuals during classroom activities, and partly to represent the demographic mix at the CEC. In explaining my research, I told participants that I was interested in how what happened inside the classroom connected with their lives outside the classroom. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, mostly in the participants' homes; all were audiotaped and transcribed by an educated native speaker of Spanish. Questions focused on participants' literacy practices and life histories, especially their experiences with formal and informal education. Although I used the same protocol with all participants, I also let interviews develop in unexpected directions at times, according to the interests of the interviewees (Weiss, 1994). Throughout the study, my concern was to understand adult learners' perspectives on their educational and language-learning experiences and to examine how their classroom literacy activities were congruent with their identities and goals.

In this paper I focus on the literacy experiences of 2 students in the beginning class, Trini and Laura. Because they were recent enrollees, I was able to observe some of their initial encounters with classroom literacy practices in English. Both women were in their 30s, had lived in the US for about a decade, and had young children enrolled in a nearby English-only elementary school. Like many CEC students, both belonged to extended family networks in the local area in which Spanish was being actively maintained as the language of the home, and both expressed the desire to study English in order to help their children with schoolwork. While both had completed sixth grade in rural Mexico, neither had further formal education.

As well as serving as a volunteer in their ESL classroom, I conducted three formal audiotaped one-hour classroom observations of each woman. I interviewed Laura twice and Trini four times; these interviews averaged 1.5 hours. (Although I asked both women the same questions, Laura answered more concisely, and Trini more expansively). The interviews took place in their homes, so I was able to meet family members and see the books

and other literacy materials they had available. By adopting this case-study approach rather than generalizing across a broader population of immigrant women, I am able to examine in more detail the complexities of these learners' individual literacy experiences, goals, and identities (Nunan, 1992). Below I discuss these learners' participation in particular literacies practiced at the CEC (reading storybooks and writing short compositions). I do so not because these activities are particularly innovative, but in order to share the perspectives of learners on classroom activities that they were beginning to "make their own" (Bakhtin, 1981).

After completing data collection, I conducted a thematic analysis of all of my data, coding all of the interviews and classroom observations for emergent themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I decided to reexamine Trini's and Laura's classroom and interview data through a Bakhtinian lens after noting a similarity between some of Trini's interview comments on her own literacy experiences and the Russian scholar's theories (see below). This congruence between Trini's statements and Bakhtin's views struck me immediately as a useful way to reconceptualize the value of family literacy instruction for immigrant women learning English. Since Laura was at a similar level of academic literacy, I included her data as well in this added layer of analysis. In recoding Laura's and Trini's data, I defined "making words one's own" in terms of events when these women appropriated school literacy genres and practices for their own purposes, beginning to express their own meanings through these structures. Much of the data below illustrates moments in which the words were "half someone else's" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293), exhibiting "varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of (one's)-ownness" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89).

### **Findings: Learners' Perspectives on Family Literacy Activities**

To answer my research questions, I present below my research participants' perspec-

tives on two types of family literacy activities: storybook reading and composition writing. These two activities form an interesting contrast, in that the former was a relatively familiar practice that the learners were able to build upon, whereas the latter was new to them yet still congruent with their goals and identities. For each of these activities, I describe the learners' backgrounds with similar practices in their first languages; detail their current participation in these practices; and discuss how these activities fit in with their sense of their own identities and their goals for themselves and their children.

### **Reading Storybooks**

Teaching adult learners to read storybooks to their children has been an important component of many family literacy classes (e.g., Delgado-Gaitán, 1996; Handel, 1999; Janes & Kermani, 2001). Authors who have written on family literacy topics have tended to assume that storybook reading is not something that comes naturally, and that parents need instruction if they are going to engage in this practice effectively. Having read this literature, I was surprised to find that storybook reading, in both Spanish and English, was widespread among the immigrant parents taking the CEC classes. Years before entering family literacy classes, Trini and Laura had adopted the cultural practice of storybook reading and “populated it with their own intentions” (Bakhtin, 1981), that is, adapted it to their own needs and goals. Although I am examining the experiences in detail of only 2 students, a number of others mentioned to me that they also enjoyed reading to their children.

Neither Trini's nor Laura's mother could read in Spanish. However, as Trini said, her mother had taught her and her siblings “that we should read (*que leyéramos*)” [Interview, 10/25/02]. No children's books had been available in their villages aside from school readers, but Trini's father read the newspaper, and Laura's father read “terror magazines” recreationally. In addition, their mothers told

them stories about girls who got into trouble, from Little Red Riding Hood to real-life examples in their hometowns. As adolescents, both girls commonly read magazines about celebrities and television soap operas, buying and sharing them with sisters and friends. After moving to California, Trini continued buying and reading magazines, a practice that she told me led directly into buying “board books” for her son when he was an infant. Both began telling their children stories “about Mexico” when they were small.

Laura was introduced to the local public library by a teenage niece:

My niece...was going to the library and she asked me to go with her...and I saw how close it was, and that was when we began to go...When [my daughter] was little, we would bring her two or sometimes even three times a week, [but] when she started to go school, no more than once a week. (*Mi sobrina...iba a ir a la librería<sup>2</sup> y me dijo que la acompañara y fui con ella y ya vi que ahí estaba y me agarraba cerquita, y ya fue cuando empezamos a ir...Cuando estaba chiquita la llevábamos dos veces por semana y a veces hasta tres, y ya cuando empecé a ir a la escuela ya nada más vamos cada ocho días*) [Interview, 10/11/02].

As a result of this introduction to the library resources, Laura started reading to her daughter in both languages, English and Spanish:

I began to go to the library and now I liked to take out books to begin to read to her, but I read them in Spanish...And then I was seeing books that were kind of easy to read in English, and now I began...to take out books to read to her in both languages, to try to read something to her in English. (*Fuimos a la librería y ya me gustó agarrar libros para empezarle a leer, pero le leía en español...y ya después fui viendo libros que estaban facilitos en inglés para leer y ya empecé...a agarrar ya los dos idiomas*)



*para leerle, tratar yo de leerle en inglés algo.*) [Interview, 10/11/02].

According to Laura, this became an important way to learn English while homebound with a small child: “The little bit [of English] that I know [is] because I read her lots of books. (*Lo poquito que más o menos ya sé [es] porque le leo a ella mucho libro*)” [Interview, 10/11/02].

Trini also began reading to her children when her son was small. She explained to me that her son kept requesting her to tell him stories, and she got tired of making them up all the time. She was also influenced by the reading practices of two school-age nieces. When she mentioned her book-buying habits during an interview in her home, her husband confirmed this and joked, “And what do they ask their dad for? Games—they look to her for books (*Y a su papá ¿qué le pide? Juegos— a ella la busca para los libros*)” [Interview, 10/25/02]. As part of this same conversation, Trini said that one thing she appreciated about her son was how much he liked books. While Trini read to her children only in Spanish, she drafted her sixth-grade niece to read aloud the books she bought in English. She said she also continued to tell her children stories in Spanish about her hometown, and especially about the wild animals who lived on the hill there.

Particularly because storybook reading was already an established practice in their families, these adult learners welcomed the chance to spend class time in this way, and they brought home what they could from the class to share with their children. The book-giveaway program that was part of the state-funded family literacy classes had been particularly popular. Once a month, the CEC would receive from the CBET program multiple copies of a particular storybook. After the classes had read and discussed the books, students who had been attending regularly during the past month would be given a copy to keep, with instructions to share the story with their children. When I asked Laura’s 5-year-old daughter, Eva, for the name of her favorite book, she replied, “To Market, To

Market” (Miranda, 1998), which had been part of the book giveaway. *Dr. Seuss’s ABC* (1963), used by the teacher for pronunciation practice, was not part of that program, so Trini looked for it at Barnes and Noble. She told me she thought that all the repetition of sounds would be good for her 5-year-old son, who had a slight speech delay, “so that he loosens his tongue a little bit (*para que él vaya aflojando un poquito más la lengua*)” [Interview, 10/25/02].

At the same time, Trini looked forward to her son’s surpassing her in English literacy, in the same way that she had surpassed her own mother (Menard-Warwick, 2005): “I want him to learn so that when I need help with something he can read it to me. (*Yo quiero que él se enseñe para que cuando yo necesite que él me lea eso*)” [Interview, 10/25/02]. My final interview with her was around Martin Luther King Jr. Day in January, and she reported enjoying the account of his life that she had read in her ESL class. Her son had been studying the same topic in his kindergarten, and she was impressed when he was able to explain it to her:

I think that my son already knows a little more than [me]....He came up to talk to me about the story of Martin Luther King, that they killed him....The teacher told them, right, that it was because he had been a good man, that he wasn’t violent, and I don’t know what all, and...the teacher had to tell them in English because she doesn’t speak Spanish, and he told it to me in Spanish. (*Yo creo que el niño ya un poquito sabe más que...él me llegó a platicarme de la historia de Martin Luther King, que lo mataron...La maestra les dijo, verdad, que porque había sido un buen hombre, que no era violento y no sé que tanto y...la maestra se los tuvo que haber dicho en inglés porque no habla español, y él me lo dijo a mí en español*) [Interview, 1/17/03].

This conversation was the example she gave when I asked about the value of reading chil-

dren's books in adult ESL. The fact that Trini was already familiar with the storybook genre in Spanish made it easier for her to adapt the books she read in the ESL class to her own intentions (Bakhtin, 1981) of supporting her son's education. Certainly, for both women, guiding and supporting their children in this way was congruent with their own sense of their maternal identities.

### ***Writing Personal Compositions***

While reading storybooks was an activity that many adult learners at the CEC already practiced with their children, writing short texts in English was new to Laura and Trini when they entered the beginning class at the CEC in the fall of 2002. Nor had their primary education in Mexico given them much experience in writing personal compositions in Spanish. Nevertheless, family themes offered both women a way into writing, giving them the confidence to make this practice their own (Bakhtin, 1981), even in an unfamiliar language. While this practice perhaps remained *more* than "half someone else's," they were in the process of appropriating it because it fit with their goals for supporting their children's education.

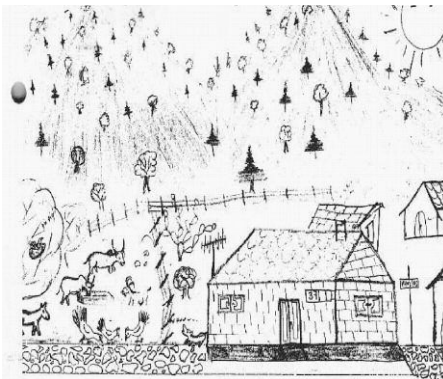
When I asked Laura which classroom task

had been most interesting for her during her month in the ESL program, her 5-year-old daughter, Eva, replied for her, "The drawing! (*¡el dibujo!*)" [Interview, 10/11/05]. Agreeing, Laura pulled out of her folder an illustrated composition about her hometown:<sup>3</sup>

I grew up in Santiago del Valle, Jalisco, Mexico. It was in the country. It was a quiet and peaceful place. When I looked out the window, I saw the hill, the house of my neighbor and the birds in the tree singing. Things I liked there are a Tranquil place and the Traditional Mexican food. Things I liked to do when I was a Child were to play with my sisters around the block. I left my Country because I married and my husband came to USA for the best future for us.

Laura had written the first draft in class after reading a model that the teacher had provided. The second draft she wrote at home after teacher-proofreading. Eva participated in this process with keen interest, because this was a story about her mother's hometown, where she had never been but about which she had heard many stories. Inspired, Eva had decided to write and illustrate her own story.

**Figure 1**  
**My Hometown: From Jalisco to California**





Her text read as follows:

“REPLFMWNB. hayI.ostvAc.Eva. KLRO.... ONYAoFSyKOCeTOGlk.” This was translated for me by her mother, according to what Eva told her at the time, as, “*Yo nací en San Francisco. Me llamo Eva. Soy contenta. (I was born in San Francisco. My name is Eva. I am happy.)*” Eva’s text has many of the features that have been found to be important in early literacy development (Clay, 1975). Not only has she learned a number of letters and how to spell her name, she is aware of the “generating principle” (p. 27), that letters recur in variable patterns, sequenced horizontally from left to right. She is also aware that such sequences of letters can be highly meaningful: This text allowed her to participate in writing a family history, spanning the distance between Jalisco and California. In this way, composition writing became part of a larger effort on the part of Laura’s extended family to maintain Eva’s connection with Mexico. For example, Laura’s sister-in-law, who lived next door, told Eva ongoing stories about an (imaginary) little girl in Mexico named Antonia, whom Eva informed me she expected to meet when she went to visit her grandmother. Thus, Laura populated the composition, which was half the teacher’s words, with her own intentions as well as those of her extended family.

While Laura and Eva showed me their texts after the fact, I was able to observe Trini writing a similar composition on a family theme. Significantly, she chose to write this during the 20-minute break in the middle of class, *without* being requested to do so by her teacher. I believe that her decision to do this was a sign that she was appropriating this genre to her own purposes. The model she used was a text the class had read:

My name is Chai. There are five people in my family. My wife’s name is Lor. I have three children. My daughter’s names are Pa, Mai, and Hlee. My children are six, four, and two years old. I have one sister. Her name is Plia. She is twenty years old.

She lives in Laos. I live in Minneapolis (Magy, 1995).

As Trini said afterward in an interview, “Because only the names are a little different, but the story is almost our story, really, or we can make it fit. (*Porque nada más los nombres, son poquitos diferentes pero la historia casi es de nosotros, verdad, o sea nosotros le podemos acomodar*)” [Interview, 10/25/02]. Her own break-time composition was written immediately after the class’s reading of the above text:

My name is Trini  
There are four people in my family  
My husband’s name is Alfredo.  
I have two children’s  
My children’s name are Alfredo and Iliana.  
My children are five and three years old  
I have two sisters.  
Her’s names are Elia and Marisa  
Elia lives with me She is married She has three children one boy and two girl  
and Marisa lives and oregon.

Two days later, during an interview, when I asked her why she’d decided to spend her break writing, Trini replied, “Because I want to teach myself (how to say it) like that when I’m chatting about my family. (*Porque quiero enseñarme como cuando estoy platicando de mi familia.*)” She went on to explain that she knew words such as children and husband, but, “I don’t know how to make the complete phrase. (*Yo ya no sé como hacer la frase más completa*)” [Interview, 10/25/02]. Thus, writing this short text was not only a way to tell her story, which was almost the same as Chai’s story, but also a means to learn phrases that she wanted to be able to use in conversation. This recognition on Trini’s part that “almost” her own story was being told in English words in the textbook led to my own first recognition of the similarity between Bakhtin’s theories and Trini’s literacy experiences. In my interpretation, it was the value that Trini placed upon her family that led her to appropriate the textbook excerpt for her own purposes, to begin to make these words her own.

These examples illustrate how Trini and Laura were beginning to establish their voices in English within the constraints of this basic academic genre, the personal composition. Because their writing was based closely on classroom models, one could argue that these words were not yet their own, that they had not yet found a voice in English. Nevertheless, from a Bakhtinian perspective, individuality is revealed through command of an existing genre: An utterance “can in no way be regarded as a *completely free combination* of forms of language” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 81 [italics in the original]). Rather, as Trini explained, “from the story I take what serves me in order to learn to tell my own (*de lo que me sirve de la historia esa lo pongo para aprender de lo mío*)” [Interview, 10/25/02].

### **Discussion: Making Words One’s Own**

How can a teacher tell when the words become the learner’s own? How can teachers help learners to populate words and practices with their own intentions? Why should a teacher (or researcher) pay attention to such questions? Below, I will briefly summarize my findings, suggest why an attention to learner perspectives is important for both researchers and educators, and then offer some brief recommendations for teachers.

In summary of my findings, the ESL classroom literacy activities in which Trini and Laura participated were congruent in many ways with their identities and goals. It was this sense of congruence that afforded them access to new practices and genres. Storybook reading, familiar to them in Spanish, allowed them to develop literacy in English and to become familiar with issues that their children were learning about in school (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr.). They were also enthusiastic about taking on less familiar academic literacies, such as writing short compositions. For Trini and Laura, family themes drew upon the strongest parts of their identities and made them feel that they could express themselves in writing in English. Moreover, as these learners began to

make new genres of academic literacy “their own,” they were enabled to participate in their children’s education in new ways, as when Laura’s composition led Eva to write one too, or when Trini discussed the Martin Luther King Jr. story with her son. All these activities fit in with their sense of their maternal identities, guiding their children’s education for the good of the family, in the same way that Trini’s unschooled mother had taught her children that they “should read” (Menard-Warwick, 2005).

While teachers may not always be able to observe learners’ appropriation of classroom practices and genres for their own intentions (Bakhtin, 1981), they may still want to make this appropriation a goal of instruction, a way to conceptualize the possible value of the family literacy endeavor. Moreover, teachers who pay close attention to learners’ perspectives, whether expressed in class discussions or written compositions, will be able to observe students’ use of school language to express meanings important to them. Paying attention to learner perspectives in this way is vital for implementing a “strengths” approach to family literacy pedagogy and research. Focusing on learner strengths must imply respect for their goals, values, and preferred learning activities; this respect necessarily includes an attitude of attentive listening. Since students fully engage only with activities that they see as meaningful, researchers who seek to explain what happens in classrooms cannot ignore student viewpoints, while teachers who work to impose a mandated curriculum without reference to student needs, goals, and desires will often find that resistance rather than learning is the end result (Canagarajah, 1999; Norton, 2000).

Family literacy critics, such as Valdés (1996), have rightly feared the imposition of mainstream cultural values on immigrant families. These concerns potentially pose a dilemma for ESL instructors, with the dilemma particularly acute in California where the program attended by Trini and Laura was funded through an antibilingual education voter initiative (*California Voter Guide*, 1998).

However, throughout my observations and interviews, the CEC students in my study continued to value bilingualism and their own cultural traditions, while seeing the classes as a way to attain new goals for themselves and their children. Trini and Laura continued speaking exclusively Spanish at home, reading to their children in Spanish, and telling them stories about the Mexican villages where they had grown up. At the same time they came to class five days a week to appropriate new academic literacy practices in English, which they also shared with their children. Within the heteroglossia of contemporary California, they were populating a variety of languages, literacies, and genres with their own intentions (Bakhtin, 1981).

In the literature on family literacy can be found positive models (e.g., Auerbach, 1989, 1992; Taylor, 1997), in which adult learners actively participate in creating the curriculum, drawing upon the cultural practices of their own ethnic communities and discussing societal issues that affect their lives. Such programs can facilitate learners' joint goals of hanging on to what is valuable in their own cultural traditions while making new words and practices their own. However, in the nationwide push to standardize adult literacy instruction (Kutner, Webb, & Matheson, 1996; Van Duzer, 2002), it can be difficult for programs to focus on learners' individual goals and values. With program funding often tied to test scores, many instructors teach in programs whose design they can do little to change. However, there is much that educators can do to draw upon learners' strengths, even in programs that are in some ways based upon deficit models.

First, it should go without saying that teachers need to respect students' home language and home culture. In so doing teachers can build on practices that learners have already developed, such as telling and reading stories in the case of Trini and Laura. To do this, teachers need to pay attention to where learners are coming from, their backgrounds with education and literacy, and especially their L1 literacy practices. In so doing, teach-

ers might employ the "funds of knowledge" approach detailed in González et al. (1995), documenting and then developing lessons based on the pedagogical resources available in learners' homes (e.g., family members' expertise in areas of cooking, carpentry, handicrafts, etc.). Some teachers will be able to ask students about such resources in their own languages, while others may need to rely on bilingual aides, but most ESL teachers should be able to incorporate simple activities into their classes that allow students to report on their previous experiences with schooling, as well as ways that they or their family members have used literacy and other cultural practices outside of school settings. It could be especially important to find out learners' experiences with oral language traditions such as storytelling (Riojas-Cortez, Bustos Flores, Smith, & Riojas Clark, 2003). Teachers can then create lessons that help students do in English what they are already doing in their first languages.

It is equally important, however, for teachers not to discount adult learners' capacity and desire to take on new practices that may be culturally unfamiliar to them, such as writing compositions about their personal experiences. Laura's short piece on her hometown is a good example of how a sense of history and tradition can be reflected within a new L2 literacy practice. When practices are unfamiliar, it is particularly important to give learners a chance to focus on *content* that is familiar and meaningful to them. Again, teachers need to pay attention to what learners can tell them about their backgrounds, lifestyles, interests, and goals, as well as noting any lesson topics that lead learners to become particularly engaged. As lessons build upon previous lessons, teachers will have a better and better idea of the L2 words that learners will want to appropriate and make their own through new literacy practices. In this way, students can learn to express their own meanings through previously unfamiliar genres (Bakhtin, 1986), and in this way participate more fully in their children's education as well as in the larger society.

Students will learn most powerfully when the course content engages their passions. Given that most parents are passionate about their own children, family literacy instruction can lead very effectively to L2 literacy development. By respecting both the capabilities and the aspirations of their immigrant students, teachers can avoid silencing learners as they begin to make new words and practices their own. As even family literacy critic Guadalupe Valdés concludes, "It should be possible to move into a new world without completely giving up the old" (1996, p. 205).

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### Author

*Julia Menard-Warwick is an assistant professor in the Linguistics Department at the University of California, Davis. Her research interests focus on second language learning in specific social contexts. Previously she taught ESL for 10 years at a community college in Washington state.*

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Names of people, places, and institutions are pseudonyms; all interview excerpts are translated from Spanish by the author.

<sup>2</sup> In standard Spanish, *librería* means "bookstore," but many of my interviewees used this word to refer to the public library.

<sup>3</sup> All writing samples are used by permission.

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